

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly  
**worker**



**Italy's hot autumn:  
strikes, smoke bombs  
and tear gas**

- Letters and debate
- LU active abstention
- Immigration controls
- Match girls remembered

No 1035 Thursday November 20 2014

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

£1/€1.10

LEFT UNITY

Safe spaces  
checked, past  
gains defended



## LETTERS



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

## Fighting

Very recently I was elected by the students at the University of Birmingham to serve as a first-year guild councillor for the University's guild of students. Unlike most left candidates in student elections, I refused to adopt a reformist agenda. As a Leninist, I perceive elections to be first and foremost an opportunity to agitate people's consciousness. I, along with comrades in Communist Students, was adamant that I wasn't interested in putting forward 'respectable' and 'reasonable' policies in order to narrowly scrape a position onto the guild bureaucracy; I wanted to put forward policies that would make people think.

In my campaign materials I openly declared myself a Marxist and a member of Communist Students; despite the fact various people on the soft left encouraged me to drop such labels, as they thought it could cost me the election. I also refused to alter two of my key policies - the advocacy of freedom of speech/association on campus and the campaign for a more democratic guild. I was told that talking about reforming guild structures, so that the board of trustees (a body which is unelected, which can overturn decisions made by the guild, and whose members are mostly non-students) is either abolished or elected, was a 'hard sell'; *ergo* I shouldn't mention it to students, as they'd find it 'boring'. On the contrary, I found that most students were aghast at the fact Birmingham is the only university in the Russell Group to have a body, made up of university management, which can overturn democratically agreed student decisions.

My advocacy of the freedom of speech/association on campus caused a lot of ambivalence amongst various lefties. Some comrades took it upon themselves to commend me for standing up for this, and for actively voicing my opposition to the suspensions imposed on students who took part in an occupation last year, whilst helpfully reminding me that my policy could be *misinterpreted* as advocating the freedom for unsavoury groups, such as the 'rape apologist' SWP or the 'racist' Young Independence, to organise on campus; or as advocating a deviation from 'safe spaces' (freedom of speech could lead to someone getting offended). It is scary that such Stalinist ways of thinking passes for common sense on the left nowadays, but that is where decades of defeats and demoralisation have led the movement. Many comrades have lost confidence in their politics; they don't believe they can win people over through debate.

Unfortunately, guild electoral regulations mean candidates cannot be endorsed by an organisation, as that could provide them with an "unfair advantage over other candidates". Such rules undeniably hindered the type of campaign I was trying to run, making the process much more individualised. As a lone communist, I obviously accepted help from friends, including people in the Green Party and Left Unity. Whilst I greatly appreciated their assistance, I think it is fair to say that, when they were arguing for free education, a lot of 'We can afford it', 'Germany reversed their tuition fees' and other such reformism came out their mouths. So, whilst I tried to avoid a reformist agenda, I think the campaign inevitably drifted into centrism from time to time.

Had I been allowed to be officially endorsed by CS, then perhaps things would have worked out differently. I also think that, had CS been in a stronger position, and had the guild allowed non-students to campaign for me, we could have drafted in volunteers from outside

Birmingham who were on the same ideological page to help out with the canvassing and thus make the campaign message more coherent.

Ultimately, the campaign was a success. Two first-year councillors were elected: the candidate who secured the first position was from the Jewish Society and polled 190 votes (45%), I won the second position with 140 votes (33%), the candidate from Labour Students got 90 votes (21%), while 'Reopen nominations' polled 11 votes (3%). I'm not going to claim that all 140 people who voted for me have been won over to the ideas of communism. Indeed, many did so because they knew me, they were vaguely left, or because I was the only candidate they saw campaigning. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students didn't vote at all; the election for first year guild councillors only attracted a paltry 1.3% turnout.

Despite these qualifications, the campaign did draw some serious people out of the woodwork. A batch of students did express their support for the ideas of Marxism and hopefully I can continue to have a dialogue with them now the election battle is over.

By the time you read this letter, I'll have already taken my seat as a guild councillor. I'll have also just moved a motion of censure against all the sabbatical officers, at my first meeting, for deciding to cancel guild-subsidised coaches to the upcoming free education demonstration in London, because it ostensibly breaches the National Union of Students 'safer spaces' policy.

**Robert Eagleton**  
Birmingham

## Percentage

While I thought Eddie Ford's description of Ed Miliband's difficulties was useful and interesting ('The coup that never was', November 13), I think he missed the central reason why Miliband and Labour are in such dire straits: namely, the disastrous and deeply unambitious '35% strategy' - ie, the notion that a majority Labour government might scrape in with just 35% of the vote.

When the Labour Party was founded in the early 20th century, its supporters believed that in the end virtually all working people, the large majority of the population, would come to vote for their party. From its beginning, Labour's vote grew dramatically. Originally, Labour was class-based. Britain was a society divided into two distinct classes with irreconcilable economic and social interests. In the conflict between these two classes, Labour represented workers by hand and by brain, while the Conservatives represented the property-owning class. The role of the Labour Party was to represent and serve the interests of the working class and to challenge the power and sway of the other. This vision and strategy was dramatically successful, displacing one of the two capitalist parties, the Liberals, and brought rising membership and votes right up to 1951.

In today's Britain, the core working class still accounts for over half the working population. Including all those who are dependent on a wage, salary or benefit, the broad working class represents around 75% of the total population. Labour's founders would have aimed to win the electoral support of at least 60% of the modern electorate, and were once well on the way to achieving that. Modern Labour's 'ambitions' are pathetic and pitiable in comparison.

The '35% strategy' in a funny way follows Tony Blair's 'triangulation' policies - ie, the assumption you can take your core vote for granted, because there is nowhere for them to go. The only difference is that, while Blair shat on those core voters to demonstrate his capitalist credentials to Rupert Murdoch, Miliband makes minor, timid, tepid, limp policy attempts to appeal to them, while

hoping the electoral system will produce an arithmetic majority in parliament.

A Labour government 'elected' by just 35% of the vote - a fifth of the electorate - would have no democratic mandate, let alone the organised mass backing which will be necessary, to implement any real reforms in the interests of working people.

Andrew Murray, in his polemic with Left Unity, was right to say that in 2010 Ed Miliband was the most credible leadership candidate on offer. It was excellent he won the support of a majority of trade unionists in the electoral college. It would have been better if he had won a majority of individual members as well. It was obvious leadership had come very early for him and he was far from the finished article. But we were optimistic he could grow into the role, build a strong team around him and develop strong relationships with progressive, organised labour.

It is clear now that Miliband is no calibre leader of any description, certainly no working class one. He is clearly intelligent, serious and compassionate, and would perhaps be at his best behind the scenes assembling the best possible team and thinking out strategy and policy. Coupling a 35% strategy with an electoral campaign based on his personality and 'appeal' is going to be a double disaster.

Two years into the job should have been enough for him to grow into the role, but in 2012 we had the utterly nonsensical and ridiculous notion of 'one-nation Labour'. A silly, student prankish attempt to appropriate a phrase invented by a Tory prime minister for his own purposes. Ed Miliband is no Disraeli and clearly learned no Marxism from his father.

Murray was wrong in asserting there is no electoral space to the left of Labour. Working class people and working class communities have rejected patronising, arrogant Blairite 'triangulation' by either voting for other parties, not voting at all or even dropping off the electoral register altogether. Labour's core vote is today haemorrhaging to the Scottish National Party, the UK Independence Party and the Greens. At the moment, even 35% would seem to be unachievable.

Modern Labour should be aiming literally to double its electoral support, and developing policies, organisations and relationships purely and simply with that aim. Labour can only win by once again becoming the political party of the working class, a working class with very different needs and indeed opposite aims to those of the establishment and the ruling class.

This clearly cannot be achieved in a few months or even a few years. But we need to aim big, and to win big and irreversibly. It may take five, 10 or 20 years, but who cares, if when we do win we genuinely do bring about the 'end of history'? That is the 'long war' we need to conduct.

**Andrew Northall**  
Kettering

## Thank god

Eddie Ford's article on Miliband's electoral future misses a crucial factor when he looked at voting polls. Labour is due to be wiped out in Scotland in the next election. 'Yes' voters are quite consciously preparing a campaign which will aim to render them as rare as Tory MPs, by voting SNP and Green. This, if effective, will reduce even further the chance of Labour producing enough MPs to form a government.

I must say that Nicola Sturgeon, the newly elected leader of the SNP, is shot through with hypocrisy and double standards. Don't misunderstand me - I would have voted 'yes' in the referendum and believe in Scottish independence. But the principle that Scotland must be allowed self-determination and a voice is completely undermined by Nicola Sturgeon's public statements that she

doesn't believe there should be an EU referendum. That the British public should not be allowed a vote to decide in or out of the EU after banging on for decades about the right of a similar referendum on in or out of the UK.

Her public desire to forge a coalition with a minority Labour government is in main part to prevent a UK referendum on the EU. Apart from the glaring hypocrisy and double standards, she misses entirely the point that many 'no' voters who would have otherwise voted 'yes' did so because the SNP had ruled out a Scottish referendum on EU membership had they won. She aims to deny the voice of not only the folk south of the border, but Scottish people too on this subject.

Ee, thank god these members of the political ruling class are around to tell us what our best interests are and to stay our hands and voices when we foolishly seek to decide things for ourselves.

**David Douglass**  
South Shields

## Fence-sitters

Stan Keable's article, 'Threat of witch-hunt averted' (November 13), correctly welcomed the withdrawal of the witch-hunting part of the national committee statement at the Labour Representation Committee annual general meeting. The bit of the statement that took my fancy was the last paragraph, which proclaimed: "Anyone may advocate a course of action and seek the approval or cooperation of the LRC through the appropriate forum [can't get more democratic than that!]. If such action is not agreed, members are expected to refrain from continuing to advocate a course of action unless there is a material change of circumstances."

Unless "material change of circumstances" means simply 'tomorrow', we can see that the Russian Revolution would never have got off the ground because only Trotsky and Shliapnikov agreed with the *April theses* initially. So under the watchful eye of the troika of Andrew Berry, Valerie Graham and Simon Deville, Lenin would have to shut up about all that 'All power to the soviets' stuff until "a material change of circumstances" - Kornilov's attempted coup? - released him from his silence, by which time that other politically similar troika, Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev, would have ended all hope of rallying the masses for the second revolution by their support for the war and the provisional government of Kerensky.

Which brings me to the big problem with Stan's account: war, or rather the war against the Russian speakers of the Donbass. Advocating work within the "mass organisations of the working class" - the trade unions and the Labour Party - Leon Trotsky wrote: "A revolutionary group ... can work most effectively at present by opposition to social patriots within the mass organisations. In view of the increasing acuteness of the international situation, it is absolutely essential to be within the mass organisations, while there is the possibility of doing revolutionary work within them."

This was the central political issue at the LRC AGM and Stan cannot bring himself even to mention it. Stan's Labour Party Marxists proposed a wrecking amendment to the Brent and Harrow LRC motion, which advocated affiliation to the Solidarity with the Anti-fascist Resistance in Ukraine (SARU), to delete all except the bit that proposed disaffiliation from Chris Ford's pro-Maidan Ukraine Solidarity Campaign. So on the subject of the looming World War III the CPGB are neutral - a stance they confirmed the following week at the Left Unity conference by backing the Lewisham motion (which denounces the Kiev far-right regime and supports self-rule for Donbass), but not the amendment to

it that proposes affiliation to SARU. Despite supporting self-rule, they won't back the people fighting for it (as Richard Brenner reported on Facebook).

So we are back to 1914 in many ways; once again imperialism is beating the drums of war and Russophobia is everywhere - far more in the LRC than in the LU, of course, which is why the CPGB took a 'firmer' stance against the opponents of social-patriotism there than in Left Unity.

Maciej Zurowski speaks up for the CPGB on Facebook and takes a very orthodox-seeming line to cover this capitulation to social-patriotism: "I cannot think of many terms in the history of the workers' movement more obfuscatory and corrupt than 'anti-fascism'. True to tradition, Solidarity for the Anti-Fascist Resistance in the Ukraine employs it in a way that conceals more than it says about the politics on the ground. We support the right to self-determination of the various regions in the Ukraine, but we won't idealise competing nationalist factions or sow illusions in their political character."

Indeed, Zuri: the old Stalinist, popular-frontist hiding of the class lines is visible from some within the SARU and must be fought. But even more appalling are the capitulators to social-patriots on the leadership on the LRC and in the Socialist Resistance leaders of Left Unity. And they got a big boost on November 16, when Ukrainian nationalists commemorated their dead of 'all wars', including Nazi collaborators who murdered Jews, Russians and Poles in World War II, by laying a wreath at the Cenotaph. SARU managed a silent counterdemonstration, which carried a placard saying: "Remember the victims of Ukrainian Nazism - past and present". Around 60-70 attended.

Revolutionary socialists know what a united front is and what a popular front is, and we are in no doubt that SARU is the forum to fight for the politics of the socialist revolution in preparation for the momentous events that are now unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East. The CPGB are fence-sitting.

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Dangerous

I would like to respond to the letter (October 23) regarding my article on 'Democratic revolution and the contradiction of capital' (October 16), critiquing Mike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy* (2008), and specify the issue of the proletariat as alleged "passive victim of history". The Frankfurt School of the 1930s recognised that the two historic constituencies of revolutionary politics, the masses and the party, had failed: the masses had led to fascism; and the party had led to Stalinism.

Trotsky had remarked, in his *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), on the "interference of the masses in historical events": "... whether this is good or bad we leave to the judgment of moralists". But, as Lenin had written in *What is to be done?* (1902), this was not a spontaneous development, but rather such apparent "spontaneity could be explained by the prior history of the workers' movement for socialism". The Russian Revolution had broken out on International Women's Day, a working class holiday invented by Marxists in the socialist parties of the Second International.

Trotsky wrote, in 'Stalinism and Bolshevism' (1937), that Bolshevism was "only a political tendency closely fused with the working class, but not identical with it" and had "never identified itself with either the October revolution or the Soviet state that issued from it". So what was political party for Marxists such as Trotsky, Lenin

and Luxemburg? It was one part of a differentiated whole of society and its political struggles, a political form that allowed for conscious participation in all the variety of arenas for politics that had developed in capitalism: parliaments, labour unions, mass strikes and their councils, and popular assemblies, including workers' councils for revolutionary governance. However, as a political form - as Andrew Feenberg has pointed out in *The philosophy of praxis* (2014), about Lukács' account of the articulation of theory and practice in Bolshevism in *History and class consciousness* and related writings - the party was not only or even especially a subject, but also and, perhaps most importantly, an object of political action. It fell to Trotsky, in the aftermath of the failure of Bolshevism, to attempt to sustain this Marxist concept of political form, against Stalinism's liquidation of politics in the USSR and in the international communist movement.

In this, Trotsky followed Lenin and Luxemburg, as well as Marx and Engels. Trotsky followed Marx in regarding both Stalinism and fascism as forms of the Bonapartist state. The death of the left as a political force is signalled by its shying away from and anathematising the political party for social transformation - revolution - not only in anarchism and left communist notions of politics without parties, but most of all in the long and pervasive, if largely unrecognised, Stalinist inheritance that justifies the party only by identifying it with the people, which puts an end to politics, including political consciousness. What Dick Howard, following Marx, means, when he warns of the 'anti-political' crisis of politics in capitalism expressed by Bonapartism, is this unmediated identification of politics with society, whether through the subordination of society or the liquidation of the party in the state - all in the name of quieting the inherent instability of politics, which society in its crisis of capitalism cannot afford.

For, as Marx recognised in the aftermath of failed revolution in 1848, Bonapartism was not only undemocratic liberalism, unbridled capitalism without political accountability to society, but was also the state run amok, dominating society, and with a great deal of popular support - for instance by what Marx called the 'lumpenproletariat'; an example of the reduction of society to a politically undifferentiated mass, the very opposite of what Marx considered the necessary 'class-consciousness' of the proletariat. This is why Trotsky rightly regarded Stalinism as the antithesis of Bolshevism.

Stalinism's suppression of politics in the Marxist sense was not only undemocratic, but also popular, both in the USSR and internationally. It was borne of the same social and thus political crisis in capitalism. Stalinism was not the cause, but was an effect, of the failure of politics in capitalism. We still need to try to overcome this problem of capitalism by constituting it through the inherently dangerous game of party politics.

**Chris Cutrone**  
email

## Communalists

The ethno-chauvinist ideology often purveyed by Jewish comrades is again on display when Moshé Machover (Letters, November 13) repeats the communalists' tortured argument: we are uniquely qualified to prove Israel doesn't speak for all the Jews! ('White folks against the KKK', anyone?)

That this ethno-chauvinism has been allowed to fester - covered for rather than exposed by official anti-racism - permits the flourishing of the thinnest of veneers. Who, in actual reality, would think possible that Israel speaks for Jews without exception?

These communalists pretend they perform internationalist service by proving (how wonderful!) that a few

Jews don't support Israel uncritically. Anyone not blinded by Jewish ethno-chauvinism sees that what they actually try to assert is that their beliefs are terribly important because they're Jews.

That this licence is claimed based on Israeli boasts substantiates the symbiosis between left communalism and Zionism. The main function of Israeli leftists is to prove that Israel is a 'free country', which 'tolerates dissent' - unlike the loathsome Arab states.

**Stephen Diamond**  
USA

## Unproven group

Pete McLaren sets out very well the problem with free schools (Letters, November 13). Much of what he says can be found on the National Union of Teachers website ([www.teachers.org](http://www.teachers.org)) under 'Edufacts'. But it is worth developing his last bullet point with a local example from Waltham Forest.

It is even worse than Pete states in some cases. A local trust called Lion Academy, who have three primary schools in the borough, now want to set up a secondary free school in 2016 for 1,400 secondary-age students. This outfit have no experience at all of running secondary schools and their record at primary level is questionable. This has not stopped their application, because they see this as a business opportunity, pure and simple.

Any reasonable application would assess the geographical need for places and look for sites. This could mean two schools in different parts of the borough, for example. Not this lot! They want the biggest possible school on any site, no matter what chaos this could cause other schools locally. They don't care where their business is done, as long as they can make money. We have heard of one site they are looking at, no more than 50 yards from an existing secondary school, and another at the far end of the borough.

Their arrogance knows no bounds. They are asking parents at their primary schools to sign up to their new secondary school. They already have the largest primary in the country and it seems their desire to build a school for 1,400 is based on the number of students they teach in their existing schools. The existing primary schools have a very high turnover of staff, with no NUT reps. They have a highly questionable management structure with excessively high wages for those at the top.

The local authority in Waltham Forest has told Lion Academy Trust that they have no support. The head teachers are up in arms at the disparaging public remarks LAT have made about other local schools and the unions are furious. It will be interesting to see if, despite these forces against them, the department for education still allow this totally unproven group to run schools in Waltham Forest.

**Steve White**  
email

## Microcosm

I would like to comment on a *Daily Mail* front-page story, which asked: "Is there no-one left in Britain who can make a sandwich?"

The Greencore company has apparently travelled to Hungary to recruit 300 people to work in its Northampton sandwich-making factory, which already employs 1,100 workers. This news has sparked howls of protest in a town where 7,800 people are in receipt of job seekers' allowance.

Greencore started out as the privatised Irish Sugar Company and has expanded into food processing, including sandwich-making for Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, Sainsbury's and Asda. In the UK and Ireland it has a turnover of £25 million a week.

The story is a microcosm of what is happening across the UK. A closer look at the facts says a lot. Most workers in the factory are on the minimum wage of £6.50 an hour and are supplied via

an employment agency. 'Cold money' payments of 26p an hour only kick in once a worker has passed a three-month probationary period. The jobs involve shift work and only one day a week's work is guaranteed. With rents and mortgages to pay, no wonder very few of the 7,800 people on JSA in Northampton have considered applying for jobs at the factory.

The *Daily Mail* story shows the need for Unite the union to fight for a national minimum wage of £12 an hour; the abolition of employment agencies; a guaranteed 35-hour week; trade union control over hiring and firing; and the opening of the books of Greencore to inspection by experts employed by the union.

**John Smithee**  
Cambridgeshire

## Real loss

I've just learnt that my old friend and comrade from Leeds, Jim Padmore, has died of cancer. When I was based in Yorkshire we used to meet up regularly to talk politics and he was also an ally in much of my campaign work and political interventions.

I first met him when we were both involved in the Campaign for a New Workers' Party - he had very little time for the dumbed-down politics on which the Socialist Party wanted to base the CNWP. He later helped set up an active Hands Off the People of Iran group in Leeds. He was a subscriber to the *Weekly Worker* right until his death and had plenty of comments and questions based on its content.

When he went back to uni (as a maths student at Leeds) he took up our challenge to join Communist Students and fight (albeit briefly) for his (fairly ortho-Trot) politics within the group. He drew up a raft of amendments to the draft CS platform, which was discussed at our founding conference. After leaving Yorkshire, whenever I met him at some conference or national demo, we would chat and he would fill me in on what was happening up in Leeds.

He was a really nice, if slightly awkward, person. He was generous with his time and books and other publications. He was also reliable. The last I heard from him was on Facebook where he was arguing against the collapse of many left comrades into Scottish nationalism.

One of his most striking features, which put him apart from the rest of the left (and was no doubt why he fell out with so many groups - he had been in Socialist Action, Permanent Revolution, Workers Power, Socialist Fight and possibly others over the years), was his honesty. He was always happy to point out where he disagreed with us and have a debate, but also he was not deterred by being seen to be in agreement with CPGBers by others when that was the case.

His death is very sad news. A real loss.

**Dave Isaacson**  
Milton Keynes

## Do the bus stop

For the two weeks surrounding Remembrance Sunday I wore as a substitute poppy a CPGB badge - when out and about on my outside coat; when at work semi-surreptitiously on a bracelet.

I half-expected some active hostility, but everything passed off without comment, except that two German-speakers I gave advice to at a bus stop about the vagaries of road works and a diversion said they liked my political statement - which gave me an opening to engage them on the esteem in which the CPGB holds the pre-World War I German SPD and Karl Kautsky.

I had little time to elaborate before we were separated by our different bus routes. Nevertheless, I was gratified by this quite unexpected modest positive experience of wearing a 'dissident poppy'.

**Tony Rees**  
email

# ACTION

## CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast commenting on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts>.

## London Communist Forum

**Sunday November 23, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. This meeting: Vol 1, appendix: 'Results of the immediate process of production' (continued). Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk).

## Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology  
**Tuesday November 25, 6.30pm:** 'Woman's biggest husband is the moon: how hunter-gatherers maintain social equality'. Speaker: Jerome Lewis.

Cock Tavern, 23 Phoenix Road, London NW1. Talks are free, but small donations are welcome.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group:  
<http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

## Homes in Hackney

**Thursday November 20, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, Round Chapel, Lower Clapton Road, London E5. Demand more council and social housing in Hackney.

Organised by Hackney People's Assembly:  
[www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/hackney](http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/hackney)

## Whistleblowing and the security state

**Thursday November 20, 6pm:** Forum, room B04, Birkbeck main building, University of London, London WC1. Speakers include whistleblowers from GCHQ, NSA, FBI and US state department. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

## Socialist Theory Study Group

**Thursday November 20, 6pm:** Discussion, Jack Jones House, Unite the Union, 1 Islington, Liverpool L3. Marx's 'Critique of Hegel's philosophy in general', part 3, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844).

Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group:  
[teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com](mailto:teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com).

## Teesside People's Assembly

**Tuesday November 25, 7.15pm:** Meeting, St Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough TS1. Discussing potential actions on local authority cuts and public transport.

Organised by Teesside People's Assembly:  
[www.teessidepa.tumblr.com](http://www.teessidepa.tumblr.com).

## Eye-witness from Gaza

**Wednesday November 26, 6.30pm:** Report-back from trade union representatives, Unite the Union London regional office, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1.

Organised by Unite the Union: [www.unitetheunion.org](http://www.unitetheunion.org).

## War, colonialism and protest

**Wednesday November 26, 7pm:** Public meeting, Haringey Kurdish Community Centre, 11 Portland Gardens, London N4. Speakers include: Jeremy Corbyn MP, Katherine Connelly, Dr Hakim Adi.

Organised by North London Stop the War Coalition:  
[northlondonstwc@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:northlondonstwc@hotmail.co.uk).

## Humberside friends of Palestine

**Thursday November 27, 7.30pm:** Buffet fundraiser, Hitchcock's vegetarian restaurant, 1 Bishop's Lane, High Street, Hull. £18 (£15 concessions). Booking required: telephone 01482 320233.

Organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign:  
[www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

## Isis, Iraq and imperialism

**Saturday November 29, 3pm:** Student educational forum. Room GR3, University of Sheffield students union, Western Bank, Sheffield S10. Speaker: Yassamine Mather.

Organised by Left Unity Sheffield:  
[www.facebook.com/sheffieldleftunity](http://www.facebook.com/sheffieldleftunity).

## Remember the miners' strike

**Tuesday December 2, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, The Mesmerist, 1-3 Prince Albert Street, Brighton BN1 1HE.

Organised by Labour Representation Committee: [www.l-r-c.org.uk](http://www.l-r-c.org.uk).

## Ecosocialism

**Saturday December 6, 1pm:** Meeting, Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield WF1: 'Green socialist ideas past and present'. Free admission and a free (meat-free!) light buffet. All welcome.

Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group:  
[www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html](http://www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html).

## Trade unions and Palestine

**Saturday December 6, 10am to 4.30pm:** Public meeting, Brighton University, Pavilion Parade Building, Pavilion Parade, Brighton BN2. Free entry.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

## After the referendum

**Saturday December 13, 12 noon:** Debate, Govanhill Baths, Calder Street, Glasgow G42. Alan Armstrong (RIC) and Sandy McBurney (Left Unity) on the way forward for the left in Scotland.

**2.30pm:** Report-back from Left Unity conference.

Organised by Left Unity Glasgow (South):  
[leftunityglasgowsouth-request@lists.riseup.net](mailto:leftunityglasgowsouth-request@lists.riseup.net).

## CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

**LEFT UNITY**

# Safe spaces checked, gains defended

Peter Manson introduces our coverage of the LU policy conference

Left Unity's November 15-16 policy conference resulted in the retention of a number of important gains and some useful achievements - not least over the appalling 'safe spaces' policy proposals. Once more, this intersectionalist nonsense, despite being rewritten yet again, was kicked into the long grass. In fact the Communist Platform's alternative "code of conduct" received more votes than did the cherished 'safe spaces' (although the former was not endorsed either - see the separate reports on pages 6 and 7).

The excellent LU policy on the European Union was reaffirmed, and this was protected from any watering down in next year's general election by the rejection of a straight electoral merger with the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. In addition, any trace of social-imperialist support for western intervention against Islamic State was voted down, and the CP's policy on crime and punishment was agreed by a clear majority.

So, all in all, it was a successful two days from our point of view. However, it has to be said that the conference was beset by organisational problems, which made the weekend a trying experience - especially for political newcomers, I am sure. Ironically this stems from the extremely well-meaning attempt to be 'inclusive' and the rather less commendable effort to appear 'bottom-up'. So any member or group of members was able to propose any number of motions and amendments, and this resulted in an agenda stretching to 106 A4 pages. Added to which, attempts at compositing the various (often very lengthy) motions were not always successful, and it could be very difficult at times to follow exactly which item was being proposed.

This was compounded by the fact that a large part of the agenda was taken up discussing the reports from the various policy commissions. These typically took up five pages and attracted a raft of amendments. Of course, any member could volunteer to join any of the commissions and these tended to produce either a mish-mash or a set of platitudes (or both), through the attempt to reconcile sometimes incompatible viewpoints within a single document.

All this resulted in a very crammed agenda - there was no way we were going to get through it all, despite the two-minute limit on speeches from the floor.

There were certain other difficulties too. I will not dwell on the problems with the microphones, which appeared to have a mind of their own, frequently cutting off when a speaker was in full flow. Nor on the overhead projector, which was used to display the motion being discussed on the screen above the stage and tended to blind the conference chair!

The conference began with the report from the standing orders committee, when John Pearson of the SOC explained how we would try to get through the agenda. The whole item was supposed to take 10 minutes, but his report alone took up 15, and this was followed by several challenges to the SOC's proposals - mainly from those comrades whose motions were likely to fall off the agenda. Amongst them was Jack Conrad of the Communist Platform, who stated that the CP motion on the constitutional right to bear arms had been placed under the 'Miscellaneous' section, instead of under 'Constitution and democracy', where it belonged. This meant that it would not be reached. However, this challenge was defeated

on a show of hands.

But even those challenges that were accepted by conference had little practical effect. For example, principal speaker Pete Green said that the decision to exclude amendments to the LU constitution from the agenda would mean that we would go on for another year with a "seriously dysfunctional constitution". Conference agreed with him, but the item was still not reached.

## Hyperbole

As a result of these organisational disputes, the conference proper got underway some 50 minutes late with national secretary Kate Hudson's annual report, which was overflowing with hyperbole. She said it had been "no mean feat" to found a new left party, especially one which had "achieved an extraordinary amount". LU had mobilised an "enormous turnout" on the TUC demonstration last month, had had a "major presence" on the earlier Gaza demo and had also been "prominent" in Iraq protests. She was confident we would "rise to the challenge" of next year's general election - we did, after all, have "similar politics" to Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, our "sister parties" in Europe.

Speaking of which, Syriza's Marina Prentoulis was one of the guest speakers invited to address conference. She confidently predicted that her party was going to form "the first left government in Europe" - something that would represent the "victory of the left across Europe". Later on another guest speaker - Ken Loach, whose media intervention had led to the formation of LU in the first place - made a pertinent comment on the likes of Syriza and Podemos. He asked: "When they get big, can they keep their politics?" Of course, neither organisation had ever been guided by principled Marxist politics in the first place, but Syriza is now regarded by sections of the bourgeoisie as possibly a safe option. Nevertheless comrade Prentoulis was enthusiastically applauded, including by comrades from Socialist Resistance and the International Socialist Network (see p8).

The first commission report was on the environment and was presented by Sean Thompson. Inadvertently illustrating the vague and unsatisfactory nature of the report's contents, he said that our task as "ecosocialists" was to "make greens redder and reds greener". However, the report was accepted by conference, with the notable exception of the CP which abstained.

Following the environment debate, Will McMahon moved the equally eclectic and insubstantial crime and justice commission report, asserting that we needed a "much smaller criminal justice system, based on much greater equality". Mike Copestake of Sheffield moved the CP's straightforward and much shorter motion calling, amongst other things, for the defence of the jury system, the election and recallability of judges and magistrates, fines proportionate to income, etc. He urged the reference back of the commission report. In replying to the debate, Bianca Todd defended the report on the rather insubstantial basis that "we need something on crime for the general election". In fact Sheffield's motion, along with three others, was passed, but unfortunately so was the report.

However, there was a better result in the following session, on social security, when the commission report was indeed referred back, following strong criticism from the floor. One speaker said the report was "dangerous



Beaten: safe spaces

and reactionary", while another likened the proposal for a "two-tier" national insurance system to something from a Frank Field scheme. Another comrade pointed out that the report was in conflict with what had been agreed at a previous LU conference.

But unfortunately the report from the education commission was accepted, despite the usual eclecticism and weaknesses. The CP's Sarah McDonald pointed out that the whole thing had not been sufficiently thought through and was not comprehensive in the areas it dealt with - even the "secular amendments" to the report did not go far enough. Once more the report was defended on an insubstantial basis - it was only a "framework document", and so could be improved later, we were told! Having failed to win a reference back the CP bloc abstained in the final vote.

## International

The 'International' session saw several contentious issues. The commission report exhibited the usual eclecticism and had been weakened in particular by the acceptance of an amendment from SR, which was clearly part of an attempt to water down LU's strong opposition to any campaign of withdrawal from the European Union. Fortunately, however, conference rejected another SR amendment, which wanted to sneak in a reversal of our commitment to remain within the EU, and fight for working class policies in that context, by deferring a decision on the LU position on any referendum to a future conference.

National treasurer Andrew Burgin and the CP's Mike Macnair both spoke against. Comrade Burgin stated that Europe is a "fundamental part of our work". He also admitted that "some comrades are sceptical about Syriza" - although personally he was enthused by the situation in Greece, where we were likely to see a "workers' government".

But the main thing was, although the commission report was accepted, the central plank of LU policy on this "fundamental part of our work" - Europe - remained in place.

The 'International' session also saw the defeat of attempts to weaken our opposition to imperialist intervention in the Middle East. The argument was that the Kurds have the right to self-defence against Islamic State and this means we must join a campaign to demand imperialist heavy weapons and air strikes to back up their ground counteroffensive. Some also expressed illusions in the Free Syrian Army.

This was countered by Ben Lewis and Yasmine Mather, both supporters of the CP. Comrade Mather said: "Decriminalisation of the PKK, opposition to IS - absolutely." But the "mess" in the Middle East had been created by imperialism and it was absurd to demand another imperialist intervention to sort it out. She spoke as someone who had fought alongside Iranian Kurds and who knew from her own experience about imperialism's role. Comrade Lewis, for his part, said that some members were making a "false choice". Surely we could oppose imperialist intervention *and* support independent and democratic resistance to the likes of IS? Once again LU's anti-imperialism won the day.

The Saturday ended before all the items under 'International' were reached, which meant that a number of topics, including Ukraine, South America, nationalism and the CP's 'War and peace', were not reached. But, first thing on Sunday morning, a challenge to the standing orders committee (SOC) resulted in Waltham Forest's motion on Palestine being reinstated on the agenda. Towards the very end of conference 'Support for Palestinian rights and BDS' (boycott, disinvestment and sanctions) was unanimously agreed.

The SOC reported at the start of Sunday's business that it had agreed to remove the word "denigrate" from Felicity Dowling's 'safe spaces' policy motion because of its "racial connotations". This in my view illustrated to perfection the absurdity of the whole 'safe spaces' hullabaloo. Not even comrade Dowling had been conscious of the fact that the original meaning of 'denigrate' is 'blacken' (and I suppose it must also be unacceptable to use an expression like 'blacken my name'). The privileged position of the 'safe spaces' protagonists also struck me. Who else could get an amendment nodded through at the very last moment by the SOC? (As I write, the 'offensive' word still appears in the 'safe spaces' motion on the LU website.)

For our coverage of the whole debacle surrounding the 'safe spaces' debate, plus the equally heated disagreements over discipline and the disputes committee, see pages 6-7. But here let me comment on the useful innovation of 'counterposed voting' proposed by the SOC, since it was used when it came to a choice between 'safe spaces' and the CP's code of conduct. Its use was challenged by Jeremy Dewar of Workers Power, who said that the correct way of dealing with motions that directly contradict one another is to vote for the first one only; and if that passes the second, opposing, motion is deemed to have been defeated. This had been the method of the working class movement "for 150 years", said comrade Dewar. But comrade Macnair responded that it was actually the method of the trade union and labour bureaucracy, designed to give an advantage to the leadership. His description of the alternative "democratic method proposed by the standing orders committee" brought a rare smile to the faces of the overworked SOC comrades.

## Elections

The order of business was challenged

again on Sunday afternoon, so that the debate on LU's 2015 election challenge could be taken immediately. It was fortunate that this was accepted, since the discussion took up almost all of the remaining conference time.

This did not get off to a good start, for the first motion concerned "joint candidates" with the National Health Action party. Although comrade Mather pointed out in the debate that NHA could not be considered leftwing, since it does not even express a preference between Labour and the Conservatives, this motion was carried. True, it was not quite as bad as it appeared at first sight, because it applied only to individuals who were members of both LU and NHA. But it would certainly involve those individuals standing on a highly compromised platform.

At least the second motion, moved by Pete McLaren, had the merit of seeking cooperation with another working class group: namely the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. But the proposers wanted to take things too far, demanding "intensive and structured collaboration (as opposed merely to non-aggression)". This might include, in the words of comrade McLaren, "being part of Tusc, but without giving up any positions of Left Unity".

That, however, is easier said than done. LU's good positions on Europe and migration would never make it into the Tusc party political broadcast, its national manifesto, etc, given that the main force within Tusc, the Socialist Party in England and Wales, has stood in the last two European elections on a platform that espoused a diametrically opposite position - in effect for withdrawal from the EU and for border controls (see p12).

Thankfully, the amendment from Pete Green and Phil Pope (who described himself as "an anarchist prepared to talk to Trotskyists") removed the call for closer collaboration and when this was passed the motion was supportable. A further amendment wanted to extend cooperation to the Greens, but this was overwhelmingly rejected.

Finally in relation to the elections, a joint motion from Leeds and Lambeth stated: "LU should only stand candidates if we can democratically agree a manifesto through a policy conference and a delegate conference on the final manifesto..." The mover, WP's Jeremy Dewar, argued that the Labour Party "has never allowed" a delegate conference to determine its election manifesto, and therefore such a thing must be a good idea. A little bit of a non-sequitur. An amendment from Tom Walker replaced the references to a further conference by one to LU's national council, which would draw up a manifesto based on policies determined "by this conference and previous Left Unity conferences". Once again, the correct position was voted through.

As expected, several issues were not reached. In addition to amendments to the LU constitution, sessions on the British constitution and democracy, equality and housing fell off the agenda.

Let me end this report by quoting Joseph Healy of the disputes committee, who made an ironic comment in relation to this paper. He said: "If you want to find out what's happening, read the *Weekly Worker*. I'm thinking of writing a weekly column called 'Disputes corner'!"

We look forward to that, comrade Healy! ●

peter.manson@weeklyworker.co.uk



Organisation leads to effectiveness

# Abstention and organisation

As baffling as the agenda sometimes was, the one thing apparently hardest for many attendees at Left Unity conference to comprehend was the Communist Platform's abstention in a large number of votes.

It has to be said that we did abstain a good deal: from the opening item of business (the policy commission report on the environment) to some of the last reached (on fighting austerity), most chances at unanimity were scuppered by rows of hands going up at the front. If abstentions had not been called for by the chair, Jack Conrad yelled out to make sure they were.

Reactions varied through the weekend: from puzzlement, to mutters of "why are you even here?" When motions about child sexual abuse met the same snub, the atmosphere chilled considerably. By the end of Sunday, with all souls exhausted, conference seemed to settle on a kind of ironic whoop - alternating with amusement whenever we *did* vote one way or another.

In all reactions - bafflement, anger and grim humour - there is an element of 'confirmation bias'. The CP did not recommend abstention on anything like *all* the motions on the agenda, or all those not to come from our own members and allies. Indeed, Mike Macnair provided a three-page guide to our voting intentions last week (November 13) - for this, against that, abstain on the other (and, yes, we changed our minds on one or two things in the heat of the argument).

Mike addressed the abstention issue thus:

Several proposals, particularly those of the policy commissions, display a combination of (1) good general principles which are 'motherhood and apple pie' for socialists, followed by (2) concrete

proposals for micro-reforms within the framework of the immediately current general regime: ie, that created by Thatcher's 'reforms' ...

We do not wish either to lend visible support to proposals constructed on what we think is an unsound basis or to be seen to vote against 'motherhood and apple pie' principles, or against the limited gains which would be represented if the concrete reforms proposed were implemented. So in these cases we urge a demonstrative abstention.

## Voting for nothing

Our approach is based not on what reforms are 'realistic' minimum demands, but what is actually needed for a revolutionary shift in political power. The reasons for this are quite sound: major reforms are not, on all historical evidence, built up from a tissue of small ones, but drilled out of our rulers when they fear for their property or their lives. Being overly modest simply prevents that fear from ever being generated. Voting for a "motherhood and apple pie" resolution with a few tinkering changes tacked on is not a principled compromise, but a vote for gesture politics.

The weekend furnished us with examples enough of this phenomenon, but it is perhaps good enough to cite the one abstention that had your correspondent fearing for his personal safety: Brighton and Hove's motion on child sexual abuse. "Conference notes the uncovering of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in the UK as a widespread phenomenon," it began, and then listed the police failures and so on.

When we get to "conference resolves", it is thin gruel indeed: "To work nationally with survivors' groups, women's groups and other appropriate organisations to come up with a programme of demands for

the resources necessary to offer all survivors counselling, therapy and other appropriate support." There are *no* such demands in the motion - persons unknown are going to have to come up with them, in collaboration with other (unspecified) groups. How can one vote for *nothing* except an empty expression of disapproval?

More ironically, the motion also called for "bring[ing] together socialist feminist academics to study the relationship between class, gender and child abuse with a view to publishing an in-depth article - either online or in print". Ironic because Jim Hollinshead, the comrade who moved this motion, is an academic criminologist (although his main research interest appears to be the conservation of ponds) - we suggest he would have a more productive impact on human knowledge by organising such a conference through his institution, inviting people on the basis that they possess deep expertise within the domain rather than their political convictions.

Not that our stance mattered - the motion passed overwhelmingly. Child abuse is, after all, very bad; and our principal speaker, Felicity Dowling, apparently cannot make a speech on any subject without a jeremiad about violated innocence tacked rudely on. Let us see who Left Unity can rustle up for this conference of theirs.

## Evolutionary advantage

Even on this issue, perhaps, a scattering of hands around the room in favour of 'none of the above' would not have provoked such disapproval. A small, concentrated island of dissenters presents a different countenance to the eye.

The Communist Platform's abstentions were as vexatious because they were *organised* as because they

were abstentions. And organised they certainly were. When motions were first released for this conference, we were faced with a choice: either we encourage comrades to submit scores of amendments in the hope of restoring some backbone to the policy on offer and getting some actual debate going, or submit a formal written explanation as to why so many motions were not worth voting on. We decided for the latter - on the basis that, with the best amendments in the world, a conference with an agenda so hopelessly overpacked would be unable to seriously discuss more than a small minority of timetabled items anyway.

That having been done, we nominated the long-suffering comrade Macnair to burrow through the eventual 140-page motion pack to come up with final recommendations, reproduced in last week's paper. We proceeded more or less according to the plan on the day.

Left Unity as an organisation is composed in large part of 'flotsam and jetsam' - people who have suffered previously in other left organisations and have no wish to be steamrollered again. Such comrades often entertain a distrust of 'the sects', who are always manipulating things to their advantage.

This is a not entirely unfounded attitude - for one, many left groups *do* behave in a manipulative fashion in the broader movement; but, more importantly, organisations (even small ones) are qualitatively more effective at achieving their aims than individuals. A faction will always have a greater impact than an atomised group of individuals of the same size - organisation is an evolutionary advantage.

The great irony of Left Unity is that it has magnified this advantage considerably. Dear reader, we had to *work* to abstain last weekend! Without a division of labour, an independent collective decision-

making process and all the rest, how on earth could anyone keep on top of 140 pages of motions and amendments, plus points of order, last-minute composites, challenges to the agenda ...? We are sure some comrades managed; but many others will have been left bewildered.

## Travelling light

Comrade Macnair described this saturation of the agenda, the huge pile of motions at short notice, as a concealed form of plebiscitary politics, which *prevents* serious deliberation on the issues at hand, playing instead to already formed prejudices. It in fact prevents *new* disciplined groupings from being formed, rewarding only those that already exist.

The motives of the comrades involved in organising the conference are no doubt impeccable, and their hard work admirable, but the net result is to retard the political development of Left Unity. It also lightens the attachment members have to the decisions made: two months from now, will anyone (save the movers, and maybe Felicity Dowling) remember what was in that child abuse motion? If this academic conference never happens, will anyone complain next year? We doubt it.

A light attachment to decisions serves a certain kind of politics just fine - mainstream bourgeois politics, where presentation is everything and substance is delegated to Whitehall and wonks. Left Unity fancies itself to be "doing politics differently"; but if it really wants to be different, it must become a space where political ideas are taken seriously. Voting banal, unactionable items through on the basis of sentiment is not the way to do it ●

Paul Demarty

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

**LEFT UNITY**

# Good intentions and the road to hell

Where now for disputes and 'safe spaces'? Mike Macnair examines the issues

**F**ortunately, the Left Unity conference rejected the 'safe spaces' document proposed by Felicity Dowling, Terry Conway *et al.* But this is only a temporary reprieve, since conference also in the end rejected the alternative proposed by Tina Becker and Robert Eagleton (based on Communist Platform's draft). So the issue will surely be re-addressed next year.

Also, very regrettably, conference accepted the mistaken approach of the disputes committee to its work over the last year and its procedures. So LU goes forward having adopted by this indirect route commitments to secret inquisitorial trials in internal complaints and disputes, without recognition of the basic obligation to hear both sides.

It has also committed to operating a body which clearly *is*, as a matter of English law, quasi-judicial (it determines civil rights and obligations in relation to the contract of membership between LU and its individual members), but explicitly *denies* that it is quasi-judicial or has the obligations of this role.

And conference has adopted a report which is very probably actionably defamatory of some of the identifiable individual members dealt with by the DC - particularly those suspended (a course of action it claims is in these cases necessary for the safety of other members). The defamatory risk is *precisely because*, having refused to report any information about individual cases, it inevitably makes by innuendo serious, unsupported allegations against *any and all* of the small number of people it has dealt with.

Communist Platform will not back any litigation against LU, and other members are *probably* unlikely to think it desirable or worthwhile to sue. But the LU officers would certainly be well advised to take formal legal advice, from specialists in (a) the law of voluntary associations and (b) defamation law, about the party's potential liabilities created by these decisions.

## Safe spaces

The substantive arguments around 'safe spaces' are reported in Yassamine Mather's article opposite. Here I am concerned with how we got to the situation where no real decision either way was taken, and how we go forward from here.

As I reported in my November 13 article, 'How to vote at conference', the standing orders committee ruled the third alternative motion on this topic, 'A brief guide to party solidarity' (proposed by the disputes committee), out of order on the ground that the DC had no standing to submit motions.<sup>1</sup> The motion was then submitted by Tony Aldis and Gioia Coppola as a 'delete all' amendment to the 'safe spaces' policy. The SOC now ruled this out of order on the ground that 'delete all' amendments are unacceptable.

As to the principle involved in SOC's second ruling, it is true that such amendments are in general undesirable, as are very long amendments, which would be better expressed as motions. But, where, as in LU's practice, there is no opportunity to *see* the motions submitted until after the deadline, rejection of 'delete all' amendments in effect silences those who, on reading the original motion, decide that the flaws in it are so fundamental that it is necessary to present a full alternative. The result of refusing such amendments is then likely to be anger and a messy procedural argument.

So it proved. On Saturday morning



**Who judges the judges?**

John Tummon moved rejection of the SOC's report on two points. The first was to admit to discussion and voting on the 'Brief guide to party solidarity' proposal. This was clearly carried on a show of hands. The second was to admit an emergency motion from Greenwich and Lewisham, which stated that the DC had no power under the LU constitution to suspend members. This was clearly lost (56 votes for, 70 against, abstentions not counted).

Between the Saturday and Sunday sessions, supporters of the 'safe spaces' policy document met and came up with what they called a "composite" between their document and the 'Brief guide to party solidarity'. This consisted of adding to the 'safe spaces' document several items, including: (1) provision for a meeting between the 'safe spaces' commission, the DC and the LU leadership to take discussions further; and (2) the following passage from the 'Brief guide':

B3. Members who bring LU into disrepute - eg, by subjecting other LU members or supporters to violence or intimidation or who steal party property - will be subject to suspension and/or termination of their membership. Any police agents, racists, fascists, misogynists or homophobes discovered in our ranks face automatic termination of their LU membership. We take seriously the security and the protection of LU and all of its members.

The first that conference - or the chairs of the session - heard of this "composite" was in Felicity Dowling's speech introducing the 'safe spaces' document. Comrade Tummon immediately rose to object to the admission of this "composite" to the agenda. It was not clear *who* had been consulted in constructing it, but he, who had been involved in drafting the original 'Brief guide' and had successfully moved rejection of SOC's decision to rule this out of order, had not. Conference voted narrowly to admit the "composite": 77 for, 71 against, abstentions not counted. We thereby *in effect* reversed Saturday's decision to overturn the SOC's original ruling; the debate would offer, as the only alternatives, the latest 'safe spaces' version, and the Becker/Eagleton proposal.

The discussion heard eight speakers from the floor. Four were supporters of the "composite" (Terry Conway, Anna Fisher, Bianca Todd and Susan Pashkoff). Two were supporters of the Becker/Eagleton alternative (Sarah McDonald and the seconder, Robert Eagleton). One, Simon Hardy, spoke against the *procedure* of late compositing, as an "access issue" (ie, it is very hard for people with vision and/or hearing issues to get clear what had

been proposed; in reality, it is very hard for *damn near everyone*, including the chairs) and against the added section B3 from 'Brief guide' quoted above, as being counterposed to LU's aim of a mass party - surely it would be better to recruit those who generally agree with us, but may have some racist or homophobic prejudice, and try to *win* them. He drew attention to the use of such policies against the left in the student movement. The final speaker, Ruth Cashman, made very similar points: the adoption of the latest 'safe spaces' proposal would mean that LU intended to recruit only the very pure.

This was not an unfair or unbalanced allocation of speakers. But in effect, the limits both on *number* of speakers and on *speaking time* meant that it was quite impossible for anyone (even the movers when they summed up) to respond to anyone else's arguments. This is endemic in the 'plebiscitary' procedure adopted by LU of having numerous items crammed into agendas, as I pointed out in my November 12 article.

What happened was that, following a procedure recommended by the SOC, the 'safe spaces' "composite" and the Becker/Eagleton alternative proposal were voted against each other as counterposed proposals, with 'abstentions' counting (as the chairs had to explain) as votes against both proposals. In this vote, 65 voted for the Becker/Eagleton alternative, 61 for the "composite" and 36 against both. The Becker/Eagleton alternative proposal thus had the plurality, and a vote was now taken whether to ratify it as the decision of conference. This was defeated - 68 for, 79 against, abstentions not counted. This meant that the 'safe spaces' crew actually preferred to have no code of conduct at all if their own proposals were rejected.

I am told that some supporters of 'safe spaces' have approached the movers of the alternative with a view to discussions. This is welcome, but it has, of course, yet to be seen how productive such discussions can be. While there is no doubt that the alternative based on the Communist Platform's draft can be strengthened, improving the 'safe spaces' document from our point of view would involve more radical surgery. If we thought the document could be made acceptable by minor amendments we would not have put forward a counterproposal. The question posed by discussions between the two sides is then how radically 'safe spaces' supporters are willing to reshape their proposal and, conversely, how many of the CP's major objections we would be willing to give up, for the sake of getting agreement.

There is another question. What did the 36 people who voted against both proposals - who must be taken as representing a broader current of opinion beyond conference - want? I

do not know how Simon Hardy or Ruth Cashman voted; neither positively recommended a vote for the Becker/Eagleton alternative proposal, so I do not know if their speeches represented this group. What they both *did* argue was rejection of 'B3' from the DC 'Brief guide' as committing LU to create a 'party only of the pure'. The point is explicit in 'B3'. Hence, it *may* be that 'safe spaces' supporters shot themselves in the foot with the "composite": both because it looked like an anti-democratic manoeuvre, and because 'B3' was objectionable to people who did not accept the Becker/Eagleton alternative proposal.

Communist Platform comrades have argued that even without this explicit commitment to a 'party only of the pure', it is *implicit* in the 'safe spaces' document. It is not clear whether the comrades who voted against both texts understand this point, though the underlying 1970s women's movement argument for 'prefigurative politics' in the form of 'The personal is political' was there in both Terry Conway's and Susan Pashkoff's speeches from the floor in the debate.

## Disputes and trust

The discussion on the disputes committee report and draft standing orders was even more cramped. After Shelia Mosley introduced the report (by reading parts from it) I moved reference back very briefly. This was defeated on show of hands.

Joseph Healy then introduced the DC standing orders proposals. He argued that the DC had been forced to introduce suspensions without any constitutional power to do so, in order to prevent branches disintegrating. Confidentiality was vitally important and the amendments which would get rid of it (Sheffield) or water it down (Phil Pope and Mike Thomas) were to be rejected: vulnerable people had to be protected, and in addition a DC member who was a solicitor had advised that otherwise the DC would have no protection from defamation liability.

Tina Becker moved the Sheffield amendment A1, arguing for transparency. Phil Pope did not have enough time to explain fully the five amendments he and Mike Thomas were proposing (A2), but spoke to three of them - on referring criminal cases to the police, on suspension and on confidentiality. Anna Fisher moved amendment A3, which contained two points: the first to make the use of suspension more exceptional; the second to require the DC to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to investigate allegations, rather than using suspension as a threshold for investigation.

From the floor, Terry Conway spoke against Sheffield's amendment on the ground that it was inconsistent with current law (that is, the Youth, Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, chapter II, which prohibits cross-examination *in person* - not by counsel - in trials for sexual offences and of child witnesses in trials for child abuse offences). Lesley Mahmood raised the same point, relying on the recent suicide of a woman facing charges of making up a rape claim.<sup>2</sup> Brian Green, from Norwich, who has been under suspension, attempted to raise the question of his own treatment by the DC, but was stopped by the chair. The reply for the DC insisted (as the documents do) that they do not see themselves as a quasi-court.

In the voting, the Sheffield amendment was defeated on a show of hands. The Pope/Thomas amendments were voted on in parts. The first sensibly

removed a requirement to report *all* crimes to the police and replaced it with a statement that the DC would not "discourage or impede" potential victims of crime from reporting. It was carried. The next three fell: the fifth, which would allow the national secretary and executive committee to refer cases to the DC, was accepted. The Fisher amendments were both carried on show of hands.

Arguments in favour of 'safe spaces' and DC confidentiality, etc showed a certain amount of what can roughly be called 'hedge-lawyering'. One justification of confidentiality offered was the right to privacy in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights; this certainly does *not* require privacy in relation to allegations made by or against you with a view to some sanction being imposed. The advice on defamation given by a DC member is, in the form in which it was reported, nonsense: 'domestic tribunals' like the DC do not have *absolute* privilege like courts, but they are protected by *qualified* privilege in reporting to, say, LU members, as long as their reports are not malicious. As I indicated above, the effect of a 'no particulars' report like that accepted by conference is that it is *more* likely to be actionable.

Cross-examination by the defendant in person in rape and child abuse cases is quite irrelevant, since *all* the versions - 'safe spaces', 'Brief guide', and the Becker/Eagleton alternative proposal - are rightly agreed that such serious cases should not be dealt with in-house. The DC is concerned with *much less serious* allegations - which are also, precisely because they are much less serious, far more likely to be exaggerated or wholly fabricated than rape claims. People with any length of experience on the left will have encountered the phenomenon several times. The argument that the DC is not a 'quasi-court' would not hold water in any real court.

Equally prominent, however, were arguments asking us to trust the authors of the 'safe spaces' policy or the DC. In relation to the latter, this was backed up with the point that we elected the DC in May. In reality, of course, members of the DC were elected unopposed. In a recently formed organisation, which has persistently too few bodies to fill posts, election does not in itself imply trust.

But the real point is more fundamental. Trust is not something automatic, except between a young child and its parents on whom it depends. Among adults, trust has to be earned by trustworthy behaviour. It is foolish to expect members of LU, only recently formed, to take on trust officers, committee members, etc, of whom they have little experience. All the more so since many ex-members of the Labour Party, or of left groups, have experienced persistently *untrustworthy* behaviour from leaders.

In this context, procedures like the late 'compositing' of the 'safe spaces' document tend to *reduce* trust. So does the adoption of secret inquisitorial trials and reporting only in generalities on the part of the disputes committee. I have every sympathy with the burden placed on DC comrades in the last year. I do not wish to suggest that their intentions are not good. But the road to hell is notoriously paved with good intentions ●

mike.macnair@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. In my article I mistakenly said that the SOC ruled out the DC's motion after the deadline. It turns out that it actually did so before the deadline, but communicated only with Alan Storey of the DC, who was by then suspended (by the DC!) from LU membership.
2. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29946823.

# The tyranny of safe spaces

We cannot start from the premise of exclusion, argues Yassamine Mather

**S**ocialists should be in the forefront of the battle for the emancipation of the oppressed. So they should and do struggle against misogyny, racism and homophobia - not just as an integral part of the struggle for socialism, but also in support of women, minorities and gays against the burden of double oppression under capitalism. How can we do otherwise, given the obvious fact that 50% of the population are women and we live in multinational, multicultural societies?

So the debate in Left Unity and our disagreements with so-called 'safe spaces' has always been about one issue: how can we best achieve this aim? How can we find revolutionary ways of confronting misogyny, homophobia, etc within our own ranks and in society? Such a task cannot be undertaken if we limit ourselves to formal, often ineffective, forms of gender equality proposed by neoliberal capital - policies that are an integral part of 'cultural capitalism'. In other words, 'global capitalism with a human face'. We cannot rely on capitalist legal frameworks, regulations and 'safeguards', often produced to do the opposite of what they claim.

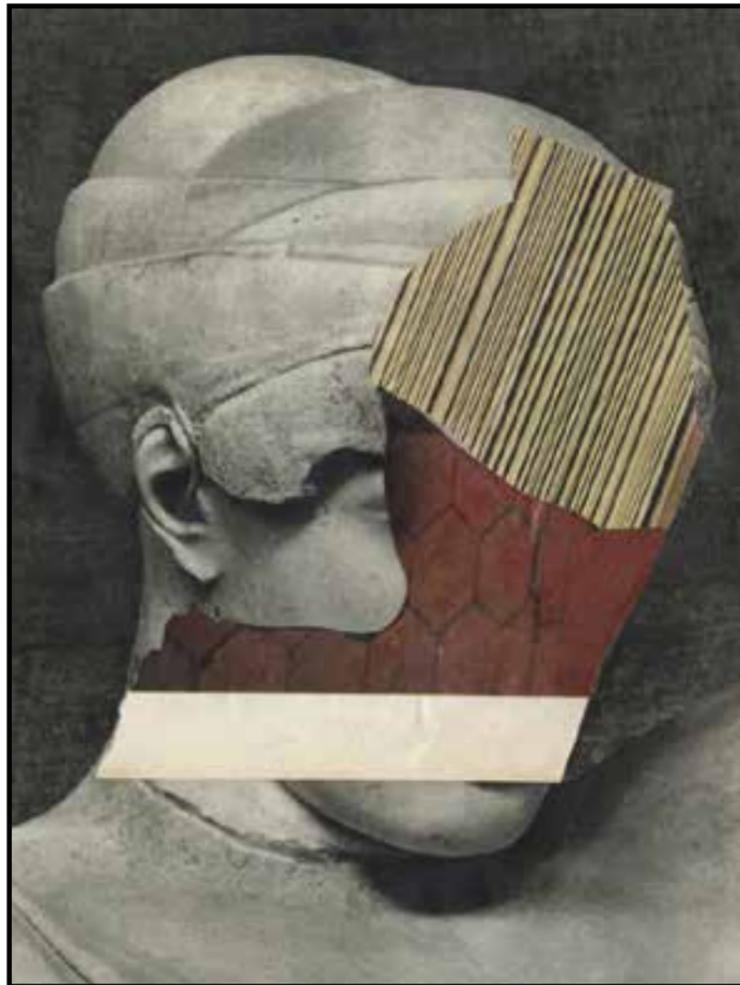
Most of the lengthy legislation in the health service, schools, universities, social services, care homes regarding 'equality' and 'safety' ... is written to protect the relevant organisations from prosecution for neglecting their duty to those in their care or in relation to legislation regarding formal equality. Very often they are not worth the paper they are written on. They are long, complex documents earning money for lawyers, but they rarely relate to real work conditions and should not be duplicated by organisations of the left.

In her speech to LU conference the Communist Platform's Tina Becker, arguing against the proposed 'safe spaces' document, said it was patronising and bureaucratic. What did she mean by these two adjectives?

The idea that women in leftwing organisations need 'protection', as opposed to 'empowerment', is what is patronising. No doubt Felicity Dowling's extensive work in dealing with child abuse cases and fighting for children's rights is commendable. However, time and time again when she speaks about safe spaces she starts with abused children, before moving swiftly to the need for safe places for women, gays, blacks in society and, by extension, in the organisations of the left. I disagree with such a classification of women, gays and blacks as weak creatures - actual and potential victims who constantly need 'protection' from the rest of society.

On the contrary, as adults they need a progressive culture that encourages them and everyone else to challenge sexism, homophobia and racism. Comrades in Left Unity are not weak creatures: they are conscious individuals who recognise capitalism as their enemy - that is why they are in politics. They do not need protective legislation of the type social workers use when dealing with vulnerable children.

Here the example that comes to my mind is the struggles of Iranian women over the last 35 years. They had to fight misogyny not only at home, but in every aspect of social, political and economic life. The state claimed that their 'safety' was best maintained by segregation - in the home, or beneath the hijab in the street. But women rejected this from the first days of the Islamic Republic. They took to the streets and fought against misogynist legislation and, although there are still many battles to win, they have made



Silencing and self-censorship

great strides against all odds - to such an extent that the women's movement in Iran is by far the most significant social movement of the region. Would they have been able to achieve this if in their battles against misogyny they had retreated to 'safe spaces'? Of course not. On the contrary, it is precisely the 'safe spaces' provided by the clerical regime that they are rebelling against.

On the left the most effective way to fight sexism and racism is to make sure we battle against privileged positions and the abuse of power, against secrecy and cronyism. It was not lack of safe spaces that led to the disastrous situation in the Socialist Workers Party. It was secrecy, the power of those in authority, their ability to use 'confidentiality' to suppress reporting. A 'safe spaces' policy cannot protect women from a 'comrade Delta'.

## Serious approach

In fact there is nothing new or innovative about 'safe spaces': they have been practised in postmodernist US campuses since the late 1990s, drawing serious criticism both in academia and elsewhere for being impractical, obsolete, dangerous ... Let us be clear: these criticisms are directed at academic institutions (ivory towers) that are actually practising 'safe spaces'.

Those of us who want to change society must take a much deeper, more serious approach to this issue, precisely because of the points raised by Simon Hardy speaking at the Left Unity conference last weekend. If we had adopted the proposed 'safe spaces' document we would have been legitimising the exclusion of working class activists who exhibit any hint of sexism, homophobia, racism or Islamophobia. What is more, the 'pure' Left Unity envisaged by some would have had to constantly make difficult choices on precisely *who* to exclude. If there were a dispute between the championing of the hijab as a cultural religious demand by activists of

Muslim origin and its rejection by feminists, 'safe spaces' officers would have to choose between the priority they give to fighting Islamophobia and fighting sexism. Where are we going to draw the line? Who is going to decide which minority's oppression is worse than the others'?

If you don't believe my prediction that this will be lead to vicious, anti-socialist, postmodernist battles, I suggest you take a look at the dead ends produced by existing 'safe spaces'-type policies on university campuses.

On October 26, Edinburgh University's Feminist Society held a meeting to discuss the future of Fem Soc member Kirsty Haigh following allegations that she had violated its 'safe spaces' policy. The existing regulations are as follows: "Members of the society are expected to conduct themselves in an orderly manner, and respect the right of all society members to enjoy Edinburgh University Feminist Society as a safe space environment, defined as a space which is welcoming and safe and includes the prohibition of discriminatory language and actions. Where a member violates these guidelines, the committee and/or welfare and accessibility officer shall have the right to deny access to the society's physical and online spaces to the offending member, either for a prescribed period of time or indefinitely."

Note the similarity with the tone of the defeated 'safe spaces' policy at LU conference.

In her defence, Haigh told the student paper: "I believe this is an abuse of the safe space policy to deal with political disagreements, something which I hasten to add I think is very rare but very damaging for the feminist movement. Never once have I been told what I have done wrong or given any opportunities to address complaints, but merely some members have pushed for it, to jump straight to trying to throw me out. In addition, at this public meeting I am

meant to make a statement defending myself, again, without having heard the accusations."<sup>1</sup>

In another example in the United States, Jewish high school pupils are given advice by the Anti-Defamation League on how to create 'safe spaces' when they enter university campuses, so that they can be 'safe' from anti-Zionist, anti-Israeli rhetoric, whereby the language of anti-Zionism is defined as anti-Semitic. The Anti-Defamation League's 'Words to Action' are clear: "To diminish anti-Semitic speech, attitudes and behaviours on college campuses, to create a safe space and open up a conversation among students around issues of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel bias." At the same time, Arab-American and Iranian-American students are creating 'safe spaces' to protect themselves against Islamophobia - a clear recipe for segregation and division.

An even more bizarre example is the story of Amira Hass, a brave, anti-Zionist journalist working for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, who was asked to leave a Palestinian university on the grounds that her presence violated its 'safe spaces' policy. This is what Amira Haas wrote about the incident: "One of the lecturers explained that it is important for students to have a safe space where (Jewish) Israelis are not entitled to enter; that, while the law is problematic, this was not the time or place to discuss amending it ... She also told me that professor Ilan Pappé, author of the book *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine*, among others, had been invited to deliver a lecture at Birzeit, but, owing to the law, gave the talk off campus."

## Academic debates

Safe spaces or echo chambers? According to Wikipedia, an echo chamber in the media is "a situation in which information, ideas or beliefs are amplified or reinforced by transmission and repetition inside an 'enclosed' system, where different or competing views are censored or disallowed". Others have described echo chambers as spaces where people repeat and agree with certain ideas, congratulating each other rather than discussing new, conflicting ideas.

In an echo chamber nobody learns anything new or expands their perspectives. Similarly if women, blacks or LGBTQ activists refuse to confront their opponents, 'safe spaces' risk becoming 'echo chambers'. A 1998 study by Robert Boostrom questions the 'safety' aspect of 'safe spaces' in universities as counterposed to the mission of higher education to promote critical thinking. If critical thinking is desirable in higher education, it is essential in a political organisation of the left.

One of the most informative studies about 'safe spaces' in universities has been carried out by Betty J Barret, published in the *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Under the title, 'Is safety dangerous?'<sup>2</sup>, Barret points out a number of theoretical criticisms relating to the construction of educational communities as safe spaces for students, in support of her claim that they may indeed be counterproductive to student learning. She refers to an empirical study by Holley and Steiner (2005), which found that students overwhelmingly "placed the responsibility for the creation of safety on instructors, listing 387 instructor characteristics that defined safe space. Indeed, the number-one characteristic that students reported as defining a safe learning environment was that the

instructor was perceived by students to be non-judgmental and/or unbiased."

As you know, the BBC makes a very similar claim. In a class society faced with many contradictions, how will we identify these figures, so essential to the maintenance of safe spaces, these responsible adults who will remain "unbiased"? How can we guarantee against abuses of power by such figures themselves in the proposed 'safe space'?

## Stay at home

'Safe spaces' must have rules to ensure that the participants know what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. If the participants violate these rules, they are usually warned, removed or blocked. Safe spaces by definition do not tolerate certain 'oppressive' views, but who defines what is oppressive? There clearly cannot be much of a debate about an issue deemed to be oppressive - hence the accusation by some feminists in the US that "Safe spaces are silencing sisterhood", valuing "safety over debate" and "leading to a tyranny of silencing and self-censorship, a policy of shutting up debate, keeping any dissent out of their little world."<sup>3</sup>

The exclusion of trans women from feminist 'safe spaces' has also led to a number of debates challenging the concept of safety:

In reality, you are only 'safe' from things that might make you uncomfortable or triggered if you stay at home, where you have absolute control over everything that happens (and even then, not always). Each person's idea of 'safe' is different, and therefore a group space cannot possibly be 'safe'. 'Safe' isn't real, and as such I believe it's not worth investing energy in. It's much better, in my opinion, to create spaces where there are a few clear rules for acceptable behaviour (which does not depend on identity or status of any kind, gender or otherwise), a stated expectation of kindness and goodwill, and one or several people who are in charge of smoothing things out if they go wrong.<sup>4</sup>

We are told safe spaces are places or communities - either online or off - where bigotry and oppressive views are not tolerated. As you can see from the examples above, such a policy creates contradictions, even when applied in a feminist caucus, a classroom, in social work. At best one can say the policy might work for a small sect trying to live in isolation.

Our task is quite different: we intend to change society and we cannot hide from reality. As many comrades pointed out at the Left Unity conference, we are socialists because we believe we can change society. We are not in the business of creating cocoons to protect us from evil - we intend to fight and destroy evil. If Left Unity is serious about recruiting from the working class, with all its prejudices, we must confront its homophobia, its sexism and its racism. We cannot start from the premise of exclusion ●

yassamine.mather@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. <http://www.studentnewspaper.org/femsoc-to-vote-on-removal-of-kirsty-haigh>.
2. [http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cjsotl\\_rcacea](http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cjsotl_rcacea).
3. <http://quietgirlriot.wordpress.com/2011/03/29/safe-spaces-silencing-sisterhood>.
4. <http://sexgeek.wordpress.com/2013/09/20/if-trans-women-arent-welcome-neither-am-i>.

**LEFT UNITY**

# Under the cosh of the safe spaces police

**R**eaders will be aware of the scandalous case of Laurie McCauley, a Left Unity member in Manchester and supporter of the Communist Platform. This comrade has been suspended by his Left Unity branch for what in the end - after some flimsy and routine accusations of 'bullying' and intimidating behaviour had been quietly dropped - boiled down to nothing more than that he wrote a critical article in the *Weekly Worker*, describing the political problems and differences between LU members in his branch.<sup>1</sup>

Given the general atmosphere developing in LU - and the pernicious influence of the 'safe spaces' proposals - we feared that Laurie's problems were simply the tip of an iceberg and that others around the country were under a similar cosh. We feature below three comrades who have witnessed the hypocrisy of the 'safe space police'. The case of Alan Story - once a key figure on the LU disputes committee - is particularly instructive and it is a pity that the comrade did not agree to talk to us directly, unlike the others.

Comrade Story's travails stem from a clash of personalities and differing approaches rather than political issues of any real substance, let alone actual serious misconduct. A number of things need to be highlighted about this travesty.

As Alan's Facebook material below makes clear, the comrade was not allowed to communicate with any other LU members apart from the DC, once he had been suspended. He was prevented from entering the March LU policy conference in Manchester, outrageously being informed by Bianca Todd that his mere presence posed an unacceptable 'safe spaces' risk. His case - like others - has taken the form of a *secret trial* (in other words, it has conformed to the requirements of "confidentiality", as the disputes committee has rebranded this anti-democratic insult).

However, the obvious irony in all of this is that the comrade has now fallen victim to *exactly* the poisonous culture of unaccountable power used to police and censor political differences in LU that he once wielded as a member of the DC and which he fronted in the case of Laurie McCauley.

On June 20 of this year, comrade Story was the DCer tasked with writing to Laurie:

... we are asking you today ... a third time: do you agree that the communications involved in trying to resolve the dispute between you and the LU Manchester branch should be kept confidential?

Your agreement on this matter and your agreement to cooperate in a collegial fashion with the LU disputes committee means that we can then try to move things forward and next hear the views of both parties to this dispute.

Put more prosaically, as a precondition for comrade McCauley to even be present at his own hearing, he must agree for it to be *in camera*, to be a *secret trial*.<sup>2</sup>

*Schadenfreude* as a response to Alan Story's difficulties would be a particularly stupid response. So what if comrade Story was and is a victim of the same noxious culture that he was responsible for imposing on comrade McCauley? That is just a detail. Left Unity as a whole is the real loser here. More sturdy 'unity projects' than LU have gone the way of all flesh in the past period, and windy protestations about 'doing politics differently' are



**Demands for silence and isolation**

no guarantee that LU could not join them in the grave - the definitive 'safe space'.

**Mark Fischer**

## Bad politics

Three weeks before the July 10 strike I was on a picket line with the chair of the trades council and other leading trade unionists/stewards. I asked if they were organising a rally on the day. They said they were thinking about it. I suggested we add a city-centre march to bring the strike to the attention of city workers. I said I would propose to the branch that Left Unity leaflet for five days before the strike to publicise it. They all said it was a welcome proposal.

Because of the shortness of time, I sent this proposal to the secretary to be circulated to the branch, together with a draft leaflet. She refused to circulate it, saying it was sectarian ... I put in the details of the rally before it had been agreed and I suggested in the leaflet that the rank and file need to organise in a way that prevented the leadership from demobilising action, as had happened with the pensions dispute.

I pointed out to her that the leaflet would not be published until we had details of the rally and that it was up to the branch to discuss the body of the leaflet. She refused, saying it had to be held over to the branch meeting to be held on July 6, which would have prevented us printing and circulating the leaflet in time.

I then pointed out to her that she could not substitute herself for the branch; that she could not decide on behalf of the branch; that she had a duty to circulate proposals put to the branch, but that she had the right to append her criticisms and comments to the proposal. Still she refused ... with time running out I sent her an email in 24-point type saying once again she could not act in such an undemocratic manner.

I then bypassed her and circulated the leaflet and proposal to our activists. A leaflet was approved, we printed 2,000 and leafleted over five lunch hours outside eateries like Greggs, where shopworkers would go and get

their lunch. This initiative earned us the respect of the local trade union movement and was recognised. Left Unity alone leafleted. Not the Greens, Labour, the SWP or anyone else.

I then invoked a disciplinary action against the secretary. A disputes officer was elected who set out her investigation.

The secretary did not like the emerging verdict and so wrote directly to Kate Hudson saying she was being bullied. [Kate Hudson] passed it on to the disputes committee and I was suspended. Suspended, mind you, before Kate Hudson had enquired as to whether any action on this matter was being conducted at branch level.

Our disputes officer was really pissed off and almost resigned from the party. The majority of branch members were horrified and could not believe I was suspended.

Finally, immediately prior to being suspended, we had a meeting to discuss our claimants' work and again the secretary accused me of being a sectarian. I stormed out of the meeting and that was the only mistake I made. I do not take kindly to being labelled a sectarian by an ex-Labourite who supports immigration controls because they are needed to protect the British way of life and who said so openly at our Eastern aggregate in Cambridge, where she was roundly criticised. In fact, our election material had to be massaged because of their objections.

I am drafting a model resolution to Norwich branch on this issue and if passed it will go on to the NC to be discussed to replace their safer spaces policy. It is not bad characters that have destroyed parties in the past: it has been bad politics.

**Brian Green, Norwich LU**

## Chilling

Effective immediately, I have resigned from Left Unity. I will keep this message brief.

Nationally, I have watched as the LU disputes committee (of which I have been a member since January) has been transformed into a political - and personalised - police force that is used to serve and protect certain members

of the LU leadership and their local mates and friends. And today they have engaged in the most disgraceful threatening behaviour; its active members have said they will resign if their proposed unilateral power to suspend members is not endorsed at this weekend's LU conference.

I have questions, as well, about the general drift of Left Unity; these are for another day. Meanwhile, here in Nottingham, a small group of people have pursued me (and my colleague, Claire Jenkins) relentlessly on Facebook and on email lists for several months with a nasty and bullying pack mentality. Several of them also did it before during the autumn of 2013.

Today (November 14) I have learned that Liz Silver, secretary of LU Nottingham and a few others from that branch, will try to block my attendance - and presumably Claire's as well - at tomorrow's LU London conference. Yesterday, I registered to attend (as is my right under article 5b of our constitution), because, among other things, I wanted to argue in favour of the LU 'Brief guide to party solidarity', which I wrote this past summer.

None of the above has been good for my mental or physical health nor - and *much more* importantly - has it contributed one iota to the struggle to transform this oppressive economic/political/social order ...

Without warning or consultation and on the orders of some persons within the central leadership of LU in London, I was expelled as the moderator of the LU Nottingham Facebook group and replaced by Bianca Todd of Northampton. A few days later, I made a detailed complaint about this incident to the LU disputes committee, but, as I have explained elsewhere the other day on these pages, the DC refused to process that complaint. (No surprise there, I must sadly say, because the DC has become a political police force within LU ... which is one of the main reasons I resigned from LU and hence from the DC.)

On October 21, I also wrote [an] email ... to ... Kate Hudson (and

others) about the legal basis for my expulsion here as Facebook moderator and related incidents that occurred here in Nottingham over recent months. I got no response ... Despite sending two more reminders over the following three weeks, I never did get an answer to the questions I asked.

Perhaps all of this may seem tiresome and academic ... but I continue to maintain that my expulsion was not only undemocratic, but also an illegal act within LU. Actually, a month later, I still find the incident chilling ... and perhaps others will as well ...

No-one mediated what happened.

1. On October 17, under orders from London, Scotty Jennings pulled the plug on me here: I was expelled as LU Notts Facebook moderator and replaced by Bianca Todd and then blocked from posting.

2. On the morning of October 20 - and again without any warning - I (and Claire) was told by the DC: you're both suspended and you are ordered not to communicate with anybody except the DC.

3. On the morning of November 14, when I tried to log onto the Notts LU FB page as an FB member, I was not allowed. Honestly, what happened to us reminded me what happens in the Workers Party of Korea.

PS: The central leadership of LU in London knows *all* of this.

**Alan Story, formerly of Nottingham LU and disputes committee**

(November 14 Facebook postings)

## Long way to go

It was a positive conference in many ways. Particularly pleasing was that conference agreed some practical ways of working with the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and others on the left for the general election. The March conference position for LU to be part of the largest ever left challenge remains - but what was agreed fell short of the full cooperation that many of us hoped for. However, there were three events on Sunday that spoiled things for me and illustrated how far LU still has to go in terms of its culture.

Firstly, some sectarian comrade must have binned the pile of Tusc pamphlets we had brought - they simply disappeared. Secondly, it was not pleasant being accused of supporting sexist or racist behaviour in the party simply because I had voted for the alternative safe spaces policy (which got the most votes, but not 50%) by a leading member of a political group very close to the leadership. And finally, after conference finished, I certainly did not enjoy the personalised verbal political attack made on me and Tusc by one of the leading members of LU, without provocation. This episode happened when I returned to the conference hall to collect my jacket and bag some 20 minutes after conference ended.

I am not interested in naming and shaming - if I was, I would go to the complaints/disputes committee! I just think it smacks of hypocrisy that LU feels it so important to draw up strict rules of behaviour, whilst in practice some of its leading members cannot even show perceived political opponents any respect. Maybe that's why a non-draconian safe spaces policy is indeed needed!

I doubt you disagree, comrade! ● **Pete McLaren, Independent Socialist Network, Rugby LU**

## Notes

1. See *Weekly Worker* June 19.
2. See Mike Macnair's comprehensive dissection of this anti-democratic outrage in his 'Transparency is a principle' (*Weekly Worker* September 29).

# Immigration controls kill

Eddie Ford calls for the abolition of *all* border controls, not just 'racist' ones

On November 15 a study on immigration was published by the think-tank, British Future.<sup>1</sup> Polling found only 30% of the public "trusted" David Cameron on the matter, whilst 27% believed Ed Miliband, and Nick Clegg found himself on 23%. BF director Sunder Katwala concluded that politicians should "listen more to the public's concerns and views" - which is that, while the British people do not want to scrap "our proud tradition of protecting refugees", they do expect an immigration system that is "effective and fair": ie, most of them would "probably like to see a bit less of it".

Cue Labour's Yvette Cooper and Rachel Reeves. Cooper, the shadow home secretary, announced on November 18 that under a Labour government a £10 surcharge will be levied on the 5.5 million annual visitors to the UK. In this way, she hopes, that will more than generate the £45 million needed to employ 1,000 additional guards to defend our borders from illegal migrants and in general "restore public confidence in the immigration system". For instance, she complained, Labour has discovered that 175,000 failed asylum-seekers may not be removed because the government has "limited resources". Shocking. Instead, she promised Labour would be the "sensible", patriotic voice expressing "people's genuine concerns" - unlike the Tories or UK Independence Party, which want to up the "arms race of rhetoric" over immigration.

On the same day, Reeves, the shadow work and pensions minister, penned an article for the *Daily Mail* saying that Labour would clamp down on tax credits claimed by about 252,000 working European Union migrants - the period for which they are prevented from claiming out-of-work benefits would be extended from three months to two years.<sup>2</sup> She said that Labour would also end the "absurdity" of child benefit and child tax credits being claimed for children living in other countries.

Reeves insisted that she would "never pander" to those who would deny the positive contribution that immigrants have always made to the country, arguing it was the Tories who were "desperately attempting" to "out-Ukip Ukip". However, the *Mail's* sub-headlines were more accurate and honest, telling us about Labour's "attempt to outflank Tories and Ukip on immigration" with its plans to "curb welfare tourism".

## Socialist demands

As Cooper and Reeves remind us, immigration is a toxic issue for the working class movement - meaning that support for *any* form of immigration controls (firm, fair or otherwise) is to succumb to British nationalism and divide the global working class into competing national units. Communists therefore call for the abolition of immigration controls and utterly reject the 'socialist' justification that restrictions are needed because mass migration is used to drive wages down, and hence we must retreat into our national shells to defend the rights and conditions of the 'indigenous' workforce. If you are an internationalist, as opposed to a left nationalist, the answer is to *incorporate* migrants into the trade union and labour movement and in turn *learn* from them about their struggles and experiences.

Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels fought to do precisely that with regard to mass Irish migration into mainland Britain - initially it was met with hostility by British workers, well aware that the



Banksy on immigration: no human should be illegal

bosses were using the Irish migrants to depress wages and undermine the growing trade union movement. Yet the long and determined struggle to assimilate Irish migrants into the other Britain was undoubtedly successful, as the number of Irish names that run through the history of the workers' movement testifies. Eleanor Marx, of course, campaigned vociferously against the 1905 Aliens Act, aimed mainly against poor Jews trying to flee Russian pogroms, which was the first (relatively unsuccessful) attempt by the British state to control immigration into this country.

Nor should we ever forget that the First International proclaimed that "each member of the International Association, on removing his domicile from one country to another, will receive the fraternal support of the Associated Working Men". By contrast, history has shown us that if you start defending national borders against the incoming tide of cheap labour, even if motivated by 'socialist' ideas, then sooner or later you find yourself supporting your country's right to militarily defend its front lines.

Cooper wailed about the "awful cases" of immigrants taking increasingly desperate measures to get to the UK from Calais, citing the example of young men camping by the roadside, then leaping onto the wheel arches of passing lorries, "only to be crushed and killed". What crocodile tears. Her toughening of border controls will only make such instances *more likely*, not less - immigration controls kill. If you genuinely want to stop such incidents in Calais and everywhere else then you must fight to end *all* immigration controls and extend the hand of solidarity to all workers.

Given our principled and internationalist stand on immigration controls, we in the CPGB think that Left Unity made the correct decision at its November 15-16 national conference to turn down a full electoral coalition with the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition at next May's general election - local branches will have the option instead to cooperate with Tusc on a case-by-case basis. Our reason for not wanting LU to agree a common platform with Tusc is quite straightforward: it seems likely that Tusc will insist, amongst other things, on a position of opposition only to "racist" controls - the obvious inference being non-racist immigration controls would be acceptable. But for us in the CPGB that would not be acceptable in

the slightest.

Admittedly, you can glean little, or nothing, from Tusc's official website - clicking 'policies' on the home page just gives you a statement dated March 3 this year about how "councillors can make a difference", and so on, and directly below that are its "core" policy positions for the 2010 general election - the comrades are really up to speed. The 'latest news', dated November 12, merely tells us that the national steering committee has approved the first eight parliamentary candidates for the general election. However, giving us a strong clue, we do read in the Socialist Workers Party's *Internal Bulletin* No2 that its central committee has proposed that "around 15 SWP members" should be adopted next year as Tusc candidates because doing so apparently involves agreeing to a list of "good, basic socialist demands" - including the "repeal" of the 2014 Immigration Act and "all racist immigration controls".<sup>3</sup> Yes, comrades, but what about immigration controls *in general* - are you opposed to them or not, especially as you have always argued that immigration controls are *inherently* racist and have historically been opposed to *all* border controls.

Alas, the suspicion is that the SWP is watering down its stance for the 2015 election campaign in line with its Tusc partners, the RMT union and the Socialist Party in England and Wales - both of which, just like the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, subscribe to a 'common sense' view on immigration that in the last analysis is not profoundly different from that of the Tories or even Ukip. SPEW's frankly rather nauseating approach to migration was made explicit in its 2013 perspectives document:

Of course, we have to stand in defence of the most oppressed sections of the working class, including migrant workers and other immigrants. We staunchly oppose racism. We defend the right to asylum and argue for the end of repressive measures like detention centres.

At the same time, given the outlook of the majority of the working class, we cannot put forward a bald slogan of 'open borders' or 'no immigration controls', which would be a barrier to convincing workers of a socialist programme, both on immigration and other issues. Such a demand would alienate the vast majority of the working class, including many more long-standing immigrants, who would

see it as a threat to jobs, wages and living conditions" (my emphasis).<sup>4</sup>

Whilst our SPEW comrades, of course, believe in the lofty Platonic ideal of open borders, the working class - deep sigh - is far too backward to go along with such an idea. Hence in the interests of 'unity' and perhaps grabbing a few votes, we just have to face facts and sign up to the prevailing consensus - which would have you believe that people should have no right to live, settle and work anywhere on this planet and that the whole world must remain divided up into nations (or pseudo-nations) protecting their 'own' patch at the expense of outsiders. But for communists, for whom the common interest of the international proletariat is an *absolute* principle, this consensus is pure poison. National borders are part of the crap of class society.

## On-off

This race to the bottom, politically speaking, is down to the fact that Tusc is a mere on-off electoral coalition devoid of any principled programmatic positions or world view - epitomised by the high farce last May of SPEW comrades standing on the same day for *both* Tusc and No2EU, hardly the best way to propagate the idea of a new and attractive working class party committed to universal human liberation.

No2EU, of course, is a national chauvinist organisation that promulgates a particularly abhorrent form of anti-EU left nationalism - wanting to exit the bloc and effectively slam the doors shut. Presumably, everyone will be forced to stay put unless they get government permission to move. Yvette Cooper may want a 1,000 extra border guards. Under No2EU's plans, they would have to employ at least an additional 50,000 guards to patrol the borders - not to mention the creation of a vast network of form-fillers and enforcers. Strangely enough though, in a near off-the-cuff remark by Daren Ireland of the RMT's national executive at SPEW's recent Socialism 2014 school, we discovered that No2EU had actually been "wound up" - surprising the majority of people in the room. So much for the principle of open and transparent decision-making.

Anyhow, even as opportunist electoral alliances go, Tusc is a lousy failure. Last year it did not even reach its target of 600-plus local election candidates, and its performance on the day was predictably dismal - its 560

candidates polled 68,031 votes, a less than impressive average of 121 per candidate. A statistic skewed, needless to say, by the victories of Keith Morrell in Southampton Cxford (a former Labour councillor suspended for opposition to the cuts) and Dave Nellist in Coventry St Michael - the former got 1,633 votes and the latter, who had been a Socialist Party/Socialist Alternative councillor in the area from 1998 to 2012, received 974 votes (29.7% for second place). Subtract their votes from the total and SPEW's 'strategy' for the building of a "new mass workers' party" becomes an embarrassing joke.

This time around, aiming for glory again and helping to explain why SPEW is so desperate to get LU on board, Tusc is aiming for 100 general election candidates and 1,000 council candidates, because then the BBC would be forced to give it a party election broadcast (PEB) - the eligibility criteria stating that in England a political party will qualify for one PEB if it stands candidates in at least 89 constituencies or parties standing candidates in at least *one sixth* of the seats in "one or more of the nations" will be entitled to a UK-wide broadcast instead of national broadcasts.<sup>5</sup> Then again, the Greens have had a Westminster MP since 2010 and polled 7.9% last year in the European elections (not forgetting the 15% of the vote they got in the 1989 European elections), and yet the BBC almost totally ignores them.

Thankfully, the pro-Tusc comrades did not get their way at the LU conference. Tusc is not a serious partyist project, which is why LU was right to reject a formal electoral alliance that would have included a common manifesto containing policies weaker in certain areas than those currently upheld by LU ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/How-To-Talk-About-Immigration-FINAL.pdf.
2. *Daily Mail* November 19.
3. www.cpgb.org.uk/assets/files/swpinternalbulletins/PreConf\_Bulletin\_ii\_Oct\_2014.pdf
4. www.socialistparty.org.uk/partydoc/British\_Perspectives\_2013\_a\_Socialist\_Party\_congress\_document/16413.
5. Though the rules do also state that a PEB "may be allocated where a party does not qualify under the above criteria, but can demonstrate that it has significant levels of current electoral support" (www.broadcastersliaisongroup.org.uk/criteria\_genelect.html).

## ITALY

# Strikes, smoke bombs and tear gas

Toby Abse reports on the latest union action and the autonomists' social strike

The strikes and demonstrations all over Italy on Friday November 14 clearly indicated that the rather predictable capitulation of most of the left wing of the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD) to a grudging acceptance of prime minister Matteo Renzi's "Jobs Act"<sup>1</sup> has had very little effect on the strength and militancy of the grassroots movement against austerity.

The next few weeks will see further action by the trade unions, at least by those affiliated to the biggest and most leftwing of the major confederations, the CGIL. November 21 will see a strike by all members of the CGIL's most radical affiliate, the engineering workers' union, FIOM, in the central and southern regions, accompanied by a mass demonstration in Naples. This is the logical corollary of FIOM's November 14 strike in the northern regions, when there was a mass demonstration in Milan.

The CGIL as a whole has called an eight-hour general strike for December 8 to protest against both the Jobs Act and the draft budget. After the failure of Renzi's government to make any sudden and unexpected concessions on pay in a meeting with public-sector union leaders on November 17, the CGIL also intends to call a nationwide one-day public-sector strike and there is some possibility that the UIL, the third largest trade union confederation, but traditionally the strongest amongst public employees, will also participate, even if the Catholic confederation, the CISL, has so far refused to engage in joint strike action with the CGIL. The CISL had shown some willingness in recent weeks to participate in joint campaigns and mass demonstrations in defence of public-sector workers, which Susanna Camusso, the CGIL general secretary, had hoped might lead to the involvement of both the CISL and UIL in united action, at least in the public sector.

The events of November 14 were the result of a deliberate coincidence between the FIOM strike and action by a coalition of breakaway unions of a semi-syndicalist type - most notably Cobas, but also others that have attracted students, unemployed and casualised workers. To describe this combined effort as a joint action would be a bit inaccurate - FIOM is always very careful to keep some distance from the wilder elements close to autonomism, which on occasions can be drawn into counterproductive and often aimless violence on the streets; whilst some of the more ideological autonomists are hostile to all mainstream unions, even FIOM.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, since the Cobas-led coalition had first decided on their 'social strike' - which had broader targets than just the budget and the Jobs Act, including privatisations, casualisation, health and education issues - back in September, whilst FIOM named the day for its one-day strike in the northern regions much more recently, it is quite clear that in practice FIOM was giving indirect support to the Cobas-led upsurge.

The 'social strike' was by no means the first essentially political 'general strike' called by Cobas and other 'base unions',<sup>3</sup> but coordination with the CGIL or its affiliates has been very rare. Such 'general strikes' around political or social, rather than specific economic, demands have been essentially symbolic actions, since they have had very little impact on production. Most of their practical impact has arisen from associated street processions involving students, unemployed and others outside the workforce and quite often giving rise to widely reported clashes



Nationwide protests

with the police.

## Rioting

Therefore, the coincidence of the 80,000-strong Milanese march led by FIOM<sup>4</sup> - ending in a rally at which not only FIOM leader Maurizio Landini, but also Susanna Camusso, spoke - with the activities by Cobas and its allies was rather unusual. Whilst FIOM's strike in the northern factories does not seem to have given rise to any incident on the picket lines and all commentators have remarked on the entirely peaceful nature of the huge Milanese trade union march, many of the demonstrations called by Cobas and its allies ended in scuffles with the police. Arguably the willingness of mainstream trade union leaders like Landini and Camusso to be associated - at least in media coverage, even if not in reality on the ground - with the unpredictable behaviour of Cobas and the even more extreme - autonomist and anarchist - supporters of the 'social strike', is a clear indication of their extreme anger against the anti-working class policies of the Renzi government.

Rioting in Milan, Turin, Pisa, Padua, Naples, Rome and elsewhere was widely reported and will doubtless be blamed on the trade union leaders - if not by Renzi, then certainly by his more enthusiastic fans on the PD's neoliberal wing, who tried to put a negative spin even on the entirely peaceful million-strong demonstration in Rome on October 25. Whilst Camusso and Landini, until very recently political adversaries, have put behind them their quite bitter disputes at the July 2014 congress of the CGIL, the more moderate PD ultra-loyalist elements on the CGIL's right wing are not happy with Camusso's new course, asking, "What do we do after the 5th?"<sup>5</sup> Fabrizio Solari has expressed his doubts in the CGIL's secretariat, with some backing

from Franco Martini.

As I indicated in my article about the million-strong demonstration,<sup>6</sup> Carla Cantone, the leader of the CGIL's strong pensioners' section, is also unhappy with the new radical oppositional stance, despite her anger at Renzi. Landini's radical rhetoric at the Milan rally - "We will not stop, we will go forward until they change their positions. We have the force and intelligence to do it. We are not joking" - had Camusso's backing, but is not welcomed by all sections of the CGIL bureaucracy, since it means that the confederation is pursuing a path that will bring it into confrontation with both the PD, of which most of its officials are members, and the other, more moderate trade union confederations - the CISL and UIL.

The 'social strike' had a massive impact - the *Corriere della Sera* claimed there were protests in 25 cities, whilst *La Repubblica* estimated there were demonstrations in 60 cities. Regardless of the precise figures - *La Repubblica* claimed 100,000 for Italy as a whole, with 15,000 in Rome, 10,000 in Naples and 5000 in Turin - there is no dispute that tens of thousands of workers, school students, university students and unemployed took to the streets. Outside Milan, they did so largely in response to a call by Cobas and its radical allies, even if FIOM had some input into the protests in Turin and Genoa.

The most serious violence occurred in Padua, the traditional stronghold of the autonomists, where Toni Negri used to teach at the university in the 1960s and 1970s. The scuffles broke out when about 500 young people - many with their faces covered by helmets or balaclavas (the traditional uniform of the hard-core autonomists) - sought to break through a police cordon to reach the nearby PD offices. Presumably, given their attire, the

intention was to vandalise it rather than just chanting a few anti-Renzi slogans. This particular scuffle obtained national prominence, since Marco Cali, the head of the Padua flying squad, was amongst the five policemen injured in the scuffles. The PD and CGIL joined the rightwing president of the Venetian region in condemning the demonstrators, whilst the autonomists of the Centro Sociale Pedro equally predictably blamed "the aggression of the flying squad against the right to strike".<sup>7</sup>

However, it would be wrong to see events in the rest of Italy as such a dispiriting re-enactment of 1977 - autonomists against the trade unions, paramilitary tendencies and so forth - even in cases where clashes with the police occurred. Two PD offices were targeted in Genoa, but the demonstrators confined themselves to throwing eggs - whilst some students were responsible for similar action at the new city-centre PD office, the incident at the PD's Sampierdarena headquarters seems to have been the work of FIOM members who felt the PD had turned its back on the class it once represented. Some industrial sabotage occurred at the control centre of the AMT, Genoa's transport company, where an occupation of the management office had been going on for a week as a result of redundancy threats. A group broke away from the main march, entered the control centre, tampered with the wires and brought the city's entire tram system to a halt.

These Genoese incidents need to be seen in the context both of popular anger over recent floods,<sup>8</sup> for which the mayor and other local officials were blamed, and a much more serious industrial dispute over the privatisation of the city's transport system that occurred a couple of years ago.

Despite the peaceful character

of the main march in Milan, there were various clashes involving the more radical supporters of the 'social strike'. Some of these occurred near the stock exchange - an obvious symbolic target for anti-capitalists - where smoke bombs were thrown, but the main incidents occurred as a result of students attempting to disrupt a meeting taking place at the Archbishop's Palace - the students threw smoke bombs and were met with tear gas from the police.

In some other places the incidents were essentially symbolic and carnivalesque - stunts rather than attempts to provoke serious clashes with the police. In Rome the ministry of finance and the German embassy<sup>9</sup> were targeted mainly with eggs and red paint, although some smoke bombs were thrown. Some activists got into the Policlinico Umberto I - one of Rome's main hospitals - to put up banners proclaiming "Salute bene comune" ('Health is a public good') and banners were also raised on the scaffolding surrounding the Colosseum against the privatisation of public services and in favour of some sacked bus drivers ●

## Notes

1. A small minority has continued to oppose Renzi's attack on article 18 of the workers' statute of 1970, which provided some degree of protection against arbitrary dismissal for those in workplaces employing 15 or more workers. The most prominent of the intransigent opponents, Pippo Civati and Stefano Fassina, participated in the FIOM march in Milan on November 14. However, many other leading members of the PD's left have settled for some very minor modifications: promises have been made that it would still be possible to obtain reinstatement in some circumstances for those unjustly dismissed on disciplinary grounds. Cesare Damiano, a former FIOM official and currently a leading PD parliamentarian, who initially opposed Renzi's counter-reform, now claims: "We have made a good agreement and it ought to be defended." Renzi's coalition partners in the Nuovo Centro Destra (New Centre-Right) have objected to the limited concessions made to quell the PD dissenters, so it is not clear if this agreement will be implemented. It ought to be stressed that the soft-left party, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (SEL), is continuing to oppose Renzi's bill. Its leader, Nichi Vendola, and Giorgio Airauda, an SEL parliamentarian who had previously played a leading role in FIOM, both participated in FIOM's march in Milan.

2. Unfortunately the November 14 demonstrations were spoiled by some manifestations of this kind of hostility. In Bergamo a group of 'antagonists', as autonomists and anarchists often describe themselves in Italy, attempted to attack a CGIL office (see *La Repubblica* November 15 2014).

3. Cobas is the oldest of these, first appearing in the 1980s, and has traditionally had its greatest support amongst transport workers and school teachers, so that, even if it has never had majority support amongst either of these groups, any strike it might call in these sectors would have a noticeable effect and might on occasions win some concrete results for the workers concerned. There is a whole galaxy of similar unions, with all the splits, fusions and name changes characteristic of small, radical left groupings. At one stage supporters of the Fourth International seemed to have some influence within Sincobas, a rival to Cobas, while Cobas's most well known spokesman, Piero Bernocchi, is from the autonomist tradition, even if this veteran activist is less extreme and sectarian than many of that persuasion.

4. This estimate by FIOM was reported in the centre-right daily *Corriere della Sera* on November 15; the centre-left *La Repubblica* on November 15 claimed a total of 50,000 had protested in Milan, mostly as part of the FIOM demonstration - although this figure also included the paper's estimate for the smaller, more radical marches in the city.

5. Referring to the general strike scheduled for December 5 2014.

6. 'Marching in defence of article 18' *Weekly Worker* October 30 2014.

7. *La Repubblica* November 15 2014.

8. Yet more floods have occurred in the city since the 'social strike'. Insufficiently regulated building in this low-lying port city over the last few decades means that there is inadequate drainage from local rivers. Legal disputes between rival companies making bids for remedial public works have meant that the issue remains unresolved, as infrastructure improvements have been blocked.

9. The long-running dispute between the Terni steelworkers and the German firm, Krupp-Thyssen, provides a partial explanation, although Angela Merkel's role as the champion of austerity within the euro zone may also have contributed to anti-German feeling.

REVIEW

# The beginning of new unionism

Louise Raw *Striking a light: the Bryant and May match women and their place in history* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011, pp300, £17.99



Strike a light

This is a wonderful book. Louise Raw has taken a penetrating, fresh look at the Bryant and May strike of 1888, which ended in a sensational victory for the strikers and an inflated reputation for the person who is supposed to have led them - Fabian socialist, theosophist, women's rights activist and publicist Annie Besant (1847-1933).

Besant wrote an article in *The Link*, a journal which she produced along with fellow Fabian, Herbert Burrows. This was entitled 'White slavery in London', and appeared on June 23 1888. It followed a discussion at a Fabian Society meeting in London the same month, which highlighted Bryant and May's high profits and low wages. In order to obtain factual information, Annie Besant went along to the firm's premises in Fairfield Road and interviewed some of the women who worked there.

But she did not in fact suggest that they call a strike: indeed, in the very same copy of *The Link* which exposed the working conditions at the factory there is a piece on the following page asserting that it would be impossible to organise a union there or stage a strike, since that would only lead to the dismissal of the rebellious elements in the workforce and their replacement with other workers (see p8). Annie Besant's preferred tactic was different: her aim was to force action via Bryant and May's shareholders and, if possible, the government.

The workers were subject to a system of fines, with penalties imposed for faulty work and for any matches that accidentally caught fire during manufacture. Then there was the safety aspect, which is surely the area where the management's activities were at

their most heinous.

In 1831 a French chemist called Charles Sauria perfected an easily strikable match by coating the end of a stick of wood with a mixture of potassium chloride, gum arabic, starch and white phosphorus. Unfortunately white phosphorus is a particularly toxic substance - used with searing effect by US armed forces not so long ago in Iraq. The poisonous fumes were inhaled by workers assembling the matches, leading in extreme cases to a disfiguring industrial disease called by the workers "phossy jaw" - see Louise Raw's vivid description of the symptoms, which sometimes led to a painful death (p93).

All in all, the situation was full of incendiary material (no pun intended). Explode it did, but was that Annie Besant's doing or was it the matchwomen themselves who took the decisive initiative? Louise Raw answers in this way:

After the matchwomen's strike Besant published her book, *The trade union movement*, making no mention whatever of the matchwomen, and praising new unionism on the grounds that "when it desires it will use the ballot box instead of the strike", and control "women workers and unskilled labourers, the two unorganised mobs which have hung round the disciplined army of unionists and have lost them many a fight ..." (pp115-16).

This suggests that it was not Annie Besant's aim to provoke a strike: what she wanted was a consumer boycott. This is confirmed in her autobiography written in 1893.

Annie Besant did, however, apprise Bryant and May directors of her intention to publish an article on their factory in her journal. If the intention was to sting them into threatening legal action, which would give the case useful publicity, it worked. The directors threatened to sue, and, what is more, began to pressurise their workers into signing statements denouncing Besant's report as a tissue of lies. But they miscalculated: most if not all the women refused to sign. One was the given the sack on what was fairly

clearly a trumped-up charge, and that provoked a walkout.

The first thing Annie Besant seems to have known about this was when around a hundred of the strikers called at her offices two days later. She agreed to meet a small deputation, and promised some sort of action in support, but clearly this turn of events caught her unawares.

However, the strike generated a lot of interest in the press and the adverse publicity this produced eventually forced the company to agree to a settlement, conceding all the strikers' demands, including reinstatement of the women regarded as "ringleaders" - Louise Raw's inquiries mean that we now know at least some of the actual strike leaders, such as Mary Driscoll, Eliza Martin and Martha Robertson. The victory led to the establishment of a Union of Women Matchworkers, with Annie Besant as secretary and Herbert Burrows as treasurer (p142).

Clearly, as Louise Raw demonstrates, the matchwomen's strike, far from being an isolated precursor of the movement known as the 'new unionism' (ie, the drive to organise unskilled labour in Britain), was in fact the beginning of that movement. This has not been the prevailing view among labour historians to date, but Louise's book sought to change that.

Her book is valuable not only for these labour history aspects, but also contains much useful background material on the position of women in the UK in the 19th century, the effects of which are still with us. Particularly telling is her evocation of the typical middle and upper class woman, financially dependent on her husband, with no automatic right to custody of her children, should the marriage break up, and without even the right to a divorce until the latter part of the century, but expected to play her destined role as devoted wife and mother with the fortitude of an angel.

The matchwomen, as factory workers and unruly strikers, acted as a total challenge to these 'respectable' notions, and indeed the advent of women able, potentially, to support themselves out of their own earnings posed a problem for male trade unionists, which took some time to resolve ●

Chris Gray

## Fighting fund

### Looks good!

"Congratulations on the new, colourful *Weekly Worker*," writes comrade EW. "While the case could be made that it's a bit of a waste of money, doesn't it look good?!" And, to show how much he appreciates it, EW encloses a cheque for £100!

In fact I don't think it's a "waste of money" by any criteria - even if you think that making things "look good" falls into that category. But if an attractive appearance leads to more readers - and in theory it ought to - then no money will be lost in any case. We only have to sell an extra 50 copies a week to break even.

Another reader who sent us a cheque this week was JC - for £50. On top of that we had two PayPal donations - £20 from FG, which

was added to his subscription, and a sizeable £40 from MD. They were among 3,097 online readers last week (by the way, when it comes to readership by country, the US has been relegated to second place for the first time in a while, behind the UK). Then there were three standing order donations - thanks to MM, DW and JP.

All that takes our total to £921. But there are only 10 days left to get the extra £829 if we are to reach our £1,750 target. So if you happen to have a few pounds to spare, you know what to do! ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

## What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# weekly worker

**Left Unity  
ought to  
distance itself**

## Not European left's historic moment

Syriza's speaker at Left Unity's conference expressed unbounded optimism, but, says Mike Copestake, such hype is dangerous



**Golden Dawn: fascist counterrevolution**

Not short on over confidence and empty rhetoric, Marina Prentoulis of Syriza, declared: "We have to understand that the moment we have a left government in Greece this will be the victory of the left across Europe and across the world." Casting a knowing glance at the Communist Platform bloc seated directly in front of her, she admitted: "I know that for some comrades this 'new left' does not sound very promising." But then she rounded on such doubters, demanding we should all spend less time contemplating past revolutions or engaged in idle daydreams, and more time getting out there and - well - *winning!*

The vehicle for our victory is, of course, Left Unity, which comrade Prentoulis considers a "sister party" of Syriza due to its 'broad' character, encompassing as it does a variety of different political tendencies. But the real key, according to our comrade, is to maintain our unity and the unity of all such broad left parties, wherever they may be. No matter how coded by the euphemistic talk of achieving "social justice", the hope of working class advance and "the victory of the left across Europe and across the world", combined with appeals to the natural and powerful desire for unity, will always play well in front of any leftwing swamp.

This was all very exciting, of course, and apart from the Communist Platform bloc, the applause given to comrade Prentoulis was generous, if not rapturous. But such a level of unwarranted hype is more dangerous than anything else when it cannot be lived up to. The general election in Greece must be held by June 2016 and may be called as early as

February 2015. If Syriza comes out on top and forms a government, yet fails to advance working class power, that will not represent a *victory* for the left across Europe, whatever temporary morale boost it may at first provide. In the longer run we should instead be expecting the demoralisation that occurs when broad parties turn out, even under whatever mass pressure can be expected from the Greek working class, not to be committed to social transformation.

A Syriza government is almost guaranteed to be far more moderate than soft left observers contend and the party is obviously coming to an accord with the Greek and European establishments - in its present predicament between either continued austerity or 'drachmageddon', it feels that there is, in fact, no alternative to such 'moderation'.<sup>1</sup> It is *this* which will be Syriza's lasting legacy across Europe. And if such a conclusion is unavoidable for even the *model* left party, then what hope is there for the rest of us?

A Syriza government is likely, but

not inevitable. In the party's favour the latest polls have reported its support at a new all-time high of 35.5%.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Left Futures* blog, this would, if elections were held tomorrow, provide Syriza with 150 seats in the 300-seat Greek legislature.<sup>3</sup>

What transforms a sturdy but far from overwhelming 35.5% potential vote into half the seats is, of course, the anti-democratic 50-seat top-up for whichever party receives the largest single vote. Needless to say, minority support provides no basis for working class power. If (if!) Syriza were still committed to its more radical policies from the recent past, the party would face immense opposition.

There is not only the 64.5% of voters who will have sought to deny the party the right to govern, but also the familiar state and extra-state actors for the current order: police, army, courts and magistrates, business executives, bankers, whatever remains of the Greek middle class or its embittered former members, not to mention the street thugs of Golden Dawn - all on top of the more or less instant

economic dislocation, capital flight, inflation, etc that would greet such an eventuality. A Syriza committed to running capitalism will be pushed into an open confrontation with the working class and therefore its own electoral base. Hardly a positive example for left parties in other countries.

For its part the governing conservative New Democracy party and its allies will be hoping that the marginal reduction in unemployment over the last quarter and the equally marginal growth of Greek GDP can continue in a positive direction until the election. They are also seeking to find a way to score a definitive political victory by ending the bailout programme (or appearing to) earlier than scheduled - ideally before the election. The coalition parties themselves will no doubt also have modest plans for whatever measly amount of money they can afford to throw at key sections of the electorate - all 'results' they will attempt to portray Syriza as threatening.

We can now maybe look upon the stress that comrade Prentoulis

placed on the need for unity slightly differently - it will indeed take discipline, no matter how displaced, for Syriza to be maintained in office on such a programme of accommodation.

I would like nothing more than for comrade Prentoulis to be right: for Syriza to be the model we seek to emulate, for working class power to be imminent in Greece, allowing a revitalised and internationalised European left commanding powerful parties across the whole continent, and for the victory, at last, of 'social justice'. Far more likely any Syriza government will be a government of crisis, a government threatened by the army, the courts and Golden Dawn on the one side and on the other the forces of the working class and the authentic left ●

### Notes

1. 'Process of accommodation' *Weekly Worker* October 30 2014.
2. <http://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/me-115-monades-diafora-o-syriza-flertarei-me-tin-aytodynamia>.
3. [www.leftfutures.org/2014/10/new-poll-would-give-syriza-half-the-seats-in-greek-parliament](http://www.leftfutures.org/2014/10/new-poll-would-give-syriza-half-the-seats-in-greek-parliament).

Subscribe			
	6m	1yr	Inst.
UK	£30/€35	£60/€70	£200/€220
Europe	£43/€50	£86/€100	£240/€264
Rest of world	£65/€75	£130/€150	£480/€528

**New UK subscribers offer:  
3 months for £10**

**UK subscribers: Pay by standing order and save £12 a year. Minimum £12 every 3 months... but please pay more if you can.**

Send a cheque or postal order payable to 'Weekly Worker' to:  
Weekly Worker, BCM Box 928,  
London WC1N 3XX

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tel: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Sub: £/€ \_\_\_\_\_  
Donation: £/€ \_\_\_\_\_

**Standing order**

To \_\_\_\_\_ Bank plc \_\_\_\_\_  
Branch address \_\_\_\_\_  
Post code \_\_\_\_\_ Account name \_\_\_\_\_  
Sort code \_\_\_\_\_ Account No \_\_\_\_\_

Please pay to Weekly Worker, Lloyds A/C No 00744310 sort code 30-99-64, the sum of \_\_\_\_\_ every month\*/3 months\* until further notice, commencing on \_\_\_\_\_. This replaces any previous order from this account. (\*delete) Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Name (PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_