



weekly **worker**



Burnham's 'no border poll' ruling - a body blow for Sinn Féin and all who fostered illusions in the Good Friday Agreement

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RISE OF THE ROBOTS

LETTERS



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

Grow your own

I attended most of Communist University online this year and as usual there was a discussion about the usefulness of engaging with other political movements on the left.

The argument in favour of this is commonly that it is 'a field of struggle' and an opportunity to recruit new members. We heard stories of the various attempts to form parties on the left over the past few decades and I have briefly - in my relatively short life on the left - been involved with a few of them myself. They all end in disappointment. Extraordinary quantities of time and effort are expended by good comrades on creations that from an early stage look like three-legged horses. Your Party is the most recent example.

I came to the CPGB because I was persuaded by the arguments and presentations provided by its members - most notably the late Kevin Bean and Carla Roberts. A book group exploring Mike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy* and subsequent discussions with Yassamine Mather and Mike himself led me to join as a candidate member, then subsequently I became a full member.

In my view the cause of building a Communist Party is best served by clear presentation of the arguments for communism now, evidence-based discussion of attempts to implement communism in the past, and personal engagement by committed communists with those who can be persuaded to commit themselves.

I invite those who continue to put forward the argument that it is worthwhile engaging in the 'field of struggle' represented by organisations like Your Party to present their evidence of what substantive result such engagements have ever produced historically. How many people have joined the CPGB after becoming disillusioned with Your Party or any of its other inglorious predecessors?

I hope this letter provokes a flurry of responses filled with evidence of substantive benefits to convince me that I'm wrong!

Ken Syme
email

Lock 'em up

One thing I've found strange, as a long-time observer and recent member of the Democratic Socialists of America, is the leftist group doesn't seem to do a lot of messaging about the need to lock up the fascist criminals in president Donald Trump's administration.

I generally associate these kinds of demands with mainstream liberals who watch the MS Now TV station or alienated conservatives who read *The Bulwark*. And, yet, punishing such authoritarian lawbreakers for their domestic and international crimes is essential in my view. Without severe consequences, Republicans have demonstrated they will simply continue to radicalise.

When I wrote this on DSA's internal forums, I was met by a good deal of trolling. I'd recently caused a bit of a stir, by arguing the socialist group should vote against self-avowed Marxist-Leninists seeking positions of DSA leadership, as Stalinism and its descendant ideologies were unapologetically anti-democratic. One person asked, who was the Marxist-Leninist now? Needless to say, prosecuting Trump and his cronies who have genuinely tried to overthrow the limited self-government we have is very different from Stalinist show trials. I don't think these objections

were made in good faith, so they're not worth dwelling on.

One argument that appeared to be made in earnest was that the DSA has committed itself to police and prison abolition, so calling for fascist gangsters to be locked up would be hypocritical. For what it's worth, I don't consider myself an abolitionist in this sense. Even if police and prisons are dramatically transformed and called something else, I believe there will always be a need for people to enforce the law and a place to confine those who violently break it. While I'm all for forgiveness, if abolitionism is preventing you from supporting legal consequences for an aspiring dictator and his conspirators, who are unleashing terror at home and abroad, you should reconsider your politics.

That said, most of those writing on the forums seemed to agree that prosecuting leaders of the Maga movement was necessary and that, for whatever reason, the DSA didn't seem to be making this demand a priority. A number of people added messaging on the subject would be immensely popular with the Democratic Party base, which is hungry for justice, when it comes to Republican malfeasance. Political layups don't get much easier. The DSA should take the opportunity to give mainstream liberals what they want, while distinguishing the organisation from the do-nothing Democratic establishment.

All political progress in the USA is contingent on beating back the current fascist menace. The experience of president Joe Biden's administration shows that attempts to turn the page on fascist criminality without imposing stiff legal consequences will only result in the far right coming back stronger and more radicalised. Most Democratic politicians are conflict-averse. Unless there is an overwhelming drumbeat within the party's base demanding accountability for Trump and his coterie of fascist gangsters, liberal politicians will repeat the mistakes of Biden's administration. The DSA should be beating this drum as hard as it can.

Jon Hochschartner
Connecticut

DSA 'communists'

There was an interesting discussion about the upcoming US mid-term elections at the Online Communist Forum on Sunday August 30. There was also discussion on Trump's reaction to the DSA - they're all communists!

It is worth a mention, I think, regarding the reaction of the Democratic Party leadership to all these 'leftists' winning primaries. The said leadership has been in the habit of saying to 'leftists': 'Well, you lost the primary - now you must campaign for the winning Democrat candidate.'

Apparently, they are not so keen on the converse case. A DSA candidate, on, say, \$700,000, beats the 'centrist', on, say \$7 million and the leaders are not quite sure what to do next. Leaders in Congress, the Senate and the individual states fear some small erosion of their absolute control - so who must they support? Their quiet support of Trump policies may get some unwelcome attention from the public.

Jim Nelson
email

Rojava closure

As to Rojava comes to an end: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are about to become part of the new Syrian army under Ahmed al-Sharaa. With this, all Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria is being abandoned. The Women's Defence Units, meanwhile, will take on the role of an "anti-terrorism police force". This

is what Mazlum Abdi, commander of the SDF, said on Syrian television.

The new Syrian state under Ahmed al-Sharaa is pro-western and particularly keen to maintain close relations with the United States, while under Bashar al-Assad it was geopolitically aligned with Russia and Iran. This, in all likelihood, is what this particular episode was always really about. Not human rights, not authoritarianism - and least of all the pursuit of egalitarianism, grassroots democracy or feminism - but great-power geopolitics.

Naturally, in the minds of many western leftists - some of whom showed great physical courage by volunteering for this misadventure - the matter went far beyond that. And it went far beyond that in the minds of the Kurds themselves, who have historically been repeatedly screwed over - and have now been screwed over once again.

But from the perspective of the state that supplied the SDF with weapons, special forces, logistical and medical personnel, vehicles, individual equipment, training, air support, intelligence and assistance on the ground - not for a brief period, but for roughly a decade, from the very formation of the SDF in 2015 until the point at which they ceased to be geopolitically useful - it was never anything other than this.

As with the SDF's pragmatic dealings with Assad's Syria, I'm not sure its alliance with the United States was ever a matter of ideological convergence. Rojava simply cooperated with whoever was willing to assist it at any given point. These were not moral choices, but practical ones. Unfortunately, choices have consequences.

I don't necessarily think that one should be condemned simply for accepting arms from this or that power, if it is a matter of tactical necessity in a particular situation. But if you cooperate with a much stronger power over the course of a decade, receiving training, arms, intelligence, etc, then this is no longer simply a momentary tactical arrangement: you become integrated into the stronger partner's strategy, while your own aims become subordinated to it. You become a proxy - and ultimately become liable to be abandoned or fucked up the arse by your patron at any time.

Maciej Zurowski
Italy

Totalitarian threat

Jon Hochschartner's letter (August 27) reflects the contradiction on the left between democratic socialism and Leninist totalitarianism. This contradiction exists in every leftwing party, the most recent example being Jeremy Corbyn's Your Party. Many people on the left are in the camp of totalitarianism, even without realising it. (When I use this term I confine it to politics and culture, rather than applying it to the economic level of society. At the economic level, the more control humanity has over the economy, the better.)

It is of great importance for people on the left to understand the nature of this contradiction. At the present time most probably don't realise that the ruling class can turn against private capitalism and nationalise the economy. All it will take is the complete collapse of the capitalist system, which I expect to happen any time before 2035. This can then be presented as a necessary measure in line with socialism. But a managerial revolution from above leads directly to totalitarianism. And a revolution from below can lead to the same place in the absence of democratic socialism.

In my view, although it can be traced

earlier, the transition of the communist party from democratic socialism to totalitarianism began in 1921, with Lenin's resolution formally banning factions in the party. This ban was supported by Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev and others, although previously the Bolsheviks had made a revolution and won a civil war without having to ban factions - a feat later repeated by the Communist Party of China.

The banning of factions in a socialist or communist party is politically telling us that a bureaucratic caste - ie, a totalitarian managerial stratum - has taken over the party. In other words, those who support a formal banning of factions in leftwing parties are the unconscious agents of the bourgeois tendencies. The class struggle exists in the party before and after the communist or socialist party comes to power.

It is the capitalist tendencies which seek to formally ban factions in the communist party. Lenin became an unconscious tool of the capitalist tendency within socialism, supported by others. He certainly wasn't consciously seeking to support the managerial or bureaucratic stratum within socialism, whose *modus operandi* is totalitarianism at the political level.

As the unconscious tool of the totalitarian tendency on the left in conflict with democratic socialism, Leninism was bound to collapse sooner or later. But it's important to realise that the totalitarian tendency within socialism doesn't have to take a Leninist guise.

It's also important to realise that the contradiction between the totalitarian and the democratic tendency is of a non-antagonistic nature. Hochschartner clearly recognises this without a conscious recourse to dialectics. Hence he correctly opposes the expulsion of 'Marxist-Leninists' from the Democratic Socialist of America.

It is time for all communist and socialist parties to declare themselves supporters of democratic socialism against the totalitarian tendency, which is behind the constant fragmentation of the left when not in power.

Tony Clark
For Democratic Socialism

Kill, kill, kill

Those of us with long memories (or a good connection to Dr Google) will remember Joe Hill, the activist and song writer, who was executed in 1915 by firing squad. As it is now over 100 years later, and with capital punishment absent from most European thoughts, one would have thought the question of firing squads was farthest from most people's minds. Unfortunately, not in Trump's USA.

The states which have carried out the most executions between 1976 and now are (no surprise here): Texas (600), Oklahoma (132), Florida (138), Missouri (102) and Alabama (84). Twenty-seven states have capital punishment, of which two (Oregon and Wyoming) have no inmates sentenced to death. The other 23 and Washington DC have abolished or established a moratorium over capital punishment. (Some federal crimes also carry the death penalty.)

Most people in Europe probably remember that between 1967 and 1977 there were no executions and many of us felt (hoped) that that was the end of capital punishment in the US. In 1972 the US Supreme Court changed all pending death sentences to life in prison. But then in 1976, with many of the states having introduced new death penalty laws, the Supreme Court reversed its decision.

The usual manner of killing by the state until now has been the lethal injection. However, various states have had problems with this method of death. In one state, the medical team had problems with an IV line and the convict had to be returned to his cell. The publicity was lethal itself. Other states have had problems because of an international boycott of sellers of the medical supplies used in an execution like this. One state took up nitrogen gas asphyxiation, which was then declared unconstitutional by Trump's Supreme Court. (I guess even they couldn't stomach the possibility of people dying by a slow form of strangulation.) Four firing squad executions have been planned since 2010, and of those two went terribly wrong, with the executed dying slowly and in great pain.

The state closest to actually executing someone by firing squad is Idaho. Originally they wanted to use it from July 1 but so far it hasn't happened and there's no information as to why. Idaho's capital punishment law projects three volunteer shooters, known only to the state director of prisons and his deputy. Maybe the state can't find the three (there is no problem with almost anyone getting guns and ammunition in the US). Maybe the state is weighing up the publicity if an execution goes wrong in an election year?

The very first execution by gun was in Jamestown in 1608, but its use after that in the US has been sparse (147 of civilian prisoners since Jamestown), possibly because of stories like the one in 1879, where the prisoner took 27 minutes to die. The French in World War I were more charitable - the highest ranking soldier, after the firing squad had finished their grisly job, then shot the executed in the head, thus making sure he was well and truly dead.

As Langston Hughes once wrote, "To think is much against the will. Better - and easier - to kill."

Gaby Rubin
London

Fridaisation

The exhibition at the Tate Modern - 'Frida: the making of an icon' - presented a liberal sanitisation of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's work.

There were limited examples of her original work - made up for by lots of comparison work from other artists, dressing up pantomime-style in her image. Fridaisation was alluded to at the end point and without irony led directly to an overpriced gift shop for middle class tourists. There was only a passing inquiry into her personal, physical, blood-and-guts existence and zero mention of her communism and association with revolutionary social struggles.

There were lots of references to Frida as an "activist", her support for "progressive causes" and her darling status as a 'LGBTQIA' icon completed a sickening hatchet job that she doubtlessly would have been the first to contest. There was no exploration of her technique (not the purpose of this 'Frida for dummies' effort), while ignoring the communist politics underpinning her work and associations veers into the appropriation of 'our' culture.

Whether this was deliberate or reflects ignorance on the part of the curators (seems unlikely), we are reminded that art is a terrain as much as the workplace, community or the field of ideas. As a long-term admirer of her work and a regular visitor to both Tate Modern/Tate Britain, this exhibition left me cold and resenting the £25 entrance cost for a disappointing afternoon.

Paul Cooper
Email

IRELAND

Taking unity off the table

Andy Burnham has made it abundantly clear, whatever the Irish people want there will be no border poll. For those, and not only in Sinn Féin, who have fostered illusions in the Good Friday Agreement, this is a strategic body blow. For communists it comes as no surprise, writes **Carl Collins**

There is a darkly humorous anecdote from Northern Ireland. A Catholic asks a Protestant: “How will you stop us winning a border poll, when there are more of us than you?” The reply: “Shoot some of you.”

The joke captures two features of the Irish question. First, it treats demography as destiny, assuming that Catholics will continue to outbreed Protestants, and that means it is only a matter of time before a reunited Ireland is realised. The second part of the joke works because the sectarian antagonisms remain a defining feature of politics in Northern Ireland.

Against this backdrop, many were surprised by Andy Burnham’s categorical declaration that a border poll was “off the table”. He justified this by referring to the divisions associated with the 2016 referendum on Brexit and the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Instead he wants people to concentrate on ‘bread and butter’ issues such as the cost of living and public services.

His comments are politically significant. As well as reigniting debate about the nature of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the history of British colonialism, Irish self-determination, nationalism and unionism, not to mention the class nature of democracy and nation-states, they do mark a definite shift. Louise Haigh, deputy PM, had previously stated in 2021 that it was not up to the Labour Party “to be a persuader for the Union”. Of course, she added that the constitutional future rests on the principle of consent by the people of Northern Ireland.¹ Burnham does not want to be outdone by the Tories and Reform when it comes to UK unity, patriotism and waving the flag.

Then there is Burnham’s commitment to devolution. Some atomised ‘lefts’ have accused him of double standards.² But wanting more Bonapartist mayors has little or nothing to do with Irish reunification. Yet the fact of the matter is that Burnham’s hands are tied by the history of Northern Ireland, its creation and the strategic approach of Westminster and the British state long before he became PM.

True, the GFA states:

It is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, north and south, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.³

However, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states: “the secretary of state shall exercise the power [to hold a border poll] if at any time it appears likely to him [!] that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland.”⁴

Taken together, these provisions expose a fundamental contradiction. The GFA supposedly presents Irish self-determination, and most of the



Éamon de Valera addressing a crowd in County Clare in July 1917

republican and socialist left urged a ‘yes’ vote in 1998: Sinn Féin, SDLP, Communist Party of Ireland, the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Movement, etc. GFA would defeat the Paisleyite ‘no’ campaign, end the violence and step by step lead to a reunified Ireland (and, for the economic left, ‘normal class politics’). But, and this is crucial, the GFA and the Northern Ireland Act actually leaves the decisive trigger for a border poll in the hands of the British secretary of state, who alone decides whether it “appears likely” that a majority in Northern Ireland would vote for unity.

This imbalance has been at the heart of decades of frustration for those of us wanting an end to British occupation of the Six Counties. Those who placed faith in the GFA road through which Irish unity could ultimately be delivered are now confronted with the reality of British strategic interests... and Britain does still have a strategic interest in being able to control the whole of the island of Ireland through controlling Northern Ireland. (If the south could be brought into Nato that might be a different matter). Burnham’s ‘bread and butter’ remarks ought therefore to bring about a radical rethink on the left, not silly complaints about inconsistency.

Oppression

Any serious analysis has to go back considerably earlier than the GFA. Britain’s relationship with Ireland developed through periods of conquest, colonisation, settlement, resistance and incorporation, leading to today’s political and social situation.

The Act of Union of 1800 abolished the Irish parliament and incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 established separate institutions for northern and southern Ireland, providing the constitutional framework for partition. And the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 established the Irish free state, while Northern Ireland remained in the United Kingdom.

So partition was no arbitrary administrative accident. Northern Ireland was constructed as a six-county entity within the United

Kingdom, with its constitutional relationship to Britain maintained through the institutions of the state. The sectarian and colonial structures that shaped society had deep roots in the English/Scottish colonisation of Ulster, particularly the ‘plantation’ of the 17th century.⁵ These historical divisions subsequently shaped the political and constitutional processes that helped produce the six-county state of Northern Ireland.

Constitutional arrangements are never politically neutral. Northern Ireland’s creation reflected the strategic interests of the British state, while compromising with Irish nationalism and its ambitions: Éamonn de Valera wanted a united, Catholic, Gaelic nation based on rural smallholdings, economically self-sufficient and free from British interference. Though never fully realisable, that programme helps explain the huge popularity of his Fianna Fáil amongst small farmers and urban workers that made it the dominant political party in Ireland during the 20th century.

Meanwhile in the north, Protestant workers and farmers could be relied upon to protect the union with Britain by voting for the Ulster Unionist Party, in return for which they received material, political and cultural privileges. Catholics were a second class minority.

Of course, Protestant and Catholic are not simply religious categories. There are class and national divisions that closely map onto those confessional designations. In Northern Ireland the Protestant working class was a labour aristocracy and clung to a definite British-Irish national identity. Despite the promises of the GFA, that has not gone away. Indeed the GFA has institutionalised sectarianism: every government has to be a coalition uniting the two different ‘traditions’. Hence today we have a four-party coalition: Sinn Féin, Democratic Unionist Party, Alliance and Ulster Unionist Party.

The political task of communists is not to rely on the terms of the GFA and tailing Sinn Féin in the forlorn hope of forcing the British secretary of state to concede a border poll. That is the perspective of the Socialist Workers Network and People Before Profit (its leader, Richard Boyd Barrett

dreams of becoming a minister in a ‘left’ government headed by Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O’Neill).

This is where James Connolly remains important. Connolly did not regard national independence as the final destination of political struggle. He understood that an independent Ireland could still be an Ireland in which workers were exploited: “If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic, your efforts will be in vain.”⁶

The point was not that national liberation was meaningless. It was that changing the flag was not enough. A united Ireland under capitalism would still contain landlords, employers, banks, financial capital and transnational corporations. Workers would still have to fight over wages, housing, public services, democracy and the distribution of wealth.

The abolition of partition and the abolition of capitalism are therefore different political questions. They are connected, but they are not the same thing.

Self-determination

Burnham’s argument that referendums can be socially divisive is not wrong. Referendums reduce complicated questions to binary choices and can be dominated by wealthy interests, the mainstream media and misinformation that amounts to barefaced lies. Brexit demonstrated how competing sections of the ruling class can use popular fears and frustrations to rally the masses *behind them*: we had two bourgeois camps. The Lexit campaign tailed Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage; Another Europe is Possible tailed David Cameron, George Osborne and Keir Starmer.

Democratic rights cannot be conditional upon everyone agreeing in advance about the result. The fact that a question is divisive does not make it illegitimate. The constitutional question already divides Northern Ireland. It is embedded in political parties, institutions, identities and competing understandings of national belonging. Refusing to provide a democratic solution does not make those divisions disappear.

The real issue is not demanding

the ‘right’ to hold a referendum though. We recognise no such ‘right’. Especially here in Britain we should be demanding a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. In Ireland itself communists should stress rapprochement and voluntary unity. We have no interest in unity brought about at the point of a bayonet.

There are those who see Irish unity as a necessary stage in the struggle for socialism. Their basic idea is that workers should pursue their economic struggles around wages, rents, public services, etc. Meanwhile they should support, aid, pressurise, urge on the Sinn Féin ‘left’ nationalists. No, on the contrary, it is the working class itself that needs to take on the leadership of all democratic questions - not least, when it comes to Ireland, the national question.

The national question and socialism are hardly the same thing. But they are related though, *given working class leadership*. Without working class leadership all we have is one variety or another of nationalism. That is for sure.

The Irish Free State provides an unsurpassed historical example of what happens when workers have been persuaded, politically disarmed, by the arguments of stagism. Independence did not abolish capitalism: it changed the political framework within which Irish capitalism developed. National independence and working class emancipation were never the same thing. The same would be true of a united Ireland today. A united Irish state would still be part of an international capitalist economy. Capital would still move across borders. Transnational companies would still operate. Employers would still seek to maximise profits and workers would still have to organise to defend their interests.

There is therefore no case for pretending that Irish unity in and of itself is a prelude to socialism. In fact, even if a 32-county Socialist Republic is declared and the red flag raised over Dublin Castle, the danger is that, far from it inspiring others as Connolly hoped, it would be the prelude for disaster. A united *but isolated* Ireland would be blockaded, sanctioned, even invaded. That is why a European perspective is the vital starting point. Socialist politics in Ireland do not culminate in a 32-county Socialist Republic. That is a left nationalist delusion.

Working class liberation has to be international or it is nothing: capital rules as a global system and can only be superseded globally. A united Europe under the rule of the working class represents the most realistic route towards that end ●

Notes

1. *The National* August 31 2026.
2. www.reddit.com/r/LabourUK/comments/1w018pf/andy_burnham_says_a_united_ireland_poll_is_off/.
3. assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034123/The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf.
4. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents.
5. See J Bardon *The plantation of Ulster* Dublin 2011.
6. As explained by James Connolly in ‘Socialism and nationalism’: www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1897/01/socnat.htm.

USA

Going through the left

The DSA has grown significantly since 2016 and has recently won a string of congressional nominations. Communists have won increasing influence too. **Matthew Campbell-Strupp** discussed the perspectives of building a mass Communist Party in America at the opening session of CU 2026

What is the path to the mass communist party we need? Something we in the USA learned from the CPGB, which was an attractive answer to us and which we are still pursuing, is the idea of going through the existing left to get us to the mass communist party we need - regrouping self-identified Marxists in a programmatically unified party through open polemic.

Achieving unity in this way, we can have the sort of collective social weight and legitimacy as an alternative political force in order to get a snowball effect of growth, resulting in a communist party becoming a hegemonic political expression of the working class. This is in opposition to small groups of competing communists attempting to go to the class directly, either through agitation or by attempting to lead the economic struggle directly without having first achieved unity on a political basis.

In the US there was something called the 'base building tendency' and an organisation called Marxist Center that promoted the latter position. What became the Marxist Unity Group around the magazine *Cosmonaut* instead embraced building a *political* alternative and promoted the idea of programmatic unity. Those of us in MUG have attempted to follow this path primarily through engagement with the Democratic Socialists of America - an organisation which has regrouped both individuals and organised tendencies from across the various Marxist and more broadly leftwing traditions and which has also captured and developed significant layers of newly organised socialists in this country in both of its major growth phases from 2016 to 2020 and from the 2024 election to the present. At the same time, the DSA shifted significantly to the left after 2016, with its embrace of the 'boycott, divestment and sanctions' movement and exit from the Socialist International in 2017, and its 'Bernie or bust' position on the 2020 presidential election.

What became the Marxist Unity Group began intervening in the DSA around the 2021 convention, and since then we have had a significant effect on the organisation's overall political character, and have fought to democratise it and make its debates more clear and open - though its basic structure was already fairly democratic, compared to leadership-centric, left-populist or entrenched bureaucratic party structures that exist in some other contexts. Not everyone in the DSA thinks of it as an embryonic mass communist party, but over time we have worked to make this a widespread vision for the organisation that formations from the anarchists in the Libertarian Socialist Caucus to class collaborationists in the Socialist Majority Caucus now often have to frame their ideas within. Internationally, the word 'partyist' has come into use to describe groups inspired by the thinking of the CPGB, especially Mike Macnair's book, *Revolutionary strategy*, but in the DSA, MUG's usage of the term has led to its adoption as a widespread self-description among multiple factions that do not share our political influences.

Some recent victories for our vision of the DSA as a mass communist party include the passage of the resolution we authored titled



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: striving for respectability

'Principles for party-building' at the 2025 convention, and the political content of the DSA's new version of its political programme, called *Workers deserve more*, which was adopted this summer. 'Principles for party-building' laid out 10 principles meant to guide the sort of party the DSA is striving to embody and become, the first of which reads: "The fundamental purpose of a socialist party is to be a mass association of the working class formed for collective political action. The party will be united around a democratically created programme that outlines goals that, enacted together, will allow the working class to rule and end capitalism."

Ruling class forces

This was a way of stating simply what a party is for and what the character of its programme is. On the issue of how the party orients toward other class forces, point eight reads: "DSA orients itself in opposition to all ruling class political forces. DSA's project is to unite workers to win the battle for democracy and bring about socialism, not to seek a governing coalition with a perceived lesser evil under the current undemocratic political system."

This is meant to articulate that the DSA sees itself as an opposition party that engages in political struggle in order to make its political programme hegemonic in the working class, so that we can gain majority support for a revolutionary programme for working class rule through radical political democracy, and implicitly repudiates the idea of working as junior partners to the liberal wing of the capitalist class - as was a major thread of the DSA's orientation in the first couple years of the Biden administration and around which new divisions are now emerging. The fact that a majority of delegates in 2025 approved of this resolution, which so clearly laid out some of what we see as key features of a Marxist party, gives a good sense of how much of an appetite there is

among the DSA's membership for the organisation to play the role of a mass communist party.

We were able to use the declaration about the role of the party's programme in 'Principles for party-building' to influence the drafting of the DSA's revised political programme as well. Some would have leaned toward making the programme a short list of reform demands or so-called transitional demands, but we made the case that the resolution meant there was a convention mandate for something more ambitious, something "outlin[ing] goals that, enacted together, will allow the working class to rule and end capitalism". Having framed the drafting process this way, we also used our voices in the responsible committee and our votes on the national leadership to ensure that we included an articulation of the maximum programme - a fully liberated, classless future - and most of the key democratic demands of the minimum programme like abolishing the senate, the imperial presidency and the supreme court, proportional representation in elections, and the right of self-determination for oppressed nations. The programme was written with a sharp focus on economy of language and comprehensibility, and was negotiated among different tendencies, but we consider it a major victory that the DSA now has a programme which includes this political content and frames it in revolutionary terms:

The Democratic Socialists of America is building a party whose goal is a democratic society of the working class. Our enemies are not just individual bosses, but the entire global system of capital; not just this or that cop, judge or president, but the entire anti-democratic structure of our society. We are workers fighting to transform society: to win the battle for democracy, draft a new constitution, and create a

democratic socialist republic.

The fact that this programme was formally adopted at a time when the DSA's visibility is higher than ever due to its candidates' victories in several congressional primaries and other elections, means that this vision is getting an intense amount of attention in the capitalist press and the DSA's identity is becoming tied to a specific revolutionary political programme in a way that it never has before. While candidates themselves have sometimes sought to distance themselves from the programme, the attacks from the right wing have made it quite popular among a broad progressive base, and DSA spokespeople have done an admirable job defending its various aspects in the face of hostile interviewers.

Broad engagement

So that is the DSA, but what about other self-identified Marxists, and what about those comrades in countries without an equivalent organisation on which to centre their activity? It must be admitted that MUG has not spent nearly as much of its time or publishing capacity addressing the sects outside the DSA as, for example, the *Weekly Worker* has with the groups in Britain. One of the reasons is that the size of these organisations pales in comparison to the DSA and any given extra-DSA tendency on the left often has some sort of expression, organised or not, within it, where its ideas have to be weighed in the form of concrete proposals for the organisation and put in conversation with the ideas of others. That is more conducive for debate than addressing groups whose own internal reasoning for their ideas is obscured by their bureaucratic centralism - the only expression of which that is available to contend with is its bastardised, external agitational form.

That is not to say that MUG could not do more to engage with the ideas

of these groups, as both the Party for Socialism and Liberation and Socialist Alternative have recently suffered major splits, in which the curtain of their internal strategic thinking was pulled back a little, leaving room for generative engagement. The Communist Party USA has also experienced multiple waves of growth since 2020 and tendencies coming out of their younger guard have joined the fray in the DSA, with *Geese Magazine* coming to embrace a form of Gramscian left populism, which has been picked up by members of the DSA right as a theorisation of their existing practice.

I am aware that the idea of creating a 'British DSA' has become a topic of conversation on the British left, and I think that multiple features of the DSA that do not necessarily have to go together end up getting mixed up in these conversations. The feature of the DSA that *should* be picked up by any left regroupment project in Britain is its internal democracy, the presence of multiple organised trends, and progressive development of a culture of open debate in the organisation. However, while the DSA is moving towards greater coherence and programmatic clarity, its historic lack of clarity and muddled programme is sometimes pointed to as desirable.

Hopefully, the huge impact that the DSA's new programme has had is because it is fairly ambitious and clearly shows the value of taking seriously the question of what we are fighting for. Others seem inspired by the specific model of the DSA's successful electoral campaigns. On one level, the DSA's campaigns truly are well organised and we have developed an apparatus for field organising that is qualitatively different from how other political forces operate in the US. On another level, the US primary election system and the DSA's legal existence as a tax-exempt, non-profit organisation without a state-recognised ballot line (the one upside of which is that our candidate selection does not have to go through a state-run primary election and can be decided by our membership, as in political parties outside the US) is relatively unique and would be difficult to replicate.

MUG has become recognised as an important and legitimate political actor in the DSA and some of our ideas have become part of the fabric of the organisation, but there is still quite a ways to go before it fully embodies our ideal of a mass communist party, which can stand independently, uncompromisingly and coherently for the interests of the international working class. Thus the need for a partyist faction narrower than the party - united around both programmatic perspectives and an assessment of the specific organisation around which our struggle is centred - remains.

With several new DSA-endorsed socialists entering Congress next year, dissatisfaction with the Trump regime mounting, and the contradictions of a declining US imperialism shown more starkly than ever, we can only hope that our ability to both articulate our long-term perspectives and flexibly adapt our tactics to an ever changing situation can pass the muster required by our historical period ●

IRELAND

An honest and open culture

People Before Profit has enjoyed modest success as a loose alliance. But if we really want revolution and socialism it must, argues **Anne McShane**, aspire to become a programmatically rooted mass party of the working class

Something of a crisis has arisen within what has been the majority tendency of People Before Profit. This matters, even for the Irish bourgeoisie: besides a string of councillors PBP has two high-profile members of the Dáil and one member of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Socialist Workers Network is the Irish affiliate of the International Socialist Tendency, led, of course, by the SWP in Britain.¹ The SWN was the main initiator of PBP in 2005, and has been its leading force, not least on the six-strong officer board. But now it has lost its dominant position due to the resignation of 15 members, including Dublin Central councillor Conor Reddy, national organiser Aislinn Shanahan Daly and Dublin organisers Damian Kelly and Farah Parvazi. TD Richard Boyd Barrett is now the sole SWNer.

Rumours of conflicts amongst the Cliffites have been circulating for months, but only became public knowledge with the leaking of the resignation letter of the 15 to *The Irish Times*. It published the gist of it on August 26.² Disgracefully, the comrades declined to make an open declaration in the workers' press, so it was the bourgeoisie's paper of record which first publicly announced the split.

Richard Boyd Barrett responded to a request by *The Times* for a comment by insisting that it was really no big deal. The debates "about strategy and tactics" are "not something I'm terribly worried about. It's an ongoing discussion and I think you will find it in any vibrant political project". He went on to claim that leftwing parties are "possibly more honest about different currents of thought than other parties" like the governing Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael who "have their divergences [such as over Palestine], but are not, in my opinion, very honest about them".³

If only it were true that the left has a more open and honest culture than the bourgeoisie. The SWN is an example of the opposite - of a closed and intolerant environment. A significant number of the 15 who resigned are experienced leading comrades. They maintain that the reason for leaving was because their criticism of the leadership was obstructed - met with "accusations of being undemocratic, mouthpieces for 'Belfast', apolitical, overly personalised, unskilled, ageist and more".

Their claim is that "political difference in the SWN is repeatedly dealt with through denial of its very existence, or at worst marginalised through dogmatic moralism". It has a "sect-based" and "hegemonic" culture. This suggests frustration by those who think PBP ought to be much bigger, especially when it comes to parliamentary representation. Note, since the 2016 general election the left has gone from six to just three TDs today. So why didn't the 15 openly rebel? Why didn't they begin an open polemic?

But it isn't just the 15. Some PBP members have admitted to me that there is a siege mentality within the SWN. This seems to reflect a deliberate tactic used to insulate members from polemics that originate from ex-members or non-members. Thus we are told that the Red Network, a tendency that left PBP in 2025, having fought against its closed political culture, has lied and should not be treated seriously.



Richard Boyd Barrett: hegemonic in SWN?

I myself have been accused of slander for *open* criticisms I made of Boyd Barrett - in particular when I described him as an aspiring junior minister in a bourgeois government. I have been painted as a dangerous wrecker and liar, who has a personal vendetta against the SWN, PBP and their leadership.

Even those comrades who describe themselves as politically sympathetic to my politics are fearful of association with me within the PBP project because of the wrath that will be unleashed on them. While they have no issue with working together in broader campaigns, such as Palestine solidarity, where I have played a leading role, when it comes to PBP, I am deemed to be beyond the pale.

Of course, none of this is about me as a personality. Instead it reflects the willingness of those who view themselves as oppositionists to self-censor. They believe that, if they make their criticisms in a cautious, polite and diplomatic manner, then they can protect themselves from accusations of being wreckers. Polemics are dismissed as containing factual inaccuracies or being too polemical. Not being suitably deferential, or being downright provocative, only makes their job more difficult. The implication is that I and other critics should also tone down our criticisms in order to support the left to make its arguments in PBP.

Comrades, you are placing the blame on the wrong people. You are providing cover for the leadership rather than opening up debate. You are subjecting yourselves to self-censorship and this makes you weak, not strong. There is no way that you can defeat a bureaucratic clique without being very clear and sharp in your challenges. You should be aiming to transform the closed culture by practicing an open culture.

Meanwhile the new IST leadership in Britain has failed to utter a single word of criticism about the increasingly rightwing political direction of SWN. It fails, for example, to criticise the 'left government' strategy of going into coalition with Sinn Féin and the

Social Democrats - both thoroughly bourgeois parties. Instead it continues to applaud Boyd Barrett, fulsomely welcoming him to Marxism this year.

Of course, in terms of culture the SWN's internal regime is merely a reflection of the SWP's. In my personal experience of working alongside SWPers in the Socialist Alliance or Respect in Britain, it was normal for members who raised criticisms to be treated as wreckers, and often deliberately isolated. The experience was too much for many comrades, who left frustrated and demoralised, vowing never to join a leftwing group again. It is an alienating, anti-working class culture - an obstacle that we must overcome to have any chance to develop a mass working class party capable of leading the fight for self-emancipation.

North and south

Back to *The Irish Times* report. It states that the new leadership of PBP will be based around the Rise tendency led by Paul Murphy TD, independent members, and the 15 who resigned. Rise stands for 'Revolutionary, Internationalist, Socialist, Environmentalist' and came about from a split from the Socialist Party of Ireland (the affiliate of the Committee for a Workers' International). Anyway, Rise and its journal, *Rupture*, claims, in general, to have a far more open culture than the SWN.

It states, for example, that it stands for "Full democratic rights for all networks and tendencies [in PBP] to make the case for their ideas, and strive to create a party free from sexist, racist, ableist, anti-LGBTQ attitudes or behaviours."⁴ The fact that it has not published so far on the split implies a hands-off approach, when it comes to SWN disputes. It appears unwilling to become involved, preferring perhaps a diplomatic arrangement, where every tendency keeps its internal affairs to itself. This does not in any way resemble the dynamic internal culture that some oppositionists have claimed exists.

The *Times* also reports that the dispute involves the Belfast branch of the SWN, and that a number

of Belfast members have already resigned. While there is undoubtedly discontent in the southern SWN about campaigning for government with Sinn Féin, comrades in the north are in a more serious position. They are already opposing the SF-led administration in Stormont and local councils. Gerry Carroll, the PBP member in Stormont and councillors Shaun Harkin and Michael Collins are leading the resistance against SF's decision to increase the cost of public transport, its imposition of severe cuts to the health service, its refusal to take a stand against the production of military weaponry, and its support for the generous pay increases for Assembly members. SF had shown that it is essentially the same as any bourgeois party in government. These comrades know in practice that a government led by SF will certainly not be a progressive step forward: it will be more of the same.

Those who resigned are to meet with Boyd Barrett this week to discuss the split. It is difficult to know if he can win them back to the SWN fold, given the depth of dissatisfaction. However, it is positive that they remain in PBP and hopefully they will fight against the opportunism of the 'left government' perspective, alongside insisting on the creation of an open and democratic culture.

PBP is the most important left organisation in Ireland at the moment. How it uses that position is a key question. Elected representatives need to be held strictly to account and remain under the discipline of the majority. It is inevitable that TDs will be pulled to the right within the Dáil, under the pressure of that environment, of that rightwing milieu, with its horse-trading and deal making.

The SWN undoubtedly relies on Boyd Barrett when it comes to finances. Rightly he only takes a worker's wage and uses the rest for political purposes - presumably he also gets a generous official allowance to pay for administrative support and research. As his salary alone is well

in excess of €100,000 a year, what he has available is quite substantial. Being in this position gives him a great deal of power compared with an ordinary member - another reason why it is vital that PBP controls its TDs. Not the other way round.

The necessity for political control over elected representatives has been hard fought for in our movement, from the German SDP deputies in the Reichstag to the Bolsheviks in the Duma. It has been written about at length by comrades such as Alexei Badayev in his *The Bolsheviks in the tsarist duma* (1929). Badayev was a metal worker who was elected as a Bolshevik deputy to the fourth Duma in 1912. In more recent times the work of August H Nimtz on Lenin and revolutionary parliamentarism ought to be mentioned too.⁵ What comes out, in particular, is the centrality of the programme, democracy, and the tight control exercised over elected representatives.

It is vital that comrades study the rich experiences of the past, especially the Bolsheviks and the role their parliamentary fraction played in building the party and rallying the working class. Our elected representatives too must consider themselves as fighters in an enemy camp, using the platform provided by parliament to build the strength of the workers' movement and the party to a position where it can overthrow the state.

If you aspire to be Revolutionary, Internationalist, Socialist and Environmentalist, this is the way forward ●

Notes

1. Till December 2025 the IST was the responsibility of Alex Callinicos. He was belatedly removed as international secretary because of his prominent involvement with the 'Comrade Delta' scandal of 2013.
2. www.irishtimes.com/politics/2026/08/26/members-resign-from-internal-people-before-profit-group-over-hegemonic-leadership-style.
- 3 *Ibid*.
4. www.letusrise.ie/what-we-stand-for.
5. In particular, A Nimtz *The ballot, the streets - or both: from Marx and Engels to Lenin and the October Revolution* Chicago IL 2019.

Fighting fund

Shortfall

Some disappointing news to start with: we fell rather short of the *Weekly Worker's* monthly fighting fund target of £2,750 in August.

As I reported last week, we needed £400 with five days still to go, and I was pretty confident that we'd get there. But, unfortunately, a mere £178 came our way in those five days, taking the total for the month up to £2,535 - in other words, a shortfall of £215. Not a disaster, but still problematic.

Our best thanks go to the comrades who contributed in those last five days: JT and BK (£25 each), AB (£20), JM (£15), MD and JD (£10), KA (£8) and AR (£5) all contributed by bank transfer/standing order, while comrades DB (£50) and AC (£5) clicked on that PayPal button, and comrade Hassan handed his usual £5 note to one of our team.

So now we really must make up for that shortfall in September. And things have started reasonably well, with £296 received in just

two days! Thanks, this time, to comrades LC and BO (£50 each), MM (£31), ST (£30), MS (£25), DL and MT (£20), CP (£16), AN (£15), MR (£13), MM (£11), and DI and JD (£10), for your transfers/SOs, plus TM for his £5 PayPal donation.

The question is now, though, can we keep up that useful start to the month? We need not only to make up for last month's shortfall, but also make up ground for the two months earlier in the year when we were also short of target. Please play your part in ensuring that the only weekly paper in Britain that campaigns for a single, principled, genuinely democratic-centralist Marxist party can continue to play its vital role! ●

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

PARTY CULTURE

Standing for open debate

‘No-platforming’ and speech controls are rooted in the cross-class politics of popular frontism and only serve to strengthen the right, argues **Mike Macnair**. This is an edited version of his talk at CU 2026

Back in October 2024 I wrote an article in this paper, ‘Crushing it in the egg.’¹ This was addressed to the view on the left that sufficiently violent action against the fascists at an early stage of their development could crush fascism “in the egg” and prevent it developing rapidly. I looked at where that idea came from.

It comes from a writer called Daniel Guérin, writing about the rise of Nazism in Germany. He quotes Hitler and Goebbels as saying that, if the opponents of Nazism had crushed it in the egg by sufficiently violent force in the 1920s, then it would never have succeeded. In reality, this Hitler and Goebbels story is complete nonsense, because actually the Nazi Party was one of a number of far-right parties that organised veterans’ groups to beat up leftists. They acted as external auxiliaries of the German state, with the support of the police and the judiciary, who protected them against the leftists who wanted to organise self-defence against them. So, even supposing Hitler and Goebbels had been assassinated, some other far-rightist would have emerged.

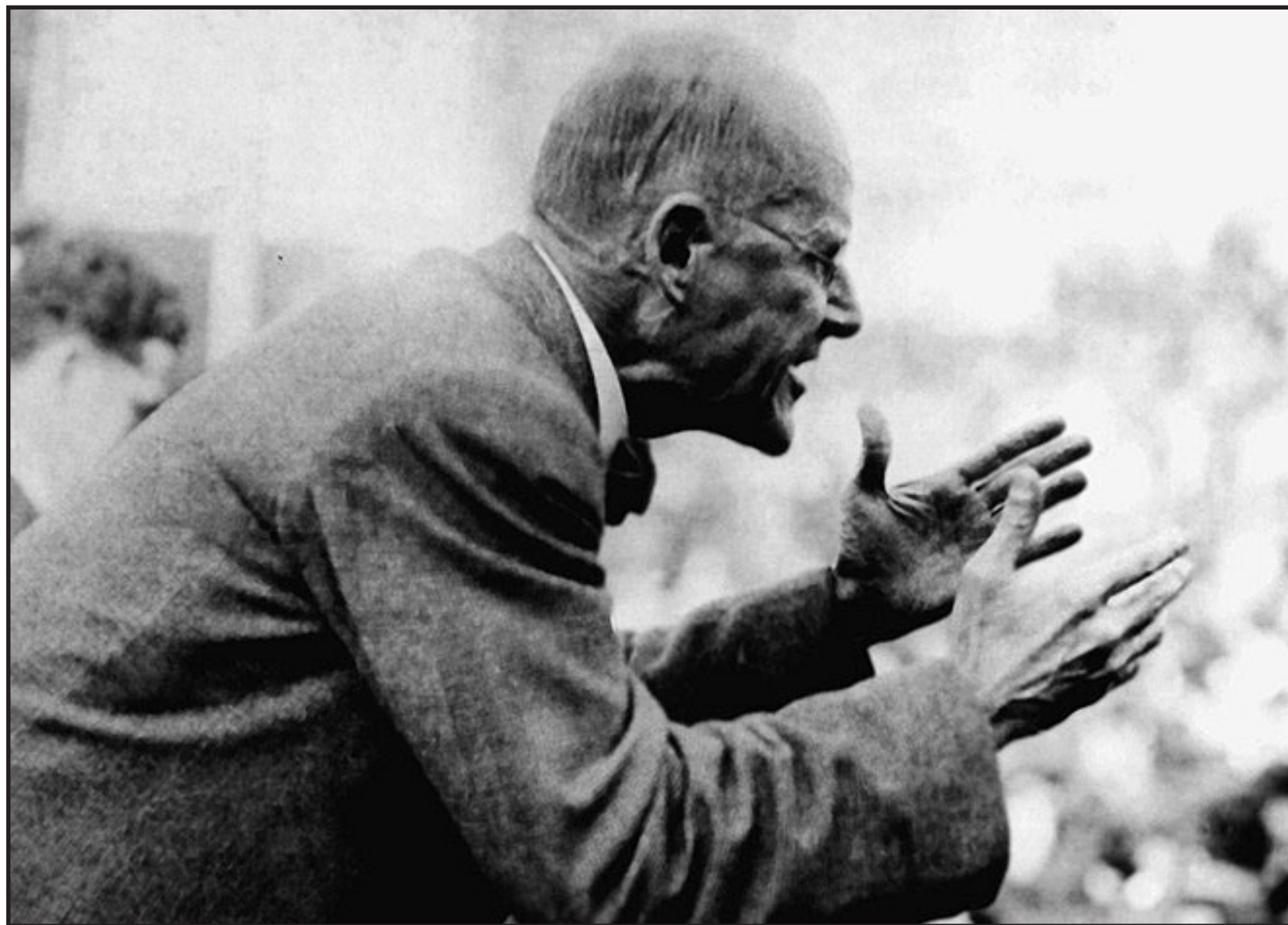
Daniel Guérin’s book was translated by the US Socialist Workers Party in 1939. And in 1953 we see a leader in the SWP’s *Militant*, and in 1954 Murry Weiss of the SWP (later a Maoist), saying of Senator Joe McCarthy (who the SWP characterised as ‘proto-fascist’): “Our conception of fighting the fascists is to crush them in the egg.” This was a seriously unrealistic assessment of what was going on in the United States.

By 1975, SWP leader Farrell Dobbs, who had been an important trade unionist in the Minneapolis Teamsters’ strikes of the 1930s, recognised that this ‘crush fascism in the egg’ line was simply wrong. What it does is take small groups of the left and throw them into adventurist confrontations with small groups of the far right (and with the cops), which diverts attention from actually building up the mass organisations of the workers’ movement. When it really comes to a threat of fascism, it is the strength of the mass organisations of the workers’ movement that matters.

However, from Murry Weiss it was taken up by the Spartacists. It became one of the big differences between the Spartacists and the US SWP in the 1970s, and was picked up by the Ligue Communiste in France. LC leader Alain Krivine - standing in the ruins of the Ligue’s office, which had just been raided by the police after a petrol-bombing of a far-right organisation - said in 1973: “You cannot avoid your responsibilities ... No freedom of speech for racists and anti-Semites! And since all the traditional workers and democratic organisations have failed to assume their responsibilities, the revolutionists have had to do it ... We have shown the way.” And from Krivine, I think, this spread and became a dogma of the far left.

What has ‘crush fascism in the egg’ actually achieved? In Italy, the Fratelli d’Italia government of Giorgia Meloni, is post-fascist, but it is the descendant of the MSI (Italian Social Movement), the post-1945 successor of Mussolini’s fascist governing party. In France, the Rassemblement National, far-right in its origins, is the leading contender in the next presidential election. In the United States we have the Trump administration - not fascism proper, but a far-right government. And so on.

This dogma is completely



Eugene V Debs: Socialist candidate for US presidency and passionate defender of free speech

misconceived, and not just for the reason given by Farrell Dobbs. Fascism poses two sorts of threats to the workers’ movement. The first is the threat of physical violence. The second is the threat of ideological poison - nationalism, racism, culture-war politics of one sort or another. The threat of physical violence is something the workers’ movement can defend itself against through united-front action, without regard to anything other than the need to exercise self-defence - you can agree to defend the movement against far-right violence without agreeing on anything else.

But that logic does not extend to the ideological poison. The ideological poisons are just as much presented by the Labour Party. Burnham is right now playing the game of ‘immigration is why there isn’t enough housing - I’m going to stop the boats’ and all of that.

Equally, the SWP in Britain, starting in the late 1970s, created the Anti-Nazi League, which was a unification with the Conservative Party and all forces to the left of the Conservative Party against the National Front, identified as ‘the Nazis’. The ANL was enormously successful. The reason was actually that a bunch of rank-and-file SWP members had organised Rock Against Racism, a musical anti-racist initiative, and the ANL essentially rode on the success of Rock Against Racism. This success meant that the ANL was succeeded by Unite Against Fascism, then Stand Up to Racism, and the latest iteration is Together. They all have the same characteristic: you try to draw a clear line between the far right and the Conservative Party, treating the latter as a ‘constitutionalist’ party.

But this is the same party that, in the 1914 Curragh Mutiny, attempted to organise a military coup to prevent Irish Home Rule. It is the party of Enoch Powell, when he gave his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968. Going back further, it is the party which promoted the 19th century ‘hooligans’ scares against Irish immigrants to Britain; and the agitation against Jews in the early 20th century, against French refugees in the 1790s, against Jews in the 1700s and 1750s, and against Huguenot refugees in the 1680s. This is a party not only of nationalism and anti-migrant sentiment, but also of the organisation of physical-force violence. The *Tory press* is the main promoter of anti-immigrant campaigns and other varieties of culture-wars poison. So it is extraordinary for the left to identify the Tory Party as a potential ally against the far right - an aspect of the logic of the people’s front.

Witch-hunt

The second element of how this policy strengthens the right is the anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism witch-hunt. This is conducted on the basis that opposition to Zionism, and in particular opposition to the Israeli state’s genocidal operations, amounts to anti-Semitism and is therefore racist and hence to be no-platformed - leading to cancellation of pro-Palestine speakers and various meetings. Activists in Labour Against the Witchhunt had to move from venue to venue, and finally wound up in an obscure council-estate community centre, because of threats and cancellations on the basis that holding meetings opposing the witch-hunt amounted to harassment of Jews under section 26 of the Equality

Act 2010.

The other side of this is that the attacks on Kathleen Stock - the anti-trans, conservative, feminist academic, at Sussex University - was on the basis that Stock’s comments about trans people amounted to harassment of trans people, also under section 26 of the Equality Act 2010.

If we go back to the debates about that section of the act when the government was briefing parliament, opponents were saying this new section is an immense interference with freedom of speech. The government said no, the courts will read it down by reference to the right of freedom of expression under article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. No such thing has happened, partly because nobody has been prepared to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds at the Court of Appeal (or millions at the UK Supreme Court) testing the relationship between the Equality Act and article 10. This, of course, is itself a sale and denial of justice, in violation of Magna Carta, produced by the free market in legal services.

Nonetheless, what we have, essentially, is anti-harassment rules used as a limit on freedom of speech, and used primarily against the left.

And it turns out that the no-platforming of ‘transphobes’, as a tactic adopted by the trans rights movement, has not ended prejudice against and persecution of trans people. It has, if anything, been followed by the no-platforming of trans activists on a much larger scale, by individual US states and by the US federal government.

This in one sense is exactly the same issue as the utter failure of the policy of no-platforming fascists.

Imagined to be a soft-target policy, it diverts attention from the actual tasks needed to fight fascism - or to fight the oppression of trans people. And no-platforming and cancellation/dismissal campaigns not only do not work, but lend real political support to the state’s no-platforming the left.

A comrade in the discussion following my talk at CU argued that repeated failure is not a reason to abandon no-platforming: the project of communism has also failed over the last century, yet we do not abandon it. The difference is, firstly, that communism is a *goal*, while no-platforming is a *tactic*. Secondly, as I said at the outset, there were *never* any grounds for believing that fascism could be ‘crushed in the egg’ by no-platforming. Fascism is an external auxiliary to the state, which protects the fascist bands. It can be defeated - by full-dress civil war and/or international war. Either needs broad mass support.

The same comrade argued that the anti-Semitism witch-hunt would have happened without the left’s popular frontism. Probably true, because the capitalist state and the political and media representatives of the capitalist class identify and strike at *weak points* of their enemy’s front. But it is perfectly clear that popular frontism radically weakened the *left’s* response to this witch-hunt: visible in Corbyn and his advisors, in Momentum, in David Renton’s 2021 book, *Labour’s antisemitism crisis* (these are merely examples).

Popular front

Why does the left keep pursuing this policy in spite of its plain repeated failure over the last 50 years? The essence of the no-platform policy is

the popular front. The idea is unity of the left and workers' movement with the liberal bourgeoisie to defeat the far right.

There is another form of popular front: unity of the workers' movement with the 'national' bourgeoisie - that is, support for nationalists; this was a common policy of the majority of the left through the cold war period in the semi-colonies, and continues in dilute forms, without its underlying strategic grounds, to this day (as, for example, in 'Lexit' advocacy and in the widespread left tailing of Scots nationalism). But nationalists are generally (not invariably) politically closer to the far right, and commonly advocate social conservatism on, for example, gender issues; obviously then, unity with the 'national' bourgeoisie does not produce 'crush it in the egg' no-platforming.

Trotskyists imagine they are not popular frontists, because they endlessly tell the story of the failure of the Spanish Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War, the failure of the French Popular Front, which issued in conservative governments, and then the treason of the generals in 1940 and the victory of fascism in the form of German occupation and Pétain's Vichy regime in France. Trotskyists then leap forward in history to the Popular Unity government in Chile, and its efforts to unite with 'constitutionalist' generals against fascist generals - and then it turns out it is the 'constitutionalist' general, Augusto Pinochet, who organises the military coup against Popular Unity.

But there is an enormous gap here, and it leads to a real misunderstanding of why the left keeps pursuing popular frontism. The gap is that the fall of France, the Benelux countries and Scandinavia in the spring of 1940 destroyed the strategic position of British imperialism. In consequence, when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1941, the 'democratic' imperialists - Britain and the USA - were led to ally with Moscow. That alliance amounted to a global popular front between the workers' movement and the Soviet Union and 'democratic capital'. Under the banner of this popular front we get the extension of the Soviet 'socialist camp' across the whole of eastern Europe, and into China, North Vietnam, and North Korea - an extension which included Cuba and South Yemen and continued down to the 1970s with the fall of Saigon. All of these apparent victories were conducted under the banner of the popular front.

It is this history of apparent major success that has led the left to be gung-ho for the popular front. And not just the 'official communists' and the Maoists. The Trotskyists *thought of themselves* as opponents of the popular front. But they imagined that the US 'New Left' and trends influenced by it offered a way out of their isolation. As a result, they came to imagine 'liberation movements' as strategic allies of the working class, much as 'official communists' and Maoists did. The result is that the left, including the large majority of Trotskyists, has been and still is under the spell of the US left, and specifically of the 1950s-60s civil rights movement.

This movement was itself a form of the popular front, because the idea is that the working class as a class subordinates itself to the project of black civil rights - limiting demands to those which could be common to the black middle class as well as the black working class. This was a policy the Communist Party of the USA developed in the 1930s, as a way of attempting to pose the popular front policy.² The theory underlying the popular front is that there are uncompleted democratic-capitalist, 'bourgeois-revolutionary' tasks. It was hard to argue that there are

uncompleted tasks of the bourgeois revolution in the 20th century USA; but the race and sex issues could be claimed as posing necessary allies, to which the working class must subordinate itself.

Then Vietnam intersected with the civil rights movement: the US army nearly fell apart in Vietnam, to a considerable extent because of the endemic racism within its own structures. In consequence, between the mid-1970s and the rise of Trumpism in the 20-teens, the US Department of Defense, and the American state more broadly, actively promoted anti-discrimination politics.

The US state turned towards anti-discrimination as a response to defeat in Vietnam; but also as a policy directed against the left. This idea was already there, when Gary Becker, the Chicago economist, wrote his 1957 book, *The economics of discrimination*, arguing that racism arises from the workers rather than from the bosses; it was already there when the US Libertarian Party was founded in 1971 on a manifesto combining the defence of the rights of 'minorities' - women, black people, and so on - with the defence of millionaires as a minority.

Meanwhile, out of the US 'New Left' Students for a Democratic Society there issued (among other things) the western 'soft Maoist' movement, influenced by the ideas of the Chinese Cultural Revolution without being fully orthodox Maoist. This movement provided the ideological framework for black power movements and for women's, gay and lesbian liberation ideas. In the 1970s the movements smashed themselves up through what Jo Freeman called 'trashing' - accusations of privilege in relation to competing oppressions.³ It later turned out - when the files were disclosed - that, although the FBI did not invent trashing, it picked up on it as something to amplify, as part of the Cointelpro (Counter Intelligence Program) infiltration projects to undermine and destroy the left.

We wind up with what was, in the 1960s, the genuinely virtuous popular front of the US civil rights movement, mutating into the much more ambiguous popular front of the left together with the human resources departments of corporations, the equalities departments of local councils, and - via Cointelpro's infiltrators, or the British spy cops - the state security apparatus.

No alternative

The left has to fight fascism in two ways. One is united-front physical-force self-defence, on the broadest possible basis of people who are actually willing to defend the right to meet, the right to march, the right to hand out leaflets, without getting beaten up for it.

But, on the other hand, we have to pose a political alternative to the far right's posturing as opponents of the existing establishment 'elites', and we are not currently posing one. We cannot pose an alternative to the ideological influence of the far right in the form of practical unity with the Tories, or indeed practical unity with the Labour Party. We need to pose a positive alternative.

Now, the problem with posing a positive alternative is that the left, as it is now, is a very small minority. That is why people hide behind formulas - SWP members constantly describing themselves as 'a speaker on behalf of Stand Up to Racism', or 'I'm speaking in a personal capacity as a member of Unite at such-and-such workplace', and so on. The left is a small minority because we are still in the shadow of the failure of the USSR. This is something taught to every child in school at GCSE level - everyone is taught about Europe in the 'age of the dictators' - with Hitler and Stalin as twins. There is endless ideological and

literary production about the failures of Stalinism, and in a sense that could be overcome.

I have given an analogous example before: the medieval Italian city-states all collapsed into factionalism and tyranny, with the exception of Venice; and dramatists and writers endlessly taught the lesson that republicanism and democracy inevitably lead to faction and tyranny. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most famous examples; Thomas Otway's 1682 play, *Venice preserv'd*, is a Tory drama denouncing the parliamentary opposition by analogy with factionalists in Venice. The idea that democracy and republicanism only lead to faction and tyranny was utterly dominant from about the 15th century to the late 1680s. It only ceased to be dominant, once first the Netherlands, and then Britain, showed that you could organise politics in a way that was not absolute monarchy, but did not rapidly collapse into factionalism and tyranny.

The left, however, has not shown a superior alternative to the way the Soviet Union ran things - it actually continuously promises to reproduce the same crap. It promises to reproduce it in the form of bureaucratic centralism: the SWP and the 'Comrade Delta' affair - the cronyism in the apparatus, the top-down management, the fact that the Comrade Delta affair involved sexual abuse by the woman's own line manager. How on earth did it come to be the case that the party's organising secretary had that role? Because they had adopted the Soviet model of top-down appointment of district organisers by the centre.

The same thing happened in the Socialist Party in England and Wales: Peter Taaffe and his associates expelled the majority of SPEW's international organisation because they were not prepared to lose a vote. The same, in reality, occurred in the Revolutionary Communist Party - I do not think we have examples in the RCP in the recent past, but it certainly has a history of the same kind of thing, with the same consequences of cronyism and top-down managerialism, in its precursor, Socialist Appeal, and its co-thinkers in the International Marxist Tendency.

Equally, there are trade-union-style bureaucratism and rule-of-law regimes, where you have elaborate rules and standing orders, and people playing procedural games at the expense of allowing the membership actually to take a decision. Left Unity worked like that. The trade unions, of course, work like that. The Labour Party worked like that until it became even more centralised and bureaucratised.

Then there are the latest devices: legal control, where you have something that is essentially a political brand with no rights for the membership, because the brand is legally owned by an individual or small group, the finances are legally owned by an individual or small group, and data-protection rules are used to suppress the availability of information. This is how La France Insoumise works, Podemos in Spain and, in this country, previously Momentum and now Your Party.

Bad words

A fourth form of bureaucratic practice is speech controls. 'Safe spaces' policies were an endless source of fighting in student unions 10-15 years ago, and in the same period Left Unity saw numerous denunciations of people for disagreeing. In Manchester Left Unity, one of our members, Laurie McCauley, was charged with violating the safe-spaces rules for reporting what happened in the Manchester branch - though they did not actually charge him with the reporting itself, they charged him with bullying other members in Manchester. When we finally got the charges thrown out,

it was because new people were put onto the disputes committee, and (I was there as a sort of McKenzie friend for Laurie) the disputes committee members dealing with this case explained that there were hundreds of vexatious complaints of misconduct that were being brought merely because of political disagreement. The committee was totally overwhelmed; the previous members had resigned because they could not see any way of dealing with all these complaints fairly and reasonably.

Last year we debated 'civility' rules as a bar on political characterisations like calling people 'opportunist', or calling those who promote naive policies which benefit their opponents 'useful idiots'. Nick Wrack and his co-thinkers broke off unity discussions with us, ostensibly on the basis that we would call them opportunists - 'we can't unite with you if you call us opportunists'. In reality, they *were* opportunists (in the ordinary English-language sense, not in the technical sense of being rightwingers): they thought more opportunities would open up for them in direct relations with Your Party. Surprise, surprise: what actually happened, very shortly afterwards, was that Nick Wrack was himself no-platformed in Manchester by the Your Party proto-branch, for being 'rude' about the SWP people running that proto-branch.

The latest version is the 'N-word scandal' - and this one, in my opinion, is peculiarly dishonest. We participated in setting up a Socialist Education and Debate Association (emphasis added). Alex Green and Tony Collins suddenly announced that it is a matter of principle that the word, 'nigger', cannot be used, even in a quotation from Marx, and that Ian Donovan must be excluded on account of his (genuinely) left anti-Semitic views; they used their legal control of the e-list to exclude dissenters. Debate?

Alex and Tony are ex-Spartacists. I see no reason, given this political history, to believe that they honestly believe in the 'principle' that 19th century quotations must be falsified. This, of course, is merely a branch of popular frontism of the 1970s western soft Maoist variety, and an excuse for 1970s-style 'trashing'.

Rather, the Spartacist method is at work: persuade less experienced comrades you are in contact with that an issue of principle requires an *organisational* split in the very short term, and corral your contacts in a separate organisation. Back when Tony and Alex were recruited from the International Marxist Group to the Spartacists, the issue of principle was immediately that you had to call out the Mandelites as 'centrists' and, behind that, you could not be in the same organisation as people who supported Solidarność in Poland. With other operations, a succession of matters have been the issue which demands a short-term split; it is really about the method of corralling and separating people, so that internal discussion is blocked.

It is not the CPGB's 'bad culture of demanding the right to give offence', or standing on this as a principle, that is at stake. Take us out of the picture and the problem would be as bad or worse. Rather, the problem is *the left's* 'western soft Maoist' bad culture of taking offence and demanding speech controls and purity. I said that Nick Wrack was no-platformed by Manchester Your Party proto-branch. More recently, Richard Gerard, who participated in witch-hunting the CPGB over the 'N-word' issue online, has been forced out of the leadership of the Socialist Federation - a frankly trivial grouping arising out of Your Party's left wing - because he does not toe the line on Judith Butler's theory of gender.

Comrades who pursue these politics are effectively saying to the

broad workers' vanguard - the broad layer of militants who pay some limited attention to what the left says - that nothing is possible beyond either Stalinism or managerialist capitalism. In reality, they are saying there is no alternative to managerialist capitalism, because we have committed ourselves, we have committed *the movement*, to this regime of managerial control: exclusion of people for incorrect speech, safe-spaces and civility rules, and so on, controlled by a bureaucratic apparatus, leading to endless splits into smaller and smaller fragments on the basis of purity. By telling the broad vanguard this, they are indirectly telling the mass of the working class that there is no alternative to managerialist capitalism.

An alternative

I will not go into the positive alternative here at any length, but the basic principle is: one vote, one voice for everybody; freedom of communication and freedom of information; freedom of association, the right to enter into blocs and organise in order to amplify your voice.

Nobody gets a prior right to amplify their voice simply by virtue of property rights - which is essentially the regime of the bourgeois press, where Rupert Murdoch's wealth allows him to amplify his political voice through *The Times*, *The Sun*, *Sky News*, and so on.

Nobody gets a veto. The safe-spaces regimes commonly involve the idea that the caucuses of the oppressed have a veto. The claim being made by Alex Green and co is that black people would veto any quotation of the 'N-word' by somebody else. They are not saying that black comrades *are* vetoing it - they are saying that hypothetical black people might.

We call for: no vetoes, no bureaucratic control, majority voting, one vote, one voice, freedom of association and organisation, freedom of communication and information. Those give you the fundamental principles (I wrote at greater length a few weeks ago about the general principles of democratic-centralist decision-making⁴). But these basic principles, as opposed to bureaucratic mechanisms (whether bureaucratic centralism or trade-union-style legalistic bureaucratism, and so on) are principles which actually pose an alternative to the regime of managerialist bureaucratic socialism. And they therefore pose an alternative to capitalism.

By showing that we could make our collective decision-making better, we also show that the socialism we propose would be better. And by showing that we could do socialism better, we can potentially pose an alternative that mobilises the working class as a class to counter the influence of the far right - and even potentially reaches the layers currently influenced by the far right ●

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Notes

1. October 24 2024: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1512/crushing-it-in-the-egg. References for points in this section are in this article.
2. For references, see my article, 'Intersectionalism: the highest stage of western Stalinism?' *Critique* Vol 46 (2018), pp541-58 (preprint at ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:4e207cae-a7bb-4327-ab09-2e0ba8332b95/files/rqr46r0842).
3. www.joffreeman.com/joreen/trashing.htm.
4. 'Centrality of democracy' *Weekly Worker* June 18 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1590/centrality-of-democracy); 'Time is on our side', June 25 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1591/time-is-on-our-side); 'Legalism and labyrinthine rules', July 2 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1592/legalism-and-labyrinthine-rules); 'Principles and guidelines', July 16 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1594/principles-and-guidelines); 'Break from failed nostrums', July 23 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1595/break-from-failed-nostrums).

TECHNOLOGY

Rise of the robots

Headlines have been about outrunning Usain Bolt, playing football and learning to kickbox in just a couple of hours. But, explains **Yassamine Mather**, the development of humanoid and other such robots is about far more than entertainment and mere spectacle

Held in Beijing from August 19-23, the World Robot Conference 2026 featured roughly 3,000 products and over 300 global exhibitors, including 150 plus new products.

Despite its international branding, the entire event was dominated by domestic Chinese tech firms. Judging by the videos, there were eye-catching and standout moments: humanoid pioneer Unitree Robotics launched its Shanghai STAR Market listing to coincide with the event opening. Its stock rose more than fivefold by the close, while its bots entertained crowds by dancing, boxing and taking on human opponents at table tennis.

The presentations moved beyond industrial tasks - robotic arms showing dexterity, humanoid models walking down the aisle in bridal gowns, and a waterproof robotic hand operating inside a fish tank. Topsun Bot drew major crowds with a giant humanoid sculpture, while autonomous security vehicles monitored the entrance. Traditional quadrupeds ('robot dogs') performed. Some displays, shown online, featured practical applications, such as luggage scanning at mock security checkpoints, shelf-stocking retail units (Galbot G1), and relaxed domestic humanoids lounging on sofas (Robotera L7).

Humanoid football matches were a hit with attendees, highlighting bots competing against human goalkeepers. But I must admit to finding this particular presentation totally uninspiring. The goalkeepers seemed extremely slow in reacting to their opponents' shots, and the human referee looked as bored and frustrated as I was watching it.

The conference unfolded against a backdrop of tightening trade tensions - all part of US-China rivalry and sanctions, widely seen as targeting Chinese robotics developers. There were other concurrent August events in China, including the World Humanoid Robot Games, also in Beijing, where hundreds of humanoid bots were tested across events ranging from track-and-field to medical sorting. In October 2026 we will have CIIF Robot Show (Shanghai), which will prioritise industrial automation, collaborative robots (cobots), high-precision robotic arms and digital-twin software.

If, like me, you started working with robots in the 1980s, you will remember the limitations of that era. The single-arm robot in the UK's National Engineering Laboratory was designed to do one task: collect parts from specific, fixed holders in the right order and assemble an electric rotor ready for the next manufacturing operation. The work involved programming the arm's movements, in assembler code, using sensors/transducers to prevent collisions with people, containers and other objects. All this took place in a cage - not because the arm could escape, but to protect those of us who worked in the lab. A similar arrangement existed in my second robot-related job, at Glasgow University's Centre for Systems and Control. All these worked at a rather slow pace. So you can imagine my surprise when I read headlines describing robots recording a faster 100-metre sprint time than Usain Bolt's world record (8.64 seconds, compared to Bolt's 9.58.)

The combined events in China



Robot dogs too

have initiated considerable debate and raised some important scientific and social criticisms - and, of course, we should also consider the security and military implications of some of the unbelievable advances in robotics technology. In this article I will look at some of the arguments raised about different categories.

Achievements

Iain Hunter, an exercise science professor at Brigham Young University, points out that Bolt and the robot started their sprint very differently. Bolt reacted in just 0.146 seconds using starting blocks, while Tiangong started upright and took almost a full second to get going. Hunter estimates that Bolt would have already been almost two seconds ahead after just five metres.

Park Suhan, a robotics professor at Kwangwoon University, makes the point that robot Tiangong's quick, short-stepped running style is not really trying to copy how humans run - it is more likely just the best solution, given what electric motors can do. Bolt only needed 41 strides to finish the race; Tiangong needed more than 50.

Parunchaya Jamkrajang, a sports scientist at Mahidol University, thinks the short strides are mainly about staying stable - taking longer strides would make the robot more likely to fall. She says a better test of real progress would be whether robots can do things like change direction, spot obstacles, make decisions and slow down on their own - something they still cannot do at high speeds.

Matt Bundle, a biomechanics expert at the University of Montana, makes the point that human runners get physically tired near the end of a 100m race, but electric motors do not. On the other hand, humans have to stay in control of their bodies, even after hitting top speed. Tiangong, by contrast, just keeps going at speed until it hits a barrier. As Bundle puts it, being fast does not mean much if you end up as "a heap of broken bones" because you cannot stop.

So, yes, the robot, Tiangong, ran 100 metres faster than Bolt - but that does not mean it is actually a better sprinter in the way humans are. Those are two very different claims.

There is also a problem with how these things get measured. The

National Institute of Standards and Technology (a US federal agency under the Department of Commerce) started a new project in 2026 to test humanoid robots side by side, precisely because the field does not have good enough standardised ways to compare them. The plan is to test a mix of walking/running with hands-on tasks, and to show basic skills that would actually matter for real business use, not just flashy one-off records.

The following summarises the criticism of the games themselves: if you tune a machine to do well on one narrow test, you can get eye-popping numbers without showing it actually has broad, real-world smarts. These robots are impressive - but what they demonstrate is different from what the spectacle encourages us to believe: not just 'This robot can run', but 'Robots are becoming like humans' and eventually 'Robots will replace humans'. Those are three very different claims. The first may be demonstrated directly. The second involves interpretation. The third requires assumptions about economics, reliability, workplace organisation and politics that a sporting demonstration cannot establish.

So, in terms of replacing humans, Associated Press expressed a similar opinion: what actually matters is not whether a humanoid can sprint at 42 km/h on a smooth track, but whether it can reliably handle messy, unpredictable jobs in real warehouses and factories. Evan Ackerman's 2025 article, 'Reality is ruining the humanoid robot hype: the obstacles to scaling up humanoids that nobody is talking about',¹ reminds us that four problems have to be overcome before humanoids can scale commercially - demand, battery life, reliability and safety.

A more serious point is about capitalist cost calculation. A factory owner does not normally ask, 'Can this robot perform the task as well as a human?' The more relevant questions are: 'How much does the system cost over its lifetime?' 'How often does it fail?' 'How much maintenance does it require?' 'How much electricity does it consume?' 'Does the factory need redesigning around it?' 'How many technicians are needed to keep it running?' And 'How quickly does the investment pay for itself?'

That changes the significance

of humanoid robotics. A humanoid might eventually become technically capable of carrying a box across a warehouse. But, if a wheeled autonomous vehicle can move the same box for a fraction of the cost, the humanoid has not really 'won'. This also explains why spectacular demonstrations can be misleading. Running, boxing and dancing are impressive demonstrations of control, balance and mechanical coordination, but they are not necessarily demonstrations of economic usefulness. Industrial automation rewards boring reliability more than spectacular versatility. A machine that performs one movement 100,000 times with almost no failure may be economically more transformative than a humanoid capable of performing 50 impressive tasks unreliably. The distinction is between technological possibility and social outcome. Technological determinism treats the sequence almost as automatic: invention→adoption→job destruction.

There are several political and economic decisions between those stages. A technology may exist without being profitable to deploy. It may be profitable in one country, but not another, because wages differ. Companies may automate because labour is expensive, but they may also automate because machinery gives management greater control over the labour process. Governments may encourage automation through subsidies, procurement and tax policy - or discourage particular applications through regulation. That means the claim that 'Robots are coming for our jobs' hides the actors actually making the key decisions. Robots do not decide to replace workers: private companies, managers, investors and states decide how technologies will be deployed.

There is also a useful Marxist extension available here. Automation can be understood not simply as replacing labour, but as changing the relationship between capital and labour. Machinery can reorganise the labour process, alter the balance of power inside the workplace, reduce management's dependence on particular skilled workers, intensify work and create new systems of surveillance and control. So the political question becomes larger than unemployment. It becomes: who controls automation, for what purpose, and who receives its productivity gains?

Key questions

Those who study labour relations keep telling us that the real question is not whether humanoids eventually get good enough to replace workers technically - it is under what conditions companies and governments choose robots over people, which jobs get automated, whose jobs vanish, what new jobs pop up, and who ends up pocketing the extra profit that comes from it.

In China, a study by Yi Xu and Xin Ye, 'Technology upgrading and labour degrading? A sociological study of three robotised factories', examined Chinese institutions that had introduced industrial robots against the background of the government-backed drive for technological upgrading and 'machine substitution'. Their findings complicate the familiar idea that automation simply eliminates

human labour. In the factories they studied, production remained semi-automated: workers continued to perform essential tasks alongside and around the machines. Robotisation therefore did not simply replace labour: it reorganised the labour process.

In some cases, workers became assistants to the robots, carrying out tasks such as loading and unloading materials, packaging products, monitoring machinery and intervening when automated processes failed. Crucially, Xu and Ye found that technological upgrading at the level of the factory did not necessarily produce an equivalent upgrading of workers' skills. It could instead result in deskilling.

Factory C provides a particularly revealing example. Workers designated as robot operators received some additional training and a technical allowance, which appeared at first sight to represent an improvement in their skills and status. Yet Xu and Ye argue that this apparent upgrading concealed a degradation of the actual labour process: much of the operator's work consisted of assisting and monitoring the robot. Other workers employed around the automated production system received neither additional training nor corresponding improvements in their working conditions.

Xu and Ye describe one important mechanism behind this transformation as "execution substitution". Instead of necessarily eliminating an occupation altogether, machinery takes over increasingly complex elements of its execution, leaving workers with simpler residual tasks or with responsibility for monitoring the automated system. In highly automated production, workers can consequently become what the authors describe as a "supervising crew", whose principal responsibility is to ensure that the production line continues running.

This is an important distinction. A technologically more advanced factory does not necessarily produce more highly skilled or autonomous workers. Indeed, the opposite can occur: the production system becomes more sophisticated, while the individual worker's role becomes narrower, more repetitive and increasingly subordinated to the requirements of the machine. Automation should therefore be understood not simply in terms of how many jobs disappear, but also in terms of how it reorganises the division of labour, redistributes skills and changes workers' control over the production process.

A related, but distinct, issue arises with newer AI and humanoid robotic systems. Their apparent autonomy can itself depend on substantial amounts of human labour performed elsewhere: demonstrations, teleoperation, data annotation, correction of failures, maintenance and the production of training data. This should not be attributed to Xu's and Ye's three-factory study, but it reinforces their broader warning against equating technological sophistication with the disappearance of human labour. Automation can remove human labour from the most visible part of a process, while simultaneously creating or depending upon less visible forms of work elsewhere.

Another paper relevant to the Beijing Games is one by Phyllis

Xue Wang, Sara Kim and Minki Kim: ‘Robot anthropomorphism and job insecurity: the role of social comparison’.²

They ran a number of studies on how human-like robots affect workers’ sense of job security. They found that, the more human a robot looked, the more insecure workers felt about their jobs - because they were more likely to compare themselves to the machine. That matters, because the whole Olympics framing anthropomorphises - humanises - the technology. The whole spectacle is built to invite comparison: robot boxer versus human boxer; robot runner versus Bolt; robot worker versus factory worker.

The Beijing event also showcased what China has called the technical architecture: ‘brain + small brain’ fusion. China’s 15th five-year plan explicitly calls for “integrated, embodied AI models and algorithms, combining the large brain and small brain” - meaning high-level cognition (perception, reasoning, language, planning) fused with low-level motor control (balance, locomotion, grasping, real-time feedback), rather than treating cognition and physical control as separate systems. The ‘co-agent’ framework, UBtech (a Shenzhen-based Chinese humanoid and service robotics company), is the flagship example.

Where the AI actually shows up in the hardware, UBtech’s patent portfolio shows that AI is not concentrated in one layer - it is spread across the whole stack: one model handles perception, reasoning, memory, planning and action together - so a robot can understand a task, choose the right tool, spot problems and act, while also coordinating with other robots on the line rather than working alone. Galaxy General’s AstraBrain claims something similar: full-body, full-hand control, running straight from perception to real-time motor response.

AI perception (vision, voice, ‘natural language processing’, ‘simultaneous localisation and mapping’), which allows the robot to build a map of an unfamiliar space (a factory floor), while also tracking its own position within that map in real time - is important. So is ‘light detection and ranging’ (LiDAR) - a sensor that fires laser pulses and measures the reflections to build a precise 3D picture of the robot’s surroundings - used for obstacle detection, navigation and depth perception. LiDAR is the single largest category (28%) of all patents, since perceiving and responding to messy, unstructured factory environments is what actually separates a lab demo from a deployable industrial worker. Navigation and autonomous mobility and motion/control (gait, balance, trajectory planning) are the ‘body’ side. Testing and calibration - life-testing rigs and zero-calibration devices - are the least glamorous patent category, but the most telling: you do not patent a calibration jig unless you are setting up a real production line, not just a lab.

Reinforcement learning (RL) works by trial and error: the robot tries an action, gets a score based on how well it worked (did it grasp the object, did it stay balanced?), and adjusts its behaviour to repeat what earns a good score. The problem for humanoids is that RL needs huge numbers of attempts - learning to walk or grasp this way in the real world would mean thousands of falls and drops per skill, which is slow, costly and hard on the hardware. So almost all training happens in simulation instead, where a robot can ‘fail’ a million times in an afternoon for free.

The catch is the ‘sim-to-real gap’: skills that work perfectly in simulation often break down on a real robot, which has real friction, sensor noise and play in its joints. Much of

the unglamorous engineering work - domain randomisation, system identification, fine-tuning on real robot data - goes into closing that gap.

Imitation learning sidesteps some of this by learning directly from demonstrations - either human teleoperation (someone in a virtual-reality rig or motion-capture suit puppeting the robot’s arm through a task) or video of humans performing the task. This gives the robot a good starting policy much faster than RL from scratch, but on its own it tends to be brittle outside the exact conditions it was shown - it can struggle when the object is in a slightly different position than any demonstration. In practice, most labs combine the two: imitation learning to bootstrap a reasonable policy, then RL (in simulation, sometimes fine-tuned in the real world) to refine and generalise it.

Vision-language-action (VLA) models are the more recent architecture, and they are the ones doing the most work toward that ‘intuition’. A VLA takes in an image (or video) of the scene plus a natural-language instruction (‘pick up the red bottle’) and directly outputs a sequence of low-level motor commands - essentially treating ‘what to do next’ as a next-token-prediction problem (the same way as a large language model predicts the next word). The reason this matters is because these models are typically built on top of vision-language foundation models - pretrained on enormous internet-scale image-and-text data, they inherit a broad, semantic understanding of objects and concepts even for things the robot has never physically manipulated before. A VLA that has never picked up a specific model of a coffee mug can still often succeed, because it has generalised visual/semantic knowledge of ‘mugs’ and ‘grasping’ from its pretraining, not just from robot-specific data.

This is exactly the layer UBtech’s ‘co-agent’ system and Galaxy General’s AstraBrain are built around - an end-to-end model, fusing perception, reasoning and action rather than a hand-coded pipeline of separate modules. It is also why the earlier point about UBtech’s patent portfolio matters: 28% of UBtech’s patents sit in the ‘AI perception’ category, precisely because perception quality is the bottleneck for this whole learning approach. It explains the emphasis in Chinese policy documents on data - the training data vouchers: “100 high-quality industrial datasets” as an explicit 2027 target in the AI+Manufacturing plan - since VLA-style learning is fundamentally data-hungry, and industrial deployment generates exactly the kind of large-scale, real-world, varied-failure data that is hard to get any other way. Mass deployment is not just commercialisation: it is also the data flywheel that makes the next generation of models better, which is arguably the sharpest edge of the ‘diffusion-forward’ strategy, meaning that diffusion itself becomes the training pipeline.

Robots wars

When it comes to political economy, some academics are detecting differences between the approaches of China and the USA to AI and its relationship to robots.

Hao Chen and Meg Rithmire call China’s approach “diffusion-forward AI”. Instead of treating the tech race as mainly a sprint toward super-smart AI, they argue China’s real strength is the government pushing AI out into the physical, real-world economy - manufacturing, industrial robots, and robots with bodies. They point to China’s state-linked investment system, its mix of top-down and spread-out decision-making, and its habit of running industrial policy like a campaign, as key reasons why.

You could read the Games, then, as

more than just entertainment - as part of a whole ecosystem the government built on purpose: competitions set benchmarks, companies show off their hardware, universities test their software, the government hands out contracts and subsidies, and whatever works gets fed into real factories.

But there is a tricky economic question buried in there too: does government-backed competition build real, useful tech skills - or does it eventually just cause too much investment, too many copycat companies and way more capacity than anyone needs? That question matters, because humanoid robots might be heading into the same cycle we have seen before in Chinese industrial policy: subsidies→a flood of new companies→a price war - and then only a few survivors left standing.

In addition to jobs, we should be concerned about the use of AI-equipped robots in military operations and in state security... What Beijing demonstrated is potentially more dangerous: the beginnings of an industrial ecosystem, in which AI, relatively cheap robotics, autonomous navigation, sensors and mass manufacturing can be combined with existing military systems. At the World Robot Conference, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China - its main state-owned aerospace and defence conglomerate, responsible for designing and manufacturing military and civilian aircraft - showed work on humanoids intended for aviation-related tasks, including loading missiles onto aircraft and, at some stage, operating aircraft. Other systems demonstrated security, patrol and restraint functions.

Humanoid soldiers are probably the least significant near-term development. The athletic displays showed machines running, leaping and clearing obstacles at a speed and standard that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Yet the same machines still struggled with seemingly straightforward manipulation tasks, such as handling tools consistently.

Kaia Glickman, writing in *Nature* in an article entitled “‘Robot Olympics’ reveal humanoids’ rapid progress - and flaws”,³ draws this distinction well: robots are getting very good at motions that can be rehearsed along fixed paths, while dexterous handling of unpredictable environments remains tougher. That is significant for warfare. A battlefield is close to the opposite of a controlled robotics contest. There is mud, debris, smoke, wrecked buildings, civilians, electronic jamming, deliberate trickery, GPS interference, signal disruption and erratic human behaviour. As a result, a £50,000 humanoid armed with a rifle could often prove less militarily useful than a £2,000 drone.

Even experts focused specifically on China’s military robotics warn that humanoids currently trail behind wheeled, tracked and airborne unmanned systems. Their future value hinges on reliability, power supply, communications, autonomy and whether they genuinely outperform simpler machines. There are, however, credible military applications on a shorter horizon: handling ammunition, logistics, evacuating casualties, clearing mines, standing sentry, reconnaissance, entering contaminated areas, maintaining aircraft and loading weapons. None of these roles demand that a robot make complex decisions about who to kill.

The truly significant development is robotics merging with autonomy, and here we have to mention pre-programmed missiles; however, it is important to distinguish three generations of weaponry:

■ Traditional guided weapon: a person selects a target and fires a missile at it. The missile’s onboard computer steers

itself towards that specified target.

■ Pre-programmed/autonomous weapon: a person defines an area and the characteristics of a target; once launched, the weapon can hunt for something matching that description.

■ AI-enabled autonomous weapon: sensors and algorithms read the surroundings and can potentially identify, rank and strike targets without any further human input. This last shift is qualitatively significant.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) essentially defines an autonomous weapon as one that, once activated, can choose and engage targets without any further human involvement. Notably, autonomous weapons do not necessarily need modern AI; fairly basic rule-based systems can also qualify as autonomous.

So the real breakthrough is not merely ‘smart missiles’, which have been around for decades. What is new is the possibility of linking together - sensor→AI identification→targeting decision→autonomous platform→weapon - into a single, increasingly automated sequence. That could reshape the economics of war. This may end up mattering more than what humanoid soldiers can do. China holds an unusual edge here, thanks to its vast civilian manufacturing base for batteries, motors, actuators, cameras, electronics, drones and industrial robots.

The Royal United Services Institute therefore makes a compelling case: China’s decisive edge may not be a single, remarkably sophisticated robot soldier, but rather the capacity to mass-produce autonomous machines. It notes China installed around 295,000 industrial robots in 2024, versus roughly 32,200 in the US, and argues that much of this industrial base can be repurposed for military robotics.

In other words, military strength could partly shift from ‘Who has the best tank?’ towards ‘Who can build and replace 100,000 reasonably capable autonomous systems the fastest?’ That represents a profound strategic shift. It could also give rise to a new kind of ‘mass army’. Industrial-era warfare traditionally relied on mobilising millions of people. Robotic warfare could change that equation. A country with an ageing population might, in theory, deploy vast numbers of unmanned systems without mobilising equivalent numbers of soldiers. And machines can carry out missions that are politically awkward to assign to people, since governments do not face domestic casualties when robots are destroyed.

That could create a troubling paradox: automation might make it politically easier to start military action, even as it eventually lowers the danger soldiers face. There is already talk within China’s robotics industry of future military humanoids. One Chinese developer interviewed at the Beijing Games suggested armed humanoid soldiers could be five to 10 years away. That should be read as one individual’s forecast rather than an official Chinese government timeline, but it shows where parts of the industry envisage the technology heading.

So, for a frightening scenario, picture not a single humanoid robot, but hundreds or thousands of cheap autonomous drones. They are given a broad instruction, such as: ‘Find objects showing specified military characteristics within this geographic area’. They spread out. Their sensors pick up vehicles, radar signals or other signatures. Algorithms classify possible targets. The machines strike matching objects. At that stage, the human commander has authorised the mission, but has not personally chosen every object that ends up destroyed.

This is exactly why the line between automation and autonomy matters so much. The ICRC warns

that autonomous systems can leave their operators unable to predict precisely who or what will be hit, or exactly where and when. And bringing machine learning into the mix makes things harder still, since behaviour can become less predictable than with conventional, deterministic software. Here we have a serious risk of escalation.

In science-fiction-type imagination, let us think of China and the US fighting each other with autonomous systems. One AI system flags what it classifies as hostile radar activity. It directs drones to reposition. The opposing system reads that movement as preparation for an attack. It raises its alert level. The first system takes that as confirmation of hostile intent. Humans might have only minutes, or seconds, to step in. So the real danger is not necessarily ‘robots becoming conscious’. The realistic danger is far more mundane: machines behaving exactly as programmed, while the overall interaction produces a disaster nobody intended. Cyber warfare compounds the problem. Military robots bring together communications, sensors, software and computing, creating openings for spoofing, jamming, hacking and manipulation.

Nuclear weapons are where this turns genuinely alarming. There is a vast gap between using AI to help interpret satellite imagery and letting AI into nuclear launch decisions. The ICRC’s current stance is that AI should not be built into nuclear command-and-control in ways that override human judgement, and it is pushing for binding international limits on autonomous weapons, especially those aimed at people. This is no longer a purely theoretical debate. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s 2026 assessment notes that military-AI discussions have widened beyond autonomous weapons, to cover targeting, intelligence analysis and military decision-support systems. That distinction is important. AI does not need to physically press a nuclear launch button to become dangerous. An AI system telling political leaders, ‘There is a 93% probability that these satellite observations indicate an imminent attack’, could heavily sway a human decision made under extreme time pressure.

So I would not read the Beijing demonstrations mainly as proof that ‘China will soon have robot soldiers’. The more important trend is this convergence: AI +cheap sensors +drones +humanoids +autonomous navigation +missile technology +enormous manufacturing capacity. That combination could shift warfare away from small numbers of extremely expensive precision weapons and towards vast populations of relatively cheap, intelligent machines.

And there is an intriguing political-economic angle to this. Industrial capitalism once reshaped warfare by making it possible to mass-produce rifles, shells, tanks and aircraft. We may now be heading into another transformation, in which the manufactured commodity is not just a weapon any more: it is increasingly the combatant itself. That is why what happened in Beijing matters, even though today’s humanoids are still clumsy.

The unsettling question is not whether a robot can beat a human soldier in hand-to-hand combat: it is whether states can produce millions of expendable, autonomous machines, capable of sensing, communicating, coordinating and applying force faster than humans can meaningfully oversee them ●

Notes

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COMMUNISM

Abundance for all

How can climate catastrophe be stopped? Capitalism, almost by definition, depends on endless accumulation and the production of more and more stuff. But, at CU 2026, Ted Reese argued that degrowth is not the answer

Degrowth has been put forward by sections of the left as the necessary solution to preventing the worst outcomes of the environmental and climate crises. Kohei Saito goes further by promoting ‘degrowth communism’. It is easy and tempting to mock and misrepresent what ‘degrowthers’ really stand for. So in my talk at Communist University 2026, I attempted to give an even-handed account of what degrowth and degrowth communism are; and what their proponents get right and what they get wrong.

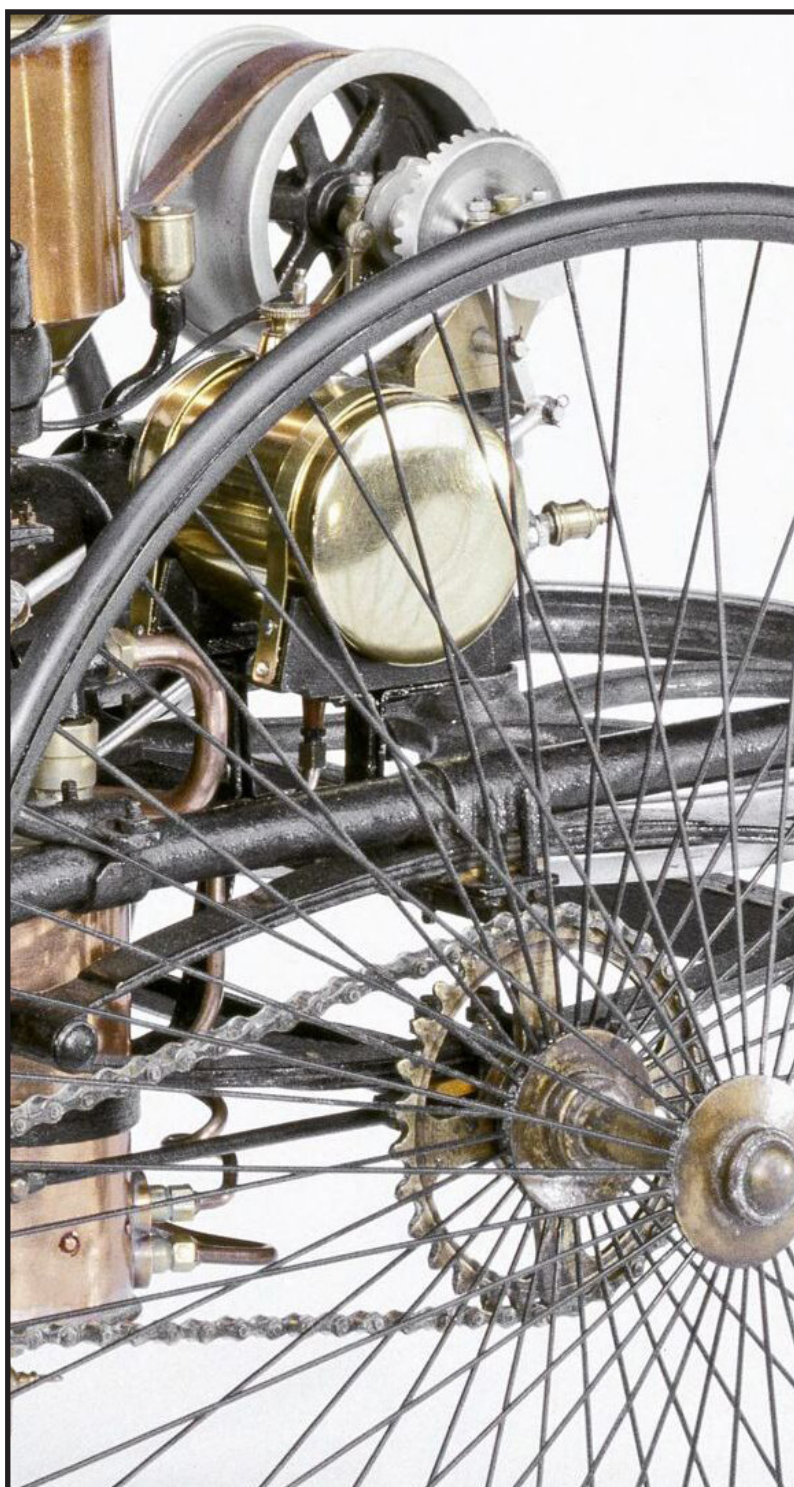
The term ‘degrowth’ and what it stands for has been popularised by Jason Hickel, following his book, *Less is more: how degrowth will save the world*, published in 2021. The degrowth movement aims, of course, to significantly reduce the volume of material and energy we use to produce our economy, at the same time redistributing and rebalancing wealth in order to minimise inequality, thereby transforming our socio-economic system into an eco-friendly one that reverses the ongoing destruction of the environment. Degrowth is not simply about absolute negative growth, though: the fundamental target is to wind down and end our dependence on fossil fuels, deforestation and unsustainable farming, to be replaced by *abundant* renewable energy, biodegradable plastics, afforestation and regenerative farming. Marxists therefore have plenty in common with the aims of degrowthers.

In online debates on the subject, I have seen some communists make some pretty disingenuous or misguided claims. Chief among them is the charge of degrowth favouring primitive or ‘pre-industrial’ forms of production or being pro-austerity or Malthusian (pro-depopulation). That it lays itself open to that kind of conflation and confusion - and you could easily imagine it being coopted by ‘ecofascists’ - is in itself a pretty unavoidable problem with the ‘branding’ of the concept and one reason I do not think communists should use the term in their agitation.

Nevertheless, it is rather over the top to claim, as some perhaps ‘socially conservative communists’ have, that the degrowth movement’s promotion of free access to contraception, for example, is promoting Malthusianism and depopulation. While I concede that it is ‘risky’ and incorrect to at least imply that population growth is the problem that needs to be curbed, exaggerating and throwing around false accusations only makes the debate more toxic and unproductive. Such accusations would only be warranted if degrowthers were promoting measures like sterilisation. Promoting free access to contraception is something quite different, giving women independence, choice and bodily autonomy - which communism would work towards giving everyone.

Support for degrowth makes a lot of sense instinctively. If we produce half as much stuff, we will have half as much impact or thereabouts on the environment. And look at all the crap and that we produce that we could easily do without, *without harming human living standards*. In fact, we could raise living standards just by significantly reducing pollution levels that cause so much human disease, and spending far less time and energy transporting junk to landfills.

Studies back up the thinking. A



Degrowthers want to slam on the brakes and go into reverse gear

paper by Joel Milward-Hopkins *et al*, ‘Providing decent living with minimum energy’,¹ found that general mid-20th century living standards - when things like employment, housing and childcare were far more accessible - were achieved at a fraction of today’s per capita energy and material use; and that with modern efficiency gains that standard could be achieved for everyone today with even less. The study by Jason Hickel and Dylan Sullivan, ‘How much growth is required to achieve good lives for all?’² found that decent living standards for all - nutritious food, good modern housing, healthcare, education, electricity, sanitation, household appliances, computer/internet, transport, recreational goods and services - would require 30% of current global resource and energy use.

Degrowthers though are, by and large, idealists and social democrats. They often locate the problem with the ‘greed’ and excessive consumption of the super-rich; or the ‘political obsession’ with economic growth of the ‘neoliberal elite’. Through state regulation they think industrial policy can be redirected, the consumption of the rich curbed and the wealth gap between rich and poor ‘rebalanced’.

This is where their case falls down, since capitalism, or private commodity production, can only be temporarily reformed. That is because capital by definition must tend to accumulate. As more commodities are made in less time through expanded production and innovation, commodities obviously lose value and so *tend to produce less profit per commodity* and a falling rate of profit on capital investment. An underproduction of profit arises, whereby there is not enough to cover the costs of wages, capitalist consumption, maintenance and reinvestment.

The necessary counteraction to offset this problem under capitalism is to produce a greater amount of absolute profit, by innovating and expanding production. Because the source of profit, furthermore, is human labour and labour time, the difficulty of extracting fossil fuel and metals from the earth is far more profitable than producing biodegradable plastics and renewable fuels from non-extractive sources.

The environmental crisis then is *the capitalist crisis* - a crisis of profitability, driven inherently by the dual character of the commodity, since, the faster use values are produced, the more their exchange value tends to

with away. The capitalist class is then compelled by the unchangeable logic of the system to *plunder and commodify nature at an ever-faster rate*. And it is compelled to crush any reformist project that slows down the rate of commodity production or the flow of profit and value into private accumulation. If it does not do so, capital cannot attract and secure enough investment to prevent bankruptcy. Any spending on the public is money that is being taken away from private capital accumulation. Any spending on renewables is money that is not being spent on fossil fuel production. Investment in renewables is only profitable when the initial build requires a sufficient amount of labour, after which much less labour and labour-intensive work is required only for maintenance - whereas fossil fuel disappears into thin air, *renewing the demand for labour and capital investment*. Abundant renewable energy would be so cheap as to provide no profit margin without massive (and unsustainable) taxpayer subsidies (since taxpayers only have so much money). Making the degrowth vision sustainably possible therefore requires ending capitalism - all private production - for good. That requires not social democracy, but a powerful working class state that can prevent capitalists from retaking power.

Marxism

Does the concept of ‘degrowth communism’ fare any better then? It is certainly an advance on ‘degrowth’ merely by explicitly endorsing communism.

Although Hickel is quite open about blaming capitalism *per se*, he is less explicit about naming the solution. In a recent article in *The Guardian* published with Yanis Varoufakis, the two squarely called out “the need to overcome the capitalist law of value”, but recommended reformist measures that, while deserving of critical support, would nevertheless not achieve that stated requirement.³

The first measure: financially “penalise destructive private investments” - money that can be given over to public investment. As I have implied, private productive investment is highly likely to be extractive by nature, so this would likely only apply to companies with particularly visible pollutive practices. The fact remains that companies cut back on recycling and environmental cleanups *because their profits are not high enough to cover the costs*.

Secondly, they call for “a new public investment bank that, in association with the central banks, converts available liquidity into the types of investment consistent with common, sustainable prosperity” - an obvious hindrance to capital accumulation, not to mention that existing central banks serve and unite a nation’s network of private, capitalist banks.

Thirdly, they propose “the extensive use of deliberative democracy to decide sectoral, regional and national goals (eg, regarding the growth or even winding down of different outputs)”; and “a Great Corporate Reform Act for the purpose of democratising corporations, favouring and promoting the formation of companies run along the lines of one employee, one share, one vote”. Sounds nice, but a private company run by workers is still a private company, and is then still subject to the law of value that Hickel and Varoufakis recognise is destroying

the environment. Such companies that decide to make less tat and crap are not going to accumulate profit and capital sufficiently to stay in business either; and since the fall in the rate of profit must be countered by centralising capital into fewer hands - *per law of value* - any democratic gains would not be sustained.

At least Saito explicitly names communism as the solution then. Saito, very usefully furthermore, has followed John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett in showing that it is wrong to claim, as some left environmentalists do, that Marx and Engels ignored the issue of the environment (which may be, the thinking often goes, why the Soviet Union and Maoist China did the same). Saito won the Isaac Deutscher prize in 2018 for his analysis of Marx’s notebooks on agriculture and the exhaustion of the soil.

Saito says that Marx increasingly attempted to analyse how the logic of capital generates various disharmonies in the metabolic interaction between humans and nature. Marx analysed this point with reference to Justus von Liebig’s critique of ‘robbery agriculture’, which takes as much nutrition as possible from the soil without returning any. A grave chasm arises between the logic of capital’s value production and that of nature’s metabolism: ‘metabolic rifts’ in human interaction with the environment. Marx wrote in *Capital* (volume 3) that the capitalist mode of production produces conditions that “provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process between social metabolism and natural metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of the soil, [resulting in] a squandering of the vitality of the soil”. Marx also became more interested, says Saito, in how “pre-capitalist society had a unique way of communal regulations of land” and “imposed various rules on production and consumption, which realised a more steady state of sustainable production”. This made Marx “a ‘degrowth ecological communist’”, he claims.⁴

To be precise, we should be clear that this metabolic rift again *manifests as a result of the contradictory nature of the commodity*. The rate of profit falls, private companies go bankrupt and the winners of capitalist competition buy up the bankrupt capital on the cheap, centralising capital into fewer hands; meanwhile mergers and acquisitions in general achieve economies of scale, cheapening production and making investment more affordable. This centralisation of capital is reflected geographically, concentrated in the richest cities. Workers are forced to follow to find work, food is increasingly shipped away from farmland to the cities, and the nutrients from the soil are never returned. Instead they are flushed with pollutive treatments into waterways via sewers. Farms then need synthetic fertilisers that take up yet more resources to produce, while disrupting and acidifying soil biology.

Saito, author of *Marx in the Anthropocene*, wants to “overcome the divide between Marxism and degrowth”, saying we need “a vision where mass production, mass consumption and mass waste can be avoided”. He adds: “My vision is not Soviet-style - I am not arguing for the state ownership of everything or state-planned economy.”

Like Hickel and Varoufakis, his emphasis is instead on ‘starting

small' by championing school strikes, workers co-ops, as well as localised production and consumption. Again, in actual fact, this smacks of reformism, not communism (of any actual 'type'). His call for a "popular front in defence of the planet" is, moreover, quite useless. Effectively that is what we already have, with the working class subordinated to the leadership of social democrats and liberals who are not confronting the essence of what is no less than an existential 'problem'. The popular front did not prevent the rise of fascism in the 20th century because it refused to break with capitalism. Its contemporary proponents are repeating the same - to put it generously - catastrophic 'error'.

Own goal

Degrowth, unfortunately, is what we are going to get, at least in the way that many people may associate with the term. The Korean canary is already singing: South Korea's stock exchange crashed by 40% in July for the first time since 2008 - a likely sign that another major global economic contraction is upon us. That means production will fall markedly through bankruptcies, while the survivors scale back production to raise prices. The capitalist state will enforce yet more austerity: deeper cuts to public spending, jobs and wages; even higher consumption and income taxes to subsidise capital; and so on. The dwindling remainder of profitable capital will be centralised into yet fewer hands, taking inequality to levels that will make the present obscene divide look like the good old days.

As I said at the start, the ease with which degrowth can be conflated or confused with austerity or depopulation makes using it as a means of attracting mass appeal to either environmentalism or communism an unnecessary own goal - especially when we can put sustainable, eco-friendly abundance for all at the forefront of our politics.

The problem with degrowth is its overemphasis on growth and consumption: ie, on the quantitative side of the equation. If the quality

of production were different, if production were based more or less entirely on clean, renewable, recyclable and biodegradable energies and materials, quantity would be a much lesser problem, even if we continued to, say, make cars at the expense of public transport (which is much more efficient - able to carry far more people over much greater distances in much shorter periods of time); but the former, of course, generates much more profit for capital than the latter. As long as we were using such materials at a rate at which nature could replenish them and itself, the environmental issue would be 'solved', or manageable. By using such renewables and materials, the rate at which nature could replenish would in fact speed up, since the lack of pollution and the biodegradables would aid the process. (And, of course, we can grow plants with vertical agriculture - something that has again proven too productive for capitalism to make good use of - we are not simply limited to the land.)

Communism enables this ability inherently. Capitalism already inherently plans production at the level of the individual enterprise, but does so on the basis of profitability - what and how and how much is produced depends on what will make a sufficient amount of profit. Communism does not introduce planning, but takes it to a higher level - a joined-up, holistic, economy-wide level - by producing on the basis of need - without the interruptions of financial crises, falling profitability, competition, and commercial secrecy; and, crucially, on a break-even basis. We can therefore adapt our production and production levels according to what the environment is capable of providing.

We must doubtlessly do better than the Soviet Union - which did not have today's technology and was forced into a destructive and wasteful arm's race by imperialism, although it did achieve some impressive environmental feats, such as afforestation drives. But Saito's scepticism of state ownership and planning is myopic. China is already

proving this: its state ownership of the 'commanding heights' of the economy (energy, steel, banking, etc) is a major factor in its ability to affordably mass-produce solar panels, wind turbines and electric vehicles. That is because state ownership decommodifies and deprivatises the relations of production. Proceeds are reinvested socially, rather than ending up with shareholders who only reinvest when profitability is high enough, sustaining supply and therefore keeping prices relatively low.

In the Communist manifesto, Marx explicitly calls for the progressive increase in state ownership of the economy.⁵ The reaction to the Soviet Union should not be to denounce state ownership and planning, but to recognise that there was not enough of either to withstand the forces and distortions of capital (ie, globally). Once everything is owned by the state, nothing is owned by the state - since the state is the expression of the rule of one class over another. In a total monopoly no exchange of ownership is necessary and therefore class no longer exists.

As Engels writes, "To carry out this control [over our interaction with nature] requires something more than mere knowledge. It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and with it of our whole contemporary social order."⁶ It is the relations of production which are of paramount importance.

In the near term, we probably cannot reduce our use of fossil fuels and mined metals as quickly as we would wish without seriously downgrading living standards - although, of course, we will be inheriting a collapsing society anyway - while we are building up the capacity of the renewables and biodegradables that can replace the current productive system. Having said that, China, again, has proven that renewable production can be ramped up very quickly - albeit in a way that is warped to whatever degree by its own private sector and its dependence on trade with the capitalist world order.

In the longer term, because communism can make production easier - ie, without relying on the difficulty of extraction to produce demand for labour time - we can enable the transition we really need by radically upscaling the research and development of additive production. That is, instead of extracting finite materials from the Earth, we can grow them effectively infinitely (as opposed to the unimaginative degrowth argument that 'infinite growth is impossible on a finite planet'). Additive production often involves self-replicating material: ie, with relatively little human labour. And, instead of using subtractive production (metal milling, or carving furniture out of trees, for example), we can layer materials (as with 3D printing) into all sorts of shapes and sizes, radically reducing unused material/waste.

The obvious example is biodegradable products made from hemp (a plant that is self-seeding and requires relatively little water), around 50,000 of which already exist (albeit on a relatively small scale), including battery supercapacitors.⁷ More imaginatively, a 'mycelium revolution' is already underway, whereby fungi can be coaxed, again, into all sorts of shapes and structures, including, apparently, computers;⁸ purer metals and diamonds than those found in the ground can be grown in labs (China's use of synthetic diamond for its general industrial production has been vital to its global rise in the past decade or so); and food claimed to be chemically identical to 'conventional' food, including meat, can be grown via 'cellular agriculture' or 'precision fermentation' (something that could supplement regenerative farming and which could be especially important, even if the quality is not of the standard

it may well reach in the future, when food systems have diminished as a result of the collapse of capitalism and its environment).⁹

Humanity

Meanwhile, Nasa is apparently developing powerful biofuels from the bacteria in human waste.¹⁰ Nuclear fusion is arguably additive in comparison to subtractive fission. Alternatively, instead of making batteries, solar panels and wind turbines from mined metals that produce hazardous industrial waste as a byproduct, they could be made, of course, from fibrous plants and lab-grown materials. The list goes on. I may be accused of extreme technological optimism, but do your own research. Many of these options are already in production at a small scale; they will just never be profitable to invest in at a much larger scale, because, of course, they would become too cheap to generate profitability.

None of this is to say that communism alone is the complete panacea. We would still obviously need developed human intelligence to take the decision to wind down fossil fuel production and deforestation at the required pace and transition to additive production. The point is that communism enables this option sustainably and at the required scale.

The arguments for degrowth are worth taking seriously. We would indeed need to restrict many forms of production and prioritise the absolute necessities in the early phases of communist development, in order to reduce atmospheric carbon emissions as quickly as possible and put resources where they are most needed, for environmental restoration and absolute human need.

'Abundance for all' is then the long-term vision and some form of 'degrowth' and outright prohibition of unnecessary production is required, while we move to recyclable and renewable production. Eventually though our productive capacities are likely to become so high that enforcing prohibitions will become effectively impossible - meaning that making sure that clean and recyclable material is readily available to all is what is vitally important •

Notes

1. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378020307512.
2. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2452292924000493.
3. www.theguardian.com/environment/commentisfree/2026/feb/12/capitalist-model-climate-growth-capitalism-species-humanity.
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5. "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state [our emphasis]: ie, of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible" (www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm).
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What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly worker

Don't tail the US Democrats

Beyond the 'Epstein class'

We need the truth. We need science. Marxists should abjure conspiracy theories about all-powerful cabals, no matter how popular they are on the internet, argues **Paul Demarty**

With the Jeffrey Epstein scandal now a permanent part of political controversy in the western world, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has become the master key for all historical explanation for a substantial number of politically engaged persons.

Such persons may be found on the far right, on the far left and in the atomised swamp of politically indeterminate 'low-information voters'. On the far right, this is hardly a surprise: theories of politics based on the malevolent actions of secret cabals have been its stock in trade since at least the French Revolution, blamed by Catholic reactionaries on the continent on Freemasonry - and, of course, the anti-Semitic variants of this story need hardly be mentioned. Epstein's connections to prominent Democrat politicians - above all Bill Clinton - fuel this fire.

But Epstein also had connections to Republican politicians, and indeed a close friendship at one time with a certain Donald Trump. Trump exploited Epstein-obsessives on the 2024 campaign trail, but always seemed a little standoffish on the question, when pressed directly; the attempts of his second administration to put a lid on things and declare the case closed backfired spectacularly, with Congress imposing document releases on the executive, which proved embarrassing to him (though not as bad as they might have been).

Pushing for further disclosures, congressman Ro Khanna - roughly a left populist with some affiliation with Bernie Sanders and 'the squad' - came up with the term 'Epstein class' as an image of the all-powerful super-rich, whose world barely meets that of us mere mortals. This is a wonderfully ambiguous phrase; it *might* mean no more than that, and therefore play the same kind of role that 'the 1%' played in the Occupy Wall Street era. Or it *might* be repurposed as a description of a conscious cabal of secret rulers.

Special interest

In any case, the Epstein affair has long had a special interest for parts of the US left, particularly in the fandoms of political comedy podcasts like *Chapo trap house* and *TrueAnon* (which began as an Epstein-specific show in 2019, shortly before Epstein's suicide). With the bungled retreat of the right on the issue, the way is clear for the left and, more ambiguously, the centre to press the advantage, and overdetermine the name of Epstein to their own advantage.

The comfort of Democrat moderates like senator Jon Ossoff with 'Epstein class' rhetoric is notable, and indicates perhaps that the mainstream Democrat obsession with appearing to be the 'adults in the room', compared to the crazy Republicans, is losing sway. The replacement, according to the various wonks, is a focus on bread-and-butter issues, combined with centring Trump's catastrophically obvious corruption, producing a simple populist message that the Trump regime is stealing directly



Not only Trump and the GOP: Bill Clinton, Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell

from your family's dinner table. It is neither exactly true nor exactly false, but it may have some potency on the door-knocker.

Regrettably, this opportunistic and cynical populism has found a home on the traditional far left as well, particularly in the form of the Revolutionary Communist Party and its oil-slick Revolutionary Communist International. "Wipe out the Epstein class" banners have become prominent in their contingents on demonstrations; they have even penned a short defence of their use of the term in reply to unnamed critics (to which we will return). Of course, the RCP/RCI rebranded as 'communist' when it seemed popular on the internet, and so it is not terribly surprising that they have gone back to drink again at the same well.

It will already be clear that we object to this framing of the concept of the ruling class. Many objections can be made to it, but the primary one is that it is not true as a characterisation - at least in its 'strong' form as a description of a secret manipulative cabal running the world. Marxists are scientific socialists and, while that is a rich phrase that rewards extensive unpacking, there is a fairly unsophisticated, but nonetheless essential, element to highlight here: we care about whether things are true, or whether they are made up.

The secret cabal theory of society is simply untenable as a meaningful description of how modern capitalist society operates. A clear-eyed observer of this society gets no sense of any overall design. A secret cabal would be an improvement: it would presumably not wish to see its homelands ravaged by endless heatwaves, or its great cities sink under rising sea levels. It would act to prevent such eventualities. Étienne Davignon, then the chair of the Bilderberg group (another candidate for 'secret ruling cabal' status in conspiracy fandom), quipped to the BBC in 2006 that "if we were a secret government of the world, we should be bloody ashamed of ourselves". It was a well-observed point.

The Marxist method (although,

frankly, the most dunderheaded productions of the bourgeois social sciences equally defeat these fantasies in a fair fight) instead identifies the capitalist system as a product of the search for profit, and the contradictory ways in which this is pursued. Differences of interest among the fractions - national, sectoral and otherwise - of the capitalist class find expression in rival state regimes, rival parties within states, and rival interests in avoiding one's own extinction. The conflict of the capitalist class with subordinate classes like the proletariat and petty bourgeoisie is no less important. Though powerful, the capitalists are oddly unfree, carried along by the insatiable and impersonal desire for profit and the divergence of interests between different classes, and even different capitals, with respect to how that desire is to be fulfilled.

In this respect, the Epstein clique represents a certain wing of the capitalist class: roughly American high finance and more specifically wealth management - hedge funds and friends - deeply integrated into the state. This is not even the hegemonic wing of *finance capital*, which would instead be institutional investors like sovereign wealth and pension funds. No doubt many at the top end of such institutional firms spend their spare cash on teenage prostitutes as well, and no doubt they have powerful friends; but nobody would seriously argue that this is how Blackrock *works*, never mind the sector as a whole.

The 'weaker' version of the Epstein class conception deserves mention here, since it is rather more defensible. That there is an enormous gulf in almost every area of practical concern for daily life between the very rich and the poor - indeed, the merely decently well-off members of the professions, for that matter - cannot be denied. A crucial part of this division consists in impunity. The Epstein case illustrates this very sharply: there is no taboo more fiercely enforced in social life, at least in the Anglo-American world, than that against sex with minors, and Epstein extremely publicly got away with it (until, at last, he no longer did).

The revelations in the Epstein files are so damaging, in part because they

show that, for those within his clique, this taboo was essentially moot. Grandees from Peter Mandelson to Noam Chomsky lined up to absolve good old Jeff of any wrongdoing, when he was convicted in 2009. A wholly different permission structure seemed to exist for him and his friends, and a bottomless pit of money made a legal tarpit of any attempts to hold him to account.

In this form, the Epstein class draws a moral line: justice has been denied. It is quite correct to draw this moral line. But *imposing* justice on the rich and powerful is no simple thing. Therefore, as well as normative categories, we need descriptive categories that aid us in doing something about it. The 99%-1% framing of Occupy failed because 1% was too large a number - divide it by 10, at least, to find the real movers and shakers - and also paradoxically that 99% was too large. It implied a class amalgam of the working class, the petty proprietors, and even much of the capitalist class. The 'people vs the Epstein class' framing is *worse* - the 1% gets smaller, at least, but the 99% gets larger.

Gross opportunism

The RCP's defence of its use of this framing is notably impoverished. In their regular Q&A column, 'Ask The Communist', Jack Tye Wilson responds to the question: "Isn't the term 'Epstein class' unscientific? Shouldn't we be using the term 'bourgeoisie' instead?" This question is attributed to "critics online" and to "sectarian groups and individuals", none of whom get the courtesy of being named or quoted. There is already a strange contradiction - well, we "critics" are mere "sectarians" who are not worth naming, but we are worth responding to? Pick a lane, comrade!

But, anyway, on to the substance: "For Marxists, a concept is scientific to the extent that it enables us to explain the real, objective relations in the world, and thereby raise the consciousness of the working class." That is good enough. So why is 'Epstein class' scientific? "The term 'Epstein class' has a rich content and meaning to ordinary, radicalised

people", its rich meaning being presumably Wilson's earlier statement that this is "a notion that has taken root in the minds of millions, spontaneously and organically, allowing them to connect the dots between exploitation, corruption, and oppression".

We then get bromides about consciousness being "distorted and contradictory", and - since no piece of gross opportunism is really complete without it - a citation of Marx's quip in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* that "every step of the real movement is more important than a dozen programmes".¹ (Marx, as we never tire of reminding people, was talking about *the Paris Commune* as his step of the real movement, not an especially fruity Joe Rogan episode that got a lot of views.)

What we do not get is any reason, even on the comrade's own definition of 'scientific', why the 'Epstein class' conception *specifically* is scientific. The distorted and contradictory stirrings of consciousness among the masses deserve real attention and respect, but they are not properly called scientific. That this conception allows people to "connect the dots" is neither here nor there. After all, some people "connect the dots" by reference to charismatic Christianity's doctrine of spiritual warfare, or the actions of godlike alien lizards, or indeed by stories of global Jewish conspiracies. What makes something scientific is at least - to return to my crude characterisation above - that it allows us to discriminate *true* from *false* hypotheses.

We take comrade Wilson's account, in fact, to be an admission of defeat on the narrow question he sets himself: no, this is not scientific, but who cares? It is *popular*. It is an *opportunity*. Leave me alone with all your pedantry about the difference between reality and fantasy! He finds the reticence of unnamed other organisations to make use of the notion "truly mind-boggling". If his mind is bogged, however, it is not our fault (or whoever else he shadowboxes here). He has simply failed to notice that Marxism is an *ascetic* doctrine - a doctrine of conscious self-denial of the base pleasures of wild denunciation, for whose faithful adherents popular excitement has never been a substitute for hard thinking and rigorous self-criticism.

Occupy failed, comrade. So did Podemos, with its campaign against *la casta*, as did all other left-populist attempts to replace such hard thinking with titillating images of floridly evil enemies. Scientific socialism synthesises these failures, so as to learn from them; internet-poisoned 'communism' merely slaps a vulgar hammer-and-sickle logo on their latest incarnation ●

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Notes

1. communist.red/ask-the-communist-what-would-socialist-britain-actually-look-like.