

# weekly worker



**SPEW decides not to call for a Labour Party vote ... and not to tell its readers anything about it**

- Letters and debate
- Lessons of ISO
- Iran and war threats
- Cuba and Trotsky

No 1252 May 23 2019

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

£1/€1.10

**IF BORIS JOHNSON BECOMES TORY LEADER A GENERAL ELECTION WILL SOON FOLLOW. IF HE WINS THAT ELECTION BREXIT AND A JOINED-AT-THE-HIP ALLIANCE WITH DONALD TRUMP IS ON THE CARDS**



# LETTERS



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

## Shocking

One of the things I found shocking in Amanda MacLean's second article ('Sex is not psyche', May 9) is her attempt to sidestep my concerns about her use of the term 'gender ideology', which she implies is some sort of misreading of her first article, 'Decoupled from reality' (April 18). Throughout her original article MacLean uses the terms, 'gender ideology' and 'genderism' or 'genderist' as interchangeable.

I am troubled about MacLean's reluctance to even acknowledge the existence of a rightwing assault on LGBT and women's rights in various places around the world, through attacking transgender people. It is notable, for example, that the assault on woman's right to choose in Alabama has been part of series of reactionary bits of legislation, including an attempt to pass a 'Bathroom Bill' that would prevent trans woman and trans men from using woman's and men's bathrooms respectively. Given this, I find it perplexing that MacLean does not take the opportunity to distinguish how she sees the 'gender ideology' that she proposes from that of the conservative Christian and alt-right movements.

Instead MacLean goes on the offence, by claiming that trans people asserting their rights is somehow "racist". Not only does this overlook the fact that many transgendered people are black, Asian or from a minority ethnic background, but adopts a counterproductive perspective that sees rights as a zero-sum game and that assertion of one identity requires the negation of another. MacLean's position is certainly not shared by groups like Black Lives Matter, who see "gender justice" (their phrase) as part of their struggle.

Since Amanda MacLean's first article we have seen the ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on Caster Semenya's case. They upheld the decision of the International Association of Athletics Foundation (IAAF) only to allow Caster Semenya to compete in women's 800 metre events if she takes drugs to reduce her naturally elevated levels of testosterone. More recently the IAAF has said that, if she prefers, Caster can run against men. Caster, who has XX chromosomes and identifies as a woman, has in effect been put in no-man's land (sic). One can only conclude from this that the relationship between gender, sex and biology is not as straightforward as Amanda MacLean suggests, and that 'sex' as not stable, ahistoric category. For the IAAF at least the levels of someone's testosterone is more important than people sex chromosomes or genital development.

As MacLean observes, discussion amongst biologists over whether sex is a spectrum has been around since the 1980s, if not earlier. With more advanced techniques in genetics, scientists are finding greater diversity in nature. Here the question is not some 'new science', but more evidence that 'sex' may not be immutable. 'Sex' may become like 'race' - ie, problematic to see as biological concept. I appreciate that this is a still controversial and the case has yet to be proved, but to dismiss it as "decoupled from reality" is somewhat crass and unscientific.

Indeed, MacLean's arguments are somewhat circular. She dismisses anyone's biology or self-identity as statically unimportant or having a disorder if they don't conform to her narrow definition of the sexes. Sex may not be psyche, but neither is it god-given. All definitions of 'sex' are based on humans' interpretation or, as in MacLean's case, selective interpretation

of the evidence.

Perhaps the most shocking and quite chilling aspect of 'Sex is not psyche' is MacLean's solution to her transgender 'problem': the creation of "third gender/third space". This "third gender" is not a recognition of some cultural phenomenon, but an imposition of MacLean's circular logic - with, one assumes, 'men' and 'women' genders corresponding to MacLean's understanding of sex, and all people that she deems statistically unimportant or having a disorder pushed into this "third gender".

Leaving aside whether this is biologically determinist, it does raise a whole range of practical and ethical questions. Is there really the desire in austerity-torn Britain to build a whole array of public toilets, hostels, prisons and hospital wards for this new "third gender"? How is gender to be assigned and by whom? And how are these genders to be policed? This has the smell of segregation and ghettoisation.

Transgender people have been using spaces of the gender that they identify with for years. This right was enshrined in the Equality Act of 2010. Acts like the proposed new Gender Recognition Act have been passed in countries across the world, including Ireland, Malta, Norway, Argentina, Portugal and Belgium, with no upsurge in violence against woman.

Isn't it time Amanda MacLean and people who share her intolerances just learn to accept the wider diversity of humanity and that trans women are women, and trans men are men?

**Richard Farnos**  
South London

## Safe spaces

I had to laugh at Nicola Daniels' letter in the *Weekly Worker* (May 16). Did you omit, for reasons of space, the rejoinder where she states that some of her best friends are trans women?

I won't go into her unsubstantiated accusations about trans women's behaviour in safe spaces, other than to say I felt sad that the old capitalist tactic of 'divide and rule' is alive and well! I presume the women that live in Mayfair, Park Lane or feature in the rich list of the broadsheets have no need to avail themselves of these safe spaces. I wonder why.

Creating safe spaces for women, or indeed anyone, under capitalism is like getting drunk to forget your problems. Unfortunately when you sober up they are still there. Why not join the readers and writers of the *Weekly Worker* to create a safe place for all members of the working class? It's called *socialism* - and trust me, Nicola, that will be a safe space for women. But for those that want to sell working class women short, then I guess safe spaces are probably all the reformists have to offer.

I won't be wishing you good luck with that, because it does nothing to stop women dying at work, dying of starvation or dying in capitalism's wars. But what does that matter, when there are trans women to exclude from safe spaces?

**Steven Johnston**  
email

## Diplomatic corps

I was initially surprised to read Ian Birchall's wholesale sense-of-humour bypass in response to myself (Letters, May 16). As I understand from other comrades active in years gone by, Birchall's role in the Socialist Workers Party was essentially one of presenting 'Cliffism with a human face', given that he was one of the few of its members who had the capability of relating on any human level to the rest of the left.

This was a reflection of the fact that the general SWP 'cadre type' tended (then as now) to be unpleasant, half-educated, permanently over-excited

and occasionally loutish. With that in my mind, it was necessary, even for the SWP, to have people who had the ability to *sweep up* from time to time. (Being in the SWP 'diplomatic corps' wasn't necessarily a comfortable position. In Cardiff, many moons ago, I saw those in the SWP who did have good relations with the rest of the far left ostracised, with one eventually being booted out on trumped-up charges and slurs about his conduct.)

So I am quite sure that Birchall has had to listen in good humour to a fair few jibes about the SWP down the years. But, with the mothership limping on after the crises of the last decade, I suspect that it's all become a bit more painful for the refugees.

Birchall says: "I should think very carefully before involving myself with a political organisation that finds hundreds of millions of human deaths a subject for humour." I am sorry to tell Birchall that I am a member of no other organisation or campaign except the Labour Party. I am not a member of the CPGB and I am hardly a prolific writer for its paper. Obviously, I'm not talking for the Labour Party either. I could ask Corbyn if he needs a spokesman on 'the disintegration of the SWP' but I suspect he has bigger fish to fry.

As for the pompous and censorious injunctions on what should and shouldn't be a topic for jokes, I'm guessing Birchall has never heard of gallows humour. This is bluster anyway; he knows full well I am joking about the former inmates of a deluded political sect and not about the imminent destruction of humanity. I don't necessarily expect people to find funny what I do, but I certainly don't intend lecturing to others what they should get a giggle from either.

Birchall complains that I "make no political arguments". It may have been oblique, but I did have a serious political point to make. It is ridiculous that people such as Birchall have learnt so little from history. His wanting to opportunistically adapt himself to Extinction Rebellion (XR) is classic SWP politics - being merely the obverse of its brittle sectarianism, which led to ridiculously inflated ideas as to its importance. The idea behind this was that the SWP aimed to keep mass movements at a politically primitive level, in order that it could indulge in low-level recruitment campaigns. Birchall is not offering tactical advice in relation to XR: he's merely reminiscing about the good/bad old days.

He now suggests that lying about membership figures and demonstration sizes was a mistake, but repeats sterile SWP bullshit that "the Nazis were set back for a generation" by the Anti-Nazi League, etc. (In reality, the National Front was set back by Thatcher; only those in and around the SWP really believe that the wretched pop-front ANL defeated the NF.) Very little of the SWP's legacy has been rethought by the group of people who ended up being politically wounded the most by it.

As a final depressing indicator of how little Birchall has learnt from history, he offers up this classic SWP-inflected gem: "... it is also true that the SWP initiated the Anti-Nazi League and Stop the War. Now doubtless Parker will find some doctrinal point to justify sitting on his backside rather than involving himself in those movements." In SWP parlance, unthinking activity is always sharply counterposed to criticism: 'doctrine' is nothing, movement decides all. When Birchall was an oppositionist in the SWP a few years back, the leadership attempted precisely this kind of stupid counter-position: the SWP rebels were guilty of wanting an inactive party that didn't intervene in the class struggle, in favour of navel-gazing and picking

away at internal scabs. As SWP oppositionists said at the time, it is perfectly possible to have criticism and activity. You can walk and chew gum.

Exactly why Birchall still wants to parade the discredited cultural mores of the SWP leadership by implying his critics are lazy slobs beats me. He really should know better.

**Lawrence Parker**  
London

## Mass

I primarily want to counter one political argument in Ian Birchall's reply to my letter of May 7, when it comes to the police and tactics.

I would state that XR shows that it takes too kindly to the police and repression, when they, as I stated before, yell that they love them and their children, while their comrades (or even random passers-by!) are being arrested. There is a difference between bringing a gun to a 'peaceful' action and actually trying to resist police repression and exposing what side the state is on. There is no evidence that this was a conscious tactic to confuse the police. Furthermore, in their guide to doing prison time they put forward the absurd claim that prison guards are nice people and that most are non-white (while in reality an absolute majority are white). They have since taken it down after a backlash.

Lastly, I do not have all the answers, of course, and I do try to discuss with more knowledgeable comrades on what the relation should be between socialist organisations and the different environmentalist organisations. There might be valuable lessons from XR, but they will more likely be 'practical' rather than political. At the same time I think we need to be smug from time to time to counter the smugness from XR militants, and the 'left' environmentalist movement at large. In my time as an organised communist I've stumbled upon people who simply state that the climate is to be our number-one issue - if not resolved all others don't matter. Things regarded as central by the left and labour movement, like workers' struggle and feminism, are implied to be secondary or explicitly made out to be distractions. This tendency is growing more and more rapidly.

The response to 'climate politics above all' and the hyper-focus on 'civil disobedience' needs to be a rejection of 'forming opinions in the mainstream' as a sole tactic and the 'immediate-ism' of thinking that the climate can be saved by simply forcing the states of the imperialist core to adhere to climate agreements. It sounds obvious, but it is the core to our strategy as socialists and needs to be reaffirmed when new movements pop up in the left: the organisation of the masses of workers is the strongest weapon for real societal transformation. In other words, unification of the socialists and labour movement.

**Emma Silva**  
email

## Rank hypocrisy

I'm pleased that the *Weekly Worker* believes in freedom of speech enough to publish my letters. But I'm not so pleased about the quality of the journalism on offer.

Yet again David Shearer misquotes and misleads, and I wondered if we could start a GoFundMe in order to get him to journalism school ('Preparing for battles ahead', May 9). The first rule of journalism is to appear impartial and sadly David gets that wrong too. His creepy tribute to Labour Against the Witchhunt's show trial was worthy of anything Stalin's media acolytes would have churned out.

His biggest boo-boo is tantamount to slander, but I really can't be bothered to sue him - his legal costs would surely

put him on the street. Let's look at this sentence: "The steering committee proposed to expel Peter Gregson over his refusal to remove a link from his personal website to someone who was recommending an article posted on the well-known holocaust-denial site, *Codoh*."

Fact 1: Change.org is not my personal website (I'm not *that* powerful).

Fact 2: Ian Fantom was not recommending Kollerstrom's article; he was just referencing it.

Fact 3: LAW patron Noam Chomsky actually had an article on *Codoh* calling for freedom of speech for real holocaust deniers.

Mr Shearer makes so many more errors, it would fill the letters page to go into all of them. Sadly, Shearer even gets the voting wrong - he claims 24 called for my expulsion, but it was only 20. This represents but 5% of the LAW membership. I'd previously lobbied to allow the 360 LAW members who were unable to make the meeting the right to vote by email, but the steering group would have none of it. A few members did write in, expressing their support; their views were ignored. And the truth is, only 10% of LAW got to the meeting and of those only just over half wanted me out. So, the views of those 5% now reflect the reputation of the other 95%.

Shearer suggests that I have "no problem in associating with holocaust deniers". If he had bothered to read the whole exchange of emails, which I put on my website, he would see this is untrue. It is precisely because of this kind of skewed and slanderous coverage that I have felt it necessary to put things online.

Being accused of holocaust-denial support is a pretty serious allegation. Bad news travels fast and I do not want anybody to think I had a fair trial. The motion was untrue: it claimed that I had "refused to distance myself from the holocaust denier, Kollerstrom". But I *did* distance myself and Kollerstrom is not a denier - he accepts Jews were mercilessly slaughtered, but he disputes the efficacy of Zyklon B gas.

When the allegations are patently wrong, how can the trial be fair? The steering group published fraudulent charges against me - for a reference that I had declared at the outset to be toxic. This was a witch-hunt by the witches. This was a lynching, with Jackie Walker putting the noose around my neck, and Tony Greenstein, Graham Bash and Tina Werkmann pulling the rope tight - for committing a crime that did not exist.

Tony is even now saying that I "linked with a holocaust denier", who could only be Ian Fantom - he wrote the article that Tony despises so much. Ian has written to Greenstein to protest at this slur. He writes: "One of the sponsors of LAW is professor Noam Chomsky, and I came across an article of his titled 'All denials of free speech undercut a democratic society', in which he defended professor Robert Faurisson's rights after he had denied the existence of gas chambers." Chomsky had written: "He was then brought to trial for 'falsification of history' and condemned - the first time in the west, to my knowledge, that the courts have affirmed the familiar Stalinist-fascist doctrine that the state has the right to determine historical truth and to punish deviation from it."

Since LAW patron Noam Chomsky argued for the rights of holocaust deniers to be heard, he must surely be next in line. But LAW allows him to get away with far greater support for holocaust deniers' freedom of speech than I. This is rank hypocrisy.

The issue throughout all this affair is *about* defending freedom of speech. The body, LAW, that sought to pick up the reins from Liberty - another agency that is failing to tackle the loss of freedom of speech on Israel in this country - has

shown itself to be unequal to the task. It is more concerned with expelling activists (Socialist Fight were expelled on January 6 as anti-Semites, when they were nothing of the kind) than fighting for our rights.

I pray it finds its course and reflects upon its tarnished reputation. We need organisations like LAW. But we need them to be honest and fair. Something they have patently failed to demonstrate.

**Pete Gregson**  
Edinburgh

## Loose cannon

I must take exception to a bit in David Shearer's otherwise useful report of the latest members' meeting of Labour Against the Witchhunt. He writes: "The steering committee proposed to expel Peter Gregson over his refusal to remove a link from his personal website to someone who was recommending an article posted on the well-known holocaust-denial site, *Codoh*."

That does sound terribly convoluted - and it is also false. I am a bit surprised by Shearer's misunderstanding - presumably he was at the meeting? Also, in the previous week's edition of the *Weekly Worker*, Carla Roberts did manage to correctly describe the motivation of LAW's steering committee. Maybe he should have just copied that? In any case, the steering committee neither has the time nor the desire to go checking out the "personal websites" of its members. We are not thought police.

Here is what really happened. Peter Gregson regularly updates his various online petitions, which means that every single person who has ever been unfortunate enough to have signed one of them will be getting these updates by email. In these updates, he often identified as a member of LAW - just as he did in the one he sent out in March, in which he urged people to read Ian Fantom's article, 'UK's Labour anti-Semitism split'. In this article, Fantom positively references "my colleague, Nick Kollerstrom", who is a well-known holocaust denier (or "holocaust sceptic", as holocaust deniers like to describe themselves).

LAW's Tony Greenstein engaged in a long email exchange, in which he tried to persuade Gregson to take down his recommendation of Fantom's article, but Gregson refused. Instead, he idiotically put the whole - private - email exchange online, which also featured people's personal email addresses. There it was picked up by the *Jewish Chronicle*, which gleefully reported the whole disagreement.

This is the real background to the steering committee's proposal to expel Gregson - and it is rather different to Shearer's rather lazy account.

As if to prove how right we were to expel him, Gregson has since published an audio recording of the LAW meeting (which he secretly recorded, despite the meeting expressly asking everybody not to make such a recording) and has sent out libellous and false accusations against Tony Greenstein to rightwing organisations and media outlets.

While we would still argue against Gregson's expulsion from the GMB union and his suspension from the Labour Party, we also urge all *Weekly Worker* readers to be very wary of his various campaigns. The man certainly has a lot of energy, but he is also a very loose cannon.

**Tina Werkmann**  
Law steering committee

## 'Anti-Semitism'

Any critical reader will understand that truth is often the first casualty of journalism. If not actually a casualty, the truth is treated as malleable in other spheres.

At present there are various discussions (ongoing) about anti-Semitism, and what exactly constitutes it. I have heard it said that only Jewish people can decide what is anti-Semitic. But what happens if people

from different Jewish communities disagree? Who decides - the group with the loudest voice, or the most column inches in *The Guardian* (or the *Weekly Worker*, for that matter)?

One angle at present being used to 'prove' anti-Semitism seems to say that if the words 'Nazi' and 'Jews' are used in the same sentence, it automatically equates to anti-Semitism. For instance, a bone of contention is about whether/when/where there were negotiations between the Nazi hierarchy and Jewish communities (Zionist and non-Zionist) about releasing Jews to leave the country for another destination, in exchange for money or property.

I don't understand how this discussion can possibly prove someone is anti-Semitic. Of course, we all know now what 'fake news' is - it appears that, especially in the era of Trump, any and all history - complete with names, dates, times, research and personal interviews - is now a matter of 'opinion'. Or, to quote *Alice in Wonderland*, "A word means what I want it to mean; neither more nor less."

For those of us who still read books that do not need to be coloured in, a suggested tome on the actual Jewish-Nazi negotiations is Yehuda Bauer's *Jews for sale?*, subtitled *Nazi-Jewish negotiations 1933-1945*. Bauer is a professor of holocaust studies at Hebrew University. Although from Bauer's point of view the Zionists did what was best (a debatable point, as he acknowledges), the detail is staggering.

By the summer of 1933, for example, he writes: "... the American Jewish Congress ... had become the major Jewish body organising [a worldwide boycott of German goods], just when the Jewish Agency reached its agreement with the Nazi government called Ha'avara (transfer)." Transfer of what? People (Jewish people, of course) able to leave Germany with some of their wealth intact, as long as the boycott was called off.

The Ha'avara agreement was a bone of very heated contention amongst the various Jewish entities from its beginning, and eventually succumbed to the holocaust, when, as Bauer points out, the Germans realised that 'world Jewish domination' was not as dominant as they had originally thought.

Bauer eventually concludes: "Given the circumstances, [the Jewish negotiators] could not possibly succeed ... In any case, they should be judged not by their success or failure, but by the answer to a basic moral question: 'Did they try?' And try they did." Again, this in itself is debatable, but at least in this book every last detail of the 'trying' is analysed.

**Gaby Rubin**  
London

## EU elections

The May 23 European Union elections are an example of a special election when the normal rules don't apply. While I decided to vote Labour, you can't vote that in Northern Ireland and I would not support Labour in Scotland, since the party has done nothing to support Scotland's right to remain.

Earlier this week I went to Vauxhall to canvass with Labour members and Jeremy Corbyn, Emily Thornberry and Richard Burgon turned up. So I was able to talk to them about a ratification referendum. I emphasised the important distinction between ratification and repeat/remain (or multiple-choice). I emphasised the democratic case for the former and the need to oppose the latter, and I got a fair hearing.

As a republican I don't normally vote for her majesty's Labour Party, which is institutionally loyal to the constitutional monarchy and the British union. It has produced Labour governments responsible for the Iraq war, support for Nato and Trident, continuing Thatcher's neoliberal assault on the working class, etc. So this is no auto-Labourism, where you vote Labour at every election out of routine, or from 'proletarian' dogma.

Jonathan Freedland says: "If you don't vote Labour on Thursday you are not abandoning the party for ever; you are not even committing yourself to voting the same way at the next Westminster election. That will be a different contest. Each election is about the decision in front of you at the moment" (*The Guardian* May 18). I agree with this, but draw the opposite conclusion.

In this election Freedland wants Labour members to back any 'remain' party. The anti-Corbyn Labour MP, Margaret Hodge, urged something similar. Tory grandee Michael Heseltine is going to vote Liberal Democrat this time. So in the game of Brexit musical chairs I would urge working class people in England and Wales to vote Labour as the best means to finish off a Tory Brexit and oppose the Brexit Party.

**Steve Freeman**  
London

## Building unions

In the 2016 EU referendum 72% of Fenlanders voted 'leave'. So I can understand what it must be like for Dave Douglass living in a Brexit-supporting community like the north-east (Letters, May 16).

Last October I went to Blackpool for the weekend. Apart from the new bus routes and tramways, it is very run-down and depressed. I came away understanding why so many people in the north-west solidly voted 'leave'. I also understand the problems Dave has faced in trying to organise the many migrants who have come to live and work in the north-east of England since April 2004.

In my hometown of Wisbech, out of a population of 31,000 there are now 8,000 migrant workers. However, these migrant workers could be living in a parallel universe as far as any integration between the migrant community and the locals is concerned. Wisbech, March and District Trades Council has tried to promote union membership amongst the wider migrant community, but without much success.

The only place where the two communities come together is in the large food-processing factories which dominate the Fenland economy. Only two of these workplaces have union branches - the GMB in Nestle and Unite in Princes. Ironically, in these two factories it is the migrant workers who are more likely to be union members than the locals.

I think there are lessons we can learn from the German Social Democratic Party 120 years ago. In contrast to Britain, where the trade unions built the Labour Party, in Germany the SPD came first and then set about building the unions. In 2019, we cannot rely on the trade union bureaucracy to rebuild the movement. All the bureaucracy is interested in is 'servicing' their members and 'managing decline'. As Lenin famously said, "The trade unions must become schools for communism." Union branches in Britain today are shells. However, this means that the 'lever' of a small number of active Marxists can have an effect far greater than their numbers.

Just like the Trotskyists and communists in 1930s America, who built the trade unions and led the famous strikes in Minneapolis, Toledo and San Francisco, it will be Marxists who rebuild the trade union movement in Britain in 2019. Marxists in the Labour Party have a role to play here. Just like the SPD 120 years ago, Labour branches need to play an active role in rebuilding the unions in our local communities.

I look forward to the days in the not too distant future when the *Weekly Worker* is sold at all trade union conferences, and reports of the goings-on at these conferences become a regular feature.

**John Smithee**  
Cambridgeshire

# ACTION

## London Communist Forum

**Sunday May 26, 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 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917*. This meeting: chapter 3 (continued): "A model of revolutionary parliamentarism": the trial of the Bolshevik deputies'.

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 Anthropology Group

**Tuesday May 28, 6.30pm:** Series of talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Tavistock Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1.

This meeting: 'Dangerous laughter: egalitarianism and the Batek of peninsular Malaysia'. Speaker: Alice Rudge.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group:

<http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

## Youth Strike 4 Climate

**Friday May 24, 11am:** UK-wide (and global) student and school student demonstrations. Take direct action on the climate crisis and ecological catastrophe - system change, not climate change!

Organised by UK Student Climate Network:

[www.facebook.com/UKSCN/events](http://www.facebook.com/UKSCN/events).

## Labour, value and exploitation

**Tuesdays from May 28 to June 18, 7pm:** Series of four classes, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Beginners course in Marxist economics, presented by Sorcha Foster. Entrance £5 (£3).

Organised by Marx Memorial Library:

[www.facebook.com/events/331184307542225](http://www.facebook.com/events/331184307542225).

## Chelsea Manning documentary

**Tuesday May 28, 9pm:** Film screening of *XY Chelsea* followed by discussion with director Tim Travers Hawkins. Genesis Cinema, 93-95 Mile End Road, London E1. Tickets £6.50.

Organised by Fringe! Film Fest:

[www.facebook.com/events/2091338577640787](http://www.facebook.com/events/2091338577640787).

## Iran: 1953 roots of 1979

**Friday May 31, 5pm:** Lecture, Investcorp auditorium, St Antony's College, Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2. Speaker: Ervand Abrahamian, Professor Emeritus of History at the City University of New York and author of books about Iran and US-Iranian relations.

Organised by University of Oxford Middle East Centre:

[www.facebook.com/MiddleEastCentreOxford](http://www.facebook.com/MiddleEastCentreOxford).

## Stop the far right across Europe

**Saturday June 1, 1pm:** International forum, NEU, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Speakers from anti-fascist organisations across Europe debate why the far right is on the rise and how to stop it.

Organised by Stand Up To Racism:

[www.facebook.com/events/1448957158579543](http://www.facebook.com/events/1448957158579543).

## Trump and transition

**Saturday June 1, 12 noon to 5pm:** Seminar, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. 'Are we entering a new stage of the post-World War II crisis?' Speakers: Hillel Ticktin and Mick Cox.

Organised by *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*:

[www.critiquejournal.net](http://www.critiquejournal.net).

## Protest against Trump state visit

**Tuesday June 4, 11am:** Assemble Trafalgar Square for march through central London (details to follow).

Organised by Together Against Trump:

[www.facebook.com/events/447620012676970](http://www.facebook.com/events/447620012676970).

## Stop the London arms fair

Events organised by Campaign Against Arms Trade.

**Saturday June 15, 12.30pm:** Network organising meeting, St Hilda's East Community Centre, 8 Club Row, London E2. Planning the mobilisation against the global arms trade in London in September.

[www.facebook.com/events/432514417493720](http://www.facebook.com/events/432514417493720).

**Saturday June 22, 11am:** Training session, Bridge 5 Mill, 22a Beswick Street, Manchester M4. Skill up to stop the DSEI arms fair.

[www.facebook.com/events/591596081307911](http://www.facebook.com/events/591596081307911).

## Bargain books

**Saturday June 15, 11am:** Book sale, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by Marx Memorial Library:

[www.facebook.com/events/318713752161574](http://www.facebook.com/events/318713752161574).

## Justice for Grenfell

**Saturday June 15, 12 noon:** March. Assemble Portland Place, London W1. Solidarity with the victims of the fire two years on. Demand justice and action now.

Organised by Justice4Grenfell:

[www.facebook.com/events/581265065709901](http://www.facebook.com/events/581265065709901).

## Miners' strike 35th anniversary

**Saturday June 15, 1pm:** Rally, Orgreave Lane, Sheffield S13. Demand truth and justice for miners brutalised by police at Orgreave in 1984. Speakers include Matt Wrack (FBU) and Steve Hedley (RMT).

Organised by Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign:

[www.facebook.com/events/2016964828402260](http://www.facebook.com/events/2016964828402260).

## Definitions of socialism

**Thursday June 20, 6pm to 8pm:** Study session, Jack Jones House, 2 Churchill Way, Liverpool L3.

Organised by Merseyside Socialist Theory Study Group:

[study4socialism@outlook.com](mailto:study4socialism@outlook.com).

## CPGB wills

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

**ELECTIONS**

# Take a class stand

Peter Manson condemns leftwing traitors - both of the open kind and the silent kind

In the lead-up to the May 23 European Union elections, the focus of the mainstream media was primarily on the expected results of both the Tories and the Brexit Party - for related (but opposite!) reasons.

But what about the non-Labour left? Well, there was, of course, George Galloway, who called for a protest against the establishment's failure to deliver Brexit by voting for Nigel Farage's party. In the same treacherous spirit, support for Farage came from the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist). And clearly Farage himself was attempting to present a 'broad' image through running candidates such as Claire Fox and James Heartfield - both former members of the Revolutionary Communist Party. While, in fact, Fox and Heartfield lined up with the libertarian right decades ago, they are being used to provide a 'left' cover.

However, when it comes to the two largest non-Labour left groups - the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party in England and Wales - they were strangely unforthcoming about a clear, consistent and programmatically coherent call to vote Labour. On the one hand, they are for a British withdrawal from the EU - that would be a blow to the ruling class, wouldn't it? But, on the other hand, they could not possibly recommend a vote for Farage or - worse still - the even more rightwing UK Independence Party.

And, while both groups are formally for a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government, things were not so simple, it seems. Firstly, these were not UK elections, and would not result in any kind of 'progressive', let alone 'socialist', administration in Britain (or the EU, needless to say); and, in any case, we had voted to leave, so we should not even be holding EU elections. Secondly, the majority of Labour EU candidates were *against* Brexit - some were openly pro-'remain', while others were prepared to go along with the official party line of abiding by the 2016 referendum, while at the same time demanding a 'Brexit in name only' (continued membership of the single market and a customs union), together with a 'ratification referendum' (that would hopefully overturn the 2016 decision). So how could the SWP and SPEW unambiguously recommend a Labour vote?

For us things are rather more straightforward. Labour continues to be riven by an ongoing civil war, in which the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party is still aiming to remove Corbyn and return the party to the control of the Blairite, pro-capitalist right (very much second best would be to completely tame the current leader, but it is extremely doubtful he could ever be regarded as a safe pair of hands for capital in view of his past record).

It is vital that the right wing is defeated, so that the process of transforming Labour into a genuine party of the working class - a united front of a special kind - can begin in earnest. We cannot stand back and refuse to intervene in this internal battle. We must encourage individual workers to join Labour, and all trade unions to become affiliated, in order to help win it. And, of course, except in exceptional circumstances, we must campaign for Labour electoral

victories, so as to strengthen the leadership's hand and help it see off the attacks of the right.

## No to racism

However, for the SWP there is a rather different priority: to build its own popular front, Stand Up To Racism, from which it hopes to recruit to itself. So, with this in mind, the pre-election period saw it focusing on demonstrations and pickets against Ukip and, in particular, Tommy Robinson, who was standing as an independent in the North West constituency.

So, for example, the SWP's internal *Party Notes* (May 20) led (as it had in previous weeks) with the need to organise against the candidates of the racist right. Its main headline read: "Stop fascist Tommy Robinson and the far right in the Euro elections". It reported how the "day of action" it had organised in Manchester "finished with a SUTR rally, where over 100 people packed in to hear speakers". The SWP was proud to announce that these included several Labour figures, including mayor of Manchester Andy Burnham, as well as Wendy Olsen of the Green Party.

On Robinson, it stated:

The danger is that a low turnout on Thursday could help boost his chance of winning. We have to go all out to stop Tommy Robinson. Manchester SUTR has a programme of action up until Thursday evening and have called a protest at the vote count on Sunday.

This poses several questions. First, and most important, *how* was Tommy Robinson to be defeated and prevented from winning one of the eight seats in the constituency? Under the proportional representation voting system, his vote would need to be well under 10% to ensure he was not elected. So obviously it did not matter who electors voted *for* - anyone but Robinson, it seemed, including the Greens' Wendy Olsen, the Liberal Democrats, Tories, Brexit Party ...

Was keeping Robinson out of the EU parliament really the priority for the working class then? Whatever happened to building a working class alternative to capitalism? Oh I forgot - campaigning around SUTR helps recruit to the SWP, doesn't it? And what is the purpose of the "protest at the vote count on Sunday"? Demand that votes for Robinson be annulled?

It was the same story with *Socialist Worker*. Its front-page headline in the pre-election issue read: "Hit back at the racists" (May 21). The online version was slightly different and its headline was: "As Tories face wipeout, make the most of their Euro election disaster". But both versions end: "We need to urgently fight to force May and the Tories out - and to stop the right from gaining from their crisis."

Another article was headlined: "Anti-racists take action against Robinson in North West". It declared: "Robinson is a Nazi whose aim remains to build a violent street movement. He must be stopped." This article reported how people had been encouraged by SUTR to "vote against Robinson" - without, of course, specifying who to vote *for*.

However, the same edition of *Socialist Worker* carried another article, penned by Alex Callinicos and headed 'Ruling class split is to Farage's benefit', which looked at things from a different angle. It examined the Tory Party crisis and



**SPEW: for Corbyn's policies, but - shush - don't vote for them**

ended by discussing the likelihood of a Boris Johnson premiership:

This will probably mean a no-deal Brexit. It will in the short term also mean a rightwing Tory government aligning itself as closely as possible to Donald Trump. Also in the short term, the only force standing in the way of this prospect electorally is Labour under Corbyn. Therefore what we need to see on Thursday is the biggest possible Labour vote.

Better late than never! Or did this article represent a last-minute change of line?

## Not lifting a finger

Whether that was the case or not, I am afraid to say that there was no such shift within SPEW. Just like the SWP before the appearance of Callinicos's article, SPEW made no voting recommendation for the EU elections. For example, the May 1 issue of *The Socialist* carried an article headed 'EU elections: countering Farage's rightwing Brexit Party'. Well, at least it was not *only* Robinson and Ukip that had to be opposed - in fact the article reported how SPEW comrades had been part of a SUTR protest outside a Brexit Party rally in Nottingham last month.

The article ended:

We want to see a Jeremy Corbyn-led government with socialist policies negotiating a pro-worker EU exit in the interests of the 99%. For a government which supports workers' struggles against the bosses in Britain, Europe and across the world. For unity of workers across Europe - no to racism - don't let the bosses divide us. General election now!

But, as I have said, it carried no voting recommendation - despite SPEW's apparent illusions in the nature of a Corbyn government if one were elected prior to the defeat of the right. This non-recommendation position, is, it needs to be understood, no oversight. SPEW made a definite decision to take a neutral stand ... but it also made a decision not to tell readers of *The Socialist*. They were supposed to guess, infer or find out from private conversations. How SPEW squares this line with its call for a Corbyn-

led socialist government or the call for Labour to allow SPEW to affiliate goes entirely unexplained.

The comrades correctly state:

... unfortunately, months upon months of concessions to the Blairites, including allowing Blairite remainers like Keir Starmer to take centre-stage on Brexit, has muted Corbyn's more radical voice and allowed confusion over Labour's Brexit position.

In fact its article in *The Socialist*, published on the very eve of the elections - 'European elections expose deepening political crisis: workers need a party of our own' (May 22) - was silent on the question. It states:

What is needed is not just ousting the Tories, but to fight for a real working class party. Such a party would mean not just passive voting and expressions of anger, but active participation of working class people in building their own party ... A mass movement and a working class party that can implement socialist policies are essential.

So what about Labour? Is there no connection to its ongoing internal battle and the fight for such a party? We are not told.

## Boycott?

Unlike the SWP and SPEW, the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain *did* make a clear voting recommendation: it called for a "people's boycott" of the EU elections.

The reasoning for this was explained in an article written by CPB general secretary Robert Griffiths, entitled 'Neither Farage nor Brussels' (*Morning Star* May 18-19). The introduction to this article read: "All votes cast in the EU election endorse the existence of the EU parliament - but voting for the Brexit Party is no alternative, argues Robert Griffiths."

Let us leave aside the contradictory logic of the two halves of that sentence and proceed to what comrade Griffiths argues. He states: "... it is not a question of opposing participation in EU elections in principle, even though the Brussels-Strasbourg parliament has been designed to be one of the feeblest directly elected bodies on the planet." He goes on:

"After all, Britain's communists have long participated in elections to the Westminster parliament, despite our fundamental opposition to the British state and its flawed institutions":

Rather, we are urging a boycott because the poll in Britain on May 23 is illegitimate. It is an insult to all those who participated in the June 2016 referendum in good faith, whether they voted to leave the EU or remain ... Only a 'people's boycott' next Thursday will uphold the principle that the people have already decided to leave the EU and their decision must be implemented.

Apparently there is a difference between casting a vote in elections to Britain's "flawed institutions" (where the elections are not "illegitimate") and in elections to a body of which the UK remains a member, despite the 2016 referendum (which, of course, did not specify any departure date).

Griffiths quickly rejects voting for rightwing Brexiteers, such as the Brexit Party and Ukip, and adds: "Which leaves what would normally be the preferred option in most constituencies in other elections: namely, a vote for Labour."

So why, on this occasion, must that option be rejected? Well, "most Labour candidates have made clear their support for remaining in the EU." Yes, but the same applies to Labour candidates for the recent local elections, when the CPB *was* for a Labour vote.

A *Star* editorial a few days earlier was entitled: 'Labour must recapture the anger of working class "leave" voters' (May 15). It claimed that in relation to Brexit Jeremy Corbyn was "playing a poor hand with great skill"! Nevertheless it declined to help him out by calling for a Labour vote. The editorial ended:

The Labour Party's big losses are among people where the 'leave' vote signified working class anger. This is not a healthy situation. Labour needs to recapture its insurgent spirit and find a shared language with the millions of people it needs if it is to form a government. These are among the millions who seem unprepared to vote for its candidates in next week's election.

But that editorial did not say whether those "millions" were right or wrong - and there was no mention of a "people's boycott". It seems that, like SPEW, the CPB is sometimes just a little too embarrassed to keep spelling out its position.

You might ask, what is the difference between the CPB's position of a "people's boycott" in 2019 and our own call for an "active boycott" of the 2016 EU referendum? The answer is simple: in principle we oppose referendums, we despised the motivation behind David Cameron's 2016 referendum gamble, we despised *both* the options on offer in 2016 - either the status quo of an EU of capital and the bureaucrats, or an 'independent' United Kingdom under a constitutional monarchy.

But May 23 is entirely different. We say, take a class stand. Vote Labour despite the rotten candidates. Vote Labour as part of the civil war to defeat the right ●

peter.manson@weeklyworker.co.uk

**TORIES**

# After Theresa has gone

If Boris Johnson becomes Tory leader, a general election will soon follow. If he wins that election, Brexit and a joined-at-the-hip alliance with Donald Trump is on the cards. **Eddie Ford** reports on latest developments and future possibilities

**M**ore than 20 MPs - and counting - have declared an interest in standing in the Tory leadership contest. Indeed, there are so many possible candidates that the 1922 Committee executive is considering changing the rules to allow *four* candidates selected by Conservative MPs to go on the final ballot paper that goes out to party members - possibly in a single transferable vote contest.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, that would mean a huge boost for Boris Johnson's chances, who is the runaway favourite among the rank and file, but might struggle to get the backing of enough MPs if the candidates to go before the membership are whittled down to only two, as stipulated in the current rules.

As for exactly when the contest formally begins, it could be very soon. Some commentators have dubbed it a "Tory *Game of thrones*" - though arguably a second-rate one on a limited budget. As we all know, the prime minister said she would go "after" her deal with the European Union has been approved by parliament - a prime example of creative ambiguity, since the chances of that happening are close to zero. Andrew Bridgen MP, the obnoxious ultra-Brexiteer, has said that he expects Theresa May to stand down before the emergency national convention of the party, pencilled in for June 15, in that way avoiding the humiliation of a vote of no confidence. A new leader could be installed within six weeks of her resignation.

All this is happening, of course, against the backdrop of May's final throw of the dice - in the week beginning June 3 she will bring back her amended EU withdrawal agreement to parliament for the fourth and *definitely* last time (assuming the speaker, John Bercow, allows it). However, on this occasion, the debate and vote will be on the actual *legislation* - the Withdrawal Agreement Bill - rather than the previous, largely symbolic "meaningful votes".<sup>2</sup> In the extremely unlikely event that the WAB survives a second reading, MPs can then pile in with their amendments, such as a 'confirmatory ballot', Common Market 2.0, permanent customs union, etc. This is precisely why some steadfast Labour 'remainers' like Stephen Kinnock MP worry that if the WAB gets shot down in flames on the second reading, there is no other readily available mechanism to prevent the default option of no deal. In which case, taking into account the summer recess for parliament - plus the time-consuming Tory leadership battle - the October 31 deadline set by the EU is not far away at all.

Anyway, May has said that her new plan would be "big" and "bold" - though you can understand why it has been kept under wraps for so long. It will have to contain the toxic finer details on the negotiated financial settlement of £39 billion or more, and on restoring parts of the European Communities Act for the transition period. This would preserve the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, keep its citizens' rights provisions in UK law and create an "independent monitoring authority" to ensure the UK complies, and so on. None of which will be music to the



**He is the one the others have to beat**

ears of Brexiteers.

## Despair

But, giving us a taste of what is to come, on May 21 the prime minister delivered a relatively lengthy speech outlining her 10-point "new deal" ... and, if anything, made things even worse. Desperately trying to woo remainers, she promised that if MPs supported the deal at its second reading she would offer them a vote on a second referendum - and be bound by the result. MPs would also be given the opportunity, she said, to vote on various alternative customs proposals. For example, they would get to choose between the much derided Facilitated Customs Agreement previously proposed by the government (and now back from the dead) and the compromise offer made to Labour during the ill-fated six weeks of talks: ie, a *temporary* customs union on goods only.

Additionally, May made a series of other pledges, including a separate bill to guarantee workers' rights do not fall behind those in the EU and a guarantee that there will be "no change in the level of environmental protection when we leave the EU". Furthermore, she formally accepted the proposals made earlier by several Labour backbenchers that the Commons "will approve the UK's objectives for the negotiations on our future relationship with the EU" and "will approve the treaties governing that relationship before the government signs them" - which, we were told, would be "set out in law". When it comes to the dreaded Irish question - the bane of the Conservative Party - she admitted that it is "not possible" to replace the backstop insisted upon by the EU. But she did say that she intended to "place the government under a legal obligation" to finalise "alternative arrangements" by December 2020, thus in theory avoiding any need for

the backstop to come into force. No, I don't believe it either.

Needless to say, almost everyone hated May's "new deal", which was neither big, bold nor new - in reality, not one dot or comma of the withdrawal agreement has changed: merely old wine in new bottles. Jeremy Corbyn immediately declared that he will not back a "repackaged version" of the same deal voted on before, especially as it is abundantly clear that this "disintegrating" government will be unable to deliver on any commitments and promises it makes. Prime minister Johnson or Raab will just tear it up anyway, so why would Labour sign up to a piece of meaningless nonsense?

The response in Brussels, as if you could not guess, was one of "despair" at the emptiness of Theresa May's "new" proposals - especially the suggestion that the government's policy was to seek a customs arrangement that delivers the same benefits as today, along with the renewed ability to make independent trade deals - something comprehensively rejected last year by the EU. You cannot leave the club and expect to retain the same benefits and privileges. Entirely dismissing May's new-old plan, a former European commission official, Mujtaba Rahman, said Brussels was no longer interested in negotiating with a zombie prime minister of a zombie government.

Naturally, Tory backbenchers and Brexiteers reacted to the "new deal" with a sense of incredulity, despondency, anger, rage and betrayal - the Democratic Unionist Party denouncing it as a hopeless "hodge-podge". With the situation getting worse for the prime minister by the minute, the 34 Tory MPs who have already opposed May's deal on three separate occasions show absolutely no sign of shifting their position -

quite the opposite. In fact, those who *did* vote for her deal at the third time of asking - scared of losing Brexit altogether - are now reverting to their original opposition. And MPs who previously supported May's deal all along are now expressing doubts. For instance, former minister Andrew Percy of the pro-government Brexit Delivery Group told the BBC that he found the prospect of offering a second referendum "really worrying" and the ultra-loyalist Stephen Crabb, another former minister, has gone on record to say he would "struggle" to support this bill.

Small wonder that the prospect has been raised of the prime minister pulling the vote in the face of such odds, as she has done before. Michael Gove struggled to confirm on the BBC's *Today* programme that she will bring forward the WAB, as planned - he said it was important to "reflect" on "all the options in front of us". Like summarily removing her as leader?

More directly, Nigel Evans - member of the 1922 Committee executive - said Theresa May should recognise it was "game over" and would press once again for rule changes to allow another vote of no confidence before the state of grace expires in December. Or go now and save the bother. In the same vein, Jacob Rees-Mogg of the pro-Brexit European Research Group hoped the prime minister would look at the lack of support for the WAB and finally recognise that she "does not command the confidence" of the Commons.

## Drubbing

Meanwhile, the Tories will get the drubbing of a lifetime in this week's European elections - the election that should never have happened and is viewed by many - but not by Labour nor the CPGB - as a second referendum on Brexit. Ironically perhaps, turnout will surely be higher than usual. The

result will diminish her authority even more, if that is possible.

Boris Johnson was predictably the first out of the starting gates to become the new Tory leader - he is now the person to beat. Johnson has been assiduously courting Tory MPs over this recent period, meeting 200 of them in 15-minute individual sessions at his plush offices at Portcullis House - which must be rather exhausting, or boring, depending on which way you look at it. In a bid to widen his appeal and play up his 'liberal credentials', Johnson endorsed the mini-manifesto released at the beginning of the week by the One Nation group of 60 MPs unofficially led by Amber Rudd. This has fuelled fresh speculation about her acting as the kingmaker by backing a first-choice candidate and then pivoting to back Johnson in the last round if he were to be in a run-off with either Dominic Raab or Esther McVey - the latter this week launching her rival 'anti-one nation' group, Blue Collar Conservatism, promising to slash overseas aid.

What has Boris Johnson got to convince MPs to select him as one of the candidates on the final ballot paper? The answer is simple, of course. Johnson can plausibly claim that he can save their jobs, beat Jeremy Corbyn, see off the Brexit Party and even secure a substantial majority for the Tories in the House of Commons. Under those conditions, the Tories reinvigorated under a new leader, you can imagine Brexit actually happening - which has been impossible up to now, given that parliament has an inbuilt 'remain' majority and big business is hostile to a Brexit of any sort. After all, we have an American president who appears to be enthusiastic about Brexit and regards Nigel Farage as his favourite British politician - you can almost bet money that Boris Johnson will be his second favourite.

But, despite Johnson's attempts to court centrist and liberal Tory MPs, there is a highly determined 'Anyone but Boris' group of between 80 and 100 who will try to prevent him from seizing the keys to No10 by any means possible - mainly involving a coordinated set of tactical voting for rival candidates.<sup>3</sup> This substantial slate would leave Johnson needing the *majority* of the remaining 200 Tory MPs to vote for him if he is not to be knocked out early in the fight - a tall order. Aware of the plotting, legal advice has been drawn up by close allies of the former foreign secretary, who claim that action to thwart him would be in breach of the Tories' leadership contest rules. MPs have no right to prevent a candidate from getting onto the deciding ballot if he or she has "significant support" from the party membership.

Johnson supporters are confident they would win if it came to a court battle - perhaps explaining the *real* reason why the 1922 Committee is now thinking about changing the rules on leadership contests ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. www.politichome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/boris-johnson/news/104030/excl-boost-boris-johnson-tory.
2. www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-brexit-withdrawal-agreement-bill
3. www.thesun.co.uk/news/9117741/legal-battle-anyone-but-borisjohnson/

**ISO**

# Reclaiming democratic centralism

One of the major issues raised by the Renewal Faction of America's now liquidated ISO was the managerial regime that underpins the Cliffite tradition internationally. But there is *bureaucratic* centralism and *democratic* centralism. **Mike Macnair** continues his investigation

**F**our weeks ago, writing in this paper on the role of 'democratic centralism' (SWP version) in the collapse of the US International Socialist Organization, I said that "'democratic centralism' is a phrase, like the words 'communism' and 'socialism', which needs to be rescued from both misuse and obloquy".<sup>1</sup>

That article was directed to helping to rescue the phrase from 'misuse'; but, as I indicated there, this 'misuse' goes all the way back to decisions taken in the Russian Communist Party and Comintern in 1919-22, which were understandable in the (very difficult) circumstances of the time, but turn out in hindsight to have been mistaken - and now serve merely as ideology for 'left' versions of managerialism. To reclaim 'democratic centralism' therefore requires us to go back to its earlier history, and also to think a little bit more generally about what it means.

## Arrival

Paul LeBlanc identified in 1990 that the phrase 'democratic centralism' was adopted by both Mensheviks (first) and Bolsheviks (later) in November-December 1905, and then by the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party's unification conference in April 1906.<sup>2</sup> The resolutions in question are available in translation in the collection edited by Ralph Carter Elwood,<sup>3</sup> but we need them here for clarity as to what they actually say:

*Mensheviks, November 20 1905:*

The RSDRP must be organised according to the principle of democratic centralism.

All party members take part in the election of party institutions.

All party institutions are elected for a [specified] period, are subject to recall and obligated to account for their actions both periodically and at any time upon demand of the organisation which elected them.

Decisions of the guiding collectives are binding on the members of those organisations of which the collective is the organ. Actions affecting the organisation as a whole (ie, congresses, reorganisations) must be decided upon by all of the members of the organisation. Decisions of lower-level organisations are not to be implemented if they contradict decisions of higher organisations. The foundation of the organisation is the party union, whether unified for a given locality or subdivided into *raion* and sub-*raion* unions ...

*Bolsheviks, December 12 1905:*

Recognising as indisputable the principle of democratic centralism, the conference considers the broad implementation of the elective principle necessary; and, while granting elected centres full powers in matters of ideological and practical leadership, they are at the same time subject to recall, their actions are given broad publicity, and they are to be strictly accountable for these activities ...

*Appeal of the unified central committee, January 1906:*

... In the organisational area, the transition from the tight framework of conspiratorial institutions to more or less open elective organisations has unified the party on the principle of democratic centralism ...

RSDRP Unification Congress,



**Democratic centralism needs to be rescued from such obscenities**

*organisational rules, April 25 1906:*

2. All party organisations are built on the principles of democratic centralism.

3. All party organisations are autonomous with respect to their internal activities. Every approved party organisation has the right to issue party literature in its own name.

4. New party organisations are approved by *oblast* conferences or by two neighbouring organisations. The central committee exercises supervisory power over such approvals ...

7. The central committee and the editorial board of the central organ are elected at the [party] congress. The central committee represents the party in relations with other parties; it organises various party institutions and guides their activities; it organises and conducts undertakings of significance for the party as a whole; it allocates party personnel and funds, and has charge of the central party treasury; it settles conflicts between and within various party institutions and it generally coordinates all the activity of the party ...

8. The congress is the supreme organ of the party ...

A particular aspect of the organisational model is shown by this Unification Congress's 'Draft conditions for the unification of the Bund with the RSDRP':

1. The Bund enters the RSDRP as the Social Democratic organisation of the Jewish proletariat; its activities are not limited to any particular region ...

3. All decrees of party congresses are binding on the Bund.

4. Within the limits of the general decrees of RSDRP congresses and of the general decrees of the RSDRP, the Bund retains its independence in matters of agitation, organisation and propaganda ...

6. All local organisations in the RSDRP form a single guiding

city committee of the RSDRP on the basis of general elections, regardless of the nationality of the party members.

*Note:* This committee resolves all questions common to the proletariat of the particular city by simple majority vote ...

Lars T Lih's 2013 article, 'Fortunes of a formula', confirms the judgment of Carter Elwood and LeBlanc that the formula first appeared in the November 1905 Menshevik resolution, rather than having prior Russian antecedents. He adds that Lenin only used the tag in 1906-07 (with the accent on "democratic") and in 1920-21 (with the accent on "centralism"); and he confirms both species of usage from Vladimir Nevsky's 1925 *History of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*.<sup>4</sup>

Lih recognises in his article two intermediate usages, one of which I had identified, and which he immediately discards as irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> This is in Lenin's 1913 polemic on the national question:

[W]hile, and insofar as, different nations constitute a single state, Marxists will never, under any circumstances, advocate either the federal principle or decentralisation. The great centralised state is a tremendous historical step forward from medieval disunity to the future socialist unity of the whole world, and only via such a state (inseparably connected with capitalism) can there be any road to socialism.

It would, however, be inexcusable to forget that in advocating centralism we advocate exclusively democratic centralism. On this point all the philistines in general, and the nationalist philistines in particular ..., have so confused the issue that we are obliged again and again to spend time clarifying it.

Far from precluding local self-government, with autonomy for regions having special economic and social conditions,

a distinct national composition of the population, and so forth, democratic centralism necessarily demands both ...<sup>6</sup>

As will appear below, I am not persuaded that this argument about 'democratic centralism' in the state is, in fact, unrelated to 'democratic centralism' in the party.

The second intermediate usage Lih cites is in a 1915 or 1916 friendly critique in a letter, written in English, to the secretary of the Socialist Propaganda League of America:

We defend always in our press the democracy in the party. But we never speak against the centralisation of the party. We are for the democratic centralism. We say that the centralisation of the German labour movement is not a feeble, but a strong and good, feature of it. The vice of the present Social Democratic Party of Germany consists not in the centralisation, but in the preponderance of the opportunists, which should be excluded from the party especially now, after their treacherous conduct in the war. If in any given crisis the small group (for instance, our central committee is a small group) can act for directing the mighty mass in a revolutionary direction, it would be very good. And in all crises the masses cannot act immediately; the masses want to be helped by the small groups of the central institutions of the parties. Our central committee quite at the beginning of this war, in September 1914, has directed the masses not to accept the lie about 'the war of defence' and to break off with the opportunists and the 'would-be-socialist jingoes' (we call so the 'socialists' who are *now* in favour of the war of defence). We think that this centralistic measure of our central committee was useful and necessary.<sup>7</sup>

In the absence of the text of the leaflet Lenin responds to, it is not

completely clear what this is directed against. The leader of the SPLA's *The Internationalist* No1 (January 1917) asserts: "We want to reorganise [the Socialist Party of America] *from the bottom up*" (emphasis in original);<sup>8</sup> this perhaps 'tones down' an earlier, more explicit anti-centralism?

The letter to the SPLA shows that the 'centralism' side of the formula is already doing operative work in Lenin's writing before the traumas of 1918-21. It should also be clear from both texts, as well as from the 1905-06 resolutions, that the idea is concerned with relations between the centre and the localities. This will be equally visible in the German antecedents, to which Lenin refers in that letter.

Lih's work, however, certainly confirms LeBlanc's view that the 'democratic centralism' formula in the Russian party was an *innovation* of 1905 - and one shared by both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. Given that it was an innovation, its uncontroversial character ("recognising as *indisputable* the principle of democratic centralism", say the Bolsheviks) means that it pretty much *must* have come from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which was the fount of orthodoxy and the model to which the Russian Marxists aspired.<sup>9</sup>

## Lassallean?

LeBlanc suggests that the formula is originally Lassallean. He cites Leonard Schapiro, who included the attribution in the 1970 second edition of his *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. Schapiro in turn cites to Leo Valiani.<sup>10</sup> Valiani attributes the usage to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer, speaking in 1868 to the Berlin congress which refounded the Lassallean Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein (ADAV) as the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterschaftsverein, after the dissolution of the original organisation by the Prussian police.<sup>11</sup>

This is, I think, something of a leap too far. Valiani, an Atlanticist writing in 1968, had an axe to grind, and this axe was the idea that Marx and Engels would have repudiated

the 'democratic centralism' formula as anti-democratic. This is perfectly possible as of 1868; but the argument asks us to leap from 1868 to 1905, *presuming continuance* of the ideas, across a series of events which are likely to have erased any positive memory of Schweitzer's version.

First is the splits in the ADAV in the late 1860s/early 1870s - over issues of democracy - and the 1871 resignation of Schweitzer as ADAV president after he lost his Reichstag seat.<sup>12</sup> Second is the 1875 Gotha unification, which, while making *theoretical* concessions to the Lassalleans, adopted the *organisational* model of the 'Eisenachers' (Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel and their supporters).<sup>13</sup> Third is the subsequent illegalisation of the unified organisation under the Anti-Socialist Laws (1878-90), which prohibited everything but constituency organisation and the parliamentary *Fraktion*, so that the party paper *Sozialdemokrat* had to operate from abroad and be smuggled in.<sup>14</sup>

Fourth - and this seems to have been most decisive in the claimed centralisation of the SPD Lenin referred to in 1915 - is the debates in the SPD about organisation in the early 1900s, in the context of 'revisionism', coalition governments, imperialism and whether to vote for naval budgets (considered further below).

Lassalle was remembered in the late 19th and early 20th century SPD as a dead hero of the workers' movement.<sup>15</sup> Schweitzer was not.<sup>16</sup>

## German

The history of the German workers' movement through the 1860s to 1890s, as well as the debates of the 1900s, were relevant to the origins of the organisational practices which were tagged as 'democratic centralism' in 1905 and after.

I have not so far found a 'smoking gun', in which the tag is used, either in the *Neue Zeit* theoretical magazine (which the Russians certainly read) in 1904-05, or in the discussions of party organisation in the *Protokolle* (stenographic publications) of the SPD *Parteitage* (party conferences) for 1904, 1905 or (looking further back to earlier 'party organisation' discussions) 1900 or 1890, when the party emerged from illegality.<sup>17</sup> I have not (yet) found any use of the exact phrase, but there is a lot of closely relevant material.

We must, in fact, begin with the Lassalleans and the Eisenachers - but *not* with the Lassalleans as 'democratic centralists'. Lassalle himself was certainly an advocate of *centralism*, but not of *democratic centralism*. He argued for the radical unification of the wills of the members of the Verein - in the single will of its president, himself. He polemised against Julius Vahlteich (1839-1915), who left the ADAV for the First International and later the 'Eisenacher' Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP), on the ground that Vahlteich (in objecting to Lassalle's absolute power) was a 'decentraliser'.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the Lassalleans introduced an element of workers' organisation, which the Eisenachers copied from them. This was the creation of a national, *individual-membership* political party. The earlier efforts of Wilhelm Liebknecht, before the 1869 formation of the SDAP, involved entry in a left-liberal formation in Saxony, which had the usual characteristic of most political parties at the time - inherited from the English Whigs and Tories, and continuing in the modern US Democrats and Republicans - that it was a loose coalition of political clubs. Both the success of the ADAV, which at first far outstripped Liebknecht's projects, and the participation of ex-Lassalleans in the formation of the SDAP meant the adoption of an

individual-membership model.

But the SDAP unambiguously rejected the model of being run by a directly elected president with unlimited powers. Instead, it was run by an elected *committee*. It was also an organisation composed of local branches, and so on, with their own extensive powers, especially the power to publish their own press - a noteworthy feature, also found in the Russian documents (quoted above).

In 1875 the SDAP and the ADAV fused at Gotha to form the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SAP). As I have already indicated, though there were considerable substantive concessions to the ADAV in the Gotha programme, which Marx famously (and Engels less famously) sharply criticised, on the organisational front the Eisenachers' conceptions were largely accepted. The snowball effect - unification of small groups can allow them to have a massively increased impact - meant that the SAP grew very rapidly after 1875.

In 1878, the German government responded to this growth with the Anti-Socialist Law, intended to suppress the SAP. The laws did not, however, prevent SAP supporters standing for election to the Reichstag; and the party was able to operate *sub rosa* through a combination of the use of the Reichstag *Fraktion* as a leadership and of their interventions as privileged speech and hence publishable, with publishing abroad, with '*vertrauensmänner*' (trusted agents) linking local groups to the exile publishing network. The law therefore after the first few years did not prevent continued growth of the party's electoral support.

In 1890, the government gave up and the Anti-Socialist Laws were allowed to lapse. The party was now reorganised as the SPD. Ignaz Auer (1846-1907) gave the leadership's introduction to the Halle *Parteitag*'s discussion on organisation. The model recommended was basically that of the SAP - though the *vertrauensmänner* were retained from the period of illegality. The leading committee, the *Vorstand*, of the mass SDP was a small committee: it rose from five members in 1890 to eight after 1905. The small size reflected the fact that fundamental decisions went to the annual *Parteitag*, and many tactical decisions were left to the local or sectoral organisations.

Auer insisted (against the old Lassalle-Schweitzer idea) that a socialist party must necessarily be democratic. He emphasised strongly the rights of freedom of criticism. Though it was proposed to adopt the Berlin *Vorwärts* as the party's paper, he emphasised (against suspicions that this is unduly centralising) the rights of the localities to publish papers, and the fact that they did so in practice, so that, even if the *Vorstand* wanted to create a centralist tyranny, it could not.

## 1904-05

The SPD debated organisation in 1904 (electing a commission to consider various issues) and again in 1905. There were three aspects to the context. The first was that legislation which had prohibited city or province organisation, allowing only constituency organisation, had been lifted. The party thus needed to think about city committees, and so on.

In this context, Georg von Vollmar (1850-1922) gave the report of the organisation commission in 1905. He stressed centralisation (that is, increased organisation beyond the constituency level), but also the accountability of the elected committees, and that what was being proposed was not 'mechanical' centralisation.<sup>19</sup>

The other two were more contentious. Max Schippel was forced to resign his parliamentary seat on account of his voting with the

government in support of the naval budget. The claim that the MP's mandate from the constituency's electors should take priority over party discipline figured from the right in the arguments round the Schippel case.<sup>20</sup> It is the identical issue argued repeatedly by the Labour right in this country. When the claim came up again in 1903-04, in relation to the 'Göhre case', Karl Kautsky wrote an article for the *Neue Zeit* - 'Wahlkreis und Partei' ('Constituency and party') - which was published in this paper in November 2015.<sup>21</sup> The arguments are again for centralisation - this time for the claims of the party as a whole against the alleged mandate of the individual MP.

Thirdly, the SDP leadership reorganised the editorial board of the party daily *Vorwärts*, published in Berlin, which had been supporting the 'revisionist' right wing of the party. This produced cries of outrage from the right at this 'dictatorial' behaviour, and allegations that the Berlin local organisations should control the paper.<sup>22</sup>

All these debates were addressed to the same issues - democratic functioning, majority rule and its relation to localism - which the tag 'democratic centralism' addressed. We know that at least the Kautsky article we published in 2015 had influence in the Russian party's discussion of organisation: Lenin quoted it in his 1904 pamphlet *One step forward, two steps back*.<sup>23</sup>

## Democratic centralisation

Several of the speakers at the SPD *Parteitage* spoke about the need for centralisation. Several of them also spoke, in various ways, about the need for the party to be, or to remain, democratic, open to criticism, preserving local initiative, and so on. As I have said, I have not found an actual use of the tag 'democratic centralism'. But it seems clear enough that what the Russians mean by this tag is precisely: the adoption of the values which are reflected in this tension in the SPD's organisation discussions between 'centralisation' to create a more effective striking force and the ability to act together *as a party*, and 'democracy', or 'criticism', or local initiatives.

We can then formulate from this history roughly what is meant by 'democratic centralism'. It is an individual-membership party, as opposed to the loose, federative formations which came before the ADAV. Hence the fact that in the 1906 proposals for the *Bund*, the latter is given the right to organise the work among Jewish workers - but no veto power. This is not an 'intersectional' approach.

On the other hand, it rejects the leader-worship ("labour monarchism", Marx and Engels and their co-thinkers called it) of Lassalle and Schweitzer - which has been resurrected by the left since the cult of the personality of the dead Lenin fed into personality cults of Stalin and his successors (and, since then, so many petty Trotskyist and Maoist *lider maximo* types).

Thirdly, it is an organisation which has a central organising body, a leadership which can at need speak for the party as a whole - and can also break with, for example, party MPs who decide to support the capitalist parties' arms budgets. This leadership is obliged to report and be accountable to the membership. The SPD *Parteitage Protokolle* show, among other things, the sheer level of detail required in the reports of the *Vorstand* and of the Reichstag *Fraktion*.

The leadership has broad powers - but the local, regional and sectoral organisations can also publish in their own names. This is democratic centralism, as opposed to federalism: the centre *can*, at need, overthrow the localities - but there are strong 'constitutional conventions' (to use

an English constitutional phrase) preventing it from doing so except in really serious cases. In reality, of course, the Schippel case - discussed above - went to the *Parteitag*.

This model can be adapted to the city, district, region; the principles of means of common decision-making, while keeping local initiative, are the same at all levels. It is a model for *political action*. The underlying principles are not just applicable to parties, but can be used, with appropriate variations, for all sorts of political activity. It is a model which *can* apply to states - Lenin uses it in 1913 in connection with the national question: a democratic centralist state will involve extensive liberty to the localities, which *can* be used to deal with 'nationality questions' without either splits (self-determination) or the 'Austrian model' of nationality-corporations.

What it is not, is a model for an army command structure, or for a *clandestine* party.

In the first article in this series I suggested that the '1921 model' had become merely an ideology for managerialism. In this article I have looked at the history and - I would argue - original meaning of the 'democratic centralism' tag. In the third article, yet to come, I will suggest that the supposed alternatives to this basic 'democratic centralism' idea are no better - and often worse ●

mike.macnair@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. 'Full-timers and "cadre"' *Weekly Worker* April 25 2019.
2. P LeBlanc *Lenin and the revolutionary party* New Jersey 1990, pp128-29.
3. R Carter Elwood *Resolutions and decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1898-1917* Toronto 1974; also quoted by LeBlanc (note 2).
4. LT Lih, 'Fortunes of a formula' *Weekly Worker* April 11 2013. LeBlanc adds more quotations on the 'democratic side' in 1906 (pp130-32).
5. "'Democratic centralism' can also be applied to the state, but this is an entirely different topic" (*ibid*).
6. VI Lenin, 'Critical remarks on the national question', section 6: 'Centralisation and autonomy': [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/6.htm#v20pp72-045](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/crnq/6.htm#v20pp72-045).
7. [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/nov/09.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/nov/09.htm), incompletely quoted in Lih (above). The dating issue is identified as a problem by Tim Davenport in an annotation on Marxists Internet Archive.
8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist\\_Propaganda\\_League\\_of\\_America#/media/File:Internationalist-1917.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Propaganda_League_of_America#/media/File:Internationalist-1917.jpg).
9. LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Leiden 2006, part 1, has the fullest treatment of Russian 'Erfurtianism'.
10. As I have observed before, Peter Nettl, the biographer of Luxemburg (and polemicist against the SPD's and colonial nationalist parties' 'attentism' and refusal to join coalition governments) served in British intelligence at the end of World War II ('The study of history and the left's decline' *Weekly Worker* June 1 2011). In a letter last week I remarked that Carl Schorske, another of the cold war historians of the
11. L Valiani, 'La storia della socialdemocrazia tedesca (1863-1914)' (1968) Rivista storica italiana Vol 80, section 1, p38. He gives an Italian translation - "abbiamo una rigida centralizzazione democratica" - and cites Hermann Peter ('Der Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiter Congress zu Berlin', Berlin 1868), without a direct German quotation or page reference. Googling and the use of online library catalogues does not produce the work cited; it seems likely, if genuine, to be an erroneous citation for a report of the congress in the ADAV's *Sozialdemokrat*.
12. Splits: GP Steenson, *Not one man! Not one penny! German social democracy, 1863-1914* Pittsburgh 1981, pp19-21; Schweitzer resignation: *ibid* p28.
13. *Ibid* pp31-32.
14. Steenson summarises in *ibid* pp32-40.
15. LT Lih *Lenin rediscovered* Leiden 2006, pp53-55.
16. H Kennedy, 'Johann Baptist von Schweitzer: the queer Marx loved to hate' *Journal of Homosexuality* Vol 29, pp69-96 (1995) attempts to explain the marginalisation of Schweitzer by homophobia. But, though Kennedy has strong evidence of Marx's and Engels' prejudice against homosexuality and of their willingness to exploit this prejudice for political advantage, to make this the dominant factor in the marginalisation of Schweitzer, Kennedy is forced in his narrative to discard Marx's initial willingness to work with Schweitzer, and to sideline instead the obvious political differences about German nationalism, relations with Bismarck, trade unions, party organisation, and so on.
17. The *Neue Zeit* is available at <http://library.fes.de/nz>. There is an intervention by H Schulz ('Die Organisationsfrage und der Parteitag', Vol 23, 1904-05, pp765-70) and a report of the discussions by Kautsky (*Zum Parteitag* Vol 23, 1904-05, pp748-58), but neither addresses the issues discussed here directly. The Protokolle are at <http://library.fes.de/pariteitag>.
18. Quoted in CW Fölke *Zweck, Mittel und Organisation des Allgemeinen Deutschen Arbeiter-Vereins* Berlin 1873, pp21-22, 29-30.
19. Discussion in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Jena vom 17 bis 23 September 1905* - available at <http://library.fes.de/pariteitag>. Vollmar had been a radical leftist in the 1880s, but went over around 1890 to the project of a socialist-liberal coalition. He stresses in his speech that he is speaking on behalf of the commission; so clearly this is the consensus view rather than oddball rightism or leftism.
20. Discussion in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Bremen vom 18 bis 24 September 1905* (<http://library.fes.de/pariteitag>).
21. 'Origins of democratic centralism' *Weekly Worker* November 5 2015.
22. Discussion in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands abgehalten zu Jena vom 17 bis 23 September 1905* (<http://library.fes.de/pariteitag>), and, from the right, *Der Vorwärts-Konflikt* Munich 1905.
23. VI Lenin, 'The new *Iskra*: opportunism in questions of organisation' ([www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/q.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/q.htm)).

## Fighting fund Up to you

As I was hoping last week, the third week of our May fighting fund more than made up for the dismal sum that came our way last week - a mere £122 towards our monthly £2,000 target. By contrast, week three saw no less than £915 land in our coffers!

The reason for that is, of course, the concentration of those regular standing orders at this time of the month - they amounted to £840. A special mention must go to comrades TR, KB, MM, PM, SK and TB for their generosity - and to GB, who decided, in response to the editor's pleas last month, to increase his SO from £25 to £40. But something went wrong and we got both amounts. However, when this was pointed out, the comrade politely shrugged and

told us to keep the whole lot!

In addition, we got a one-off £25 bank transfer from JS, who is now amongst the keenest sellers and distributors of the *Weekly Worker*, plus two cheques - thank you, MN (£25) and BV (£20). Finally there was a single, if modest, PayPal donation - a fiver from comrade JK.

Anyway, our running total has now soared to £1,557, with just over a week to go, so there is a real possibility that we will reach that £2,000 target once again, despite last week's bad news. It's up to you, dear readers - we still need £443 by May 31 ●

Robbie Rix

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

**IRAN**

# Stepping up the threats

Trump is garnering support for his crusade against Iran, but there is widespread opposition too, reports  
**Yassamine Mather**

**Demanding a photo op surrender**

Last week the US website *Onion* published a Photoshopped image of a “Bleeding John Bolton” stumbling into the Capitol, above a mock story where he claimed that “Iran shot him”.<sup>1</sup>

This was in response to claims by US neoconservatives that Iran was attacking US forces in the Middle East. Iran is being blamed for half a dozen incidents in the Middle East - any one of them could have been used as a trigger for war. Yet it is difficult to verify exactly what happened and decide who was responsible in any of them. The list includes Saudi and Norwegian claims that two Saudi oil tankers and a Norwegian ship were damaged last week in what Saudi Arabia claimed was an “act of sabotage”, while Thome Ship Management, the owners of the Norwegian vessel, said an “unknown object” had created a hole in the hull of one of its ships. This happened the day after a drone attack on a Saudi oil pipeline, caused “minor damage”. Responsibility for that was claimed by a Houthi group, but, of course, the United States and Saudi Arabia pointed out that the Houthis are Iran’s allies. So Iran must be to blame.

Then on May 19 a Katyusha rocket exploded near the US embassy in Baghdad. As if it was expecting something like that, a couple of days earlier Washington had ordered “non-emergency government employees” to leave Iraq, citing the danger of conflict with Iran. This was followed by Germany and the Netherlands suspending military training in Iraq and Exxon Mobil evacuating all its foreign staff from Iraq’s West Qurna 1 oilfield.

By this stage people in Iran were rightly concerned about a military escalation and preparing themselves for the worst - if all this is part of a war of nerves, it is clearly succeeding. In the meantime, Iranian analysts and academics, including some on the ‘left’, were calling on Tehran to negotiate, while royalists and other supporters of ‘regime change from above’ were advising the US government not to trust the leaders of the Islamic Republic.

The reason why Trump’s apparent attempts at distancing himself from rogue elements in his own administration (such as national security advisor Bolton) have not worked so far is not because of the steadfast anti-imperialism of the Islamic Republic, or because the regime ‘never’ compromises, as pro-regime change exiles claim. In reality Tehran has bent over backwards to please global capital - eg, during ‘Irangate’, before the Iraq war and the US invasion of Afghanistan, and during military action against Islamic State in Syria. The problem is, Trump does not want serious negotiations: he just wants a photo opportunity - and to be able to claim he has stopped Barack Obama’s “very bad deal” - in the same way as he attempted to use his meaningless negotiations with North Korea. Iran, on the other hand, wants secret negotiations and the lifting of at least some of the sanctions - something Trump cannot deliver without losing face. Hence the impasse.

By this week the war of words was reaching new heights. Trump tweeted: “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!” The reply from Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, came swiftly: “Iranians have stood tall for millennia, while aggressors have all gone ... Try respect - it works!”

Iranians are more than concerned that talk about “the end of Iran” implies the annihilation of an entire country. People see a resemblance between Trump and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hated rightwing populist, who was the country’s president between 2005 and 2013. Inevitably Trump’s tweet has been compared to Ahmadinejad’s talk of the “disappearance of the state of Israel”. How can anyone take seriously the British media and politicians’ obsession with ‘anti-Semitism’, when Trump’s threat of obliteration gets almost no reaction and is apparently taken as acceptable.

However, the tweet’s real significance is the fact that it tells us what the real aims of the current US administration are. Clearly the aim is

not just the overthrow of the Islamic Republic, but the breaking up of Iran. From the beginning this conflict had nothing to do with terrorism or nuclear weapons - no regional rival to Israel or Saudi Arabia can be tolerated by the Trump administration. This is in line with US foreign policy after World War II: every war, from Vietnam to Iraq and Libya, has had one aim: destruction. The intention is the same - to weaken rivals, deprive them of access to cheap natural resources, cut them off from potential allies.

With Iran, the aim is to divide it into smaller, less powerful states. Iranian nationalists and royalists, who are for regime change from above, should take note: their beloved country will be destroyed in the process. In fact, going by the example of other regime-change plans, such as for Iraq, they should be aware that if there is a war, not only will there be untold death and destruction, the end result could be the dismemberment of the country and a massive influx of jihadis and Salafis sponsored by Saudi Arabia. As Jefferson Morley writes in the *New Republic*, “Iran has not posed a serious terror threat to the United States since the 1980s. Sunni terrorism, on the other hand, has.”<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, however, there is large-scale opposition to a new war in the Middle East. Democrats have compared some of the hysteria about holes in tankers with the warning of George Bush and Tony Blair about Saddam Hussein’s “45 minutes” threat to western Europe. Leftish independent senator Bernie Sanders was the most vocal:

Trump, the schoolyard bully, is threatening to take us into another war in the Middle East. Just what we need! But it will not be Trump’s or his billionaire friend’s kids and grandkids who fight and die in that war. It will be working class kids. No war with Iran!<sup>3</sup>

Four of the seven senators running for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination have signed a bill that would prohibit the US military from

spending money to attack Iran.<sup>4</sup> In Europe internal politics have meant that in both France and the UK rightwing politicians have been competing with each other to support Trump.

In the UK, foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt and defence secretary Penny Mordaunt - both looking for votes amongst rightwing pro-Brexiters, when it comes to the Conservative Party leadership election - were blaming Iran for ‘interfering in the affairs of other countries’. Now we know that these two late appointments in the decaying May administration are seriously challenged when it comes to international affairs, holding high office well beyond their capabilities. However, even someone with minimum information about the Middle East should know that Iran’s interventions have largely resulted from the tensions created by the United States and its allies in the region. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam in Iraq strengthened the position of the Shia government in Tehran, beyond its wildest dreams. The US and UK were warned about this, yet they paid no attention.

Saudi Arabia and the emirates of the Persian Gulf have relied on their jihadi allies - many of them reincarnations of al Qa’eda - to start civil wars in Iraq in order to advance the Sunni cause. This, together with the common practices of US occupation forces in dealing with their opponents - be it in notorious prisons such as Abu Ghraib in Iraq or in the bombing of towns such as Tikrit and Mosul - have helped swell the ranks of the jihadis, who all along were the beneficiaries of Sunni Arab sponsorship. In subsequent civil wars, when IS was threatening the entire region, Iran got involved - to the applause of the United States. As far as Lebanon is concerned, Iran sees its alliance with Hezbollah as a type of insurance to prevent Israel bombing its industrial and military installations. So it would be interesting to know what exactly Hunt and Mordaunt mean when they talk of Iran’s ‘interference’.

Amongst Iran’s neighbours, Iraq is the most concerned. The fragile

peace following the defeat of IS can easily be broken. Washington has been spreading a lot of rumours about Iran’s top military leaders telling Shia militias in Iraq to prepare for war, so, despite the insistence of Baghdad that it wants to stay out of any conflict, the reality is that, in the event of a military conflagration between the US and Iran, Iraq will be dragged into yet another deadly conflict.

As far as Israel is concerned, the surprising recent silence of Binyamin Netanyahu about a possible war between Iran and the United States has led to speculation that, despite all the efforts of the Israeli premier to achieve US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, Israel is weary of war with Hezbollah. According to *Al-Monitor*, “If full-blown war breaks out, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will enter the picture. Should that happen, Israel believes that it would be in the top tier of Iranian targets.” Apparently Netanyahu has instructed his security apparatus to stay out of the current escalation of conflict, while downplaying “support for the stance of US national security advisor John Bolton, who advocates direct conflict”.<sup>5</sup>

It is fair to say that the majority of the opinion columns in US press and national media networks, with the exception of *Fox News*, are carrying alarmist reports about a new clash in the Middle East. The headline of an opinion column in *The Washington Post* sums it up: “A war with Iran would be the mother of all quagmires”<sup>6</sup>; while *The New York Times* advises on “How to stop the march to war with Iran”.<sup>7</sup>

According to a Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll, “More than half of Americans believe the US will go to war with Iran within the next few years”. Fewer than 40% approve of Trump’s handling of the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

If the intention of the Trump administration has been to increase tension inside Iran and isolate the leadership, the recent escalation has had the reverse effect. The many factions of the Islamic Republic might not like each other, but in the face of foreign aggression they always unite. Ordinary Iranians, facing harsh economic conditions, remain angry about the corruption and incompetence of their leaders, but, when faced with the threat of a devastating war, they are united in their opposition to US aggression.

When I speak to friends and relatives in Tehran or read various posts on social media, I am amazed by how well-to-do, upper middle class people, often with rightwing opinions, are all posting militant anti-war messages, expressing horror at Trump’s plans. If the US administration cannot win the support of this layer, how can it expect to enforce ‘regime change from above’? ●

**Notes**

- [1. https://politics.theonion.com/bleeding-john-bolton-stumbles-into-capitol-building-cla-1834847900](https://politics.theonion.com/bleeding-john-bolton-stumbles-into-capitol-building-cla-1834847900)
- [2. https://newrepublic.com/article/153537/growing-obsession-linking-iran-terrorism](https://newrepublic.com/article/153537/growing-obsession-linking-iran-terrorism)
- [3. https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/444602-sanders-blasts-schoolyard-bully-trump-on-iran](https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/444602-sanders-blasts-schoolyard-bully-trump-on-iran)
- [4. https://theintercept.com/2019/05/17/iran-war-congress-democratic-candidates](https://theintercept.com/2019/05/17/iran-war-congress-democratic-candidates)
- [5. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/israel-united-states-iran-benjamin-netanyahu-nuclear-idf.html#ixzz50dtQWP8X](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/israel-united-states-iran-benjamin-netanyahu-nuclear-idf.html#ixzz50dtQWP8X)
- [6. www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/20/war-with-iran-would-be-mother-all-quagmires/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/20/war-with-iran-would-be-mother-all-quagmires/)
- [7. www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/opinion/stop-iran-war.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/opinion/stop-iran-war.html)
- [8. www.dw.com/en/us-americans-believe-war-with-iran-is-coming-poll/a-48822649](http://www.dw.com/en/us-americans-believe-war-with-iran-is-coming-poll/a-48822649)

**TURKEY**

# What passes for democracy

Erdoğan is desperate to prevent the opposition from taking control in Istanbul, writes **Esen Uslu**



In the March 31 local elections the ruling coalition of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the National Movement Party (MHP) suffered defeat in the principal cities of Turkey at the hands of the opposition. And the waters are yet to be calmed.

On the election night it became apparent that the AKP and its leader, president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were shocked. Erdoğan and the candidates he fielded confidently declared they had won during their well-in-advance planned 'balcony speeches' in the evening. But, as the night proceeded, the bad news started to accumulate.

At first there was disbelief. As opposition tallies started to mount, the state-run Anadolu news agency - the only authorised source able to report results from far-flung corners of the country - stopped supplying information for no less than 11 hours.

This immediately raised serious concerns about possible cheating. The election observers appointed by the parties at each balloting centre, as well as elections officials, camped down alongside the counted ballot bundles under police protection. At some counting centres that lasted for days, with both officials and observers actually sleeping on the ballot sacks to prevent tampering.

Obviously the ruling coalition was not happy about losing the post of mayor in several cities and adopted an aggressive stance, though the opposition's winning margin, especially in Istanbul, was quite small. For a long while the county and provincial election authorities seemed to be counting, recounting and dealing with the objections raised on various technical grounds. However, after a protracted process they announced the tallies and issued certificates to the elected politicians.

Then the seemingly never-ending objections and appeals against the results, and decisions made by the lower election authorities, reached the final arbiter, the supreme electoral council, whose decisions are final and binding. Parties with seats in parliament appoint a representative to the SEC, but they cannot vote. However, when the constitution was amended in 2017, such bodies were dominated by Erdoğan's people, so it was apparent from the start that the cards were stacked against the opposition.

Of course, the word 'justice' has

long lost its meaning in Turkey, and brash statements started to flow out of the SEC. The first grossly unfair decision was like one of the bolts of Zeus. It was directed against the leftwing People's Democratic Party (HDP), whose councillors, elected against all the odds, were replaced by state-appointed administrators. In all its infinite wisdom, the SEC decided that if a person had been subjected to a governmental 'Decree with the Power of Law' (KHK) and expelled from the civil service without due legal process, they could not hold any elected office.

The vetting process started long before the elections: that is, the checking of every candidate's details in compliance with electoral law, conducted by the SEC - a candidate can only appear on the ballot paper after such a rigorous vetting. Yet many leading local HDP candidates, who have naturally been among the prime targets for KHKs, were allowed to stand and actually won by a large margin. The AKP cronies - either appointed as administrators or fielded as candidates - again lost, and lost big. But the SEC was out there to help them reverse things.

After a while the previously tried and tested method of squeezing the HDP from control of various cities was put into practice again. Elected councillors were dismissed by quasi-judicial, and politically motivated, administrative decisions. Through these means, the regime tried in particular to keep Kurdistan in check.

## Wobble

Erdoğan, and his disunited AKP outfit, were, as I say, shocked by the loss of principal cities. However, his allies - the representatives of the true owners of the state in the guise of the MHP - pointed to the way out: now is not the time to wobble. Instead, shout and shoot your way out of the impasse.

The ruling coalition lost mayors to the opposition, but there were no direct elections for councils governing

**If the first election produces the wrong result ... fix another**

**Erdoğan is not only a bad loser. He is a bad cheat too**



the cities - metropolitan councils were made up of appointed members from borough or county councils. As the ruling coalition still maintained its hold over a majority of them, metropolitan councils had been able to act as a brake on the opposition.

Erdoğan's gut reaction was to emphasise this dominant position in his vindictive post-election speech - a kind of grudging acknowledgment of defeat. He said: "They think they won, but they cannot run without us." And for a brief period he thought about shedding his spiky MHP ally and replacing it with a national coalition, for which he was sharply rebuked.

And then the SEC came forth once more to declare the Istanbul mayoral election invalid. According to the SEC, there had been "irregularities" in the formation of local electoral councils. But who appointed and formed them? The SEC, of course! The law says the chair of such councils should be a member of the civil service or a public employee and the SEC interpreted that as it saw fit. Cynics have said that such appointments were like built-in time bombs, to be used if needed. Others have said there was no need for such 'forward planning': it was the normal blundering way of the Turkish bureaucracy.

After the decision the certificate of Istanbul's elected mayor was withdrawn and the city's vice-governor was appointed as interim administrator until the repeat elections, to be held on June 23. However, there was still a minor issue: the SEC may have announced its decision, but to date it has been unable to provide any written explanation. As readers may appreciate, to justify the cancellation of just one ballot paper - out of four placed in the same envelope - is quite a feat. But this is Turkish democracy, and anything goes.

In Ottoman popular satire there is a saying, "If you intended to steal a minaret, you prepare your cloak first". State-owned properties, such as land and buildings, have been subject

to the greed of our rulers through privatisation since the early days of the empire. Previously *waqfs* (pious foundations) were used to cloak the privatisation of common property through the intricate interpretation of the *Shariat* law and the *Fiqh* jurisprudence.

We are quite familiar with the notion that even the tallest structure in the town, standing next to a mosque, could be stolen if it is wrapped in the baggy cloak of an administrator. And, while we wait to see how the cloak used to dismiss the Istanbul local election results will be presented to us by the SEC, the opposition is trying to emerge from the muddle.

## Weak link

The opposition will need leftwing support as well as Kurdish votes to win the Istanbul local elections for a second time. However, the main forces of the opposition were the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İP), and their aversion to Kurdish self-determination is well-known. They are as blatantly nationalistic and anti-Kurdish as the AKP.

But the ruling coalition is also very aware of this weak link and is using it to its advantage. The increasing tension in Idlib province of Syria, where a semblance of a truce, with the participation of Iran and Russia, is very fragile indeed. Then there are all the other flashpoints in the region, where Kurds and Alevis are blamed. Such factors will be put to good use when it comes to the repeat local elections.

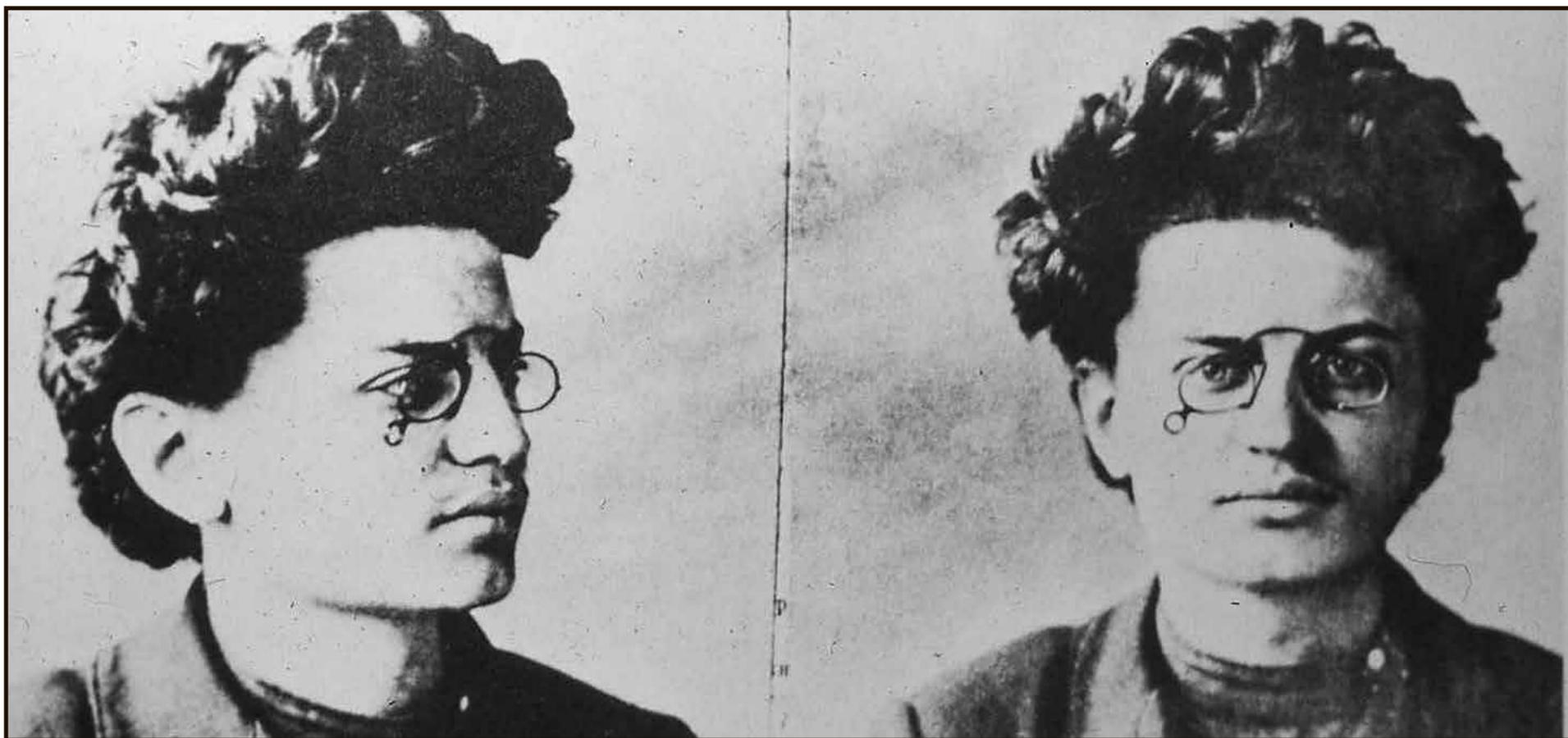
Similarly, token anti-Americanism, stoked on the flames of the F-35/S-400 aircraft and missile disputes with the Trump administration, is presented as an 'anti-imperialist' sop to attract leftwing voters. The dispute that flared up between Greece, Israel and Egypt, as well as the EU, over undersea oil and gas exploration off the southern Cyprus coast has also been used to stir up nationalistic fervour.

Will all those wedges placed in the fractures of the opposition, combined with overt and covert electoral cheating, be enough to win the Istanbul mayoral elections for the ruling coalition? We will wait and see. As the saying goes, "The tree worm comes with the fruit." The badly shaken AKP is prone to splits that may eventually lead to its collapse - especially if it loses Istanbul for a second time ●

**TROTSKY**

# Neither kings nor bureaucrats

US author and political broadcaster **Suzi Weissman** reports on the miraculous organisation of a conference on Leon Trotsky, which took place in Havana



**F**rom May 6-8 2019, an historic conference - or 'International Academic Meeting' - took place in Havana, Cuba: 'Leon Trotsky: life and contemporaneity - a critical approach'.

The event was historic, and would have been unimaginable until very recently. Trotsky was *persona non grata* in Cuba, considered a renegade, counterrevolutionary and traitor - just as he was throughout the rest of the Soviet bloc. And it was in Cuba that Trotsky's assassin, Ramón Mercader, was given refuge after his release from a Mexican prison in 1960. Trotsky's name, life and writings were virtually scrubbed from standard histories of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union in Cuba, and when interest in his ideas percolated from below, he was denounced from above. There had been active Trotskyist parties and Trotskyist militants in Cuba from the 1930s through the 1960s, but by the mid-60s they had been expelled from the party, repressed and, for the most part, imprisoned. The son of a leading Trotskyist, who had been active in the Cuban Communist Party, was a participant in the Trotsky conference.

Yet interest in Trotsky has survived in Cuba right up to the present, and is an important element of the politico-intellectual background to the conference. As late as the 1960s, some of Trotsky's works were being published, but then largely disappeared. In 2009, Leonardo Padura, one of Cuba's greatest contemporary writers, published his monumental novel based on Trotsky's assassination in Mexico City in 1940, *El hombre que amaba los perros* (*The man who loved dogs*, published in English in 2014) to wide international acclaim - although the print run in Cuba itself was so small that it was literally unavailable after its initial launch. Nonetheless, this book raised the level of curiosity in Cuba about Leon Trotsky, according to the conference organiser, Frank

García Hernández, a 36-year-old graduate student in philosophy, who is writing his dissertation on Trotsky. García Hernández is from Santa Clara, where he says there are students trying to read Trotsky, in collaboration with others in Havana.

## Political opening

So what do we make of the fact that this conference took place in Havana? One conjecture could be that it represents an opening, or the possibility of a political opening. Raúl Castro, long-time member of Cuban Communist Party, stepped down as president in April 2018, but will remain first secretary of the party until 2021. The new Cuban president, Miguel Díaz-Canel - a former minister of education who is largely unknown outside the island - is called a "cautious reformist".

**In spite of his youth Leon Trotsky appeared like a supernova in the firmament of the Russian revolutionary movement. He went on to play a leading role, first in 1905, and then in October 1917**

**Open discussion about Trotsky and his ideas has long been impossible in Cuba ... that has now changed (a bit)**

As the first secretary of the provincial Communist Party in Villa Clara province in the 1990s, he was recognised for his long hair, bicycle-riding, and walking around in Bermuda shorts. He was a strong advocate for LGBT rights at a time when homosexuality was frowned upon or downright illegal. Raúl Castro, on the other hand, was notably more tied to Communist Party politics than even his brother, Fidel. Did the end of Raúl's rule and the accession of Díaz-Canel have anything to do with the microscopic, and still somewhat mysterious, political opening that enabled a conference on Trotsky to take place in Cuba? There is no direct evidence to that effect and, unless and until there is, that remains no more than speculation.

The conference did have the

blessing of Cuba's prized writer, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, though he was not in attendance, and this may have provided the minimal amount of political leverage that allowed it to happen. But the fact remains that the Cuban government has given ample evidence that, for it, Trotsky and his ideas are still dangerous - any slight opening is contradictory, pushed and pulled by bureaucrats acting on traditional (anti-Trotsky) reflexes, seemingly without any coordinated policy.

A special feature of the conference was to be the screening of part of the forthcoming documentary film by Lindy Laub, *Trotsky: the most dangerous man in the world*. When we (I am the co-producer of the film) first told Frank we would like to show an excerpt at the conference, he was jubilant - he wanted the film to have its premiere in Cuba, imagining a huge and enthusiastic audience. We settled on showing a 21-minute trailer and a 24-minute segment of Trotsky in exile in Prinkipo, Turkey, from 1929-33 - that included his fight to get German social democrats and communists to unite against Hitler, his speech in Copenhagen and the suicide of his daughter, Zina, in Berlin.

Frank was in high gear trying to secure a venue - only to find nearly every screen in Havana closed to him and this film. Finding a public place to show it proved to be an impossible hurdle. No one wanted to take responsibility for allowing a portion of an unfinished, sympathetic documentary about *Trotsky* to be screened in their theatres. Finally, when it seemed the segment would not be projected at the conference, Frank got permission to screen it in a small theatre in the Centro Cultural Cinematográfico (ICAIC). Publicity for the showing was confined to a small announcement and word of mouth at the conference. But every seat was filled, and people stood and sat on the floor on every available inch of space - the audience was



# What we fight for

electric with excitement.

García Hernández and his partner, Lisbeth Moya González, a young journalist, had pulled off a miracle. That the conference did actually happen is certainly historic.

In addition to the institutional resources they received from ICICJM, García Hernández had support from the Institute of Philosophy, Casa Benito Juárez - the venue for the debates - and the Trotsky Museum in Mexico City. Organisational help came from a dedicated group of co-thinkers: Ana Isa, Verde Gil and Yunier Mena Benavides, all from Santa Clara.

They succeeded in getting homestays for the many international visitors, providing lunch for all the participants for three days, but they were unable to have the conference programme printed in time. So there was no programme for the first day, although photocopies were distributed on the second day.

The hall was lined with beautiful posters and pictures, thanks to Gabriela Pérez Noriega, director of the Museo Trotsky in Mexico City. Pérez Noriega had also brought along 100 Trotsky T-shirts, 150 Trotsky pens, and most importantly, 50 books the Trotsky Museum was donating for distribution at the conference. They were all confiscated by customs agents at the airport, who claimed they could not allow them in because they were “merchandise” for private sale. On May 16, a week after the conference ended, Frank posted a picture of himself wearing a Trotsky T-shirt with the caption, “The T-shirts arrived, now - a tremendous victory!”

## Success

Nearly 200 people from all over the world asked to participate in the conference, but Frank had to winnow down the number to 80. However, even with 80 it was nearly impossible to find a venue to accommodate them. In the end there were perhaps 100 in attendance, including up to 40 Cubans, and a sizeable contingent of Latin Americans. Many were young, while others had been around a long time. Participants came from Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, UK, US, and Venezuela.

We were told we each had 15-20 minutes to present our papers in panels that featured four-six speakers, but that time was whittled down because of translation difficulties. García Hernández had envisioned simultaneous translations in small groups on the floor, but he ended up without the resources to pay for equipment or translators, so one heroic volunteer translated every paper, line by line or paragraph by paragraph, from the stage. The substitution of consecutive for simultaneous translation effectively cut the time available for each paper in half, forcing draconian reductions in what could be included. But the quality of those papers was still generally excellent, and the range was broad.

The opening panel was made up of Eric Toussaint from Belgium on ‘Lenin and Trotsky confronting the bureaucracy and Stalin’; Paul LeBlanc on ‘Trotsky against Stalin’; Robert Brenner on ‘Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the peasantry’; and myself on ‘The Left Opposition divided - the Serge-Trotsky disputes’. There were numerous other panels on various aspects of Trotsky’s life, politics and legacy, including in Cuba.

Participants came from across the spectrum of Trotskyist politics - from so-called ‘orthoTrots’, to ‘state caps’, to bureaucratic collectivists. These represented the leading interpretation

of the ‘Russian question’, from Ernest Mandel to Nahuel Moreno, to Gerry Healy and Hillel Ticktin. Some sessions descended into hostile sectarianism (I walked out of these), but for the most part the tone was one of enthusiasm and respect. The final session was devoted to the history of Cuban Trotskyism, and some of the presenters had real ties to the early Trotskyists.

For many reasons the Cuban participation was lower than hoped for - there was almost no publicity, and little room in the venue in Old Havana. That was unfortunate, since Trotsky is little known in Cuba. As Frank García Hernández emphasised,

We were missing Trotsky. We lacked Trotsky to understand what happened in the Soviet Union, because none of the referents of Marxism, like Che Guevara or Fidel Castro, could, for different reasons, give a systemic explanation of what happened. Trotsky had the courage to have done so since 1936, having developed a sociological analysis that we never knew, and, for us Cubans, one in which we are very interested.

For García Hernández and the organisers, the conference was an historic marker and a major breakthrough, and they are unquestionably correct in this assessment. Despite the strong and enduring hostility to Trotsky on the part of the regime, the organisers carried off an outstanding conference, which introduced Trotsky in a wide-ranging manner. It was truly a coup, and only made possible by virtue of the considerable courage of Frank García Hernández.

The Institute of Philosophy has promised to publish the papers of the event, and the Cuban Institute of Cultural Research Juan Marinello seems willing to collaborate in this publication. If this is done, it will be the first time that a book dedicated to Trotsky and the socio-political-cultural phenomena that have been generated around him will appear in Cuba since the 1960s.

## Impressions

Cuba is a tropical paradise of immense beauty, with pristine beaches and merciful breezes from the Caribbean sea.

Havana features grand old colonial buildings in varying stages of deterioration and renewal. The architecture is elegant, wide streets are lined with houses of one to three stories, with high ceilings and large rooms in areas like Vedado and Miramar. The old hotels - including the famous Nacional, the Ambos Mundos (where Ernest Hemingway’s room is preserved as a tourist attraction) and the completely redone Habana Libre (the old Havana Hilton) - remain as icons of a pre-revolutionary Cuba, where the mafia and others from Miami gambled, dined and danced.

Old Havana, closed to cars, still features music in the streets, and Cubans of all walks of life stroll leisurely through it - or stop to dance. One sign of Cuba in the ‘special period’ - after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its subsidy - are the many beggars (mostly pensioners) in the heart of Old Havana. We saw no sign of homelessness, especially of the sort that is so widespread in US cities. Cuba is vibrant, colourful and sunny - and I noticed a sense of dignity that is often hard to detect these days on the streets of Los Angeles.

Cubans still have free education and free healthcare, and they are guaranteed housing, food and jobs. Life may seem easy-going to our

eyes, but, in fact, Cubans are for the most part poor and struggling. Shortages are constant, electricity and/or water could go off for an hour or more at a time.

The woman who worked in the house where we stayed described life as “overwhelming”. She was scrambling to support her family and had suffered a huge setback when her wallet was pilfered from her purse on a standing-room-only bus. Others we spoke to were more relaxed and seemed to be better off. Skin colour seemed to be a factor in poverty.

Air conditioning is much more evident in public places and even in May - Cuba’s low season because of the heat - there were tourists in abundance. We saw, in particular, numerous wealthy Russians - in some cases Russian military and/or intelligence officials, whose rank prevented their travelling elsewhere. One Russian told us he managed to live in Cuba in the winter, when Russia was too cold, and in Russia in the summer, when Cuba was too hot.

Taxis are ubiquitous. Colourful, mostly American cars from the 40s and 50s fill the streets, thanks to the magic of Cuban mechanics, who find or improvise spare parts. We rode in Chevys, Plymouths, Oldsmobiles and Fords, all painted in bright colours, some fitted with air conditioning or Hyundai engines inside the original shell. One particularly proud owner of a British 1960 Hillman showed us the car’s engine - still the original, running after hundreds of thousands of miles. For many drivers, the car was the investment of their lives and they are expensive to maintain. But providing a taxi service earned them more than working in the state sector.

Cuban life appears like a throwback. There is no intrusive commercial advertising anywhere, and only a minimum of revolutionary posters and slogans, some in fading paint. Television stations featured children’s programming, discussion panels on art and culture, and sports. There was soccer from around the world, and even the US basketball playoffs - although appearing days after the fact. News came from TeleSur, sponsored by the Venezuelan government and, while we were there, it focused exclusively on the unfolding, disastrous coup attempt in Venezuela. The film channel was a delight, featuring only art films - with no commercial breaks.

Cuban taxi-drivers were keen to talk about Donald Trump - they hated him and loved Barack Obama. When we turned to talk about Cuba itself, we got a version of national pride and nothing about the internal situation, either political or economic.

Cuba is one of the least connected countries on the planet. The Cuban state had restricted access to the internet, just as it still restricts travel. But in the last five-six years the state has relaxed restrictions, and more hot spots are appearing. Sporadic connection is possible. More and more people have cellphones and one can buy cards for internet connection (to use in the zones where there is such connection). We stayed in Vedado - a largely upscale district, with many beautiful, if sometimes decrepit, houses - that is only partly online. There was no access in our neighbourhood, though our house was on a main street.

Cuba has a two-tier economy with two currencies: one for ordinary Cubans (the Cuban peso) and the other - Cuban Convertible Currency (CUC) for tourists and the private sector. Euros, Canadian dollars, Mexican pesos, and plastic from European banks can be used, but Visas and Mastercards from US banks are not accepted anywhere. It is possible to exchange US dollars, but there is a pricy exchange fee, so one dollar is 0.87 CUC. The peso is

worth about one 25th of a CUC.

For Cubans working in the traditional sector of the state economy, wages are very low, public transportation is rickety and scarcities abound. Many Cubans rent out parts of their homes to foreigners, allowing them the chance to earn extra money in CUCs - and giving visitors a glimpse of Cuban life. Neighbours drop in, life is very social, people sit around and talk for hours.

Cubans, like citizens of the former Soviet Union, manage to get round shortages and other difficulties with ingenuity. We talked to waiters in the private restaurants, many of whom were highly educated and multilingual. In the restaurant we frequented the biggest complaint was about the almost 16-hour shifts (8.30am to midnight), but for only two-three days a week. Given that the restaurant is open seven days a week, I could not get an answer as to why they had to work so long (and then endure another hour on the bus to and from work) rather than having more eight-hour shifts. One waiter was an engineer, who told us that one had to work for two years to pay back the cost of higher education - the salary for an engineer in the state sector was \$18 per month. He made much more in the private sector, but lamented the fact he could not work in his profession and survive economically. We heard similar stories from taxi drivers.

We travelled to the Playa de Santa Maria, just 25 minutes from Havana - a gorgeous beach that was the popular equivalent to Varadero, with its luxury hotels and foreign tourists. The hotel we stayed at in Santa Maria appeared ‘Soviet’ to my eyes: sprawling, poorly designed and badly built. A Spanish company had bought it and began to renovate and refurbish it - but then bowed out when Trump was elected. So some rooms were newly painted and refurbished, while others remained in their neglected, old shabby state. We had an old-style room - dreary, dimly lit, with a loud, inefficient window air conditioner. Included in the price were three meals, buffet style, of ample, but mostly mediocre to terrible, food. Still, it was on the beautiful beach - the favourite place for Cubans from Havana to go on vacation before the two-tier economy made life more difficult.

And, all too soon, our interlude in Cuba was over. Conference participants left in high spirits, fully recognising the historic nature of the event that had just taken place, hoping that it was but the beginning of more such international gatherings.

At the end of the conference Frank García Hernández spoke emotionally of what it took to get it off the ground, despite the thousand obstacles the bureaucracy put in the way - he thanked the Institute of Philosophy for its invaluable support. He finished by declaring: “Neither kings nor bureaucrats, nor bosses - towards communism!”

The participants then enthusiastically sang ‘The Internationale’ - simultaneously in many languages. Paul Le Blanc noted that he saw younger comrades who did not join in, thinking it was a weird relic from another time, but the older participants loved it ●

**Suzi Weissman is professor of politics at Saint Mary’s College of California and is on the editorial boards of Critique and Against the Current. She is the author of Victor Serge: a political biography, among other works, and is co-producing the documentary film Leon Trotsky: the most dangerous man in the world.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# weekly worker

**Opposition  
to war will be  
branded  
anti-Semitic**

## BDS on the march and under fire

The witch hunt against those who campaign against Israeli settler-colonialism is unlikely to end any time soon, observes **Paul Demarty**

As Donald Trump cranks up tensions with Iran, he must necessarily cast the spotlight on other regimes than that of the ayatollahs.

The United States - far more for such a war than it was for the conquests of Iraq and Afghanistan, troublesome enough as they were - will be reliant on its allies in the region. None more so, of course, than Israel - whose governing class has been screaming for Iran's downfall for at least as long as Binyamin Netanyahu has been in office, and possesses the necessary munitions and guile to stage a provocation that will get the little crusade of Trump and national security advisor John Bolton started. One option among many, but a very attractive one from the American point of view.

Israel probably ought to be in the news for that - now that Netanyahu's relentless sabre-rattling is bearing fruit. Instead, other matters arise.

We might as well begin with the more serious of them. The German federal parliament, the Bundestag, passed a Kafkaesque motion entitled "Resisting the BDS movement decisively - fighting anti-Semitism", which called on the government to refuse to "provide premises and facilities under the administration of the Bundestag to organisations that express themselves in anti-Semitic terms or question Israel's right to exist."

It later emerged that dozens of Israeli academics had written to urge that the motion be not passed; but such squeaks of protest from people who dare to have a conscience could never compete with Netanyahu's chums and various Atlanticist creeps in the major parties.

This builds on the same offensive in the United States itself, where over half the states have now legislated against boycott, divestment and sanctions (so much for the First Amendment ...). A particularly ugly flashpoint has been the repeated slurs directed against Ilhan Omar, a leftist Democrat congresswoman and lukewarm BDS supporter, who is now officially public enemy number one for the American right; she is repeatedly accused of supporting terrorism and is the number one assassination target for white supremacist fruitcakes.

If there is a silver lining to morally perverse pronouncements like that of the Bundestag, the monstrosity of Ilhan Omar and the wider American state offensive against BDS, it is that it tells us something encouraging about the real level of support for the Israeli state in the western general population.

The overt moral claim of Israel to support from the enlightened populations of the great powers was always based on two matters - restitution due to the Jews after their near-extirmination in Europe; and Israel's apparently democratic internal norms. In both cases, there was a bit of prestidigitation going on - Israel's claim to be the state of all Jews is bogus; and its democracy had definite limits when it came to those Israelis who opposed Zionism outright (never mind its Arab



**Icelandic entry, Hatari: making their feelings clear**

residents). Secondly, such sentiments functioned as an ideological fig leaf for Israel's willingness to act as an attack dog for the 'free world' in an important theatre of global strategy.

Yet it was convincing enough to do the job in practice. When the Palestinian national movement stepped up its resistance after 1967, there was at least enough drama - plane hijackings and whatnot - to set up a superficial 'Israel versus the terrorists' narrative. Its interventions in Lebanon and elsewhere in the 1980s threatened this somewhat, but not absolutely, and the theatrical 'peace process' repaired some of that damage in the 1990s. The next decade, however, placed the Middle East much further up the American order of priorities - the Palestinians could thus be redefined as part of a hostile Muslim horde, surrounding an agreeably 'western' Israel.

Inexorably, this turned the chauvinist right in the west into the most fanatical supporters of Israel, and pushed anti-war and war-weary liberals away. What remained of the liberal Zionist milieu were reduced to a resentful tail of the openly Islamophobic spokespeople of the new 'populist' right. There are enough left over to fill newspaper comment pages with contemptible apologies, and to staff the imperialist wing of social democracy; but little else.

Liberals and the left today are faced not with a quasi-'socialist' Israel administered by the heirs of Ben Gurion, but an increasingly militarised society led by a corrupt sociopath, whose political parties compete merely on the basis of who has killed or displaced

the most Palestinians; which bombs hospitals and power plants without meaningful provocation; and which pals around, as Sarah Palin would put it, with similarly ugly nationalists around the world. The close friendship between Trump and 'Bibi' is emblematic, but, of course, this phenomenon even extends to those happy to promote anti-Semitism, as in the case of Fidesz in Hungary.

Legislative action against the BDS movement must be seen in this context. It is a tacit admission that, so far as the broadly defined left is concerned, Israel is a write-off. It is seen for what it is - not a plucky little underdog, but a monstrous colonial oppressor, armed to the teeth with conventional and nuclear weapons, and governed by a shifting coalition of religious fanatics, racists and scoundrels. Thus, a broad consensus in favour of a US-led hegemonic alliance, of which Israel is the pointy end, cannot be maintained with appeals to fair play and liberal values, but only - like the occupation itself - by force, lies and witch hunting demonisation.

A US 'shock and awe' bombing campaign against Iran is easy to envisage. Especially if Israel first stages a provocation on its border with Syria or Lebanon, or annexes territory on the West Bank, or ... If Iran can be pictured as being behind or involved in any such events, the US could act in the name of saving Israel. One could imagine a post-Brexit Britain, under prime minister Boris Johnson, responding positively to US appeals for a token number of strike aircraft and war ships.

There would, of course, be

considerable opposition. There are the usual suspects: Stop the War Coalition, leftwing trade unions, secular and religious Muslims, Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour left, Quakers, communists, international socialists and assorted pacifists and peaceniks ... and protests will attract hundreds of thousands.

They will, on this occasion, however not just be accused of being naive, of being in receipt of Iranian money, of being unpatriotic. They will be accused of anti-Semitism. Indeed the whole anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism campaign is ultimately about war in the Middle East. That is why the Atlanticist ruling class want rid of Corbyn and rid of the entire Labour Party membership that supports him.

### Eurovision

The less superficially serious piece of Israel news this last week rather underlines the case. The Eurovision song contest took place in Tel Aviv on May 18, and understandably the BDS movement made a target of it. All artists and general worthies were urged to boycott the event; the special celebrity guest singer, Madonna, came in for particular criticism, and presumably a stage show that nodded gloomily in the direction of 'peace, maan' will have satisfied nobody. Protests have dogged the contest since its earlier rounds that select acts, and the Icelandic entry - a leftwing band by the name of Hatari - repeatedly took the opportunity to express solidarity with the Palestinians, as a result of which the Icelandic broadcasting authorities are to be sanctioned by the Eurovision powers-that-be. *Quelle horreur ...*

Opponents of BDS managed to get together a letter from 100 celebrities of varying levels of importance to oppose a boycott, citing the power of music to "help bridge cultural divides". Madonna herself stressed how music (including the type of boring stuff heard at Eurovision, presumably) brings people together internationally. As with all such sentiments, it is entirely off the point; the idea that what is at issue in Palestine is a cultural division healable by dancing to the same pop songs is utterly risible, already mocked by Art Brut back in the days of Ariel Sharon's premiership ("We're gonna be the band that writes the song that makes Israel and Palestine get along"). By rendering the underlying problem in soft focus, the refusal of various worthies to take a moral stand becomes - as if by magic - part of the solution.

In reality, we know why these things happen. Israel hosts Eurovision for the same reason Qatar hosts the World Cup - to launder its reputation. A night of pop music that discreetly places Israel at the heart of Europe is just the sort of message its PR people would like to send. This, however, turns out to be exactly the sort of thing which empowers a boycott campaign. In the case of Qatar 2022, it is the wounded pride of potential hosts spurned in a flagrantly corrupt process that led to greater scrutiny being placed on the preparations; and the average British football fan knows a great deal more about the appalling conditions of migrant labourers in the tiny Gulf state than they did before. Likewise, it matters little that no contestant actually pulled out of Eurovision (although it would have been nice); the fact that there has been a controversy about it has exposed what a shabby arrangement the whole thing is, and how hollow attempts to 'put differences aside with music' (or football) actually are.

The *limit* of the boycott is that it cannot substitute for a material change in the balance of forces - the boycott of South Africa could not have brought down apartheid. That was the work of a mass movement, combined with geostrategic changes. However, the American empire is not about to collapse, and it cannot yet dispense with its Israeli pet. Which means that the witch-hunting of supporters of the Palestinian cause is only likely to get worse ●

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

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

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

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

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

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

**Standing order**

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

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

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Name (PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_