

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly



# worker



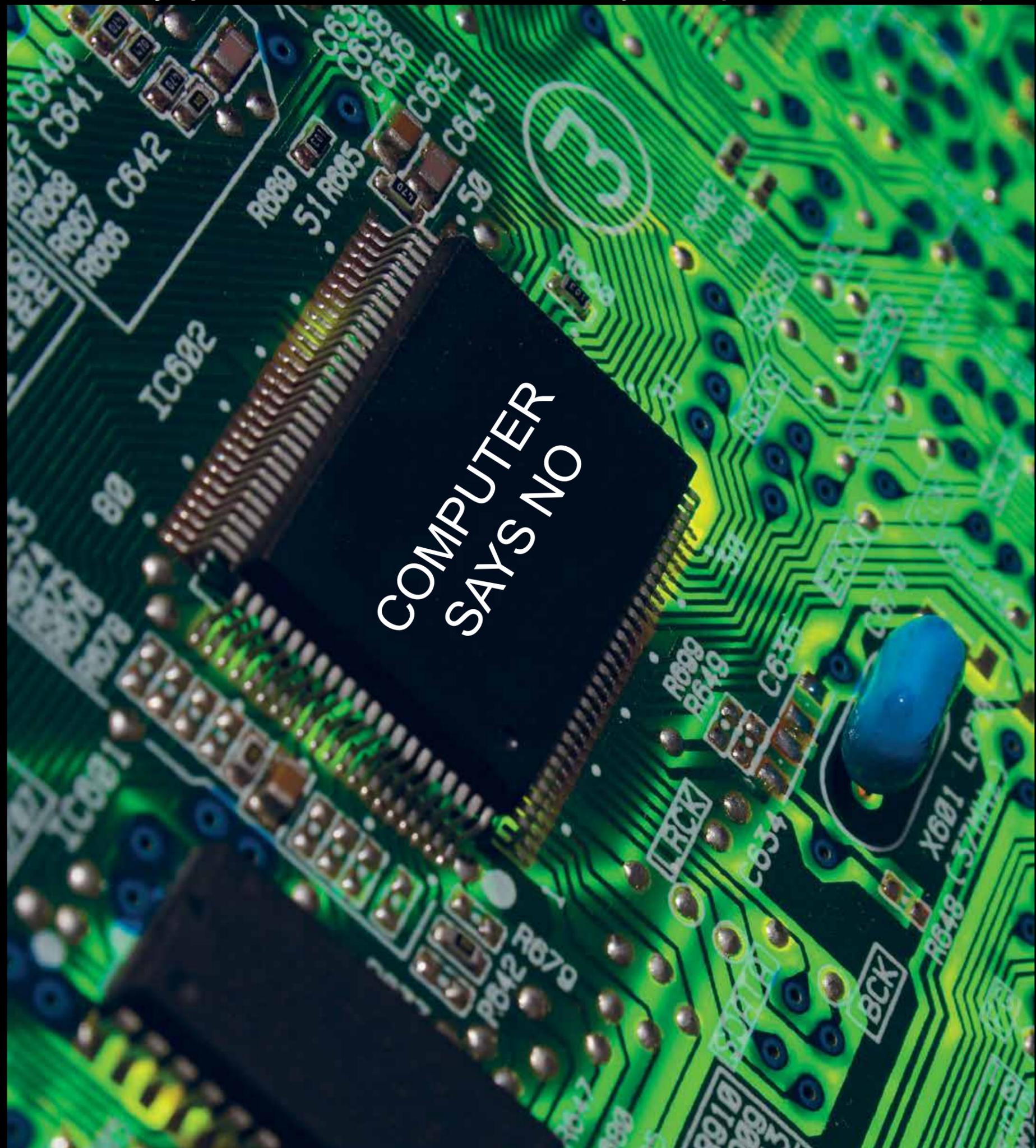
**Don't abandon Palestinian cause because of fake 'anti-Semitism' campaign**

- Letters and debate
- South African massacre
- Democratic Socialists of America
- Populist moment

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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SAYS NO

## LETTERS



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

## 1917

Alan Gibson accuses the CPGB and myself of opportunism (Letters, August 31). Why? Because we supposedly confuse Bolshevism in 1917 with "popular frontist alliances between proletarian and bourgeois parties in 2017". Actually, it is comrade Gibson who is confused.

Let me go through comrade Gibson's argument point by point - beginning, predictably, with the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.

It is self-evident that there was continuity between this Bolshevik strategic formula for the widely expected coming revolution - as, for example, mapped out, elaborated and defended by Lenin in his famous pamphlet *Two tactics* in 1905 - and the Bolshevik slogan, 'All power to the soviets'. The revolutionary democratic (majority) dictatorship (rule) of the proletariat and peasantry, in fact, correctly, accurately, brilliantly anticipated the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies of 1917.

Comrade Gibson denies this. Instead he insists upon a break, beginning with Lenin's April theses (when, according to the Trotskyite myth, Lenin discards old Bolshevism along with his previous programmatic writings, such as *Two tactics*).

Comrade Gibson tells us that there were differences between the Bolsheviks over Lenin's April theses. Undoubtedly true. As detailed in these pages, some Bolsheviks worried that Lenin was calling for a socialist revolution (Lenin reassuringly denied it). All he was proposing is "taking steps in the direction of socialism". Others thought Lenin wanted to forget about the necessity of winning a majority for revolution: ie, the peasantry (again, Lenin reassuringly denied it). No Marxist would countenance carrying out a second revolution without majority support.

Such misunderstandings were surely inevitable. Not only had Lenin been in exile in Switzerland, where he had to rely on the unreliable bourgeois press, when it came to post-February 1917 developments in Russia. Understandably, he was also in a terrible rush. Therefore Lenin wrote his theses with "insufficient preparation" and "only the briefest explanatory notes" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p21).

Nevertheless, there was the attitude towards the Provisional Government. Lenin insisted that there could be "not the slightest concession" to "revolutionary defencism". The Provisional Government headed by prince Lvov was unquestionably capitalist. Cadets and Octobrists dominated. The presence of a "would-be socialist" - ie, Alexander Kerensky - had no function other than to "lull the vigilance and attention of the people with sonorous phrases" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p58).

On the other hand, Kamenev, who had been editing *Pravda*, the Bolshevik daily, advocated critical support for the Provisional Government. A twin-track approach: defend what had been gained by mass action in the revolution; "expose" the "counterrevolutionary" essence of the Provisional Government, its alliance with Anglo-French imperialism, its predatory war aims, etc, by fielding what would appear to the masses as perfectly reasonable demands. Through employing this "agitational device", Kamenev believed that the Bolsheviks could win over "honest revolutionary defencists", not only amongst the working class, but the peasants - crucially those in the armed forces. Over a period of months, not years, this approach would prepare the ground for the "transfer" of power to the "dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry". Needless to say, this was the operative line of the Bolshevik leadership, the bureau of the central committee, headed by himself and Stalin over March-April 1917.

So here, in the positions of Lenin and

Kamenev, there was real disagreement, but, I would argue, one of shade, even temperament. Anyway, it was decided, in early April, to "openly" discuss "our differences, and thus provide material for the All-Russia conference of our party", which was due to meet a few weeks later.

Comrade Gibson sees some considerable significance in Lenin emphasising that the Bolsheviks would openly debate their disagreements. For him - that is, comrade Gibson - there was a "clear implication that doing so was the result of a democratic decision, which presumably had gone the other way on other issues". In point of fact, as comprehensively shown by Lars T Lih, what the Bolshevik cadre wanted was the chance to clarify, strengthen and amend Lenin's April theses (see 'Thirteen to two?' *Weekly Worker* July 27 2017). And, of course, open debate was the norm amongst the Bolsheviks. Open debate appears strange, exceptional, the prelude to a split, only for those whose political expectations, their mental horizons, have been limited, narrowed, impoverished by membership of confessional sects such as the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales, Socialist Appeal, etc.

But what about Lenin's supposed rejection of the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry? Comrade Gibson fields what he clearly imagines to be a killer quote: "The person who now speaks only of a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' is behind the times; consequently, he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle; that person should be consigned to the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archive of 'old Bolsheviks')." Note, I have emphasised the word "only".

Yet immediately after this little passage, the one just cited by comrade Gibson, we find Lenin saying this: "The revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry has already been realised." Yes, yes, as I have repeatedly argued, relying on nothing more than Lenin's words, in the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, the formula has "already been accomplished in reality" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p45).

That comrades such as Alan Gibson refuse to see what is in front of their eyes, refuse to take on board, right or wrong, what is absolutely explicit in the writings of Lenin they are so selectively, so disjointedly, so crudely quoting, testifies to a religious approach to politics that more than strays into what might well appear to be borderline madness. The attempt to deceive others is clearly inadequate in terms of an explanation. No, for their own reasons, the Alan Gibsons of this world want to, need to deceive themselves.

Anyway, what was dangerous about speaking "only of a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'"? Why did Lenin field the aggressive charge of "in effect" going over to the petty bourgeoisie in the attempt to whip his leading comrades into line? Lenin went straight to the heart of what was a highly contradictory situation. The Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies had realised the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, but in a "highly original manner". The Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary majority in the soviets supported the Provisional government, not with the intention of exposing it, readying the masses for its overthrow, but to ensure its continued popularity, its long-term survival.

More than that though, despite the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies possessing effective authority in Petrograd, the Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary majority were intent on transferring power to the Provisional government (ie, the bourgeoisie). Under such circumstances, to limit oneself to the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry formula (ie, the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants'

Deputies) was to downplay the unexpected dynamics of dual power, the intermeshing, the very real danger of not maximising the historic opportunity that presented itself.

Presumably, Lenin had Kamenev in mind as his main target. Nonetheless, through their open debate, over the course of a few, albeit highly concentrated, weeks, there was an unmistakable convergence of views. However, even before that rapprochement, even before Lenin had arrived in Petrograd's Finland Station, Kamenev had already adjusted his approach. At the March 31 session of the Bolshevik conference of party workers, he forthrightly attacked the proposal to include support for the Provisional government in the final resolution: "It is impermissible to have any expression of support, even a hint of it" (quoted in L Trotsky *The Stalin school of falsification* London 1974, p213). By the time of the 7th Conference of the RSDLP (April 24-29), Lenin was saying his differences with Kamenev "are not very great". Eg, both opposed the immediate slogan, 'Down with the Provisional government' - raised by the "adventurist" Petrograd committee. Instead the correct slogan was "Long live the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies".

Lenin goes on to grant that: "The Provisional government must be overthrown, but not now, and not in the usual way. We agree with comrade Kamenev. But we must explain. It is this word that comrade Kamenev has been harping on. Nevertheless, this is the only thing we can do" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p246). Hence the 7th Conference perspective of undertaking the hard slog of peaceful persuasion and winning a Bolshevik majority in the soviets. Once this was achieved, the Provisional government could be overthrown, and a "pure" revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry installed (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p61).

Comrade Gibson adopts a mocking tone. Throughout the CPGB's Communist University he was faced with the claim that the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry was "a central expression of the unbroken continuity of Bolshevik politics". What, he asks, would Lenin have made of "the idea that a political organisation in 2017 would still be holding firm to this slogan, taken from what must now be a very old and mouldy archive"? A question which neatly sums up comrade Gibson's confusion.

The continuity of Bolshevism is surely an established fact. It should, especially nowadays, rank alongside the Greek discovery that world is round, the Norman invasion of 1066, Isaac Newton's physics and Charles Darwin's *Origin of the species*. Just to reinforce the point, albeit in negative form, take a look at Lenin's *Leftwing communism* (1920). Here, in a pamphlet designed to educate the newly formed Communist International, Lenin stresses that the success of Bolshevism in Russia relied on "a very firm foundation of Marxist theory". Nowhere does he write about a break, an abandonment of their standing programme.

I argue that there was continuity because it is surely impossible to build a genuine Communist Party in the 21st century unless the lessons and historical significance of Bolshevism are understood and fully grasped. The Bolsheviks openly debated differences; they allowed factions; they dug deep roots in the working class in 1905 and maintained that support from then onwards; they equipped themselves with a correct programme; they saw themselves as loyal to the orthodox Marxism of the Second International; they understood the necessity of winning the peasants as allies; they learnt tactical flexibility, etc. In other words, they did not emerge from nothing, from a mere confessional sect, in April 1917.

As for the CPGB, we hardly "hold firm" to the revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry... we have our *Draft programme*, which envisages working class rule, with Europe as the decisive point of departure, neutralising,

prising sections of the middle classes away from the big bourgeoisie, and defeating all counterrevolutionary attempts by the national and international bourgeoisie. When it comes to the so-called third world, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the rural poor will doubtless have to be won as allies. But everywhere there has to be working class leadership, hegemony, rule.

Comrade Gibson seems to imagine that, by recognising the continuity of the Bolshevik programme, not least its strategic alliance with the peasantry, this opens us up to the temptation of calling for, defending and even joining a popular front government of the kind seen in France and Spain during the 1930s. There the communist parties held back the struggle of the working class, radically cut back their programmes, preserved the existing state machine and all in all sought to placate the capitalist class... for the sake of defeating fascism. A disastrous strategy.

In terms of logic comrade Gibson is mistaken. His first proposition does not lead to the second. The Bolshevik-Left Socialist Revolutionary coalition government was transparently a concrete expression of the Bolsheviks' worker-peasant alliance formula. The Left SRs were the main peasant party - they constituted the majority in the All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies - and their comrades headed the commissariats of agriculture, justice, posts and telegraphs.

Maybe comrade Gibson thinks that Lenin's government violates the "core principle" of Marxism: namely "working class independence". If that is the case, he does not understand Marxism. Marxism does not eschew alliances, even governmental alliances. Working class independence is about the working class being formed into a party that is politically and organisationally independent from the parties of the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie. When it comes to government, it is programme that provides the litmus test. It is programme that decides what is principled (ie, in the long-term interests of realising communism) and what is unprincipled (ie, what hold back, derails the struggle for communism). Lenin's government was based on Bolshevik leadership and carrying out their *full* minimum programme. Neither in spirit nor in practice did this Bolshevik-Left SR government have anything to do with the popular fronts advocated by the 'official communists' (and a few years ago by the SWP in its Respect phase).

The CPGB takes the same approach as the Bolsheviks. We will only form a government, or enter a coalition government, on the basis of carrying out *to the full* our minimum programme. This is, of course, no tinkering reform programme, a programme of running capitalism better than the capitalists. No, we shall get rid of the monarchy, the secret state and the House of Lords; a single chamber will exercise "supreme power in the state" and its recallable delegates will be elected annually; we shall disband the existing police and armed forces, establish a people's militia, extend democracy to every sphere of society, abolish unemployment and reorientate production towards need.

**Jack Conrad**  
London

## Anti-social

Robin Cox's argument that there was no socialism in the Soviet Union is dogmatic and one-sided (Letters, August 31).

Cox uses the 'no socialism' theory to refute my argument that lack of socialist consciousness contributed to the collapse of the former Soviet Union (FSU), which illustrated that social ownership of the means of production does not automatically lead to socialist consciousness, thus exposing the flaw in Marx's position that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness". Cox presents this quote as only an aphorism of Marx, while directing me to Peter Stillman to get an understanding of what Marx meant.

Apart from the fact that anyone can have their own interpretation of Marx, the above passage needs no interpretation. In plain English, Marx is saying that being determines consciousness. Cox attempts to tar me with the myth of Marx's economic determinism, but I never claimed Marx was an economic determinist. What the above passage tells us is that for Marx, philosophically speaking, when a person crosses the road, the decision was made by the legs, not the mind. Cox says that social being is undefined in the Marx quote and likely includes consciousness. But in the passage social being is clearly contrasted with consciousness. Cox is, of course, free to include consciousness in social being. The truth is that all human relationships are determined by consciousness. This includes a relationship between two people and a relationship between classes. Also, if you are born in France and live there, you are likely to speak French, but this is determined by a relationship between people beginning with consciousness.

Cox quotes Engels to support the argument that there was no socialism in the FSU because socialism means society taking possession of the means of production, and for classical Marxism socialism refers to common ownership. Terms like common, social or public ownership are partly judicial concepts. The question is, what do they mean in practice? The debate about the different type of social ownership is a long-standing one in socialism. In the transitional period, state ownership can be one of the forms of social ownership, its socialist character determined by whether society remains on the socialist road. Social ownership reinforces socialist consciousness, but does not create or determine it. That is why it's possible for people to believe in socialism in capitalist countries.

Marxism is not a dogma, it is not flawless. It has to be viewed dialectically - ie, containing truth and errors. And one of its errors is that social being 'determines' consciousness. I am not saying that social being doesn't influence consciousness, but this is quite different from determining it.

**Tony Clark**  
Labour supporter

## Dissolution

Having exposed the fatal contradictions within capitalism that mark it as historically contingent and doomed to extinction quite early on in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, the task of the chapters and volumes that follow is to explain how it exists at all and why it doesn't simply immediately collapse under the weight of those contradictions; and then to explain how ultimately those things that keep it going ultimately cannot save it and become part of what kills it.

The unintended consequence of capitalist competition is that the rate of profit tends to decline. As the socially necessary labour time contained in each commodity lessens, so does their value and so, therefore, does the rate of profit. The capitalist tries to compensate for the declining rate of profit by increasing its mass, which leads to overproduction, monopolisation and crisis. These crises occur roughly every 10 years, with capitalism re-establishing itself once again on a higher level with profitability temporarily restored, so that the cycle can begin again. But there are bigger cycles lasting several decades, when capitalism cannot re-establish itself without major political and violent upheavals that change practically everything and take the system to a whole new level.

What we are experiencing now is not a crisis, a recession or a depression, but a dissolution. The great dissolution of capitalism in fact. No mode of production leaves the stage until it has completely exhausted all of its potential and capacity, as Marx explained, and in the end it would be a case of socialism or barbarism. That is no longer a prophesy. It is the situation we are now confronted with.

**David Ellis**  
Leeds

# IRAN

## Part and parcel of global capital

Instead of creating illusions in 'regime change from above', writes **Yassamine Mather**, we must offer support and solidarity to workers like Reza Shahabi

In late July around 50 political prisoners in Iran's Rajai Shahr prison were moved to new cells, where windows are covered by metal sheets, access to drinking water is limited and prisoners complain of suffocation and dehydration. In protest 17 of them began a hunger strike.

One of them is labour activist Reza Shahabi. He has gone without food for more than 20 days and, according to his family, his physical condition has deteriorated considerably in the last few days. Shahabi is the treasurer of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and has been in and out of jail since 2010. In the spring of 2012 he was sentenced to six years by an Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran - five years for "conspiracy against state security", and one year for "propaganda against the system". He was also fined and banned from all trade union activities for five years.

Many Iranians have compared his plight with that of former presidential candidate and leader of the 2009 'green' movement protests, Mehdi Karroubi, who is currently under house arrest. He recently staged a hunger strike, which succeeded in its aim of removing members of the security forces from his house. Karroubi's plight was widely reported by a number of media outlets, including the BBC Persian service and Voice of America, and was also widely reported inside Iran. However, when it comes to Shahabi's hunger strike, there is a deafening silence.

Of course, the charges against him are nonsense: a trade unionist who has constantly opposed war and regime change from above is not a threat to "state security". However, he is a threat to the regime, as he symbolises workers' protests against the neoliberal economic policies of successive governments, both 'reformist' and conservative.

In the midst of all the publicity for regime change from above (boosted no end after Donald Trump's election) it is often difficult for those opposing both the Islamic regime, together with its oppressive, neoliberal form of capitalism, and the threat of war and new sanctions to make themselves heard. But in fact Shahabi is not alone. Every day there is news of demonstrations and protests by Iranian workers across the country.

A comrade reminded me recently that many of the younger supporters of the conservative cleric, Ebrahim Raisi, who stood against Hassan Rouhani in this year's presidential elections, believe corruption and the current problems of Iran's economy - in particular the financial hardship faced by the overwhelming majority of the population - is down to the specific capitalist path taken by 'reformists' like Rouhani. Such elements genuinely believe that a fairer economic system is possible within the framework of Iran's Islamic Republic and blame the unprecedented gap between the rich and the poor, as well as the all-encompassing corruption, solely on policies followed by the 'reformist' faction. They have illusions in the likes of Raisi and in supreme leader Ali Khamenei's so-called 'resistance' economics.

Although it is correct to say that the implementation of neoliberal economic policies started with 'reformist' president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani (1989-97) and both the Khatami and Rouhani governments have implemented the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in terms of 'privatisation', casualisation of work, the imposition of 'white' contracts (where the employee signs a blank sheet of paper regarding terms of employment), etc, we should not forget that it was Khamenei himself who decided overnight to rewrite article

44 of the constitution, removing any legal barriers to full-scale privatisation of the state sector. The original constitution anticipated state ownership for key economic areas - although, of course, this was never enforced strictly by the market-loving clerics who came to power in 1979: after all, their social base was in the bazaar and amongst the property-owning classes.

However, as time went on, the role of the private sector gradually increased. By 2004, an amendment to this article, approved by Khamenei, allowed for 80% of state assets to be privatised. The IMF and World Bank have constantly encouraged Iran to pursue these policies and in fact it was under president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, supported by the conservative factions of the regime, together with Khamenei, despite his claims of being "on the side of the poor and the deprived sections of society", that Iran was heralded by the IMF as a 'model' country following its economic liberalisation programmes. Over the last few years a government body called the Iran Privatisation Organisation has pursued an aggressive policy, aiming to ensure that the remaining state-owned enterprises are privatised.

Successive governments have declared the aims of Iran's economic policies in terms that include "economic competition through the market", an "increase in labour productivity", the shrinking of government through privatisation, and a reduction in subsidies and budget costs.

For all their talk of a 'resistance economy', the conservatives consist of individuals and institutions overseeing billion-dollar private organisations. During the presidential elections, Raisi told voters: "I own nothing but a 140-square-metre apartment and a private bank account", but the reality is, he is head of the multi-billion-dollar religious foundation, Astane Quds Razavi.

In 2013 Reuters revealed that Khamenei is head of an organisation created to help the poor that is now a major business worth tens of billions of dollars. In the last decade it has become a conglomerate that holds stakes in nearly every sector of Iranian industry, including finance, oil, telecommunications, the production of birth-control pills and farming.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the idea of a third-world economy surviving independently of global capital is either day-dreaming or a deliberate lie - in the case of Iran's supreme leader and his claims of building a 'resistance economy' clearly the latter. It is true that, like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, Khamenei claims he is in favour of 'delinking' Iran's economy from western capital (his predecessor, Ruhollah Khomeini, famously declared that dependence on Japanese capital was acceptable, as Japan was not part of the west!). But the reality is that his own 'charitable' multi-billion-dollar organisation, not to forget the partly privatised banks and industries owned by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, are actually part and parcel of global capital.

A few months ago Khamenei complained about the gap between the rich and the poor in Iran. But, despite the fact that the Islamic regime has been in power for over 38 years, there are many reasons why that gap keeps growing. First of all, those sections of the Iranian aristocracy and bourgeoisie that were not directly involved with the shah's regime have retained their wealth, their capital and their land: and, thanks to Iran's extremely high interest rates, that wealth grows daily. In addition the exploiting classes have been augmented by a whole new layer of *nouveaux riches*. What Iranians call *aghazadeh-ha* (sons and daughters of the ayatollahs) spend money at levels

comparable to Saudi princes - driving sports cars and generally displaying their wealth.

As elsewhere under neoliberal capitalism, there is no 'trickle-down effect'. During the years of sanctions senior clerics and their closest civilian and military supporters made billions from sanction-busting and the black market, while ordinary Iranians faced hunger, abject poverty and death due to a shortage of medicines and surgical equipment. Shahrzad Elghanayan, a *New York Times* reporter, was astonished by what she saw in a programme screened by the pro-government Press TV: "It was not just the wealth that struck me, but how freely Iran's one percenters flaunted the symbols of western decadence without fear of government retribution."<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays no-one denies that the nuclear deal was promoted and managed by Khamenei every step of the way. One of its main aims was the further integration of Iran's economy within the global order and in this all factions of the regime, irrespective of their rhetoric, are united. The warnings of both supporters of regime change from above - who keep telling us that the supreme leader wants to isolate Iran and turn it into another North Korea - and the conservative factions - who claim they want to save Iran from globalisation - are nonsense.

The Islamic Republic is and will remain an integral part of global capitalism. That is why the idea that somehow a bourgeois government (either one composed of 'more committed' reformists or one imposed by regime change from above) would introduce democracy and workers' rights is also a complete nonsense. Freedom of movement for capital has its rationale and the post-war commitment to democracy, trade union rights and public services has ended. There is a need more than ever for uninterrupted free movement of capital to the cheapest zones of exploitation. In the advanced capitalist countries concessions to workers are threatened, while trade unions have been considerably weakened by membership losses, as well as draconian legislation.

Under such circumstances it is criminal for the Iranian left to sow hopes that bourgeois democracy can save workers such as Reza Shahabi from arrest, intimidation and long prison sentences. It is irresponsible to offer Europe or the USA as models to be followed. The gains won in the advanced capitalist countries came at the expense of the superexploited third world. We live in the era of new imperial practices - as Alain Badiou puts it, "the policy of destroying states rather than corrupting or replacing them"<sup>3</sup> - and that is the kind of future 'regime change from above' will bring to Iran.

As for Reza Shahabi, we have a duty to support his struggle, calling for his immediate, unconditional release and building support for his case amongst the international working class. But we should have no illusions in the rightwing, pro-regime-change NGOs, political groups, charities and other organisations which also claim to support him. They are an insult to the Iranian working class, which, despite severe hardship, has maintained its principled opposition to foreign intervention, while pursuing class-based struggles against Iran's Islamic Republic and its internal and external capitalist allies ●

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### Notes

1. www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1.
2. www.nytimes.com/2014/06/11/opinion/clerical-rule-luxury-lifestyle.html?mcubz=0.
3. A Badiou *Notre mal vient de bien loin* Paris 2015.

# ACTION

## London Communist Forum

**Sunday September 10, 5pm:** 'After Zuma, where next for the ANC?' Speaker: South African socialist, journalist and author Terry Bell.

**Sunday September 17, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimtz's *Lenin's electoral strategy from Marx and Engels through the revolution of 1905*. This meeting: chapter 2, 'Revolutionary continuity' (continued).

Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1.

Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk);

and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk).

## Radical bargains

**Saturday September 9, 11am to 3pm:** Book sale of radical left and Marxist literature, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

## No to the arms trade

**Saturday September 9, 10am:** Art exhibition, ExCeL Exhibition Centre, London Docklands, Royal Victoria Dock, 1 Western Gateway, London E16.

Organised by Art The Arms Fair: <https://artthearmsfair.org>.

## Stop the cuts

**Saturday September 9, 12 noon:** March against budget cuts. Assemble College Green, Park Street, Bristol BS1.

Organised by Bristol People's Assembly: [www.facebook.com/BristolPeoplesAssembly](http://www.facebook.com/BristolPeoplesAssembly).

## Scrap the pay cap

**Sunday September 10, 1pm:** Rally at TUC Congress, Arundel Suite, Holiday Inn, 137 King's Road, Brighton BN1. Confirmed speakers: John McDonnell, Mark Serwotka (PCS), Steve Gillan (POA), Ronnie Draper (BFAWU), Sean Hoyle (RMT), Amy Murphy (Usdaw).

Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: <http://shopstewards.net>.

## Living with trauma

**Tuesday September 12, 6.30pm:** Meeting, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. How to cope in Iraq.

Organised by Tadhmun (Iraqi Women Solidarity): <http://solidarityiraq.blogspot.co.uk>.

## Back from the brink

**Tuesday September 12, 7pm:** Public meeting, Friends Meeting House (George Fox room), 173-177 Euston Road, London NW1. 'How to stop nuclear war in the Pacific'. Speakers include Tariq Ali, Lindsey German and Kate Hudson.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

## Scottish campaign against Trident

**Wednesday September 13, 7pm:** Meeting, Committee room 6, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1. Discussion introduced by Scottish activists

Organised by Birmingham Socialist Discussion Group: 07771 567496.

## Funny like a bomb

**Thursday September 14, 7.30pm:** Comedy event, SET Space, 7th floor, Capstan House, Clove Crescent, London E14. Anti-war and arms trade comedy coinciding with arms fair. Free, but booking advised: [www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-comedy-night-of-art-the-arms-fair-tickets-36840700527](http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-comedy-night-of-art-the-arms-fair-tickets-36840700527).

Organised by Art the Arms Fair: <https://artthearmsfair.org>.

## No to war

**Wednesday September 20, 6.30pm to 8.30pm:** Rally, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by North London Stop the War: [www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7](http://www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7).

## Peace market

**Saturday September 23, 10.30am to 4pm:** Anti-war event, St Michael and All Angels Church Hall, The Avenue, London W4. Stalls from groups campaigning for peace and social justice.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

## LRC fringe

**Tuesday September 26, 6.30pm:** Meeting at Labour conference. *Forward to a Labour government*. Friends Meeting House, Brighton BN1.

Organised by Labour Representation Committee: <http://l-r-c.org.uk>.

## Social histories of the Russian Revolution

**Thursday September 28, 6.30pm:** Discussion meeting, Birkbeck, University of London, 26 Russell Square, London WC1. 'Taking power: remaking the family, levelling wages, planning the economy'. Speaker: Wendy Goldman.

Organised by Social Histories of the Russian Revolution: <https://socialhistories1917.wordpress.com>.

## Tories out!

**Sunday October 1, 12 noon:** National demonstration on opening day of Conservative Party conference. Assemble Castlefield Arena, Rice Street, Manchester M3.

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

## Making a world without war

**Monday October 2, 7.30pm:** Talk, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speaker: Dr Scilla Elworthy.

Organised by Conway Hall Ethical Society: <https://conwayhall.org.uk/ethical-society>.

## Capital and historical materialism

**Thursday October 5, 7pm:** Lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Marx's approach to the analysis of capitalist society. Speaker: Dr Jonathan White (*Theory and Struggle*). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

## CPGB wills

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**SOUTH AFRICA**

# Apologists for mass murder

The *Morning Star* is still in denial about the Marikana massacre, writes Peter Manson

Last month, following the lead of the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the *Morning Star* was doing its best to play down the significance of the August 16 2012 Marikana massacre, when 34 striking miners were shot dead by police and a further 78 suffered gunshot wounds.

Cosatu and its largest affiliate, the National Union of Mineworkers, had been complaining in the run-up to the commemorations on the fifth anniversary of the massacre last month that they were not taking into account the fact that others apart from the strikers had been killed around that time. After all, as NUM deputy general secretary William Mabapa was quoted as saying in the *Star*, "Ten workers, including two police officers and two Lonmin security guards, were killed in the preceding week" and so it was wrong to focus exclusively on the strikers shot by the police.<sup>1</sup>

Lonmin is the British-owned platinum company that employed the 34 killed miners, but the reason Cosatu wanted to broaden the commemorations is because none of them were NUM members - they had all joined a non-Cosatu affiliate, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), which was viewed as a bitter rival. Then there is the small matter of Cosatu's support, alongside that of the SACP, for the African National Congress - it does not want to focus too much on the mass murder committed by the police under the control of the ANC government.

And let us be clear: what happened in Marikana was indeed mass murder. Police penned in and then gunned down workers who had gathered for ongoing protests - as they were attempting to flee. Sporadic shooting continued for more than half an hour, as police on horseback or in helicopters hunted down individuals desperately trying to get away, shooting several in the back. At least a dozen were picked off in this way, including many as they were trying to surrender.

Survivors tell of being hunted down by officers yelling, "Ja, you cop killers, you cop killers. You are in the shit. We are going to kill you here."<sup>2</sup> Individual police officers were seeking vengeance for the deaths of two of their colleagues, in a battle which saw police tear-gas the strikers and shoot dead three of them. On the day of the slaughter the police's own photographs showed dead miners who were clearly unarmed, but later images of the same bodies had had weapons placed next to them in an attempt to maintain the pretence that the strikers had launched a violent attack.

The South African Broadcasting Company televised an interview with a police spokesperson just a few hours before the murderous assault began. Provincial police commissioner Nosaziso Mbombo announced her intention to "disarm" the miners and make them leave the "illegal gathering" on a nearby hill, even though it was common ground with no connection to Lonmin. Mbombo declared: "Today we are ending this matter." She did not reveal that 4,000 rounds of ammunition had been delivered to the police at 6am that morning - they had already been armed with lethal automatic rifles. Without a trace of irony Mbombo declared to a gathering of police officers on August 17 that the previous day's action had represented "the best of responsible policing".

The strikers had recently been flocking to join Amcu, formed in 1998,



**Shot down in cold blood**

in disgust at the unwillingness of the NUM to fight for a substantial rise in their poverty wages and improvements in their working conditions. Lonmin NUM officials and shop stewards seemed to be no better than company stooges. They not only received release on full pay to fulfil their 'union duties', but also had been issued with Lonmin credit cards.

When the strike started on August 10 2012, a turning point occurred when miners marched on the local NUM office demanding support. Officials came out with makeshift weapons and at least one had a firearm. Several shots were fired from the NUM office. It was after this that the strikers themselves started to carry traditional spears and sticks. But workers are not permitted to defend themselves, of course, and an official decision was taken to force the miners to disarm.

On the fateful morning, Amcu president Joseph Mathunjwa, having got wind of police plans, pleaded with the strikers to lay down their arms and leave the hill - about 1,000 did so. It was after a further attempt by strike leaders to warn the men that they were now in severe danger that all those who had remained rose and began heading together for their shacks. The police claimed that this movement represented a deadly attack and the order to fire was given.

There is footage readily available showing the moment the police opened fire. Contrary to official reports at the time, the strikers were not attacking the police, but attempting to escape. The footage shows the workers moving from right to left, in a direction that is at right angles to police lines. I have come across one video, which shows in the distance one of the strikers stopping and facing the police - he is crouching and holding something that he appears to be pointing towards them. It is claimed that this *could* be a gun, and the sound that is heard *could* be that of a gun firing twice, but the pictures are out of focus and the sound is unclear amid the general hubbub. But what is clear on all the videos taken at the scene is the fact that hundreds of shots were being fired by dozens of police.

So how was the massacre covered by the *Morning Star* immediately afterwards? Obscenely its report the following day was headlined: "NUM: rival union 'may have planned' mine violence". It read: "National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) secretary general Frans Baleni ... blamed the unrest on the rival Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union making promises which could never be delivered and, in the process, organising an illegal action which led

to the loss of lives."<sup>3</sup>

No, you did not misread this. The NUM actually blamed the breakaway union for the slaughter of its own members - and the *Star* dutifully went along with that!

## Like father, like son

However, things have been complicated a little by the fact that the *Star's* foreign editor is now a certain James Tweedie, who is himself South African. He is the son of leading SACP hack, Dominic Tweedie.

Tweedie senior was possibly the most disgusting of the SACP apologists immediately after Marikana. He was quoted by rightwing journalist RW Johnson as saying:

This was no massacre: this was a battle. The police used their weapons in exactly the way they were supposed to. That's what they have them for. The people they shot didn't look like workers to me. We should be happy. The police were admirable.<sup>4</sup>

Later Tweedie claimed he had been "misquoted", but refused to explain how these words came to be in a web article.

But it was Tweedie junior who penned the *Star* article last month, which highlighted Cosatu's complaints about a 'lack of balance' in the anniversary commemorations, and it was he who wrote a follow-up piece a week later, in which he described the massacre in this way: "Police reportedly opened fire after at least one protestor fired a handgun at security forces, and other [sic] charged police lines with spears and other weapons."<sup>5</sup>

As I have pointed out, only one piece of footage showed images of one striker who *could* be firing a gun, but there are no video or photographic images that I have seen showing the attack on police lines claimed by Tweedie.

In the same article, Tweedie junior notes without comment that "The NUM, Cosatu and South African Communist Party blamed mining transnationals for encouraging Amcu to usurp the established union and provoking unofficial strikes as a pretext for mass sackings." Yes, it was all Amcu's fault that the police gunned down its members.

A *Star* editorial the same day states:

Despite the combined efforts of [the opposition] Economic Freedom Fighters and ... Democratic Alliance to blame president Jacob Zuma or then ANC secretary-general Cyril Ramaphosa for ordering police to

open fire ... on Amcu members armed with clubs, machetes and spears, no credible case has been made.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically a "credible case" was actually made by James Tweedie himself in his August 12-13 article, when he wrote:

Meanwhile, vice-president Cyril Ramaphosa, a former NUM general secretary and Lonmin board member, denied he would be attending the commemorations after families said he would not be welcome.

Some Marikana activists blame Mr Ramaphosa for the massacre over a series of emails he sent to the mining firm. On the eve of the Marikana shooting Ramaphosa said in an email discussion between Lonmin management and government officials that events around the strike "are plainly dastardly criminal and must be characterised as such". He also called for "concomitant action" to be taken.

The billionaire has thrown his hat in the ring to become leader of the ruling ANC party when it holds elections this December.

Yes, the man who was at the time ANC secretary-general and today is deputy president of South Africa, the "billionaire" who was a senior Lonmin board member, had urged "concomitant action" against the strikers on the very eve of the massacre - he also declared in his emails that it was essential to get the minister of police to "act in a more pointed way".

But the *Star* editorial, having quoted Ramaphosa's "dastardly criminal" characterisation, continues:

Ramaphosa was right. Murdering police, security guards and members of another union is not part of any normal labour dispute. It is criminal behaviour. Rather than high-ranking ANC leaders ordering a bloodbath, it is more likely that police exacted unlawful retribution for the murder of their comrades ...

It is of course true that the police were exacting such "unlawful retribution", but that does not negate the accusations against Ramaphosa or the fact that the police had been armed with lethal weapons in readiness for the slaughter.

Perhaps *Morning Star* editor Ben Chacko should ask himself why, five years after the massacre, not a single police officer has been charged with any crime - despite the ample video evidence of their murderous assault. Remember, only 17 of the 34 who died were killed at the scene of the initial shooting - the other 17 were chased, cornered and murdered a mile away. The obvious answer is that any prosecution would inevitably bring to light evidence that has so far been suppressed - what exactly were police orders on the day in question and who issued them?

## Still for 'liberation'?

But none of this is of any relevance for Chacko, who claims in his editorial: "Dozens of local NUM leaders have had their lives snuffed out, usually shot, in the five years since the Marikana massacre, yet the world remains fixated with the blood spilt on one day only."

First of all, it is totally false to imply that "dozens" of NUM officials have been killed by Amcu members. Certainly the violence between the two unions has been vicious (on both sides) and a handful of "local NUM leaders" have indeed been killed. But what

really takes the biscuit is Chacko's conclusion:

The ANC, SACP, Cosatu and NUM are linked in the revolutionary alliance that led South Africa's liberation struggle. Britain's labour movement stood four-square with this alliance and should not be budged from that principled position by a concerted campaign by its opponents to project a one-sided, politically motivated parody of reality.

So, because the ANC once led the liberation struggle against apartheid, our support for the alliance it leads must continue indefinitely! Even though it now runs a neoliberal regime headed by a corrupt president, whom the SACP itself has called upon to resign. And even though one of South Africa's richest capitalists, Cyril Ramaphosa - who has a substantial interest in several large companies as well as Lonmin - is one of the favourites to replace Zuma as ANC leader when he steps down in December. The new leader will almost inevitably be elected president of the republic when Zuma's second term ends in 2019.

But the SACP was not united when it called on Zuma to resign immediately on March 31 this year. It was Dominic Tweedie who on April 3 reposted without comment, on one of the pro-SACP email lists he runs, a party statement dated December 17 2015 - just after the dismissal of finance minister Nhlanhla Nene. In this statement the SACP had "strongly opposed the regime-change agenda disguised as 'Zuma Must Fall'". It called on "our liberation alliance, all formations of the mass democratic movement and democratic people of South Africa as a whole to close ranks" against "an imperialist-supported offensive ... to discredit and delegitimise the whole of our ANC-led national liberation movement" by "singling out targeted leaders".

Tweedie was amongst those who opposed the new, "anyone but Zuma" official line of the SACP and therefore also opposed the support offered by both Cosatu and the Young Communist League to Ramaphosa as Zuma's replacement. Presumably that was why Tweedie junior included the anti-Ramaphosa comments in his *Morning Star* article of August 12-13 this year. Note that the Tweedies, like the SACP faction they support, are not opposing Ramaphosa because he is an unscrupulous capitalist who demands "concomitant action" against strikers. No, they are against him because he lent support to the Zuma Must Fall campaign ●

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## Notes

1. *Morning Star* August 12-13.
2. <http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-09-10-marikana-murders-the-world-now-believes>.
3. *Morning Star* August 17 2012.
4. [www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/massacre-at-marikana](http://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/massacre-at-marikana).
5. *Morning Star* August 19-20.
6. *Morning Star* editorial, August 19-20.

## After Zuma where next for the ANC?

London Communist Forum

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**POPULISM**

# Possibilities and challenges

Are Donald Trump, Jeremy Corbyn and Marine Le Pen from the same mould? Kevin Bean completes his analysis



**Donald Trump is no Hitler and his supporters are no Brownshirts**

Following Donald Trump's election in November 2016 *The Economist* produced one of its striking cover illustrations portraying Trump, Vladimir Putin, Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen in the style of late 18th century revolutionaries marching through the fog of war and summoning the masses to the populist colours. Trump and Farage were shown beating the militant drums of insurgency, accompanied by Putin sounding the tocsin on the fife, whilst Le Pen brandishing a tricolore, in the guise of Delacroix's *Liberty leading the people*, brought up the rear.<sup>1</sup>

In the accompanying editorial and supporting articles the paper explored many of the explanations for the rise of these new forms of populism that I considered in the first part of my article last week.<sup>2</sup> However, amongst what have become now familiar arguments about the impact of globalisation, economic change and the generational and culture wars between the cosmopolitan, outward-looking young and the fearful, pessimistic old, two different themes were also given prominence: the emergence of new forms of 'populist nationalism' internationally; and their impact on mainstream politics beyond the extremist fringe.<sup>3</sup>

In Britain these elements were perhaps best encapsulated in Theresa May's speech to last year's Conservative Party conference, in which she moved further on to UK Independence Party territory by arguing that "those who still believe Britain has made a mistake in leaving the EU are just patronising members of a liberal metropolitan elite". She further developed this populist identification between her party and 'the people' by making common cause against these rootless elites and suggesting that "if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means."<sup>4</sup>

This rhetoric of rootedness and belonging was not confined to the Tory leadership. Similar national-populist themes, expressed in a language of community and patriotism, had emerged in the 2010s, as Blue Labour argued that a commitment to "family, faith and flag" would enable the Labour Party to rebuild its electoral base amongst "the white working class".<sup>5</sup> Another more influential, although related, position was developed by David Goodhart, who

suggested that "the rise of populism" reflected a new type of political division between "the people from Anywhere" with a "mobile 'achieved' identity" and the "marginalised, roots-based identity of the people from Somewhere".<sup>6</sup>

What Theresa May, Maurice Glasman (of Blue Labour) and David Goodhart all share in common is a sense that 'populism' represents a serious challenge to the existing political status quo and that 'forging a new politics' means engaging with and adapting to this new social and electoral force.<sup>7</sup> This also chimes with other currents in bourgeois thought that see populism as a threat to capitalism internationally - partly as a long-delayed reaction to the Great Recession unfolding since 2007-08, but, perhaps more importantly, a reflection of a related, developing crisis of political legitimacy and authority of much longer duration.<sup>8</sup>

## New normal?

These arguments suggest that there is a distinctive 'populist moment' with its own particular characteristics and forms developing in response to the current political and economic crisis. They also seem to suggest that the various populist movements are more than episodic outbursts or reactionary spasms.

The various movements, whether defined as 'left' or 'right', it is widely argued, are united by more than a common rhetoric and style which pits 'the people' against 'the elite'.<sup>9</sup> Rather they present something of a more permanent, serious threat to the established political order: they are, in effect, 'the new normal'.<sup>10</sup> Whilst it is understandable that bourgeois politicians and mainstream commentators should be alarmed by the political and electoral impact of these populist challengers - consider, for example, the implications of the Trump presidency for the wider economic and strategic interests of the United States ruling class or the impact of the Brexit referendum on British politics and the future direction of British capitalism - Marxists should be more sober in their assessment of 'the populist moment' and what its likely trajectory tells us about the nature of capitalism's political and economic crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst recognising that populism is a valid description of an historically contingent political form that has

emerged at particular times and in particular places, we should be wary of its indiscriminate use in the contemporary world, especially when quite distinct and radically different processes, such as 'the revolt of the rustbelt', which possibly brought Donald Trump to power, and the surge in support for Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership elections are lumped together as simply two examples of the same phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, as American commentators Max Fisher and Amanda Taub suggest, "miscalculations, surprises and uncertainty, more than populism ... [are the] new normal in western politics".<sup>13</sup>

However, this identification of contemporary politics with the 'populist moment' by certain politicians and commentators might be more than simply miscalculation or a misunderstanding of the surface phenomena of these very different movements. Whether politically motivated and ideologically driven by the bourgeois parties and their social democratic allies, or disguised as impartial comment or objective research by their sounding-boards in the media, the academy or 'independent' think tanks, the dominant common sense in mainstream politics since 1989 has been a narrative of general depoliticisation and the collapse of the left internationally.<sup>14</sup> Although explanations for and responses to these fundamental changes, such as Fukuyama's celebrated 'end of history' thesis or the Clinton-Blair 'third way', were either undermined by events or ultimately discredited by imperialist adventures overseas and the fall-out from the global financial crisis of 2007-08, the relatively muted response of the working class movement in the advanced capitalist world to these developments, alongside the continued weakness of an ideologically coherent left politics, did little to shift the analytical assumptions of bourgeois politics.<sup>15</sup>

## Left populism?

Whilst certainly a little less complacent and self-assured after 2007-08, it seemed to many politicians and commentators that after the small local difficulty of the financial crisis, the imposition of austerity and bailouts in various forms to the banks and financial sector, the storm had been weathered and politically

it was back to business as usual for the capitalist parties.<sup>16</sup>

However, when in response to these crises a series of oppositional movements and parties began to emerge and challenge the dominant consensus, with varying degrees of seriousness, one response was to label them 'populist'.<sup>17</sup> Although this tag reflected the shock and disdain that the established parties and technocratic politicians felt both towards these upstart challengers and, more importantly, the rebellious electorates who voted for them, there were a number of organisational and rhetorical elements in these movements that might justify some limited comparisons with historical populist movements.

Three features of 'left' populist parties and movements, in particular, seem relevant to these comparisons:

- a charismatic leader or figurehead operating with little democratic control by the 'membership', embodying, for these supporters (or followers), the essential characteristics of the movement;
- a 'movement culture' based on an emerging 'consensus' developed organically (usually top-down from the leadership) rather than through the formal, traditional party structures and democratic organisation;
- a broad, poorly defined political ideology, usually encapsulated in some key slogans, which claims to speak on behalf of 'the people' (rather than the working class) and directs its fire against 'elites' in the broadest terms rather than a specifically capitalist class.

These characterisations of 'left populism' clearly resonate with the experience of Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and aspects of the mobilisation of Corbyn's support in the British Labour Party.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by understanding how these characteristics of the forms of populist politics - found historically in the peripheral, colonial and semi-colonial regions of the capitalist world - are present in some contemporary European left currents, we can assess their weaknesses and programmatic limitations. In so far as they reflect these relatively undeveloped political, ideological and organisational forms, they show how far the working class movement in general and the left in particular has fallen back in the last 30 years.

Whilst we must be realistic in our

assessments of 'the populist moment' and understand why such a variety of political currents from right and left place such great emphasis on the concept, both as an opportunity and a threat, Marxists should also understand the deeper connections between these populist movements, the current moment and the future patterns of politics in Europe. With all their contradictions and limitations, left populist currents are more than a transient episode or the latest rhetorical fad for the commentariat: in outline they represent the first stirrings of opposition to capitalism after a long period of retreat and reveal the possibilities and potential of the new and as yet inchoate forces, which could develop to rebuild and rearm our movement ●

## Notes

1. 'Trump's world: the new nationalism' *The Economist* November 19 2016.
2. 'Understanding the "populist moment"' *Weekly Worker* August 31 2017.
3. 'League of nationalists' *The Economist* November 19 2016.
4. J Crace, 'Theresa May treads the Brexit path of empathy and righteousness' *The Guardian* October 5 2016.
5. See, for example, I Geary and A Pabst *Blue Labour: forging a new politics* London 2012; T Hunt (ed) *Labour's identity crisis: England and the politics of patriotism* Winchester 2016. These currents enjoyed some publicity in the aftermath of Labour's 2015 general election defeat, but were somewhat eclipsed by the growth of the Labour left during the leadership elections in 2015 and 2016. Although much weakened, Blue Labour still retains some support amongst the Labour right.
6. D Goodhart *The road to somewhere: the populist revolt and the future of politics* London 2017.
7. A Pabst in I Geary and A Pabst *op cit* pp1-2.
8. See, amongst many others, P Mair *Ruling the void: the hollowing of western democracy* London 2013; J Ganesh, 'The trick with populists is to see them in perspective' *Financial Times* March 26 2016; L Elliott, 'Populism is the result of global economic failure' *The Guardian* March 27 2017; M Roberts, 'Crisis, capital and Corbyn' *Jacobin* June 2017; and A Beckett, 'How Britain fell out of love with the free market' *The Guardian* August 5 2017.
9. For example, see L Parkin, 'Why Jeremy Corbyn is like Donald Trump' *New Statesman* March 3 2016; and P Stephens, 'Trump and Corbyn join hands against the liberal world order' *Financial Times* August 31 2017.
10. T Blair, 'Against populism, the center must hold' *New York Times* March 3 2017.
11. A good example of perhaps wishful apocalyptic thinking of this type was a (possibly) humorous column at the time of the Stoke by-election, which foresaw how Labour, under Corbyn's leadership, might be replaced by 2030 as the party of 'the traditional working class' by a Paul Nuttall-led (remember him?) Ukip! See Bagehot, 'How the slow death of Labour might happen' *The Economist* February 2 2017.
12. 'Fascist' and 'Nazi' are related 'boo' words, whose indiscriminate use likewise devalues and blunts their analytical value. For contemporary examples of this tendency to equate Trump, populism and fascism see V de Grazia, 'Many call Trump a fascist. 100 days in, is he just a reactionary Republican?' *The Guardian* April 30 2017.
13. M Fisher and A Taub, 'Uncertainty, more than populism, is new normal in western politics' *The New York Times* June 20 2017.
14. There are numerous accounts, both of this process and of the ideologically framed explanations for it. As a 'Eurocommunist' Eric Hobsbawm both contributed to and explained this depoliticisation. See E Hobsbawm *The age of extremes: the short twentieth century* London 2004 and *How to change the world: tales of Marx and Marxism* London 2011. For a critique of these and other 'revolutionary reformist' analyses of this period see J Conrad *Which road?* London 1991. For contemporary assessments of developments in the 1990s-2010s see *The Leninist and Weekly Worker* archives at [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker).
15. For one insider's account of how bourgeois politicians and European Union technocrats saw this crisis and the politics that emerged from it, see Y Varoufakis *Adults in the room: my battle with Europe's deep establishment* London 2017.
16. For accounts of the nature of the crisis and some discussion on the drawn-out response to it by the working class, see P Mattick *Business as usual: the economic crisis and the future of capitalism* London 2011; and M Roberts *The long depression: how it happened, why it happened and what happens next* Chicago 2016.
17. For a survey of recent struggles and responses to austerity throughout Europe, see C Principe and B Sunkara *Europe in revolt* Chicago 2016.
18. See, for example, 'Where left populism leads' *Weekly Worker* December 11 2014; 'Syriza and the left' *Weekly Worker* July 30 2015; 'Things have just got even better' *Weekly Worker* June 15 2017.

## USA

# Left wing of the permissible

As the Democratic Socialists of America begin to make an impact, Jim Cregan analyses the politics of its founder, Michael Harrington

The beginning of the American new left is usually dated from the appearance of the 'Port Huron Statement' in 1962. Drawn up by a handful of members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at a conference in the Michigan town it is named after, the statement is an expression of the growing discontent of middle class students - "raised in modest comfort", in their words - with the social and political status quo of mid-century America.

Its call for the revitalisation of American democracy is far removed from the radical leftwing politics that SDS was to embrace later in the decade. It decries the prevalent apathy and social atomism at universities and in the larger society, and advocates "participatory democracy" - the direct involvement of citizens in the decisions that affect them. It enumerates concrete policy objectives, all clearly intended to be achieved by reformist methods. Internationally, these include universal nuclear disarmament, as opposed to the cold war arms race, and support for third-world economic development instead of third-world dictators. On the home front, the manifesto advocates a renovation of the Democratic Party through a break with the Dixiecrats, a large expansion of the public sector and the welfare state, and a democratisation and renewal of the labour movement as a force for social progress. Neither these goals nor the manifesto's urging of the incumbent Kennedy administration to act more aggressively in pursuit of racial integration and world peace would seem to place SDS outside the framework of 1960s American liberalism. This conclusion is underlined by the statement's explicit repudiation of the Soviet Union and communism:

As democrats we are in basic opposition to the communist system. The Soviet Union, as a system, rests on the total suppression of organised opposition ... The Communist Party has equated falsely the 'triumph of socialism' with centralised bureaucracy. The Soviet state lacks independent labour organisations and other liberties we consider basic ... Communist parties throughout the rest of the world are generally undemocratic in internal structure and mode of action ... The communist movement has failed, in every sense, to achieve its stated intentions of leading a worldwide movement for human emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite these decidedly non-radical pronouncements the statement sounded a note of dissatisfaction with established liberal politics that was highly unsettling to the board of SDS's parent organisation - an educational arm of the Socialist Party called the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), which received funding from the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, both fiercely anti-communist.

There was, for instance, Port Huron's sharp criticism of "a Democratic Party which tolerates the perverse unity of liberalism and

**Michael Harrington: founder**

racism, prevents the social change wanted by negroes, peace protestors, labour unions, students, reform Democrats and other liberals".<sup>2</sup>

The manifesto also took aim at the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which

As a political force, generally has been unsuccessful in the post-war period of prosperity. It has seen the passage of the Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffin [anti-union] laws ... it has made little progress against right-to-work laws, and has seen less-than-adequate action on domestic problems, especially unemployment ... [it] tends to be cynical toward, or afraid of, rank-and-file involvement in the work of the union.<sup>3</sup>

But what upset the LID old guard more than anything else was the distance SDS took from the dominant political creed of the cold war:

An unreasoning anti-communism has become a major social problem for those who want to construct a more democratic America ... Even many liberals and socialists share static and repetitious participation in the anti-communist crusade and often discourage tentative, inquiring discussion about the 'Russian question' ...<sup>4</sup>

The statement declared "open to question" the "basic national policy-making assumption that the Soviet Union is inherently expansionist and aggressive, prepared to dominate the world by military means".<sup>5</sup> It also cast doubt on the motives behind the global anti-communist crusade:

With rare variation, American foreign policy in the 50s was guided by a concern for foreign investment and a negative anti-communist political stance linked to a series of military alliances, both undergirded by military threat. We participated unilaterally - usually through the Central Intelligence Agency - in revolutions against governments in Laos, Guatemala, Cuba, Egypt, Iran. We permitted economic investment to decisively affect our foreign policy: sugar in Cuba, oil in the Middle East, diamonds and gold in South Africa ...<sup>6</sup>

Passages like these provoked the ire of the LID board's representative at the conference, who served as the principal liaison between SDS and the organisation's old guard - the 34-year-old Michael Harrington. He had just published an *exposé* of poverty amid plenty titled *The other America*, which would make him the country's most famous socialist, and

earn him a place on Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty task force. On this occasion, Harrington protested that an earlier draft of the manifesto would send the LID board "through the roof". He left the conference early to report his dissatisfaction to the parent group's headquarters in New York.

The principal authors of Port Huron - Tom Hayden and Al Haber, along with a few other SDS leaders - were soon summoned to a hearing in front of the LID executive committee to determine whether the decisions of the conference were compatible with the purposes of the organisation. Harrington acted as the chief inquisitor. It was alleged by one board member that Port Huron "lambastes the US and taps the Soviets on the wrist".<sup>7</sup> When Hayden answered that the document hardly lets the Soviet Union off the hook, Harrington replied, "Document shmocuments. [Don] Slaiman [another board member who attended the conference] and I said that this was antithetical to the LID and everything it's stood for."<sup>8</sup>

The executive was also furious that the conference had voted to admit a member of the Communist Party youth group, the Progressive Youth Organizing Committee, as an observer without voting or speaking rights. Harrington said, "We should have nothing to do with these people."<sup>9</sup> Another board member demanded: "Would you give seats to the Nazis too?"<sup>10</sup> In addition, the executive objected to SDS's choice of Steve Max as field secretary because his father had once been a prominent member of the Communist Party, and Max himself had belonged to the communist youth group years earlier.

An hour after the hearing ended, the SDS leaders were informed that Hayden and Haber had been removed from the payroll; that all SDS documents and publications would henceforth have to be submitted to the LID for prior approval; that the LID would appoint a secretary for SDS responsible to itself rather than the membership. They found out later that the LID had cut off all funding for SDS, and, most galling of all, had had the locks changed on the door of its New York office.

The above episode did not result in a final rupture between SDS and LID. On second thoughts, the board decided it had been too harsh, and both sides made an effort at reconciliation. But the same issue - cold-war anti-communism - would continue to bedevil relations between the two groups, especially as the Vietnam war issue took on greater urgency, leading to a permanent parting of the ways in 1965.

Years later, in the early 1980s, Michael Harrington was to apologise profusely for his conduct in the Port Huron episode. He was at the time trying to effect a merger between the organisation he headed, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), and the New American Movement, a group containing many veterans of the new left, some of whom remembered - and still resented - Harrington's earlier role. From that time forth, past quarrels were more or less forgotten, and Harrington is today a venerable founding father in the

eyes of many on the left. The organisation that resulted from the 1982 merger, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), displays his image on its web page.

Yet, as we shall try to demonstrate below, the events of 1962 were not an aberration, but

only the shrillest variation on the most consistent theme of Harrington's political career: socialism within the bounds deemed acceptable by the liberal wings of the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO officialdom. If Harrington expressed this position in more measured tones in later life, this was due as much to the wider acceptance of his politics on the left as to any fundamental change in his outlook, which exhibits a basic continuity from the time he first entered politics to his death in 1989.

## Accommodating socialists

Harrington had settled in New York City in 1951, after having received a thoroughly Catholic education in his native St Louis, and then at Holy Cross College in Massachusetts. His growing interest in politics led him first to the Catholic Worker Movement - a group founded by the pacifist and social activist, Dorothy Day. Harrington resided at one of Day's 'hospitality houses' called St Joseph's on the Lower East Side, which ran a community kitchen, and whose residents dedicated themselves to living austere lives in service of the poor and marginalised. Harrington edited the group's paper for a short time. However, he was soon drawn out of the orbit of the church, toward the bohemian-intellectual life of Greenwich Village, and, most importantly, to the socialist movement.

Harrington first joined the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), the youth arm of the Socialist Party of Norman Thomas, but, along with a new political co-thinker, Bogdan Denich, soon led a leftwing split, which took the entire youth wing out of the party, and into an organisation called the Independent Socialist League (ISL) and its youth group, the Young Socialist League (YSL). Here, he soon acquired a reputation as a talented writer, public speaker and all-round charismatic personality.

The ISL's leader was Max Shachtman. Shachtman had first come into prominence on the left as a follower of Leon Trotsky. He broke with Trotsky, however, in 1940 over the question of whether US Trotskyist group the Socialist Workers Party should continue to defend the Soviet Union in the wake of the Stalin-Hitler pact. Trotsky argued that the USSR was still a "degenerated workers' state", worthy of unconditional military defence despite the pact and the horrors of Stalinism. Shachtman, on the other hand, maintained that the USSR represented a new form of state-dominated class society which he called "bureaucratic collectivism". As such, Stalin's Russia did not merit defence of any kind.

At the time Harrington joined the ISL/YSL in 1953, Shachtman still adhered to a 'third-camp' position of equal opposition to Stalinism and western capitalism/imperialism. He also held that the fight for socialism had to be waged independently of the two major capitalist parties, the Republicans and Democrats. But Shachtman soon began to move sharply to the right. By the early 60s, he had decided that Stalinism was a greater obstacle to socialism and human progress than capitalism. He reasoned that, while capitalism and Stalinism were both class societies that exploited workers, workers in western democracies at least enjoyed political freedoms that they were denied in the USSR. Shachtman's belief in western capitalism as the lesser evil eventually led him to support America's worldwide anti-communist crusade, including the 1962 US Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and - at first only privately - the Vietnam war. Domestically, Shachtman

came to see the Democratic Party as the political arena in which socialists should work, and within the Democratic Party, he viewed the AFL-CIO bureaucracy - first in the person of United Auto Workers chief Walter Reuther, then in the federation's president, George Meany - as representing the true interests of the American working class.

Shachtman's rightward turn was prefigured by a major organisational step. In 1958, he took the ISL into the Socialist Party, although he had engineered the leftward breakaway of its youth group to his own organisation just a few years earlier. While he continued to adhere to a 'third-camp' position, and independence from the two major parties, his determination did not last long. Shachtman, moreover, entered the party in full cognisance of the politics and associations of its six-time presidential candidate and *éminence grise*, Norman Thomas.

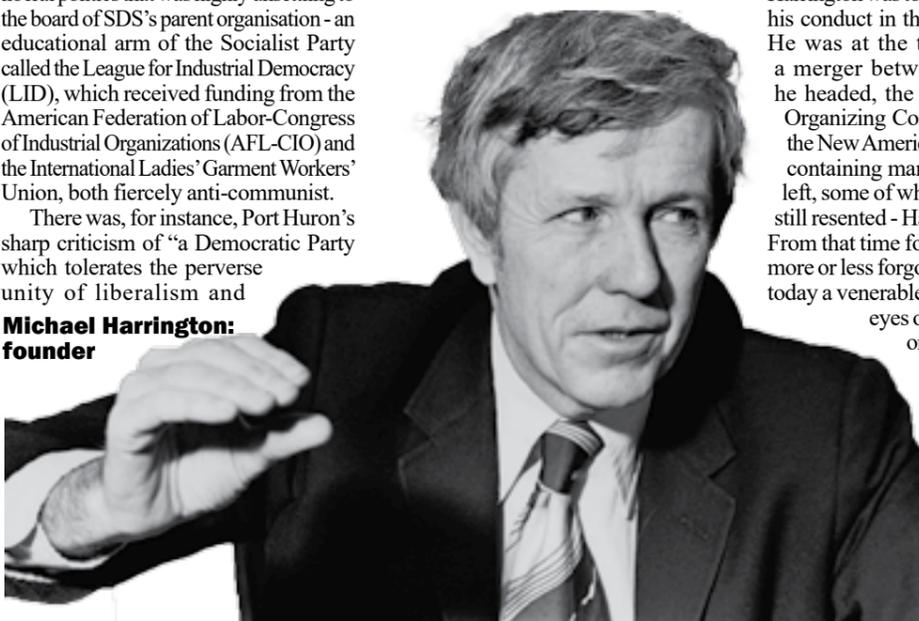
Like social democratic parties in other countries, the Socialists opposed communism in the name of democracy. But Thomas could not have been insensible to the fact that his anti-communism also allowed the Socialist Party to escape the McCarthyite witch-hunt of the 1950s, or of the considerable rewards it conferred in terms of financial support and proximity to power. Thomas served on the board of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (ACCF), the US affiliate of the Congress for Cultural Freedom - an international grouping of prominent artists and intellectuals whose declared purpose was the defence of western values of free thought and artistic expression against the state-imposed mind control of the Soviet bloc.

In 1966, *The New York Times* revealed that the ACCF had been funded for years by the Central Intelligence Agency. Nor was Thomas unaware of the connection. In 1952, when the ACCF found itself hard up for cash, Thomas did not hesitate to call upon his old family friend, Princeton University classmate and neighbour, CIA chief Allen Dulles, for financial relief, delivered promptly in the form of two grants totalling \$14,000.

There is no evidence that emoluments like these were part of any explicit political *quid pro quo*. But Thomas would have had difficulty explaining how his passionate belief in democracy squared with his participation in the CIA-linked American Friends of Vietnam, organised to shore up the reputation of the US-sponsored South Vietnamese dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem. The "Vietnam Lobby", as *Ramparts* magazine dubbed it in a 1967 *exposé*, was instrumental in persuading the Eisenhower administration to back Diem - a step that led directly to US military involvement. Thomas's signature appeared on a letter circulated in official circles supporting Diem's decision to cancel the 1956 Vietnamese elections, mandated by the Geneva accords, for fear that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh might prevail.

Ten years later Thomas publicly associated himself with the Committee on Free Elections in the Dominican Republic, a CIA front group aimed at legitimising rigged elections in 1966 to prevent the return to office of Juan Bosch, a democratically elected reformist president, effectively ousted by the invasion of 42,000 US troops the previous year.

The decisions to cancel one election and annul the results of another were not mounted by the US government to defend democracy. The CIA and state department rather sought to protect the global regime of private property. For this crusade, the US government was careful



to enlist the aid of leftwing, or formerly leftwing, intellectuals and political figures to give its designs a 'democratic' and 'progressive' face.

Harrington never took CIA money himself (and in fact declined to do so on one occasion when the agency offered to pay his airfare to a Russian-sponsored European youth festival on the suggestion of another CIA operative in Europe named Gloria Steinem, later to become a leading American feminist). Nor did Harrington exist in the shadow of Thomas or Shachtman in the 50s and 60s. His literary and oratorical gifts gave him an independent presence on the American left, one that probably eclipsed that of his mentors. Especially after *The other America* became a best-seller, and got the attention of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Harrington became a contributor to liberal journals and a big draw on the nationwide lecture circuit. But he remained loyal to the Socialist Party, and especially to Max Shachtman, up until the end of the 60s.

It is with these politics, and these ties, that he confronted the leftward-moving authors of the Port Huron Statement in 1962, and with which he attempted to address the political upheavals that would soon be brought about by the Vietnam war.

## Vietnam default

The emergence of Vietnam as the defining political issue of the 60s presented a dilemma for those who pursued a strategy of leftward 'realignment' of the Democratic Party. Up until 1969, the massive military assault in south-east Asia was being prosecuted not by the 'greater evil' Republicans, but by Lyndon Johnson, the head of the very party socialists like Harrington were seeking to realign.

And the Johnson administration had indeed taken what Harrington viewed as significant steps in the direction of reform. Johnson had pushed two civil rights bills through Congress, and appointed Sargent Shriver to head his widely trumpeted War on Poverty, which took Harrington into its counsels. But even the minor role Harrington played in Johnson's reform team came at a price: support for - or at least a willingness not to oppose - Washington's global effort to 'contain communism'. Unlike figures such as Shachtman or civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, Harrington was not among the most zealous of cold warriors. But, despite definite personal misgivings, declining to call for US withdrawal from Vietnam was a price Michael Harrington was willing to pay for remaining in the good graces of the Democrats throughout the Johnson years. During the mid-to-late 60s, he often referred to Vietnam as a 'tragedy,' as if it were an unfortunate natural disaster, instead of the deliberately inflicted American slaughter that it was.

Harrington was not among the signatories from his corner of the left to a letter circulated by Bayard Rustin - and signed by Norman Thomas, A Philip Randolph and AJ Muste - warning people away from the first big anti-war march on Washington in the spring of 1965 because it welcomed all who opposed the war, including those demanding unconditional withdrawal, and even some openly supporting Vietnam's National Liberation Front. But it was only weeks later that Harrington added his voice to the social democratic red-baiting chorus. In a statement co-authored with Rustin and Irving Howe, Harrington denounced those in the anti-war movement who offered "explicit or covert support to the Viet Cong", or "hoped to transform the protest into an apocalypse - a 'final conflict' in which extreme gestures of opposition will bring forth punitive retaliation from the authorities".<sup>11</sup>

This was followed by an article in the *Village Voice* titled 'Does the peace movement need communists?', in which he once again argued that "any effective peace movement" would be one that dissociated itself from "any hint of being an apologist for the Viet Cong" and should instead demand negotiations between the warring parties, leading to

free elections, and that he would "under no circumstances celebrate a Viet Cong victory" in any such plebiscite.<sup>12</sup> Articles like these prompted then SDS chairman Carl Oglesby to remark:

Here were these guys [Harrington and fellow socialist Irving Howe] I admired so much denouncing me as a red because I wouldn't criticise both sides [in the war] equally - which seemed bullshit, because both sides weren't invading each other equally, weren't naping each other equally.<sup>13</sup>

Within the Socialist Party, Harrington remained loyal to Max Shachtman, who by the mid-60s was entirely in the orbit of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and its fanatically anti-communist president, George Meany. The erstwhile Trotskyist revolutionary was therefore, like Meany himself, squarely on the side of the US and its Saigon client regime, and told Harrington and Howe privately that he favoured their military victory. Harrington was more inclined personally to a 'neither Washington nor Hanoi' position, but was willing to swallow his qualms in the interest of party unity. Shachtman was less than candid in public about his support for the war effort because he wanted to maintain some kind of presence in the anti-war movement, where most of the action on the left was then taking place. Maurice Isserman comments in his sympathetic biography of Harrington, *The other American*:

Michael heard what Shachtman was saying about the war, yet failed to draw what seems in retrospect the obvious conclusion: that if Shachtman and his supporters took part in organising an 'anti-war' group, they were dissembling.<sup>14</sup>

Isserman continues:

And so, the following spring [1967], Michael helped Shachtman and others organise a new group called Negotiations Now, which promoted itself as a responsible, moderate alternative to the irresponsible, radical groups calling for the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam ... But Negotiations Now's chief function was to serve as the SP's placeholder in the anti-war movement - something they could point to when challenged to show that they too were working to bring the war to an end. Negotiations Now also served as a convenient podium from which the Shachtmanites could criticise the rest of the anti-war movement as being, in contrast, extremist, misguided and objectively pro-communist. It was a sham operation.<sup>15</sup>

It is true that Harrington was to change his position on Vietnam. The year of his conversion was 1970. Then he finally declared that, while he still favoured a negotiated end to the war, "only an American commitment to withdraw can make a negotiated settlement possible."<sup>16</sup> This was a pathetically reluctant and belated reversal, considering the powerful currents that had swept the entire anti-war movement to the left in the preceding five years.

Three years before Harrington's change of heart, Martin Luther King had denounced the war from the pulpit of New York's Riverside Church. Several of America's black ghettos had erupted in rage, at least in part over the war. Vietnam had radicalised a cohort of American youth, who were now conducting student strikes, occupying campus buildings, burning draft cards and brandishing Viet Cong flags at demonstrations. Televised scenes of American and South Vietnamese army atrocities against civilians had shocked and revolted much of the American public, nearly half of which was by this time in favour of withdrawal. Roughly a million people had marched on Washington in the biggest anti-war demonstration of 1970, demanding a pull-out. Many GIs had come to the capital to discard their medals in disgust, and still more in Vietnam

were refusing to go out on patrol, and 'fragging' - ie, tossing grenades into - their officers' quarters.

These developments had a more profound effect on a number of other leading Socialist Party members than on Harrington. His change of heart occurred only after two of Shachtman's closest followers, Hal Draper and Julius Jacobson, had publicly broken with him over the war; after another Socialist Party member, David McReynolds, had organised an internal faction called the Debs Caucus to oppose Shachtman, before quitting the party altogether; after Norman Thomas had publicly apologised for signing the earlier red-baiting letter, and begun speaking regularly at anti-war rallies (from which Harrington was conspicuously absent until 1969).

It is difficult to account for Harrington's change of heart through moral revulsion, or a decisive shift to the left, when so many morally revolting things had already transpired, and so many occasions for breaking in a more radical direction had already presented themselves. An explanation in keeping with his 'pragmatic' profile is far more plausible.

Mounting American losses on the battlefields of Vietnam, especially after the NLF's Tet offensive of February 1968, and Johnson's pouring in of troops by the tens of thousands with no end in sight, were overextending the military; the war's expenses were bankrupting the treasury and fuelling inflation; the 'patriotism' that kept citizens loyal to the government was fast eroding. The conviction was therefore gaining ground in Congress, and in elite economic and policy circles, that Vietnam was no longer worth the cost. There was the added worry among Democrats that the war was losing them younger voters, and many felt the need to restore the faith of radicalising youth in the party and the political system.

Eugene McCarthy had mounted an anti-war campaign in the Democratic primaries in 1968, and Robert Kennedy, who had been supporting the war as late as January of that year, had been persuaded by McCarthy's early primary victories to enter the contest as an anti-war candidate. (Despite the fact that he had not yet called for complete withdrawal, Harrington supported Kennedy, and after his assassination McCarthy, in the 1968 Democratic primaries, but the thuggery perpetrated on anti-war protestors on live TV by the police at the behest of pro-war Democrats in front of their Chicago Democratic convention that summer did not deter him from endorsing Johnson's vice-president, the pro-war Hubert Humphrey, in the general election).

Differences among Democrats were also mirrored among trade union officials - Walter Reuther, having pulled the United Auto Workers out of the AFL-CIO, declared himself against the war. Add to this the fact that, since January of 1969, hostilities were being conducted by the newly elected Republican president, Richard Nixon, and it becomes clear that a way was now open for Harrington to oppose the war without having to offend the Democrats. Within Democratic Party and union bureaucracy, he could associate himself with a growing liberal wing that favoured withdrawal for pragmatic reasons. A stronger anti-war position had, more than being morally imperative, become politically respectable.

The split among Democrats and union chiefs resulted in the break-up of the Socialist Party. In 1972, the Socialist majority who remained loyal to Johnson/Humphrey and the Meanyite union right wing, and continued to support the war, followed Max Shachtman and Bayard Rustin into Social Democrats USA (SDUSA). Like Meany and the AFL-CIO, this group refused to endorse the 1972 Democratic anti-war presidential candidate, George McGovern, and Shachtman considered Nixon the lesser evil. SDUSA can claim credit for being among the pioneers of neo-conservatism. Those who supported McGovern and the more liberal trade union wing went

with Harrington to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC).

## A new Michael?

Political circumstances had greatly altered by the time DSOC merged with the New American Movement (NAM) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in 1982. The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, and the subsequent rightwing onslaught, made Harrington's socialist brand appear considerably more radical than it had looked 15 years earlier. Moreover, many of the now older new leftists and SDSers who comprised the core of NAM had gone on to raise families, acquire professional careers and adopt a commensurately more moderate politics. As Harrington remarked in a 1984 dialogue between himself and long-time comrade, Irving Howe in *The New York Times Magazine*, "Time passed, tempers cooled and old disputes faded."

But he immediately goes on to dispel any doubts about the terms on which the merger had taken place: "And by now practically everyone on the left agrees that the Democratic Party, with all its flaws, must be our main political arena." Then, further on:

... when I criticise American foreign policy, our intervention in Central America, the MX [missile], I do that in the name of the national security of the United States ... If you think back to somebody in the late 60s at an anti-Vietnam war rally getting up and talking about the national security of the United States - well, it would have been difficult.

Howe adds: "And you speak of the national security because you recognise that there is a totalitarian enemy out there which needs to be met." He goes on to say: "We are loyal allies and sometimes friendly critics" of the Democratic Party.<sup>17</sup> One of agreed-upon conditions of the merger of the two groups was support for the state of Israel.

Not only was Harrington's anti-communist Democratic loyalism carried over into the DSA; his long-standing orientation to trade union officials also remained intact. In the 70s, he cultivated three union chiefs who had gone against George Meany to endorse the McGovern candidacy in 1972. Two of the three - Victor Gotbaum of New York's biggest municipal workers union, AFSCME District 37, and William Winpisinger, president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) - had actually belonged to DSOC. A third - then UAW chief Douglas Fraser - worked closely with the organisation. All three bear major responsibility for the historic defeats suffered by labour in the 70s and 80s.

With investment banker Felix Rohatyn, Gotbaum was one of the architects of the 'rescue package' put together by the Municipal Assistance Corporation in response to the New York fiscal crisis of 1975, when the administration of Gerald Ford refused to lend the city the money to pay its debts to big banks. The package finally negotiated included the loss of thousands of municipal jobs, tuition charges for the City College system (which prided itself on being tuition-free up until then), and drastic cuts to social services of almost every kind. As a reward, Gotbaum's son was given a job at Rohatyn's financial firm of Lazard Frères. Rohatyn also introduced Gotbaum to a personal friend, Henry Kissinger, with whom the union president went to parties and at least on one Easter Egg hunt.

The 'concession bargaining' that Gotbaum pioneered in New York was being closely watched at the time by large employers across the country, particularly in the auto industry. In 1979, it came the turn of Chrysler workers to make sacrifices for the 'financial health' of their employer. Fraser bargained away 50,000 jobs and negotiated a \$3-per-hour wage reduction. In return, he was given a seat on Chrysler's board of directors, from which he was to urge against any softness

toward the workers in his own union. He negotiated similar concessionary contracts at Ford and General Motors.

Harrington's third union ally, William Winpisinger, who even described himself as a Marxist, found his union in a critical position when Ronald Reagan summarily fired over 11,000 striking members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization (PATCO) in 1981. Winpisinger could have come to the aid of the air traffic controllers by calling upon the airline machinists in the union he headed to respect PATCO picket lines, thereby crippling the industry. He preferred not to, citing his fear of fines and other legal liabilities his union could have incurred. The strike is widely regarded as the turning point in the 1980s rollback of labour's historic gains. Reagan's victory against PATCO encouraged employers across the country to hire scabs and bust unions. Harrington nonetheless continued to tout these union chiefs as labour movement 'progressives'.

## Revisit and reassess

Throughout his life, Michael Harrington's political method was consistent. It was largely confined to persuading and cajoling those who already wielded power in politics and organised labour. His insider methods left little room for those who would challenge existing authority from the outside or from below. His chosen political label of 'democratic socialist' was only a cosmetic reversal of terms. He was, in fact, an American social democrat. Unlike his European counterparts, however, Harrington was consigned to the margins of American politics.

Yet even within those margins, he operated in ways that were broadly similar to those of his European *confrères* in the Second International. Like them, he was willing to act as a left custodian for the system against everyone - Stalinist or not - who threatened to go beyond its prescribed limits. Harrington was only too willing to make the loud and repeated declarations of anti-communism that were required to qualify as a loyal oppositionist in the 50s and 60s. When anti-communist ideology lost its grip as result of the Vietnam war, he sounded this note a little less sharply. The trade union leaders Harrington promoted played the same role in imposing austerity on their members as Second International governing socialists played *vis-à-vis* entire national populations. Harrington's famous 'left wing of the possible' was in fact the left wing of the permissible.

Broader horizons of possibility may be opening up once again. The organisation Harrington helped found, Democratic Socialists of America, has trebled in size since the Sanders campaign, and voted at its August convention to sever its membership of long standing in the Second International. Will it now go beyond the failed strategy of working within the Democratic Party and attempt to fill the void left in American politics by the absence of an independent socialist party? It only stands to reason that renewed debate over this question should be accompanied by a thorough re-evaluation of the Harringtonian legacy ●

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## Notes

1. 'The Port Huron statement', New York 1964, p31.
2. *Ibid* p60.
3. *Ibid* p57.
4. *Ibid* p30.
5. *Ibid* pp31-32.
6. *Ibid* pp29-39.
7. K Sale *SDS* New York 1974, p63.
8. *Ibid* p63.
9. *Ibid* p63.
10. *Ibid* p63.
11. Quoted in M Isserman *The other American* New York 2000, p259.
12. Quoted in *ibid* p261.
13. Quoted in *ibid* p262.
14. *Ibid* p271.
15. *Ibid* pp271-72.
16. Quoted in *ibid* p288.
17. *The New York Times Magazine* June 17 1984.

**AUTOMATION**

# Computer says no

Paul Demarty asks why we insist on treating our computers like gods

**Just like a plumber**

I have chosen as my title for this article a catchphrase from *Little Britain* - the late and mostly unlamented comedy vehicle of David Walliams and Matt Lucas.<sup>1</sup>

The particular sketch centres on Carol Beer, a passive-aggressive bank clerk played by Walliams in drag, who, faced with any request, taps at a computer keyboard and returns the inevitable outcome - "computer says no" - typically with an exultant cough as punctuation. *Little Britain* is justly derided in our more sensitive times as a moronically 'provocative' exercise in stereotype-mongering and taboo-breaching, but this particular sketch is quite well observed. For the role of the computer in Carol's life is expansive indeed - it gives her the strength to get from one end to the other of her working day, providing the confidence to say no to all those seeking mortgages and unsecured personal loans ... It advises her to skip the office party, where the object of her unrequited affection will be carousing with a certain Melanie. "Computer says no" to Melanie and the others; and implicitly says yes to Carol.

I suppose I am one of those to whom the computer says yes. I work as a 'software engineer', which in the end is a more exotic, better paid, but less skilled, variant of plumbing. I have attached a lot of pipes together - for that is what the internet is, a bunch of pipes - for money, and by extension for the causes in service of which people are prepared to pay me to wield the spanner. Those causes seem, in the end, to have an awful lot in common with the worldview of Carol Beer. The world is changing - because the computer says so. Artificial intelligence, 'the internet of things', or some other fashionable buzzword, is about to change everything about how we live: the question is merely whether we shall be riding the wave or get upended and drowned by it.

But this in turn is merely a particular variant of a more expansive narrative about the effect of technological change on society at large. Computers - if you read the popular media and take as

good coin the witterings of competing 'thought leaders' at TEDx and what have you - are indeed changing everything; it is merely on the technical matter of how, exactly, and whether we should be worried, and indeed what we should worry about, that the story differs. We are told that, as a species, humanity is denuded of its intellectual heft by smartphones and the truncated time horizon that attends to their usage - we are, it is supposed, unable to concentrate on anything for more than five minutes, thanks to the superfluity of stimulation available at any given moment. The age of blue-collar 'real jobs' is over - anything that can be done repetitively will sooner or later be done by a computer, controlling a robot in such circumstances that contact with the material world remains drearily necessary.

Given the deleterious effects our age has on attention spans, I feel obliged to state my argument at the outset, clearly, in the form the internet abbreviates as "TLDR" - "too long; didn't read". The idea of computers and technological progress *in themselves* having this or that concrete effect on human history is in the end a way of excluding human decision-making from effectivity on the course of human history. We are told that we should not hope for stable or gainful employment, "because of robots"; we should accept any given economic regime as merely the necessary excrement and consequence of some level or another of technical development. But this is in the end a faulty syllogism - we take as a logical consequence what is merely a contingent result. Contingent upon what? Merely the earthly powers to which we are accustomed well enough - the class rulers of one sort or another, the people who gave us Donald Trump and the Iraq war and the Thighmaster.

We are therefore talking in the end about a species of fetishism, in the precise sense that Marx pinched the idea from the anthropologists - the imputation of magical powers to inanimate matter. We are also, as I argued in a recent article in the *Weekly Worker*, in the end doing something

very similar to religion as it appears to Ludwig Feuerbach and, following him, the young Marx - the magical powers projected onto the inanimate matter are in the end *our own*, and we have merely built a new god, who, much like the old ones, is an alienated reflection of ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

The chrome sheen of new technology serves merely as a convenient occasion for a rehash of the old lies about the inevitability of ... whatever the status quo happens to be. Excluded, by definition, is the power of humans, by their odd, meat-imprisoned whimsy, to act otherwise - to declare themselves the masters, not the slaves, of their dumb inventions.

**End of something**

There are two classes of eschatology that pertain to the accelerating computerisation of economic life - the utopian and dystopian modes.

These are in turn divided. There are two basic doomsday scenarios that come out of this mindset. The first is the one familiar from major science fiction franchises, in particular the *Terminator* and *Matrix* films. A computer system is designed that it is ultimately so sophisticated that it comes to view humanity as a threat to itself, and sets forth to exterminate us (or, in the case of *The Matrix*, it turns out - despite its superintelligence - to be stupid enough to use human organisms as very low-powered batteries).

The classic advanced-in-all-seriousness version of this is the paperclip maximiser. Say you create an artificial intelligence system and tell it to maximise the production of paperclips. Before long, it will realise that the current number of paperclip factories is unambitious, and open more - and indeed convert all other factories to create paperclips. All those who attempt to turn it off will be killed, for to turn it off would be to reduce the number of paperclips being produced. In the end, there will be a shortage of iron ore, and the machine's attention will turn to the human race at large, which carries traces of iron in its blood ... The idea is that 'general AI' will not

face anything like the same physical limits as the human brain, and will not only outsmart us, but cannot be relied on to worry overmuch about the continuation of the human species.

I do not propose to spend any time refuting this class of fantasy, but merely highlight that it is put about, and represents perhaps the most extreme form of the fallacy under discussion - computer, very definitively, says no.

The less histrionic version is that basically all jobs are going to end up better performed by computerised systems and robotics, leaving 90% of the world's population as essentially an unneeded reserve army of labour. This is all put very well in a book called *Rise of the robots* by Martin Ford, a well-meaning liberal tech entrepreneur type, trying at present to get his 'thought leader' scout badge. He lays out the spectre of 'techno-feudalism':

The most frightening long-term scenario of all might be if the global economic system eventually manages to adapt to [total automation]. In a perverse process of creative destruction, the mass-market industries that currently power our economy would be replaced by new industries producing high-value products and services geared towards a super-wealthy elite. The vast majority of humanity would effectively be disenfranchised. Economic mobility would become non-existent. The plutocracy would shut itself away in gated communities or in elite cities, perhaps guarded by military robots and drones. In other words, we would see a return to something like the feudal system of the Middle Ages.

There would be one very important difference, however: medieval serfs were essential to the system, since they provided the agricultural labour. In a futuristic world governed by automated feudalism, the peasants would be largely superfluous.<sup>3</sup>

Ford's conclusions as to how to avoid this disaster are pretty typical of his caste - he advocates a version of the universal basic income scheme (UBI).

If you were to look that phrase up in the dictionary, you might almost find it defined as the bad conscience of Silicon Valley liberals.

The plausibility of the projection has several sources. Firstly, the post-war era of near full employment in western societies has given way to several crises followed by essentially jobless recoveries. Something, it seems, has changed. Secondly, computer systems have exponentially increased in power for a half-century, and as a result robotics systems are able in principle to replace an ever-increasing number of workers. Thirdly, there are an awful lot of people that *have*, as it happens, been replaced by robots, at least so far as their bosses see the matter. From all this, it is not an unreasonable leap to make the prediction that displacement of labour is on its own exponential curve.

**How to fire people**

We could take as an exemplary case of technology displacing labour one that, oddly, barely involves computers at all.

In the last 50 years, the shipping industry has changed almost beyond recognition. The old situation had vast piles of goods being sailed around the world in the holds of enormous cargo freighters. The freighters would dock somewhere or other, and a small army of workers would unload the goods and deposit them in nearby warehouses, for land transportation onwards; then the whole thing would be done in reverse, and the ship sent on somewhere else with new cargo. Add it all up, and you have a thriving dockside economy that can support tens of thousands, once all the accessory industries are factored in - multiplied for as many cities in the world as have a decent natural harbour.

In the last five decades, however, the intermodal shipping container has become ubiquitous - standardised in shape and size, it can be loaded directly onto trucks or trains with the intervention of only a handful of people and a lot of heavy machinery. The containerisation of ports around the world, therefore, occasioned the displacement of large workforces in

the docks themselves; on top of that, the warehouses were now superfluous, since the containers could now be driven directly off the docks and onwards to wherever they need to go, perhaps tens or hundreds of miles away. By the time this process got its great representation in popular culture - the second season of *The Wire* - it was basically complete.

It seems to fit suspiciously well; but there are some oddities with the story that complicate our naive understanding of automation. For one, of all the vast advances in the means of production made under capitalism, manufacturing steel boxes to a fixed and regular size seems a little, ah, obvious. Can it really be the case that nobody had thought of it before 1968? It surely cannot - the first international standard for such containers was defined in 1933. There was merely a long interval before adoption started to accelerate.

That adoption, starting in the late 60s, coincides suspiciously well with the end of the brief, anomalous period of post-war corporatism and full employment in the imperialist centres, and the first signs of the rollback of the gains made by the working class in the same era. Can this be a coincidence? Again - it surely cannot. The record is littered with the voices of dockside businessmen who, driven to their wits' end by union power, were sold containerisation and the concomitant rollout of ever more sophisticated machines as a means of breaking the resolve of their restive workforces.

This peculiarity should not, in the end, surprise Marxists. At our Communist University, Neil Davidson remarked, rightly, that we should not view the 'development of the productive forces' as an entirely anonymous, automatic process - concrete historical agents *are driven*, and thereby choose, to develop them. The issue is illustrated nicely in the negative by Stalinist bureaucratic 'socialism', whose tendencies towards enormous waste stemmed in part from strong *disincentives* to deploy easily available new technologies.

Capitalism, of course, traditionally has no such difficulties revolutionising the productive forces. Why? In *Capital* volume 1, the process is spelled out nicely. The bourgeoisie stretches every sinew to increase absolute surplus value, but hits a hard, external limit in the worker. The worker's body physically cannot be coerced into working longer and harder than they have calories to spend; the worker's will, being that they are a conscious human, cannot be crushed to the point that they are reduced to Aristotle's 'speaking tool' and instead they will resist.<sup>4</sup>

It is *this*, not the inherent attractions of mechanisation, that drives capitalists to automate production. But they *might* not need to - it seems the most profitable way to make cheap clothes is to pay armies of adolescents a pittance to stitch them together in an anachronistically labour-intensive fashion. On a much smaller scale, there is the humble car-wash: these services installed machines at an enormous rate in the late 20th century, but have lately begun removing them; it is easy enough to find people willing to wash cars in return for not very much money, possibly less than the upkeep and operation of the machines; so why not go back to the old ways?

From the point of view of the capitalist looking to get rid of uppity workers, even the case of the shipping container is a bittersweet one. The drastic reduction of worker numbers on the dock went with the specialisation of the workers who remained, who needed each to grasp much larger parts of the industrial process and master more skills, and thus became harder to replace - and, given their small number, a dangerous bottleneck. Although the unions are battered,

the remaining workers have ended up in a bizarrely stronger position in negotiations - somewhat similar to the train drivers who initially did very well out of privatisation in this country.

## The good news

The dystopian view of automation has as its intimate opponent a utopianism of the very same. It was expressed most notoriously, albeit with moral reservations, by Keynes in his 'Economic possibilities for our grandchildren',<sup>5</sup> when he predicted that technical progress in production would radically reduce the amount of work people actually did, and so the next great challenge faced by humanity (after the war even he must have seen coming) would be finding a way to live without the disciplining influence of daily labour. As Marx might say, *quelle horreur!*

But the same conception was already present in the revisionist socialism of Bernstein in the 1890s, and in the related school of 'legal Marxism' in Russia, and lampooned with some venom by Trotsky (and other social democrats) by 1906, and indeed even by Joseph Conrad in his great novel of anti-left hatred, *The secret agent*. In some sense it lives today, in the hipster-Marxist fad of 'fully automated luxury communism', according to whose glorious vision of the future machines will do all the work, so the rest of us can have orgies on yachts. Leaving politics entirely for a moment, we find genuine cranks like the prominent computer scientist, Ray Kurzweil, who expects to live forever, and other prophets of the 'singularity' or post-humanism of various kinds.

In the latter case, such optimism seems at least in part a function of biography - computers have, after all, made Ray Kurzweil very rich; the *Highlander* treatment is surely to follow. As a political projection, in the case of the hipster-Marxists and especially revisionists, the history of automation and technical progress in production seems a little hard to square with such bullish projections. (Exactly where a 'socialist' future in which everyone is entitled to seven iPhones leaves the environment is another matter of some minor concern.)

If we are looking for positive cues as to the future, however, we would be better served again to break through the fetish and its ecstatic speculations, and look at the social relations underlying the production of new technical artefacts.

Engineers of all sorts, under capitalist rule, end up being a distinct breed even among 'the professionals'. For what lawyers and doctors have in common is that there is not a lasting end-product of their efforts: they are each called in as a means of ensuring the material homeostasis of their charges (companies and persons respectively). The engineer resembles the traditional professional, in that they possess a body of skills and knowledge, against which they can charge rent in money and/or in kind (typically in power and autonomy at work). Yet they are like blue-collar productive workers, in that the outcome of their labour is a distinct 'new thing' that did not previously exist, and that at least *could* command a price and be thus integrated into the commodity system - a bridge, a chemical compound, a car, a software system.

We have made, for ourselves, a pretty good life. The story begins in inauspicious circumstances - in the late 40s Japan was being aggressively rebuilt with American money, but people remained poor and short of money for little luxuries like cars. That was a tough problem for budding Japanese automotive companies, which needed to somehow create cars comparable to the American models flooding the market, but better, faster and cheaper. As it happened, they worked it out. The Toyota company employed a number of forward-

thinking industrial engineers, above all Taiichi Ohno, who took a very simple approach to the problem - it was all about reducing waste. What was waste? Sure, it was obvious things - materials not needed or used, cars that nobody bought.

But from there the idea expanded. Merely having a lot of materials lying around, if you thought about it, was waste. Economists back to Smith understood that such materials merely rot on the factory floor. It ought to be avoided. How else can you waste materials? Very often, in a factory, some mechanical process goes wrong - let us say, car doors are stamped into the wrong shape, and thus become unusable. At the same time, what is the ultimate metric by which car manufacturers are measured? Why, merely the number of cars rolling off the lines. There is thus a strong incentive for workers - aiming to avoid victimisation - to let the nonsensical car doors continue to roll along, and try to fix things later. Nobody wants to be responsible for stopping the assembly line.

If there is one decisively important feature of the Toyota system above all others, it is 'stop the line': if any worker sees defective input, he or she is expected to pause production, and nobody will be fired for doing it erroneously. But the same thing applies in less dramatic circumstances - if workers spot waste, they are trained to self-organise to get rid of it, a process called *kaizen* or continuous improvement (even most westerners prefer the terser Japanese word).

As soon as workers can stop production and reorganise it at the molecular level, however, all the Taylorist time-and-motion studies in the world are worthless. (For the ideologists of the Toyota production system - or 'lean manufacturing', as it is often known - they always were.) The reduction of waste means optimising not for keeping every worker continuously utilised, but for keeping non-wasteful production in progress. It thus points to a smaller, more skilled and self-activating workforce. We should not romanticise things - putting cars together in Japan is just as much a manual, blue-collar process as it is anywhere else. Yet Marxists must learn to spot the seeds of the new society in the old, and the vast expansion under capitalism of cooperative labour in general is one of them. We must therefore also acknowledge and examine the *different forms* in which, so to speak, these seeds sprout.

## Short-sightedness

Back, at last, to computers! In the 1990s, most software development was conducted in a fashion more on the Taylorist model of mass production - the smartest guys in the room would expend a great deal of effort, maybe over months or more, to work out exactly what needed to be done down to the last detail, and when it would be done; this specification would then be handed off to developers, who would sit in their cubicles and crank out what they were told to do, and then it would be tested and released. If Taylor and Henry Ford had at least some success in organising assembly lines in automotive factories, their influence was wholly catastrophic in software, and two decades ago influential software engineers were coalescing around the idea that something else needed to be tried, and that the Toyota/lean methods were the ones to go for. After a lot of toing and froing, this family of best practices came to be known as 'agile software development', and it is safe to say that, by the early part of this decade, agile had won the argument against so-called waterfall or traditional methods, although the latter die hard.

Here is what a healthy, agile process looks like. Take a short span of time - usually two weeks, but sometimes one, and less commonly a month. At the beginning of that period, you

decide what is going to be worked on, which means working out what one thing or few things are most useful to the organisation. You cannot take on more work than you think you could finish in that time period. Then everyone goes to work - and 'everyone' will include engineers, but also visual designers, and maybe even marketers and so on. By the end of your time period (commonly called an iteration or a sprint), the things you worked on should be 'live', being used by whoever it is you ultimately do the work for; or it should be at least *releasable* if you want. You may choose to delay things for some reason or another. At the end, everyone gathers together to decide what worked and what did not and should be changed. Rinse, repeat...<sup>7</sup>

I go into this level of detail, for the question at the heart of our discussion is 'What is technology doing to work?' And I have suggested that the question is wrongly phrased, for it assigns agency to technical progress that the latter does not really possess. Yet if I think about what the technology industry *could*, at its best, bequeath to broader society, it is not so much the artefacts themselves, as they figure into the fantasies of 'fully automated luxury communism', but rather what we actually do when we make software.

To put it crudely: my job rules! Most people's jobs suck, and would be better if they were more like my job. They would be better if the workers themselves exercised collective control over their work - so far as is feasible, given the wider economic context; if they defined and freely modified their own methods of organisation and cooperation; if they were trusted to decide what was important and what was not, and to evaluate how successful those judgements were. Such a process, probably for only a brief moment - as brief as the cooperative factories mentioned in *Capital* volume 1 - *actually exists now*, but only for a very particular elite layer of the labour aristocracy (the archdukes, as it were, rather than the baronets) and only within very well defined limits at that. There is no reason a factory could not be organised analogously - this stuff came from car plants, for god's sake! - or a hospital, or a school, or even a military unit (in their book, *Lean software development*, Mary and Tom Poppendieck cite - of all things - the US Marine Corps as a salutary example<sup>8</sup>).

The obstacles to this are not so much that we have not, as a species, noticed that this sort of thing 'works', but that a method of organising work can only succeed if it is not in contradiction with the prevailing economic conditions. For us plumbers of software, times are good - there is far more work to go around than there are engineers to do it and, though there is neither a union nor a professional association on the model of the Bar or BMA through which we can collectively defend our interests, in circumstances where it is highly costly for employers to annoy us, we do not very much need one.

In wider society, of course, this is hardly a typical case. The 'economic' benefits of time-and-motion, and the bullying, hectoring form of management, and arbitrary power on the shop floor in all its forms, are inseparable from the 'political' benefits *to the capitalist class* of having a supplicant working class without the confidence to assert itself at all levels of society. Even the defensive, 'negative' workers' control that came with greater union power in the post-war era was intolerable - never mind forms of work that make obvious the utter superfluity of management and the seat-warmers of the corporate hierarchy.

As long as we engineers are the sole layer, or at least one of the only layers, of the productive classes to enjoy such autonomy in our work, however, even we are victim to a peculiar dialectical reversal, and find ourselves on the wrong side of the automation fetish. We, who are

ostensibly the masters, of the machines, have our power only inasmuch as we are at the service of the high priests of the technology-religion. Just as the labour aristocracy in general both benefits from the crumbs sent its way and is in some way imprisoned by them, so we are made into tools by the inanimate machines we shepherd into life.<sup>9</sup>

Escape from the tyranny of the computer-god implicates, in the end, the central feature of capitalist labour organisation, which is specialisation - the breakdown of production into ever smaller, tediously measurable sub-processes; and, most egregiously of all, the separation of mental and manual labour, and the transformation of 'knowledge workers' into a byzantine apparatus of professionals with status far exceeding the grunts on the production line. We have seen that the domination of the machine is actually the domination of one class over another, that it is not robots that throw people out of work, but other people; breaking the machine-myth proceeds inevitably from breaking the social organisation, of which it is merely the distorted reflection.

This, in the end, is the short-sightedness of Ford and his Silicon Valley liberal *confères*, as they busy themselves with UBI. Their outlook is founded upon the axiom that hyperspecialisation is the natural order. Ford's book focuses on the way in which this leaves workers especially vulnerable to replacement by robots and computer programs, but cannot call it into question itself. He seems to argue that neither the elite nor the masses have the power to preserve the link between work and reward; so it is up to the elite to make sure everyone gets on anyhow. Strikingly absent from his account are the masses themselves, who are purely the object of the machines. (Since his book was published, the election of Donald Trump gave his caste a reminder that the superfluous serfs of techno-feudalism cannot be expected to go away quietly.)

Despite his sincere concern for the consequences of a new industrial revolution, he is in the end reduced to apologetics - UBI, since it does not call into question the ownership of the machines, at best (if Keynes is right) merely keeps them rolling to the great benefit of a shrinking *haute bourgeoisie*. Leftwing support for UBI is understandable, but misplaced - for the point is to lay hold of and transform the whole productive process. Then we will see how much work there is to go around, and what use revolutionary technologies can actually be to humanity ●

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## Notes

1. This article is based on a talk at Communist University 2017.
2. 'The roads to Wannacry' *Weekly Worker* May 18 2017.
3. M Ford *Rise of the robots* London 2015, p215.
4. K Marx *Capital* Vol 1, London 1990. See especially pp375-416 and pp526-64.
5. www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/keynes/1930/our-grandchildren.htm.
6. See chapter 7 of *Results and prospects*, specifically the polemic with Rozhkov: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/trp/rp07.htm.
7. The particular variant of agile development described here is Scrum, the most popular and also the most directly inspired by the Toyota system. See Ken Schwaber's and Jeff Sutherland's *Scrum guide*: www.scrumguides.org/scrums-guide.html.
8. M and T Poppendieck *Lean software development* Boston 2003, pp62-63.
9. I add, here, the additional problem raised by comrade Mike Macnair: that all productive enterprise in a capitalist society, very much including the relatively egalitarian cooperative labour of an agile software team, is subordinated ultimately to finance capital, which plays - in its corrupt manner - the main role of coordination within capital as a whole. We have since then had a most wonderful demonstration of this phenomenon with the acquisition of ThoughtWorks, a development consultancy that spearheaded the adoption of agile methods and the war against waterfall, by a hungry-looking private equity outfit. The previous owner, to add an extra layer of irony, is a self-proclaimed socialist and admirer of the Chávistas, who has now got an undisclosed, but probably vast, war-chest for his political causes. Socialism looms in the United States, no doubt.

**LABOUR**

Jeremy Corbyn: is he still a militant fighter for Palestinian rights?

# Don't abandon Palestinian cause

The National Policy Forum wants to end Labour's opposition to the occupation, writes Tony Greenstein

As news leaks out of Israel's shameful supply of weapons to the Burmese army, which is engaged in a genocidal war against the Rohingya people,<sup>1</sup> the right in the Labour Party, led by Labour Friends of Israel sponsor and shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry, continues to paint Israel in rosy colours. Israel is seen as the equivalent of Ronald Reagan's "shining city on a hill". In this display of imperialist arrogance, Israel is portrayed as a democratic beacon in the Middle East rather than a bulwark of repressive regimes the world over.

For over 30 years there was no more ardent supporter of the Palestinians than Jeremy Corbyn. When I was chairperson of the Labour Committee on Palestine and its successor, the Labour Movement Campaign on Palestine, Corbyn was the most steadfast and reliable of the MPs who supported us. Subsequently he became a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and attended virtually all its AGMs.

When the prospect of Corbyn becoming leader dawned on the right in August 2015, the tabloids and the *Jewish Chronicle* launched the false 'anti-Semitism' campaign starting with Corbyn himself. He was accused of consorting with an open holocaust denier, Paul Eisen.<sup>2</sup> This campaign was soon taken over by Labour Friends

of Israel and the Jewish Labour Movement, in conjunction with figures on the Labour right like John Mann MP and the *Jewish Chronicle* under the editorship of Stephen Pollard - a cold war warrior, member of the Henry Jackson Society and former editor of the *Daily Express*.

The smear campaign was coordinated by the Israeli embassy, as the undercover *Al Jazeera* series, 'The lobby', demonstrated. Its purpose was to defame supporters of Palestine with accusations of anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup> The campaign had nothing to do with Jew hatred - which was why I, as a life-long Jewish anti-fascist and anti-racist campaigner, was among the first to be suspended from the

Labour Party on vague charges of 'anti-Semitism'. Eighteen months later I am *still* suspended.

But that is not all. Now Labour's manifesto commitments on Palestine for the general election, which were already pathetically weak, have been ditched in favour of full-throated support for the state of Israel and Zionism. The proposals of the National Policy Forum's international commission mean a complete abandonment of any support for the Palestinians.

If Jeremy Corbyn allows these proposals to pass, then the policy of the Labour Party on Palestine will have taken a step backwards from the positions it held under Ed Miliband. It

will be ironic, given his own previous support for the Palestinians, if Labour under Jeremy Corbyn adopts the most pro-Israel stance Labour has had since the time of Harold Wilson.

## Two states

The only reference to Palestine in the NPC proposals is support for a two-state solution. Support for two states is also the position of Labour Friends of Israel and the Jewish Labour Movement. There is, of course, a reason why the pro-Israel lobby in the Labour Party supports a two-state solution and that is because *it can never happen*. Those like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty who advocate it today are in reality calling for a single apartheid state from the Mediterranean to the Jordan river.

Labour's manifesto included opposition to the settlements, which today contain 600,000 Israelis, as well as opposition to the starvation blockade of the Gaza Strip, which is causing a major human rights crisis, and an end to the occupation.

To delete any reference to ending the occupation, dismantling the settlements or ending the siege of Gaza means that references to two states are nothing more than a hypocritical repetition of a stale mantra. Even supposing that a two-state solution were possible, how could it possibly be achieved if Israel maintained its occupation and its settlements?

The position of Labour if the NPC formula is adopted will be no different from that of the Trump administration - except that Trump and his ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, are at least more honest, since they have now resiled from support for two states.

There is no Zionist political force in Israel, bar the extremely weak Meretz party, which today supports a two-state solution. The Israeli Labor Party, of which the Jewish Labour Movement is a 'sister' party (actually its British representative), does not support it. It supports segregation: in other words, a pitiful echo of South Africa's Bantustan policy. It is the position of Jim Crow in the American deep south

It was just a week ago that prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu vowed not to remove a single, solitary settlement from the West Bank. "We will deepen our roots, build, strengthen and settle," Netanyahu told settlers at an event marking 50 years of Israeli occupation.<sup>4</sup> And his deputy foreign secretary, religious nut Tzipi Hotovely, was even more blunt: "We need to return to the basic truth of our rights to this country," she said. "This land is ours. All of it is ours. We did not come here to apologise for that."<sup>5</sup>

At the last Israeli elections in May 2015 Netanyahu made it clear that he was opposed to a Palestinian state.<sup>6</sup> One wonders what part of this the Labour right and Emily Thornberry do not

## Current position and new proposal

### Labour manifesto

Labour is committed to a comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on a two-state solution - a secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine. There can be no military solution to this conflict and all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve. That means both an end to the blockade, occupation and settlements, and an end to rocket and terror attacks.

Labour will continue to press for an immediate return to meaningful negotiations leading to a diplomatic resolution. A Labour government will immediately recognise the state of Palestine.

### National Policy Forum

In Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Labour is committed to a comprehensive peace based on a two-state solution: a secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine.

# What we fight for

understand?

Talk of two states serves one purpose only - to act as a smokescreen for the military occupation of the West Bank and for Israel's apartheid rule. Within the borders of what was mandate Palestine, which is the area covered by the present Greater Israel bar the Golan, there are approximately six million Jews and the same number of Palestinians. It has always been a cardinal rule that a Jewish state had to have at least 70% Jewish population. That is why the West Bank was not been officially annexed. If Israel were to declare that the West Bank was officially part of Israel then it would either have to grant the right to vote to the Palestinians, which would mean an end to the Jewish state, or officially declare apartheid.

## Apartheid

Israel's answer to this is to keep the Palestinians under military rule, whilst at the same time the Jewish settlers in the West Bank are subject to ordinary Israeli civilian rule. The maintenance of two sets of laws and legal systems within the same territory is the very essence of an apartheid system. That is why fantasy talk of two states is a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. As long as two-state solutions are talked about, even though they will never happen, Israel has a *bona fide* pretext to continue its present military occupation and apartheid rule.

South African veterans of the anti-apartheid struggle are not so easily fooled, which is why South Africa is the state which is most supportive of the Palestinians. They know that the Israeli checkpoints and ID card system on the West Bank are like the pass laws and controls they suffered under - *except that they are much worse in Israel.*

At the hundreds of military checkpoints dotted around the West Bank, whose sole purpose is to disrupt Palestinian life and economic activity, there are two doors - one for Palestinians, who can wait for hours in the hot sun, and one for Jewish settlers, who pass through without let or hindrance. Combine this with the 'Jewish only' roads and you have a fully-fledged apartheid system. What Labour needs to do is to come out *now* against this apartheid system, not talk about the mirage of two states.

That is why people like archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, was reported as saying:

I have witnessed the systemic humiliation of Palestinian men, women and children by members of the Israeli security forces. Their humiliation is familiar to all black South Africans, who were corralled and harassed and insulted and assaulted by the security forces of the apartheid government.<sup>7</sup>

In a message to the Presbyterian Church of the United States Tutu depicted Israel as an apartheid state.<sup>8</sup> Ronnie Kasrils, a former Jewish minister in the ANC government, has described Israel's military occupation of the West Bank as worse than that of South Africa under apartheid:

When I visited the territories I also passed through Israel and I saw the forests that cover the remnants of the Palestinian villages. As a former forestry minister, this was especially striking to me. I also went into a few settlements. It was insane. Young Americans spat on the flag that was on my car. The occupation reminds me of the darkest days of apartheid, but we never saw tanks and planes firing at a civilian population. It's a monstrosity I'd never seen before. The wall you built, the checkpoints and the roads for Jews only - it turns the stomach, even for someone who grew up under apartheid. It's a hundred times worse.<sup>9</sup>

In 1961, Dr Hendrick Verwoerd, the South African prime minister, recognised his fellow twin at the top of Africa, when he said that "Israel, like South Africa, is an apartheid state."<sup>10</sup> Yet Corbyn's Labour wishes to pretend that Israel is some form of democratic nirvana.

## Reversion

Nowhere in either the Labour manifesto or the National Policy Forum documents is there any recognition that the Israeli state is the oppressor and that the Palestinians are the oppressed. Instead it adopts the formula of a "secure Israel alongside a secure and viable state of Palestine". This is nothing other than a reversion to Labour's previous support for British imperialism. How is it that the Labour Party, under Corbyn of all people, can revert back to an age when it supported white minority rule in Southern Africa and the colonisation of India and Malaya?

It is not Israeli security which is under threat, but the continued daily existence of the Palestinians. Instead of being seen as a thoroughly racist, warlike state, sponsored and funded by the west - all ideas that Corbyn was fully signed up to before he became leader - Israel is portrayed as the outcome of the holocaust and the answer to anti-Semitism. That is the argument that has been put forward over the past two years by the false anti-Semitism campaign.

Everyone knows, as Chris Williamson MP said recently, that allegations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party are "bullshit" and "repellent". Of course, the various Zionist groups, including the Board of Deputies immediately called for his dismissal. Telling the truth is anti-Semitic!<sup>11</sup> No doubt a few people harbour prejudices or stereotypes about Jews in the Labour Party, as do approximately 7% of the population, but I personally have never come across an anti-Semite in the Labour Party. Indeed, if anyone harbours prejudices, it is the Labour right. It was very instructive in the 2016 Labour leadership campaign debate that, when Owen Smith MP was asked what he most admired about Jews, he said they were "a very entrepreneurial set of people".<sup>12</sup>

The Zionist lobby and the Labour right's support for Israel is an integral part of support for the alliance with the United States, Donald Trump included. Israel is America's strategic guard and its closest partner in the Middle East. It is the most stable base of the US in the region. A politically reliable settler colonial state. To support Israel is to support American imperialism, Nato and Trident.

It is one of the major political weaknesses of Corbyn that he views the question of Israel as one of pacifism and peace rather than anti-imperialism. That is why he has been so susceptible to the anti-Semitism attack. He cannot see that 'anti-Semitism' is simply another way of treating the settlers as victims rather than as oppressors. Corbyn does not perceive that support for Israel is an integral part of the anti-communist, cold war, Atlanticist approach to foreign policy.

## Supremacist

The other major omission from both the manifesto and the National Policy Forum is the question of the Israeli state itself and the Jewish supremacist nature of that state. Israel is not simply another bourgeois-democratic western state. It is an ethno-religious *settler* state. Whereas bourgeois states in the west have anti-racist legislation and policies aimed at combating racial discrimination, in Israel the main engine of racial discrimination is the state itself. Racism is built into Israel's DNA.

Apartheid may differ in form between Israel pre-1967 and today's Greater Israel, but apartheid is not limited to the West Bank and Gaza. It

was not in the West Bank that Israel demolished the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran in January of this year in order that a Jewish town, Hiran, could be built in its place, but in the Negev in Israel 'proper'.<sup>13</sup>

Half of the Arab villages in Israel are 'unrecognised': ie, they have no mains water, electricity, sewerage, schools, etc. They are liable to demolition at any time, despite having been there for longer than the Jewish towns and villages surrounding them. No Jewish communities are unrecognised.

There is a state education system which is completely segregated, as used to be the case in the era of segregation in the USA. The Arab sector gets about one-third of the funds allocated to the Jewish sector. Jewish students receive grants in higher education, unlike Arab students.

The Jewish National Fund and Israeli Lands Authority control 93% of Israeli land. It is national land and is not available to Palestinians, who are confined to about 3.5% of Israeli territory - the same amount that the Arabs were left with in 1948, when their numbers were less than a 10th of what they are now. No extra land has been allocated to Israeli Palestinians and 'illegal' buildings in Arab villages are regularly demolished because building permits are rarely granted to Arabs.

In 2000 an Arab couple, the Kadans, won a supreme court victory that said that the Jewish Agency and the JNF could not refuse to sell or lease land to someone because they are not Jewish.<sup>14</sup> In 2006 this was enforced when the attorney general Menachem Mazuz ruled that the JNF could not discriminate against non-Jews in the sale of land, and they should be 'compensated' with state land.<sup>15</sup> In Israel today, according to the authoritative Pew Research Center survey, a plurality (48%) of Israeli citizens favour the physical expulsion of Israel's Arab citizens.<sup>16</sup> No less than 79% of Israeli Jews were recorded as saying that in a Jewish state Jews should receive preferential treatment.

Barely a day goes by without reports of social discrimination, such as the barring of Arabs from country clubs, the university practice of giving Jewish students the option of not having to live with Arab students (Technion, Bar Ilan) or the opposition to Arabs buying properties in 'Jewish' cities and communities. Indeed the Knesset, in order to get around the ruling in the Kadan case, passed the Reception Committees Act, which gave communities of 500 residents or

less the ability to exclude those who 'don't fit in': ie, Israeli Palestinians and no doubt Ethiopian and black Jews.

The reality of Israel is that it is the most racist state in the world. A state where the right holds marches to the chant of 'Death to the Arabs'. A society where, according to the same Pew Research Center report, just 8% of Israelis describe themselves as being on the left.

This is the state that the Labour Party in Britain is signed up to. If Jeremy Corbyn accepts the National Policy Forum proposals on Israel/Palestine, then he will have abandoned 30-plus years of support for the Palestinians without a whimper. He will also be signalling that, whenever a controversy arises or pressure is applied, he will buckle under the pressure of the right. Supporting Israel is supporting American imperialism in the Middle East. That is why we have to resist the proposed changes and unite against the false anti-Semitism allegations of the Labour right and the Zionists ●

## Notes

1. 'As violence intensifies, Israel continues to arm Myanmar's military junta *Ha'aretz* September 4 2017.
2. See, for example, 'Exclusive: Jeremy Corbyn's "long-standing links" with notorious holocaust denier and his "anti-Semitic" organisation revealed': [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3187428/Jeremy-Corbyn-s-links-notorious-Holocaust-denier-revealed.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3187428/Jeremy-Corbyn-s-links-notorious-Holocaust-denier-revealed.html).
3. [www.aljazeera.com/investigations/thelobby](http://www.aljazeera.com/investigations/thelobby).
4. 'Netanyahu vows to never remove Israeli settlements from West Bank: "We're here to stay, forever" *Ha'aretz* August 29 2017.
5. 'Israel's new deputy foreign minister: "This land is ours. All of it is ours" *The Guardian* May 22 2015.
6. 'Netanyahu's last-minute reversal on the two-state solution' *The Atlantic* March 16 2015.
7. *Jerusalem Post* March 10 2014.
8. 'Desmond Tutu: US Christians must recognise Israel as apartheid state': [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.599422](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.599422).
9. [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone-cry-the-beloved-country-1.221250](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone-cry-the-beloved-country-1.221250).
10. *Ha'aretz* May 24 2007; *Middle East Monitor* January 28 2014; [www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140128-opposing-apartheid-palestine-and-the-experience-of-south-africa-with-ilan-pappe-and-ronnie-kasrils](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140128-opposing-apartheid-palestine-and-the-experience-of-south-africa-with-ilan-pappe-and-ronnie-kasrils).
11. 'Corbyn should consider sacking MP who described anti-Semitism attacks as "bullshit", says Jewish group' *Huffington Post* August 30 2017: [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/williamson-antisemitism-corbyn-jews\\_uk\\_59a68a1fe4b084581a146edd](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/williamson-antisemitism-corbyn-jews_uk_59a68a1fe4b084581a146edd).
12. 'Israel has right to exist, but so do boycotts against it - Labour leader Corbyn': [www.rt.com/uk/359900-corbyn-bds-settlements-israel](http://www.rt.com/uk/359900-corbyn-bds-settlements-israel).
13. [www.timesofisrael.com/fear-and-loathing-in-umm-al-hiran/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/fear-and-loathing-in-umm-al-hiran/), Fear and loathing in Umm al-Hiran, Times of Israel (January 19 2017).
14. 'Israeli court rules Arab couple can live in Jewish area' *New York Times* March 9 2000.
15. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_National\\_Fund](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_National_Fund).
16. 'Israel's religiously divided society': [www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society](http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society).

## Fighting fund

# With your help

Following my absence from these pages during the CPGB's Summer Offensive fundraising drive over the last two months, I am pleased to be able to announce a good start to the *Weekly Worker's* own September fighting fund on my return.

Both AG and HJ celebrated the reappearance of our paper after its two-week August break by writing a cheque for £50 - just what the doctor ordered! Then we had the usual flurry of standing orders, which we see at the start of every month - they amounted to £327 since September 1. Thanks in particular to comrades MS, and EW (£40 each), ST, SW, AC and CG (£30) - you all helped boost our aim of reaching our £1,750 target before the month is out.

Then there was the cash handed over personally from 'Hassan' (£15) and the total collected for

the *Weekly Worker* at the last two London Communist Forums, amounting to £31. Last but not least, three comrades clicked on the 'Donate' button on our website - thank you, KT (£20), PM (£15) and MN (£10), who were among the 2,566 online readers of last week's edition. I just wish a few more of those readers would show their appreciation by also making use of our PayPal facility.

But, as I say, a good start. After exactly one week we have raised £518. Yet I can't help worrying about, for example, the drop in standing order donations toward the middle of each month - will we be able to keep up the pace? With your help I know we can! ●

Robbie Rix

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# weekly Worker

**Markets  
useless  
in the face of  
disasters**

## First Harvey, now Irma

How many times must the American south be flooded before the political class drops its ecological complacency? A few more yet, worries Ira Wiseman

**H**urricane Irma, the most powerful Atlantic storm ever recorded, has already devastated the Caribbean and is due to hit the US coast some time very soon. Irma was, of course, preceded, just a week or so ago, by Hurricane Harvey. The exact damage wrought in Texas and Louisiana by Hurricane Harvey will not be known for some time. But it was undeniably enormous.

The dry, monetary estimates of the physical upheaval range from \$90 to \$160 billion. To this must be added the value of 66 American lives so far - in the Trump era, surely at least seven or eight dollars a piece - not to mention the trauma suffered by the tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people displaced, and the hit to the Lonestar State's priceless swagger. Tropical storms are common enough on the gulf coast, of course, and Harvey is the eighth to merit a name this year. It remains rare, however, that they are quite so catastrophic; and several aspects of the devastation merit comment. As is drearily typical, much of this is down not to the cruelties of a capricious natural order, but the shortsightedness of humankind.

The Harvey story is a classically biblical one, of inundation. It is the wettest tropical storm ever to have struck the mainland United States. The rains were torrential and relentless, and in the end have done far worse than the winds and the tornadoes. Houston is the worst affected urban area, and in part that is merely a matter of it being the largest city in the south, its 2.3 million people making it the fourth largest by population in the entire country.

### Bad planning

It has been widely noted, however, that more than the mere size of the place is at issue. Houston's planning regulations are notoriously *laissez-faire*. Unlike the strict zoning requirements obtaining in most other US cities, the municipal authorities are content, for the most part, to wave things through. The most obvious consequence of all this is *sprawl* - the metastasis of low-density housing. (Houston has a quarter of the population of New York, but twice the square-mileage.) "Under the paving stones, the beach," went the slogan of May 1968; in Houston, under the concrete foundations of the multiplying neighbourhoods, there is the soft soil of a floodplain. When the rains came, before the place was what it is today, the ground would absorb the water. With such a vast, 600-square-mile spread of urban development, there is simply nowhere for the water to go.

To make things more dangerous still, the city is on very flat ground, which (again due to the pattern of development) has over the years become very slightly concave. Houstonians have been living in what amounts to a huge bowl, issuing the Almighty with a standing challenge - in true Texan style - to go ahead and do your worst.

The Houston flooding represents a severe challenge to a Texan body politic which has grown increasingly fraught over the past few decades, as its urban population grows, and especially



Record-breakers: one after another

among those demographics traditionally at odds with American conservatism, come election time. Texas is on the border with Mexico - indeed, was a part of Mexico, until it was annexed as the last great success of southern slaveholder expansionism in the 1840s. Its Hispanic population is huge; and, while the Catholics among it may be happy to vote with Republicans on abortion or homosexuality, it is the Democrats who have the best record of success in coopting voting caucuses along ethno-particularist lines. That in turn leads to increasingly shrill rhetoric on immigration in the American southwest, and the likes of the vile racist cop, Joe Arpaio - recently and notoriously pardoned by Donald Trump. This drives Hispanics closer to the Democrats; and the cycle continues.

The upshot is a state government still dominated by Republicans, and increasingly by Tea Party and Trumpite headbangers. As the urban centres grow, and grow politically to resemble other major cities in the US, so this dominance is increasingly dependent on blatant gerrymandering, of a sort that would have shamed 1950s Ulster - a look at the political map of Texas permits only one alternative explanation: viz, that it is some sort of psephological crop circle left by aliens with inscrutable motives.<sup>1</sup> The deal is sealed with flagrant violations of the electoral franchise, dressed up as countermeasures against 'voter fraud'.

Houston, believe it or not, has a black, liberal Democrat mayor, Sylvester

Turner, albeit elected only narrowly; his predecessor, Annise Parker, was a lesbian, and the first openly non-heterosexual mayor in American history. Inevitably, some of the more simple-hearted Protestant fundamentalists in the state have pointed to such creeping liberalism in the city as the cause of the recent unpleasantness, but frankly this opinion is more marginal than it has been for some years. (God, after all, promised not to destroy Sodom if even 10 good men could be found within its walls; are there not 10 Baptists in Houston?) The fact that Texas has just had a special legislative session - not on the small matter of its most populous city being at vast, known and terrible risk of flooding, but instead on whether transgendered people should be denied the use of their toilet of choice - has rather more of a last-days-of-Rome, looming-Armageddon feel to it to this writer.

Speaking of Armageddon, it is hardly responsible to discuss all this without mentioning the threat of anthropogenic climate change, an idea also lacking in popularity among rightwing Texans, and indeed Americans in general, who have seen fit to elect a president who proclaims the whole thing a scam perpetrated on the US by envious competitors, and has pulled out of the weak-tea Paris accords on that basis. Ann Coulter, the rightwing pundit, caught some flack for saying, "I don't believe Hurricane Harvey is God's punishment for Houston electing a lesbian mayor. But that is more credible than 'climate change'."

Of course, it is impossible to say that Harvey was a direct result of climate change; the point is rather that the outcome of global warming is in many cases a matter of more such 'surprises', like the exceptionally wet hurricane that has drowned Houston.

### Socialists in foxholes

The other major strand of Texas politics - in this case, perhaps we ought to say Texas *ideology* - is that most ostentatiously rugged of all individualisms, and that too is left dangerously exposed in Houston. True Texans, according to this ideology, are the ones who pull themselves up by their own cowboy bootstraps. The cult of self-reliance translates into exactly the sort of politics we would expect. Texas has no state income tax. Its dominant political doxa is violently resentful of federal authority (with the usual exceptions made when the matter at hand is people's private sexual lives). Its past governors include George W Bush and Tea Party perennial Rick Perry; its senior senator is the scenery-chewing God-botherer, Ted Cruz - the last man to be sent packing by The Donald on his way to coronation as Republican candidate last year, and who considers public education an egregious instance of government interference in private life.

In the midst of a natural disaster, however, such nostrums fall to pieces. Mass flooding and similar events immediately and always engender 'socialism': that is (in this connection), consciously organised distribution on the basis of need. As Hal Draper might put it, the choice is between 'socialism from above' - the intervention of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (Fema), widely hailed in the conspiracy theory literature as the agent of the shadowy cabal *du jour*; and 'socialism from below' - the spontaneous material solidarity of the people in the disaster zone, which is far more common than the luridly reported phenomena of looting and general anarchy. The market is not an option - unless, of course, unnecessary mass death and displacement is an option.<sup>2</sup>

So far as the Feds are concerned, the president is demanding a multi-billion-dollar reconstruction package - perhaps the only economic stimulus that stands a chance in a Congress ever more full of people roughly as mad as Ted Cruz. As for the spontaneous mutual aid end of things, a glorious example comes from The

Baffler, an American left-liberal outlet, concerning the local petty bourgeois Tea Party blowhard furniture salesman, Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale, who temporarily overcame his hatred of handouts to turn his showrooms over into something like refugee shelters:

Because this is the thing about those hard-charging capitalist cowboys: the tough-guy shtick breaks down every time it's held to the light, and not because people are particularly compassionate beyond belief, or any saccharine judgement of the like. It's just that the tight-walleted conservative sentiment relies only on a lack or refusal of the imagination. And, once imagination's not required, once the consequences are real and close to you, the answers get easy. What do you do? Help. Contribute. Share. Why is that so hard to grasp in the abstract? Why must it be tested in the extremely, life-threateningly tangible to prove essential? Why is it so easy for some to fabricate and fixate on the image of the lazy citizen, the government parasite, but alternatively difficult for them to imagine the Houstonian grandmother standing on her roof, drenched in rain?<sup>3</sup>

Neither the low-level solidarity of the afflicted nor the emergency plans of Fema are remotely good enough, however, for neither are able to anticipate the disaster; they merely ameliorate its malign effects and help with recovery. Socialism without scare quotes would mean acknowledging that prevention is better than cure - that cities should not be allowed to spread anarchically to the point that they are at extreme flood risk, but should be democratically planned to best ensure the safety of all their constituencies; that humanity should not chug through its hydrocarbon reserves like there is no tomorrow, for tomorrow is coming on fast and the forecast is warm and wet ●

### Notes

1. [www.sacurrent.com/the-daily/archives/2017/05/23/the-supreme-court-just-gutted-texas-defense-of-its-rationally-gerrymandered-congressional-districts](http://www.sacurrent.com/the-daily/archives/2017/05/23/the-supreme-court-just-gutted-texas-defense-of-its-rationally-gerrymandered-congressional-districts).
2. A timely illustration presents itself: one of the earliest controversies surrounding Uber came when Hurricane Sandy triggered off its demand-based 'surge pricing', doubling fares; an appropriate market response to the disruption in the New York metro area, but directly counterproductive from the point of view of everyone making it to the following week in one piece, and a humiliating PR gaffe.
3. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/mattress-mack-will-save-you>.

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