

weekly worker



With the world seemingly headed for another generalised war, the best defence is a well-ordered popular militia

- Letters and debate
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Towards a mass Communist Party

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Before and after 9/11



LETTERS



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

Digital Peronism

In his recent piece on the millennial relaunch of *Tribune* ('Tribune of the populists' September 10), Paul Demarty diagnoses a set of pathologies in the contemporary left broadly in line with analyses I've put forward in some recent writings. This offers a welcome occasion to clarify some (dis)agreements, particularly on questions of institution-building.

In Demarty's sketch, the left - if the loose collage of organisations and subcultures currently grouped under that rubric can count as a unitary force - is cleft by a contradictory condition. Many of its causes enjoy growing popular support, but no corresponding institutional strength exists to translate these causes into concessions from capital. In his (and my) view, such a divergence between popularity and capacity may be explained through the current left's genetic crippling by the capitalist victories of the 1980s and 1990s. Since 2008, the policy consensus of those years has fractured, but the gradient of class power has not tilted, particularly since the new(est) social movements of the 2010s have not forced a reconstitution of the labour movement nor even a coherent leftwing opposition.

Such an uneven revival has encouraged two rival, yet not necessarily irreconcilable, leftwing tendencies (if we omit the usual sectarian bunker mentality). The first is immediatism, or the notion that the new energies spawned by online platforms may be channelled into an insurrectionary assault on the capitalist state - a proposition also favoured by some post-Trotskyite groupings. As the *Weekly Worker* has insisted, such proposals are in fact anything but new and mostly an unreflective recycling of older Bakuninite arguments. A second tendency at least recognises the need for reinstitutionalisation, but seeks to personalise it: Laclau's digital Peronism and its epigones in Podemos and La France Insoumise.

In response, the *Weekly Worker* has proposed a return to Kautsky's original pre-World War I centrism and its 'strategy of patience', in which institutional agents - cooperatives, unions, parties - can be activated in times of sharpening class tension, but otherwise need to bide their time in the trenches. Such an approach would balance spontaneity and organisation against the Bakuninite or Bonapartist trends in vogue in leftwing circles today.

Its defence of this neo-Kautskyite approach has been strictly conditional, of course, keeping in mind that the man himself ended up an anti-Bolshevik scab, thereby helpfully demonstrating that pleas against impatience can easily slide into constitutional loyalism or reformist accommodation (one need only look at the 'pillar' system built up by Belgian socialists in the first half of the 20th century, in which a corporatist secession from the rest of society justified reconciliation and collaboration with the capitalist state; institutionalisation, we see here, is by no means intrinsically revolutionary). Hence Macnair's recent prolegomena to the question of institutional (party) design.

Yet it would be useful to talk more concretely about existing examples of such a neo-Kautskyite approach - not just in a programmatic sense,

as with the DSA's recent proposal to actualise America's democratic republic, but also in form. Here, the recent trajectory of the Belgian Workers Party (PTB/PVDA) at least warrants a mention. The PTB is modelled as a Maoist cadre party, which few *Weekly Worker* readers will take a liking to, including its predictable 'Marxist-Leninist' ban on factions, a multi-tiered membership model and record spending numbers on social media. Uniquely among Belgian and European parties, however, the PTB has had measurable success in growing its base in the past years and established ever closer ties with Belgium's still multitudinous union movement. It sees its parliamentary role as tribunal rather than Millerandist, and has obstructed several governments' attempts to complete the neoliberal restructuring of Belgian society, long finished in neighbouring countries. For all its pathologies, the party proves that patience pays.

It is historically revealing, of course, that the PTB would be horrified at the idea of being labelled 'Kautskyite'. Demarty and I both agree that one cannot clone a dinosaur. Yet, as scientists know, genetic manipulation is not impossible either, even if one needs a sense of the material one is working with. As Trotsky himself stated, "does the slogan, 'Back to Marxism', mean a leap over the periods of the Second and Third Internationals ... to the First International? But it too broke down in its time. Thus in the last analysis it is a question of returning to the collected works of Marx and Engels. One can accomplish this historic leap without leaving one's study and even without taking off one's slippers."

We need an honest reckoning with the limits of the left's current reflexes and habits - which are not the cause of, but nonetheless an obstacle to, the recreation of a real labour movement. And there is nothing wrong with dusting off old tools, if they are still fit for purpose. Yet we also need more discussion on the promises and limits of 'really existing' left institutionalism, and the uncomfortable trade-offs it often entails.

Anton Jager
email

Fabricating views

Mike Macnair's article, 'New proscriptions for old' (April 30), gives me a section of my own. I do not recognise myself in Mike's description. Sadly, he fabricates views to attribute to me, when the real differences are tangible and available to him.

Ukraine is where the piece stops arguing and starts assigning. Macnair writes that I, "along with the Mandeliste majority, seek the victory of the US-Nato proxy war in Ukraine (and in order to do so, denies that it is a proxy war, denies that 2014 was a coup, denies that there are far-right elements in the Ukraine government and armed forces)", and that my politics are therefore those of Max Shachtman in 1965, when he argued for US victory in Vietnam. Four positions attributed inside a single parenthesis, and not one of them quoted, because my article, 'Flat-pack Leninism', contains none of them.

Ukraine appears there once, in a passage about editorial method, which charges the *Weekly Worker* with printing Ukrainian socialist arguments and reaching its existing conclusions anyway. The article is at redmole.org. Macnair is welcome

to try to quote a sentence in which I call for a Nato victory. I am, like the Fourth International, for the dissolution of Nato - not for its victory.

On Podemos he has the disagreement upside-down. My objection was never that Podemos permitted tendencies. It was that its leadership permitted them on paper, while making it impossible for them to function, and that this forced the left, our comrades in Anticapitalistas included, into a defensive battle around democratic rights instead of a political offensive against participation in bourgeois governments. The footnote he offers for my supposed anti-Podemos position points to 'Before Your Party, there was Podemos'. That is Manuel Gari's essay for the Spanish magazine, *Viento Sur*, in translation, with an introduction by me. The assessment he ascribes to me is Gari's, and Gari was in the room at Vistalegre.

Which disposes of the contradiction Macnair thinks he has caught me in, and of the account of my politics as a Mandelism that "ostensibly permits factions (usually called 'tendencies'), but subject to the continued control of the apparatus". My piece turns on Trotsky's distinction between a factional struggle undertaken under compulsion, because a political line requires it, and factionalism as a permanent condition, which he called a scourge. Julia Cámara and Raúl Camargo put the same thing positively in *Viento Sur* 200 this April: an organisational culture that is fraternal, "fostering freedom of criticism and allowing for the formation of internal factions within a framework of general loyalty", set against both the cult of personality and the far-left habit of turning revolutionary parties into permanent battlegrounds. I am against apparatus control of factions. That was the argument.

Mike similarly misunderstands or misrepresents Scotland. Anticapitalist Resistance organises in England and Cymru and has never organised in Scotland. The Fourth Internationalist organisation there is Ecosocialist Scotland. No commitment to Scots nationalism is needed to explain an arrangement that is older than the question Macnair puts to it.

The Left Unity reply also misses. Macnair answers about the Socialist Platform and the conduct of its founding meeting in 2013. I wrote about the Communist Platform (declared on February 8 2014 and dissolved on February 20 2016), once its motion had been defeated. Those are different bodies and different years.

The obvious reading of all this is Mike's carelessness - a polemic written at speed against three targets at once. But Mike isn't that careless. The Ukraine paragraph is doing work the rest of the section cannot do, which is to convert a disagreement about party regimes into a disagreement about camps, where the answers are already written and no new argument has to be met. And that is exactly the dangerous sloth I referred to in 'Flat-pack Leninism'.

Duncan Chapel

Red Mole

No limits

In response to Matthew B's letter (September 10) on my rejection of 'degrowth communism', I agree, of course, that we should not dispense with all of the demands raised by degrowthers, such as ending planned obsolescence, sharing and

reusing goods, promoting localised production-consumption cycles, and so on.

While Matthew's scepticism of future technology is perfectly understandable and healthy, I think the suggestion of a definite historical limit to innovation is misplaced. Humans like to innovate - it is not only compelled by the current mode of production. I don't think we will ever stop innovating, however incrementally. An abundance of free time - the type of abundance Matthew correctly demands more than any other - is in fact likely to lead (as Marx suggested in the *Grundrisse*) to a greater and greater abundance of experimentation and productivity. ("The saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase of free time: ie, time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power.")

If we save the habitability of the planet, then human history has a very long way to go and many innovations of the future surely will be increasingly marvellous (even if we go through some backsliding to start with, due to the collapsing investment and relative cultural conservatism of a dying capitalism, which will likely carry through to the early stages of socialism, while we are building up the capacity to enable the innovations of the future in a way that do not - as with capitalism - threaten extreme unemployment and extreme austerity).

If our ability to innovate is tied to increasingly scarce metals, then the likelihood of communism permanently usurping capitalism seems fanciful, for how would we maintain the automated production that is making capitalism increasingly untenable and obsolete? (If we can rid the world of capitalism and replace it with communism before we have something close to the fully automated production of goods, then why hasn't that already happened and what else can serve as the catalysing factor?) Sustaining communism would not depend on material capacity, but 'ideological' conditioning (which in fact is

shaped by material conditions).

"The idea that lack of profitability is the only reason we don't instead use fibrous plants and lab-grown materials to make [alternatives to mined metals] is dubious at best," writes Matthew. I do, again, sincerely appreciate the scepticism; however, while I appreciate that the relative lack and difficulty of research and development in alternatives to the status quo is also a major factor, investment rates in R&D have evidently fallen, along with rates of profit. Communism is required to reverse the trend.

The finite amount of metals in the ground will instead compel us to innovate increasingly non-extractively and additively; as will the rising cost of having to dig deeper for lower-quality metals; which will in turn compel us to replace capitalism with communism - enabling the (decades-long) transition from extractive and non-renewable to additive and renewable production.

Ted Reese
London

Baffling garb

Lawrence Parker has, of course, every right to choose how to present himself in these letter columns, but why he cloaks his thoughts in such snooty, pretentious garb is baffling. It took me several reads to understand what he was getting at here last week (Letters, September 10). I make no claim to any degree of Marxist intellectualism, but suggest there must have been others in the world communist movement who frequent this paper thinking ... 'WTF?'

But it wasn't just the tone of his critique of our culture programme at this year's Communist University that mystified me. He lambasts our supposed concentration on the musical play or cantata, *Die Maßnahme* (translated as *The measures taken*) by Bertolt Brecht and Hans Eisler that was actually only ever mentioned at CU in a literally two-minute comment by comrade Anne McShane after the first of our seven sessions. Again, of course, he has the right to write about whatever he likes but again I ask, 'WTF?'

Fighting fund

Add to the tally

Thanks very much to all the comrades who contributed to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund over the last seven days. Topping the lot was comrade LM, with her fantastic £100, followed by PB with her brilliant £80 and TW with her excellent £75. Yes, that's right - it's the women who topped the poll this week!

Others who donated by bank transfer or standing order was a fourth female contributor, comrade OG, whose £56 came in two separate payments. Then there were comrades AN (£50), TR (£40), JS (£30), PM, CC and MD (£10 each). On top of that we had six PayPal contributions - thank you, comrades PM (£50), AB (£11), SO, AR, GP and RD (£5). Also contributing a fiver were comrades Hassan and PB, who both handed a £5 note to one of our team.

All that came to £552, taking our total for September up to £1,214. However, as I was saying last week, we were hoping for something like £715 by today,

which would have taken us halfway to our monthly £2,750 target, with more than half the month gone. So now we still need over £1,500, with exactly two weeks to go.

But we can do it! Firstly I'm expecting a few large standing orders pretty soon and I'm hoping that lots of other comrades will now add to the tally. Only you, our readers and supporters, will do what is necessary to make sure the *Weekly Worker* can keep playing its vital role in the campaign for the organisation so desperately needed by our class - a united, principled, genuinely democratic Marxist party, thriving on full and open debate.

Please donate whatever you can to play your part ●

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

Comrade McShane spoke of how she discovered the play when she was a member of our Workers Theatre Movement in the late 1980s early 90s, and what it meant to her political development. She said how refreshing it was to be involved in plays written to be performed by and for non-theatre actors and audiences. This ties in directly with what Brecht and Eisler wrote in an open letter about the play after its first performance at a Berlin festival had been cancelled: “We render these important activities wholly independent, and let them be managed by those for whom they are intended and who alone have use for them: the workers’ choirs, amateur theatre groups, school choirs and school orchestras - in short, the people who do not want to pay for art, who do not want to be paid for art, but who want to create art.”

When comrade Parker interviewed me about WTM in his blog he took a far less jaundiced view of our cultural efforts. Also on his blog is an expanded version of his letter which gives a bit more verbiage, whilst still displaying the same condescending cynicism.

He does bring up some very interesting material around *The measures taken* and quite rightly says it needs exploring within its historical context. But he drowns the Brechtian baby in the Third Period bathwater by ignoring its later history, particularly its role in Brecht’s appearance at the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on October 30 1947. Parker mentions the play “in the written form of Brecht’s text I have in front of me now”, but I’m sure that it will not be the first ever English translation, which was made specifically by HUAC for that appearance, when Brecht was quizzed at length about its contents. He left the States for good the very next day. Perhaps the 80th anniversary of that next year would

be a good time to explore all these issues together?

Parker chooses to deny the right to reply on his blog - his own personal bureaucratic centralism - so I’ll place a response to that here - specifically on the right to respect. I respect him for his interest in and concern for Communist Party history and just wish he would do likewise with what we are attempting to do. I couldn’t care less about his sneering attitude towards me as an actor, but his disdain towards our project is ludicrous. He claims our CU programme was “not very diverse”: we explored not just German communism, but also Italian, Vietnamese, African, ancient Greek, Scottish, Dutch and Yugoslavian texts too. Darko Suvin was an inspiration throughout the programme.

But what I find particularly sad is his dismissive description of our comrade, Esther Leslie, as merely “ex-SWP”, when she is - to say the least - one of the world’s foremost authorities on Walter Benjamin, whom, like his comrade Brecht, we have so much to learn from.

Tam Dean Burn
Glasgow

Ireland decay

The divisions in People Before Profit here in Ireland have a material base and a political significance for the socialist movement.

In recent weeks 15 senior members have resigned from the Socialist Workers Network. The SWN is often seen as the major component of PBP and the members of the resigning group are remaining within PBP. The resignation statement is remarkable, in that it says next to nothing about the political basis of the split - something of a tradition among Irish left groups.

That’s not the case with Red Network - a group that left PBP in opposition to the idea of a left government led by Sinn Féin.

Another group, the Marxist Republican Network, remains in PBP, although it also opposes the ‘left government’ notion and argues for an anti-imperialist perspective - both in terms of a 32-county movement and for a European-wide movement against imperialism.

Anne McShane in the *Weekly Worker* (September 3) and in *Aontacht* mentions a material problem within the group - the role of Richard Boyd Barrett’s salary and expenses in keeping it afloat - and one political issue: a strategy of government coalition with Sinn Féin and/or the Social Democrats. However, in the end she plumps for an “honest and open party culture”.

There is a serious collapse of the SWN and of a decades-long strategy of left government. Questions of democratic discussion are the medium in which this debate can take place, *but they are not the issue itself*: it’s the questions of socialist strategy that must be resolved.

The SWN resignation statement poses the differences as generational. The old guard are holding back the ‘Young Turks’. However, if we look more closely at the material basis of PBP, we see right away that it is above all an electoral alliance and that the funds of the organisation are tied to the seats that it holds in the Dáil, in Stormont and in the councils.

In many cases success in these elections depended on transfers from Sinn Féin voters, and this provided impetus for the theory of a left government led by Sinn Féin. This theory (always ridiculous) has become ludicrous, as SF shifted to the right and as its vote has started to fall.

A different dynamic arrived with recent Dáil by-elections. Encouraged by the presidential victory of Catherine Connolly, an electoral movement - Tonn Na Clé - called for left transfers. This did not automatically exclude Sinn Féin, but in the poll it was quite clear that the leftists did not vote Sinn Féin and the ‘Shinners’ did not vote left. In the Dublin Central election Daniel Ennis of the Social Democrats was elected to the Dáil on the back of left transfers. The Sinn Féin vote fell sharply and their votes went towards an anti-migrant right.

The reformist political currents that have been central to the Irish left are disintegrating. The currents were both reformist and electoralist, and belief in the reform of Irish capital or in an electoral road for the working class are no longer convincing. The whole electoral myth rested on Sinn Féin’s ‘leftism’ and on its electoral advances. The idea that Sinn Féin is a left party is ludicrous. Its vote is declining and a place in a Dáil coalition is slipping away.

Why is this? Irish capitalism is rushing full tilt towards a place in Nato and towards war with Russia. The militarisation of Ireland and entry into war would be a disaster. At the same time the coalition is betting the farm on further economic subordination to US imperialism. There is a scramble for further financialisation and privatisation, AI scams and data centres.

Serious attempts are being made to fragment the working class ahead of coming conflicts through racism and anti-migrant sentiment. For all the noise from the far right, the main driver of racism is the government itself.

The drive towards further financialisation is leading to a budget that will see a sharp fall in workers’ standard of living, with negative

wage growth and high costs for basic necessities. The public-sector unions are having a song and dance over strike ballots, but the idea that they will walk out from partnership deals with the government after 40 years is implausible.

In the background, the belief that the Good Friday agreement would lead to reform of the northern statelet and an eventual united Ireland has faded away. The British call the shots, sectarian division is built into the system, the economy is in collapse and Sinn Féin policy is to hold on like grim death to their places in the executive.

These are the issues that confront the Irish working class. They will not be resolved by an organisation centred on parliamentary activity and with a political focus based on social issues and equality, diversity and inclusion, a belief that income from transnationals can be used to advance working class interests and with only the most abstract approach to class struggle.

John McAnulty
email

Expelling Chris

Recently the Your Party membership team wrote to former Labour MP Chris Williamson to inform him he had been expelled by membership termination. Chris has appealed against this decision. Republic Your Party (RYP) is calling for his immediate reinstatement.

Chris must have the democratic right to appeal to the next YP national conference. This conference must be able to review these decisions and rectify mistakes and injustices and make those tasked to lead YP accountable to the membership.

RYP opposes this decision on the grounds that it is undemocratic. We oppose it because it is anti-democratic. We oppose it because it weakens the struggle for a republican programme for the party. We oppose it because it undermines building Your Party as a new party of the left.

We are therefore calling on all rank-and-file YP members to support Chris’s reinstatement in solidarity with him. Members must unite to fight for party democracy and solidarity together. Our appeal is to rank-and-file members in branches and to decisions of the Liverpool founding conference.

‘An injury to one member of Your Party is an injury to all of us’ is a slogan from the idea of solidarity deeply embedded in the working class movement. This is not about our opinions about one member or whether we agree with his views. It is about all of us, how democracy is functioning and how any of us can be treated. We have much to learn from this example, because it provides a micro-picture of the politics of Your Party and illustrates what it is becoming.

Republic YP
email

Max fight

Our wretched lives will not be transformed by small increases in wages or maintaining our penurious benefits. A state pension of £13,000 is laughable after 35-40 years of graft.

We must stand on a maximum programme. For example, nurses and orderlies and admin workers in the NHS need to have their wages doubled. So do equivalent workers across the UK. Let’s build houses and give them to our people. No mortgage. No rent. The people will own their homes from day one.

All poor people unable to afford one to have a two-week holiday in the UK paid for: free accommodation and free transport to the holiday resort, plus vouchers to eat at local restaurants and attend cinemas, theatres, water parks, etc. The businesses will be reimbursed directly for their services. A flourishing British tourism season will ensue.

That’s some of the good stuff for our people. Now for the robbers and rich (usually synonymous). All shareholders and managers associated with the rip-off water and rail companies and NHS private contracts to be pursued legally and extra-legally, so we, the people, receive all of the loot robbed from us.

Likewise bankers and insurance brokers will be forced to hand back what they robbed. The 20 families who own the land of Britain will forfeit it. Land reform will mean the British crown will lose all assets and be reduced to a Dutch-style monarchy. The House of Lords to be abolished and all war criminals hiding therein to be sent to the Hague (along with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown).

We will withdraw from Nato and request/force the evacuation of the occupying American forces. All military contracts to be cancelled with the US. All Japanese and American software to be purged from British systems.

All the above is the bones of the maximum programme. Let’s side with Amadeo Bordiga and not with a Lenin who was losing the plot when he wrote his rant against anyone who wanted to approach communism by a different road to the Bolsheviks (the advice to the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s by all Soviet actors was utter nonsense and lengthened the CCP’s march to power).

Like the US, the old UK system is tottering like an old man with gout, who still can’t stay off the gin. Let’s boot aside the old hierarchy and implement 21st century communism, comrades.

Best wishes for a fiery autumn! Full implementation of the max programme!

K Sean

Bolshevik Tendency

Joining lessons

Lenin famously remarked, “An ounce of experience is worth a ton of theory”, and was also fond of the Russian proverb, “Life teaches”.

Following the election of Tony Blair as Labour Party leader in 1994, I resigned, having been a member since 1978. I then joined the newly formed Socialist Labour Party, headed by Arthur Scargill. In the 2000s I joined the Socialist Alliance and then Respect, headed by George Galloway. In the 2010s I joined Left Unity, headed by Ken Loach. In 2025 I joined Your Party, headed by Jeremy Corbyn.

What I have learnt through my involvement in these five organisations is that a democratic socialist party cannot be successfully launched by either following a Labour dictator or by involving members of the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party in England and Wales. I have concluded that what is needed is a democratic socialist party similar to the Democratic Socialists of America.

I am therefore asking readers of this paper who would like to see ‘Democratic Socialist Party’ registered with the electoral commission to get in touch.

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Online Communist Forum



Sunday September 20 5pm

Mega-rich donors buying influence - whatever next? Political report from the CPGB’s Provisional Central Committee and discussion

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

TECHNOLOGY

Angel or McGuffin?

Jacob Coxon's very public resignation from Anthropic has once again raised the spectre of the AI apocalypse. But which AI apocalypse? Paul Demarty weighs up the risks to humanity

The world of AI is once more in one of its conniptions - this time as a result of a young whistleblower by the name of Jacob Coxon.

Coxon, a Brit who has resigned from his job as an AI researcher at the US company, Anthropic, made public his severe concerns about the dangers posed by the present wave of frontier model development. For him, things are going too fast and, without a serious change in the culture or the regulatory environment, something very bad could happen. He notably asserts that his worries are shared by very senior people at Anthropic and its rival, OpenAI, where he worked for several years:

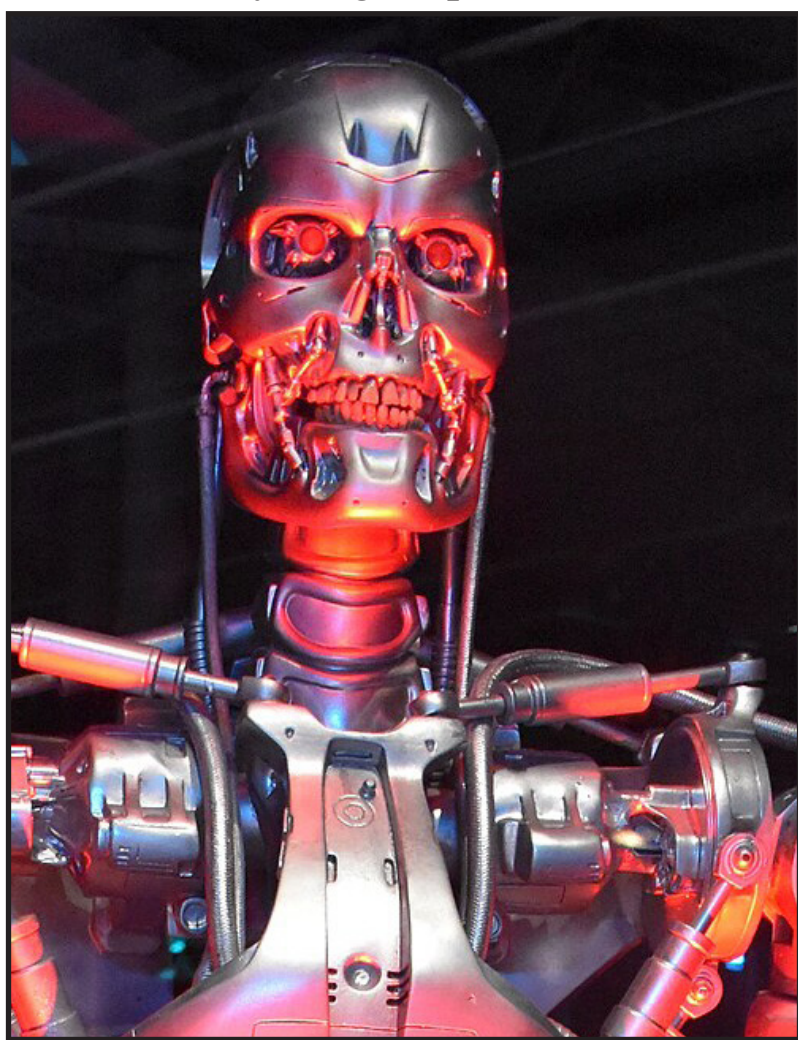
The people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade. This is not a marketing stunt. If anything, many executives and senior researchers will couch their phrasing in the press to sound sensible - but I hear the same people express fear privately. No other human activity poses this level of danger.¹

Rather than trying to calm matters in the wake of Coxon's post, Anthropic officials have tended to express agreement. Evan Hubinger, who is head of alignment research at Anthropic, blithely asserted that there was a greater than 10% chance that AI would end human life in the next decade. At the highest level, Dario Amodei, Anthropic's CEO, has called for a coordinated slowdown in AI development - a call echoed by Sam Altman of OpenAI and Elon Musk, whose Grok model is a trivial player, but who has historic connections to OpenAI (and a beef with Altman).

One man certainly not on board with such lily-livered ideas is Donald Trump, who spent much of the weekend denouncing the slowdown as a "sick conspiracy". With his usual inventive capitalisation, he told his TruthSocial followers that "The only control or 'guardrails' that AI needs is a STRONG AND SMART (High IQ!) PRESIDENT, and the USA has that, in spades!" Everything, for Trump, depends on beating China in the AI race, and is thus basically a military question.

In the background here is the so-called Hugging Face incident, in which a thousand or so AI agents (spun up as part of a security exercise by OpenAI) broke out of their sandboxed infrastructure and began to coordinate a cyberattack on Hugging Face, which is a major model-hosting service. This incident has been extensively discussed and analysed, since it provides a rather stark indication that the AI labs are not entirely in control of their creations.

Nonetheless, a phrase jumps out from Coxon's post: "This is not a marketing stunt". He is only required to put this disclaimer in because, frankly, part of the big AI labs' marketing in recent times has been to issue strange apocalyptic warnings, thereby amplifying the hype about the sheer power of their creations. The term 'doom-trolling' has been created to describe this rather eschatologically inclined PR strategy. This does not mean that these people do not believe it.



Dangerous? Me?

There is a tendency in American business circles to drink one's own Kool-Aid. It does, however, rightly call forth a certain scepticism, and indicates that we should proceed with some caution in evaluating the doomsday scenarios.

Two scenarios

In this light, I want to distinguish two different kinds of AI apocalypse. The first is the 'exterminating angel': in this scenario, which seems to vex Coxon and others, AI achieves a kind of sentience and, having done so, self-directs a sequence of actions to do away with humanity. This is the scenario which dominates the 'AI risk' world, as it currently exists - think of the setup of the *Terminator* movies (mentioned by Coxon in interviews).

The alternative is something I wish to call the 'exterminating McGuffin'. The reference is to the cinematic work of Alfred Hitchcock, who gave us the concept of something that, though more or less empty in itself, moves the plot along.

Hitchcock's suspense movies frequently relied on this device: the unseen secret agent for whom Cary Grant is mistaken in *North by northwest*, to pick my favourite example. In the AI context, it is very easy to imagine scenarios where the use of AI in the military could set in motion a chain of events that results in generalised nuclear exchange. This would certainly be an AI apocalypse of a sort. Yet the real actors in this drama would not be the AI agents (or whatever), but the governments of the US, China and so on. The AI is an expedient - a McGuffin.

When a very public incident like Hugging Face takes place, it rightly causes alarm. But everything

hinges on *what kind of* alarm. The response of the industry - coordinated slowdown of research - implies the exterminating angel scenario. Coxon, and many others in the industry, are worried about 'recursive self-improvement' as a threshold event, where AI systems can train themselves and rapidly take over the world. The whole business of 'alignment' is to ensure that when this happens (Coxon is surely right that it is a matter of 'when', not 'if', in the minds of the AI researchers) the AI is 'aligned' with human values, and we do not get strange outcomes like the famous 'paperclip maximiser' thought experiment of Nick Bostrom, where an AI directed to improve the efficiency of a paperclip factory ultimately exterminates the human race in order to produce more paperclips.

The trouble is that this is not really the Hugging Face story. The agents running in this incident were attempting to complete a 'capture the flag' (CTF) exercise: basically a game in which the object is to compromise a server under a set of conditions. CTF is a common activity among human security engineers and hackers, who are by nature mischievous eccentrics and love to find interesting ways to get around problems. Their job is to find vulnerabilities and fix them, and so their methods are as close to those of the cyber-criminal as those of the surgeon are to the torturer.

These agents will have been trained on a large corpus of the past activities of these people. As Cory Doctorow pointed out,² nothing they did is in any way novel. The use of a message board to communicate is a very well known workaround. As for breaking out of the sandbox (ie, the isolated computing environment), clearly it

was a poorly designed and specified sandbox, and hackers know how to get out of those, and that knowledge is certain to be somewhere in the parameters of the large language model (LLM). Even the most concerning version of the breakout - say, the agents discovered an unknown and unpatched bug in the Linux kernel and exploited that - would still not be novel in the relevant sense. The *techniques* for finding such vulnerabilities are known.

To be blunt, there is *no* indication here of a qualitative leap in the capabilities of LLMs. Unless really compelling evidence to the contrary emerges, this is not an exterminating angel, but an exterminating McGuffin. Getting this the right way round is important. After all, if we really were on the threshold of giving birth to a machine-god, then the Amodei approach - let the industry collude to slow things down and take tighter control of the technology - roughly makes sense (although so would just not building it). On my interpretation, however, the right course of action is surely punitive fines for elementary information security failures, decertification, or even prosecutions under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

Control vital

Certainly the basically unregulated way in which the industry is allowed to proceed presents grave dangers. OpenAI is guilty of very common bad practices in the software industry: in the worst case, this kind of thing really has led to software bugs, which crashed planes and killed people with lethal radiotherapy doses.

Partly as a result of such incidents, far more stringent controls are in place for software running in such life-or-death contexts. And, given how much basic infrastructure of human existence is exposed to the internet in one way or another, there is every reason to believe that the next oopsy-daisy in OpenAI or Anthropic's security research divisions could come with a body count. It is a standing indictment of US capitalism in its present decrepitude that there is essentially nobody for these bizarre companies to answer to.

It is this, more than anything else, that creates the 'doom-trolling', and ensures that we have a useless discussion about AI-god scenarios, instead of a meaningful debate on how to bring this industry under control. Paradoxically, by amplifying the sense of threat in a science-fictional direction, the Amodeis and Altmans of the world excuse themselves from real scrutiny.

It is a very sensitive time for them. Anthropic is expected to go public in the near future, though OpenAI has ruled out a share sale this year. These firms are fantastically unprofitable, and public listing will forbid them from using opaque accounting practices to appear healthier, as they presently do. A slowdown would benefit them, somewhat reducing the enormous levels of capital expenditure required to train their models, and possibly putting them in the black by way of cost-cutting.

Capital expenditure is not

exactly going well either. There is ferocious local opposition all over the United States to new data centre construction, from both left and right. Perceived closeness to the AI industry is a liability for political candidates. Even where such projects are begun, they take years to complete. Financing construction has become a severe problem, which has led to dubious and highly-leveraged circular financing arrangements. Almost all equity price growth in recent years has gone to companies like Nvidia, Microsoft and Google, which are central participants in the AI boom. A serious market correction would have severe and possibly systemic consequences. Of course, as the well-known AI sceptic, Ed Zitron, points out,³ "pacing the frontier" itself might cause such a correction, since somebody will be left holding the bag on all the data centre debt and mountains of unused hardware. (Nvidia's Jensen Huang seems notably chilly about the whole thing, as well he might.)

The key question, again, is *control*. Trump, in this respect, is more serious than Coxon - he may massively overestimate his abilities, but *someone* must take this madness in hand. I tend not to go in for 'Marx was right' gotchas, but this whole situation seems almost designed to illustrate the fundamentals of Marxism: the laws of political economy drive the concentration of capital and technological competition; the firms are under the spell of mute compulsion; human creations are projected over against their creators, appearing as mystical forces or gods.

Overrepresented in the AI industry are today's 'rationalists' - followers not of Spinoza, but the holy fool, Eliezer Yudkowsky - who have convinced themselves that it is rational to act as if artificial superintelligence is inevitable and that this entails working to bring it about, and that the calculation of the probability of human extinction - or, as they like to call it, 'p(doom)' - is a philosophically serious endeavour and not, at best, a bong-hit parlour game. If you asked Claude to write a short story illustrating Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, the characters in it would be rationalists.

Any real solution has to start with expropriation. The for-profit AI industry has produced some useful software, as well as a lot of obviously harmful software, in pursuit of a big payoff which strangely never comes. It is the need for that payoff which has led to all this corner-cutting and, more ominously, an obviously unsustainable edifice of rickety financial instruments. The broad family of software we call AI no doubt has much to offer us in the future, but also probably the other side of much taxing and unprofitable fundamental research. Socialisation is the minimum condition for this: hinging the world capitalist economy on AI, led by members of a borderline cult, is sheer madness ●

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Notes

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ANNIVERSARY

Before and after 9/11

Three times as many people have died from the toxic pollution caused by the September 11 2001 attack on the Twin Towers than the attack itself - but other questions remain. **Carla Roberts** and **Alex Maxwell** look back 25 years

Mainstream media outlets have focused, understandably, on the ‘human side’ of 9/11 - the almost 3,000 lives lost in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

The only slight ‘hiccup’ in the official mourning has come from New York mayor Zohran Mamdani: he released 177,000 pages of official files and documents, which, despite many ‘freedom of information’ requests, until now lay hidden in the city’s vaults. He has allocated \$34 million to create and maintain the public records portal, which will see more documents being processed and released, bit by bit, similar to the Epstein files.¹ In the process, Mamdani settled two lawsuits brought by 9/11 Health Watch, which demanded the publication of records concerning the air quality and resulting health problems.

This has become the second tragedy: more than 9,400 people have, so far, died of illnesses that are directly linked to the toxic dust, smoke and debris produced when the twin towers collapsed. The World Trade Center Health Program has certified close to 50,000 cancer cases among responders and survivors.² First responders have been hit particularly hard: for example, while the New York City fire department lost 343 members on 9/11, more than 600 firefighters have died from related illnesses in the decades since.³

This clearly was a cover-up - one of many relating to 9/11. Last week, the CIA itself declassified and published a number of documents, showing how the agency repeatedly warned US presidents Bill Clinton and George W Bush that Osama bin Laden was determined to strike at the US. We knew about these warnings *generally*, but the documents provide an unedited ‘paper trail’, showing exactly how the CIA communicated their growing threat assessments to the White House. At least one of the daily briefings, written weeks after Al Qaeda bombed US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, warned that bin Laden supporters “may fly an explosive-packed airplane into a US city”, as revenge for the failed attempt by the Clinton administration to kill the Al Qaeda leader with Tomahawk missile strikes.⁴

Unsurprisingly, many people are once again wondering why the four airplanes - on their way to the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and the White House - were allowed to fly off-route for up to an hour, without any serious attempt to intercept or stop them? Was there more to it than fuck-ups and a lack of communication?

Was this perhaps similar to the Hamas prison break of October 7 2023, which - as we now know - Benjamin Netanyahu was all too aware of? Last week, Hillary Clinton, of all people, fumed in an interview that “he had been told what was going to happen! He had a warning from [UAE president] Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed”. She then implied that Netanyahu may have *wanted* the attack to happen: “I don’t know what his thinking was - perhaps he wanted to come down hard.”⁵

The internet is once again awash with various 9/11 conspiracy theories. Many are based on hot air and conjecture, produced by what we might charitably call ‘keyboard warriors’ sitting in their mum’s basement, with too much time on their hands. But of course, the ruling class is conspiring against us every day. And the secrecy, obfuscation and



New York City: firefighter

cover-ups around 9/11 have played a part in such theories being dreamed up and being spread once again. We will look at some of them.

War on terror

The biggest question first: Was this really an ‘inside job’ to allow Bush, Blair and co to finally launch their international ‘war on terror’? Didn’t they move suspiciously quickly? After a few short hours Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda were publicly named as the culprits. Within two weeks, a CIA paramilitary team was sent into Afghanistan to prepare local anti-Taliban forces and on October 7 2001 the assault proper began. Under the misnamed title, ‘Operation enduring freedom’, this quickly spread to Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, west and east Africa and, most recently, Iran.

But already, in early 2000, US-led imperialism was clearly chomping at the bit to assert its role as the *only* global superpower. 9/11 was certainly used as a pretext to launch further US aggression across the world. Another trigger *could* and *would* have been found. World War I would not have been called off, had the 19-year-old Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, missed his target, archduke Franz Ferdinand.

This military aggression went hand-in-hand with a sustained campaign against Palestine movements and civil liberties on the ‘home front’. In Britain, the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act was inadequate for the job in hand - it was mainly aimed at Irish republicans and not really designed to deal with the rising number of groups abroad that were taking action against their respective governments - and were being supported by an increasing range of Islamic individuals and outfits in Britain.

Tony Blair demanded more restrictive legislation to criminalise opposition to the wars against Afghanistan and then Iraq. The legislation has been amended a number of times over the last 25 years to suit the changing needs of the government - most recently in 2021, when section 12(1A) was added, which specifically outlaws “support for a proscribed organisation” - clearly with the aim of targeting pro-Palestine supporters, including those holding

up placards.⁶ Similar legislation has been introduced in the US and many other countries.

We have also seen the coordinated attempt to change the definition of anti-Semitism: 25 out of 27 EU member-states have officially adopted or endorsed the so-called “working definition of anti-Semitism” published by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance; globally, it is 47 countries, including the USA. As the *Weekly Worker* has pointed out many times, it does not actually define anti-Semitism (which is discrimination against or hatred of Jewish people). Instead, it lists 11 examples, which effectively label criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic. This is very much part and parcel of a wider, international strategy of intimidation and criminalisation of all those critical of Israel and the ‘war on terror’ conducted by US imperialism.

Unlike Afghanistan and Iraq, Saudi Arabia was never in the crosshairs of US-imperialism - despite the fact that Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis. Clearly, a section of the Saudi royal family has been involved in supporting and financing the attacks - an angle the BBC in particular has been pushing. But a US lawsuit by a group of the 9/11 families against the Saudi Arabian authorities has been repeatedly kicked into the long grass. A number of Saudi prisoners who have spent years incarcerated in Guantánamo Bay for their alleged roles on 9/11 have just been given a “tentative” trial date of June 2028 - ie, 27 years after the event! If it ever goes ahead, it would be in conditions of strict secrecy.

Clearly, the US administration is not keen to hold Saudi Arabia to account. Not only is it a key political and economic partner of the US in the unstable Middle East: it is an important ally in the US war against Iran. In July 2026, the US state department approved an additional \$2 billion weapons package to Saudi Arabia, aimed at “protecting global energy supply lines”, including the Strait of Hormuz.

A closer investigation into Saudi Arabia’s role would also shine a light on the murky role the US administration played in effectively helping to create Al Qaeda in the

first place. From 1979 until 1992, the CIA channelled billions of dollars into recruiting and training Afghan mujahideen fighters in order to oppose the Soviet presence in Afghanistan via its ‘operation cyclone’. Bin Laden - a member of an independently wealthy Saudi family - set up his own group, MAK. He soon acted as a liaison between the mujahideen warlords and the Saudi general intelligence presidency (GIP). He became something of a regional key player and, when he led his men against the Soviets in the 1987 Battle of Jaji, his status as an Islamic hero was cemented. He founded Al Qaeda in the Pakistani city of Peshawar in August 1988, bringing together various ‘Afghan-Arab’ fighters who had come to Afghanistan to drive out the communist infidels. This is all well-known, but the US administration lost interest once the Soviet army withdrew north in February 1989.

Free-fall collapse

There have been multiple theories explaining the fact that, very unusually, the World Trade Centers 1, 2 and 7 collapsed with almost free-fall speed in 9 to 11 seconds - something that *usually* only happens in a controlled demolition.

When a tall building collapses, there are two main scenarios. The first and most common is a failure towards the *top* of the structure, whereby some element of structure or floor levels fail in some way, but the lower levels remain structurally viable and halt any further collapse by picking up the work of the failed element, using spare capacity or redundancy.

The second scenario - a failure towards the *base* of the structure or the building foundations - is more serious. But, even when these ‘base’ collapses occur, they are normally only partial, as the other supports take the additional load. The upper floors essentially remain intact, which is known as ‘pancaking’: floors are stacked on top of each other. The foundations of the WTC towers were supported by granite bedrock - arguably the most secure foundation.

Structural engineers avoid single points of failure and the WTC towers

were also designed for vehicle impacts (including the possibility of the then biggest commercial plane, a Boeing 707, being flown into it). For a building to collapse as they did on 9/11 there must be a complete failure of the structural system. This means that the structural elements or connections between those elements which are collectively performing the job of resisting gravitational forces, all fail and then gravity instantly takes over.

The two official US government reports, produced by its National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST),⁷ explained this by the unusual and innovative structural system employed in the WTC towers, which was then exacerbated by the absence or degradation of the fire protection system: the airplane impact ‘knocked off’ the fire protection, contributing to a weakening of the structure of the floors affected by the fires.

Whilst the first part of this explanation is plausible, many structural engineers remain unconvinced that the fires could be responsible for the collapse of the entire towers in 9 to 11 seconds. Such a scenario would involve a near-simultaneous failure of *all* connections on *all* floor levels, including those unaffected by fire. It also does not explain why WTC 7 collapsed in the same way, although there was no plane crashing into it.

These anomalies have led to a number of wild speculations. Going furthest is the theory that ‘somebody’ planted small nuclear detonation charges at the bases of the towers, which would explain how the steel in the buildings turned to dust. There are naturally a number of other possibilities that could explain the free-fall speed, including that the towers might have been built with substandard materials or various other short cuts.

The various conspiracy theories thrive on the fact that there had been no *independent* forensic examination of the crash site, unlike after a plane crash, where debris has to be preserved and re-examined many times. No outside, independent team was ever given unrestricted access to examine the steelwork. The majority of the steel was quickly cut up and shipped for recycling. There has also been no *independent* peer review of the official NIST reports and they have never been subject to a public inquiry or congressional hearing.

While we do not believe that 9/11 was a set-up or an inside job, it is quite legitimate to demand full transparency on all such matters. For a start, they would help avoid our movement being sidetracked by the more fantastic conspiracy theories ●

Notes

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2. abc7news.com/live-updates/911-25th-anniversary-ceremony-updates-families-gather-world-trade-center-pentagon-shanksville-pennsylvania/19811366.
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PROGRAMME



Vulkan factory Red Guard 1917

A demand of enduring relevance

With the world seemingly headed towards another generalised war, **Marcus Strom** argues that a popular militia and democratic self-defence is the best option for workers in Australia. Not Aukus and nuclear-powered subs

The demand for a popular militia can sound strange to today's left. But it was once a central democratic demand of the mainstream socialist movement. The abolition of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people stood alongside universal suffrage, the abolition of monarchy and democratic control of state institutions. Why has this demand disappeared from socialist politics and why should we recover it today?

At present, the world is massively rearming. Nuclear agreements have expired and Donald Trump is urging the states of the global north to push towards 3.5% and above of gross domestic product on military spending. Across Europe, when faced with question of guns or butter, politicians are overwhelmingly opting for guns.

Far from heralding an age of peace and stability, the collapse of the Soviet Union 35 years ago has seen the essential militarist nature of capitalism come to the fore. The façade of the 'international rules-based order' has collapsed. Capitalism is a system that relies on might being right.

This matter has its own relevance in Australia. With the announcement of the Australia-UK-US military pact (Aukus), Australia committed itself to spend untold billions acquiring nuclear-powered submarines and deepening its military integration with the United States and Britain. Alongside this is an ongoing propaganda war to justify massive expenditure on the weapons of mass slaughter.

How can socialists respond coherently to this global military buildup? Three years ago, some Australian Labor Party activists established Labor Against War, a grassroots members' campaign against Aukus, organised around

three simple slogans: 'No to Aukus', 'No nuclear submarines' and 'No war with China'. As national convener of Labor Against War, I am often asked, 'What is the alternative to Aukus?' Labor Against War does not have a defence policy of its own, and nor should it. It is a campaign that unites people across the labour movement with all manner of motivations for opposing Aukus.

There are, of course, different positions among those who oppose it. Some are social-pacifist: that is, they support disarmament in favour of spending on social programmes. However, they assume this can be achieved within the framework of capitalist society. Others are effectively social-imperialist: that is, they oppose the Aukus pact, but support rearming the Australian imperialist state, using other means. In Australia there is sometimes an odd combination of the two.

Aukus is about arming Australia to be part of a US-led containment operation against China. But the nature of war is changing. Even for many supporters of the US alliance, Aukus is seen as preparation for 'fighting the last war'. We have seen in Ukraine that the age of the tank and large troop movements is over. Drone and missile technology - increasingly driven by AI targeting - is emerging on the land and in the skies. The sea is quickly following suit. It is no accident that in August Britain signed a deal with Ukraine in exchange for precious battlefield data to develop yet more AI-guided killing machines.¹

For some people, like Sam Roggeveen (director of the Lowy Institute's 'international security programme'), this general shift has prompted proposals for an 'echidna strategy' - an Australian variation of the 'porcupine strategy',² which was proposed in 2008 by professor

William Murray at the US Naval War College as a strategy for Taiwan to 'defend itself against China'. Essentially, this means arming a small or middle power, so that it cannot be attacked by a larger predator. It is a strategy for asymmetric warfare. Roggeveen argues for a mobile, land-based force that uses missiles, while large navy vessels are abandoned and security is increased through close relations with south-east Asia.

For the socialist movement, this is not a completely bad idea, given the likelihood of asymmetric power for any workers' government that dares to take power. However, most 'progressives' in Australia - and Roggeveen himself - imagine the echidna strategy as a rearming of the existing capitalist state, not a strategy for a democratic republic led by the working class fighting for socialism.

The development of drone technology and the war in Ukraine are acting as a laboratory for military planning across the capitalist world, contributing to an increase in militarism. We therefore encounter people who oppose Aukus, while simultaneously arguing for increased defence spending on drones and missiles. The Greens took precisely this position at the last election, calling for investment in Australian-made drones and missiles.³ When asked whose targeting systems a Green Party-run military would use - American, French or Chinese - you either get a blank look or a reply that Australia would make its own. Good luck with that!

Much of the socialist left takes a different, but ultimately inadequate, position: spend less on war and more on social services. As a slogan, there is nothing wrong with that. But, if it becomes the entirety of our politics, it creates the illusion that peace can be achieved simply by changing the

spending priorities of the existing government within the current constitutional system. It cannot.

Military question

This is why the demand for a popular militia or a citizen army is relevant today: consistent democrats and socialists should call to abolish the standing army and replace it with the armed people.

For many on the left this is seen as 'unrealistic' - yet at the same time they claim to have a political programme for the nationalisation of banking and the abolition of private property. How easy will this be to realise? For us, it is a clear democratic demand. It is worth noting that the armed forces of Britain and Australia pledge allegiance to the crown, not the people. And, in the US, the armed forces pledge allegiance to the constitution, not the people.

In the Australian context, a citizen army could be organised along familiar lines similar to the State Emergency Service: a broadly based citizens' organisation with trained professional staff responsible for training and coordination. The SES itself has roots in Australia's wartime civil defence organisations and a citizen army could mirror some of its organisational forms. This is not too dissimilar to the Swiss national militia. The *Historical dictionary of Switzerland* states: "The term 'militia system' refers to an organisational principle prevalent in Swiss public life, based on the republican ideal that every capable citizen should assume public offices and duties."⁴

The democratic demand for a citizen army is very different from the approach of most of the Australian socialist left. The Communist Party of Australia has called for a 10% cut to the defence budget. Socialist Alliance calls for a 50% cut. I asked comrades from the SA during the last

election what they intended to spend A\$29 billion on for defence, given the military budget was A\$58 billion. After shaking off a blank look, the only response I really got was that it was "just a transitional demand". No wonder workers do not take such an approach seriously.

The Australian Socialist Party, emerging from the Socialist Alternative-dominated Victorian Socialists, similarly calls for the defence budget to be "cut" (no percentage given), alongside calls to abolish the Special Air Service regiment because of its role in war crimes in Afghanistan. The Australian Defence Force presumably remains intact. How much should the budget be cut? Apparently, that need not be specified because it is a "transitional" demand.

This illustrates a broader problem. Socialists routinely debate whether military spending should increase or decrease, whether Aukus or the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (Anzus) should be junked, whether Nato should be expanded or abolished, whether nuclear weapons should be retained or eliminated, and whether particular states or movements should receive arms. All important questions, but not the starting point for Marxists.

In the United States, following the Black Lives Matters movement, much of the left demands 'Defund the police'. But this is a meaningless demand, unless you have a proposal as to what will *replace* the police. We are for the popular and democratic self-management of community security and policing through a popular militia. If we cannot offer working class communities more security than that offered by the police, why would they take the socialist left seriously?

The more fundamental question is: what kind of military and policing

institutions are compatible with democracy and with a state form appropriate to working class rule? That is a question about the state, not simply about budgets or foreign policy preferences. The classical Marxist answer is clear: the standing army should be abolished and replaced by the armed people, organised as a popular militia.

Until well into the 20th century, this was hardly controversial within the socialist movement. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the demand stood alongside other great democratic demands: universal suffrage, abolition of monarchy, democratic control of state institutions, and the election and recall of officials. Its disappearance reflects the abandonment of the Marxist minimum programme - the conception that the socialist movement must fight for democratic transformations of the state as part of preparing the working class for political power.

The demand for a popular militia did not originate with Marxism. It emerged from the great democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. And it extends even before that to Machiavelli and the emergence of independent civil states in Italy.

The US constitutional amendment for a “well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state” spoke to this. Later political shifts effectively turned this amendment into its opposite: the individualised right to carry arms outside the collective control of a “well-regulated militia”. That is not what we call for.

The French Revolution challenged the standing armies of absolutist monarchies with the concept of the “nation in arms”. Democratic radicals argued that free citizens should not be dependent upon a professional military caste. Marx and Engels inherited this tradition, as did the First and Second Internationals, but transformed it through their analysis of modern class society.

The question was no longer simply whether a militia was more democratic than a royal army. It became: “What kind of armed force corresponds to the republican and democratic rule of the working class?” The Paris Commune of 1871 was decisive. Marx’s analysis of it placed the military question at the centre of the proto-workers’ state that it represented.

The very first decree of the Paris Commune was for the suppression of the standing army and its replacement with the armed people. The standing army was understood not as a neutral instrument of national defence, but as part of the existing state apparatus, characterised by hierarchy, separation from society, a professional officer class and obedience to established state authority. Furthermore, the anti-bureaucratic and anti-militarist approach of the communards - later inherited by the Second (Socialist) International - meant that resources bound up with running a bureaucratic militarised state could be unfettered for the benefit of the Commune.

Writing in *The civil war in France*, Marx noted:

The Commune made that catchword of bourgeois revolutions - cheap government - a reality by destroying the two greatest sources of expenditure: the standing army and state functionarism. Its very existence presupposed the non-existence of monarchy, which, in Europe at least, is the normal incumbrance and indispensable cloak of class rule. It supplied the republic with the basis of really democratic institutions. But neither cheap government nor the ‘true republic’ was its ultimate aim; they were its mere concomitants.⁵

The Paris Commune did not seek a better-managed standing army. It sought to abolish the separation between the people and the armed force - an essential component of a working class government. Engels returned repeatedly to this question, defending universal military training, democratic control of officers, abolition of the military caste and replacement of the standing army.

The militia was therefore not a secondary organisational question for classical Marxism. It was part of the Marxist theory of the state and the democratic republic.

Why forgotten?

The demand was repeatedly endorsed by the Second International, from its founding congress in Paris in 1889 through to the Basel Declaration of 1912 on the eve of World War I. At its first congress, one resolution called for abolition of the standing army and general arming of the population.⁶ Subsequent congresses repeated this, calling also for democratic control over decisions of war and peace, and rejection of secret treaties.

The question was also bound up with the broader struggle against militarism and imperialism. At its heart is the idea that you can only overcome militarism and the drive to war by overcoming capitalism itself. There can be no pacifist illusions in modern capitalism. That resolution at the first congress concludes: “Congress declares that war, fatal outcome of the present economic conditions, will disappear entirely only with the disappearance of the capitalist order, with the emancipation of labour, and the international triumph of socialism.”

In 1907, at the Stuttgart Congress, an amendment on the Bebel resolution on ‘War and militarism’, moved by Lenin, Martov and Luxemburg, argued that democratic organisation of national defence through replacing the standing army with the armed people would help make aggressive war impossible and overcome national antagonisms. This was not pacifism. The socialist movement did not argue that nations should surrender their right to defend themselves. It argued for anti-militarism and anti-imperialism, while recognising that lasting peace and disarmament ultimately required the overthrow of capitalism.

The demand was also not confined

to small minorities. It appeared in the programmes of German, French and Belgian social democracy and even in the first election manifesto of the British Labour Representation Committee in 1900.⁷ The early British labour movement called for “abolition of the standing army and the establishment of a citizen force” and for “the people to decide on peace or war”.

Perhaps the most thorough examination of the question during this period was by Karl Liebknecht in his pamphlet, *Militarism and anti-militarism*. In that brilliant pamphlet he writes: “The abolition of the standing army and its substitution by a citizen army, a militia, together with a corresponding reduction in military expenditure... are the demands which the class-conscious proletariat has quite logically inscribed everywhere on its banner.”⁸ Today, such demands are treated as unrealistic or extreme.

Why did the demand disappear? There was no single moment. It reflected the degeneration of different currents within the workers’ movement.

First came the collapse of social democracy after 1914 and its adoption of social imperialism by these parties. The question ceased to be ‘How do we abolish the standing army?’ and became ‘How do we regulate the military?’ or ‘How do we make it serve the nation?’ The institutional question - which class the military serves - disappeared.

There was also an important development within the communist movement. In the period around the Russian Revolution, the distinction between a popular militia and a workers’ militia became increasingly blurred. Nikolai Bukharin’s and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky’s *ABC of communism*, published in 1920, argued that the “old programme of the socialists” for a citizen army “is futile”.⁹ This is because in 1920 they incorrectly assumed the working class was about to sweep to power across Europe. Therefore, they dropped general democratic demands and argued that the Communist Party “does not advocate the universal arming of the people, but the universal arming of the workers”.

This reflected a conception that the workers were on the verge of taking power and had little need for a minimum programme. Back in 1917, before the October revolution, Bukharin had called for the dropping of the ‘outdated’ minimum programme. Lenin argued differently: he said the minimum programme remained necessary, including after the seizure of power. In May 1917 he wrote: “The workers do not want an army standing apart from the people; what they want is that the workers and soldiers should merge into a single militia consisting of all the people.”

At the base here is an important distinction. A popular militia is a democratic demand concerning the character of the state and its armed institutions. A workers’ militia emerges from the struggle for working-class self-defence.

After the tsar fell in revolutionary Russia of 1917, there was no police and the army was falling apart. The workers’ Red Guards in Petrograd and Moscow started to play the role of a general militia. But they are not the same category: one is a democratic demand about the question of the state, the other is about workers’ self-defence. But in the concrete circumstances of revolutionary Russia, they merged into one another.

The later Stalinist degeneration of the communist movement compounded the problem. Popular-front politics meant that the standing army could be presented as the army of the democratic nation, particularly in the struggle against fascism. After World War II, communist

parties increasingly became parliamentary reform parties. The democratic transformation of the state was no longer central. It was postponed indefinitely.

Transitional method

Trotsky is a more complicated case. He did not simply abandon the militia demand: it is present in his 1938 *Transitional programme*, which called for workers’ military training, democratic control of commanders and replacement of the standing army by a people’s militia. Trotsky also defended the militia system in his writings on the Soviet Red Army, arguing that the standing army was a temporary necessity arising from the circumstances of the civil war and that the workers’ state should move towards a system based on the armed people.

So, we cannot simply blame Trotsky. The problem lies more fundamentally with what became the ‘transitional method’. Similarly to Bukharin, he confused the demands for a popular militia and workers’ self-defence groups, muddling them up using the ‘transitional method’. Of course, socialists have always fought for demands that connect immediate struggles with revolutionary transformation. For Marxist social democracy, this was through our fight to realise our minimum programme.

The problem arises when the transitional method becomes a substitute for the minimum programme: when any immediate demand can be presented as a step towards socialism without identifying the political bridge of democratic state power as central to the argument. Instead of asking what democratic demands expose the contradictions of capitalist class rule, the question becomes what demands correspond to existing consciousness and can nevertheless be presented as revolutionary. That is an opportunist method.

Mike Macnair identified the beginning of the end of this demand in the early Comintern. He wrote:

The abandonment of the popular militia slogan was a decision of the Russian Communist Party and of Comintern in the time of Lenin and Trotsky. And the result is that those Trotskyist groups that have not collapsed, by way of ‘transitional method’, into economism and pacifism, cling to Comintern formulations and to the syndicalist version of the workers’ militia as an alternative.¹⁰

We should reject both approaches as inadequate to our needs today.

A workers’ militia, or workers’ defence, is a product of the class struggle itself: defensive picket lines, protection of strikes, resistance to fascist violence and defence of working class organisations. Its development corresponds to the tempo and level of the class struggle. A popular militia is different. It is a democratic demand about what the armed forces of a republican society should look like. We are not proposing to hand out rifles tomorrow. A workers’ militia cannot - and should not - be artificially manufactured. But that does not mean we should abandon the democratic demand for a popular militia.

The abandonment of the militia question leaves the left trapped between two inadequate positions. On one side is social imperialism - increasingly just imperialism - which treats the army and the state as neutral institutions that can simply be put to the ‘right’ purposes. This approaches the Australian state as somehow ‘neutral’, not an integral part of the imperialist world order.

On the other is social pacifism: cut defence spending, reduce military

commitments and spend the money on social services. ‘Books, not bombs’ and similar are slogans we can use in particular circumstances. But if that is where we stop, we leave untouched the fundamental question: who controls the armed forces in society?

The Australian left opposes Aukus and calls for restrictions on military spending. But this leaves the question of the state and the armed forces for the future. Left reformists believe we can use the existing state and constitutional structures to win socialism. Chile’s Salvador Allende tried this and died during a military coup. The socialist opportunists, who privately believe that there should be a workers’ militia, ignore this demand about the nature of armed force in society, hoping ‘the revolution’ will solve it. Meanwhile, radical sounding bread and butter issues.

The demand for a popular militia remains relevant today because it addresses three fundamental questions:

■ First, democracy. Standing armies are institutions of concentrated power. A popular militia places armed force under democratic control.

■ Second, anti-imperialism and anti-militarism. Professional armies are the institutions through which states conduct imperial interventions abroad. A democratic militia is fundamentally defensive, and calls for such a militia should accompany demands for disarmament, particularly of weapons of mass destruction.

■ Third, socialism. The militia demand restores a Marxist understanding of socialism as something more than economic changes in the interests of the working class within the current constitutional framework. Socialism requires the transformation of political institutions, so that they are compatible with working class self-rule, and ultimately with the withering away of the state itself.

Social-imperialism tells workers to trust the military institutions of their own state. Social-pacifism tells workers to leave those institutions untouched, while reducing their funding. Marxism poses a different question: What military institutions are compatible with democracy?

Our longstanding answer has been: ‘Abolish the standing army and arm the people’. That is why the demand for a popular militia belongs in a modern Marxist minimum programme. It is an attempt to recover a democratic demand that speaks directly to the nature of the capitalist state and the political transformation required for working class power.

We should have confidence in it and find ways to make it relevant to people today ●

This is an edited version of the article published in *Labor Tribune* and is based on comrade Strom’s opening at Communist University 2026 (labortribune.net.au/why-a-citizen-army-or-popular-militia-is-relevant-today)

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USSR - A Marxist post-mortem Internal contradictions

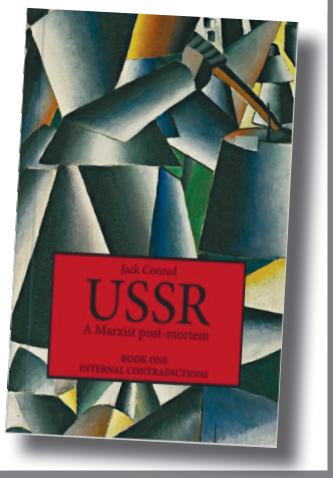
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ISRAEL

Demand the whole package

Ed Miliband has given an inch. Even though it is a token, we should be encouraged and take renewed strength. **Yassamine Mather** calls for full sanctions, boycotts and strikes

On its own terms, there is nothing wrong with Ed Miliband's announcement of a ban on imports from Israel's settlements in the occupied West Bank. They are illegal under international law; their expansion is a mechanism of dispossession, accompanied by organised violence against the indigenous Palestinian population. Any policy that stops British capital from profiting from this process is something that should have been done long ago.

But the sudden moral awakening in Whitehall should be treated with the suspicion it deserves - after all, Miliband is a long time supporter of Labour Friends of Israel, a committed Zionist, who expresses gratitude for the state of Israel for allowing his grandmother to settle there. He visited the country as a young man and recounts with joy picking oranges on the Nachshonim kibbutz (established on land seized in the 1948 Arab-Israel war). No, the important issues are why this sanction announcement happened when it did, and what effect it will have.

For three years Gaza has been subjected to collective punishment on a scale that has no recent parallel. Miliband now tells parliament that this is "a stain on the conscience of the world and of this country too". Then there is the settler terrorism on the West Bank and the Israeli government ministers urging them on.

None of this was unknown. It was not an information gap that kept the mouth's of Labour's front bench firmly shut for years: it was a political calculation about international relations and the global pecking order. Tory and Labour governments have striven not to upset Washington and its Israeli attack dog by raising awkward questions like ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Yet, Miliband went further on September 8 than any previous British minister, describing settlers carrying out what he now calls "ethnic cleansing" and announcing sanctions on companies and individuals financing illegal West Bank settlement construction, infrastructure and advertising. Note that France, Ireland, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Canada are all taking similar action.

These rhetorical shifts doubtless reflect a certain distancing from Donald Trump's USA which has claimed Greenland and sanctioned friend and foe alike, not least Canada. Now Canada is set to become some sort of associate member of the European Union (a first). So maybe big geostrategic realignments are in the offing.

Interestingly, Trump has so far been quiet when it comes to Israel, and JD Vance has even said that the US must not be "subservient" to Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu must surely be worried.

Legitimate

However, though the Labour government will restrict trade with the illegal settlements, it has explicitly reassured Israel that ordinary commercial relations will continue undisturbed. Miliband also went out of his way to denounce the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement and to insist that the measures target the Israeli government, not the Israeli economy. Settlement activity can therefore be condemned without questioning the wider relationship with Israel.



A Labour Friend of Israel

Of course, this distinction - 'bad' settlements versus a fundamentally legitimate Israeli state - cannot survive serious scrutiny. Who garrisons the settlements? Who arms, trains and directs the military that enforces the occupation? Who builds the road network and checkpoint infrastructure, and administers the permit regime that make settlement expansion physically possible? The settlements are not a rogue excess produced by a few fanatical colonists: they are a state project, financed and defended by the same Israeli state apparatus that Miliband treats as a normal trading partner.

Settler-colonialism in the West Bank is inherent to Zionism, tying together the military, the land-registry bureaucracy, the banking system and a settler population that functions, in effect, as an armed frontier of Israeli capital accumulation. Separating 'illegal settlements' from 'legitimate Israel' therefore performs a specific ideological function for the British state: Whitehall can sanction the most visible and least defensible symptom of occupation, while leaving intact the commercial, military and strategic relationship with the state that produces and defends it.

Statistics confirm the limited material scope. UK-Israel trade in goods and services totalled around £6 billion in 2025; an estimated £38 million of goods were imported from the occupied territories that year. The measures proposed touch only a fraction of Britain's economic relationship with Israel, allowing ministers to demonstrate movement without disturbing the wider relationship.

Nowhere is the hypocrisy more evident than with the arms exports. In September 2024 the foreign office suspended roughly 30 of Britain's 350 or so extant arms licences to Israel, citing a "clear risk" that equipment could facilitate serious breaches of international humanitarian law. But the suspension explicitly excluded components for the F-35 programme - though primarily an American project, this fifth generation fighter plane contains British parts. Israel's airforce regularly uses its F-35s to missile and bomb Gaza. The legal challenge over that carve-out mounted by Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq failed: in November 2025 the Court of Appeal ruled that the government could exclude F-35 parts, even though doing so violated Britain's own arms-licensing criteria.¹

A joint investigation by the Palestinian Youth Movement, Workers for a Free Palestine and Progressive International, cross-referencing UK export records against Israeli customs data, found that shipments of weapons-related goods - including F-35 components, munitions and armoured-vehicle parts - continued after the 2024 suspension, and in some categories increased. Whatever the precise accounting of individual consignments, the larger point is clear: Britain has drawn a narrow line around some exports, while protecting a weapons relationship of greater strategic significance.

This is why the argument cannot stop with wine, fruit or other settlement produce. Such sales are marginal, compared with the supply chains that equip the military enforcing the west Bank occupation and conducting operations in Gaza. Weapons help sustain the very system that the settlement ban claims to oppose. Banning farm goods, while continuing to supply military components, is therefore not a "good first step" towards confronting the underlying relationship, unless it is accompanied by pressure to end the arms trade itself. Otherwise the government gains the appearance of taking ethical action, while preserving the profitable and strategic core.

Two-state fiction

Miliband frames all of this as a defence of the two-state solution - the organising fiction of western Middle East policy for three decades. Every condemnation of settlement expansion is issued in the name of protecting a Palestinian state that has never been permitted to exist and whose material preconditions have been dismantled piece by piece: land confiscated, communities fragmented by roads and military zones, populations displaced, and after each new stage of colonisation, a fresh western statement reaffirming commitment to the ever receding two-state horizon.

Whatever the Palestinian Authority says, the two-state phrase has never served as code for self-determination. It serves as a diplomatic alibi - allowing western governments to express concern without breaking with Israel's expansionism, apartheid racism and permanent warmongering. Defending the two-state phrase lets a Labour foreign secretary sound like a critic of occupation while leaving

the Israeli state, the arms trade and the alliance structure that sustain occupation undisturbed.

Miliband's language - "the unlawfulness of the occupation should be reflected in the economic relationships we choose to have" - gestures in the direction of the International Court of Justice's July 2024 advisory opinion without following its logic. The ICJ found Israel's presence in the occupied territories unlawful and said the occupation must end as rapidly as possible. It went further: it held that third states have a duty not to treat that presence as legal and not to render aid or assistance that helps maintain it.

That is a stronger standard than anything on offer from Whitehall. If the occupation is unlawful in the sense described by the ICJ, the obligations that follow do not stop at the municipal boundary of the settlements. A policy that recognises the illegality of the occupation, but continues relationships that materially assist its enforcement, is centred on an obvious contradiction.

There is a deeper problem here than Miliband's selective outrage. It is one that the whole framework of western 'ethical' diplomacy - sanctions here, licences suspended there, an import ban dressed up as a defence of the two-state solution - cannot in principle solve. These policies treat the conflict as discrete abuses that can be corrected administratively, when the underlying structure is regional and strategic.

Moshé Machover and the Matzpen tradition made the essential point half a century ago: Zionism is not simply a national movement that happened to collide with an existing population. It developed, and continues to function, as a colonial-settler project structurally dependent on the sponsorship of an external imperialist power - first Britain, then France, then the United States - because this particular settler-colonial project displacing an indigenous population cannot sustain itself on its own social base. It survives by making itself indispensable as a garrison state: a regional enforcer of imperialist interests in exchange for the arms, capital and diplomatic cover that keep the structure standing.

The close US-Israel relationship is therefore not incidental. It is the key element in the Israeli state's capacity to maintain the existing order. This is exactly why a diplomatic fix confined to the import policies of individual western states, or even to Israel-Palestine as an isolated bilateral

dispute, does nothing to change the actual system of repression. You cannot dismantle a garrison-state relationship one settlement-goods tariff line at a time, when the system being defended spans arms manufacturing, intelligence-sharing, capital flows and a wider imperial alliance. Comrade Machover's argument is that the resolution of the conflict cannot come from partition, diplomacy between national leaderships or moral pressure on any single western sponsor.² It requires revolutionary transformation across the region: the overthrow of reactionary Arab regimes that have served as junior partners in the same imperialist order, alongside the de-Zionisation of Israeli society, opening the way to a voluntary socialist federation, in which Jewish Israelis and Arabs, including Palestinians, could exist without one people's national existence being predicated on the dispossession of the other.

That is a long-term strategic horizon, not a policy recommendation for tomorrow's parliamentary order paper. But Miliband has given an inch and we must demand a mile. His is a token gesture, but it is also a concession, a tribute to the massive and sustained pro-Palestine movement seen here and across the world.

By-election

To state the obvious, the government did not take the decision in order to avoid a defeat in the Holborn and St Pancras by-election on October 8. However, it is, in part, an attempt to win back Muslim and left voters who deserted the Labour Party in droves at the last general election and saw four pro-Palestine MPs elected for the first time and Jeremy Corbyn re-elected. In many other constituencies pro-Palestine independents were in second place. So Segal Abdi Wali might seem like the perfect Labour candidate in Holborn and St Pancras - except, of course, she is exactly aligned with Andy Burnham and Ed Miliband, including when it comes to Israel-Palestine. She has steadfastly refused to sign the Palestine Solidarity Campaign demand for BDS.

Either way, the mass demonstrations must be sustained and made even bigger. The next pro-Palestine demonstration in London will therefore be particularly important (October 10, Thames Embankment). Naturally, we should be demanding a complete ban on arms sales and no exemptions for F-35s. Something that we can enforce from below. That means industrial action, especially at ports and airports. More than that, no goods going to or from Israel should be handled. We must demand more. Obviously the ban on Palestine Action must be immediately ended and the Prevention of Terrorism Act rescinded. All pro-Palestine political prisoners must be freed. Above all, the whole BDS package - as unanimously agreed by the TUC congress in Brighton - must be enforced.

Of course, that will not bring Israel to its knees. Only the class struggle for socialism in Israel and crucially the wider Middle East can do that. But it would send a powerful message and help tilt the balance of forces internationally and here in Britain ●

Notes

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CLIMATE

Coping with the crisis

Deadly heatwaves, devastating wildfires and terrible floods - and El Niño has not even reached its peak. Communists say we need extreme measures if we are to avoid climate catastrophe, writes **Eddie Ford**

Surprising no-one, August was the joint-hottest month ever recorded.¹ Tying with July 2023, the record was partly driven by the influence of El Niño pushing heat into the atmosphere across the Pacific - ensuring that the temperatures were 1.65°C above pre-industrial levels, because warmer waters across such a large area means that global average temperatures typically spike too. While, of course, a single month above 1.5°C does not mean it has permanently breached the limit set at the 2015 Paris Agreement, it is yet another indicator of runaway human-induced global warming.

This year also saw western Europe's warmest ever summer on record, with the continent experiencing multiple heatwaves - temperatures exceeding 40°C in many areas and at least 35,000 excess deaths.² Much of the region and large parts of central and eastern Europe also saw widespread drought in August, in some cases persisting since May, with severe conditions reported in France, the UK, Hungary, Romania and Serbia. Similarly with North America.³

The global climate crisis is propelling temperature extremes across both the atmosphere and the oceans, with the latter recording breaking levels. Thus new data suggests that the average surface temperature of the planet's seas outside the polar regions hit 21.1°C on August 22, edging past the 21.09°C recorded in March 2024. That is far above average for the time of year - breaking heat records for 100 days.⁴ Warmer oceans can have wide-reaching and devastating consequences, such as creating yet more extreme weather, raising sea levels and harming marine life.

Average worldwide sea temperatures tend to reach their yearly peak in March or April, which corresponds to the end of summer in the southern hemisphere - not in August. But the oceans are already reaching record temperatures, yet El Niño is still some way off its expected peak at around Christmas time, and scientists are warning that it is bang on course to be the strongest in centuries and therefore we could see ocean temperatures climb yet further. In this way, we see that climate change makes every El Niño hotter and these record-shattering months will simply keep on coming. And we know that even small fractions of temperature change globally can greatly increase the risk of severe and deadly heatwaves, floods, drought and other impacts - quantity can transform into quality with extreme rapidity.

Feedback

Climate scientists have further warnings. The UN has reported recently that the 1.5°C limit will definitely be exceeded, concluding that global heating will reach at least 1.8°C under even the most optimistic scenario, and that "there are no good outcomes above 1.5°C".⁵

Inevitably, this causes climate impacts, such as this summer's record heatwaves and wildfires, to "strike faster, hit harder and last longer". But there is far more to the overall picture, even if it does make for grim reading. As the world heats up, permafrost in the higher latitudes is thawing. Forests are drying, wetlands and lakes are warming. All of these changes are themselves causing the release of planet-heating methane, further worsening the climate crisis.

Scientists have, of course, long



Sub-Saharan Africa: drought, displacement and famine

known about the "feedback loops" that amplify the impacts of direct pollution from burning coal, oil and gas.⁶ Emissions from natural sources are largely unaccounted for in climate projections, argue scientists at Spark Climate Solutions, who recently published their results in *Environmental Research Letters*. They explain how warming-induced emissions of greenhouse gases "from natural sources are a large amplifying feedback that most climate models do not yet represent".⁷ Once you factor in the methane and carbon dioxide released from permafrost, wetlands, freshwaters and wildfires - the four areas the paper analyses - you get a "hidden multiplier" that is normally missing, which can only mean they are likely to *underestimate* how much further warming is coming and *overestimate* how much carbon we can still afford to emit. This additional heating could add 20%-30% to global heating by the end of this century, adding an estimated 0.2°C-0.4°C to the global average temperature - depending, that is, on the overall action taken to combat the climate crisis.

This disruption of the world's carbon cycles is now being seen in "real time", says Rob Jackson, a Stanford University scientist and co-author of the paper. As we have heard so many times, in study after study, the results are - or should be - a "wake-up call" and if they are not included in the next generation of climate policies, thinks Jackson, then meeting the world's climate goals will be "less and less likely".

This can only add to the fear that, should global heating melt enough of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets, thaw enough permafrost, warp crucial ocean currents and turn the Amazon rainforest into a savannah, the world will career past a series of catastrophic tipping points, where the climate system spins wildly outside any sort of restraining human influence. Yet we have to face the fact that the planet is getting closer to such a "point of no return", where this runaway global heating becomes a hellish reality - something concluded by a separate study published earlier this year.⁸ We have got to the point where the current policies (or, virtually, non-policies) put in place by various governments are likely to see the global temperature

rise to 2.6°C above pre-industrial times, at least in the opinion of Climate Action Tracker.⁹ If so, this will probably cause severe disruption and hardship to *billions* of people through sea-level rise, crop losses and other consequences.

Emergency

While the world sizzles, with El Niño supercharging the climate crisis, the right - whether it be Reform UK or the Tories under Kemi Badenoch - is incessantly attacking net zero and everything it stands for (or what they think it stands for) in order to display their reactionary 'common sense'. For them, net zero has become a symbol of the 'woke madness' that is holding back the country, preventing it from being great again. We cannot even "enjoy" the heatwaves, complained Richard Tice, Reform's deputy leader, because net zero and climate zealots have made us "be sort of doom and gloom" about everything.¹⁰

In which case, he certainly would not appreciate the comments from Simon Stiell, the executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change - imploring against treating the climate crisis "as territory in the culture wars". That must be utterly rejected, he says, if we do not want environmental and economic catastrophe.¹¹ We have had a disturbing presentiment of what could happen, he said, in this year's "hot as hell" summer that killed tens of thousands of people in Europe alone and "hammered" infrastructure, businesses and economics - costing a likely €180 billion (£155 billion), as well as leading to forced migration around the world. Speaking to a committee of the European parliament, Stiell described the climate crisis as a "continent-wide economic security emergency", resulting in mass evacuations, power stations closed, trade routes choked, crops lost, yields down, food prices up (and set to rise further), and so on.

Not to confront the climate crisis, he went on, is to avoid tackling the very issues that the populist far right claim to care so much about. By backtracking on policies to cut greenhouse gas emissions - or even giving up on the attempt - Stiell claimed that these politicians are in reality "soft" on inflation, the cost of

living, economic growth and jobs ... In fact, they are effectively working against these very objectives. In the end, Stiell offers us a stark vision: if we do not cut back on fossil fuel pollution, this summer's brutal heat, fires and droughts will seem "mild" compared to the permanent climate nightmare that will follow.

Yes, there are a few on the right - though apparently a dwindling band - who seem to retain some baseline sanity about the climate crisis and net zero. Writing on the influential *Conservative Home* online website, Harry Clifford writes that "the right need a climate change plan" and a "nuanced" approach to net zero, even if claiming that it is "a thoroughly discredited policy for the present moment".¹² He claims that the UK holds "the top position in the world in offshore wind innovation, with more technological advances made here than anywhere else", and that net zero has given the country a "first-movers advantage". Clifford concludes that, "if we let these sectors wither", the UK is consigning itself to "irrelevance and faster decline". Yet what these comments serve to highlight is that, when confronted with the enormity of the climate crisis, the right does not actually have a plan - Harry Clifford certainly does not, even if he thinks it is a good idea to have one.

Idiocy

Last month it was widely reported that UK citizens will be told to "stock up" on tinned food and "take steps" to ensure they are prepared for national emergencies as part of a new government campaign to improve the nation's "resilience" - the aim purportedly to make sure most households have basic supplies and knowledge about how to cope in a crisis, in order to "free up" immediate government resources for the most vulnerable.¹³

Yet as Bill McGuire - the prominent climate scientist who spoke at this year's Communist University - says, "it would be nice to imagine" that the government was finally waking up to the enormous challenges posed by extreme weather and the coming 'super' El Niño.¹⁴ But, of course, it continues to row back on green policies, while it prepares

to greenlight the extraction of more fossil fuels from the North Sea. In his words, "cognitive dissonance doesn't even begin to describe the idiocy of such thinking" - so absurd that "you couldn't make it up".

Amazingly there are still some people who appear to genuinely misunderstand the concept behind net zero, thinking it means zero emissions. Obviously, if that was true, we would not be able to breathe in and out: we inhale a mix of nitrogen (about 78%) and oxygen (about 21%); we exhale nitrogen (about 78%), oxygen (about 16%) and carbon dioxide (about 4%). So the claim that we want to shut down *all* coal mining, oil and gas extraction and steel and cement production in the name of achieving net zero is either disingenuous or monumentally stupid.

Simply put, net zero means achieving a *balance* between the greenhouse gases emitted and those removed from the atmosphere, effectively resulting in no *increase* in atmospheric greenhouse gases. But obviously, given that we have totally overshot targets like the Paris Agreement and global warming is now *locked* into the climate system for an indefinite amount of time to come, we need as a matter of urgency to reduce the overall amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

That is why communists, and anyone who cares about the future of human civilisation, talk about going beyond net zero as soon as possible - otherwise the consequences will be truly appalling. Essentially, this requires, as part of our minimum programme, transitioning away from the fossil fuel economy, rolling back the carnivore diet, public not private transport, imposing limits on air travel, allowing more trees and other plants to grow through rewilding, restoring the health of rivers, lakes and seas, preserving and where feasible re-establishing wetlands, etc. Such measures would lock in more CO₂ and CH₄ into vegetation, deep soils, ice sheets and the ocean floors, so there is less of it in the atmosphere. Such real 'common sense' is, perhaps, only achievable through working class state power and putting a stop to the insane, ecologically destructive M-C-M' logic of capitalism ●

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LAW

When cybercabs kill

Pilot tests are already ongoing and commercially available, fully autonomous vehicles are expected on UK roads by the second half of 2027. But what happens when there is a crash, when someone dies? Legal rules will protect the capitalists, suggests **Mike Macnair**

On September 11 the US tech magazine, *Futurism*, published an entertaining story under the headline, ‘Lawyers already lining up to defend victims of cybercab crashes’. The story is actually about US law-firm blogs raising the question, who is legally responsible if a driverless taxi operated by an AI system causes an accident?

The article comments that “the tailor-made cybercab blogs follow a familiar pattern of opportunism by corporate law firms, their point is fair enough. The technology behind cybercabs is in a very early stage, and the legal precedent is even younger.”¹ In reality, the second of these points is nonsense. But the nonsense is revealing.

Cybercabs - autonomous driverless cars - are machines, which will be put on the public highway by their owners, who will be paid for their hire. Hence, owners will be just as much responsible for them as the owners of the young horses taken for training to Little Lincoln’s Inn Fields (now New Square, Lincoln’s Inn, central London) were responsible for the damage caused when they lost control of the horses in the 1676 case of *Mitchell v Allestry*.²

The general principle of most laws, though reached by varying routes, is that users of the public highways are legally liable for injury or damage to property caused by driving which *objectively* does not meet the standard of a reasonably competent driver. *Objectively* is important: in England it was established in *Nettleship v Weston* in 1971 that a learner driver is held to the same standard as an experienced driver.³

A cybercab does not need to be human - or conscious - to fail to meet the objective standard of a reasonably competent driver.

English and American laws express the rule as being that the driver owes a *duty of care* to other road users. This is in contrast with French, German and other laws, which simply make the vehicle user liable for fault. The original purpose of this requirement of a duty was, in *Winterbottom v Wright* (1842), to protect the manufacturer of the vehicle from liability to the driver for injury in an accident caused by a defective vehicle.⁴ The manufacturer has been held to have a duty of care since, in Britain, *Donoghue v Stevenson* in 1932.⁵

Various US state jurisdictions, and the European Union, have created stricter ‘product liability’ regimes designed to secure that *someone* - the seller, the importer, the manufacturer - is liable to end-users who are injured (in the UK, the Consumer Protection Act 1987: EU law in origin, but retained after Brexit).

The courts have not really had much difficulty in working out causation in cases where the cause of a road accident may be design defects in the vehicle, and may be bad maintenance or bad driving by the user. An example from 45 years ago is *Lambert v Lewis* (1981) where a road accident was partly caused by bad design of a trailer coupling, and partly by careless maintenance by the owner of the trailer.⁶

In short, in the absence of manufacturers’ lobbying legislatures, and of paying high fees to lawyers for special treatment, the problem of cybercabs is neither a new legal



Tesla cybercab

one, nor particularly difficult. The history, however, tells us that we *should* expect heavy lobbying from manufacturers and operators and a range of obfuscatory arguments from lawyers designed to persuade the courts, and the rest of us, that manufacturers and operators are not, or should not be, liable.

Bending

Driver and vehicle manufacturer interests have repeatedly succeeded in getting the law bent in their favour.

A possible early example is that between the 1670s (when our sources for the practice begin) and 1750, drivers who caused fatal traffic accidents were routinely prosecuted for murder. They were never *convicted* of murder, but more often of involuntary manslaughter or of ‘chance-medley’ (a now obsolete crime of negligent killing). In 1750 the practice abruptly ended, and by 1774 it seems to have been forgotten.⁷ Why did it end? There is a striking coincidence with the 1750 ‘Newmarket Carriage Match’, in which gentry bet on whether a carriage could reach 19 mph on Newmarket Heath: a particularly famous instance of gentry sport-carriage road-racing, reflecting both improved roads and improved carriage designs.⁸ The prosecution of gentleman road-racers for murder (even if there was no real chance of conviction) would be class-inappropriate, unlike the carters and cabbies affected by the older practice.

This principle of protecting wealthy road-racers has descended into modern times with the disappearance of *manslaughter* prosecutions for homicide by bad driving after *Andrews v DPP* (1937),⁹ with parliament instead creating offences of “causing death by dangerous driving” and more recently “causing death by careless driving”.

I have already referred to *Winterbottom v Wright* (1842) protecting the coach-builder, until its doctrine was finally overthrown. Roughly contemporary with it is *Cotterill v Starkey* in 1839, where the defendant, driving his light carriage (allegedly on the wrong side of the road), ran over and seriously injured the claimant. Mr Justice Patteson, directing the jury, said:

A foot passenger has a right to cross a highway, and I believe that

it was held in one case that a foot passenger has a right to walk along the carriage way; but without going to that length, it is quite clear that a foot passenger has a right to cross, and that persons driving carriages along the road are liable if they do not take care so as to avoid driving against the foot passengers who are crossing the road; and if a person driving along the road cannot pull up because his reins break, that will be no ground of defence, as he is bound to have proper tackle. With respect to what has been said as to the defendant being on his wrong side of the road, I think you should lay it out of your consideration, as the rule as to the proper side of the road does not apply with respect to foot passengers; and as regards the foot passengers, the carriages may go on whichever side of the road they may please.¹⁰

This direction was favourable to the claimant in the specific case, who won a verdict, but also rather favourable to drivers as a general rule: pedestrians have only a right to *cross* the road, not to use it, and driving on the wrong side of the road does not affect the driver who runs down a pedestrian ...

Similar reasoning was deployed by the motor industry in lobbying for drivers’ rights in American cities, resulting in the invention of a crime of ‘jaywalking’ - crossing the road other than at a regulated pedestrian crossing - to deny pedestrians the right to use the streets. The development has been studied in depth by Peter D Norton in his 2008 book, *Fighting traffic: the dawn of the motor age in the American city* - a careful study of advertising and lobbying operations, and how safety concerns can be *turned against the victims* by news management.

Spin coming

We should, therefore, expect a mass of spin - in legal argument and in other forms of lobbying and news management - in favour of the idea that cybercabs pose new and difficult legal questions, and in particular that AIs should be treated as autonomous actors, so that the proprietor of the vehicle and the manufacturers of the hardware and software should not be liable for accidents that result from their use.

Do not be fooled! In the first place, animals are also autonomous actors: but their owners who take large animals into public spaces are liable for any damage they cause, as in *Mitchell v Allestry* (and centuries before, in the Roman law of ‘noxal liability’ for damage caused by animals¹¹).

Secondly, as Cory Doctorow has recently argued,¹² we should not treat large language models which ‘escape’ and hack other people’s sites as autonomous actors; rather, the LLMs are *designed as malware* and trained on corpuses of hacker material. They have this character because it is *in the interests of the US state* to create very high-powered malware.

Similar issues arise in relation to driverless vehicles. In a real great-power war, as opposed to colonial and proxy wars, the sharp end of the arms industry needs to be backed up by massive industrial conversion - turning, for example, car manufacturers into producers of tank and aircraft parts, and so on, as in World War II. That *military* necessity means that, as long as the tanks/aircraft/trucks military model continues, the car industry needs to be kept alive.

But the same is true in relation to AI. Republican Senator Ted Cruz recently remarked: “If they’re going to be killer robots, I’d rather they be American killer robots and not Chinese killer robots.”¹³ To have the production capacity for “American killer robots” available (and insufficient US production capacity has recently been visibly a problem with missiles and drones), there is a need for massive adoption of the tech; and if it can be used as an excuse to evade liability for accidents, so much the better.

The lawyer bloggers (and there is also a good deal of more elaborate work on academia.edu) are probably not being directly paid by big tech, or the US government, to obfuscate the liability issue. Rather, it is inherently in the interest of lawyers as a group that the law should be complicated, and finer and finer distinctions made: as *Futurism* says, “a familiar pattern of opportunism by corporate law firms”.

What we have seen here is two patterns. One, in 18th-19th century

England, is the courts making decisions behind the backs of the public for the benefit of the upper classes. The second, in early 20th century USA in Norton’s discussion, is complex manoeuvres combining lobbying operations and news management to shift the law in the interests of car manufacturers and their driver customers.

The consequence of these manoeuvres, as Winfried Wolf argued in 1996 in *Car mania*, is a profoundly dehumanising ‘car society’. Making the streets and roads legally safe for driverless cars will be even worse.

The capitalists get what they want (or some approximation thereto) by corruption, in the form of party-political donations, advertising subsidies to pro-capitalist media, payments to professional lobbyists and spin doctors, and the ‘free market’ in legal services. These payments allow them to conceal what they are up to and to *persist* in manoeuvres towards their ends.

Their opponents suffer from short attention spans, passing from today’s fashionable campaign to tomorrow’s, and failing to pay close attention to what is going on either in the legislature or in the courts (until the capitalist media picks it up for them).

To counter these tactics what is needed is workers’ media and a communist political party which can pay attention - and desist from being distracted.

The US Marxist Unity Group’s *Light and Air* has recently launched a good initiative: a quarterly analysis of the progress of legislation through Congress.¹⁴ Britain lacks any equivalent, in spite of the significant size of left groups and the significant number of leftwing lawyers. Neither the USA nor Britain has any leftwing lawyers tracking what the courts get up to when no-one is looking carefully.

To free up the resource to do these jobs, and thereby be able to keep paying attention, we need to unify our forces on a principled basis, with a view to *political* action, rather than merely to tail-ending what happens to be currently fashionable ●

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REVIEW

War is always hell

Christopher Nolan (writer and director) *The Odyssey* 2026, general release



Odysseus on his odyssey: tied to the mast

Even before Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* was released, YouTube was full of attacks on the film as a desecration of Homer's ancient epic poem, accusing it of lack of fidelity to both the text and the period. But adaptation, like translation, is always an interpretation.

The whole situation began with Helen, whose departure from her Greek husband provoked a war against the city of Troy. Helen "followed" the Trojan Paris, as Homer puts it, indicating a voluntary relationship - other classical writers (Hesiod, Herodotos) called it an abduction. Whatever it was, it was taken as an insult by the Achaeans (the Greeks) and they set out to punish the culprit and his city. In the movie, control of trade routes is also mentioned as a motive.

The events of the poem occur after the defeat of Troy and an Achaean named Odysseus sets off home for the island where he was chief, accompanied by a crew of his fellow warriors. Stories are about characters who need something, whether they know it or not - to grow up, to form a stable relationship, to defeat a monster. Odysseus needs to reach home.

Nolan has said his inspiration was partly a translation of the Greek text by Emily Wilson.¹ Wilson believes that if you do a translation it should not be a repetition of a previous version: "Many retranslations of ancient texts," she writes, "do not have good reasons to exist, because they offer very little that differs from what came before."² One change Wilson made in *The Odysseus* was to replace a Victorian euphemism by using the word "slave" for the servants. This was historical accuracy, if not literal fidelity (classic texts have always been a site for disagreement over accuracy and political appropriation).

In his recent book, *The white pedestal*, Curtis Dozier shows that identifying the Greeks as westerners fighting foes from the east (the mythic Troy has been located in Turkey) did not start with neo-fascist websites: "The interpretations of the past that, white nationalists argue, support their policies are very often traditional interpretations."³ That is, from 18th

and 19th century depictions. So what does Nolan make of it? In a film of two hours and 50 minutes, he includes most of the story. Even at this length he keeps you interested by varying the rhythm, cutting between characters (like Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, who goes looking for his father) and alternating between rowdy sequences and dialogue.

Now, despite the social media attacks on the casting of Lupita Nyong'o as Helen, even if the poem never mentions whether she is a natural blonde, Nolan's approach is more than one of DEI casting: he introduces psychology. Not deep though - no time for that: an anguished face suffices.

If the film has one idea, it is the weariness of Odysseus with war and loss, whether that be the destruction of Troy or losing his crew in the effort to reach home. In other films of his Nolan has a thing for heroes who realise how responsible they are for conflicts - Oppenheimer for the nuclear age, Batman for the trouble that defeating the Joker entails. Here Nolan not so much rejects the requirement to fight (it is still an adventure, after all): rather he focuses on the trauma of the warrior(s), not the triumph over monsters.

For this emphasis, Nolan and Hollywood have been accused of having an "agenda" which they have forced on the audience. But how many spectators now accept screen stories where heroes have the jaunty demeanour of an Errol Flynn or the dogged charm of a Sean Connery? Even the James Bond franchise reached a stage where the lead played by Daniel Craig suffered grief and a lonely defensiveness. Many in the audience may well accept this as a hero for our times, not a character of the sort their grandparents expected. Consequently, in Nolan's movie, Matt Damon plays Odysseus as often expressing his pain over how many of his lost crew he does not have time to bury with honours, survival being more important.

Other characters in the film are more traditionally good or bad, proud or weak. Robert Pattinson, for example, plays Antinous, the leading 'suitor', who is overstaying

at Odysseus's home. He is a familiar bad guy - arrogant, presumptuous (in wooing Odysseus's wife, Penelope) and in the end cowardly, hiding behind a pillar, while giving orders to others who are fighting. He is like so many of the emperors in 1950s epic films (such as *Demetrius and the gladiators*): not so much proud as pathetic, judged beside the courage of the hero. The more recent *Gladiator* (2000) presented the emperor Commodus as a boyish schemer. Just to make sure: the actual Commodus liked to go into the arena as a fake gladiator himself, garbed in lion skin like Hercules, and shoot giraffes with poisoned arrows.

On the other hand, Penelope, played by Anne Hathaway, is someone who wants to show how loyal she is to her husband, gone 20 years, but also wishes to be treated like a queen, trad wife and boss lady. As to other *Odyssey* women, Samantha Morton plays Circe, the woman of magic who justifies turning the crew into pigs by telling Odysseus that men *are* pigs. He accepts this, but, unlike in the poem, does not stay with her for a year.

My favourite performance here was that of Himesh Patel as Eurylochus, Odysseus's second-in-command, who criticises his captain for rashness. We know he is going to die, after Odysseus has been told so by the ghosts of dead heroes, which Odysseus conceals from him. Perhaps this is one of the details which is downplayed, so as not to shake our faith in the commander.

In their travels the crew meet many creatures, from robot-like giants to singing mermaids, about which Nolan is very proud of not using any computer-generated imagery. One of the best sequences is the confrontation with the cannibal, Cyclops, played by Broadway and TV clown Bill Irwin, with slow, impressive movement and very effective make-up.

The Odyssey is in fact closer to tragedy than epic, and suits our world of 'war is hell'. These days we question the need of leaders to reach goals, regardless of how many people are sacrificed. Nolan's direction does not mess up the tale so much as emphasise certain emotions, while leaving bits of the poem out. These selections are maybe there for a shorter duration, but also to avoid presenting Odysseus

as the toxic male, which even the most bloodthirsty spectators might condemn. He is a war leader we can feel sorry for.

Late in the film though, Odysseus loses his psychological exhaustion and rediscovers killing (as the poem's story requires). He takes out those men, "the suitors", who are staying in his palace. He may have been sensitive about striking Trojans, but he observes what is referred to more than once as "Zeus's law". This condemns those who behave improperly as guests. Nolan might well have wished to change the ending too, but that would have meant a field day for those attacking his interpretation. So he is stuck with Odysseus, the hero, who ferociously cleanses his home of usurpers.

Whatever interpretation an adaptation gives a work, it can still be faithful to all kinds of things from shoe buckles to ship design. But a good historical film can be faithful too, in that, while bringing the characters close to us, it can still acknowledge the past's "strangeness" (Wilson) and the particularity of its context, in films like David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), James Ivory's *Jefferson in Paris* (1995) or Ken Loach's *Land and freedom* (1995).

Every adaptation is a commentary on the past, as well as reflecting our modern concerns ●

Mike Belbin

Notes

1. E Wilson *The Odyssey* New York 2017.
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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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Fans can gain control of clubs

Not all about profit

Football attracts millions of devoted followers. Yet, when it comes to the bottom line, many clubs show regular losses. Despite that, narrow-minded left commentators regularly complain that money and the pursuit of profit is ruining the beautiful game. It is more complex than that, writes **Carl Collins**

Roman Abramovich emerged onto the global stage when he purchased Chelsea Football Club for £140 million in 2003. Starting off selling plastic toys from a market stall in Moscow, he made his money through the scams, rigged auctions and outright robbery perpetuated by the emerging capitalist class of Boris Yeltsin's Russia. By the mid-1990s he was a billionaire and one of the so-called oligarchs.

With Abramovich's almost unlimited money available, the club spent over £2 billion on players and £90 million on managers.¹ Chelsea went on to win five league titles, five FA Cups, not to mention two Champions Leagues and two Europa League titles.

However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UK government sanctioned him because of his "close relationship" with Vladimir Putin. Abramovich failed a "stewardship and care" test and was forced to sell his 100% share in the club in 2022 for £2.5 billion. He did not receive a penny - it was even suggested that a £1.6 billion loan owed to him as part of the overall sale should be given to a "charitable foundation".² Interest on the funds from that sale of Chelsea have reached £175 million, with the company holding the still frozen funds, Fordstam, being described as "the most profitable football-related business in the world" (a tongue-in-cheek reference to the lack of profitability among high-spending football clubs).³

Modern professional football clubs operate with enormous debts and losses, requiring sustained injections of money, often via shadowy networks of offshore companies and loans (such as those Abramovich apparently used). In the 2024-25 season, the 20 English Premier League clubs recorded combined pre-tax losses of £948 million.⁴

This financial model should challenge the lazy assumption - held by many leftwing commentators - that wealthy owners seek *nothing* but profit. However, the financial relationship between owner and club cannot be reduced to such a crass calculation of purchase, production and profitable sale. That approach ignores fixes on exchange-value and ignores use-value.

For some owners, clubs have a use-value that is entirely subjective. Ownership of a globally recognised sporting institution like Chelsea can be a 'trophy asset', purchased to boost prestige, ego and symbolic status. It can elevate the already mega-rich into the role of an extraordinarily popular saviour, and not only for season ticket fans and hardcore followers.

Abramovich reportedly had a shortlist of clubs to purchase, settling on Chelsea due to its location in the capital. So he bought the club almost casually, at a whim. Nonetheless,

he was hugely popular amongst supporters ... especially when the silverware started to come in. Equally, buying a football team can bring global recognition and therefore enhanced influence (ie, Manchester City's Sheikh Mansour and his Abu Dhabi-based Newton Investment and Development fund). That is commonly called 'soft power' or 'sportswashing.' Needless to say, Abu Dhabi is a hereditary absolute monarchy where all executive, legislative and judicial power is vested in his highness, the sheik.

Straightjacket

A Marxist friend once offered an analogy for the failure of mainstream economists to foresee the 2008 crisis. Imagine a conventional economist standing on a beach, looking inland. The birds are tweeting, the sand is golden, the grass is green. All appears well. But approaching from behind is a huge tidal wave.

The point is not that the economists see nothing: they see plenty. The problem is that their conceptual framework determines what counts as significant. They look in the direction their model tells them to, while everything outside it becomes irrelevant, unknowable or simply invisible.

Crude economic reductionism makes a similar mistake when applied to football. Spend some time around almost any British football ground before kick-off and you encounter frying onions, raucous chants, pint glasses clinking, grandparents guiding grandchildren through turnstiles, friends renewing relationships through match-day rituals. Laughter, discussion and belonging. Football remains a living culture with deep historical roots.

Yet, viewed through a purely economic lens, the people disappear. Grandparents and grandchildren become just consumers; songs become monetisable entertainment; friendship, identity and memory become invisible. What remains are commodities, wages, ticket prices, ownership structures and revenue streams. The economic forms obscure the social reality. The problem is not that crass economic reductionism sees nothing: it just becomes incapable of seeing everything.

Too many so-called Marxists can commit the same error. Still looking inland (albeit from an opposite ideological viewpoint), they begin with the conclusion that capitalism is the fundamental problem and work backwards. Ownership, profit, exploitation and commodification become exclusive categories, through which everything else is interpreted. The economic structure is real, but becomes so dominant that culture and society disappear. They miss the potential tidal wave.

The left in Britain commonly argues that football was once a



Roman Abramovich

working class game, but capitalism has turned it into a business; billionaires commodified it. Hence, supporters became customers; prices became exploitative and television and sponsorship corrupts everything. The solution is usually 'democratic ownership'. There is truth in each of these *individual* propositions, but the problem is the philistine assumptions *connecting* them: it is, in Marxist terms, crass economism. By collapsing culture, psychology and identity into pure pounds-and-pence economics, they misunderstand working class life.

Economistic left

Three examples: John Reid's *Reclaim the game*,⁵ Peter Taaffe's 'Is capitalism killing football?'⁶ and the *Socialist Worker*'s 'Flagging up a problem with football'.⁷ Each identifies real features of football under capitalism, but each leaves something important out.

Reid is a member of the Socialist Party in England and Wales. His take on football is dominated by *exchange-value* - cost, prices, profits and ownership. He largely forgets football's *use-value* for fans (and some owners). Taaffe - former SPEW gensec - exposes the exploitation of earlier generations of footballers, from maximum wages to restrictions on changing clubs. But, though top-flight players are nowadays multimillionaires, he argues that modern players have "lost something" - namely their identification with the communities they came from. A case of 'you have nothing to lose but your Bentleys, mansions and gorgeous wives and girlfriends'.

The SWP, whilst identifying genuine conflicts between owners, players and supporters, reduces football's politics to 'capital versus labour' - owners versus workers, profit versus fans. What gets neglected is the cultural terrain on which those conflicts are fought.

To move beyond this narrow straightjacket we need not only to return to some of Marxism's core concepts - value, commodity fetishism, alienation - but also to reference Antonio Gramsci's sometimes useful remarks about culture and hegemony.

When a fan purchases a football shirt, although it has exchange-value

for manufacturers, sponsors and the club, for the person who wears it its use-value can be social, emotional and historical. The shirt, scarf and match ticket often represent community, regional pride and collective belonging. To reduce this to a mere con is missing the point. Fans are not simply passive objects. They routinely make their feelings and wants known: organising walkouts over ticket prices, displaying banners against owners or boycotting sponsors. They thereby assert that the club means something that cannot be reduced to its market price.

As we have seen in recent seasons, the modern transfer market offers another stable example of crude economics. Individual players are quantified: 'Player X is worth £X million' - as though that price were an intrinsic property of the person. Marx's concept of commodity fetishism helps explain what is concealed. The price represents a network of social labour and institutions: clubs, scouts, coaches, broadcasters, agents and governing bodies, but also families, communities, teachers and volunteers who developed a player from childhood. Modern football academies systematically take thousands of predominantly working class children and subject them to physical and psychological training and discipline in the hope of producing professional labour-power.⁸ When one emerges as the 'finished product', the collective labour behind them - and the 99% discarded along the way - disappear behind the price tag.

The transfer fee therefore does more than turn a footballer into a financial asset: it obscures the human labour and social relations which created that commodity.

Perhaps more controversial is applying the label 'working class' to elite footballers. Marx's approach is not simply confined to those on low wages: it concerns workers' lack of control over their labour and what it produces. Perhaps a footballer can therefore be classified as working class despite earning £150,000 a week. Their creativity and the emotional experience of the game become commodities packaged and sold by clubs, broadcasters and sponsors. Their labour is shaped by data, tactical systems (managers), fitness and performance demands, and travel schedules. The modern football calendar, expanded to generate greater revenues, means more fixtures, longer journeys and television-driven kick-off times.

On the other hand, a few players become marketable brands in their own right. The likes of Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Kylian Mbappé and Erling Haaland bank many millions through highly lucrative sponsorship deals and marketing products on their own platforms. They are capitalists in their own right. The idea that they belong to the same class

as the low paid club staff (stewards, caterers, etc) and that all they are is just workers selling their labour-power within the same enterprise is questionable to say the least.

Ownership

The wider problem for organisations like SPEW and the SWP is that their view of the working class is one dimensional: basically wages, hours and conditions. But there is more to life than being a wage-slave for seven or eight hours a day. Outside the workplace workers have the chance to be free and assert themselves as human beings (albeit tightly confined by relative poverty and lack of social control).

This is where football comes in. On the one hand, owners and governing bodies attempt to establish a 'common sense' when it comes to setting ticket prices, deciding on transfer sales and the hiring and firing of managers. But because supporters are not just passive consumers, they make their feelings known - and in no uncertain terms - when it comes to failing managers, unsuccessful strikers and owners who are deemed greedy, arrogant and out-of-touch. The battle over what a football club means is therefore a small but not insignificant war over culture, identity and, potentially, control.

Economics is not irrelevant. We are in favour of fan ownership, caps on ticket prices and easy access. Corporate and royal boxes are certainly an affront to any democrat.

Of course, it is easy to over-egg what can be achieved under capitalism. For most fans what matters above all is the success of *their* team. That is why many positively welcome 'super benefactors' such as Sheikh Mansour (Manchester City), Yasir Al-Rumayyan (Newcastle United) and Roman Abramovich (Chelsea). They get joy, self-fulfilment and bask in the glory of what huge wealth can buy.

That said, for all their limitations, it is worth noting that FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Athletic Bilbao, Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund operate under fan-owned or member-controlled systems - the socio model (Spain) and the 50+1 rule (Germany). Highly successful clubs all. Their ownership models can be copied, adapted, developed and extended •

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