

weekly **worker**



**Brian Keenan and Michael Bettaney:
MI5's dirty war against the CPGB,
the IRA and the NUM**

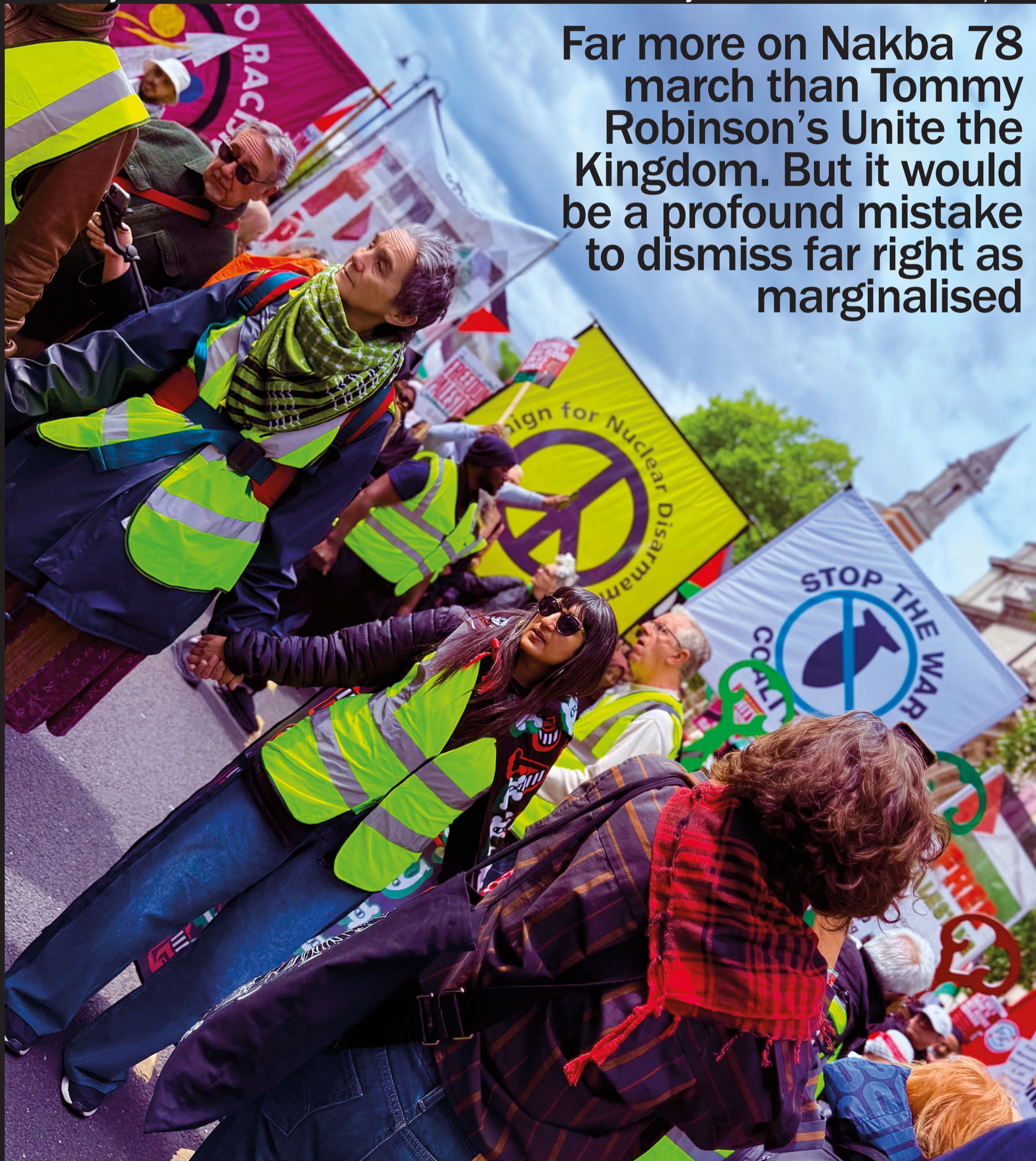
- Letters and debate
- Burnham's Manchesterism
- Your Party's two branches
- Anti-factionalism polemic

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**Far more on Nakba 78
march than Tommy
Robinson's Unite the
Kingdom. But it would
be a profound mistake
to dismiss far right as
marginalised**



LETTERS



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

Dismal results

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (Tusc) has just published its regular report on the local election results (www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2026-Results-report.pdf). At 59 pages it is a comprehensive and valuable record of the results for leftwing candidates, including the numerous local independent anti-austerity groups and individuals, who won 101 council seats with a total left vote of over 440,000.

The report notes the two highest votes for Tusc candidates - 23.8% and 19.4% in Southampton and Knowsley respectively - but says nothing about the overall Tusc performance. This is a striking omission, because on the normal metrics the results were the worst they have ever achieved. Median vote share was just 1.0%, even worse than last year's 1.1% and well below their peak performances: 4.6% in 2012 and 2.7% as recently as 2022 and 2024. The proportion of Tusc candidates securing more than 5% of the vote was just 1.05% - three out of 285, the lowest ever recorded. The contrast with their peak performances is again striking: almost 40% of candidates over the five percent mark in 2012 and 15%-16% over that threshold in 2022 and 2023.

It's unclear what the Tusc leadership expected to achieve, but, notwithstanding support for the Greens, circumstances were pretty favourable: the collapse in Labour support, the presence of just 69 Workers Party of Britain candidates (not the 1,000 target they set last year) and the near total absence of Your Party. Moreover, Tusc largely succeeded in avoiding competition with independents and Workers Party candidates, so for all these reasons they must surely have thought 2026 would be a good year - maybe a great year.

It's hard to believe they ever imagined their results would be quite so dismal.

John Kelly
email

Kitchen communism

"Rather than descending from the heavens to the Earth, we must ascend from the Earth to the heavens," wrote Marx in *The German ideology*.

Nothing exemplifies my communist orientation better than the method of dialectical materialism, succinctly expressed by Lenin's argument for "concrete analysis of concrete conditions". I appreciate David Passarine's engagement with the Communist Party's 'street kitchen' project (Letters, April 30) and I wish to provide a deeper analysis of it.

Do street kitchens cause burnout? It is generally considered common knowledge amongst the left that they do, but I have frequently and fervently argued in the negative. My brother, Lachlan, and I were two pillars of the Melbourne Street Kitchens and yet our decision to leave the kitchens were political, not a question of burnout. The simple fact is that the street kitchens are incredibly rewarding, not in the short-term as David argues, but in the long-term. It is enjoyable fun to cook large amounts of food but it was cumbersome and it was difficult to organise and coordinate, and the satisfaction came from dedication and consistency. Lachlan could turn around and whip up 70 meals like it

was nothing.

Community Union Defence League published a short article titled 'Come on Sundays: that's when the communists come'. We took pride in our work, and we took pride in the community that we built. It wasn't easy, but that was part of the satisfaction in it. Then why did we leave? I would argue that for myself it was my sheer dedication and commitment to the street kitchens that had me engaged in a serious struggle with the Melbourne section over the future orientation and direction of this project. Unsatisfied with my comrades, I took my concerns to the Communist Party central committee and, after being thoroughly demoralised by their response, I walked away from both organisations. I think that a similar trajectory is true for Lachlan also.

Before the street kitchens my brother and I had no organisational experience, but we were able to use this experience to radically transform ourselves. Honestly, we went from kids who could barely cook for ourselves to running an operation which would feed a small community. In this way, the street kitchens were the fire that hardens steel, and we developed into disciplined cadre, as David recognises. I think this developmental aspect is tangential to the Spartacist notion of proletarianisation, and the street kitchens were designed to be a demonstration that we were capable communists. The orientation was not for recruitment and in fact in our opposition to religious proselytisation we were far too opposed to recruitment, though I think this is likely only true for the Melbourne section. Nonetheless, it did somewhat operate as a tool for recruitment, and it is hard to find anyone who is not at least impressed by the effort and organisation that we achieved.

Related to the concept of burnout is the notion that there are better things to do - most notably, conduct a reading group and study theory. The purpose of my letter is not to clamour for a return of the street kitchens, and I wish to acknowledge that this is a valid concern. However, I think that in the Communist Party to an extent we had our cake and ate it too. There was a strong emphasis on reading and education, and I think that the street kitchens actually enhanced this (though I maintain that our level of activity was higher than can reasonably be expected of members, since we adhered to an element of Marxism-Leninism!).

It is important to understand that, if our aim is to educate our members, that doesn't necessarily mean just reading groups. Discussions on the streets or in our homes while we are cooking, or perhaps while driving, can contribute greatly to raising our consciousness. In fact, I would rather do a street kitchen than a 'social event'. However, there are simply logistical difficulties in running a street kitchen which are not so easily overcome - principally financial considerations.

The simple fact, which David recognises, is that the street kitchens and the ACP were *sticky* - most people involved with these projects have tended to hang around the left in one way or another and thus I think it is crucial that we seriously investigate this phenomenon, which I call an *aberration*. I believe that the ACP attracted *purposive workers*, as Lars Lih explains it in *Lenin rediscovered*. Lachlan and I took up street kitchens out of an obligation to merge theory and practice, and this is a difficult balance to strike. In Communist Unity there are concerns

such as David raised, that I am far too *actionist* in orientation; however, I posit that *perhaps the opposite is true*. While I am cautious to argue that there is a lack of activity in CU (since "we do not have the resources"), I would, however, be confident in arguing that there is a lack of discipline and centralisation, though I am reticent to go into details here.

My support for a street kitchen project is conditional upon the conjunctural analysis of the specific context; however, I maintain support for them in principle. I adhere to a principle of 'If we can, we must'. If we are able to intervene in people's lives and make a substantial difference, then I think we have a duty to do so. If we are communists who only speak of revolution and ignore what is beyond our doorstep, then we do not make very good communists. Nor do we make good communists if we do not seriously engage in theoretical study, education, agitation and propaganda.

There are certainly positive elements to street kitchens and other community/mutual-aid work, but there are downsides too. While I think it is necessary in a historical and contemporary context to understand the kitchens, the main point of my letter is to highlight methodological weaknesses in CU. David and many others in CU have basically written off such ideas without any real investigation. Even those who participated in the street kitchens have little positive to say about them, but this results from the fact that they are only able to comprehend their experience, which was decisively after Lachlan and I had departed the organisations - though I must give credit to the Spartacists, who have earnestly listened to me on this question and have sought to understand my perspective.

Furthermore, although I am writing in opposition to my CU comrades, I do recognise that they stand head and shoulders above the rest of the left, where the bar is so firmly placed on the ground that it would require mechanical assistance to lift it. If there is one thing that I take seriously, it is a certain sincerity and frankness towards politics, and I honestly see this as an expression of dialectics. If I am considered an actionist, it is by no means an essential feature of my political character. Sleek in the ACP would say that if you can't organise a street kitchen, you may as well just pack up and go home. So perhaps it is not about the street kitchens themselves, but what they represent.

My final comment would be to extend David's remarks to Red Wessex on the topic of Marxism-Leninism. I would strongly urge the comrades there to study *Fundamentals of Marxism Leninism* by Otto Wille Kuusinen.

George O'Shannassy
Melbourne

Hard-right Greens?

I have a question about something Jack Conrad said at last Sunday's Online Communist Forum (May 10). He was quite insistent that the UK Green Party had a reactionary - at one point I believe he even said 'near-fascist' - origin.

I live in the US, in the Midwest rust belt - something, I think, like your 'Red Wall' in the UK. I am more or less familiar with the US Green Party (in typical left fashion there are actually two Green Parties here) and, while it characterises itself as socialist, I have met some very conservative - even somewhat reactionary - Greens, but usually these are outnumbered by cranks and outright oddballs.

However, for the most part the US

party, if not exactly left, at least had an origin in the serious ecological movement, with all its internal contradictions. Many became Greens reading Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*. They have won elections here at the local level. A good friend from the UK, who lived here for 30 years, compared South Bend, my city, with Middlesbrough in Yorkshire (pretty much the 'Red Wall' equivalent, I would think).

I am not doubting Jack, and there are eco-fascist groups - even an out-and-out 'ecoNazi' group - here, but they are not Greens. Are there any articles or other material that explain the hard-right origin of the British Greens?

Thank you.

Lee Gloster
South Bend, Indiana

Imperialist China?

We thank the *Weekly Worker* for publishing our last letter ('Just so stories' April 23). We also thank Kieran Jeffs for his response ('Spart China' April 30). We would like to reply regarding a few points.

Comrade Jeffs takes issue with our discussion of the world situation, saying that we base our analysis on a "moralistic" understanding of imperialism. He says that, in our analysis, "imperialism is presented as a policy choice - one pursued by the bloodthirsty Americans and abstained from by the noble Chinese". He concludes: "When imperialism is understood in moral rather than material terms, it simply becomes a matter of cheerleading for one's preferred jackboot."

This is an outrageous misrepresentation of what we wrote. At no point in our contribution did we praise the Chinese state or the policies of Communist Party of China (CPC). Instead, we described the party's leaders as "treacherous". As we explained, our view is that - instead of constituting a new imperialist power - the CPC leadership have *accommodated* US imperialism as part of their strategy for export-oriented economic development *within* the US-dominated system. But this does not mean we support or celebrate the CPC's approach - we don't.

More substantively, comrade Jeffs raises the question of what we actually mean by 'imperialism', and how we determine whether a given state is imperialist. We think our position is fully consistent with the theoretical arguments in such classic works as *Socialism and war* by Lenin and Zinoviev, *In defence of Marxism* by Trotsky and, of course, Lenin's *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*. Here, we limit ourselves to reviewing a few essential ideas.

The international development of capitalism creates a need to secure property rights across borders, and this gives rise to an international bureaucratic-state-military-financial machinery: imperialism. Just as it is untenable for two states to simultaneously control the same territory, it is also untenable for two competing imperialist powers to rule over the same area. Thus imperialism means a territorial division - a *partition* - of the world among distinct imperialist blocs.

And, just as replacing one state with another requires a revolution, it takes a war to repartition the world between competing imperialists. During the past century and a half, the world was repeatedly redivided through a series of wars, and the US ultimately emerged as the dominant imperialist power. The result is that, for generations, the American ruling class has overseen the international bureaucratic-state-military-financial

machinery through which global trade and investment take place.

Is China an imperialist power? This would mean that, during the past four decades, the Chinese state somehow managed to redivide the world without fighting a single war - something that would contradict the ABCs of Marxism. Again, we contend that the Chinese state has actually worked *within* the US-dominated international system. Yes, China has a military base in Djibouti, but only because it is tolerated by the US (which has an even bigger military base in the country); yes, China exports capital, but it does so within the dollar system, and during the past 20 years the biggest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment has been the US. In fact the CPC's strategy of export-oriented growth means that - for now, at least - it has a vested interest in *preserving* key pillars of US global hegemony.

All of this flows from China's position within the world economy. As comrade Jeffs acknowledges, China's economy is at a very different level of economic development than the US - in fact, when measured in terms of purchasing power parity, per-capita GDP in China is barely above the average level for the world as a whole. While capitalists in China have an interest in investing all over the world, the Chinese state is not currently compelled by economic circumstances to create a distinct imperialist bloc. Of course, that could change in the future, but for now it isn't possible to understand the world situation as an inter-imperialist conflict between the US and China.

Thus we do not agree with comrade Jeffs (or the ISA leadership) that China is an imperialist power, but this does not mean we have any fondness for the actual policies of the CPC bureaucracy. Again, the CPC leadership has followed an approach that we consider treacherous. Just consider the way that the CPC sits on its hands while US imperialism strangles Cuba. There is a difference between agreeing with the policies of the Chinese state and disputing the notion that China is an imperialist power.

We would also like to respond to the notion that we are "Sparts". To be clear: we are not the Spartacist League. Although the Spartacists appear to agree with the three core programmatic points upon which we built our faction, our members hold a variety of opinions on other things. For example, in issue four of our *Bulletin* (page 19), we ran an article that praised sections four and five of the CPGB *Draft programme*. In fact we have important points of agreement with various groupings on the left; like us, the Spartacist League, the Revolutionary Communist International, *Left Voice* and *Cosmonaut* have all called for the defence of Iran. We think this speaks to the fact that the current organisational divisions on the left do not have a clear political basis.

Finally, we have to remark on the fact that the *Weekly Worker* published our contribution under the title 'Just so stories'. A 'just so story' is an unsupportable narrative or explanation, but in our contribution we included a link with supporting documents. We think it's unfortunate that the *Weekly Worker* removed this link from our contribution, while simultaneously placing a question mark over everything we had to say. It would be better to let readers look at our supporting documents and make up their own minds. Here is the link again: linktr.ee/int_salt_rev.

**International Socialist
Alternative (Revolutionary)**
email

LABOUR

Burnham rolls the dice

Can the 'king of the north' complete his royal progress towards Westminster? And, if he does, what then? Paul Demarty explains the limits of Manchesterism

As we predicted, Sir Keir Starmer survives for now. Only by rallying 81 brave MPs to trigger a contest could any of his rivals truly put his position in question, and the only big beast to really try, former health secretary Wes Streeting, simply did not have the numbers. He bluffed and bluffed, and that bluff was called. He is now out of the cabinet and on manoeuvres. If a contest is triggered, we expect him to sneak in - he has the backing of the residual Blairites, of course, but has also tied his colours to the 'rejoin the EU' mast, which may do him some good among Labour's remainers.

In doing so, he made trouble for Andy Burnham - who was, of course, immediately forced to disclaim any such intention, albeit in the calculatedly ambiguous way that Labour's career politicians must. Apart from that, Burnham has had a good week. His path back to parliament is cleared, with Josh Simons stepping down as MP in Makerfield and Labour's national executive committee indicating that they would not block Burnham from standing for selection. Indeed, as of May 19, he is the official candidate. There was a shortlist of one.

It remains treacherous, of course. Opinion polls in the constituency have Labour neck and neck with Reform; the Greens have refused to stand aside for him, to the chagrin of former leader Caroline Lucas. Labour was all but wiped out in contested council wards within the constituency on May 7. It is the first test of his star power in the general population (we are promised by the likes of Neal Lawson of Compass that he can win votes from the Greens, Lib Dems and Reform alike - we will shortly find out).

If he should fail, it is advantage Starmer. If the great pretender does not arrive in parliament, we revert to the pre-existing leadership contest arithmetic. Streeting does not yet have the numbers, clearly (and, it seems, would probably lose a straight fight with Starmer among Labour members). The further May 7 recedes into the past, the worse the conditions for regicide.

If Burnham wins, we can probably expect a leadership contest in short order. Forget all the garbled idiocies from Starmer and Streeting that we need our best players on the pitch and all that. Burnham's quest for a seat in the Commons is all so he can do a job. The 'king of the north' wants to be crowned in Westminster, and certainly has the numbers to start a contest if he makes it that far.

Battle

While the enormous disquiet in the ranks of the Parliamentary Labour Party is above all a matter of people in quite cushy jobs facing the reasonable expectation of the dole queue some time in the next three years, there is nonetheless something resembling a political battle breaking out, which at least offers some much-needed variety to proceedings. Burnham comes, we are told, with a fresh programme for government, which is called 'Manchesterism'. He talks left (or leftish), regretting the toll of privatisation of essential services (but will not be drawn into promising to renationalise anything beyond the railways and water), and hinting at something like an industrial strategy and a slight loosening of the



Meeting with West Yorkshire mayor Tracy Brabin and Sir Keir

government's fiscal rules (hints which he has now disclaimed in deference to the bond markets - more of which anon).

It is strange, however, to find this man somehow leading the left (such as it is) in Labour. Though born in the north-west, Burnham's career until a decade or so ago was very much that of a standard-issue New Labour clone. His political career began in the army of advisors and wonks around Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He was elected to parliament in the safe seat of Leigh, and eased up the governmental greasy pole, as a parliamentary private secretary, a junior health minister and ultimately health secretary.

With the defeat of Gordon Brown in the 2010 election, he stood in the Labour leadership election essentially as a soft Blairite, touting a rather ill-defined 'aspirational socialism', and came fourth in a contest dominated by the battle of the Miliband brothers - the victorious Ed appointing him again to the health portfolio. Upon Miliband's defeat, he stood again for the leadership; but then Jeremy Corbyn snuck onto the ballot. Burnham's pitch then was regionalist - "we need to get out of the Westminster bubble," he repeated. Some were not impressed. "If the Westminster bubble could incarnate itself in flesh and blood, like the avatar of a Hindu god, it would be Burnham," wrote Harley Filben at the time.¹

Yet you have to hand it to him: after a brief stint on the front benches, he really did retreat to the provinces, standing for and winning the new metropolitan mayorality of Greater Manchester. He kept himself out of the failed coups against Corbyn, and was already up north when they stitched up the next leadership contest for Starmer. He had, it is generally thought, a good pandemic, challenging the Tory government from afar. He succeeded in returning to public ownership a number of bus and tram routes, aiming for a fully integrated public transit system like Transport for London. He was re-elected twice with handsome majorities.

There is something strange about the way his mayorality is spoken of by his supporters, however. There is not an awful lot *there* in the record, when it comes down to it. People

are getting very excited about a few buses and trams - nothing wrong with that, but it does not exactly add up to an alternative programme for his majesty's government. The rest is largely rhetoric.

Burnham is a canner operator than the average spawn of the Blair years. His leftish posturing suggests that he actually learned something from his trouncing by Corbyn in the 2015 contest - that a performance of sensible, non-partisan technocracy was not quite the ticket to success it may once have been. His occasional grumbles about the tyranny of the bond markets exemplify this: part of Starmer's problem, and especially Rachel Reeves's, is that they cannot imagine doing politics without this invisible wall bounding in the available options. They promise 'change', but the only change that appears is the replacement of the carnivalesque misrule of the Boris Johnson type by the managed declinism of Rishi Sunak and then Starmer. Sir Keir decries votes for Reform and the Greens as votes of despair; but since he only offers more of the same (but slightly worse), who can blame them?

Programmes

If Burnham's record does not give us much to go on, there are plenty of people in the wings already trying to give a more concrete content to Manchesterism. One comes from Mathew Lawrence - founder of a think-tank called Common Wealth, which provides wonkish arguments for extending public ownership. Lawrence's essay in the *New Statesman*, 'The case for Manchesterism', has been much discussed in such circles (though it appears to be mostly a repackaging of his previous arguments, with some light Burnhamite branding added).² There is also Louise Haigh, the soft-left MP who was briefly transport minister, before being forced to resign over a nothingburger scandal, writing for *Renewal* (associated with the Compass project). Her title: 'A new fiscal framework to renew Britain'.³

Lawrence's case is essentially that there are several conditions in which private actors cannot be expected to provide services adequately. Front and centre are utilities, where profit

plainly comes from rent extraction, and rents are directly counterposed to investment. He also mentions sectors of the economy where productivity has essentially topped out. The water system exemplifies both of these: "... the core technology has been stable since the Victorian era, and what private ownership has produced is not innovation, but the financial engineering of regulated asset bases." Also considered are "investment strikes" (turning to financial engineering instead of serious investment in productivity), and "social need" (where service simply must be provided for reasons of social stability, but is fundamentally unprofitable).

These scenarios cannot be dealt with through redistributive mechanisms like social welfare. What is required is a "productive state" (similar, we suppose, to Mariana Mazzucato's "entrepreneurial state"). By way of systematically investing without quarterly results to worry about, the state alone can cure the protracted malaise affecting economies like Britain, in turn producing an environment where private capital can thrive.

Haigh's argument complements this by taking on directly the orthodox fiscal and monetary policy of governments throughout the neoliberal era - "treasury brain", as it is sometimes called. Again, a focus on short-term indicators like gilt yields prevents the kinds of long-term investment that holds the promise of solving the underlying fiscal maladies (getting more people into work, so they can pay taxes, and so forth). Not that Ms Haigh wishes to spook anyone: she is all for fiscal responsibility, and she rejects any incursions on the independence of the Bank of England, except slightly 'reframing' its mission to take account of long-term growth.

That caginess concerning the Bank of England and its prerogatives is telling. Burnham and friends are happy to speak ill of the bond markets, and in reply get the example of Liz Truss thrown in their faces. Yet her fate was not only sealed by the bond market. In a whimsical blog post, the celebrity historian, Adam Tooze, compares treasury-brained economists to *Harry Potter* characters

refusing to name Voldemort - 'that which must not be named' in this case is, of course, Threadneedle Street. It was the refusal of the Bank of England to intervene that did it for Truss. "The bond market' isn't an irresistible objective force like the weather or an avalanche. It can appear like that. But that depends on the way it is being handled - or not handled - by the central bank."⁴

Certainly it is hard to imagine a successful social democratic reorientation along Lawrence or Haigh's lines with a hostile bank to deal with. It amounts to an attempt to do politics with one and a half hands tied behind your back. It is quite remarkable how entrenched the shibboleth of Bank of England 'independence' has become, given that it was only introduced during the first Blair government. A Manchesterism that really did significantly extend public ownership would have to make incursions on the holdings of institutional investors; the bond market would be (on one level, quite rightly) spooked, and monetary policy would have to be ready to hand to counteract the resulting convulsions.

Half of it

Yet that is not the half of it. All participants in the Labour wars want to 'get Britain building', especially housing capacity; but the truth is that, for it to make any difference, the cost of housing must fall. Inflated capital values must be destroyed, and the losers will be mortgage-paying homeowners and petty landlords, of whom there are very many. All of which is to say that even the one policy goal that all can agree on in the Labour fracas poses not tweaks to fiscal policy, nor mere investment, but 'decommodification' - a move to production for need and planning in kind in at least some sectors. Lawrence acknowledges this, to his credit, but does not seem to realise that this is impossible without fighting a battle of class interests. Is Burnham game? Is anyone?

There is, lastly, the international question. Britain's prosperity is based on financial services. (As Haigh writes in a bizarre formulation, "industrial strategy sceptics need only look at the strength of our financial services to see what can be achieved" - surely the only time turning a country into a money laundry has been called an "industrial strategy"!)

All things being equal, reindustrialising would require competitiveness at the cost level, and therefore driving down wages to Chinese (etc) levels. For all things *not* to be equal, international action is required, but is out of scope for these doughty patriots.

The Manchesterism debate is interesting precisely because it poses these questions. But we doubt Andy Burnham can do much better than Starmer and Reeves, when it comes to the crunch ●

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Notes

1. 'A night in the uncanny valley' *Weekly Worker* June 25 2015: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1064/a-night-in-the-uncanny-valley.
2. www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2026/05/the-case-for-manchesterism.
3. renewal.org.uk/articles/a-new-fiscal-framework-to-renew-britain.
4. adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-449-voldemort-on-threadneedle.

DEMONSTRATIONS

More than street numbers

Far more were on the Palestine march than Tommy Robinson's Unite the Kingdom. But, what with Reform UK, it would be a profound mistake to dismiss the far right as just a marginal force, argues **Eddie Ford**

At the weekend, it was a tale of two demonstrations in London - the annual Nakba Day protest marking the creation of the Zionist state in 1948, and Tommy Robinson's second Unite the Kingdom rally. The former was primarily organised as usual by Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Stop the War Coalition, Friends of Al Aqsa, Palestinian Forum in Britain, Muslim Association of Britain and CND, with Stand Up to Racism being an additional bolt-on for the day. Together, they mobilised under the slogan "United against Tommy Robinson and the far right".

Of course, the event generated big headlines in all the mainstream media. But the statistics were a bit baffling - a war of competing realities. When it came to the Nakba 78 march, according to *Socialist Worker*, there were 100,000 - apparently humiliating Robinson, who only had around 35,000.¹ Basically, the SWP claimed a "decisive victory" over Robinson. However, when it came to the statistics there was clearly no coordination with the PSC. It talks of some 250,000 on the pro-Palestine march. A strange discrepancy.

Meanwhile, the Met claimed the latter had between 15,000 and 20,000, while there were 60,000 for Unite the Kingdom.² Make of that what you will! But if you want real fantasy figures, the organisers of Unite the Kingdom claimed that "millions" attended - and Tommy Robinson posted on X before the event the Trumpian boast that it would be "the greatest patriotic display the world has ever seen".³

Yes, it is harder to estimate marches nowadays, since they tend to be fragmented into contingents, as various organisations hold things back by stretching banners across the road, going their own pace, etc. Nevertheless, the Nakba 78 demo took a full hour from starting in South Kensington before the front arrived at the final destination in Pall Mall, with the rear just leaving Exhibition Road at 2pm. True, it was nowhere near the size of last year's pro-Palestine demonstrations, but it easily outnumbered Tommy Robinson's chauvinistic orgy.

Either way, the police erected a "sterile zone" in Trafalgar Square to keep the two demonstrations apart, Robinson supporters gathering at Kingsway and making their way to Parliament Square via Trafalgar Square. More than 4,000 members of the Met were deployed to oversee the two events, alongside mounted units, drones and helicopters, while live facial recognition technology was used for the first time - but not on the official march routes, we were told.

Characterisation

However, when it came to the *Socialist Worker* report, it is the characterisation of people who went to the Unite the Kingdom rally that is the main problem. It paints a picture of drunks, beer bottles, pissing against walls and knuckle-walking bigotry. Oh, and with the slow pace of the march, a little drizzle and news of the numbers at the pro-Palestine demonstration, a mood of profound demoralisation.

Yes, there were loads of people with Union Jack T-shirts and hats, waving the flag, carrying placards with stupid slogans, and all the rest of it. Yet they should not be dismissed as a lumpen mob. There were also families with children, people who felt totally ignored by the mainstream establishment, and some who,



More than 4,000 police at a reported £4.2 million cost

politically, were not strongly affiliated to any particular party, but just plain angry with the state of the country. The real point, of course, is that it would be a profound mistake to dismiss such people as if they were unwinnable, beyond reach, forever lost.

Remember, on May 7 Reform won 1,454 council seats - they were defending just two of them. And it took control of 14 councils across the country - nine from Labour and four from the Tories. In all, Reform secured 3.6 million votes - a million more than Labour. It also rose to second place in both Scotland and Wales. Today Reform stands at some 28% in opinion polls, ahead of both the Tories (18.3%) and Labour (18.1%).

Then there are the silly articles in the liberal press comparing the Tommy Robinson march with the National Front of the 1970s. Anyone old enough to have been on counter-demonstrations back then knows that is sheer nonsense. NF meetings, rallies and demos were not counted in the tens of thousands: they were usually only a few hundred, including skinheads looking for trouble. Can you say the same about the people that turned up for Unite the Kingdom last Saturday? Patriotic Alternative, Ukip and Britain First were there - yes, fascist organisations. So too were people high on booze and cocaine. But they were a minority. Hence, we need the right politics to split them - that should always be our approach, if we are Marxists.

Not that we should view Reform members or Reform voters as our

natural support base. True, they hate Sir Keir Starmer with a passion. They also hate Muslims, illegal migrants and the left. Strategically, our main task is winning the organised workers' movement, as well as those with some sort of class consciousness - which by definition goes beyond sectionalism of any kind.

But we do need to go beyond the politics of r-r-revolutionary posturing. Take the SWP - or, rather, the SUTR slogan, "Smash fascism!" If that means the Tommy Robinson demonstration, that is another serious mistake. The plain fact of the matter is, whatever our exact numbers were - even if we did dwarf Unite the Kingdom march - there was, rightly, no attempt to cleave off significant numbers to physically confront the Tommy Robinson protestors: that rules out any comparison with either Lewisham or, for that matter, Cable Street.

Note, in August 1977 some 500 members of the NF attempted to march from New Cross to Lewisham town centre. Many thousands of locals, not least British-Asian youth, rallied to successfully stop them. Cable Street 1936 similarly saw a few hundred members of the British Union of Fascists attempt to march through the Jewish East End of London. With the CPGB taking the lead, around a hundred thousand local residents, including Jewish and Irish migrants, were mobilised to stop them. Of course, most of the fighting was with the police, who were not only outnumbered but forced to back

off. So, very different from the left going in for 'squadism', or anything of that order.

Tommy Robinson "cut a sad and frustrated figure" when speaking at the Unite the Kingdom rally, according to *Socialist Worker*, which suggests that "perhaps the line up didn't quite live up to expectation", because the "banning of 11 international far-right figures" meant that "another of the slogans for the day, 'Unite the west', rang hollow" (May 16).⁴

Fuel the fire

There may be a slither of truth to this. On the other hand, such bans can only but add fuel to the fire. They confirm to the far right that they are subject to persecution, discrimination and a woke culture of intolerance ... which includes the left. After all, the implication in *Socialist Worker* is that it approves of home secretary Shabana Mahmood blocking several "far-right agitators" from entering the country to attend the Unite the Kingdom event. If that is the SWP view, it is a big mistake.

Communists after all should be the consistent champions of democracy and therefore oppose the British state using such powers to restrict free speech and freedom of movement in general - which can just as easily be used against us - if not more so! Open debate and expression of different views is not something to be feared, but welcomed as our weapon. This is a lesson that we on the left should have learnt by now, going back to the 1936 Public Order Act which,

amongst other things, banned political uniforms ... and which was promptly used against the left.

Former SWP leader John Rees, who now heads both Counterfire and the StWC, stated on the BBC *Today* programme that the police response should have been that it was "unacceptable" for Tommy Robinson to hold his march on May 16, given the Nakba Day event happened on the same day every year.⁵

Meanwhile, of course, new guidance issued by the Crown Prosecution Service pushed prosecutors to consider whether banners and slogans viewed on social media may amount to offences of 'stirring up hatred', and specialist officers were primed to take swift decisions to arrest people for 'hate speech' - including chanting "Globalise the intifada" or "Death to the IDF" at the Nakba 78 march. The right to protest might be a "cornerstone of our democracy", declared Mahmood, but anyone spreading hate or committing acts of violence will face the full force of the law - including those protesting against genocide.

SW further mentions that there were "appeals" from the stage by Tommy Robinson to "get involved in electoral politics". He urged his audience to get "ready for the battle of Britain", as we have an election in 2029 that is "the most important moment in our generation" - hence, register to vote and become an activist or "we are going to lose our country for ever". Significantly, Robinson said, "we're a cultural movement" and urged people to join a political party - whether it is Reform, Advance UK, Restore Britain or the Conservatives - he did not care which, as what mattered was to "locally get involved in politics".

Robinson claimed to have raised more than £225,000 from two US rightwing donors he had met on a recent trip to America (after which there were chants of "USA, USA") and asked the crowd to personally thank Elon Musk, as "none of this would have happened if it wasn't for one man".

At the end rally of the Nakba protest, the only speaker to mention the fight for socialism was Zarah Sultana. She correctly described Andy Burnham as "another establishment politician cut from the same Zionist cloth". Jeremy Corbyn mainly came out with liberalistic guff about how Reform's hatred "will not build one council house", "improve one hospital" or "end somebody's homeless life on the streets of London". Weymann Bennett and Samira Ali of the SWP had a turn each - but you would not know their real affiliation, as they were wearing their respective SUTR and Women Against the Far Right hats (the latter having a launch meeting on June 15).

Regrettably, none of the 24 speakers mentioned the Palestine Action prisoners. A shame ●

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Notes

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YOUR PARTY

Behind members' backs

The first couple of official Your Party branches are being set up in the most hesitant, most fearful, most controlled way imaginable. **Carla Roberts** reports

Out of all the possible constituencies in the country, the Corbyn clique has picked the Isle of Wight and Ceredigion Preseli in Wales to launch the first two official Your Party branches. What looks like a very odd decision indeed is, of course, no accident at all - it shows Jeremy Corbyn's right-hand woman, Karie Murphy, at her 'finest'.

At the time of the data glitch on November 10 2025, when for a few short hours the YP member portal exposed branch membership numbers and profile pages to any logged-in member, there were 55 YP members registered on the Isle of Wight West (another 50 in IoW East), making the two areas number 491st and 440th respectively out of 651 constituencies in terms of membership density; Ceredigion Preseli was number 53 with 152 members.¹ The Isle of Wight will hold its "branch formation meeting" on June 6 at 5.30pm in the Quay Arts Centre, 15 Sea Street, Newport. Ceredigion Preseli follows on June 7 at 2pm at Aberystwyth University.

Although members on the IoW were first notified by email on May 9, none of this was discussed at the central executive committee meeting a day later. In fact, Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, who represents the south of England on the CEC (and thereby the IoW), only found out about the meeting a few days ago. The Grassroots Left supporters on the CEC have been kept entirely out of the loop, all the way through. They are there to make things look democratic, nothing more. CEC chair Jenn Forbes, part of Corbyn's leadership faction The Many, does not even bother any more to tell the hybrid meeting the results of the anonymous online votes - it is clear that everything The Many puts forward *passes*, while most of the motions and amendments proposed by GL supporters *fall* (unless it is something entirely apolitical, like organising a YP presence at the Notting Hill Carnival - why on earth GL comrades bothered with that one is anybody's guess).

Membership officer

At the said CEC meeting on May 10, membership officer Cassie Bellingham merely announced that there was a timetable for branch formation, but refused to give any details. We suspect that things will continue in the current vein: pick some small and medium-sized branches first and leave the big ones right until the end. That is classic Karie Murphy. She really is very good at what she does: manipulate, micro-manage and bureaucratically stifle any inkling of democracy. The smaller the branch, the less likely it is that its members will successfully rebel - though you do need a certain 'critical mass' to make sure you can hold a meeting. There are around 200 branches with 50 or fewer members - they will struggle to organise. A branch with between 100 and 150 members (of which maybe a fifth ever show up to anything) is perfect, from her point of view.

As an aside, we suspect membership figures are a bit down from that data breach in November 2025, but perhaps not as dramatically as some believe. While many people have certainly left (among them former SPEW member Darren Galpin, who was effectively running the proto-branch on the IoW), we also know that in the run-up to the CEC elections in March, HQ managed to attract *some* new members. Heaven forbid that



Corbyn and his clique obviously fear membership

the Corbyn clique would publish the official membership figures or, for that matter, a clear plan on how branches in the rest of the country will be set up and when.

Picking the Isle of Wight as the first branch in England has the added advantage that the organised left is almost non-existent and neither the Socialist Workers Party nor SPEW have a branch there. If there are any local SWP or SPEW members in YP, they have not identified themselves as such or openly sold their paper at the monthly meetings of the proto-branch (attendance figures at the hybrid meetings have gone down from a high of 67 to about 15-20).

In small branches, it is also easier to meet the ridiculous quorum of 20% required for inaugural meetings (the lowest percentage that members at launch conference were able to choose out of a number of 'options' presented by HQ). This self-enforced rule could well bite the Corbyn clique in the bum - unless they do what they did with other things they did not like much, like 'collective leadership' and 'dual membership': they entirely ignored what was agreed and simply overturned it at the CEC. They will probably see how things go on the IoW and in Wales and then change the rules as and when it suits them.

No consistency

There is at least one glaring discrepancy between the two first branch formation meetings: while in Wales members will "hear from members standing for officer positions", the election of officers for the Isle of Wight branch will have already concluded - and members are invited to "meet your

newly-elected branch officers". HQ has organised the election of "chair, treasurer, secretary, organiser and workplace liaison" entirely online. Members were able to self-nominate between May 12 and 17, with the "candidates announced" on May 20 and an "online hustings" taking place on May 30. Voting takes place between May 31 and June 5 - ie, the election finishes the day before the actual "branch formation meeting".

From our perspective, this is entirely the wrong way around. Members should be able to meet the candidates in an actual, real-life meeting. Everybody should be able to ask questions, hear the candidates' answers, and then also see the reactions of the other members in the room - and only then cast their vote. Online hustings and votes are not only a very poor substitute: they depoliticise and demobilise members. Why bother coming to a meeting if you can just click a button at home? That is, of course, exactly what the Corbyn clique wants: a quiet and pliant membership that does not propose motions (which might, for example, criticise the lack of democracy in YP). Of course, some comrades cannot travel and arrangements should be made for them to attend online - but that is usually a small number.

In the run-up to the CEC election, executive member Hannah Hawkins had announced that she would campaign for a rule barring "anyone in office in a proto-branch" from becoming an officer in an official branch. This does not seem to have been taken up by HQ (yet) - perhaps they know that there are not that many local active members to choose from.

On the Isle of Wight, for example, six members have put themselves forward for the five positions - and almost all of those have been leading the proto-branch. In fact, it looks like a very smooth transition there. The only newcomer is Verity Bird, who writes in her candidate statement for the position of chair: "I consider it important that whoever we elect is able to connect with people very broadly, and, for example, referring to members as 'comrades', while comfortable for established communists/socialists, is likely to alienate more people than it attracts." She sounds like somebody who would get on very well with Karie Murphy - and will hopefully be roundly defeated by Christopher White, who served as *de facto* secretary of the proto-branch after the departure of Darren Galpin and is also standing for chair this time.

Talking shops

According to the agenda of both meetings, "official Your Party branches will be hubs for community organising, supporting the campaigns and struggles already happening on the ground. Whether that's industrial action, housing campaigns, Palestine solidarity or fighting the far right - our branches should exist to amplify and support that work."

In the minds of the Corbyn clique, Your Party branches are not actually supposed to take *any* initiatives, but simply get behind local stuff that is already happening. A real party of the working class, on the other hand, would, yes, get involved in any useful local campaigns - but not to simply "amplify" and "support", but also

to develop, to change, to educate ourselves ... and to recruit more members.

It would also launch its own national and international initiatives and campaigns, in the knowledge that single-issue campaigns - especially local ones - have their limits. They quickly come up against the real reason that inequality, war and the far right exist - ie, global capitalism. None of these issues can be solved without the working class being organised in an effective and principled working class party that actually presents a viable alternative to the rotten system.

Such a party requires autonomous branches, transparency and democracy. But that is not what Your Party branches are supposed to look like. YP chair Jenn Forbes explained in her CEC report that branches will be "set up as hubs for campaigning in the community, rather than talking shops" (my emphasis).² This has been pushed by the Corbyn clique in the CEC elections, too - by "talking shops" they mean the proto-branches of course, which were organising democratically and from the ground up, allowing members to discuss, debate and vote. The Corbyn clique, on the other hand, is pushing for non-voting "assemblies", "listening exercises" and backing this and that campaign. Now which one of those two ways of organising sounds more like a "talking shop", we wonder?

Better organised

It remains to be seen if local members will simply swallow what they are being served up by the Corbyn clique. What might work relatively smoothly in small branches could be much harder to enforce in better organised areas like London, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield, where enough local members could show up and simply vote to overturn any diktat by HQ. We suspect that is why those areas will be last on the list. No doubt HQ is also counting on the likelihood that, in the meantime, some of the biggest local 'trouble-makers' get frustrated and leave YP.

And perhaps some in HQ are expecting that the problem might resolve itself in a different manner altogether: John McDonnell MP and others on the Labour left have been calling on Andy Burnham, if he becomes Labour leader, to allow Jeremy Corbyn back into the Labour Party.³ There can be no doubt that this would certainly be to Corbyn's liking. He has always been and remains a left Labourite - currently in exile. He has no interest in building a viable, effective working class party, let alone a revolutionary one. He believes that socialism could be introduced through parliament. At best, he wants to build a Labour Party mark two ... and even that he does very, very badly.

Burnham has told the *Jewish Chronicle* that he "does not back calls to allow the former Labour leader to return to the Labour benches" - well, what else would you expect him to say to that rag. The prospect does indeed currently seem unlikely, but not at all impossible - especially with the prospect of a Reform government looming large •

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SPIES

A perfect spy

BBC bosses and the securocracy continue with their campaign to denigrate Michael Bettaney and therefore hide the murderous criminality of the British state in the Six Counties and the sheer incompetence of MI5. **Jack Conrad** puts the record straight



Billed as the “true story of MI5 traitor Michael Bettaney” the BBC Radio 4 play ‘Bettaney’ is, in fact, the tired old story concocted by the securocracy back in the 1980s to cover its crimes in the Six Counties during the troubles. That and its sheer incompetence.

All one needs do is read the “authorized history of MI5” written by Christopher Andrew, “Britain’s leading historian of intelligence” and emeritus professor of modern and contemporary history at Cambridge.¹ This, plus a good dollop of artistic licence, is where Rossa McPhillips MBE, the writer of ‘Bettaney’, gets his ‘truth’ from. It should be added that while McPhillips has many screen plays, audio dramas and TV episodes to his credit, he is himself a former military intelligence operative. Hence the gong.

That should immediately set alarm bells ringing when it comes to telling the “true story” about anything, let alone Michael Bettaney. MI5 has, after all, a long and thoroughly dishonourable record of lying. Eg, the notorious forgery - the ‘Zinoviev letter’ which triggered the overthrow of the Ramsay MacDonald Labour government in 1924.

Basically McPhillips portrays Michael Bettaney as the “worst spy ever”. Supposedly here was a MI5 middle ranker who early in his career ran a whole string of agents in the IRA

and then, for entirely inexplicable reasons, attempted to become a double agent for the Soviet Union. Of course, so the “true story” goes, Michael Bettaney was so inept, so useless, so befuddled, that he instantly got discovered and quickly landed himself in jail, on remand, awaiting his treason trial.

A drunk, a sad loner, a weakling, he is half-befriended, half-bullied into naming the names of the IRA turncoats while attending the prison’s Catholic mass. Who half-befriends him? Who half-bullies him? This is where artistic licence comes in (as far as I know). It is none other than Brian Keenan.

Who he?

Brian Keenan was the IRA’s quartermaster - the organiser of overseas finances, arms supplies, bomb making equipment and their distribution to the fighting units. That meant the German Democratic Republic, Lebanon, Libya and Syria. Having been arrested in 1979 Brian Keenan was serving an 18-year sentence for his role in the armed struggle. Later he went on to play a crucial role in winning the IRA rank and file over to the peace process. Keenan was highly regarded and considered beyond reproach. When he died, in May 2008, Gerry Adams paid him a fulsome tribute.

However, comrade Keenan considered himself a Marxist, a

We had real hopes of making a Communist Party out of the left of the republican movement, including the IRA’s quartermaster, Brian Keenan



communist and an internationalist. So an equivocal or conditional ally of the Adams leadership. Never an unalloyed enthusiast for the peace process, let alone a constitutional nationalist. Some have even compared him to James Connolly, Vo Nguyen Giap, Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, and Joe Slovo. Not just because of his exceptional role in reorganising and shaping the IRA’s armed struggle, but his lifelong commitment to the working class.

Keenan discovered communism through the ‘official’ CPGB. To begin with at least, his communism was therefore an anti-Stalin Stalinism. Basically, he accepted what passed for the Soviet state’s global strategy: ie, a grand alliance between the so-called socialist countries, the workers’ movement in the west and the forces of national liberation.

As a young man Keenan lived and worked in Luton, then Northampton. This was during the early 1960s. He became an active trade unionist and met industrial militants from the ‘official’ CPGB’s South East Midlands district. Of lasting importance was the fact that they introduced him to the writings of Desmond Greaves, crucially his influential book *The life and times of James Connolly* (1961).

Throughout the rest of Keenan’s life Connolly served as something of a role model. Without the struggle for national freedom, socialism

was impossible. Without socialism, national freedom was worthless. In other words, for Connolly - and Keenan - the two struggles had to be combined.

When he joined the IRA Keenan found himself regarded rather coolly at first. The rumour amongst the Provos was that he was still a card-carrying member of the ‘official’ CPGB. Mistrust soon became its opposite, however. Keenan earned an unmatched reputation as a brave fighter and strategic thinker. Living the life of the professional revolutionary, constantly on the move, single-mindedly working for the cause, he steadily rose up the ranks of the IRA to the highest levels.

Conceivably, it might be true that Michael Bettaney gave names to Brian Keenan. Frankly I do not know. But names were named ... and the IRA began to systematically take out its traitors one after another. In the McPhillips story MI5 goes into a panic. Surely the case. The spooks cannot work out how the IRA is fingering its agents. Till the penny finally drops ... it must be that drunk, that sad loner, that weakling Michael Bettaney.

Now, the fact of the matter is that I knew both Brian Keenan and Michael Bettaney.

My correspondence with Brian Keenan began during the late 1980s when there seemed a real prospect, to

me at least, of forging a Communist Party in Ireland out of the leftwing of the republican movement. We briefly exerted a real influence over the Irish Republican Socialist Party. There were two joint schools in Belfast and we helped the comrades relaunch and write *Starry Plough*. Then there were the various Marxist strands within and around Sinn Fein/IRA, not least Brian Keenan himself.²

Backstory

What about Michael Bettaney? After an Old Bailey trial in April 1984, mainly held *in camera*, he was convicted under section 1 of the Official Secrets Act for attempting to pass damaging information on to the Soviet Union. Lord Lane handed him a 23-year sentence (apparently there were those in government pressing for an even longer stretch).

This was during the miners' Great Strike ... and the ongoing armed struggle in the Six Counties. There were hundreds of political prisoners. Our organisation had a policy of sending them books, copies of *The Leninist* and exchanging letters. Various comrades were assigned to, or volunteered, for this work, one of them being Marion Johnstone. She entered into a mammoth correspondence with Michael and eventually began visiting him in Swaleside prison on the Isle of Sheppey. Being something of a diarist, she recorded exactly 444 such visits - two a week.

It is more than worth giving Michael Bettaney's backstory. Born in 1950 to working class parents in Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, with their unstinting help and encouragement he excelled at school and won himself a place at Oxford University. He attended Pembroke College and studied English.

Michael had an enduring passion for languages. He mastered German, French, Latin and Old English. In prison he taught himself Russian - mainly by listening to Radio Moscow. Later in life he learnt more than a smattering of Polish. He wanted to make the migrant bus drivers feel welcome in his adopted home town of Ware in Hertfordshire (incidentally another connection, myself and group of Young Communist League comrades established a commune in nearby Castlebury Farm from where we took over the Ware and Hertford branch of the CPGB - recruiting local convenors and shop stewards - and rewon the South East Midlands district of the YCL from the Eurocommunists).

At university Michael seems to have aped the politics and drinking habits of his more boorish upper class peers. According to the official account, he affected an admiration for Adolf Hitler and sung the 'Horst Wessel song' in college bars and local pubs. There was much throwing of food and breaking of glass. Think Black Cygnets, Piers Gaveston Society, Bullingdon Club and Oxford University Conservative Association.

The secret services have long had a record of recruiting suitably reactionary Oxbridge toffs. However, what they were looking for in the early 1970s were agents with a working class background who could mix with the hoi polloi ... and be fast-tracked up the chain of command. Michael Bettaney fitted the bill perfectly. Having undergone a thorough vetting, he was given an MI5 job-offer.

After spending a year in West Germany, MI5 assigned him to the Six Counties. There he ran his clutch of well-placed MI5 informants. Michael told how he had to watch in silence, hidden in a cupboard, while one of his grasses was kneecapped by an IRA punishment squad. He also survived a car bomb. But Ireland changed him, and for the better.

The republican hunger strike of

1981 and the election of Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone could only but have a seismic effect. It proved beyond doubt that the IRA were not just a bunch of isolated terrorists with no support in the wider population. On the contrary they stood at the head of a people risen. Michael was also more than aware of MI5 fronts such as the Force Research Unit. It directed agents in Loyalist terror gangs and selected targets for extra-judicial killing. MI5 effectively ran the Ulster Defence Association, which murdered Catholics simply because they were Catholics. Then there was the shoot-to-kill policy, and the MI5-organised cover-up of crimes, such as the Kinora Boy's Home. A Catholic from his young teens, the 'dirty war' must have been the cause of inner turmoil for Michael Bettaney.

Promoted, his next assignment was at a desk in MI5's department F. That involved counterespionage - basically monitoring KGB agents ... and their assets, real and imagined, in the Labour Party, the trade unions, CND and, of course, the 'official' CPGB.

Department F recorded each and every donation made to the *Morning Star*, instructed agents, blackmailed and secretly raided CPGB district offices (where membership details were held). Other leftwing organisations were watched, but did not rate of much importance.

Michael had to study Marxism - the motto in department F being 'know your enemy'. Unlike most of his colleagues he did not find this a crashing bore. The *British road to socialism*, the programme of the 'official' CPGB, had him laughing. However, the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin - they were a different matter entirely. Profound, gripping and persuasive. He began to think of himself as a Marxist.

Given Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and the ratcheting up of cold war nuclear missile rhetoric, it is, I suppose, no surprise that Michael decided to follow in the footsteps of Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess. There were, though, few illusions in the Soviet Union of Leonard Brezhnev. Michael knew all about the stagnating growth rates, the corruption, the endemic lies and clichés that passed for 'Marxism'. But Michael believed he could help the cause of world peace ... if he became a double agent.

Incidentally, it is worth adding that later Michael developed a considerable admiration for Hillel Ticktin and his work on the Soviet Union. He kept a framed picture of him in his 'Marxist corner' at his Ware home. For Hillel's part, he remembers being impressed by Michael's wit, learning and intelligence when they met at Communist University.

Michael secretly photographed a wide range of highly compromising documents at MI5's London HQ. Meanwhile, he delivered a suitably cryptic message to the Soviet embassy's KGB staff. It required them to make contact with him using standard spycraft techniques: pins placed on London underground escalator handrails, numbered steps, etc, etc.

The story of Michael behaving completely incompetently, being hopelessly drunk and stuffing MI5 documents through the letterbox of the Soviet embassy, is, needless to say, pure invention. The same goes for the story of a confused general, Arkady Gouk - first secretary at the Soviet embassy and head of the KGB's British section - going round to MI5 and handing back the documents. Obvious fabrication, impossible to take seriously.

British intelligence had their double agent in the KGB and they did not want to blow his cover. It was Oleg Gordievsky. He informed MI6

that there was yet another British mole. Michael found himself under immediate investigation.

He told me that he was presented with a stark choice: 'either we put a bullet through your brains here and now or you give us a full confession'. Over a bottle of whisky he owned up. Not the story as told by Christopher Andrew, of course. Supposedly, Michael was free to leave MI5's HQ anytime he wanted ... but did not realise it. Another piece of fiction.

Before his trial, on remand, Michael *sought out* IRA prisoners to tell them about the MI5 agents in their movement. There were no treats, no arm twisting. He passed on similar information to Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers. Names were given (via whom, I don't know). But evidently, in this case, to no effect.

The NUM had, of course, been infiltrated by Stella Rimington's F2 branch in preparation for the 1984-85 strategic confrontation. Not only were the phones of Arthur Scargill and Mick McGahey tapped. Former NUM chief executive, Roger Windsor, was widely rumoured to have acted under MI5 instructions in order to sabotage the union and destroy Scargill's credibility. There were others besides.

Category A

Once sentenced, Michael was always category A. Initially that meant solitary confinement ... and no TV, no radio, no writing paper. His exercise yard was covered with overhead wire mesh to prevent a helicopter rescue. His toilet paper was of the soft kind - other prisoners had to make do with the old-fashioned, shiny rolls. No surreptitious messages were to be ferreted out.

Doubtless, he expected to be exchanged for a British spy held in the Soviet Union. He saw himself giving well-informed lectures to aspiring KGB officers in the Lubyanka and living in a comfortable little Moscow flat - apparently, the view of the British secret services too. But, of course, with Mikhail Gorbachev, and then Boris Yeltsin, the Soviet Union tumbled towards a chaotic collapse. Michael had to adjust to serving a long, long sentence.

That prospect did not particularly worry him. Although Michael was extraordinarily sociable, he could easily cope with solitude. He was part monk, part communist militant. The prison authorities noted how determined he was to remain mentally and physically fit. Michael studied hard and exercised hard too. The pictures that I have seen of him from those years - taken covertly, of course - show him lean, confident and thoroughly self-possessed.

Over time the prison regime relaxed somewhat. Writing material, a radio, Christmas vodka ... the latter courtesy of a sympathetic prison governor. He even got a cellmate (one, a none-too-intelligent guardsman, was sent in to spy on the spy - Michael fed him nonsense and he was soon transferred out).

Because of Marion Johnston's letters, because of *The Leninist*, because of the collapse of bureaucratic socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, Michael came towards our point of view. He wrote for our press under his chosen name, 'Michael Malkin'. His articles, letters and reviews were always very well written ... and cutting. Eg, he had absolutely no time for former government minister and latter-day left reformist saint, Tony Benn.

After serving two-thirds of his sentence - 15 years and six months - Michael was released on parole. This is when I first met him in person. We worked together collating and posting out the *Weekly Worker*, we drank a few beers together, on a Thursday, then on a Sunday (ie, after doing the paper,

then after our weekly seminar). We even contemplated writing *Fantastic reality* - my book on religion - as a joint effort.

That never happened. Nonetheless, as I say in the introduction, chapter one, 'Sigh of the oppressed creature', owes more than a little to Michael Bettaney. Basically it deals with the views of young Marx when it came to religion and how he subsequently continued to view religion as a two-sided phenomenon: ie, not merely the 'opium of the people'.

Enigma

Not that I ever really knew Michael Bettaney. While I always liked and admired him, I have to admit that I always found him totally enigmatic.

He was a social chameleon. Michael could talk to anyone, in any way, at any time. Within 10 to 15 minutes he would know someone's life story. That is what made him a perfect spy. Having adapted to the high society Oxford bigots of his youth, he could just as easily charm prison wardens, the cleaners at Communist University ... and myself. Nonetheless, serving 15 years and six months surely speaks for itself. He had the steel of conviction.

Upon his release in 1998, Michael moved in with Marion Johnston. Both an odd couple and ideal partners - some day a playwright or a novelist will do justice to their wonderful but unlikely tale. Michael certainly deserves better, much better than Rossa McPhillips MBE.

Despite writing for the *Weekly Worker*, Michael became a thoroughgoing localist. He worked at the corner newsagent, did some maths tutoring, helped out the old and infirm and got to know all and sundry. Michael even became a beater for the local pheasant shoot on major Page-Croft's old estate. I reacquainted myself with the gamekeeper at Michael's wake and gave him a big hug. The last time we had met is when he had a double-barrelled shotgun directly pointed at me - that was at Castleberry Farm (I was fishing *with permission* on the bank of our little pond and politely told him to fuck off).

Michael Bettaney proudly proclaimed himself a Marxist until his death, yet he was a committed Catholic too. A circle which is surely impossible to square, though Connolly seemed to have managed it. So maybe Michael too. Nonetheless,

I freely admit, it is beyond me. From my earliest days I have been a member of the League of the Militant Godless.

We parted company over ... who knows what. He clearly wanted to leave our ranks. Nonetheless, looking back I still regard Michael as a dear friend and a good comrade.

He died on August 16 2018 ... sadly of alcohol intoxication. What drove him to drink to such excess is hard to tell ... but at a guess it was probably a coping mechanism. Being an exceedingly bright working class kid from Stoke, suddenly finding himself having to live in an utterly alien environment must have been the cause of immense mental strain: first Oxford University, then Northern Ireland during the troubles, then Gower Street and department F. Adding to which was his growing conviction that the whole British establishment was built on lies, murder and the preparation for nuclear war.

In his last years Michael's Catholicism became far more important than his Marxism. He regularly confessed his sins and attended mass where he ate the bread and drank the wine. In return came the promise of forgiveness and salvation.

Father John, the good-natured Catholic priest officiating at his funeral service at Ware's Sacred Heart church, assured us all that we would meet Michael in heaven - along with John Paul II and all the other Catholic bishops and saints.

For my part, as I have said, if the Christian doctrine is true, "I hope to meet Michael in the fiery circles of hell - the company is so much better there".³ ●

Notes

1. C Andrew *The defence of the realm: the authorized history of MI5* London 2009. Micheal Bettaney is referenced on pages 557, 558, 564, 714-22, 723-4, 732, 754 and 756.
2. For my obituary of Brian Keenan see 'Prisoner B26380's dilemma' *Weekly Worker* July 30 2008. Here the reader will also find some brief extracts from our correspondence in the late 1980s. We put the lot of it up on the website - some 40,000 words in all. Apart from correcting punctuation, spellings, etc, we present the letters unexpurgated. I have added explanations here and there, when I think they are needed. Where particular words are undecipherable because of Brian's awful handwriting, this is indicated. The hope is that serious historians and partisans of communism and Irish republicanism alike will find the material useful.
3. Quoting another obituary, this time for Micheal Malkin (Micheal Bettaney) 'A man of contradictions' *Weekly Worker* September 9 2018.

Fighting fund

Play your part!

The *Weekly Worker* fighting fund got a big boost this week, receiving more than a thousand pounds towards our £2,750 monthly target for May!

The most generous donors were comrades SK and PM with their *three-figure* contributions, followed by comrade TW, who actually made two transfers totalling £75. Then we had MM (also £75), TR (£40), GB and JS (£25 each), OG (£24), DR (£20), MD, JL and AM (£10), and SL (£8).

All the above made their donations via bank transfer or standing order, while another five comrades chipped in using PayPal - thank you, FK (£75), KS (£50), PD (£10), GP and RD (£5 each). Finally, comrade Hassan handed his usual £5 note to one of our team.

All that came to an excellent £1,028, taking our running total for May up to £2,062. In other words, we're now less than £700 short of target with, as I write, 11 days still

to go. Well, I'm very confident we can get there, but, as I've been saying, we really need to make up some lost ground from late 2025 and March this year, when we failed to reach that much-needed monthly target.

So, can we actually take our total for May up to £3,000 in the last 11 days of the month? That would be another huge boost! Please play your part by cheque, bank transfer or PayPal - use the link below if you need more information.

I can't stress enough how much the *Weekly Worker* relies on our readers and supporters, so now's your chance to play your part if you haven't already done so this month! ●

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

INDIA

Further swing to right

Narendra Modi's far-right BJP has made further gains at state elections and has almost totally marginalised the left. Given the country's extremes of wealth and poverty this might seem paradoxical. **Michael Roberts** investigates the politics and economics of the world's most populous country

In the recent state elections in India, the coalition government led by the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party won resounding victories in some key states previously held by opposition parties. In the highly populated West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, India's most powerful female politician, who had been in power for 15 years, saw her Trinamool Congress Party trounced by the BJP (she has refused to accept the result). And in the small southern state of Kerala, the pro-business Congress Party ousted the ruling leftwing alliance in a landslide victory, the BJP also gaining a foothold in the state for the first time ever. The BJP now controls 21 of the 28 states in India.

In the 2024 general election prime minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the BJP, retained power. The Hindu nationalist BJP was formed by members of what was basically a religious-fascist party, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organisation modelled on Mussolini's Black Brigades. Modi was a long-time member of the RSS, who then moved seamlessly into the BJP.

After winning power in 2014, Modi has increasingly cemented his control of government. The nationalist BJP is now seen as 'business-friendly', but it is still dedicated to turning a multi-ethnic and multi-religious India into a Hindu state, where minorities, particularly Muslims, would be reduced to second-class citizens. With increasing confidence, the Modi government has suppressed any public dissent by liberal democrats and socialists against this trend. Many opposition politicians have been imprisoned for lengthy periods on trumped-up charges and prevented from participating in elections and in public debate.

Support

So how is it possible for the BJP and Modi to be so popular? First, because the bulk of the BJP's political support comes from the rural and more backward areas of this huge country, which have not benefited from the strident rise of Indian capitalism in the cities. These areas are bulwarks of Hindu nationalism, incentivised by fear of Muslims.

The second reason is the total failure over decades of the main capitalist party and standard bearer of Indian independence, the Congress Party, to deliver better living standards and conditions for the hundreds of millions - not only in the country, but in the city slums. Congress appears to millions as the party of the establishment, controlled by a family dynasty (the Gandhis), while the BJP appears to many as the populist party of the 'forgotten people'.

Now even the leftist government in a small state of Kerala in the south-west of India (predominantly Christian, not Hindu or Muslim) has fallen. Kerala is constantly promoted among the international left as a success story for public investment and support for the poor over the rich. The reality is less sanguine. The Left Democratic Front government appears to have lost touch with working people. Take these examples from one source.

For 266 days, workers in the public-health system that the LDF boasts about at international forums went on strike, demanding a wage of 21,000 rupees a month (they were



Young militant carries flag of Communist Party of India (Marxist)

only drawing 7,000 rupees). After 10 months of protest, the government raised it to 8,000 rupees. The leftist government claimed that the strike was just a Congress conspiracy.

Farmers in the rubber belt have complained that they cannot survive and their children are being forced to migrate to the Gulf and elsewhere. Youth unemployment has reached 30% (among young women, 47%) - nearly three times the national average. The government promised 200,000 jobs in five years, but they have not materialised.

Worse, corruption emerged. Around 27 million rupees (\$279 million) was paid by a mining firm to the IT company owned by the chief minister's daughter between 2017 and 2020 for no demonstrable services. In the election campaign, the leftist alliance dropped its secular approach and tried to woo Hindu nationalists. As one source put it, "Kerala in 1957 voted communist because the left spoke for the labourer, the tenant, the *Dalit*, the fisherman, the woman in the kitchen and the field. Kerala in 2026 - it began speaking only for itself."

The 'communist' left and Congress have failed to offer a clear alternative to the BJP, which continues to boast of the unending success of the Indian economy since Modi came to power. The Indian media and western economists laud the strong economic growth that India is apparently enjoying under the Modi government.

So ecstatic are mainstream economists about the success of Indian capitalism under Modi that talk of his neo-fascist past and current repressive measures are ignored. Instead, all the talk is of India 'catching up' with China and even surpassing its real GDP soon. For example, Goldman Sachs contends that India could have the world's second-largest economy

by 2075.² Modi made the economy a major part of his election pitch, pledging to lift the country's economy "to the top position in the world". This is nonsense, as I have shown elsewhere.³ It is true that the world's largest country by population has had very fast economic growth, averaging 5%-6% a year (in fact a little slower in the 2020s), although the official figures can be questioned.⁴

Official figures

Also, according to official figures, poverty in India has declined substantially in both rural and urban areas. Based on the official poverty line, rural poverty fell from 64.9% in 2011-12 to 19.3% in 2023-24, while urban poverty declined from 39.7% to 8.6%. A similar pattern is observed for 'extreme poverty', which declined from 30.7% to 3.1% in rural areas and from 17.4% to 1.4% in urban areas over the same period.

But these estimates are again to be questioned. Labour market data suggest a much higher inequality in earnings with the top 10% of Indian earners getting income 17 times higher than the bottom 10%. Indeed, India's economic growth post-pandemic has been uneven - or 'K-shaped' (where the rich have thrived, while the poor continue to struggle). India may be the fifth largest global economy at an aggregate GDP level, but on an 'income per person' basis, it still languishes at 140th. Inequality has widened to a 100-year high, according to research from the World Inequality Database. The top 10% of the Indian population now holds 77% of the total national wealth and the rise in inequality has been particularly pronounced since the BJP came to power in 2014.⁵ By 2022-23, the top 1% income and wealth shares (22.6% and 40.1%)

reached their highest historical levels and India's top 1% income share is now among the very highest in the world.

In contrast, many ordinary Indians are not able to access the healthcare they need. Sixty three million of them are pushed into poverty because of healthcare costs every year - almost two people every second. Indeed, it would take 941 years for a minimum wage worker in rural India to earn what the top-paid executive at a leading Indian garment company earns in a year. While the country is a top destination for 'medical tourism', the poorest Indian states have infant mortality rates higher than those in sub-Saharan Africa. India accounts for 17% of global maternal deaths and 21% of deaths among children below five years.

Rural distress, stagnation and falling farming incomes have led to a number of protests by farmers. According to Samyukta Kisan Morcha, an umbrella of farmers' unions, over 100,000 farmers have committed suicide in the last 10 years of Modi's rule. India ranks 111th of the 125 nations in the Global Hunger Index (2023) report. It is home to over a third of the world's malnourished children - which is not only a health crisis, but has a wider impact on the economy. A 2023 joint report by institutions including Unicef and the World Health Organisation found that 74% of the population cannot afford healthy food.

The key for Indian capitalism (as it is for all capitals) is the profitability of its business sector. That profitability took a huge plunge in the 1970s, as profitability did globally. Under successive Congress-led governments, neoliberal policies were adopted to drive up profitability. Then came the 'great recession' of 2008-09 and the ensuing 'long depression'

of the 2010s, and profitability and growth began to fall back. Modi came to power as a result. Under him, Indian capital has sustained a relatively high rate of profit, enabling it to expand investment and the economy.

Investment to GDP reached 42% at the peak of the credit boom of 2007. However, after the great recession and long depression, investment to GDP fell back significantly, until the Modi regime steadied the ship for Indian capital after the Covid slump.

World Bank

The Modi government is being encouraged by international economic institutions to keep up the incentives to Indian capital. In its latest report, the World Bank said:

Boosting private sector-led growth will be critical to strengthening economic resilience and supporting more young people to enter the workforce. A predictable, business-enabling environment will help to unlock investment and create jobs at scale in priority sectors like energy and infrastructure, manufacturing, tourism, healthcare, and agribusiness.⁶

But India's economic future is uncertain: "India is not immune to these global shifts. Intricately connected to global value chains, India faces external shocks and acute effects from these global policy changes, including tariff escalations and volatile capital flows."⁷

India imports nearly 90% of its crude oil and 50% of its natural gas requirements. Conflicts in the Middle East, such as the disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, pose a severe risk to this energy supply, potentially creating high inflation and hindering economic activity. If oil prices stay elevated for an extended period, it could significantly impact India's external balance and increase the government's subsidy burden. Industrial activity in early 2026 has been a mixed bag, with manufacturing and mining showing resilience, while electricity generation acts as a drag.

So the Indian economy remains vulnerable to global economic crises, particularly due to high energy import dependence and geopolitical disruptions. External headwinds like Middle East conflicts and global supply chain disruptions threaten momentum.

And, of course, if there is a global economic slump, India will join it ●

Michael Roberts blogs at thenextrecession.wordpress.com

Notes

1. Meaning 'broken', 'scattered' or 'oppressed' in Sanskrit.
2. www.goldmansachs.com/insights/articles/how-india-could-rise-to-the-worlds-second-biggest-economy.
3. thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2024/04/19/india-modi-and-the-rise-of-the-billionaire-raj/.
4. See www.pie.com/publications/working-papers/2026/indias-20-years-gdp-misestimation-new-evidence.
5. www.worldinequalitylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/WorldInequalityLab_WP2024_09_Income-and-Wealth-Inequality-in-India-1922-2023_Final.pdf.
6. www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/04/09/india-remains-among-the-fastest-growing-economies.
7. www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/economy/asia-pacific/india-economic-outlook.html.

CHINA

Reshaping the balance

China is increasingly being treated as a near-peer economic rival. In light of the Trump-Xi summit, Yasmine Mather examines the nature of the country and its rivalry with the US

At the recent Beijing summit, Xi Jinping used the language of historical theory to frame the future of relations between China and the United States. By invoking the ‘Thucydides trap’,¹ he placed the bilateral relationship within a larger frame of whether a rising power and an established hegemon can avoid war and instead build a stable new order. The message was not simply rhetorical. Xi presented cooperation, mutual respect and restraint as an alternative to direct confrontation, while also making clear that he expected the US to recognise China as an equal global power rather than a subordinate challenger or lesser competitor.

Elon Musk, returning from China as part of Donald Trump’s entourage, was quoted as saying: “What we are going to see with China, for the first time that anyone can remember who is alive, is an economy that is twice the size of the US - possibly three times the size of the US - and it’s going to be very weird living in that world.” The idea captures the scale of the economic shift Washington is trying to manage: China is increasingly being treated as a near-peer economic rival.²

The biggest warning involved Taiwan. Xi implied that peaceful relations depend entirely on how the US handles this issue: if Washington is careful, the relationship stays stable. Trump did not formally alter US policy, but his remarks suggested that Taiwan could become part of a broader bargaining process in a way that has unsettled observers in both Washington and Taipei. The summit did not resolve the Taiwan question: it merely showed that both governments were trying to keep it from exploding in the short term.

The economic side of the summit reflected that same mixture of unresolved rivalry. Both sides announced new mechanisms for managing disputes, including a trade board and an investment board designed to keep dialogue going and reduce friction over tariffs, market access and industrial policy. These bodies were significant, but they were process agreements rather than final solutions. They showed that neither side wanted complete breakdown, but neither was prepared to resolve the deeper structural conflict between them either.

The concrete economic proposals focused on trade and market access. China was expected to increase imports of American goods, especially in the areas of agriculture, energy and aviation. Boeing aircraft, farm products and energy exports featured prominently in the package. Reports also pointed to commitments involving beef and poultry market access, along with renewed or expanded Chinese purchases of US agricultural products over the coming years. These moves were politically useful for both governments, because they allowed each side to claim a win: Washington could point to exports and jobs, while Beijing could present the deals as evidence of stability and pragmatism.

Rare earths and other critical minerals were another central issue. These materials matter because they are essential for high-tech manufacturing, defence systems, electric vehicles and green technologies. The summit was therefore also about supply chains and strategic leverage. China’s role in the global flow of rare earths gives it an important economic weapon, while the United States remained concerned



Full red carpet treatment

about dependence on Chinese supply. The meeting helped preserve a fragile trade truce, but it did not remove the underlying vulnerability on either side.

Politically, the summit aimed more at stabilisation than at reconciliation. Both sides had an interest in avoiding a direct crisis, and the public language reflected that. Chinese official commentary described the exchange as candid and constructive.

The summit took place against a wider geopolitical backdrop, especially the conflict involving Iran and the Middle East, with Trump wanting China’s help in ending Iran’s closure of the Strait of Hormuz and protecting global energy supplies. However, Beijing had no desire to bail out Washington or simply follow American priorities. This highlighted a major gap in expectations: the US wanted China to help manage crises fuelled by American pressure, while China refused to act as a junior partner in US strategy.

Global role

Ultimately, this meeting was not just about standard trade deals or politics. It was about setting the ground rules for how two rival systems will either live together or end up fighting, in an era defined by tech wars, military competition and a battle for global domination.

This larger strategic context is important for understanding the debate over China’s role in the world economy. China is no longer merely a developing or transitional economy, but an imperialist power operating through finance, infrastructure and trade. From this view, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a programme of solidarity, but a mechanism for exporting surplus capital, securing influence and binding weaker states into asymmetrical dependence.

Let us start with surplus capital. China produces more capital and industrial capacity than it can profitably absorb at home and it must seek external outlets. Its huge industrial base and financial reserves drive it to export capital abroad through infrastructure and lending.

On the domestic-capacity side, China’s official manufacturing capacity utilisation was 75.2% in the second quarter of 2024, and non-metallic mineral products were only 64.2%, while the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development says Chinese steel exports in 2024 exceeded 118 million tonnes and rose because of excess capacity.

Chinese manufactured products and technology. In places such as Africa, Latin America and parts of central Asia, China’s economic model can lock host states into commodity dependence rather than helping them build autonomous industrial capacity. A clear example is sub-Saharan Africa, where China is the largest trading partner, African exports to China are concentrated in metals, fuel and minerals, and Chinese imports are mostly manufactured goods and machinery (in Latin America, Chinese trade and investment have similarly tended to reinforce commodity specialisation rather than broad-based industrial upgrading). For example, in deals with the Democratic Republic of Congo infrastructure construction was traded for long-term mining concessions for cobalt and copper - resources vital for China’s high-tech domestic industries.

Imperialist?

A related point is legal and political sovereignty. BRI contracts often contain clauses that protect Chinese investors through arbitration systems, confidentiality rules, waivers that weaken the ability of host states to resist asset seizure in the event of default, often through the China International Economic and Trade Arbitration Commission. In this sense, China is accused of using legal rather than military tools to secure imperial advantage. The absence of open gunboat diplomacy does not make the relationship non-imperialist. It only means that coercion has taken a more modern and financial form. A concrete country example is Zambia, where Chinese lending became central to the sovereign debt crisis and complicated restructuring, because multiple Chinese lenders and contracts had to be negotiated separately.

Supporters of China dispute the above. According to their view, China is not imperialist because the Communist Party (CCP) controls capital, billionaires do not dictate foreign policy, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) serve national development, not a financial oligarchy. First of all, I would argue that the party is an oligarchy, and separating the ‘state’ from the ‘oligarchy’ is a false dichotomy. The state bureaucracy and the CCP elite function as a collective capitalist class. They control capital, accumulate wealth and use state power to expand into foreign markets to secure raw materials and profits, just like western monopolies. Under Lenin’s definition, one aspect of imperialism involves the export of capital, the rise of monopolies and the scramble for resources. Critics point out that Chinese SOEs behave exactly like transnational corporations: they seek to control supply chains (like lithium in Africa or copper in South America) and exploit local labour to repatriate profits back to the core (Beijing).

Supporters of China’s BRI argue that it provides real infrastructure that western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank refused to fund. While it is true that the BRI builds roads, ports, railways and energy grids, this does not mean it develops poor countries in any meaningful or independent way. As explained above, much of this infrastructure is designed around extraction: mines, ports and transport links are often built to move raw materials out of the country and towards China, rather than to integrate and strengthen

the local economy. These projects can function as isolated enclaves, benefiting Chinese capital far more than local workers or communities.

The claim that BRI creates local development is also weakened by the way many projects are run. Chinese firms frequently bring in their own engineers, managers and workers, limiting job creation and skills transfer for the host country. Reports of poor labour conditions, environmental damage and restrictions on trade union activity further undermine the idea that BRI represents a progressive alternative to western-led development.

Supporters of China also dismiss the ‘debt trap’ argument as western propaganda, claiming that China renegotiates debts and avoids the harsh austerity imposed by the IMF. However, as noted above, even if the idea of a deliberate ‘trap’ is overstated, debt dependency on China can still lead to a serious loss of sovereignty. When countries cannot repay, China can use debt as leverage to demand political loyalty, diplomatic support, access to strategic assets or favourable treatment for Chinese companies. The opacity of Chinese loans, including secret clauses and restrictions on multilateral debt relief, makes this dependency even more dangerous.

The claim that China practices non-interference is also misleading. China may not usually demand regime change in the way the US has done, but it still imposes political conditions. States are expected to support the ‘One China’ policy, cut ties with Taiwan, vote in line with China’s policies in the UN and remain silent on issues such as Hong Kong or politics inside China. This is not genuine neutrality or respect for sovereignty: it is a different form of political pressure.

Overall, the BRI should not be seen as liberation from western domination. At best, it replaces one form of dependency with another. As argued above, China’s relations with much of Africa, Latin America and Asia often reproduce the old colonial division of labour: poorer countries export raw materials and import higher-value manufactured goods. This keeps them dependent, subordinate and trapped at the lower end of the global economy. The issue, therefore, is not whether China is better than the west, but whether replacing dependency on Washington with dependency on Beijing can ever be called real development.

Taken together, the summit and the debate around China’s global role reveal a world in transition. The US-China relationship is no longer one of simple engagement or containment: it is a tense equilibrium, shaped by trade conflict, strategic rivalry and mutual dependence. Irrespective of our analysis of China, what is clear is that the country’s rise has altered global power relations, and that both its supporters and its critics see it as reshaping the balance between core and periphery, dependence and autonomy, domination and development ●

Notes

1. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thucydides_Trap.
2. The total economic output of the US was about \$23 trillion last year, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis. China’s GDP, meanwhile, was about \$17.1 trillion, according to the nation’s National Bureau of Statistics (moneycentral.com.ng/markets/article/elon-musk-warns-chinas-economy-could-overtake-us).

POLEMIC

Sectarianism spawns liberalism

We do not advocate an ecumenical party, nor non-aggression pacts. On the contrary, political debates and political struggles are vital. As a sort of addendum, Mike Macnair replies to Red Ant Collective's 'anti-factionalism'

This article is, as it were, an appendix or addendum to my recent three-part series on 'anti-factionalist' arguments.¹ It is a reply to Haig Kisherian's May 14 article, 'Partyism and the limits of liberalism', announcing and theorising his break with the Australian Communist Unity group in favour of the post-Trotskyist, 'capitulator', and practically Maoist group, 'Red Ant Collective'.² Though the arguments are largely banal, at around 4,300 words they are more elaborated - and more upfront - than the arguments I addressed in my series.

Haig Kisherian tells us that 'Partyism' "argues for an ecumenical communist party, one that allows Trotskyists, Maoists, Hoaxists, Bordigists and everyone else to join under one democratic-centralist banner" (presumably "Hoaxists" is the spellchecker at work on 'Hoxhaists!'). He says that he joined and has "made a sincere attempt to engage with Communist Unity. I contributed to debates, including being one of a tiny group of Marxist-Leninist voices at the 4th general conference". However, he found Communist Unity organisationally dysfunctional and characterised by "liberalism" and "degenerative debates".

The phrase, 'Marxist-Leninist', can be used by 'official communists', but is more commonly a tag for Maoists, since Maoist parties of the 1960s-80s routinely used it to flag their identification with Beijing (or, later, for some, with Tirana). It is deeply misleading, since the politics are *non-Marxist* (Maoists do not advocate the necessity of the class dictatorship of the proletariat over the other classes on the road to communism, and advocate people's fronts, not independent workers' movements) and *anti-Leninist* (their 'Leninism' would have attracted Krupskaya's comment in the mid-1920s that if Lenin were alive he would be in prison).

Red Ant are not *orthodox* Maoists: they do not maintain the thesis of Soviet imperialism beginning with Khrushchev. But Kisherian does self-identify as "Marxist-Leninist" and Red Ant's political line is at the end of the day a variant of the Maoist global line of 'surrounding the cities': that is, that revolutionary leadership is to come from the 'global south' (as Red Ant prefers to call the semi-colonial regimes), not from the proletariat as a global class.

Kisherian's subheads are 'In defence of the sect form', 'How I learned to stop hating and love the bureaucracy', 'Some sects cannot get along' and 'A disorganised Trotskyist sect'.

Bureaucracy

The second of these, '... love the bureaucracy', is the central point of his argument, without which the others practically fall to the ground (though I will return to them). Kisherian's argument is that:

A key assumption of partyism is that communism is a failed 20th century ideology. That its main issue has been the dreaded 'bureaucracy'. That this is a 'big problem' that requires serious solutions. The right for people to form internal factions is considered one big way this 'issue' can be resolved. But is this true? Is communism a



Proven failure ... as a road to socialism

failed ideology that 'grapples' with bureaucracy? Does the Communist Party just need an internal liberal, multi-party democracy?

Communism is a massively successful international movement that has defeated fascism, lifted literal millions out of poverty, destroyed reactionary practices and bigotries, and sent the first woman into space. It still continues to exist as the dominant governing system in China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos.

In the first place, if the second paragraph was truth, it would support banning factions (as 'official communist' and Maoist parties do generally). It would not support Kisherian's further argument in defence of the 'sect form'. What would follow would be that believers in the existence of "actually existing socialism" (which, shortened to 'AES', is how Red Ant characterises China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos³) should join *whatever official party is recognised as the local co-thinkers* of the 'AES' states. I do not know whether in Australia this would be the Communist Party of Australia, the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) or the Australian Communist Party. It would not be Red Ant, which is a 'capitulator' formation of Trotskyist origin.

(The original 'capitulators' broke with the Russian opposition after Stalin and his co-thinkers' left turn in early 1929. There have been a variety of subsequent groups which started as Trotskyist, but became convinced in one way or another of 'official communism': for some examples, the tendencies of Michel Mestre in France and John Lawrence in Britain in the mid-1950s; the Sri Lankan Lanka Sama Samaja Party in the early 1960s; the Argentinian

Partido Revolucionario del Los Trabajadores (Combatiente) in the early 1970s; and the US Socialist Workers Party and its co-thinkers, and the British group of John Ross and his co-thinkers, *Socialist Action*, in the 1980s. (Red Ant is descended from the Australian co-thinkers of the US SWP.⁴)

Maintaining separate organisations which defend broadly the same political platform as 'official communism' is plain sectarianism. What the hell is the point of such organisations except to maintain the status of their leaders and their particular tactical shibboleths? It is also, actually ... *public factionalism*. As far as the broad workers' vanguard can be concerned, these groups are visibly no more than factions of communism.

Secondly. There is no doubt that the Soviet Union and the east European regimes *did* fail; that this failure delivered an enormous blow to the *idea* of socialism - not just in the imperialist countries, but also in the 'global south'. Red Ant recognise as much.⁵

Kisherian simply hand-waves away this point:

The USSR collapsed due to betrayal from their dreaded bureaucracy, and China will follow soon after! (assuming it hasn't already fallen due to Dengism).

This is an unfalsifiable claim with alternative explanations. I would argue that the USSR collapsed because it tried to fix its economic issues through political liberalisation. when the moment clearly called for a tactical retreat to some new version of the NEP. I and many others would dispute the idea that China is not pursuing socialism. But, either way, I'm talking to a brick wall here, because the 'traitorous

bureaucracy' is an unfalsifiable claim. Any communist country with a functional government simply hasn't failed yet, and any that do fail must have failed because of their bureaucracy. There's no way to 'disprove' the theory, and so debating it becomes a waste of time.

Actually, the theory is perfectly disprovable. Let us suppose that (as US strategists planned) the Soviet bloc had broken up through *national* contradictions; or that it had fallen through a mass street-and-strike movement bringing in liberalism. Both are perfectly conceivable, but neither actually happened. *The Soviet leadership* collapsed its own regime and dumped the eastern bloc states, in the hope of overcoming its economic problems through gaining access to the US-led financial and trade system. Some east European states had, by taking distance from Moscow, obtained limited access of this sort in the 1970s (Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary) and obtained temporary economic growth spurts by doing so. So it is not a *hypothesis* that the Soviet bureaucracy collapsed its regime, led alone an "unfalsifiable claim": it is a *fact*.

Secondly, Kisherian's argument poses the question: why did the Soviet regime *have* "economic issues", which every Soviet leader from Stalin onwards had identified, and which the Gorbachev leadership hoped to solve by *perestroika*? There is an enormous mass of evidence that the incentive structures of forced collectivisation and the 'plan' *tended towards* the 'stagnation' which Soviet leaders endlessly complained of.⁶ Kisherian argues that in the 1980s "the moment clearly called for a tactical retreat to some new version of the NEP". But the Soviet regime had been experimenting with partial marketisation since Khrushchev and throughout the Brezhnev period. It

was the *failure* of these efforts which led to the *perestroika* turn and the collapse.⁷

China

Kisherian's argument for his alternative is, at the end of the day, the survival and prospering of China. I say just 'China', because the US now seems to be in the end-game of its siege warfare against Cuba; the *Juche* ideology in North Korea is pretty pure nationalism, and there is substantial Chinese-style marketisation; and Vietnam and Laos look like 'normal' labour superexploitation semi-colonies. In relation to China, the question is: *in what direction* is China moving? In 2005 I wrote:

US geopolitics in relation to the USSR and Vietnam led in the 1970s to the US making significant trade, financial and technical openings towards China. The result, after the fall of the 'Gang of Four', was a major shift, through a NEP-style policy, in the direction of the development of capitalism in China within the political integument of the bureaucratic regime. This development has involved not only inwards investment by capitals from the existing imperialist centres, but also a substantial growth of Chinese capitals.

Under these conditions the Chinese state leadership has around the turn of the century been endeavouring to reinvent the state with a view to managing a cold transition to capitalism without collapsing into semi-colonial status. For ideological forms for this purpose it has drawn both on the long history of the pre-revolutionary Confucian bureaucracy, and on 'social market', 'sustainable development' and social-democratic ideas current in western Europe. It faces, however, two major contradictions in this project.

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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The first is that it is not in the interests of the US that China should emerge as an independent capitalist or imperialist power, either strategically - because the ring of US clients and semi-clients round China is not at all identical to the effective subordination of the European powers to the US, so that an independent capitalist China would present a strategic threat to US world hegemony - or immediately - because the immediate solvency of the US financial system depends on sucking Chinese money capital into US money markets. This contradiction is reflected in US 'human rights' rhetoric, in US pressure on China to alter its monetary and economic policies in favour of the US and "enforce IPRs effectively", and in US endeavours to manipulate control of oil supplies and to create a more effective encirclement of China through US moves into central Asia.

The second is that the Chinese bureaucracy remains a descendant of the Soviet bureaucracy, and the claim of the CPC to represent the workers and peasants remains an important component in the internal coherence of the party and in the legitimacy of the party's "leading role". This contradiction is reflected both internally in ideological manoeuvres and inner-party tensions in the CPC, and externally in 'democracy' mutterings from the intelligentsia and localised worker and peasant protests, of types very traditional in the bureaucratic regimes. The failure of an independent trade union movement to emerge, in spite of massive proletarianisation and growth of a reserve army of labour, and the presence instead of local protests which appeal to honest bureaucrats against corrupt bureaucrats, are the clearest evidence in the considerable obscurity of current Chinese politics that the bureaucratic regime remains in place despite its extensive capitalist overlay.⁸

Twenty years since writing this, I think

it gets the *dynamics* of the situation of China about right and is confirmed by subsequent developments. It seems to me clear that the *direction of movement* is not towards socialism, but towards China as an imperialist rival to the USA. As yet this involves a much lower level of control of the destination countries of Chinese investment compared to the USA; but this was true just as much of French, US and German investments in Latin America in the later 19th century - competing with the British world hegemon, and offering a more 'egalitarian' and 'progressive' approach than Britain; but nonetheless needing to enforce debts and property rights and make a return above domestic investments.

Again, the argument that China is moving *towards* imperialist capitalism is absolutely not "unfalsifiable". It may turn out to be wrong; but is it obviously wrong enough to bet the future of the international left on its being wrong (as Parvus and his co-thinkers in 1914 bet the future of the international left on German victory)?

Finally on this issue. Kisherian throughout this section of his piece proceeds on the basis that my arguments are characterised by an untheorised hatred of "bureaucrats" and "bureaucracy". In reality, my arguments start with Marx on the Prussian state bureaucracy in the *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right [law]* and his characterisations of Louis Bonaparte's political regime in *The civil war in France*: that the state bureaucracy pursues not the general interest, but the 'turf interests' of individual bureaucrats. For myself, going beyond this starting point, I understand the full-time officials of trade unions, political parties, etc, and of states, as a section of the employed middle class - a component of the petty bourgeoisie, characterised by holdings of informal "intellectual property rights". Their class *origins* (which comrade Kisherian thinks are decisive) are overridden in most cases by their current situation. It is this class character which produces both the "economic issues" of the USSR (managers and officials lying to keep their jobs, leading to planning failures) and the dynamic towards capitalism,

which is produced by deploying market mechanisms to solve this problem.

Kisherian, then, on the question of "love the bureaucracy", offers merely a politics of nostalgia for the world as it was before 1989-1991. This is a very common feature of the left, in a variety of different forms (left social democrats, for example, imagine a return to the cold war period system of economic management). It is useless as a politics for the future.

Sect defence

Kisherian argues that "Sects largely emerge during times of failure. Conversely, sects primarily decline, once it becomes clear that one organisation in particular has momentum." He offers no historical evidence of this claim at all. The historical evidence is, in fact, the reverse. Revolutionary crises "lift all boats" and produce a proliferation of left groups of one sort and another. The Second and Third Congresses of Soviets in October 1917 and May 1918 included representation not only from Bolsheviks, Mensheviks (defencist and internationalist) and Socialist Revolutionaries (right and left) but also from a wide range of smaller groups. In Portugal in 1974-76 every Trotskyist international faction and some Maoist ones constructed their own Portuguese organisation. And so on.

Conversely, Kisherian's argument - for free competition between rival sects with one coming out on top - pays no attention at all to the actual history, in which the *unification* of groups produces a 'snowball effect', meaning the unified group has much more weight. This goes back to the 1875 Gotha unification of the Lassalleans and Eisenachers, to the 1889 Hainfeld unification of Austrian social democrats, and so on; it can be seen in the recent past in the greater weight of the Portuguese Left Bloc, compared to its former components, and on a larger scale and temporarily with Rifondazione Comunista in Italy (destroyed when it entered government).

There is, on the contrary, *no example* of one of the competing far-left sects 'winning out' and becoming the dominant dynamic leadership, leading to a mass party. And this in spite of the fact that comrade Kisherian's policy - split in order to try out a better tactic - has been persistently attempted, not only in the imperialist countries, but also in the 'global south'. Plenty of evidence is available for both Trotskyism and Maoism. Red Ant itself is one of the diminished remnants of the Australian SWP, later 'Democratic Socialist Party', which at its height imagined it had marginalised the rest of the far left.

Kisherian's fourth heading, 'Some sects cannot get along', argues that "often the debate itself ends up being an unproductive waste of time. The time spent debating whether or not office workers count as proletarian could have been better spent debating a thousand or so more productive and interesting questions." In reality, however, this debate has real and immediate practical consequences.

The Spartacists, for example, argue for Communist Unity (and in Britain for the British left) to pursue a policy of industrial colonisation, which failed for US Maoists and the British left in the 1970s, and again (more disastrously) for the Fourth International in the 1980s. They justify this line by claiming that office and shop workers are not proletarians. The converse of this point is that the Spartacists' line rests on an implicit syndicalism - the belief that power must be taken through a general strike or strike wave. The contrary of this approach is that, because the proletariat includes the whole social class dependent

on the wage share of output, for the class to be capable of taking power it needs to organise campaigns for law reforms (like the Ten Hour Day Act 1847) and for electoral representation. What superficially appears as an issue of theory (what is the proletariat?) is actually an issue of immediate political choices.

It may be that some comrades who have been influenced by the 'partyism' of the CPGB imagine that what we propose is peaceful coexistence between factions. It is not. Mark Fischer made the point as far back as 1996. We do not propose non-aggression pacts, but open political combat on the basis of agreements for common action round a programme voted on and accepted - not agreed - as the basis for common action.⁹

It is this political combat which comrade Kisherian takes to be "autonomy and individualism". If I compare the left of the 1970s to the left of today, the former was a lot better politically educated - in spite of having much less access to readings than today's left (which has the Marxists Internet Archive, and so on). Why? The answer is that it was not only the case that the 'Unified Secretariat of the Fourth International', in which I was involved, had routine factions (called "tendencies") and the conflict of the factions led members to read more deeply. It was also that members of the old CPGB, the British Socialist Workers Party and the splinters off it, the Healyite Workers Revolutionary Party, etc, debated *with each other* and, as a result, education of participants was deepened. The sect view that such debates are a waste of time and everyone should face outwards to the mass of the class produces both dumbing down and the visible political victory of forms of opportunist adaptation to capitalist politics, in the hope of reaching the masses and outcompeting.

Comrade Kisherian claims that the partyists' advocacy of open debate and freedom of association (factions) is liberalism. The truth is the exact reverse. It is *liberalism* which conceives the role of political parties as competing with each other to attract the masses. And it is this liberalism which comrade Kisherian's defence of sectarianism promotes ●

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Notes

1. 'New proscriptions for old', April 30 2026 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1583/new-proscriptions-for-old); 'Socialism requires democracy', May 7 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1584/socialism-requires-democracy); 'Break with diplomatic self-silencing', May 14 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1585/break-with-diplomatic-self-silencing).
2. redantcollective.org/2026/05/14/partyism-and-the-limits-of-liberalism.
3. Eg. redantcollective.org/2025/11/29/there-is-nothing-wrong-with-the-left; also Kisherian (note 2 as merely the abbreviation).
4. redantcollective.org/2023/04/27/the-australian-swps-break-from-trotskyism-and-its-relevance-today.
5. Text cited above, note 3.
6. H Tiktin *Origins of the crisis in the USSR* (London 1992) provides a clear theoretical account.
7. Eg. M Lewin *Stalinism and the seeds of Soviet reform* New York 1974.
8. In a contribution to a CPGB discussion on the 'Soviet question', which used to be on a page of this discussion on our party website, lost in a hacker attack some years ago.
9. 'Room for all revolutionaries' *Weekly Worker* November 28 1996 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/169/room-for-all-revolutionaries).

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weekly worker

Underfunded
and ready
for further
privatisation

Diagnosis of systemic failure

There is a huge gap between the life expectancy of the rich and the poor. When it comes to healthy life expectancy, things are bad and getting worse. However it could be very different, says **James Linney**

At the end of April, the Health Foundation published an analysis titled 'Healthy life expectancy trends in the UK: a watershed moment',¹ using Office for National Statistics data to examine changes in healthy life expectancy over the past decade. The publication prompted a flurry of alarming headlines in the media summarising its findings, which, as we shall see, makes for rather depressing reading. Despite Labour's manifesto pledge to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy, the report concludes that things are actually getting worse, not better.

'Healthy life expectancy' is defined by the Health Foundation as the average number of years a person can expect to live in good health, based on current mortality rates and levels of self-reported good health. This differs from average 'life expectancy', which simply measures the number of years a person or group is expected to live, based on mortality rates, birth year and age. The authors argue that healthy life expectancy gives a more comprehensive picture of the nation's health by considering not just how long people live, but the condition in which they live those years.

Looking solely at life expectancy, the picture appears somewhat less bleak. Over the past two centuries, life expectancy has steadily increased. Between 1805 and 1905, the rise was gradual, with average life expectancy increasing from around 40 years at the beginning of the 19th century to 50 years by its end. There were some medical and sanitation advances during the early years of the industrial revolution, but they were almost exclusively the privilege of the bourgeoisie. Despite the explosive growth in the population of the urban working class, workers and their families were virtually without a political voice and were forced to live in severely cramped houses, without sanitation or access to healthcare and forced (from early childhood) to work in terrible, deadly factories - what William Blake described as "dark satanic mills".

During the 20th century, however, improvements accelerated dramatically, and by 2005 life expectancy had risen to 78.4 years. The reasons for this steep increase were manifold. Scientific advances led to major breakthroughs in medicine, including antibiotics, contraception and treatment for conditions such as high blood pressure and heart disease. Child mortality rates fell sharply with the introduction of immunisations and eventually the near eradication of previously deadly childhood infectious diseases, such as polio and measles.

Yet socio-political changes also played a crucial role in allowing these advances to benefit wider sections of society. The working class began to assert itself politically in the form of mass unions and the Labour Party, while never going beyond a rather tepid reformism, the ruling class was prepared to pay what amounted



Jēkabs Kazaks 'Three old ladies' (1916)

to *Danegeld*, the price for the not making revolution. The result was the creation of the National Health Service and the expansion of welfare provisions. Working people could now access treatment for illnesses that had previously amounted to a death sentence: heart disease, diabetes, infectious diseases and hypertension among them.

Stagnant

Since 2005, however, improvements in life expectancy have slowed significantly and have remained more or less stagnant since 2011. Global life expectancy fell between 2019 and 2021 as a consequence of Covid-19, though it has now largely recovered to pre-pandemic levels. In the UK, life expectancy currently stands at 83.0 years for females and 79.1 years for males.

The Health Foundation's main finding, however, was that despite this relative stability in life expectancy, healthy life expectancy in the UK fell dramatically over the decade from 2012-14 to 2022-24, declining by around two years. Currently, men in the UK can expect an average of 60.7 years of healthy life, while women can expect 60.9 years.

Furthermore, the report states: "Healthy life expectancy has now fallen below the state pension age of 66 years in more than 90% of areas. In more than one in 10 local areas, healthy life expectancy is below 55 years."

Perhaps most shocking of all, the report found that: "Deep inequalities in healthy life expectancy between affluent and deprived areas have widened. The gap between the most and least deprived deciles in England is now 19.4 years for males and 20.3 years for females." Thus, while in affluent areas such as Richmond upon Thames both men and women can

expect to remain healthy well beyond retirement age, in Blackpool healthy life expectancy for males was only 50.9 years, while in Hartlepool it was as low as 51.2 years for females.

There are, of course, important limitations to the Health Foundation's analysis, as pointed out in a recent *Financial Times* article.² The data used to calculate healthy life expectancy relies partly on annual surveys conducted by the Office for National Statistics, introducing a greater degree of subjectivity. Participants are asked to rate their health as 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad', or 'very bad', as well as answer questions about any chronic illnesses. Surveys inevitably contain an element of participant bias, but this does not render them useless and it still points to a true decline in health relative to previous surveys.

The *FT* article also argues that much of the decline in healthy life expectancy is driven by worsening mental health among younger people, rather than deteriorating physical health among older people. Yet this does not undermine the legitimacy of the findings. Furthermore, mental and physical health are deeply interconnected and cannot always be neatly separated.

So, despite being aware of these limitations, we can see that the key conclusions from the healthy life expectancy data still stand: that people are increasingly living with chronic illness; that deprivation is strongly associated with poor health; and that the UK is a very unequal place. Though disgraceful, the findings are no big surprise and are entirely consistent with evidence from other sources. It is already well established that deprivation is one of the greatest determinants of both mental and physical ill health, and the inequality gap continues to widen. Even though overall life expectancy has stabilised,

those in the poorest areas can still expect to die around a decade earlier than those in the wealthiest.³

Moreover, although modern medicine has reduced mortality, increasing numbers of people are now living with at least one major chronic illness: around 40% of adults⁴ - and this figure is projected to rise significantly by 2040. Combined with an ageing population, this means that more and more people are spending later life in frailty and ill health.

The rising obesity rates are one explanation for the increase in chronic health conditions. Between 1993 and 2022 the proportion of adults in England who are obese rose from 14.9% to 28.9%, while the proportion who were either overweight or obese rose from 52.9% to 63.9%.⁵ Obesity can lead to the development of other chronic illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal conditions, liver disease and mental health problems.

Ageing

These demographic shifts are happening in the UK at the same time as the NHS has been severely defunded and large parts have been gifted to private healthcare providers - emergency departments are routinely completely overwhelmed and waiting times for basic elective care are now measured in years, not weeks. Mental health provision has been one of the services most severely hit by cuts, with young people especially facing huge gaps in service and unable to access basic support or psychology.

Ageing and the increased risk of illness that comes with it, is of course, a natural process. We rightly mock the billionaire 'tech bros' pouring their fortunes into life-extension biotechnology, in the hope that wealth might somehow bribe death itself. Yet the reality for most people today is

not simply that they age, but that they become ill prematurely. Biological limits are not the main barrier to healthier lives: rather, it is the system under which we are forced to live.

Most people spend the majority of their waking lives working in environments detrimental to their health, either sitting sedentarily in front of screens for hours on end or performing repetitive manual labour that damages joints and backs. As a result, people lack adequate time for exercise, spending time outdoors in nature, maintaining relationships, preparing and sharing meals, or even getting sufficient rest and sleep. All of which is the perfect storm for creating poor mental and physical health.

Poor-quality and expensive housing is also contributing significantly to ill health and rising morbidity. As an article in *The Conversation* points out,

When housing is unaffordable, people are forced to make trade-offs: for example, trading affordability for damp or overcrowded homes. They cut back on heating, food, medication, transport and social participation ... Poor housing quality directly shapes health. Cold, damp, mould, disrepair, poor ventilation and unsafe homes are directly linked to respiratory illness, cardiovascular risk, mental health problems and reduced wellbeing.⁶

Of course, capitalism has overseen previously unimaginable scientific and technological advances that have helped extend human life. But these advances have occurred not *because* of capitalism, but *despite* it. Under capitalism, scientific, medical and technological breakthroughs are rapidly commodified and turned into new opportunities for profit and the accumulation of immense wealth by a tiny minority. The promise of progress for all has always been a hollow lie.

Only the working class can expose and overcome this lie - by providing freedom from wage labour; freely available, high-quality food; housing with space to live, ventilation and adequate heating; and daily access to exercise and green outdoor spaces for all - in other words, a life of both quantity and quality.

These are not utopian demands. They are the bare minimum conditions for a healthy life, yet they have proven entirely unattainable under capitalism •

Notes

1. www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/analysis/healthy-life-expectancy-trends-in-the-uk-a-watershed-moment
2. www.ft.com/content/766ee31-d73d-441d-8772-6fd426d2b7e2
3. www.health.org.uk/evidence-hub/health-inequalities/inequalities-in-life-expectancy-and-healthy-life-expectancy
4. digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2021-part-2/adult-health-general-health
5. researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03336/SN03336.pdf
6. theconversation.com/how-britains-housing-crisis-contributes-to-its-declining-healthy-life-expectancy-281605