

weekly worker



**Charles Spencer v Charles Windsor:
their family feud will not open the
gates to the democratic red republic**

- Letters and debate
- Reform's mega-donors
- International call
- CPGB aggregate

No 1602 September 24 2026

Towards a mass Communist Party

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Elif Eralp and Die Linke's Berlin win

Probabilities & Possibilities

LETTERS



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

Debater tricks

Duncan Chapel's 'Fabricating views', largely though not entirely, consists of student debating society tricks to evade my arguments without actually addressing them (Letters, September 17).

It is convenient to work backwards, because the point of my comments on comrade Chapel's arguments in my article, 'New proscriptions for old' (April 30), to which his letter responds, was mainly about issues he treats at the end of his letter.

In comrade Chapel's original post he charged the CPGB with going into Left Unity with a preconceived intention of creating a front organisation: "The Communist Platform in Left Unity had its own press, its own organisation, its own membership obligations: flat-packed and ready for deployment into any broad formation that would have it." I responded that in Left Unity we had intended to work together with the Socialist Platform, but split with them over the undemocratic conduct of the founding meeting (and in particular the veto attributed to the silent non-attenders), and hence created Communist Platform.

Comrade Chapel responds that this is all irrelevant, because "Those are different bodies and different years". This is merely dishonest. The events are all reported in this paper and available there. And in any case, since the formation of Communist Platform was *after* our participation in Socialist Platform, his version of the story is still inconsistent with his original charge. Comrade Chapel should just admit that he got the facts wrong in his original post and that the "flat-pack" charge was unfounded.

On Anti-Capitalist Resistance and Scotland, I am happy to be corrected by being told that Socialist Resistance (or perhaps Socialist Outlook?) decided not to organise in Scotland before the formation of ACR. Since ACR is linked to the Fourth International, and comrade Chapel's Substack is *largely* committed to reprinting 1970s Mandelite material, I think I am justified in treating ACR as the latest iteration of the section of the Fourth International of which I was a member when it was the International Socialist Group (which did organise in Scotland).

I do think that separate organisation in Scotland is an example of Scots nationalism, even if comrade Chapel does not want to think so: I don't think there is any other possible justification for separate workers' organisations facing a common capitalist state. The *date* at which the Mandelites separated organisation in Scotland (which comrade Chapel doesn't tell us) is a diversion from this political point.

On Podemos, it is possible that comrade Chapel has misunderstood me. I wrote that "Duncan Chapel defends Mandelism, which ostensibly permits factions (usually called 'tendencies'), but subject to the continued control of the apparatus. He is involved in a contradiction here, since he opposes the Podemos model." He interprets this as being "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."

My point, however, was precisely that this view involved comrade Chapel in a contradiction. For two reasons. Firstly because *Mandelite* organisational practice "permits [factions] on paper, while making it impossible for them to [actually win]". Witness, most recently, the split of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, in which the Mandelites split to prevent factionalism (the Alliance for Workers' Liberty published documents on this in an article entitled 'A harmful split in the French far left' (December 12 2022)). There are many older examples.

Secondly, comrade Chapel *claims* to advocate "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", and also to be "against apparatus control of factions", the reality is that you can only prevent "turning revolutionary parties into permanent battlegrounds" by apparatus control of factions.

Comrade Chapel says that "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." In my opinion Trotsky was just plain wrong on this. As someone commented on Reddit not that long ago, "The Bolsheviks were a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. Get over it". The Bolsheviks were a *public* faction of the RSDLP between 1903 and 1917, for 14 years. How long factions need to last depends on the nature of the political differences involved.

If you refuse to accept that there will be long-term factional struggles, you are forced either to self-silence or 'tone down' for the sake of unity until this becomes utterly untenable (the Mandelites' policy in a series of broad front projects) or to split (the Mandelites' approach in the NPA split, and other cases). If the Bolsheviks had pursued this policy they would either have self-silenced, or created a sect like the DeLeonist Socialist Labour Parties (and the modern far left).

Finally, I wrote that comrade Chapel, "along with the Mandelite majority, seeks 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). In this respect, Chapel's politics are those of Max Shachtman." Comrade Chapel replies that "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."

Comrade Chapel writes this in a week in which the death in a road accident of a British army officer on active service in Ukraine (probably in a support or training role) was reported. Ukraine is dependent on military supplies and subsidies from European Nato countries. The UK is a co-belligerent on the Ukrainian side in this war, and so are the US and European Nato

countries. For comrade Chapel to deny that he, and ACR, are *supporting the British capitalist state in war*, because they issue a platonic call for the dissolution of Nato, is like Entente social-chauvinists in 1914-18 saying that they called for the dissolution of the Entente, but it remained necessary to defend the self-determination of Serbia and Belgium. It is at best self-deception.

Mike Macnair
Oxford

Vote George

No, the state pension was not just supposed to top up private provision, as if occupational and private pensions had been the norm in 1918 or in 1946. Life expectancy in 1946 is irrelevant to the present debate, since what were then the recent figures had been warped by World War II.

£13,000 per annum is a pitiful pension by international standards - we already pay it later than many other countries, and you will soon have to wait until beyond average male life expectancy. Why is dignity in retirement unaffordable only here? The triple lock puts money in the pockets of the people who spend it, thereby injecting it into the consumer economy, and thus employing the young. Yet, if it takes you over the income tax threshold, then you should have to pay tax on it until that threshold has been increased for everyone.

It is for the present and future wars that we have moved in half a decade from staying at home to protect our elders, to wishing them dead through what could logically be nothing less than the abolition of the state pension. The pro-war Green Party wants only a double lock, with the 2.5% rule abolished. On behalf of the whole country, as is always integral to any parliamentary election, Holborn and St Pancras should return George Galloway of the Workers Party of Britain.

David Lindsay
Lancaster

WPB bigotry

The Workers Party of Britain is absolutely right that we need a socialist voice in the Holborn and St Pancras by-election against all the mainstream parties, including Labour and the Greens. On the Greens in particular, the WPB has correctly argued that this is a liberal outfit, supporting the war in Ukraine and the EU, and not an alternative for the working class, who despise Labour.

However, the WPB cannot be a socialist and working class voice so long as its campaign makes crass and bigoted attacks on trans people. Such positions echo the politics of reactionaries and enemies of socialism, while totally undermining the Workers Party's challenge to Labour and the Greens. The precondition for us and any other decent socialists to support the WPB in Holborn and St Pancras must be an end to this pandering to rightwing reaction.

It is one thing for someone to hold socially conservative views and disagree with gender theories. But it is quite another for a self-proclaimed socialist to seek political capital by constantly attacking trans people, one of the most marginalised groups in Britain and (together with Muslims) the favourite target of reactionaries. Such politics only position the Workers Party as a transmission belt for political reaction, which is ultimately directed against

Muslims, women, LGBTQ+ people and the working class.

The goal of socialists must be to unite the working class against the ruling class. But the precondition for this is to stand *in defence of all oppressed groups*. Just as we defend Muslims and oppose attacks against their right to wear religious symbols, so must we defend the right of trans people to live their lives the way they want.

We say to the Workers Party: If you agree to cease making cheap political capital on the backs of trans people, we would be happy to support you in your campaign.

Spartacist League
email

Dubious nats

With depressing predictability, the antics of nationalist politicians (not to mention Donald Trump) have resulted in the peoples of the British Isles squabbling fruitlessly amongst themselves. In contention are questions like 'Was medieval Wales colonised?' and 'Did Scotland join the union willingly in 1707?' - questions which socialists should see as being of extremely dubious importance.

In 1707, if every Scot up and down the country had unanimously declared their desire for perpetual union with England, would that mean that future Scots had to shut up about independence for ever more? Of course not. By a similar token, what would it matter even if Scotland had been subject to a bloody conquest in that same year? All that matters is how things stand in the present.

Our thinking should not be beholden to nationalist grudges, bourgeois legal technicalities or the legitimacy of kings. Historical grievances only matter to people whose minds have been captured by regressive nationalist thinking. There are people who have begun to personally identify with some mythical idea of a nation, so that historical crimes against that nation are experienced in the present as attacks on the self. For such people, things like Oliver Cromwell's 1651 massacre in Dundee are

extremely important, because, in their minds, they exist as part of an organic entity with the victims. It is as if part of their own self was slaughtered on those cold streets centuries ago. This is obviously nonsense. Such thinking obscures present material reality behind a story about the past which is at once both fantastical and trivial, as well as being a hindrance to the cause of socialism.

More generally, the job of socialists is not and cannot be to adjudicate age-old national beefs. Every population on Earth came to be where they are by displacing or killing some long-lost predecessor. We are all of us descended from rapists, murderers, genocide perpetrators, colonisers and thieves. We have also all had ancestors who were murdered, raped and stolen from. Everyone's hands are bloody and everyone has been bloodied at the hands of others. There is simply no rectifying this, no way of undoing what has been done, no way of putting things right that will not generate yet more injustices and more grievances for the future. Ongoing crimes, such as Israel's colonisation of Palestine, must, of course, be stopped. But there is no way of turning the clock back on the distant past without doing even more wrong to the people of the present. For example, what US colonisers did to indigenous people was appalling, but even worse would be trying to make up for it by displacing tens of millions of modern Americans.

To reiterate, what is really important about these nationalist debates is what they mean in the present - and specifically for the cause of socialism. In understanding this, a big clue has been given to us by Donald Trump. Why would Trump take this moment to begin agitating for the breakup of the UK? On one level, it can be seen as one of his typical negotiating ploys - an attempt to pile pressure onto a 'partner', which has been marginally less compliant recently than usual (eg, over Iran and Israel). But, beyond this, it represents a geopolitical repositioning at a time

Fighting fund

Principled unity

As I write, there are exactly seven days to go before the end of the month, but, despite some excellent donations over the last seven days, we still need £790 to reach our monthly £2,750 target.

Let's start with what we've just received. Firstly, comrades SK and PM both came up with their usual *three-figure* monthly contributions, while comrades MM (£75), GB (£25), DR (£20), JL and TT (£10 each) also contributed via standing order or one-off bank transfer. Finally, comrade KS made his usual £50 donation via PayPal, taking our total for the week up to £746, and the running total for September up to £1,960.

But now we have to outdo the week just gone to make sure we get there by September 30. Can you help us? The *Weekly Worker* depends on your support, especially as we have to face printing and postage prices that continue to soar. We must attain that much-needed £2,750 each and every month. Please donate what you can in whatever way you

choose - preferably bank transfer or PayPal, as there's no delay in receiving your contribution that way.

Let me conclude by quoting comrade LK, who had this to say about last Thursday's edition of this paper: "What a fantastic letters column this week! It's genuine, serious debate, with loads of comrades exchanging ideas about where we need to go."

That's right - it's what the *Weekly Worker* is committed to: "genuine, serious debate"! How else can we Marxists unite within a single, principled party, when right now the left is divided into numerous 'do it yourself' sects?!

Help us keep that debate going and - who knows? - one day we'll actually achieve the unity we need! ●

Robbie Rix

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when US and UK interests are becoming less and less aligned.

The US is pivoting towards Asia for its struggle against the Chinese. As such, Europe’s relative importance to it is diminishing. The UK’s usefulness as a military ally has long been declining, along with the country itself, and there is now a serious question as to what it could actually bring to American efforts in the far east. Meanwhile, relations on the European end are being strained by the huge flows of refugees generated by American military adventurism, whilst people in European countries are increasingly intolerant of the US’s underwriting of Israeli atrocities. In this new world, a Balkanised Britain may well suit the US. If you have fewer resources with which to dominate an increasingly recalcitrant Europe, it helps to keep it in as weakened and fractured a state as possible.

It is ironic how a key grievance for many Scottish nationalists is the UK’s exit from the EU, given that Scottish independence would replicate many of the same problems. One thing that Brexit demonstrated is how winning formal political freedoms is largely irrelevant if you aren’t in a position to exercise them. Obviously, immigration was a big factor for many people who voted to leave. In theory, Brexit was meant to free the UK to unilaterally reduce immigration, as it was no longer obligated to open its doors to the rest of Europe. In practice, the decade following the vote has seen significantly more immigration than the decade before. Why? Because the UK now relies on continually expanding its tax base via immigration in order to avoid fiscal catastrophe, a dynamic which infamously came to a head in the aftermath of Covid under Boris Johnson.

In essence, the formal freedoms the UK ‘won’ through Brexit were

overcome by the demands of maintaining British capitalism, and there is little reason to think the same pressures wouldn’t undermine an independent Scotland. Indeed, such a Scotland would likely be in an even worse position to resist the pressures of international capital. What James Connolly said about Ireland has its equivalent here: “If you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain.”

Kieran Jeffs
 email

Absurd YP

For more than a year, a number of publications - including *Weekly Worker* and *The Left Lane*, which I edit - have debated Your Party’s difficulties and, to be charitable, its failure to thrive. A wide range of theories and evidence have appeared. These have included lack of transparency, ‘top-downism’, a replay of Labourism, strategical incoherence, careerism, no campaigning, and so on.

Over the weekend of September 12-13, however, at a major political and cultural festival attended by +17,000 activists in the seaside city of Ostend, Belgium, I saw new evidence of its essential (and depressing) absurdity as an organisation. The occasion was the annual extravaganza called ManiFiesta, put on since 2009 by the Workers’ Party of Belgium (PTB). I note that in last week’s *Weekly Worker* in a letter titled ‘Digital Peronism’, political theorist Anton Jäger mentioned that “uniquely among Belgian and European parties, the PTB has had measurable success in growing its base in the past years” (though he made some criticisms as well).

I was in Ostend to assess, first-hand, how the PTB functioned and campaigned as a party and report

back to my readers. Most of the +2,500-word piece did that. But then I discovered the Your Party ‘road show’ was in town and dropped in to a session. YP leader Jeremy Corbyn was one of more than 250 speakers from around the globe. He’s a perennial.

But, to my surprise, YP chair Jenn Forbes - Corbyn selected her for the post - was in the large audience of more than 500 activists in a session on “optimism and pessimism” in the current conjuncture. Soon after Corbyn announced her presence as a panel member, Forbes intervened from the floor. My piece on the conference, titled ‘Pride, optimism - front and centre at the Workers Party of Belgium festival’ (theleftlane2024.substack.com), reported her remarks.

Just like Corbyn, Forbes astoundingly did not say a single word about the progress - or lack thereof - made by YP in the past 12 months. Quoting the article: “... rather [she] told the large audience of her closeness to Corbyn. She recalled with pride ‘a compliment’ he had made during the time of the World Cup tournament about her political strengths as YP chair. Jeremy ‘told me I have shown the same defensive abilities as the Italian team,’ Forbes said to the ManiFiesta crowd.” Only later did I realise that Italy never even made it to this year’s World Cup.

The article concluded with a few facts, about which the only people in the large hall who would know were Corbyn, Forbes and I: “Forbes returns to England after losing a summertime vote of no confidence in her as chair, facing an executive committee that has been plagued by multiple resignations, and as the chair of a party that has not released its verified membership figures for more than nine months.”

I am still puzzled how this bizarre speech fits into a wider critique of Your Party. Can anyone assist?

Alan Story
The Left Lane

YP expulsion

Chris Williamson was until recently a dual member of Your Party and the Workers Party and a supporter of Republic Your Party. He has now been expelled from Your Party pending appeal and has resigned from the Workers Party.

Republic YP continues to support left unity and dual membership and can confirm that Chris remains a supporter of ours. He is continuing his appeal against expulsion and seeks support from all Your Party members.

Republic YP
 email

More waffle

Looking at Tam Dean Burn’s barrage balloon of waffle (Letters, September 17) in response to my letter (September 10), let me spell it out for him that my tone and manner of writing are no concern of his. You write how you want and I’ll write how I see fit. If you don’t like it, comrade, ignore it.

The fundamental issue is this: can we use older forms (such as Brecht’s learning plays) today without an accompanying deep critique of history and theory? I think this has to remain an open question that would be played out in the concrete, although never definitively solved. Burn’s answer, on the other hand, is a naive one. As he told me in an interview a few years back, things like Brecht’s learning plays and other material he revived in the Workers’ Theatre

Movement redux of the 1980s are valid, period.

Rather than this revivalist approach being the object of critique, Burn fills in this bare outline with the heavily crayoned smears of his own subjective taste for certain people and things. This subjective approach *will not work* in creating any kind of cultural movement. For every Darko Suvin poetry fan I’ll find you 20 who think it’s the worst type of shite. Such attempts to universalise subjective judgments are worse than useless, whereas the road of critique at least gives the movement a chance to come together beyond the ‘I like/she hates’ of everyday banality.

Readers of Burn’s letter will see, if you can wade through it, that this is an individual who does not like his cultural loved ones to be criticised. I see ex-Socialist Workers Party member Esther Leslie is the latest to be lit up in the bathetic glow of Burn’s reverence. It reminds me of an exchange back in this journal in 2008, when Burn got incredibly upset because I wouldn’t simply agree with the injunction that folk artist Ewan MacColl was one of the greatest artists that Britain had produced. My crime was picking up on the critical approach that historian Ben Harker had employed in his biography. Now, I am a fan of Ewan MacColl’s and Peggy Seeger’s music, as it happens, but to merely parade my subjective taste and shout ‘Great, great, great!’ is useless, and instantly alienates people sceptical about such art. Critique and understanding, on the other hand, begin to make things relatable; putting things on a pedestal alienates them and can only result in a ‘groovy gang’ method of clique-building.

Finally, can I assure readers that I think acting is the most noble of the arts. Not only have I seen the film *Carry on behind* five times: I am putting the finishing touches to a Christmas extravaganza, provisionally entitled *Lawrence’s gravy boat of love*.

I was thinking of casting Burn as one of the gravy granules. I can tell him he failed the audition. Hey-ho.
Lawrence Parker
 London

Fascist fight

I read with admiration the article by our Australian comrade of the need for a militia to fight for socialism and against fascism (‘A demand of enduring relevance’ September 17). Fascist militias exist already in Britain. The loyalists in the north of Ireland pre-exist the emerging blackshirts, visible recently in Dover and Portsmouth.

In Athens we had a valid slogan: “A good fascist is a dead fascist.” Here in Britain we debate refusing platforms to fascists: the struggle

has moved on and the time for debate is over. Battle must ensue. The general strike in Dublin in 1913 required protection for striking workers: the Irish Citizen Army emerged, which fought in 1916 and later. Militias were crucial in the early struggle against Franco in Spain.

The Mensheviks in the Labour Party will not defeat fascism. Keir Starmer was a proto-fascist (Benito Mussolini’s political journey began in the Socialist Party). No, the current Labour Party is full of corrupt carpet-baggers with zero connection with the poor and the workers of Britain.

So let’s begin building a militia here in England. My organisation, Bolshevik Tendency, has voted unanimously for this position. La France Insoumise has such a militia and their elimination of a fascist in Marseille made the fascists think: ‘Will I give my life for fascism?’

Let’s make the fascist vermin think again in Britain. For a workers’ militia!

K Sean
 Bolshevik Tendency

Anti-Zionist ‘lie’

Yassamine Mather writes: “He [Ed Miliband] 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-Israeli war)” (‘Demand the whole package’ September 17).

Eh ... No! All an alert reader has to do is ask the question, ‘Is Nachshonim within the area suggested by the UN partition plan to the Jewish state?’ Look it up on Google, Grok, ChatGPT, Gemini or in any history book: the answer is yes and I am well persuaded that Yassamine Mather knows this.

But she can comfortably lie, knowing that her tale meets the *Zeitgeist* of the anti-Israel stream - unless, of course, any and all land held by Israel is ‘illegal’.

John Davidson
 email

Anti-Zionist truth

Yassamine Mather is, err, not guilty of lying.

This is what Gemini has to say: Kibbutz Nachshonim was established on land seized during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Founded in 1949 by Egyptian Jewish immigrants and refugees, the kibbutz was built near the borders of the depopulated Palestinian village of Majdal Yaba (also known as Majdal al-Sadiq).

While the residential core of the kibbutz sits just south of the official village footprint, its agricultural fields and surrounding cultivated valley utilised fertile land that had belonged to Palestinian villagers before they were displaced during the 1948 conflict.

Editors
 London

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Sunday September 27 5pm

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POLITICAL FINANCE

The few and the many

Mega-donations are not the only way to gain access and influence - there is also the role played by the media, think-tanks, schools, universities and charities. We need to build our own class institutions along with the necessary finances, argues **Eddie Ford**

The staggering combined £72 million 'gift' given to Reform UK by crypto-billionaires, Ben Delo and Christopher Harborne, is the largest donation in British political history.¹

Nigel Farage said he was "honoured and humbled" by the payments, Delo himself arguing that it merely "levels the playing field" - he wants the party to be able to "spend less time trying to raise funds to compete on equal terms and more time preparing for government".² Apparently, Reform is planning to use the money to hire about 400 campaign managers in target constituencies and is now on "election footing". There is also talk of Reform TV.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Police has expanded its investigation into the party's financing. This follows the recent Channel 4 sting exposing what seems to be senior party figures seeking illegal funding from a rich American donor.

Of course, to some extent, this is indicative of a wider trend in UK politics. Parties are increasingly funded by the rich and very rich - Delo and Harborne being just the most spectacular examples. Eg, an 'exclusive' by *The Guardian* reveals that a total of £179 million has been donated by wealthy individuals since 2019.³ Hence between 2001, when donation records began, and 2018 the total donated by individuals giving more than £1 million averaged £3.9 million a year. But between 2019 and 2025, that figure rose to £13.1 million a year! The example of supermarket tycoon David Sainsbury is cited. He gave £8 million to the Liberal Democrats in November 2019, but has now returned to the Labour fold. Indeed, you find that in some years, such as 2023, almost £7 out of every £10 in reported private donations to political parties came from rich people.

The response from Gordon Brown, the former prime minister, is not untypical when it comes to the liberal establishment. 'We can stop the mega-rich buying access and influence' declared the headline of his piece in *The Guardian*.⁴ For many, it was a 'laugh out loud' moment, because it suggested that the mega-rich buying influence and access *began* with these two crypto-billionaires. Anybody who knows anything about British politics can only but find that risible. What this is all about is not stopping the mega-rich buying influence and access, as if you could ever do that. Rather, Brown and company want to stop *Reform*, not the Labour Party, or the Liberal Democrats, let alone the Tory Party.

Agendas

Nigel Farage and Richard Tice are scoffing at the notion that these crypto-billionaires are buying access or influence within the party - what an absurd idea! You cannot help but laugh out loud once again. Clearly the likes of Delo and Harborne are not going to be *deciding* the entire Reform election manifesto - they precisely want to support what they already see as laudable about Reform.

However, when it comes to some fine-tuning, that is a different matter altogether, especially given the possibility at the next general election of some sort of Reform-Tory coalition. Then these guys would certainly get on the phone to a minister and expect a friendly reception - that is exactly the point of spending £36 million each



Nigel Farage's Reform UK is awash with crypto money

- and, of course, they are not alone. There are plenty of other Chrises and Bens in the world, doing the same - that is the name of the game.

Anyway, Brown mentions in his article that last month he chaired the report of the Commission on the UK's Future, which included recommendations on reforms to election financing, particularly a donations cap - referring to Andy Burnham's "gut feeling" that it should be somewhere in the region of £500,000.⁵ Also to the fact that in September Stella Creasy and 63 other MPs backed an amendment to the Representation of the People bill - which was then withdrawn - limiting all donations annually to that figure, decreasing to £100,000 after one calendar year.

Our Gordon further looks around the world and reminds us that in December last year the UK and at least 59 other countries co-sponsored a UN resolution that urges states to consider "limitations on donations" to parties with a view to "combating corruption" - quoting figures that Canada caps donations to £930 annually, while France has a limit of £6,400 and £3,900 for presidential campaigns, and Italy's cap is £85,600.

Then Brown presents some interesting figures, showing that outside a general election period in terms of day-to-day expenses, Labour and Conservative spending has recently been around £60 million and £55 million respectively - that, of course, shoots up in a general election period. While we do not know how the figures were arrived at, we can only quote Brown: before 2024 the total spend in election years was about £87 million. But in 2024 Labour's expenditure ballooned to a record-breaking £103 million, while the Tories spent considerably less - £74 million.

Readers will be aware that the

nature of Labour's donations has changed in recent years: where it used to be the trade unions providing the bulk of Labour's finances, now that is either equalled or even surpassed by private donations. Sounding a bit like Ben Delo, Brown assures us that what Labour donors simply wanted was an even playing field, as historically the Tories have always been richer. Well, come on, Gordon - pull the other one. The idea that only Reform's mega-donors can buy access and influence, but not Labour's private donors, is bullshit. All you need to do is listen to the most transactional leading trade union general secretary of the moment, Sharon Graham, and that is exactly the point she repeatedly makes. In spite of the unions handing over their substantial donations, we have nowhere near enough influence on Labour policy. In fact, she is threatening that, unless this is changed, Unite is going to spend its money elsewhere - which surely gives the game away. The idea that money does not get you access and buy influence is simply for the birds.

Adapt

Acting righteous, Gordon Brown says there is a huge difference - and there is - between some fantastically wealthy individuals donating \$36 million and the likes of you and me donating a few quid through the trade union levy. That is true, but we are not talking about the influence of isolated trade union members. In reality, what is happening is that this influence and access is being *collectivised* and exerted by a general secretary or perhaps the union executive. Widening out the picture, we can see that through the incorporation of the trade union bureaucracy - and, of course, the incorporation of the Labour Party - the ruling class ultimately stabilises the capitalist system itself. In reality, the Labour Party was *state-loyal* right

from its very beginning - there was no golden age of socialist politics, despite what some still seem to think.

Of course, this is not a situation that the ruling class wanted - but they can learn to live with it. From their perspective, they do not want something called the Labour Party or the trade unions involved in financing an alternative party of government - or making any sort of demands upon them. They would much rather have two completely bourgeois parties.

There has not, nor ever will be, an 'even playing field' under capitalism - have you ever listened to the supposedly 'neutral' BBC? And, historically, remember the BBC bias and bile during the 1926 General Strike, or during the 1984-85 Miners' Great Strike, or any struggle that pits class against class. We all know what the BBC champions - the capitalist establishment. Nowadays it generally constitutes its *liberal* wing, as Nigel Farage constantly complains (although the capitalist right wing of the establishment is quite prepared to back Reform, Restore, etc). That may have nothing to do with directly financing of parties, but it unarguably helps to frame politics. Moreover, if you are mega-rich, you do not need to spend £36 million or whatever on directly donating - there are many other different ways to shape the agenda.

What about the 'legacy media'. Rupert Murdoch and News Corp, the *Telegraph*, the Rothermeres, GB News, etc, exert huge influence. Less overt but no less important in many respects, there are the think tanks which come out with those 'big ideas'. They are not just researching in some sort of antiseptic, neutral space: they each have their own agenda - like Bright Blue, the Adam Smith Institute, Policy Exchange and Think Labour. This is also where money can go to buy access and influence. Or

what about bog-standard schools and their government-set mind-numbing curriculum and exam-passing culture. Of course, the elite have their schools and universities too, through them our future rulers are trained to rule. Charities, for that matter, can likewise play a definite political purpose. Nor should we forget the Church of England - the liberal establishment at prayer.

Then there is the constant factor of what Karl Marx called the *dull compulsion* of everyday life. Capitalism presents itself as 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay' - equal exchange between worker and capitalist. Hey, one buys the other sells in the labour market. Marx, of course, showed that behind the 'fair deal' - and most workers instinctively know it - they are exploited. Nevertheless, there is always the apparent naturalism of capitalism.

Response

If you want a picture of a democracy that is ideal for the capitalist class, then it has to be a limited company - 'one share, one vote' (and if I've got a million shares and you've got just one, we know who wins the vote). That is the essence of 'bourgeois democracy'.

What we had in the 19th century, needless to say, was the rise of those below, ie, the working class, and the subsequent response of the ruling class. At first they used naked oppression: crude censorship, bullets, batons and sabres. But that did not work. Persuading people to choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee did. First between the Liberal and Tory parties, then between Labour and the Tories. Now, of course, it's Labour, the Tories, Lib Dems, the Greens and the SNP and Plaid nats. So more Tweedles to choose between ... but with the same result. Capitalism wins.

Communists do not propose a whole series of complex laws, or commissions, trying to work out how to prevent people from making mega political donations, or how to stop think tanks and charities from operating politically. That is a hopeless approach, akin to sticking your finger in the dyke. Rather, we need to build our *own* working class institutions, above all a mass political party that can outcompete the bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties when it comes to raising money and winning votes. We can be supremely confident here because we base ourselves on the working class: in Britain a clear, say, 70-80% majority. As Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in his famous poem 'The masque of anarchy': "We are many - they are few".

Yes, we need money. Newspapers, books, computers, TV stations, websites, offices, etc do not grow on trees. Yet, while we would not reject a few mega-donations, fundamentally what we rely on is building a mass party of millions - the many ●

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MONARCHY

Charles vs Charles

Today's royal family is a load-bearing institution of the capitalist state, its fate inseparable from the continuity of that state. It will not be brought down by this or that scandal, let alone an embittered former brother-in-law bent on revenge, says **Paul Demarty**

There is perhaps no greater worry for a king than an aggrieved earl with a controversial book to promote.

Thus it has proven with Charles Spencer's publicity campaign. Ahead of the September 22 publication date, the younger brother of Diana, the monarch's first wife, authorised a series of extracts, in the traditional way, in the *Daily Mail*. Frankly, having read them, they do not paint his royal namesake in a very good light ... allies of the king have, of course, repeatedly hit back, including with threats to sue.

Spencer says he recalls a phone call after the death of Diana with the then prince of Wales, in which he found the heir to the throne in a state of "giddy elation". He speculates that behind all this was an eagerness to marry Camilla Parker Bowles, with whom he had continued an affair throughout his marriage to Diana, and that many in the Palace squirearchy would have been "relieved" at the results of the Paris crash. He further claims that, in a later phone call, Charles Windsor remarked: "Don't worry, we'll forget her soon enough."

The strange, hyper-sentimental reaction of the British public to Diana's death made sure that was not going to happen. This seems a good moment to note that, of course, the Palace hotly denies all this (it would be *infra dig* for the king himself to comment directly, of course, never mind subject himself to a press conference). The difficulty of this matter for the monarchy, even now, may be discerned in the conspicuous charity of the official statement: "While we do not comment on books as a matter of principle, His Majesty is mindful that the pain of fraternal grief can cloud reason, affect judgment and colour memory in ways others do not recognise, even many years after such a loss."

Of course, the same is true in reverse: may not a divorcee have, ahem, complicated feelings upon the death of his ex? Could they not somehow slip out in the heat of the moment? It is the word of one Charles against another. Readers are free to take sides as they wish.

As well as his former brother-in-law, Charles has renewed hostilities with his younger son. Harry Sussex. The Sussexes have been taking a long trip over these shores, marked first of all by a brusque letter reminding the world of their diminished status as "non-working royals" (what a phrase!) and an ongoing spat over whether this status entails full security detail. (The answer, in the end, turned out to be 'yes', much to the annoyance of *Daily Mail*-poisoned would-be assassins, no doubt.) It may be remarked in passing that Spencer's account of Charles's state of mind after Diana's death rather rhymes with the one offered by Harry in his blockbuster memoir, *Spare*, which came out a few years ago.

Celebrity

All of this was unfortunate timing for the king, who had roused himself to hold a summit on AI with various worthies, industry leaders and so forth. His warnings about the possible dangers of the technology could not but be nostalgic for Brits of a certain age, who had to entertain his earlier anxieties about genetically modified crops, and the possibility that



July 1981: the marriage of Chas and Di almost instantly floundered

nanotechnology would reduce us all to a puddle of "grey goo".

One rather suspects he got the idea from the pope, who earlier this year published an encyclical on the matter in a grand event featuring a similar stable of 'stakeholders', including Anthropic co-founder Chris Olah. Charles may well have thought himself a good fit for such a role: his is, after all, similar, a matter of soft rather than hard power. His philosophical and religious obsessions are well-known. He could therefore make a pitch for British 'leadership' on AI without committing the 'efficient part' of his state to any particular action. What's not to love?

Popes

Pope Leo has an advantage over Charles, however, which is that basically nobody except seasoned Vaticanologists and Peruvians had even heard of him before his election. His past does not linger over him (although it is always possible that some mishandled abuse case will come to light). But Charles has been a celebrity for half a century or more, apart from his various titles, and in that time, he has been through the divorce of the century. We have all had to wade through his catastrophically-bizarre phone-sex lines - and, of course, the catastrophic response of the monarchy to the death of Diana is now part of British folk mythology.

It was Charles's generation who perfected the union of the cult of the monarchy with modern celebrity culture, steadily growing at least since the Victorian era - and every step of the way leavened with scandal. It was as much Edward VIII's abdication crisis (and later Nazi sympathies) that excited the public gallery as the serene progress of his niece, Elizabeth, through seven decades on the throne. Charles's infidelity and political pugnaciousness, Andrew's relentless priapism - such were always grist to

the mill (and Andrew's indiscretions have been a source of many headaches in recent years, of course).

The wholly-mediated celebrity monarchy is a strange old phenomenon. On its face, of course, it works well enough. The monarch is necessarily famous; his family are easily made so. In that respect, they fit nicely in the tabloids between pop stars and footballers. Yet the choice to go in this direction - and it was, very definitely, a *choice* - introduces friction. The monarchy, on paper, is the principle of continuity of the British state, an institution that can be *imagined*, with enough violence to the historical record, to stretch back a thousand or more years. We have only to leave out of account minor matters like the Norman conquest, the fierce dynastic struggles of the late Middle Ages that terminated in the Wars of the Roses and, of course, the Civil War and Glorious Revolution later on. Given the appalling general level of historical education, this is easily done.

Its ideal mode of existence, then, is probably summed up by the taciturn Elizabeth, patiently enduring the duties of state. By opening her family up to more 'personal' attention, by selling the royals as a family more or less like any other, the dignity of the institution was made a hostage of the press, and the explosion of tabloid scandal-sheets - especially after Rupert Murdoch's purchase of *The Sun* - ensured that the Palace would periodically find the severed finger of one of the 'hostages' in the mail.

Its present strategy is to rein things in a little. Royal duties, henceforth, would be centralised in the households of the king and the prince of Wales. Harry's and Meghan's 'non-working' status is, partly, a result of their public and acrimonious rift with the Palace, but also a well-planned piece of downsizing. Andrew's disgrace is deeply embarrassing, but likewise

convenient from a strategic point of view.

It was poor fortune that Charles and Catherine, princess of Wales, should immediately fall foul of serious health problems; but the idea is sound. A small circle of reliable people will serve the institution better in the end. It is very striking that other monarchies on the continent suffer far less in the way of scandal, and indeed barely play much of a non-ceremonial public role at all (Spain, with its own recent abdication scandal, would be an exception, and maybe Norway).

One wrinkle in it is Charles himself, as illustrated by the AI summit: he clearly fancies a more public role than merely collecting rents and sinecures, and reading government programmes off a teleprompter. But he will die off sooner or later, and I am not aware that William has ever expressed an opinion about anything. His rule is shaping up to be as boring as a bread sandwich.

Core function

The monarchy, then, slowly returns to its core function: representing the unity and continuity of the British state. It is the formal object of loyalty for both the government and 'His Majesty's most loyal opposition'; of the armed forces and civil bureaucracy. Its late difficulties cannot be unrelated to the underlying decline of Britain - crucially the loss of empire. A lack of realism about the UK's straitened condition - essentially an outpost of the United States - has poisoned the functioning of the parties of the state. The military forces, likewise, have tended to decline, and the promises of greater military spending, to be obtained at the expense of the unemployed, sick and retired, will likely be gobbled up by American arms firms rather than seriously reviving British military capacity.

Great controversies rage over the Falklands - with Argentine sabre-rattling over the South Atlantic

islands renewed probably for internal consumption but also without any objection from Washington - and the fate of the Chagos islands. In each case, a matter of *American* military projection is interpreted absurdly as one of British power. The Chagos islands only attract so much attention because the Americans lease Diego Garcia from the UK (which did the dirty work of clearing out the inhabitants). As for the Falklands, what importance can they have except as leverage for the madmen in DC over the British?

The structural role of the monarchy is possible only because of the ideological factor. It is necessary for people to *believe* in the continuity and unity and all that. The celebrity soap-opera of the last half century sat, as we said, a little athwart this goal, but it did at least build up a certain kind of parasocial loyalty in the general population. Sometimes it can backfire, as with the Diana event, but it is plain that Charles has won out over Harry. Some other source of such loyalty must be found for the institution to proceed in good order.

Roman empire

That is not to say that it will simply die off, otherwise, of its own accord. How long can a royal family truck on with only past glories to feed it? Well, the last Roman emperor was only deposed in 1453, and then only by the cannon-fire of the Ottomans. The Roman empire did not simply peter out - these things never do. However, 'official' republicanism in this country is rather prone to such wishful thinking. After the fiasco of Diana's death, many hoped that the hated institution would simply lay down and die; and, as Elizabeth aged, some thought that the British would never tolerate the pompous and cruel Charles.

In fact, despite even the scandals surrounding Andrew's friendship with Jeffrey Epstein, Charles is broadly popular. Anti-monarchy sentiment is held by a robust minority of Brits, but it is still a minority. Everything hinges on that becoming the majority, which in turn demands a political form that can actually weaken the monarchy by deliberate action.

It also demands that we have a more capacious view of republicanism. It is not merely the absence of a hereditary monarch (the papacy, after all, makes the point that it is by definition not hereditary). American rightwingers are fond of saying that America is a republic, not a democracy, but it is quite arguable that it is neither. The power of the executive is monarchical in essence; America's written constitution, as does the UK's unwritten one, defines and defends oligarchic capitalist rule, which is in substance antithetical to the freedom from domination essential to republican thought.

It falls, then, to the socialist left to be the true, or truest, republicans. The British monarchy is not, as far-left philistinism often has it, a mere 'feudal relic', still less a 'waste of money'. It is today a load-bearing institution of the capitalist state, and its fate is inseparable from the exploitation and oppression conducted by that state. Continuous propaganda against the monarchy, on a sound basis, is indispensable to the socialist project ●

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GERMANY

A chink of light

Politics are still going to the right - recent state elections show that in no uncertain terms. But then there is Berlin. Die Linke is now the biggest party. Should it compromise and form a red-red-green city administration? No, says **Carla Roberts**. Better, far better, to be a principled party of opposition

So far there have been four *Länder* elections in Germany this year. The results vary widely, often reflecting the economic situation in each state. On March 8 the Greens (Alliance 90) came first in the western state of Baden-Württemberg, with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) coming second. A few weeks later in Rhineland-Palatinate it was the CDU first and the social democrats second. In both states Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) had to settle for third place. The picture is very different in the east. Here, the AfD - generally - comes first. In Saxony-Anhalt, on September 6, it managed its best ever result, achieving 43.8% of the vote.

Politics in Germany are incredibly fluid. For now at least, the CDU's Friedrich Merz is clinging on to his job as chancellor and there are surprisingly few voices calling on him to go - perhaps the revolving door of British prime ministers, spitting out leader after leader, serves as a warning. He has thanked his partners in the federal government, the Social Democratic Party, for "sticking with the coalition". The SPD in turn would be mad to leave the coalition, which could trigger new national elections: it currently hovers at around 13% in the national polls - down from the 16.4% it achieved at the last general election in February 2025.

Die Brandmauer (the firewall) is still in place - the leaderships of all mainstream parties continue to refuse forming a government coalition with the AfD, either regionally or nationally. Only the (barely) left-populist Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht (BSW) has agreed to work with the AfD, as we previously explained.¹ But a government coalition between the two parties in Saxony-Anhalt has been ruled out by the BSW and it refuses to lend its votes to elect a regional AfD minister-president (so it *does* have principles, you see!). Yet the BSW has few qualms about quid-pro-quo deals. Ahead of the first meeting of the new state parliament on October 6, the two parties agreed to the AfD having the president and the BSW the vice-president posts.² In theory, parliament could function without electing a new minister-president. The old one from the CDU could continue, but without any real powers, while the BSW props up an AfD minority government.

A very odd situation for sure, but then, so are many things in today's Germany. The former powerhouse of Europe is in dire straits, economically and politically. *The Times* seems to believe that things might move to the left now: "There is dawning recognition on both sides of the government that its unpopular reforms to pensions, social care and healthcare may need revision."³

Actually, instead of posing left, the mainstream parties are aping the AfD - particularly when it comes to the question of migration. There is talk of abolishing dual citizenship, for example, which would affect around five million people, including many of the *Gastarbeiter* ('guest workers'), who were brought into the country to help rebuild capitalism after World War II. In the last few years, the biggest group of people granted dual citizenship have come from Syria - the



Ulrich Siegmund: fronting AfD's success in Saxony-Anhalt

so-called 'Merkel refugees'.

In 2014, former CDU chancellor Angela Merkel allowed a million Syrians affected by the civil war into the country and, unlike normal refugees, they were granted the right to work straightaway. For years, this was hailed as an unmitigated success story, which helped to supply the German economy with cheap labour. The vast majority of refugees had found fulltime work within months; crime rates were negligible; their kids started going to German schools, etc. Now, with the rise of the AfD, this episode has been entirely rebranded as a "failed experiment" and all mainstream parties are vying to get rid of the Syrians (and other 'foreign-born' people).

Unsurprisingly, this has helped to make the AfD even stronger. Why vote for a tame copy, when you can vote for the real thing? Almost anything can happen in such a fluid political period - chances are it will not be anything good though.

Berlin, which voted on September 20, looks like the odd one out - and not just because it is one of only three *Stadtstaaten* ('city-states') - the others are Hamburg and the tiny Bremen. Here in Berlin, Die Linke came first with 25.7% of the vote - an increase of 13.5% - beating the CDU into second place with 19.1% (down

9.4%) and the AfD into third with 16.3%. The Greens got 14.3%, the SPD a measly 12.1% and the BSW failed the 5% hurdle.

Federal structure

We will discuss Berlin and the many problems of Die Linke below, but it is worth taking a brief look at the federal structure of Germany, of which Andy Burnham claims to be a big fan (his book *Head north* is full of references to it). Devolution is, generally, a good idea - communists favour devolving power down to the people, so that as many decisions as possible can be made locally, on the ground.

But there can be no doubt that a certain Karl Marx would have been thoroughly opposed to today's federal republic. Of course, Marx died in 1883, long before federalism was imposed by the three western allies (USA, Great Britain and France) after World War II. During the German revolution of 1848-49, Marx and Friedrich Engels fought for a 'one and indivisible German republic'. Germany was a higgledy-piggledy patchwork of independent kingdoms, duchies and principalities ranging from the tiny - ie, Oldenburg - to the relatively big Austria and Prussia. Otto von Bismark brought about unity under Prussia with the victories over first Austria in 1866

and then France in 1870-71. However, Germany still remained a patchwork state constitutionally. The Reich was the unity of kingdoms, duchies and principalities brought about not from below, but from above.

While Marx and Engels welcomed the unity of Germany, they had no illusions in the Reich state. Nevertheless, the development of capitalism took off and, along with that, the size of the working class too. In 1875 German social democracy had united itself into a party and it grew rapidly through the snowball effect. It more than survived Bismark's anti-socialist laws and before World War I counted as the largest party in the Reichstag.

The federal structure after 1945 was not only imposed from above too, but from the outside. The federal set up was supposed to allow Germany to become strong again economically, but keep it weak politically and militarily. The two world wars were often blamed on Prussian militarism, not German capitalism.

The federal structure is a real problem - and not just because the federal representatives in the second chamber, the *Bundesrat*, often block legislation decided by the first chamber, the *Bundestag*. (This also happens in Britain, of course, where the House of Lords can act as a barrier

to proposals decided by the Commons - which is why communists generally oppose second chambers). In Germany, every aspect of education, for example, is decided by each of the 16 states, which leads to radically different outcomes. For a few years, some conservative-led states had imposed hefty student fees, while in other states education remained free. Following massive protests (often led by Die Linke), the fees were gradually abolished.

Certainly federalism allows conservative and rightwing states to pursue so-called culture wars. In Bavaria, for example, Christian crosses have to be prominently displayed in public buildings, and schools cannot use gender neutral language. Users of illegal drugs face particularly harsh treatment and the police have sweeping powers of detention, not least when it comes to migrants. All done in the name of 'state rights'. In short, the federal structure of Germany is a barrier to democracy.

Berlin

The situation in Berlin is very interesting and symbolises, in a nutshell, the many challenges and problems Die Linke faces - as does the whole international left. Some are self-made - chiefly the absolute urge to enter government (more below); others are imposed by the mainstream establishment.

"German centrists are smearing Die Linke as antisemites!" is the title of a shocked new article in the magazine, *Jacobin*. It states:

Let's be clear: The Linke, Germany's leading leftwing force, which resoundingly won Sunday's elections in Berlin, is not an anti-Semitic party. It does not have an 'anti-Semitism problem', nor is it a menace to Jews in Germany or Berlin. While some Jews in the city perceive Die Linke as a threat, this perception is fuelled by a false media narrative lacking a factual basis.⁴

One wonders if the dears from *Jacobin* have been hiding under a rock for the last 25 years. The smearing of leftwingers as 'anti-Semites' has become a standard charge, well before Jeremy Corbyn rolled over and gave in to the Zionist witch-hunters.

Since the early 2000s, it had been very seriously pursued in Germany around the Zionist-sponsored campaign, 'Anti-Deutsche'. It did not initially have quite the same mainstream impact as the anti-Corbyn campaign, but this trend ploughed on and got its hooks into Die Linke too, particularly its leadership.

For a few decades, the *Parteispitze* (leadership) could, at best, be described as soft Zionist and it always clearly took the side of Israel. This can partially be explained by Germany's history, of course. The idea that Germans carry 'collective guilt' for the holocaust is still very widespread and is taught from a young age - the fact that Hitler first murdered communists, social democrats and trade unionists opposed to the Nazis does not change the fact that everybody should feel guilt and therefore has a moral obligation to support the 'Jewish state'. This sentiment is still very

strong in Germany, even today.

But the ongoing genocide in Gaza has forced Die Linke to (slightly) move on the issue - chiefly because of pressure from the membership, which has doubled to over 120,000 in the last couple of years, with particularly many young people joining (being pro-Palestine comes more 'naturally' to them than to their older comrades). At its national party conference in Potsdam in June 2026, the party adopted a resolution that described Israel's military actions - for the first time - as "genocide". But the same resolution also explicitly emphasises "Israel's right to exist" as a "safe haven for Jews", noting its special historical and contemporary significance. The motion also peddles the illusionary 'two-state solution'.⁵ A stronger counter-motion that made no mention of Israel's right to exist was, however, defeated.

The party remains incredibly vulnerable to charges of anti-Semitism, as can be seen over the 'scandal' at an election party in the Berlin district of Neukölln. The rapper, Dahabflex, copied the British musician, Bob Vylan, and shouted "Death to the IDF!" from the stage. All hell broke loose. The media went into overdrive and various Die Linke politicians quickly obliged, declaring their outrage. Elif Eralp, the Berlin lead candidate of Die Linke (and possible city mayor) fumed: "I condemn the performance in Neukölln in the strongest possible terms. Calls for violence and the killing of people are absolutely unacceptable. I am appalled; those responsible should have intervened immediately." Tobias Schulze, who has been chair of Die Linke fraction in the Berlin senate since 2024, declared: "Anyone who questions Israel's right to exist does not belong in our party!"

This is not enough for Steffen Krach, the lead candidate for the Berlin SPD, who said that any cooperation with Die Linke must require not just "an apology from the lead candidate", but, he demands, "an unequivocal stance against anti-Semitism from *all* members of the new Die Linke parliamentary group in the house of representatives and there must be consequences". Needless to say, a number of the new members of the Berlin senate are strong supporters of the beleaguered Palestinians and this is an attempt to 'break' them, even before they take up their seats.

Another media scandal erupted over the presence of a certain Issa Remmo at not just one, but two election parties of Die Linke. Remmo is the Lebanese head of the well-known, influential Remmo-clan, whose members are repeatedly linked to spectacular organised crimes - for example, the theft of the 100-kilogram 'Big Maple Leaf' gold coin from Berlin's Bode Museum in 2017, of which other members of the clan were found guilty. Remmo himself has never been charged with any crime, though in 2018, 77 properties (!) linked to his family were seized as part of a money-laundering investigation. In an attempt to defend his dad, Firat Remmo published the text of a chat with the (elected) Berlin Die Linke politician, Ferat Koçak, in which they call each other "brother". Although Firat Remmo too has never been charged with a crime, Koçak announced that he will "rest" his mandate in the Berlin senate for now.

Having won in Berlin, Die Linke is once again on the radar of the establishment and the media: while most of their big guns are trained on the AfD, they will find the time to occasionally take potshots at Die Linke too. Bending over backwards when it comes to charges of anti-Semitism will not stop those attacks, but merely add fuel to the fire, as the

experience of the Corbyn years should have proven beyond doubt.

The biggest problem of Die Linke though is entirely self-made. The comrades in Berlin are hell-bent on governing locally, once again. Since its inception, the party has grappled repeatedly and without ever truly answering the key question: 'Without an outright majority, should it really (help to) govern?' If so, how and under what conditions - and what to do if those conditions are not met? Over the decades, various 'red lines' have been drawn, redrawn, then discarded altogether. As can be expected, the party's leaders, locally and nationally, are usually much more keen to prove how responsible they are by joining government coalitions, while the membership is more sceptical. A red-red-green coalition in Berlin is now very likely.

Elif Eralp

Elif Eralp makes no secret of her wish to become Berlin's first Turkish-German mayor. Her mum was heavily pregnant when she and Elif's father fled Turkey after the September 12 1980 military coup - as socialists and trade unionists they had been imprisoned a number of times. Her heritage will have played a large part in the party's success in a city like Berlin - as will the fact that Die Linke was the only party that did not move to the right on the question of migration. This includes the Green Party (which has already been tarnished in the eyes of many leftwingers by being the most gung-ho when it comes to propping up the Zelenskyy regime in Ukraine), as well as former communist Sahra Wagenknecht, who proposed a national referendum to reduce migration from the current 500,000 per year to just 50,000.

Of course, Die Linke does not have a particularly radical programme and does not fight for open borders, but its long-standing policy of defending the right to asylum and the rights of migrants, and its rejection of proposals from the establishment to further tighten both, have been enough to make it stand out. A quarter of the population of Berlin, almost a million people, hold foreign citizenship - half of them Turkish. Another 100,000 or so foreign-born Berliners have recently become German citizens. Berlin is a true melting pot, which partially explains the party's success.

Elif Eralp also made the right decision to concentrate on the very widespread problem of 'Mieten und Wohnen' (rents and living) in Berlin - she often wears a gold necklace with the word 'Mietendeckel' (rent cap). Rental prices in Berlin have gone through the roof, and have become a real problem for many people. She focused her campaign on the promise to implement a 2021 Berlin referendum, in which 58% of people voted for what the *Financial Times* calls the "expropriation" of big landlords like Deutsche Wohnen. Others have described it as "forced nationalisation", which would affect 243,000 rental apartments out of the 1.5 million in Berlin.

The reality is somewhat less dramatic: *Vergesellschaftung mit Entschädigung* is better translated as 'socialisation with compensation'. The cost of the plan is fiercely disputed, with estimates ranging from €7 billion to €36 billion. Die Linke says the money would be gradually recouped by the rental income that the city would receive.

It is no surprise that the establishment is hell-bent on avoiding *Vergesellschaftung* and chancellor Merz has announced he will oppose it - "above all to send a clear message to international investors: there

is no expropriation of private property in Germany!"

There is a small problem though: this is actually a provision covered in the German *Grundgesetz* ('basic law') of 1949. True, article 15 has never been applied and is therefore regarded as 'dead law' or a 'constitutional fossil'. But it is also a reflection of the fact that in 1949 things were not quite as black and white as they are now. Article 15 (and article 14, which allows for actual expropriation - for example, to build a motorway) are a reflection of what has been dubbed the 'historic compromise' (also known as the 'Bonn compromise') of the parliamentary council that drafted the *Grundgesetz* in 1948-49 under US 'guidance'.

While conservatives and liberals advocated a clear orientation to the 'market economy', the social democrats still fought for a (more) 'socialist' economic system and an extension of publicly owned services. Contrary to what kids still learn in school today, this did not, of course, enshrine Germany's 'economic neutrality', especially after the allied powers parted ways in 1948: the east of Germany was declared 'socialist', while the west became capitalist (with a lot of Keynesianism thrown in to reduce the danger of the German Democratic Republic looking more attractive than the German Federal Republic).

Merz has announced that he wants to change the *Grundgesetz* to avoid these flats being, effectively, nationalised. The success of Die Linke in Berlin has made this a huge question nationally. Merz announced that initial drafts are already being coordinated and that the CDU-SDP coalition will reach a decision "relatively quickly". This is mainly designed to assure international markets. But as a two-thirds majority is required in both the *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat* to change the basic law, it is unlikely to happen. For a start, the AfD would not support such an unpopular move - ditto Die Linke. The Greens too are likely to oppose it and the SPD could easily split on the question. So there is very little chance of any proposed change going through.

In Berlin, the regional party conferences of both the SPD and the Greens previously voted in favour

Sahra Wagenknecht: former 'official communist' willing to horse-trade with AfD



of implementing the referendum. But that was all pre-election, and things tend to change once you are in government. There will be great pressure from below on Die Linke to implement the referendum - while the pressure to stop it from above will be there too. We suspect though that in the end it will be 'the economy, stupid' that stops this plan from being implemented.

Responsibility

Unsurprisingly, what Eralp and co do not mention is the fact that it was Die Linke that had privatised much of the Berlin housing stock in the first place!

The party has been part of two previous government coalitions in Berlin: its forerunner, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), achieved 22.6% in the 2001 Berlin snap election. This period was truly awful. At first, the PDS supported the SPD minority government; then, having proven its reliability, it was welcomed into the Berlin senate in 2002, where it remained until 2011. (Halfway through, in 2007, the PDS was renamed Die Linke.) The tenor of this coalition can be summed up as "restoring the budget" and "balancing the books". It did indeed manage to cut annual spending by around four billion euros. How? 35,000 public-sector jobs were eliminated. Public-sector wages fell by up to 12%. Support staff at the Charité hospital were outsourced. Schools were starved of funds; the previous policy of free educational materials was abolished.

Most interestingly in the current context, more than 100,000 state-owned apartments were privatised by the 'red-red' coalition. Speculators such as Goldman Sachs and Cerberus (later renamed Deutsche Wohnen) bought up the flats, kicking out thousands of tenants. Die Linke agreed to all of it - and actively implemented it.⁶ No surprise, come the 2011 election, the party was severely punished, securing only 11.7% of the vote - less than half of its 2001 total.

But it bounced back, and from 2016 to 2023 it was 'junior partner' in a red-green-red government coalition. This time things were not quite so bleak and, while some privatisations - for example, of the S-Bahn - continued, there was an actual budget surplus which created scope for some redistribution and investment. A rent cap was introduced (which was, however, struck down by the federal constitutional court in 2021) and the Berlin city senate introduced subsidised travel passes and abolished daycare fees. But these measures relied on economic conditions that no longer exist today - Berlin is projected to have a whopping deficit of around €84 billion by 2029.

However, one thing the Die Linke fraction did *not* do in that period was implement the referendum on socialising housing. In fact, rather than work on the text for an actual law - as the referendum demanded - they agreed to kick the can down the road, outsourcing the question to various 'expert commissions', while doing nothing to ease the shortage of rental housing, like launching a programme to build more homes, for example.

Will the new Die Linke fraction behave differently from the old, now that it is the main party in any new coalition and not just the junior partner? We doubt it. We suspect that, as so many times before, *Realpolitik* will come knocking. In these dire economic times, there will be very little wiggle room for any progressive policies. For a start, which bank would lend the

red-red-green coalition an additional €36 billion (or even just €7 billion) to buy those apartments? Even with the best of intentions, Die Linke will in all likelihood end up doing exactly what it did between 2002 and 2011: enforce austerity and act 'responsibly'. Those elected will feel compelled, no matter how reluctantly, to once again manage capitalism. Eralp has already said: "Of course, we will also have to make compromises - that goes without saying." It really should not!

Many people in Die Linke argue that it is necessary to take 'government responsibility', given the danger posed by the AfD. We believe the exact opposite is the case. A minority Die Linke government in Berlin can only disappoint. And who are the disappointed likely to turn to? It could easily make the AfD even stronger.

We would urge comrades in Berlin to vocally oppose Die Linke joining a government coalition that waters down the very manifesto it stood on this month. Instead Die Linke should insist that the SDP and the Greens agree to that manifesto *in whole* when it comes to immediate demands. Certainly there should be a binding commitment to implement *Vergesellschaftung mit Entschädigung*. If that fails, so be it. The SDP and the Greens would completely expose themselves before the population - show that they care more about the bond markets than about the hard pressed people of Berlin.

That way Die Linke can become a majority, first in Berlin, then in other big cities and finally in Germany as a whole. To achieve that there has to be a massive growth in membership, and communists, towards that end, must organise and hegemonise. Coalitions with parties who are unwilling to commit to Die Linke's full immediate programme must be ruled out as a matter of principle. Better, far better to be a strong opposition party that intransigently fights capitalism, than a party of compromise, a party that serves capitalism.

A Die Linke Red Berlin would not go cap-in-hand to the banks and the money men. Instead it would demand the expropriation *without compensation* of the big property companies. If there is sufficient political pressure the federal government can be forced to agree. Of course, any such gain can only but be temporary. But with the eating, so the appetite grows.

Die Linke must take the fight to high politics. Break with Israel, break with the proxy war in Ukraine, break with Nato. The transport, energy and banking sectors must be nationalised and put under democratic control. All church privileges need to be ended. The standing army and the police must go, and be replaced by a well-drilled popular militia. The war against migrants must be ended. No repatriations, no deportations. Anyone who has lived in Germany for more than six months should be eligible for citizenship and full legal rights. Above all the *Bundesrat* must be abolished along with state rights, and Germany reconstituted as a centralised democratic republic ●

Notes

1. See 'Politics of the firewall' *Weekly Worker* September 10: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1600/politics-of-the-firewall.
2. www.fr.de/politik/pakt-nach-wahlsieg-in-sachsen-anhalt-afd-und-bsw-schmieden-brisanten-posten-zr-94505249.html.
3. *The Times* September 21.
4. jacobin.com/2026/09/die-linke-antisemitism-accusations-berlin.
5. www.die-linke.de/partei/parteidemokratie/parteitag/potsdamer-parteitag/potsdamer-parteitag/beschluesse/detail/news/fuer-gleiche-rechte-im-nahen-osten-westasien-gegen-jeden-rassismus-und-antisemitismus-1.
6. www.akweb.de/ausgaben/729/berlin-sieht-rot-rot-gruen-wahl-linkspartei-elif-eralp-ist-eine-linke-reformregierung-moeglich.

INTERNATIONALISM

Re-establish Comintern

We have been sent this call for international regroupment. What exact form a world party takes in the future is surely a matter for the future. There are, though, some immediate practical steps that can be taken and we will be outlining our thoughts and proposals in the near future

We are living through a revival of socialism as a political movement. The rise of a new socialist party in the United States, for all its limits, signals this. However, the socialist movement remains strictly limited to its own national terrain. Today, the overwhelming majority of socialists see the task of making socialism as having firm national limits, and either imagine separate national roads to socialism, or a domino of sequential national revolutions. This methodological nationalism reflects a profound immaturity in our movement.

The chief obstacle to workers' power and socialism is not the individual capitalist classes of this or that capitalist state. Nor is it the state apparatus itself, with all its ideological and repressive powers. Rather, it is the system of capitalist nation-states and the world market that are the final guarantors of the capitalist system of production. Within this system, the modern state serves as a kind of joint-stock corporation of the capitalist class - a cartel that is managed chiefly by the bond market.

This system serves to discipline and regulate the activities of each individual part of the state within it, in much the same way as a national market regulates and disciplines the activity of its constituent firms. It follows that socialism in a single country is as absurd as socialism in a single city or a single factory! As such, any socialist revolution must be pursued as part of an international revolutionary strategy. Today, no such strategy presents itself, nor is there a political space within which a strategy can be hammered out.

There is no force in the world today that can claim to represent the workers' international. What remains is a swamp of oil-slick internationals, Cominformesque or personal-cliqueist statement mills, reformist regional alliances, informal and interpersonal ties, and individual organisations with varying amounts of success. There is no worldwide strategy, discussion or exchange of experience. Even on the national level, there is hardly anywhere a unifying organisation of the communists. Where there is one, it is either reformist, tails reformists, is deeply undemocratic or a combination of all three. The division of these forces between a variety of international groupings means that the question of party unity cannot be resolved on a national, case-by-case basis. Rather, it must be waged internationally.

It is not enough to wait for a successful revolution in a powerful-enough country that can once again bind the communist movement to its state. This revolution could not succeed without a strong international movement to protect it from class enemies abroad. Thus, we must build the international party that we so desperately need ourselves.

The Cominternist theory of the revolutionary wave has proven to be a mirage. While it is indeed possible for revolutionary waves to spread from country to country, there is no guarantee that these revolutions will produce a proletarian, socialist content. As seen in the Arab Spring, spontaneous waves of revolutionary activity cannot be relied upon to deliver a victory on their own. It is only when combined with systematic, *pre-existing* revolutionary organisation



Shutting Comintern: Joseph Stalin and Georgi Dimitrov

that such a wave is possible. Indeed, it was the pre-existing internationalist organisation in Europe that made the post-1917 revolutionary wave possible. In turn, the south-east Asian domino effect so feared by the imperialists in the 1970s was the result of parties that had been part of a single international movement in the recent past. Indeed in both cases these waves found themselves exhausted long before they could break.

Last attempt

The last attempt at the formulation of a world strategy can be credited to the Maoist-third world trends of the 1970s. The view that the global countryside would surround the city, and that a Third World revolution would slowly exhaust and destroy the imperialist colossus, once had many adherents. However, the end of the Maoist period in China, and the defeat of the Third World has left this tendency high and dry. Today, most of its adherents have largely abandoned Marxism for nationalism of one form or another.

In the absence of a world strategy, the socialist movement simply defaults to the theory of the national revolution. Even the Trotskyists, who still claim to defend internationalism, simply argue that these revolutions might happen consecutively, persisting in the methodological nationalism that afflicts the reform socialists and the Marxist-Leninists. What is needed is an international strategy of patience, by which the working class movement coordinates its activities closely, and prepares for the seizure of power in coordinated offensives against the capitalists. However, such a strategy cannot be theorised in the abstract. It must be the product of actual joint work and systematic organisation of communists on an international basis - it must be an international of tasks first and foremost.

The Soviet Union is dead. Enver Hoxha's Albania is dead. China, whatever its state form may be, has no

interest in supporting the international communist movement. Cuba is weak, suffering under US blockade, and is moving towards a privatisation of the economy. Laos and Vietnam are small and integrated into the world market. North Korea has adopted an ideology of revolutionary nationalism.

In short, none of these states are able or willing to unite and lead the global communist movement into an international, even if the worldwide movement would follow them. It would not - and should not. The experiences of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Comintern show us that centralised control by one workers' state over the international and over the tactics its various national sections employ is not a winning strategy for such an organisation. The Comintern had not held a world congress for eight years at the time of its dissolution in 1943, and no enlarged plenums of the executive committee (ECCI) for 10 years. In practice, it served as a tool of Soviet foreign policy, and in the end, it was illegally dissolved at the behest of the liberal imperialist powers.

What of today's internationals? In short, none of them are fit for purpose. The Progressive International is a personalist media project with no democratic organisational apparatus. The International People's Assembly is a Cominformesque outfit - an information exchange that functions mostly through zoom calls. Both contain important organisations of the international left, as well as a hodgepodge of left nationalists and progressives.

The European left parties - the Party of the European Left and the European Left Alliance - are reformist electoral alliances of national parties, each promoting its own national road to socialism. They were created to receive funding from the European Union by forming fractions in the European parliament. The São Paulo Forum, which was once the crown jewel of Pink Tide internationalism,

can now rightly be asked, 'What do you do?' They do not want, or are not able, to become the world party we need.

The International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties (IMCWP) and the 'sub-Cominforms', like the real thing, do not have power over member organisations (which they do not really have) and are not world parties. The IMCWP is a talk shop, which the Chinese, Cubans, etc use to cultivate allies in this or that country. Surely it is useful to them, but not to the international proletariat.

The Fourth International and its bastard children have gone in the complete opposite direction to the 'Cominformists', preferring the by now well-known centralised control of one section over the entire international and tactics of all other sections. These internationals are 'oil-slick', in the sense that in the 'mother section' they are quite strong, and other sections are weaker and smaller. Examples include the International Socialist Tendency, which has its mother section in Great Britain in the Socialist Workers Party, and the Revolutionary Communist International - also a product of that cursed isle. Each major Trotskyist grouping has its own mothership - the Lutte Ouvrière has the International Communist Union, the Spartacist League has the International Communist League, and the Socialist Alternative (US) has the International Socialist Alternative. When one of these international tendencies splits, it produces a series of splits in a dozen countries (if it is lucky enough to have so many sections). The various left communists, anarchists and Maoists are similar, each with their own micro-sect internationals.

What of the orthodox Marxist trend? The partyist communists maintain a web of interpersonal relations between individuals and informal contact between the organisations. This has so far been largely sufficient to carry out the minimal tasks of international activity. However, it is not enough to reforge international communist unity. There are currently few avenues for hammering out international strategy, no real means by which tasks (such as support for political prisoners) can be coordinated, or any clarification of international perspectives. Much work is done doubly, triply, quadruply, etc.

We constantly reinvent the wheel on issues already solved in other organisations, or even by the Comintern. Theoretical and strategic conferences are organised, but these are hardly international events. Only a few people attend from organisations that are not the organisers' own. Even international conferences, such as the anti-Nato summits of the previous two years, are not very well known in the wider membership of the organisations.

World party

The illegal dissolution of the Communist International broke the chain of proletarian internationalism. With it, the notion of an international communist strategy was marginalised - a marginalisation we are yet to overcome. The First World Congress had established the International by a democratic vote of the delegates from the member parties. This same World Congress elected the first ECCI. The ECCI had, according to the statutes, no power to dissolve the Comintern. But it did so anyway.

Our aim must be a refounded world party of the proletarian revolution. This is a widely acknowledged fact amongst much of our tendency - it is even the stated aim of many of the democratic socialists! We should set out our long-term goals clearly. We must aim for the refoundation of the Communist International with a world congress. This world congress must reject the historical ban on factions and amend the 21 conditions, ensuring a balance between the necessity for international coordination and the need for national and regional flexibility. In turn, we must seek regional and continental coordination of communist parties. A Pan-Asian communist movement, and a Communist Party of Europe that can contest the European elections as a single party apparatus, is just as important as an international organisation.

Not close

We are not anywhere close to realising such a refoundation congress. However, without making our aims clear, we cannot hope to realise them. Importantly, this process of international regroupment cannot be delayed until the struggle for unity is achieved at the national level. This is intimately linked to the struggle for unity in each country. When the Second International convened, only the German social democrats had succeeded in forming a united party. It was the struggle for international unity within the Second International that would forge united socialist parties in America, France and Russia.

We cannot simply declare a new international into existence. This would only repeat the sectarian errors that birthed a dozen oil-slick internationals and sub-Cominforms. In turn, these create yet more divisions at the national level - with each local organisation adhering to this or that international line, making unity all the more difficult. We must proceed from the existing forces of the world movement, and aim for the fusion of existing internationalist forces.

The task before us is essentially twofold. Firstly, the forces that are in favour of international regroupment on a principled Marxist basis must establish systematic fraternal relations. We must share resources, translate our materials, and work together on common practical tasks, including solidarity campaigns and joint publications. On this basis, we can establish a correspondence committee to allow for permanent communication between organisations and trends. Through this effort, we can begin to hammer out an international strategy and perspective.

We need an international campaign for a new international to unite Marxists in an international faction. Such a faction could not organise as a distinct organisation, separate from the world movement. Rather, it would be a fighting formation within and amongst the existing international formations.

Much of this work has already begun, albeit in uneven and non-systematic ways. However, it must be deepened and broadened, drawing forth all the principled Marxist forces of the world movement, and facilitating the regroupment of our scattered comrades.

Edith Fischer (Communist Unity, Australia)

Elise van der Doelen (Revolutionary Socialist Party/ROOD, Netherlands)

AGGREGATE

A day of two halves

Our CPGB aggregate of members, associate members and supporters had two sessions. The first concerned the Middle East and that was followed by an assessment of CU 2026. **Farzad Kamangar** reports

The September 20 CPGB aggregate began with ‘Wars in the Middle East’, introduced by Yasmine Mather. Following her opening talk (published on pp10-11), the discussion ranged widely across Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon and the wider consequences of the confrontation with Iran. A recurring theme was instability: military escalation may produce results very different from those intended by Israel or the US, and no existing regional power seems capable of imposing a stable settlement.

Jim Nelson raised the question of Iraq. Despite the enormous importance attached to it after the 2003 invasion, little is now heard of its internal politics: how much control does the US still exercise, and how divided is the country between Shia, Sunni and Kurdish forces? He also raised Yemen, asking whether the Houthis’ actions might now threaten the Saudi monarchy’s stability.

Ken Sharpe was sceptical that an immediate American intervention against the Houthis was the most likely development, since this would create further problems for US shipping and considerable economic and military costs. If the aim really is to destroy or decisively weaken Iran, an intervention against Iran itself seems more likely than a major operation against Yemen. Reports that the Houthis have begun attacking Saudi Arabia further complicates this picture, raising questions about the kingdom’s stability. He also raised the role of Turkey.

Jim G pointed to the weakness of the Lebanese state, long divided along communal and political lines, its forces unable to defend the country’s borders. This raises the question of Hezbollah’s role, and what would happen if attempts were made to eliminate it as an independent military and political force.

Mike Macnair placed this in the context of Israeli military practice, including the long-standing policy of assassinating political and military leaders outside its own theatre of operations. There was also a larger question: can either side actually win? The economic consequences fall unevenly - the United States differs from France, Germany, Britain, Japan or China because of its own energy resources, so a prolonged disruption of Middle Eastern oil would hit America’s economic competitors hardest.

Replying

Replying, Yasmine returned first to Iraq. The 2003 war left a sectarian political structure: the constitution distributes leading state positions on an ethno-sectarian basis - presidency to a Kurd, premiership to a Shia, parliamentary leadership to a Sunni. This has not overcome Iraq’s divisions: Shia forces are themselves split into competing factions, and outlawing armed groups or arresting their leaders risks serious internal conflict. Sunni influence exists, but is largely concerned with protecting their own minority interests. The Kurdish region, though sometimes presented in the west as a model of self-government, is in reality marked by corruption, repression and factionalism under the Barzani and Talabani camps. On the Houthis, she warned against treating them simply as Iranian proxies: Washington repeatedly underestimates their distinct political and social foundations.



Internationalism at CU 2026: Janne van der Bosch (Netherlands) and Roxy Hall (Australia)

When it comes to Turkey, comrade Mather continued, it occupies a contradictory position: economically, Ankara maintains extensive relations with Israel; politically and rhetorically, the Turkish government has been highly vocal over Gaza. Turkey presents itself as a defender of the Palestinians without a comparable material confrontation with Israel. On oil, she agreed with comrade Macnair that the US is not dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and its access to Venezuelan oil changes the calculation further - but this does not mean the US can isolate itself from a major global disruption, since damage to European, Chinese and Japanese economies feeds back through world oil prices.

Jack Conrad questioned the assumption that Iran could be bombed into political collapse. Destroying sections of the leadership or decapitating the state is unlikely to bring the whole structure down like a pack of cards: even Iranian opponents of the Islamic Republic face the problem of what would replace it, and it retains a substantial organised social base - arguably deeper than other regimes in the region.

Saudi Arabia presents the opposite problem: the kingdom is explicitly built around the ruling House of Saud, and the monarchy has always been wary of its own armed forces. Reliance on American protection and British military advice reflects the insecurity of the ruling order. Foreign protection functions as part of the Saudi state’s internal security as much as against external enemies. The deeper political problem is that the working class and socialist movement are largely absent as independent actors, stated comrade Conrad, so the confrontation is being shaped by states, militaries, religious organisations and regional powers.

Another comrade developed the Turkey discussion. Turkish support for the Palestinian cause has gone beyond rhetoric in some respects, including advisory ties with Hamas’s political wing. Yet Turkey remains embedded in Nato and is unlikely to be abandoned by Washington - even as Israeli discourse increasingly treats it as a potential adversary, reflecting deeper competition for influence. Turkey also has an economic advantage: cheap

labour and production costs enable it to export goods competitively, sometimes undercutting domestic producers, making its regional influence economic as well as military and diplomatic.

These contradictions explain why Turkey cannot be placed simply in either camp: it pursues its own regional interests, which overlap with its Nato allies at one moment and conflict with them at another.

CU debate

Jack Conrad opened the second session with a report on Communist University 2026, giving his view on the pros and cons. This was followed by a discussion covering the venue and time of year, length and format, debate and chairing practice, technical and organisational workload, political content, international links and a possible 2027 theme. The general verdict was positive - most comrades rated this year’s CU better than previous ones, though some raised concerns about length, heat and workload.

Comrade Conrad spoke positively about the venue: central London, with excellent transport links, the right size for our organisation, accommodation for those who need it, and a suitably cool meeting room. Unlike the SWP’s rally-style Marxism event or SPEW’s economistic long weekend, CU aims to be a genuine ‘university’ - a broad range of subjects, including the big questions (the climate crisis, danger of war, humanity’s revolutionary origins, the nature of the Soviet Union) - and, of course, plenty of time for genuine debate amongst all those participating, not just listening to ‘experts’.

CU’s dates are dictated by holidays and venue availability. Comrade Conrad noted that unlike CU 2025, which was marred by “frustrating” debates, partly resulting from departing Communist Unity constituents, and division over the *Weekly Worker* ‘tone’, this year’s discussions were more fruitful, centred on more interesting disagreements. In the one top-table debate, between CPGB and Spartacist League, contributions from Spart comrades in the room rather than via Zoom would have been better.

He also proposed a short set of ‘dos

and don’ts’ for chairs rather than a rigid formula: judge how much time a contribution deserves, when to ask someone to wind up, and actively seek out minority voices (eg, finding a member of a rival group to speak if they are present).

When it came to the technical work, this was handled mainly by just two comrades - others should be identified for tasks well before next summer. He tentatively proposed the 110th anniversary of the Russian Revolution as the 2027 theme, ideally with Lars Lih, aiming to learn from October rather than mindlessly trying to copy it.

Comrade Conrad also praised the culture sessions organised by comrade Tam Dean Burn - Prometheus, Brecht, Darko’s contribution, Tam’s own session on the *Communist manifesto* - as good, wide-ranging and well attended, adding that timing across sessions might need reviewing, so that everyone “has room to breathe”.

In the following debate Carla Roberts found a full week or eight days in the heat exhausting, suggesting a long weekend (about four days). Anne McShane opposed four days and proposed six (Saturday to Thursday). I argued six days is the minimum sensible reduction: most working comrades cannot take two weekends off, mainly retired comrades stay the whole time, and there was repetition (notably in the climate sessions). Mike Macnair leaned towards six days, noting that block bookings usually run to seven rather than eight.

On the other hand, some comrades had no problem with eight days, as it allowed a wider range of topics, though even these comrades admitted they did not attend every session, or attended some online - one or two said they opted out of the evening culture sessions through fatigue. Comrade Morris noted that comrades who travel from US to attend would be far less likely to come for just four days.

There were 29 sessions this year and I argued that cutting a few would not make CU as short as an SWP’s Marxism or SPEW’s Socialism event. Parallel sessions are possible in the venue’s smaller rooms, but attendance may not justify them; comrade Morris thought them worth considering.

When it came to the debate with the Sparts, views differed on whether advanced preparation would have been appropriate. Some thought pre-planned interventions would look odd at an educational event and that we had come across better regardless; comrade McShane thought the two sides talked past each other because the Sparts had already committed to their industrial-turn strategy; I argued that we did win the argument, but that debates need preparation, and that a chair should not let an over-long speaker continue when an otherwise prepared comrade or opponent could move things on.

On the content of the sessions, comrade Sharpe thought there was too much on climate - and too much preaching to the converted, and thought we should shift the emphasis to “what we do next”. Comrade Burn thought our four sessions on climate provided “a good balance”, comrade Conrad defended them too: it is a question of “work in progress”, so we need to rethink our programme in a climate crisis, and should definitely keep engaging with leading scientists.

On the culture sessions: comrade McShane felt that those evening events were “bolted on” and so made culture seem peripheral - she thought some should have taken place in the afternoon. Comrade Burn agreed for some items (eg, the play reading needed a full daytime slot), while, on the other hand, noting how much a half-hour session can achieve. Another comrade suggested broadening these sessions - for example, to include music.

Boycottists

Carla Roberts reminded us that CU was boycotted by parts of the so-called ‘partyist’ left following the controversy over the use of the ‘N-word’ in the *Weekly Worker*, with three speakers withdrawing late; yet turnouts were decent and some 200 attended overall (substitute speakers were found without major difficulty). A number of comrades stressed that international attendance at CU is a huge strength and should be actively encouraged.

When it came to international cooperation, comrade Roberts argued that ‘partyism’ is becoming an ever wider used label and that CU should support closer international cooperation without creating another sect. We could revive sessions of ‘Why Marx’ debate outside CU as an international ‘partyist’ project. Comrade Conrad said we should certainly try to engage with those who we disagree with rather than ignore them. Comrade McShane noted some ‘partyists’ want ‘polite politics’ - ie centrist conciliation with left reformists, strikes and streets economists, and outright social imperialists. That is why the CPGB is a problem for them. One comrade was completely sceptical about the actual worth of these centrists and suggested identifying new audiences.

On next year’s theme, both comrades Morris and Burn were cool on the 110th-anniversary idea. Comrade McShane stressed the impact of the Soviet Union on the struggle for a party and revolution today. Comrade Conrad agreed: the Soviet Union question is the key question for 21st century communists ●

AGGREGATE

How did we get here?

To understand the wars engulfing the Middle East today, it is not enough to begin with the February 28 combined assault on Iran by the US and Israel or even October 7 2023 and Gaza, says **Yassamine Mather**

The present crisis in the Middle East is the outcome of a much longer transformation of the regional order. Its origins lie in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the failure of the Arab uprisings, the wars in Syria and Yemen and the gradual emergence of a network of forces associated with Iran across the region.

At the same time, the Middle East has been transformed economically. China has become increasingly important as a trading partner, even while the United States has retained overwhelming military influence. The result is a region in which economic relations, military alliances and political loyalties no longer fit neatly together. The current wars have exposed all these contradictions.

The years 1978-79 represent a decisive turning point. Two events in particular altered the political landscape: the Iranian Revolution and the upheavals in Afghanistan that culminated in Soviet intervention.

The Iranian Revolution removed one of Washington's most important regional allies. Under the shah, Iran had been central to the US security architecture in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic that replaced the monarchy was deeply hostile to Washington, opposed Israel and presented itself as a challenger to the conservative Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

Whatever one thinks of the politics of the Islamic Republic - and there are many reasons for the left to oppose it - this represented a fundamental change in the balance of power. The US lost a major ally. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies faced a regime claiming that their political order was illegitimate. Iraq, meanwhile, suddenly confronted a state on its border born of a revolution. Saddam Hussein's government feared both Iranian regional ambitions and the possible political impact of 1979 on Iraq's own population.

These tensions contributed to the Iran-Iraq war, which began in 1980 and continued for eight devastating years. Neither side achieved the decisive victory each had initially sought. Yet the war profoundly shaped the Islamic Republic. Iranian leaders repeatedly returned to the experience of surviving a war against an opponent that enjoyed considerable external support. The political and military institutions of the Islamic Republic learned to think in terms of endurance: surviving a stronger enemy, absorbing losses and making prolonged conflict expensive for an opponent.

The origins of Iran's later emphasis on ballistic missiles, drones and asymmetric warfare have to be understood partly in this context. Iran could not compete directly with the US, and later Israel, in conventional military technology. Its strategy therefore developed around cheaper weapons, missiles, dispersed military capabilities and relationships with armed organisations outside Iran itself.

The next decisive transformation came after September 11 2001. The US responded to the attacks by launching wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. The declared objectives included destroying al-Qaeda, overthrowing hostile governments and restructuring the Middle East. Yet one of the most striking consequences was the strengthening of Iran.



US invasion of Iraq, 2003

Washington removed two governments that had been major enemies of Tehran. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was hostile to Iran. Saddam Hussein's Iraq represented an even greater strategic threat. Iran had lived for decades alongside a powerful Iraqi military state. The US invasion removed it at a stroke.

Even more importantly, Saddam's regime was replaced by a political order in which Shia Islamist parties became extremely influential. Some of their leading figures had spent years in exile in Iran and had developed close relationships with the Islamic Republic. The irony was extraordinary. The administration of George W Bush identified Iran as part of an 'axis of evil', yet US policy created conditions in which Iranian influence could expand.

Post 2003

Post-2003 Iraq illustrates the point. The political system created after the invasion had institutionalised sectarian and ethnic divisions. The presidency came from the Kurds, the premiership from the Shia majority and the parliamentary speakership from the Sunnis.

Iraq consequently became a terrain of competition between the US, Iran and numerous religious and ethnic factions. Iranian influence is considerable, but this does not mean that Iraqi organisations are simply puppets controlled from Tehran. They have their own political constituencies, economic interests and organisational histories. That distinction remains important today.

The uprisings beginning in 2011 opened another period of dramatic change. Mass movements challenged authoritarian governments across the Arab world. Yet the initial hopes associated with these revolts were rapidly overtaken by counterrevolution, foreign intervention and civil war.

In Egypt the revolution failed to produce a lasting democratic transformation. The Muslim Brotherhood came to power and was subsequently overthrown. In Libya, western military intervention was followed by the division of the country. Syria descended into a catastrophic war, involving domestic forces and competing regional and international powers.

The Syrian conflict increasingly assumed the character of a proxy war. Iran and Hezbollah played an important role in keeping Bashar al-Assad's government in power. Russia subsequently became directly involved. On the other side, the US and regional allies supported various opposition forces, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states attempted to shape the anti-Assad

camp. Jihadist organisations also expanded dramatically in the chaos. This history is important, because simplistic descriptions of the conflict often obscure the extent to which multiple outside powers attempted to manipulate the Syrian war for their own strategic purposes.

Iran's intervention in Syria strengthened the perception that a regional bloc was emerging around Tehran. Hezbollah already represented a major political and military force in Lebanon. Iran now possessed close relationships with forces in Iraq and Syria as well.

Yemen added another dimension. The Houthis captured Sana'a in 2014, and Saudi Arabia intervened militarily the following year. The war was often presented simply as another confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But this interpretation is insufficient. The Houthis are not merely an Iranian creation. They have their own social base, political history and domestic objectives. Iranian support became increasingly important, but treating them simply as instruments controlled from Tehran misunderstands both Yemen and the character of Iran's regional relationships.

By the end of the 2010s, Iran had therefore developed something unusual. It was not part of a conventional military alliance comparable to Nato. Instead there existed a network of states, political organisations and armed movements, extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and southwards towards Yemen. Israel regarded this network as an increasingly serious strategic threat.

During precisely the same period, another transformation was occurring. China was becoming economically more important throughout the Middle East. The Belt and Road initiative, launched in 2013, expanded infrastructure, investment and trading relationships across the region. China's dependence on imported energy made the Persian Gulf particularly important.

This produced an unusual contradiction. The Gulf monarchies remained militarily and politically aligned with the US, while their economic relationships with China expanded rapidly. Iran also turned towards China, as western sanctions restricted its access to investment and international markets. Iran's relationship with China has sometimes been described by sections of the Iranian opposition as though Tehran had simply 'sold the country' to Beijing.

This exaggerates the character of the relationship. China's dealings with Iran need to be understood as part of its wider economic strategy across the

Gulf, including extensive relationships with Saudi Arabia and the other Arab monarchies. China, however, has not tried to match US military power in the region. That distinction became increasingly important after October 2023, which transformed the situation.

Regional effects

Whatever arguments exist about the events leading to the Hamas attack and Israel's subsequent assault on Gaza, the war created a much sharper regional division. Gaza could no longer be treated as an isolated Palestinian question.

Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and various Iraqi and Syrian groups associated to different degrees with Iran increasingly appeared as parts of the same regional confrontation. Israel likewise treated Iran as the strategic centre of the threat it perceived.

At the same time, the war produced a profound crisis for the Arab governments. There was a visible gap between popular anger over Gaza and the policies pursued by governments such as Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf monarchies. Iran attempted to exploit this contradiction politically, presenting itself as the state most consistently opposed to Israel. This did not necessarily translate into substantial practical assistance to the Palestinians. Iranian propaganda and regional political positioning often exceeded what Tehran was actually prepared or able to do. Nevertheless, the political effect mattered.

The war also spread geographically. The Houthis began targeting shipping associated with the conflict, bringing the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab into the confrontation. The consequences extended far beyond Israel and the US. Disruption of shipping routes affected international trade, including China's, despite Beijing's attempt to remain outside direct military confrontation. China therefore confronted the limitations of its strategy. It had benefited from avoiding the enormous military costs borne by the United States in the Middle East, but its economic interests still depended on regional stability and secure shipping routes.

During 2024, Hezbollah became increasingly involved in the confrontation with Israel. Israel intensified military operations in Lebanon, and the conflict eventually included the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The significance of Hezbollah, however, cannot be understood simply through its relationship with Iran. Hezbollah is embedded in Lebanese society and politics. It has parliamentary representation, a substantial social base and relationships extending beyond its immediate Shia constituency. At different points it has possessed allies among sections of the Christian population and influence elsewhere through political and economic networks.

For this reason, the idea that Hezbollah can simply be removed from Lebanese politics through outside pressure underestimates the organisation's domestic roots. Its relationship with Iran remains crucial, but again the language of puppets and proxies obscures more than it explains.

The widening conflict also brought Iran itself increasingly into direct confrontation with Israel. In April 2024 Iran launched its first large direct missile and drone attack against Israel. This represented an

important transition. A conflict that had previously been conducted largely through indirect confrontation was becoming increasingly state-to-state. The threshold separating shadow war from open warfare had been crossed.

The June 2025 confrontation marked another stage. Israel attacked targets in Iran, not least military and nuclear facilities. Iran responded with missiles and drones. The US subsequently became directly involved. The importance of this episode was not simply its duration. It demonstrated that the previous system of controlled confrontation had broken down.

Iran's military strategy reflected lessons developed over decades. Tehran could not match the technological and air superiority of Israel and the US. Instead it relied on missiles, drones, dispersed capabilities and the assumption that surviving the initial attack was itself strategically significant. The logic is essentially one of endurance. If Iran cannot achieve conventional military superiority, it *can* attempt to make war prolonged and expensive. Relatively inexpensive drones and missiles can force opponents to employ enormously expensive defensive systems. Infrastructure, shipping and regional military bases become vulnerable.

This does not mean Iran can 'win' such a war in any straightforward sense. It has suffered enormous destruction itself, and prolonged conflict imposes severe costs on a population already facing economic deprivation. But it does mean that calculations based on rapid military victory can prove dangerously misleading.

The geography of the Middle East makes regional war a global economic problem. Two maritime routes are particularly important: Bab al-Mandab, connecting the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean; and the Strait of Hormuz, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the wider world. Disruption of either route has international consequences. Disruption of both creates a much more serious problem. This is where the economic consequences of war become inseparable from military strategy.

Restrictions on oil supplies push energy prices upwards. Higher energy prices contribute to inflation. Central banks then confront pressures that cannot be solved through monetary policy alone. An interest-rate decision cannot create an oil tanker route through a blocked maritime passage.

The effects also extend beyond countries directly dependent on Gulf oil. The US is certainly not dependent on Middle Eastern energy, but it is not insulated from the world economy. Oil prices are world prices. European economies are vulnerable though. Asian economies are vulnerable too. China is particularly exposed because of its enormous dependence on imported energy and international trade.

The assumption that a regional war can be geographically contained therefore becomes increasingly implausible.

Survival?

This raises the central political question inside Iran. How can a country suffering war, sanctions, inflation and infrastructure destruction continue functioning?

Predictions of the imminent collapse of the Islamic Republic have

been made repeatedly. Yet Iranian society continues to function, albeit in contradictory ways. Construction projects continue. Public events take place. Everyday life adapts. None of this means that the economic crisis is imaginary. Factory workers, nurses and other sections of the population have protested over wages and deteriorating living conditions.

There is therefore a limit to endurance. If conditions deteriorate to the point where large sections of the population cannot secure basic necessities, economic crisis can become a crisis of the social order.

But sanctions and war have contradictory political consequences. External attack does not automatically produce rebellion against the government: it can temporarily strengthen nationalist sentiment and allow the state to consolidate support. People who loath the Islamic Republic might well oppose attacks on their homeland. This is one of the central weaknesses in strategies based on the assumption that military and economic pressure will automatically produce regime change.

At the same time, indefinite war creates its own political opposition. There is already disagreement within the Iranian establishment over how the conflict should end. On the one hand there are those advocating compromise and negotiations. Former president Hassan Rouhani represents a particular version of this conciliatory tendency. On the other hand there are forces within the establishment who reject both unconditional compromise and the idea of endless war.

Parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has expressed opposition to an open-ended conflict. His position is particularly significant because it reflects currents closer to the military and Revolutionary Guard establishment than those represented by Rouhani. At the opposite extreme are forces advocating continued war until victory. The real political struggle may therefore increasingly become one over what constitutes an acceptable settlement.

The same problem appears elsewhere. Washington can demand that the Iraqi government suppress armed groups associated with Iran. Implementing such demands is considerably more difficult. Such organisations are embedded in Iraq’s political system. Attempts to outlaw or militarily destroy them could generate conflict within the Shia political establishment itself.

Similarly, Hezbollah cannot simply be wished out of Lebanese society. And the Houthis cannot be understood as an organisation that would disappear if Iranian assistance ended.

This is perhaps the greatest problem with interpreting the contemporary Middle East exclusively through the concept of Iranian proxies. Iran certainly provides weapons, money, training and political support to allied organisations. But these movements possess their own histories and constituencies. The relationship is neither one of complete independence nor simple command from Tehran. Destroying Iran would therefore not resolve the conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen or Palestine.

Turkey represents another complication. Ankara has been rhetorically vocal over Gaza and highly critical of Israel. Yet its economic relationships with Israel have historically been far more complicated than its public rhetoric suggests.

There is also a deeper strategic tension. Turkey has its own ambitions as a major regional power. Any Israeli strategy aimed at establishing overwhelming predominance across the Middle East would eventually intersect with Turkish interests. This does not mean that an Israeli-Turkish military confrontation is inevitable. It does mean that the regional struggle

cannot be reduced to Israel versus Iran.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and the Gulf monarchies all have their own interests. China has enormous economic interests. Russia remains involved. The US continues to possess military bases throughout the region. The Middle East is consequently becoming increasingly multipolar while remaining militarily dominated by Washington. That is an unstable combination.

The trajectory from 1979 to the present reveals a remarkable historical irony. Again and again, military interventions intended to weaken one adversary have created conditions for another to become stronger.

The Iran-Iraq war consolidated important aspects of the Islamic Republic’s military state. The US invasion of Iraq destroyed Iran’s greatest regional enemy. The Syrian war expanded Iranian and Hezbollah involvement. Attempts to isolate the Houthis did not eliminate them. The Gaza war transformed what had been a series of connected but partly contained conflicts into an increasingly regional confrontation.

Now the assumption appears to be that the destruction of the Islamic Republic would resolve the problem. That conclusion is equally questionable. Iran is not the sole cause of instability in the Middle East. The current crisis is the product of a regional order constructed through decades of dictatorship, foreign intervention, military occupation, sectarian politics, failed revolutions, economic inequality and competing projects for regional dominance. Iran’s Islamic Republic is part of that order, not an alternative to it.

Its anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric should not obscure its own authoritarian character, repression of workers and political opponents, or its pursuit of regional state interests. Equally, opposition to the Islamic Republic should not require accepting the proposition that US or Israeli military power can liberate Iranian society. For the Iranian population, these are not abstract questions. It faces an authoritarian state internally and the destruction produced by war and sanctions externally. Asking them to choose between those alternatives reproduces the political logic that has trapped the region for decades.

Gaza war

The danger now is that what began as the Gaza war in 2023 has developed into something much larger: a chain of conflicts linking Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Iran and the Persian Gulf. The Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz connect those conflicts directly to the world economy. Meanwhile the competing powers continue to behave as though military escalation can eventually produce a stable regional settlement - even though the history of the last four decades suggests precisely the opposite.

The danger today is therefore not simply another Middle Eastern war. It is the emergence of a regional system in which war itself becomes permanent: a confrontation without a decisive victor, spreading across borders, shipping routes and economies, while governments on every side tell their populations that one more military escalation will finally provide security. There is little in the history of the region since 1979 to justify that expectation.

Events in September 2026 have amply confirmed this assessment.

The striking feature of the present situation is that military escalation and negotiations are occurring simultaneously. Washington has not abandoned the possibility of negotiations with Iran, but neither has the military confrontation ended. At the same time another front has reopened dramatically in Yemen,

bringing Saudi Arabia, the Houthis and the strategic Bab al-Mandab passage directly into the wider crisis.

The present US-Iran conflict has lasted for months. The expectation that overwhelming US and Israeli military superiority would produce immediate triumph proved misplaced. The war has instead acquired precisely the characteristics Iran’s military strategy has historically sought: duration, economic disruption and geographical expansion. This is also why the November US midterm elections enter Iranian calculations. A prolonged war accompanied by expensive petrol, inflationary pressures and disruption to international trade has domestic political consequences inside the US.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that Tehran has simply rejected negotiations. Iranian officials have continued to send signals that they are prepared to negotiate, but on conditions that Washington may find extremely difficult to accept.

On September 20 Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, publicly described proposals that he said had been transmitted to Washington through Qatar. They included an end to the war on all fronts, including Lebanon; an end to attacks on Iranian territory; the lifting of the US naval blockade; the release of frozen Iranian funds; and an end to American support for opponents of the Islamic Republic.

The US had not publicly accepted these conditions as of September 22 and the UN general assembly. Indeed Trump threatened to “wipe out” Iran unless it “behaves”. But the existence of such proposals is important, because it demonstrates that the Iranian leadership is not united around the idea of indefinite war.

The contradictions discussed earlier inside Iran therefore remain. One current wants to extract a settlement from Washington without appearing to capitulate. Another fears that concessions will simply encourage further American demands. More conciliatory figures want an agreement even at considerable political cost. And there remain forces prepared to argue that Iran should continue the war until Washington is forced into a more favourable settlement.

Donald Trump faces contradictions of his own. The US possesses overwhelming conventional military superiority, but military superiority does not translate automatically into a political settlement. Washington can continue attacking Iran and blockading its ports, but doing so does not necessarily produce Iranian capitulation. Meanwhile the economic costs of the conflict spread far beyond Iran.

That explains the peculiar mixture of threats, military pressure and diplomatic signalling. It also helps explain why the reopening of the Yemeni front is potentially so dangerous. The renewed Saudi-Houthi confrontation has changed the strategic picture considerably. The Houthis have expanded their position along Yemen’s Red Sea coast and gained greater control over territory overlooking Bab al-Mandab. Their forces have also resumed missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia.

For Riyadh, this could hardly have occurred at a worse moment. With the Strait of Hormuz heavily disrupted, Saudi Arabia has become increasingly dependent upon alternative export routes towards the Red Sea. Bab al-Mandab consequently assumes even greater importance. Saudi Arabia has therefore turned to the US. In September Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman asked Trump for American military assistance against the Houthis. According to reporting based on officials familiar with their discussions, Trump did not agree to direct US military strikes: Washington instead offered intelligence-sharing

and targeting assistance.

This distinction is important. The US is already deeply involved in the regional conflict, but the Trump administration appears reluctant, at least for the moment, to open another front in Yemen. That reluctance should not be confused with disengagement. US Central Command has been working with Saudi forces on intelligence and military planning. Saudi Arabia has also sought air-defence assistance from other states, as stocks of missile interceptors have come under pressure.

The extraordinary implication is that months of regional war are beginning to expose limits even in the weapons inventories available to the US and its allies. Saudi Arabia itself has reportedly approached Britain, France, Egypt and Pakistan for assistance with air defence. Yet there has so far been little indication that these governments want to become directly involved in another Yemeni war. Andy Burnham has agreed to nothing more than a single Voyager refuelling aircraft and some extra military advisors.

The reluctance is understandable. The Saudi intervention, beginning in 2015, was supposed to prevent the consolidation of Houthi power. A little more than a decade later, the Houthis remain a formidable political and military force and now occupy an even more strategically important position. This history should make Washington cautious about the assumption that another bombing campaign can provide a simple solution.

Escalate or deal

This brings us to the central question: is Trump preparing another major attack on Iran, or preparing for negotiations? The evidence at present suggests that these are not necessarily alternatives. Washington is maintaining the capacity for further escalation, while also testing whether military and economic pressure can produce an acceptable agreement. The danger lies precisely in this combination.

Both sides may believe that additional pressure will improve their position at the negotiating table. Iran can tighten pressure around Hormuz, while the Houthis can threaten Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea. Washington can intensify its blockade, retain overwhelming air power and threaten renewed attacks. Israel has its own military calculations and objectives.

A major new attack on Iran could produce renewed Iranian attacks on American bases in the Gulf. Those attacks could draw Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates further into the conflict, irrespective of whether their governments wanted such involvement. Direct US intervention against the Houthis could likewise lead the movement to abandon its current distinction between Saudi and American shipping. The Red Sea and Persian Gulf fronts would then become even more closely connected. And the economic consequences would not remain confined to the region.

We therefore return to where this argument began. The crisis cannot be understood simply as the product of decisions taken in Washington, Tehran or Jerusalem during the last few months. The structure of the confrontation has been developing since 1979 ●

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■ 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.

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Art exists within society

Politics of apolitical culture

Saying sorry over Gaza and pleasing no-one. Behind Ed Sheeran's unconvincing apologies there lies a complex network of commercial interests, political pressures and institutional power, writes **Carl Collins**

Ed Sheeran began his 'Loop Tour' in Auckland, New Zealand, in January and it is scheduled to conclude in Mexico City in December. The rapper, Macklemore, was, of course, one of the support acts for the tour's September performances at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey.

While performing as the opening act, Macklemore told the audience that he had come to publicise "two words that are very near and dear to my heart: 'Free Palestine'."¹ He repeated the phrase, prompting the crowd to join in with the chant. It is worth noting that he also explicitly reassured his "Jewish brothers and sisters" that criticism of Israel was not criticism of Jewish people, and framed his comments as part of a wider appeal for peace, mentioning Lebanon, Cuba, Congo, Sudan and even people "living in fear" of US immigration authorities.² He then performed 'Hind's Hall' - his protest song inspired by student demonstrations against Israel's war in Gaza and the killing of five-year-old Hind Rajab in 2024. At the following night's performance, he referred to events in Gaza as a genocide.

Anti-Israel

This prompted the Israeli-American Council to launch a petition demanding his removal from the tour. Another pop star, Pink, who has millions of followers on social media and is Jewish herself, shared a meme which accused Macklemore of "ambushing" the audience with "anti-Israel propaganda".³

Robert Kraft, the billionaire owner of the Gillette Stadium, barred Macklemore from a future appearance at his venue, criticising the artist's comments as "deeply offensive and hurtful to the Jewish community".⁴ Macklemore alleged that Kraft also organised other stadium venue owners to pressure Sheeran into dropping him or risk having performances cancelled. When stadium owners did just that, Sheeran buckled. His backing band and other support acts subsequently withdrew in solidarity with Macklemore.

Clearly feeling the pressure from the backlash, in the first show since Macklemore's cancellation, Sheeran apologised and described the situation in Gaza as "unjustifiable". The apology was heavily scripted and cringingly read from an autocue, along with tears - undoubtedly highlighting the legal and commercial sensitivities which have developed in the evolving situation.

It has been pointed out that Sheeran has in the past expressed 'political' positions on subjects such as the EU referendum, apparent support for Jeremy Corbyn and Ukraine. However, he has insisted that his shows are not *intended* to be political forums and that he had never wanted to be an "activist musician".⁵ Instead he assures us that he had just inadvertently found himself caught up in an argument about freedom of speech and Gaza.

However the desire to be 'apolitical'



Deserted by his support acts

is in itself socially and politically meaningful. In a period of war, mass displacement and intense political conflict, *choosing* not to address those issues, especially when given such a public platform, establishes a relationship of sorts to them: not making any political statements or taking any action can itself be viewed as a political choice or necessity.

Hegemony operates not merely by censorship of particular ideas, but by establishing the boundaries of what appears normal, reasonable and commercially viable. When someone says that they are 'apolitical', or that they do not have an opinion on important social and political questions such as war, what that tells us is that: (a) they unconsciously just repeat or acquiesce with the ideas and politics of the society that surrounds them, accepting and being shaped by what the hegemonic powers establish as being the 'common sense' of the day; or (b) they are lying.

Sheeran may claim to be an apolitical artist, but art is political.

Around a stadium performance sits an enormous structure of promoters, venue owners, sponsors, contractors, audiences, commercial relationships, reputations, capital and geopolitical actors. The apparent freedom of the artist is mediated by all of these things. The entertainment industry presents itself as a marketplace, where artists sell their particular commodity, audiences buy tickets and everyone is free to choose. But the market is not neutral.

If venue owners, such as, in this instance, Robert Kraft, who as an orthodox Jew and outspoken supporter of Israel, has a vested interest in the narratives at play in the cultural sphere, can collectively determine that a particular political intervention makes an artist unacceptable, market mechanisms themselves can regulate political expression. This need not be overt, formal state censorship. It

can operate subtly in the shaping of 'common sense' and 'acceptability', through weapons such as, in this case, economic coercion (ie, threatening Sheeran with a cancellation of the tour, and thereby access to the means through which culture reaches an audience).

Political art

The reverse proposition is equally important, in that explicitly 'political' art is not automatically 'superior'. Love songs, comedies, fantasies, stories about friendship, landscapes or personal experiences have a perfectly legitimate place in culture. The Marxist observation is not that every artist must write about, say, direct class struggle, but instead a recognition that every artist operates within particular social conditions.

The hegemonic powers are able to clamp down on those explicitly political artists that do emerge. Pete Seeger, the late popular singer of protest music, who was explicitly connected to organised labour, civil rights and peace, was blacklisted during the McCarthy period. And his later clashes with television executives over his attempt to perform 'Waist-deep in the Big Muddy' on *The Smothers Brothers comedy hour* in the form he wanted⁶ demonstrated that, while popular culture can be a vehicle for political ideas, the ability to use it in that way is conditioned by the institutions through which culture reaches an audience.

In addition to overt censorship and subtle coercion, capitalism has another weapon: the commodification of 'political' art. A protest song, if popular enough, can become just another product. A 'radical' musician can be transformed into just another brand. Symbols of rebellion can be printed on merchandise. A song about inequality can even become background music at a rightwing political event.

Take Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA' - a song about a working class Vietnam veteran who returns home to find no economic opportunities, an indifferent government, and a life trapped by systemic neglect. This was used by Ronald Reagan's 1984 presidential election campaign as a jingoistic celebratory anthem because of its booming, triumphant chorus - subtly, but deliberately, omitting the verses about institutional betrayal.⁷ Or Woody Guthrie's 'This land is your land' - now frequently treated as an uncomplicated patriotic anthem, despite having been written partly in response to the sentimental nationalism of 'God bless America'.⁸ Guthrie's politics were rooted in the experiences of working people, migrants and the poor. However, as the song travelled through American culture, some of its sharper social criticism was gradually detached from the context in which it was written. A cultural industry under capitalism can absorb political ideas, detach them from their original context and sell them back to us as entertainment.

More recently, Kneecap, the Belfast hip-hop group, have made Irish republicanism, the Irish language and opposition to British rule central to their artistic identity. Their politics are not merely an external statement attached to their music: they are part of its language, subject matter and public persona. Their conflicts with political institutions and the latter's attempts to restrict their performances have become part of the group's story.⁹ Yet it must be recognised that their political identity has also contributed to their *commercial* visibility.

Controversy generates publicity; the political persona becomes part of the product; audiences consume not just songs, but the experience of seeing a controversial group. This does not mean that their politics are insincere, nor does commercial success invalidate political art. But it does demonstrate a contradiction at the heart of commodified culture: an artist can appear to challenge the dominant order, while simultaneously becoming a commodity within it.

Ultimately, a Marxist approach must avoid two equally crude positions. The first is that commercially successful art is necessarily reactionary and therefore worthless; the second is that explicitly revolutionary art is automatically good and politically useful.

Music value

Macklemore's politics do not make his music artistically valuable by definition, just as Sheeran's commercial success does not make his work artistically worthless. For what it is worth, I think both of these artists are poor-quality. But we still have to recognise the political and cultural significance of what is going on around them.

We should be capable of separating artists from their work without pretending that artists exist outside society. Think of Lenin's admiration for Tolstoy, whom he

regarded as an important artist, while simultaneously subjecting his political and philosophical ideas to severe criticism.¹⁰ The value of a work cannot simply be determined by whether its creator has the 'correct' political opinions.

People can enjoy music made by deeply unpleasant or politically objectionable individuals (for instance, I happen to like Morrissey's music, despite him having shifted significantly to a rightwing, nationalist outlook - away from the anti-establishment, countercultural icon he once was). The history of popular culture is full of such contradictions. Personal enjoyment of a work does not require political agreement with its creator. At the same time, we should not fall into the opposite error and imagine that art exists in a social vacuum.

The culture industry can absorb rebellion and the entertainment industry can subsequently sell it as culture, while staying alert to the chance of any sort of rebellion creating an actual institutional cost. That is not unique to this dispute; it is a general contradiction of commodified culture. Macklemore's political identity is also commodified. Sheeran's enormous commercial success depends upon a different relationship between artist, audience and institution. Yet both operate within the same cultural economy. The apparent neutrality of culture is therefore itself socially organised.

The real lesson of this story is not that musicians should all become political activists or that political artists should be treated as automatically virtuous. It is that art exists within society. Art is produced under capitalism, circulated through capitalist institutions and consumed by people whose lives are shaped by class, politics and history. Sometimes artists explicitly confront those conditions. Sometimes they retreat into the personal. Sometimes their work is appropriated, commodified or stripped of its original meaning ●

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