

weekly **worker**



**Torture, class and power:
understanding the role of
systematic inhumanity in society**

- Indian election
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- Labour and the left

No 529

Thursday May 20 2004

Towards a new workers' party

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Crocodile tears from the UN, US, UK, as Israel bulldozes houses and lays seige



Pogrom in Rafah

LETTERS



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

Lucy and Liz

Golly, ouch! I certainly seem to have got Martin Sullivan cross to the point of foaming at the mouth, if his response to my letter about New Labour candidate Lucy Anderson accurately reflects his state of mind (Letters, May 13).

In his first sentence he calls me a "brain-dead sectarian" and in his last sentence calls me a "scab". Clearly I should be ashamed of myself. I own up, I did not thoroughly search my archive of back copies of the *Camden New Journal* in order to scrape up examples of the New Labour candidate's selfless commitment to unpopular progressive causes. I did not, though, have to spend long in thinking of important local campaigns that she has *not* been involved in either - campaigns on which one would imagine any socialist councillor would feel obliged to take a public stand: the Camden tenants' campaign against the ALMO proposal, for example.

The point is, if a socialist is going to stand for office as a representative of New Labour, then he or she needs to be an unequivocal and public opponent of Blair and his despicable government - like Jeremy Corbyn, for example - if he or she is not to meet with suspicions of careerism or jeers of derision.

More serious than Martin's rage at my temerity in looking for clay feet beneath the robes of Camden's very own Joan of Arc is his ignorant and sectarian attack on the local Stop the War group. If he ever took part in its regular meetings he would know that this large and active group involves a broad cross-section of progressive opinion in the borough, including within its active membership local Green Party members, Quakers, members of Pax Christi, and many local Labour Party members, including officers. The group is quite definitely not a Socialist Workers Party front; indeed the only SWP member who takes a prominent part in it is the convenor, Liz Wheatley. Such irresponsible slurs only serve to give ammunition to our common enemies on the right.

It is inevitable that there will be disagreements, sometimes sharp and profound, on the right way to proceed in building a living and popular socialist movement in Britain, particularly on the central question of whether the locus of building that movement lies within or outside New Labour. However, Martin's rant is not a useful contribution to that discussion. Rather it is a sadly too common example of the sort of sectarian bile that has discredited the left for far too long.

Let us debate serious issues by all means, but let it be as comrades in a common struggle (whatever our organisational involvements), free from cheap and demeaning insults.

Sean Thompson
email

Respect abortion

Comrades Morgan, James and Kay take umbrage with the CPGB for defending women's right to abortion against the reactionary and politically backward anti-abortion position expressed by George Galloway and the MAB (Letters, May 6).

Respectively they argue that by doing so, the CPGB undermines Respect. Furthermore, their implicit argument is that electoral success for Respect translates into political gains for the working class. Conversely I would argue that, if Respect enjoys success at the ballot box by abandoning basic working class principles, or, as in the case of the abortion issue, by adopting a cowardly silence, then its success would not be any kind of victory for the working class.

Frankly, those of us in Respect need to decide what kind of organisation we want it to be. At the moment the majori-

ty within Respect seem content for it to be a lowest-common-denominator fusion of opposition to the war and the occupation, backed up with a social programme cribbed from old Labour. It seems content to be seen as merely a protest vote against the war and against Blairism. To avoid or to silence debate for fear that it would lead to highlighting political differences within Respect is a mistake. If Respect really wants to "make a difference", as its partisans claim, then by necessity it needs to become a democratic workers' party. This cannot happen overnight - Respect has a long way to go before it reaches that goal, but its political development must start now.

To suggest, as John Kay does, that Respect members should silence themselves and simply concentrate on building the coalition is disturbingly undemocratic itself. Debate should not be hushed up for the duration of the election campaign: it should be ongoing and comprehensive. The resolution passed by the Guildford branch of Respect is not indicative of anarchistic decentralisation, but rather was an expression of the democratic rights and responsibilities of members within a political organisation. It is right and proper that branches can submit resolutions that can be debated and voted on by the organisation as a whole.

In this instance the need for such a resolution was pressing, as it was in response to anti-abortion comments made publicly by prominent elements within Respect. If the purpose of Respect branches is simply to carry out electoral activity at the behest of the executive, then that is a deeply worrying indication of the democratic health of the organisation.

Jem Jones
Guildford Respect

Another stick

Your website reviewer may have, inadvertently no doubt, given the impression that I have recently joined the executive council of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children ('Anti-abortion websites', May 13).

This absurd idea is of course false. I have never been a member of SPUC or any other anti-abortion organisation. I am against abortion (though not of course in all circumstances and Respect is not proposing any change to the current legal position; and the European parliament for which I am standing has no jurisdiction on the subject) not just for religious reasons, but for socialist reasons.

The unnecessary destruction of life, whether unborn or in the case of euthanasia of the old and chronically sick, seems to me the ultimate capitalist policy and an odd preoccupation for communists. Unless of course it is being hyped by you as just another stick with which to beat a political project your majority supports, though only in the way the rope supports the hanging man.

George Galloway MP
Westminster

SWP fudge

I was amused to read about the SWP's reasoning for opposing Dave Landau's emergency motion on abortion at a meeting of Islington Respect ('SWP vote down women's rights', May 6). It is a telling sign of its current drift into populist politics that the SWP should fear 'excluding' catholics from the ranks of Respect over the issue.

I have to ask though, when it comes to the question of abortion, does the SWP have any particular catholic in mind? The reactionary catholic personified by, for example, Tory health spokesperson Liam Fox or the catholic who, not too long ago, militantly fought for democratic rights for the republican community in Northern Ireland against British imperialism?

Some catholics will, no doubt, be put off by a principled position on abortion, but many - particularly the more progressive-thinking individuals - will also be attracted to a programme which spear-

heads rights for all women and politics which are based on democratising society in general.

I trust the SWP will be somewhat more aggressive in defending asylum-seekers from attacks. It correctly appreciates the need to address the bigotry, prejudice and inaccuracies on that issue and does not, I hope, play down that defence for fear of putting people off!

Come on, comrades, stop fudging. Socialists appreciate the need to address prejudice head-on.

Bob Davies
Swansea

Who's left?

I thought your readers may be interested in what supporters of the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform are saying in their election campaigns. Steve Godward, victimised firefighter, is standing as an independent in the Erdington ward in the elections to Birmingham council. Steve has been a prominent critic of Respect, arguing that it is insufficiently socialist.

One would expect his leaflets to include support for open borders and free right of economic migrants to enter Britain. This was the position he supported in his and others' critique of Respect. Actually what he states in his leaflet could be repeated by New Labour ministers, as it summarises the UN convention on refugees.

He states: "Fighting for the right to safe refuge for those fleeing from oppression". Respect states in its platform: "The defence of the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. Opposition to the European Union's 'Fortress Europe' policies." A little more leftwing?

Steve does state he will only take a worker's wage, but, since only a small minority of Birmingham councillors receive £40,000 or so, it is rather a non-issue. Only cabinet members of the ruling political group receive £40,000 - others receive between £10,000 and £20,000, which is about the same as a worker's wage.

Another issue raised by critics has been republicanism. The leaflet is silent on this issue. His statement on discrimination is significantly weaker than the equivalent statement by Respect. It reads as follows: "Fighting for the right to be able to live and work without discrimination on the grounds of age, race, sex or disability." What is crucially missing from this statement is any defence of lesbians and gays.

The Respect statement opposes discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation" as well as "religious beliefs (or lack of them)". It states: "Opposition to all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs (or lack of them), sexual orientation, disabilities, national origin or citizenship."

But what is really amazing is that there is no mention of the brutal occupation of Iraq. I received the leaflet on Saturday May 8, which was after a week of horrible images in the press of tortured Iraqis. Where does Steve stand on the widespread torture of Iraqis by American and British soldiers? Where does Steve stand on the imperialist occupation of Iraq? We have silence when there is a crying need for firm opposition to torture and the immediate withdrawal of US-UK troops. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens are taking up the issue in their local election campaigns. Even the Tories are asking for a government explanation of when it knew about the use of torture by British soldiers. But from the very firmly socialist campaign of Steve Godward there is merely silence.

Many of the statements in the leaflet could be repeated by old Labour and even New Labour, but have no clear socialist content. An example is: "Fighting for the right to good schools in the community for all." Note the word 'comprehensive' is not used. The general theme of the leaflet is old Labour at best it is clearly more rightwing than the politics of Respect.

Steve is still fighting to regain his job

as a firefighter after a blatant political victimisation. We have our political differences, but I would urge comrades to support his campaign for reinstatement and I offer my personal solidarity in that fight. Despite his politics being to the right of Respect on lesbians and gays, asylum-seekers and especially the war in Iraq, I urge a vote for him.

He is to the left of New Labour, but is he to the left of old Labour?

Stuart Richardson
Birmingham

MAB and BJP

Sacha Ismail compares the Muslim Association of Britain with the semi-fascist, hindu fundamentalist BJP (Letters, May 13). But this is just arrogantly asserted without any substantiation whatsoever. I also find this comparison just plain silly.

They say that you can judge people, to a degree, by the friends that they choose. I wonder if, like MAB, the BJP would place links on its website to the following: Stop The War Coalition, International Solidarity Movement, Amnesty International, Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament, Global Peace Campaign, Green Party, Greenpeace? I also note that (along with the promotion of islamic ideas) MAB includes in its stated objectives: "To assist in the endeavours being exerted towards protecting human rights in general and muslims in particular. To broaden the scope of dialogue between the different cultures and faiths in order to serve society and humanity. To improve the relationship between the muslim community and the British institutions on the one hand, and the muslim world on the other, so that their social, economic and political relationships shall be revived on sound basis."

This doesn't sound like the kind of extremely violent fundamentalism espoused by the BJP, which has included physically attacking other religious groups and the left. There are supporters of the BJP in Britain, but I have seen no sign of them affiliating in an organised way to the STWC or participating in Respect. Several leaders of MAB have agreed to the founding statement of Respect, which despite its numerous limitations has many points that any socialist can agree with. An end to all privatisation. A comprehensive education system that is not dependent on the ability to pay. A democratically controlled NHS, free to all users. Pensions that are linked to average earnings. Raising the minimum wage to £7.40 an hour. Tax the rich. Repeal the Tory anti-union laws.

Would the BJP sign up to this kind of radical platform? I think not.

John Davis
email

Comparison

Sacha Ismail's attempt to equate MAB with the BJP is absurd. The BJP has a vicious record of violence against the working class and non-hindus in India. Only a fool would claim this about MAB, which has a record of campaigning against war and for the defence of human rights and civil liberties. Many of its leaders have signed up to Respect, which clearly opposes privatisation, the dismantling of the NHS and the Tory anti-union laws.

If Ismail wants a closer comparison to the BJP, then look no further than the AWL. This despotic, Zionist, Shachtmanite-fundamentalist cult has expelled more people over the years than the Labour Party ever did.

Abdul Mir
email

Anti-democratic

I have received an email from someone calling themselves Ipswich Stop the War Coalition, announcing a public meeting on May 26. It is being held 'jointly' with Respect. Members of other political parties are invited to turn up.

I am a member of Ipswich Stop the War, and in fact one of the two signatories to its cheque book. I was also - need it be said - the person who had the original proposal to set up this group. Neither I nor the treasurer of this body have agreed to this meeting with Respect. Nor indeed have any of the comrades who actively worked for this campaign (which sent 10 coaches to London for the big demo) been asked for their opinion. There has in fact been no meeting whatsoever to decide this move.

When asked, the full-time secretary-agent of the local Labour Party, who lives about 50 metres from me, had not heard of any invite to this 'meeting'. This is one amongst many examples of the anti-democratic behaviour of the SWP - in this case an individual who has only been in the town for about year and obviously feels that as an SWP member she has the right to order people about.

Andrew Coates
Ipswich

Gays attacked

Lesbians and gay men from Outrage and the Queer Youth Alliance joined the May 15 demonstration in London to support the human rights of the people of Palestine. But they also urged the Palestinian Authority to halt the arrest, torture and murder of homosexuals.

They marched with placards reading: "Israel: stop persecuting Palestine! Palestine: stop persecuting queers!" As soon as they arrived in Trafalgar Square to join the demonstration, the gay protesters were surrounded by an angry, screaming mob of islamic fundamentalists, Anglican clergymen, members of the SWP, the Stop the War Coalition, and officials from the protest organisers, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. They variously attacked the gay activists as "racists", "Zionists", "CIA and MI5 agents", "supporters of the Sharon government" and "dividing the 'free Palestine' movement".

PSC organisers asked the gay activists to "stand at the back of the demonstration" and, when they refused, blocked their placards with their own banners and shouted down the gay campaigners as they tried to speak to journalists and other protesters. Most people at the Palestine protest expressed no hostility towards Outrage and the Queer Youth Alliance. Some expressed positive support.

Gay Palestinians live in fear of arrest, detention without trial, torture and execution at the hands of Palestinian police and security services. They also risk abduction and so-called honour killing by vengeful family members and vigilante mobs, as well as punishment beatings and murder by Palestinian political groups such as Hamas and Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

These revelations come from the independent human rights watchdog, B'Tselem, and from the Israeli gay rights groups, Aguda and Open House, which help gay Palestinian refugees. The abuse of Palestinian gays has been confirmed by two senior Palestine Liberation Organisation officials. Both officials expressed personal regret concerning these abuses but said their liberal views were not shared by the majority of PLO officials and supporters.

For over 30 years I have supported the Palestinian struggle for national liberation, but it would be wrong to remain silent while the PLO, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are abducting, brutalising and murdering lesbian and gay Palestinians. Freedom for Palestine must be freedom for all Palestinians - straight and gay.

Unless we challenge the abuse of queer human rights now, this violent homophobia will become entrenched in a new Palestinian state and Palestinian leaders will be emboldened to abuse the rights of other Palestinian citizens.

Peter Tatchell
email

PALESTINE

Pogrom in Rafah

Rafah refugee camp in Gaza is being systematically terrorised by the Israeli army. 'Operation Rainbow' has sealed off the whole area with the deployment of more than 100 battle tanks. Meanwhile thousands of buildings have been bulldozed into the ground and dozens of Palestinians, including children as young as 11, have been killed. Israel's army chief, general Moshe Yaalon, states that all houses - claimed to conceal tunnels and stored weapons - will be destroyed. And, following his orders, Israeli loudspeakers have announced that all males over 16 must hand themselves over: that or become 'legitimate' targets. The death toll could easily rise into the hundreds.

The Rafah pogrom is Israel's collective punishment, exacted upon the Palestinians for daring to resist. And resist they have. On Wednesday May 12 Islamic Jihad blew up an explosives-packed Israeli troop carrier in the Zeitoun area of Gaza, killing five soldiers. The previous day six Israeli soldiers died in a landmine attack. Ariel Sharon's security cabinet, keen for any excuse to ratchet up the 'war on terror', responded with their ferocious wave of repression.

Given the appalling level of violence being meted out by their 'warrior nation' junior partner, both Colin Powell and Jack Straw ventured mealy-mouthed criticisms in an attempt to distance themselves from Sharon's war crimes. The UN security council voted unanimously to condemn Israel. George Bush even calls for restraint. Not that any of this will hold much weight for the Palestinians. Their homes are being razed with the help of British-made tank parts and their leaders are being assassinated with US-supplied Apache helicopters.

There is opposition to the slaughter in Rafah within Israel. This is part and parcel of the polarisation of Israeli politics and the discontent with Sharon and his divided right/ultra-right coalition government and his divided Likud party. A mass rally of over 150,000 held in Tel Aviv on Saturday May 14 demanded Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. This is a staggeringly high number, given the overall size of Israel's population, and is the largest protest since the invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s.

Naturally communists welcome Sharon's difficulties. They can become our opportunities. We do, however, recognise that, while the demonstration that packed Rabin Square was a melange of forces, the dominating bloc was mobilised by the Labour Party, which seeks to undermine Sharon by running with his programme of withdrawal from Gaza - rejected by 60% of Likud despite backing from George Bush.

A *Haaretz* editorial notes: "The collective voice that arose from the demonstration ... was addressed to the silent majority of Likud voters. It urged them, and their representatives in the cabinet and Knesset, to shake off the hold of the extremist minority that has attached itself to them and dictated the results of the referendum. Public responsibility and political wisdom both oblige the Likud and its leaders to listen to the public's deepest feelings, to grasp the dimensions of the opposition to Israel's continued presence



'Legitimate' targets

in the Gaza Strip ... and to give impetus to [Sharon's withdrawal] initiative ... If the Likud's ministers and MPs do not understand this by themselves ... they will reach the necessary conclusion in another way: by observing the growing list of the fallen in Gaza and the public outcry that it elicits" (May 17).

Revolutionaries can give no support to the imperialist-brokered 'road map', itself a retrograde step even compared to the Oslo accords of 1993. 'Gaza first' has now become 'Gaza only'. Sharon's (and now Labour's) Gaza withdrawal, whilst dismantling a few settlements, would leave Israel's military free to intervene at any time. In short Gaza would be a prison for its inhabitants. Meanwhile the West Bank would be left full of Israeli enclaves, which would effectively be incorporated into a Greater Israel. As to the nearly four million Palestinian refugees, they would be ignored.

Our solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict comes from below, from the unity of the oppressed Palestinian masses and the workers and progressive sectors of Israeli society. This can only be achieved through breaking Israeli workers from Zionism - the ruling ideology of Israeli nationalism, which naturally includes liberal varieties.

All shades of Zionist ideology pit Israeli Jews against the Palestinian population, not least because of the fact that the Palestinian Arab population has outnumbered Israel's Jewish population ever since the state was created in 1948. Since Israel's birth the Palestinians have been victims of what can only be described as a continuous campaign of ethnic cleansing, achieved through expulsions, massacres, border controls, internal checkpoints, house demolitions and so on. This campaign has continued

from the mass expulsions of 1948 and 1967 through to the present operations in Gaza.

Thus the atrocities of Rafah today are not, as *Haaretz* puts it, the acts of an "extremist minority", but the logical military methods that flow from Zionism itself.

There is no doubt that a large section of Israel's Jewish population live in fear of the Palestinians, who they believe will seek revenge against them for the humiliations they have suffered. Compounding these fears is the disastrous and unsupportable tactic of suicide bombings against Jewish civilians that sections of the Palestinian resistance have embraced.

In addition, the inclusion of perspectives drawn from European anti-semitism that are included in Hamas's charter hardly helps to challenge these prejudices. Whilst communists are quite right to fight against the Israeli forces shoulder to shoulder with all the heroic defenders of Rafah, including Hamas members, there must be no concessions given to reactionary Islamist ideology. Tomorrow we might have to point our guns in a different direction. If put into practice, an 'Islamic Palestine' would simply lead to a theocratic nightmare and the reversal of the poles of oppression against the Jewish population.

Neither Zionism, Islamism nor imperialist-brokered 'peace deals' hold any solution for the peoples of the Middle East. Only a programme of secularism, internationalism and democracy, based on the working class, can lead the way out of the impasse.

In the concrete circumstances that means a common struggle to achieve a democratic, secular Palestine alongside a democratic, secular Israel

●
Joe Wills

Join the Respect Unity Coalition

Complete this slip and send it to:

Respect - The Unity Coalition
Winchester House
259-269 Old Marylebone House
London NW1 5RA

Include a cheque for a minimum of £10, or more if you wish to make a donation, payable to the **Unity Political Fund**.

I wish to join the Respect Unity Coalition

Name

Address 1

Address 2

Town/city

Phone

Postcode

Email

ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday May 7, 5pm - 'Revolution and the division of labour', using István Mészáros's *The power of ideology* as a study guide.
Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 (nearest tubes: Regents Park, Great Portland Street).

Burning issues

The Miners 1984-2004: new show from Banner Theatre Production, Friday May 21, 7.30pm, People's History Museum, Pump House, Bridge Street, Manchester. Drama, music, video interviews and newsreel. Miners and the wider community tell their own stories. Tickets, £5: 0161 839 6061. Supported by Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils.

Stop the torture, end the occupation

Demonstration, Saturday May 22, London. Assemble 11am, Embankment (nearest tubes: Embankment, Charing Cross). March to Trafalgar Square.

Songs for justice

Concert with Frankie Armstrong, Leon Rosselson and friends, Saturday May 22, 7.30pm, St James, Piccadilly. Tickets (£7.50; concessions £5) from 11 Weavers End, Hanslope, Milton Keynes MK19 7PA; 01908 510642.

Organised by Movement for the Abolition of War.

Carnival against racism

Sunday May 23, 1pm to 6pm, Ponders End recreation ground, Southbury (five minutes from M25). Bus routes: 149, 279. Music, poets' corner, dancing, speakers, stalls, children's activities.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism.

Troops out of Iraq

Public meeting, Sunday May 23, 5pm, Nonshi Civic Centre, near Blues Ground, Coventry Road, Small Heath, Birmingham.

NCADC

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns annual general meeting, Saturday June 5, 12 noon to 5pm, Carrs Lane Church, Carrs Lane, Birmingham. Lunch provided, crèche available. Reasonable transport costs for anti-deportation campaigns reimbursed.

To attend contact 0121-554 6947; ncadc@ncadc.org.uk

End the occupation

Public meeting, Wednesday, June 9, 7pm, Indian YMCA, 41 Fitzroy Square, London WC1. Speakers: Tariq Ali, Jeremy Hardy, Haifa Zangana (Iraqi writer and activist), Ewa Jasiewicz (eyewitness recently returned from Iraq). Organised by Iraq Occupation Focus, c/o PO Box 304, Southall, UB2 5YR; 07958 174451 (Suresh Grover) or 07958 673840 (Liz Davies).

Labour Representation Committee

Founding conference, Saturday July 3, 9am to 4pm, TUC Congress House. LRC, PO Box 44178, London SW6 4DX; 020 7736 6297.

RDG

To contact the Revolutionary Democratic Group, email rdgroup@yahoo.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.

Respect events

Bermondsey: Car cavalcade, Saturday May 22, 10am. Assemble The Blue.

Luton: Stall and cavalcade, Saturday May 22, 1pm, town centre.

Bristol: Cavalcade, Saturday May 22, 11am, River Street car park, St Judes. Leafleting: Yeovil Street, 11am; Sherbourne Street, 2pm.

Uxbridge: Public meeting with George Galloway and Lindsey German, Saturday May 22, 3pm, Quakers Friends House, York Rd, Uxbridge (near Uxbridge station).

Telford: Public meeting, Saturday May 22, 3pm, Belmont Hall, New Street, Wellington, Shropshire.

Bristol: Fundraising dinner, Saturday May 22, 7.30pm, St Mary on the Quay Crypt, St Katherine's Parade (near Hippodrome).

Southall: Fundraising dinner with George Galloway and Lindsey German, Saturday May 22, 7.30pm, Ambedkar Hall, corner of Featherstone Road and The Green (behind Dominion Centre).

Leeds: Fundraising meal, Saturday May 22, 6pm, Café Noor, Burley Road.

Birmingham: Film showing, *Persons of interest*, Saturday May 22, 6.30pm, Bordesley Centre.

Huddersfield: Public meeting, Sunday May 23, 7.30pm, Birkby and Fartown Community Centre, Wasp Nest Road.

Brentford: Bees United hustings, Monday May 24, 7.30pm, Stripes Bar, Braemar Road, Griffin Park.

Sunderland: Rally, Monday May 24, 7.30pm, Civic Centre.

Brunswick: Introducing Respect, Monday May 24, 7.30pm, Mad Hatter Café, Western Road (opposite Waitrose).

Birmingham: Miners' strike film showing with Ken Loach, Monday May 24, 7.30pm, Midlands Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston.

Leeds: Coalition Against the War hustings, Monday May 24, 7.30pm, Civic Hall.

Clapham: Stop the War hustings, Tuesday May 25, 7.30pm, Northcote Road Baptist Church, Clapham Junction.

Berwick-upon-Tweed: Hustings, Tuesday May 25, 7pm, The Guildhall, Marygate.

Hastings: Launch meeting, Tuesday May 25, 7.30pm, St Thomas in Canterbury church hall, Magdalen Road, St Leonards.

Plymouth: Public meeting, Tuesday May 25, 7.30pm, Welcome Hall, 4 Fore Street, Devonport.

MAB

UK Independence Party -
www.independence.org.uk

Tories in exile

The UK Independence Party must have a strange sense of humour. How else can it be explained that the European parliament (an institution it bitterly opposes) is its only significant area of electoral representation? Similarly, what was that cringe-worthy Pythonesque electoral broadcast, featuring a lederhosen-clad chap being slapped with a wet fish, all about? And what can you say about the catapulting of the odious Robert Kilroy-Silk to the head of UKIP's East Midlands candidate list? Surely it cannot believe voters would see this patronising ass as an electoral asset?

Humour, whether intended or not, is a theme running through the website. Firstly the yellow and purple design is absolutely dreadful, but seeing as the Tories have already appropriated blue, and the BNP have the union colours, I am sure it was logical to adopt such a hideous clash. Even worse, Kilroy features quite heavily. The site begins with the announcement that he will be appearing on *Question Time* this week.

Next we are presented with a (rogues?) gallery from last week's UKIP press conference, featuring Kilroy (again), two of UKIP's three faceless MEPs, and the equally obscure party leader and chair. Bizarrely, they have included three photos of the press themselves and have labelled them "paparazzi". Assuming these photographers were invited to the launch, I would suggest our UKIP web designer takes another look at their dictionary. The final item in the Kilroy theme is a 'Personal message' from our hero. In this piece, Kilroy paints himself as someone committed to "fairness, freedom and justice". The rest is the usual scare-mongering around unelected Brussels bureaucrats and the like. But the real scary thing is that this brand of vague social chauvinism would not look out of place in a speech by Tony Benn or a sermon in the *Morning Star*.

The Kilroy fan club section is followed by 'Headlines', leading with the decision of wealthy Europhobe Paul Sykes to back UKIP. Next along are a couple of YouGov polls that show 10% backing for UKIP and 48% of respondents for immediate withdrawal from the EU. The party's analysis gets all rather excited by this, predicting "huge gains". But a closer look reveals that this particular poll has a tenuous relationship to reality at best.

On the subject of polls, a little further down we have an announcement that "UKIP tops the lot". This absurd questionnaire asked respondents whether they would vote UKIP, given that it is the only party to consistently advocate EU withdrawal and an end to unlimited EU immigration, and if it was the only party to campaign on this basis. The answer is 35% support. This is like asking, 'Would you vote Respect if it was the only party campaigning against the war, privatisation, a bosses' Europe and environmental destruction?', but once again our surrealistic UKIP friends seem oblivious to the worthlessness of such a question.

The manifesto is a boring affair, lacking the kind of froth that makes anti-European rants in the rightwing press at least interesting. Viewers interested in a quick run-down of where the party stands should proceed straight to the manifesto summary. It believes that parliamentary sovereignty can only be guaranteed by leaving the EU. For the same reason, Britain should keep the pound to secure its economic sovereignty. Furthermore the treasury would be in receipt of an "independence dividend" of £20 billion - a figure plucked out of thin air, comprising of Britain's EU 'membership fee' and the result of further "deregulation". This sounds suspiciously like free-market, one-nation Toryism to me - could this be motivated by a desire to appear as Thatcher's 'real' heirs?

I could not resist visiting the UKIP gift shop. The garish merchandise has to be seen to be believed, but advertising its "famous" pound lapel with a "Pay a pound to save the pound" slogan - and then charging £1.10 for it - just makes them look silly. The book section in particular really is the literary equivalent of a freak show. For example, it promotes Philip Day's preposterous *Ten minutes to midnight*, a book that rails against the "axis powers" of France and Germany, and predicts the EU could lead down the road to yet another European war. My personal favourite has to be Chris Story's *The European Union collective*, a piece seriously arguing that the EU is a "Soviet Leninist deception strategy" to further the insidious aims of an "ongoing pan-German hegemony plan".

If this is the kind of rubbish UKIP is recommending, then socialists should encounter few problems challenging its politics •

Phil Hamilton

Mythical past, open future

How should Marxists classify the Muslim Association of Britain? Is it of the 'far right', a sinister clerical-fascist organisation, or is the truth more mundane? **Ian Donovan** gives some answers



Anas Altikriti: ex-president of MAB and Respect candidate

The Muslim Association of Britain has become the object of major controversy on the British left.

Ever since the early days of the anti-war movement, the relationship with muslim organisations has been a disputed question. Beginning with the September 28 2002 march against the drive to war against Iraq, this gained real concrete form, as the march, initiated by the Stop the War Coalition around the slogan 'Don't attack Iraq', had three main sponsors: the coalition itself, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and MAB.

This came about because earlier that year, the Al-Aqsa intifada had begun in the Palestinian occupied territories, and Ariel Sharon, having gained the Israeli premiership, launched his repeated, vicious 'incursions' into West Bank cities and Gaza. Despite the suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, this led to a rate of death among Palestinians that was over three times that of Israelis and indeed has remained so since.

MAB called a demonstration in April 2002 against this situation, a demonstration which mobilised a significant, militant layer of British muslim and Arab youth, who would have been probably unreachable by the left and anti-war movement. When MAB called another demonstration around more or less the same issues for the following September, on the same day as the planned anti-war march, the two events were sensibly merged. The 250,000-strong demonstration was really the starting point for the mass anti-war movement that has shaken Tony Blair and his government to its foundations.

So what is MAB? Critics paint it as a sinister presence, an extremist, islamic fundamentalist organisation that the left ought to have nothing whatsoever to do with. On its website it expresses admiration for historical and contemporary figures such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; Sayyid Qutb, a man from the same tradition, who some say was the ideological mentor of the Taliban; and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and Dr Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, the

assassinated leaders of Hamas.

MAB makes no attempt to hide the fact that its own particular brand of islamic belief owes much to the tradition of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, an influential organisation founded in the late 1920s by al-Banna. The MB sought to reverse the decline of islam - seen as a result of colonialism and oppression, which left most of the Middle East under British imperial domination - and return to the fusion of state and religion that had existed under the rule of the medieval caliphs.

Thus the Muslim Brotherhood was in essence a backward-looking form of nationalist reaction to imperialist domination. It does not take great imagination to see why: in the centuries prior to the emergence of European capitalism, the various islamic empires represented a civilisation that far outshone feudal Europe in terms of culture. This was in great contrast to the subsequent subjugation of much of the muslim world by the west. Such politicised nostalgia has been a recurring theme, particularly in the Middle East, ever since. The MB in Egypt was something of a prototype for other formations that grew up elsewhere in the region and especially in the mainly sunni Arab world.

In its early years, it existed in competition with more modernist, secular nationalism and the various Middle Eastern communist movements. At times it has engaged in uneasy alliances with leftist and secular nationalist forces, at other times it has been in violent confrontation with them. Both al-Banna and Qutb were killed, through assassination and execution respectively, by the Nasserites in Egypt, under suspicion of planning coups and assassinations themselves - and elements loyal to the MB were indeed responsible for the assassination of the unlamented Anwar Sadat in 1981.

These days in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is almost respectable and seeks power by basically 'moderate', legal means. Some of its splinter groups have become more notorious, particular-

ly in the Palestinian territories under Israeli occupation, where Hamas is competing with the mainstream PLO/Fatah forces for national leadership. In Sudan, one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in Africa, elements originating in the Sudanese offshoot of the brotherhood have shared power with the military at times over the past couple of decades and run strictly islamic regimes that have repressed the christian minority in the south of the country, many of whom want a separate state. This regime is also engaged in a war against insurgents in the non Arabic-speaking west Sudanese province of Darfur, from which large numbers of civilians have fled and there have been reports of atrocities. Not that it is remotely possible to equate MAB and the Sudanese regime, but you could say that these forces have some common antecedents.

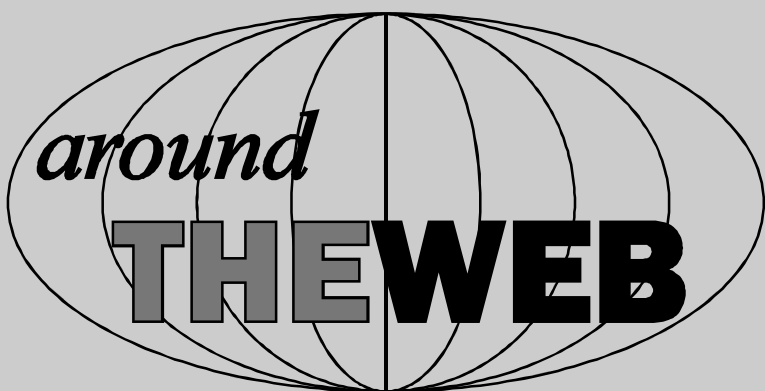
MAB has certainly gone to considerable lengths to make clear it has no truck for the most notorious actions of islamic fundamentalists - eg, those of al Qa'eda. It is one of the ironies of our time that, while some on the left, notably the Socialist Workers Party, romanticise forms of political islam to the point of refusing to condemn outright atrocities like 9/11, Bali or the recent bombs in Madrid, organisations like MAB, which have elements of formal ideology and religious belief in common with the bombers themselves, have no hesitation in condemning these atrocities. The only action of al Qa'eda that MAB has refused to condemn was the 2003 terrorist bombing of Israeli holidaymakers in Mombasa - an attitude that was, however, shared by many secular Palestinians, embittered by the wanton Israeli slaughter of Palestinians and by the limitless 'toleration' of Israel's imperialist allies.

In analysing what it is that MAB actually stands for, it is probably useful to look at its objective situation in society. This is not a ruling class organisation of any type, but an organisation of migrants from the Arab world to an advanced capitalist country.

Like most migrant groups in a society that is massively different in political, social and economic terms, the Arab community seeks to find ways to exert political pressure to ensure it is treated with a degree of fairness. Such organisations of minority ethnic communities thus tend to campaign against racism, against various perceived or real injustices done to those communities by the dominant society and culture, and to struggle for the improvement of their communities' lot within the 'host' society.

The actual activity of MAB fits this template. In fact, one creditable aspect is that it does not appear to be inclined towards separatism - the opposite in fact. Often migrant communities facing discrimination and oppression retreat from engagement with wider society into an inward-looking mentality that can find expression in forms of separatist nationalism. MAB seems set against this (partly no doubt because it also seeks to work alongside the much larger British-south Asian muslim community).

It is worth looking at its statement of 'aims and objectives' to see where MAB is coming from. The statements of religious objectives - such as "To spread the



teachings and culture of islam, instil the islamic principles in the hearts of the muslim community and enhance the good morals within the British society"; or "To assist the muslim community in maintaining its integrity and foster in them good islamic conduct like worship of allah, education and social relations, especially ties of kinship" - reveal the tensions that come from both yearning for acceptance and wanting to preserve distinctiveness. Ditto other formulations: "To assist in the endeavours being exerted towards protecting human rights in general and muslims in particular ... To improve the relationship between the muslim community and the British institutions on the one hand, and the muslim world on the other, so that their social, economic and political relationships shall be revived on a sound basis."

On the face of it then, MAB is not some kind of sinister clerical-fascist organisation, aiming to create a worldwide caliphate or rolling back the gains of the enlightenment, as some on the left have argued. Rather, what we have here is something much more mundane - a pressure group, basically wanting to preserve its own religious community, and secure religious tolerance and the place of islam within a liberal, multicultural society. That is all MAB is, and all it can really ever be. The project of building a Muslim Brotherhood in Britain, which can seriously contend for power, as in Egypt, is simply a non-starter.

The references to such figures as Qutb and al-Banna in the historical and educational materials produced by MAB should be taken about as seriously as the sale of works by Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung by Stalinists in the Indian Workers Association. In both cases, the social and economic conditions do not exist in this country for the political programmes that these figures stood for to win through and become a social reality. They have no practical significance. Perhaps this or that individual may read Qutb and as a result decide to join a militant islamist group abroad (just as it is possible that individuals influenced by IWA Stalinists may go to India or Nepal and become Maoist guerrillas), but such people would have to make a fundamental break from the pressure group-type of politics that these kinds of migrant organisations play.

The problem for MAB is that the 'war against terrorism' - which has often targeted muslims indiscriminately, not just the fringe that supports al Qa'eda - has created a road block along the 'normal' path of lobbying councils, quangoes and government departments. Instead, we see the rise of islamophobia, the demonisation of muslims by the bourgeois press and government. So in these circumstances MAB has sought allies and found them on the left in the building of a mass movement against the war and anti-muslim reaction.

This brings us to the actual role that MAB is playing in the anti-war movement along with the involvement of MAB members in Respect. For some, such as the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, the prominence of MAB in the anti-war movement is a threat: by so participating, they say, MAB will increase its influence, will win more muslims to its own political-religious beliefs, and will therefore strengthen reaction within migrant Arab communities (and it may even gain adherents within the south Asian migrant community as well). It is notable, however, that religious figures from that community - such as Ghayasuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Parliament - are themselves joining Respect as a result of the anti-war movement.

There are those who say that MAB members constitute an alien class presence which disqualifies Respect from being considered a working class initiative. Thus for our Red Platform comrades it matters not that individuals who are members of MAB are standing for election on a manifesto that hardly differs from the Socialist Alliance's old priority pledges, including a commitment to sexual equality and gay rights; simply by being on the



2003 anti-war movement saw MAB join forces with the left

West Midlands slate former MAB president Anas Altikriti renders Respect 'popular frontist', if not a popular front outright.

Actually, MAB has not as a whole endorsed Respect - it is calling for a vote for Respect in some places, for Greens in other places, and even for Ken Livingstone in the London mayoral election. And, of course, MAB called for a vote for the Liberal Democrats in the Brent East by-election last year, something it has refrained from doing for June 10 this year. Prior to the anti-war movement, it seems MAB routinely advised muslims to vote Labour.

This is certainly an unusual development. However, in my view, it was inevitable, given the 'war against terrorism', and the left should take advantage of it. Let us look back to the past for some lessons, in particular at the history of the Jewish population, which provides both parallels and some significant differences.

The Jewish migrant community in Britain largely came here fleeing pogroms in eastern Europe, particularly tsarist Russia, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Quite a few more came escaping persecution at the hands of the Nazis in the 1930s - although anti-semitism and rank inhumanity by our own rulers resulted in many desperate Jewish refugees being barred from entry. The Jewish community was demonised - those who were visibly non-emancipated and non-assimilated, who wore traditional Jewish dress, were a particular target for racist attackers, a target for hatred every bit as vulnerable as many visibly devout muslims are today.

In addition, the large number of secular Jews were scapegoated. The fact that many, through hard experience, had embraced revolutionary ideas, had become close to the working class movement, added to bourgeois panic and loathing. Jews were variously portrayed as bomb-throwing anarchists and sinister commu-

nist conspirators. In a climate of morbid irrationality, the prominence of emancipated Jews in 19th century bourgeois revolutions, was turned into a weapon against them - the ultimate expression of this being the wide currency of theories of 'international Jewish conspiracy', that world reaction greedily fed upon, leading ultimately to the genocidal horrors of the Nazi regime.

It is sadly ironic that, as a result of oppression at the hands of the Israeli state, and profound ignorance of the real causes of that oppression, that sections of Arab islamists, notably Hamas, these days echo these bizarre notions of Jewish conspiracy to explain the plight of the Palestinians. For as a result of changed historical circumstances, the demonisation of islam and muslims that is current today has sad echoes of past treatment of the Jews.

The difference is, however, that among the muslim migrant communities of the west, who bear the brunt of antipathy, there has not generally been a comparably strong secular-revolutionary tradition. Which is, of course, not to say that no secular or communist tradition existed: merely that it does not match that of early 20th century Jewry. The most that has existed in Britain at least is a tepid loyalty to the Labour Party, born of its claim to be the champion of racial equality and non-discrimination. But that position has now been severely compromised, as the crisis of reformism has led to New Labour antagonising and threatening this section of its base as part of the so-called 'war on terror'.

It is indeed the case that - particularly in the Middle East, but also in Asian countries such as Pakistan and to some extent even as far as Indonesia - imperialism has gone to great lengths to undermine left and secular forces, and to ensure the victory of more conservative, religious forces over them. The result has been to

seriously undermine the secular forces in these countries, and a strengthening of the traditionalists. The deliberate strengthening of the most bloodthirsty, extremist forms of islamism in the cold war - not least in Afghanistan - created the Frankenstein's monster of al Qa'eda, which now of course plays the role of useful enemy to imperialism.

In the heyday of anti-semitism, the left had relatively little trouble in allying with, and indeed assimilating, many Jewish militants whose initial secular impulses were simply reinforced by joining in struggles of the workers' movement against war, anti-semitism and the like. The differentiation was at that point relatively clear; though with the rise of Zionism there was also the beginning of a reactionary development among secular Jews, the beginnings of a division. Nevertheless, there was still a fairly clear line between the militant secular element and the rabbis, the Jewish clerical element, which abhorred collaboration with the internationalist left.

The situation of muslim migrants, who today face a similar serious threat, is more complex. Because of the qualitatively weaker nature of the revolutionary-secular forces among muslim communities in current historical conditions, it is entirely feasible that we could see, as a transitional phase, something more complex. Instead of a straightforward and easily discerned division and growing enmity between overtly clerical-reactionary and overtly secular-revolutionary elements, there could be a division among initially more conservative, religious elements, portending some future, more profound political differentiation.

A division between those who are prepared to work with the left, the revolutionary opponents of capitalism, in a struggle against imperialism, and those genuinely reactionary-extremist elements

who avoid such cooperation like the plague. There is in my view reason to believe that *this* is the historical significance of the division between MAB, on the one hand, and the separatist islamist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, on the other. It is notable that during the massive 2003 anti-war movement the latter group put out material bitterly denouncing MAB (though not by name) for engaging in *haram* (forbidden) activities by joining forces with the British left to organise mass anti-war marches (see 'Fundamentalists fear communists' *Weekly Worker* March 13 2003).

Of course, this parting of the ways may well not come to pass. It is conceivable that MAB, or sections of it, could retreat into the bankrupt politics of *jihadiism* - though there is no sign of this happening. It could also, of course, simply remain as a multiculturalist pressure group. But I also believe it possible - and indeed as a revolutionary optimist I consider it quite likely - that either as a whole or in part, it will at some point, under the impact of historical events that demonstrate the need for a *revolutionary*, not utopian-religious, alternative to capitalism, move much further in a leftward direction.

This analysis of the real forces acting on MAB, and where things could lead, underlies the massive flaws that afflict the British left today. On the one hand, you have the overt islamophobia of some, most notably the AWL, who reject any interaction with MAB at all. The AWL is not the only culprit, of course, but apart from the openly admitted Zionism of its guru, it also served as something of a rallying point for others to give vent to their own prejudices, and simply boycott interaction with such people in the name of 'class politics' and 'secularism'.

On the other hand, you have the terribly flawed approach of the SWP. Faced with a force that really ought to be encouraged to move into the big political space to its left, the SWP instead looks to accommodate it by itself moving to the right - considering the possibility of downplaying demands for women's and gay rights last summer, fudging the question of abortion in the Respect declaration, etc.

Such abandonment of principle is exactly the *opposite* of what is required when engaging with radicalised religious elements from the immigrant petty bourgeoisie and proletariat who could potentially be drawn politically to the left. In reality, in such conditions, where you find large numbers of previously quite conservative people come to agree with socialists on one key question - imperialism and its role in the world - blurring over other key questions and minimising differences is the way to *undercut* any potential for leftward movement on those other questions, and thus the acquiring of a new world view. It is probably thanks to the agitation of our comrades, and other critics of the SWP, that Respect has a clear commitment to gay rights and a formal commitment to women's rights, even if the question of abortion is fudged.

There is no reason why such people cannot be won to support abortion rights, and many other things, including the achievement of a socialist society, given a correct communist approach. There was no reason either why such people could not have been won to either the Socialist Alliance itself or, failing that, some clearly defined public agreement to wage an anti-war election campaign in which the SA would have been a prominent public component with full right of criticism. That would have presupposed, of course, that the SA was itself allowed to develop a party ethos, to develop real roots of its own in the working class. Unfortunately, it was killed off, mainly, though not exclusively, by the SWP.

Undoubtedly the creation of such a formation would require much more time and patience than the cobbling-together approach that has brought about Respect. But that which is solid generally takes longer to construct than that which is built on sand ●

IRAQ

Imperialists, islamists and communists

Ian Donovan's article 'Imperialism out of Iraq!' (*Weekly Worker* May 13) represents, as his theses (*Weekly Worker* April 29) did, an impressionistic response to immediate political developments in the Iraq war. Ian's line is a mirror image of that of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty which he criticises, and represents a danger of the CPGB sliding towards the moralistic and strategically empty 'anti-imperialism' commonplace on the left.

Torture and imperialism

The first 12 paragraphs of Ian's article focus on the exposures of American and British military torture practices which have dominated the news in the last two weeks. Ian correctly asserts that these practices are clearly a policy of the imperialists, not just aberrations, that the use of torture has been commonplace in imperialist counter-insurgency operations and that the imperialist powers have routinely for the last 50 years sold torture technology and torture training to client states in the colonial 'third world'.

Paragraph 5 of the article, however, claims that "The truth is that every disgusting technique employed by the little gangsters of the region, the worst torturers and killers like Saddam, the Saudi monarchy, the Taliban, etc, was only derivative ... All such regimes are in the end only pupils of imperialism." This claim is silly.

In the first place, it is not only the imperialists but also the Stalinists who exported torture techniques. But, secondly and more fundamentally, torture is in the last analysis an instrument of state power, in no way restricted to modern imperialism. Torture was a routine instrument of the 'criminal justice' of the ancient Roman and Chinese empires and of the European feudal states, and was found also in the judicial practice of the pre-colonial state regimes in the Islamic countries.

The use of 'mild' forms of torture in British mainland police practice in the 1960s and 70s was not restricted to the Irish; the resulting scandals have led to changes in the rules of evidence and the taping of police interviews, but what happens before the suspect gets to the police station will no doubt produce more scandals in future. Forms of torture and humiliation, to establish hierarchies, are found even *within the ruling elites*: 'initiation rituals' in American university fraternities and French university law faculties have in the last 20 years produced occasional scandals when they have ended in death or serious injury of new students.

In the light of all this, there was absolutely no need for the imperialists to teach the use of torture to local dictatorial regimes. The imperialists have, indeed, exported torture technologies and training, and have supported torturers, as they have supported dictatorships generally against the working class and peasant masses of the colonial countries. But there is no doubt that even without imperialist support the local class and state elites would have used torture. Perhaps in different forms, but still torture.

Ian's error here slips towards the common error of 'anti-imperialism': that is, to blame everything that is wrong with the world on the imperialists. If we could only get rid of the imperialists, we would be rid of ... torture? Really? And what

about the KGB and its local imitators even *within liberation movements*, like the security apparatus which killed and tortured dissidents within the African National Congress's military wing?

'Generalised uprising' and the Iraqi left

Ian diagnoses from Fallujah and Najaf that there is a "generalised uprising". He tells us: "The forces of shia islam are becoming a real power. Muqtada al-Sadr is acquiring the stature of a national leader who shows signs of being able to appeal across the confessional divide to at least part of the sunni population on a basis that is partly national, partly pan-islamist. A mass national liberation movement has already been born, has already seized important centres, and is growing and spreading across the country."

It is on the basis of this diagnosis of the situation in Iraq that Ian concludes that "for the Iraqi left to sit this one out and take no side, proclaiming 'a plague on both your houses' between the al-Sadr-led mass opposition and the imperialist forces, is a recipe for complete marginalisation and hence political suicide".

It should, in fact, be obvious from the news reporting of occupation opponents as well as of the imperialists that Ian's diagnosis of the situation is a gross overstatement. There *is* mass *sympathy* for anyone who is prepared to fight the imperialists. There has been movement of the political positions of, for example, elements of the traditional shia leadership towards open opposition to the occupation. At the same time, however, there was a mass exodus of refugees from Fallujah at the height of the siege, and the US has been able to create at least a temporary deal by bringing ex-Ba'athist generals back into play. In Najaf al-Sadr is for the present protected by deals with the traditional shia leadership, while an attempt by his militia to launch an insurrection in Basra failed, and US operations in Karbala have not as yet proved to be the tripwire for a mass uprising. In other words, the advocates of immediate and open war to expel the occupiers do not (yet) command the level of support which would turn their minority actions into a real generalised uprising.

The political relation of forces in Iraq is, in other words, not reducible to "the forces of shia islam ... *becoming* a real power" - they were already a real power before recent developments, or to identifying the al-Sadr movement with the birth of a "mass national liberation movement".

Meanwhile, the torture revelations, coming on top of the April crisis, have had the effect that the relation of forces within the US administration between the neocons and the realists has shifted in favour of the realists. Powell was able to state in public on May 17 that the US would accept the formation of an Islamic regime - ie, a shia-dominated clerical regime - if that was the result of elections in Iraq. At least an important faction of the administration is therefore looking for an accommodation with the shia and with Iran as a new exit strategy.

In this situation, 'taking sides' is quite clearly not enough. Today the shia leaders are the US's enemy; tomorrow they may well be on the road to a US and Iranian-sponsored attempt to create an Iranian-style Islamic republic. Ian is quite correct

to criticise the Iraqi Communist Party for playing footsie with Bremer's 'governing council' and the Worker-communist Party of Iraq for illusions in the United Nations (a much less serious problem). But rejecting the occupation, the 'governing council' and the UN is not the same thing as 'taking sides' with the Sadr movement, etc. Moreover, when this is taken together with Ian's silence about the tasks of Iraqi communists *other than* siding with the opponents of the occupation, it amounts to a repeat of the advice offered by Jack Barnes and Brian Grogan of the Unified Secretariat of the Fourth International to the Iranian Trotskyists in 1979: "Integrate yourselves in the mass movement." This really was what Ian claims the current lines of the ICP and WCPI are: a road to political suicide.

Iran

Ian claims that "Khomeini's Islamic radicalism was in reality a mutant form of Iranian nationalism." This was exactly the line of argument the USFI majority used to justify their advice to the Iranian Trotskyists. It completely lacks explanatory power, because under the umbrella term 'nationalism' it hides the class politics of nationalist and religious mobilisation under concrete political dynamics. Nationalism and religious politics are, in general, movements based on the mobilisation of the petty proprietors.

Political Islamism and political Catholicism, in countries which have not undergone full capitalist development, have an additional element. This is that the *ulama* in Islamic countries and the priests in capitalist ones are a pre-capitalist exploiting caste. They are therefore capable of creating regimes and movements which genuinely amount to reactionary anti-capitalisms (Afghanistan, where the quasi-feudal nobility and warlords also play a key role) or to Bonapartisms which freeze the transition to capitalism (Iran). In Iraq such a project is unlikely to succeed even to the limited and unstable extent of its success in Iran. But on the way to failure the effects of the attempt would be disastrous for the Iraqi workers.

Ian goes on to say that the Khomeini movement was a "novel way to create a strong national state, in circumstances where the more traditional, secular Arab and related nationalisms ... had been reduced to utter humiliation by the overwhelming imperative of US imperialism to keep a tight hold on a region containing the world's most important strategic oil reserves". The true element here is that secular Arab nationalism had been humiliated. The false is "the overwhelming imperative of US imperialism". Here Ian slips into the 'war for oil' error popular among the anti-war movement. The truth is that the policy of the US towards the Arab regimes was animated by the geopolitics of the cold war with the Soviet Union and by the struggle against the emergent workers' movement in the region. It was this that meant that the Arab regimes, and the Pahlavi regime in Iran, focused repression on the local workers' organisations, while applying only much more limited repression to the Islamists. Together with the Soviets' misguided support for the regimes, this enabled the Islamists to emerge as the primary oppositions to undemocratic regimes.

The theoretical categories deployed in this argument are simple: 'imperialism',



Muqtada al-Sadr: less immediate threat

unexplained, is opposed by 'nationalism', equally unexplained. The *class* dynamics and politics which underlie both phenomena go missing. We are left with a yes-no choice between 'imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism'. The refusal to make this choice is characterised as 'sectarian'.

'Sectarianism' and China

Ian accuses the worker-communists of an "inverted, sectarian, almost child-like mirror-image" of the opportunism of the left towards the Khomeini movement. He makes an analogy with the opportunism of the Chinese communists and Chiang Kai-Shek's massacre of the communists in 1926-27. In this context it is startling and significant that Ian should make no mention of the policy of the communists in China in the 1930s, when China was actually invaded and partially occupied by Japanese imperialism. If the Chinese communists had followed Ian's line, they would have called for 'victory to the resistance' and integrated themselves in the Kuomintang. This was Stalin's advice to them. Instead, they fought the imperialists with their own forces and their own methods independently of the Kuomintang. Political suicide? The result was that the defeat of the Japanese was rapidly followed by the defeat of the Kuomintang and the victory of the Chinese communists.

AWL and imperialism

Ian's article concludes with a critique of the line of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. The bulk of this critique is wholly well-taken. The AWL's concepts of "sub-imperialisms" and the "imperialism of free trade" actually render imperialism irrelevant to present political decision-making. As a result the AWL falls back into an abstract moralism of 'national self-determination'. In a good many cases this leads them to swallow wholesale the line of the British media about conflicts to which Britain is party. In relation to the Middle East, it leads them to take their analysis from the Israeli press and adapt their political line to the consensus elements of the foreign policy approach of the Zionist parties.

There is, however, absolutely no reason to slander the Iraqi communists, as Ian does by the assertion that the AWL's line is "an even worse expression" of the method of the Iraqi communists' arguments. The Iraqi communists confront both the immediate fact of imperialist occupation - the axe murderer, or, in the

terms of 1917 Russia, 'Kornilov' - and the very slightly less immediate threat of political Islam - the poisoner, or, in Russian terms, 'Kerensky'. Their weakness makes it hard for them to follow the Bolsheviks' policy towards Kornilov and Kerensky or the Chinese CP's policy towards the Japanese invaders and the Kuomintang. But their policy, though confused, is part-way towards this line. The AWL's opposition to the withdrawal of imperialist troops, in contrast, flows from its Zionist political commitments. It uses the position of the Iraqi communists as a cover for this position.

Moreover, the AWL's line on imperialism is a bastard variant of a legitimate point. 'Imperialism' means state-to-state dependency relations. Classically these took the form of direct colonisation. But equally important were and are the indirect forms - of corruption, control through debt, monopolistic supply of arms, and the training of colonial state elites in the metropolis's universities and military academies ('semi-colonial' status, 'neo-colonialism'). These were practised by Britain in 19th century Latin America and by the US and other imperialist powers since the 1950s 'decolonisation'. In the Leninist theory of imperialism, these state-to-state dependency relations are driven by the need of the imperialist capitals to export capital. There are other Marxist explanations. It is genuinely true that the actual economic and class dynamics of imperialist operations need to be analysed, rather than simply imposing the template of Lenin's explanation of World War I on the world. It is also genuinely true that the strategy of the 'anti-imperialist united front' of the second and third congresses of the Communist International has very often led to defeats, and at best has produced Stalinist regimes. Ian takes for granted that the Comintern line is correct.

The underlying trouble is that *Ian's* line is merely the AWL's line reversed. Ian is working, just as much as the AWL, from a moralistic commitment to national self-determination not grounded in concrete class analysis. The difference is merely that the colours are reversed: what is black for the AWL is white for Ian and vice versa. The effect is that, so far as Ian's position is taken to represent the CPGB's line on Iraq, there is a danger of us sliding into the Socialist Workers Party's moralistic anti-imperialism and practice of prettifying the political Islamists. This danger makes it all the more urgent that the party develop a line on Iraq based on the starting point of my theses (*Weekly Worker* April 29), rather than on Ian's line.

• **Mike Macnair**

Torture, class and power

“How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?”

“Winston thought. ‘By making him suffer,’ he said.

“Exactly. By making him suffer. Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own?” (George Orwell 1984).

Lynndie England is a young American soldier who has been catapulted from obscurity to global notoriety in only a few weeks. Photographs of Iraqi prisoners being abused and humiliated feature her showing every sign of being amused by their suffering. The scenes of torture are terrible enough, but Lynndie’s small-town, girl-next-door grin, as she points to the genitals of a naked, hooded Iraqi man, or her indifference as she holds a leash around the neck of another as he lies on the floor, provide a *focus* for shock and wonder.

For all the talk of ‘trailer trash’ in the world’s press, Lynndie England seems to have been a bright student at school. She enlisted into the 372nd Military Police Company, but her choice of unit probably had less to do with its speciality than the fact that it was based only a few miles from her home. Like thousands of others, she found herself carried by US foreign policy to Iraq. Finally, in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, she was actively, even playfully, involved in the abuse and degradation of fellow human beings.

It seems natural to ask the question, why? How do we understand the phenomenon of, and the psychology behind, torture?

In researching this article, I discovered that an enormous amount has been written on this subject already - but of course largely based on bourgeois liberal assumptions and values. Can a specifically *communist* analysis provide greater clarity?

It must begin not by trying to guess what was happening inside Lynndie’s head, but by looking at the material world - now, and in history.

Pain

Any discussion of torture must begin by looking at *pain*.

The evolutionary importance of pain is clear. Any random genetic twist which makes an animal more likely to avoid physical injury than others of the same species will promote *its* survival over *theirs*. The self-protective animal will be more likely to live long enough to pass its genetic disposition on to its offspring,

amongst whom further genetic drift will be selectively promoted in the same way.

Humans are, of course, the product of many millions of such changes towards ever greater sensitivity to physical injury, and ever greater displeasure associated with that sensitivity: the displeasure of *pain*.

In short, the capacity to feel pain, and be motivated to avoid it, promotes our safety and our survival. Though it can be unspeakably dreadful to endure, pain is nevertheless valuable.

Some diseases have the effect of dulling or disabling the pain mechanism. People who feel no pain have to be *taught* to regularly and frequently check their bodies for signs of injury, and effectively train themselves to consciously make self-protective decisions most of us learn largely unconsciously as we grow up. Any failure to do so can be as much a threat to their lives as the disease itself.

The development of a powerful urge to mate is perhaps the best known of the instincts favoured by evolution, as clearly success in finding a mate and reproducing is central to passing on any genetic instincts at all, but even the sex instinct does not have the *urgency* or *immediacy* of the instinct to avoid pain, or escape it once it begins.

At its simplest level, therefore, torture harnesses this motivation by rendering a human helpless and leaving them only one escape from the pain: to display behaviour demanded by the torturer.

Humiliation

Some have objected that the photographs from Iraq do not show “torture”, because they do not show the infliction of intense pain: no electrodes, and no blades. They are wrong. To be chained into what appears to be only an uncomfortable stance (for the mere moment captured by the camera) becomes excruciating after hours of endurance. It is a technique much favoured by state torturers, as it leaves little physical trace.

But that is not the complete answer to this objection. Torture aims to exert the torturer’s will over the victim’s. The infliction (or threat) of pain may motivate compliance, but the will of the victim may still stand out against this. Torture therefore relies at least as much, and sometimes entirely, on breaking down that will through humiliation.

Victims face a regime of absolute control. The Iraqi prisoners are shown naked, and their nakedness is emphasised by mockery. One is pictured on a leash.

Another appears awkwardly shackled to railings, with a pair of women’s knickers pulled over his head.

These techniques all rely on the ritualised intensification of existing social inequalities and power relationships.

Clothing is socially significant: from the uniforms of police to the ‘power dressing’ of upper middle class professionals. Poor clothing publicly signifies low status, and nudity a complete powerlessness associated with infancy. Similarly, women enjoy less social status than men: draping women’s underwear over a man’s face reduces him. I’ve yet to hear of a woman similarly humiliated using men’s clothing. Leashes are used to control animals, which are barely more than commodities in our society: to hold a human on a leash symbolises such a relationship.

The key point is that these symbols rely on the victim’s acute and nuanced, conscious and unconscious awareness of existing social rules. They manipulate these to create the greatest possible gap between the status of the torturer and that of the victim. The mechanisms of social differentiation are refined and made extreme, but are solidly based on that material reality in society. Sustained over days or weeks, such treatment can undermine an individual’s sense of their own status, and enhance that of the torturer, making the victim’s eventual submission ever more likely.

Social aims

So far, we have looked at the psychology of the victim: but what of the torturers?

At the macro-level, torture is simply one of a range of techniques used by ruling classes to maintain power.

As oppressed peoples organise, individuals amongst them may be imprisoned and forced to reveal politically and militarily useful intelligence about their organisations. This immediate use has been the subject of much debate in many specific circumstances: in Ireland, in Israel, in Guantanamo Bay, and in bourgeois democracies and dictatorships alike around the world.

After a little research, one also begins to realise just how much information is publicly available about torture. Though political strategies vary, it is not uncommon for the use of torture to be tacitly admitted by national governments or their occupying forces abroad. This is because it implicitly creates a *threat* of torture, which serves as a deterrent against revolt, and particularly against accepting roles of individual leadership in pre-revolutionary struggle.

I enjoy the current good fortune of being a western European national who is a member of a legal party under a *relatively* liberal domestic regime. I do not know, I *cannot* know, whether I would have the courage so many of our comrades abroad show, working in the knowledge of their fate if imprisoned: I can only hope I would. And to many (myself included) the threat of death is less frightening than the threat of torture - Amnesty International document many cases of victims killing themselves, or trying to kill themselves, to escape further pain. A little public fear of torture is useful *pour encourager les autres*.

The torturer

The motives of the ruling classes are clear, then. But individual torturers are not drawn from the ruling classes, any more than rank and file soldiers or police are. They do not have the same immediate interest in the preservation of the current class system, as they are often drawn from the same class as their victims. What motivates *them*?

This is the question on which most of the bourgeois liberal analysis I have read focuses. It begins from the emotions of the individual writers: they (and I) find it



Lynndie England, all-American girl

impossible to *imagine* pulling a lever to run electrical charges through the body of a naked, desperate, helpless fellow human being. *How can people do it?* And another question which is popularly asked: *what do they tell their children they do for a living?*

We must return, once again, to the realities of human society. The *professional* torturer, the *specialist*, is, above all, part of the state: part of what Lenin famously called the “bodies of armed men”. However, the forces of the state are not undifferentiated. Most are men and women from largely working class backgrounds. They enjoy reasonable rewards, but their lives are only marginally better than those of their fellows, and they are not highly conscious of the role they play, beyond the basic propaganda against working class collectivism channelled through their organisations.

There is a special caste, though, which includes the spies and intelligence officers, the infiltrators and state provocateurs, and the torturers. These people have a clearer understanding of their role, and the nature of the society in which they live and work. Theirs is, in that sense, a dirtier job, and more richly rewarded. They can be drawn from either the middle or working classes, and some are picked out of the broader arms of the state for this kind of ‘special service’, having exhibited some kind of aptitude and appetite for the role.

What light does this shed on the question, ‘How can people do it?’ What makes ‘doing it’ unimaginable is *empathy* - not merely the ability, but the involuntary tendency to put ourselves in the position of those people we interact with. Again, understanding empathy begins in the real world. It developed as a useful evolutionary and social skill, as we do better in the world if we can understand the feelings of others, and therefore predict their reactions and plan our own accordingly. For a trivial flavour of its evolved state, it is the tendency which makes us cringe with embarrassment *on someone else’s behalf* - how many people comment that they found the BBC series *The Office*, featuring the egregious boss David Brent, ‘difficult to watch’?

Empathy in turn relies on *identification*. The more we consider people to be like ourselves, the more we empathise. The working class is a revolutionary class precisely because capitalism brought oppressed people together into communities and workplaces in which their common problems and interests were obvious: they *identified* with each other,

and became conscious of their class.

The state therefore seeks to undermine this sense of identification between its own forces and the peoples they control. It divides soldiers from the working class communities from which most of them came. It sets the policeman against worker. It undermines consciousness of both *common humanity* and *class*, and so weakens *identification* and *empathy*.

The state becomes ‘us’, the oppressed ‘them’. The professional torturer takes this to an extreme. The victim is reduced to a condition which is barely considered human. Above, I explained how the humiliation in torture served to weaken the victim. Here is its other role: it protects the torturer. The sustained use of ritualised symbols of extreme separation in social status undermines empathy, making torture possible.

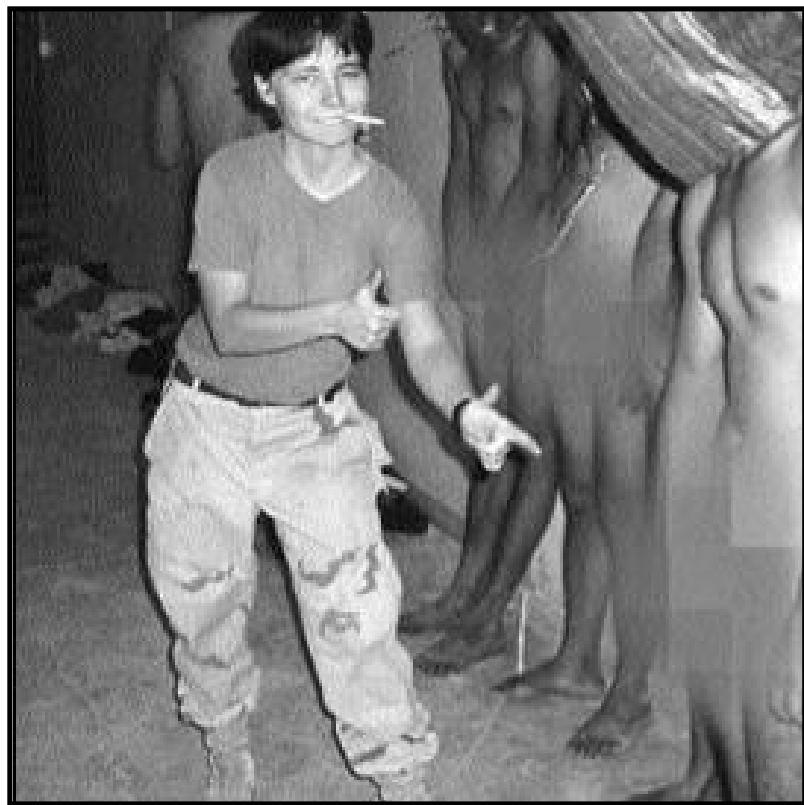
However, the process is not achieved without psychological harm. The state bases its work on a lie: the denial of common humanity which makes not only torture but all class society possible. A belief in this lie produces negative effects: alienation first from humanity, and then from reality. It can lead to breakdown, suicide or ever more anger and confusion channelled into the abuse of the victims.

So much for the *professional* torturer. But pictures of Lynndie England raise another question: how can ‘ordinary’ human beings behave in such a way?

The essential cause remains the same. During foreign occupation, where torturer and victim are separated by language, culture, appearance and beliefs, the necessary breakdown of empathy is all the more easily achieved. A coalition leadership which speaks of “cleaning out rats” nests of Iraqi dissidents” further reinforces this - the “dissidents” are vermin. And as the gap is widened between GI and Iraqi, the psychological need for solidarity between GI and GI is reinforced. Whistle-blowing and humanitarian intervention become difficult. The abuse of ‘them’ is mutually reinforced. The psychological importance of at least remaining one of ‘us’, and so not wholly isolated in a strange land, dominates.

In this situation, the unofficial, deniable, but nevertheless deliberate nudge the ruling classes feed through their state mechanism to the forces on the ground to ‘do what is necessary’ is all that is required. If it becomes convenient for them, though, the ruling classes are as happy to sacrifice their own pawns as they were to sacrifice the Iraqis - as Lynndie England is now discovering ●

Manny Neira



Lynndie England, torturer

RESPECT

Pledges and platitudes

Respect's election broadcast for the Greater London Assembly was, to put it mildly, a little disappointing. I was under the impression that socialist film-maker Ken Loach was going to direct it, but he must have been either really pressed for time or called away at the last moment, to be replaced by some amateur video freak.

The broadcast was presented by Lindsey German, our mayoral candidate, who was obviously suffering from a serious case of under-rehearsal. She read her lines woodenly and with the occasional stutter - why weren't such sections re-recorded? She sat almost motionless, looking directly into the camera, and the side-lighting seemed to accentuate the pained, quizzical expression fixed on her face, as though she was straining to read the autocue. Judging by the hollowness of the sound, the location - looking out over London - was chosen entirely for the back-drop, without any consideration of how filming in an apparently empty room might affect acoustic quality.

Lindsey was hardly selected for her charisma, but the script did not exactly show up her political acuity either. Between clips of four Respect GLA candidates (thankfully shot in the open, where the clear light and crisp sound came as quite a contrast to comrade German's echoey office), she pointed to a few of the capital's failings and offered a platitude or two by way of solution.

The first of the assembly candidates was Linda Smith, London regional treasurer of the Fire Brigades Union. Like the others, she spoke naturally, looking at the interviewer, not the camera. As a trade union representative she was well aware of the acute shortage of affordable housing - many firefighters have had to move far out of London as a result. Unfortunately she was cut off by the sound editor in mid-sentence.

At this point comrade German came back in with the revelation that "New Labour has sold off more council houses than the Tories." Respect's policy? "Housing estates need investment, not selling off to [hesitation] investors with the deepest pockets."

Next we had Tansy Hoskins, who looked and sounded like an earnest but naive sixth-former. After enthusing about the diversity of this "amazing city", she noted that "What divides people is not the colour of their skin or different religions." The real division is between "the haves and have-nots". Tansy favours "equal opportunities for young people" and passionately believes in a state of affairs where "every child in London has things that rich children have".

Janet Noble said that what was wanted was "a party that addresses the needs of ordinary people". Sounding just like an 'ordinary person' herself (or at least how our Socialist Workers Party comrades imagine them to be - capable of grasping only the simplest of ideas), she continued: "I say, bring the troops home and spend that money on something worthwhile" - like London's "crumbling" services.

This allowed Lindsey to come back and point to privatisation as the culprit. On the tube, it was "pushing fares ever upwards and putting profit before safety". Her SWP comrade, Unjum Mirza of the RMT union, echoed her almost word for word. Instead of privatisation, "Respect would make emergency investment to upgrade the tubes and the railways," promised the would-be mayor. That should sort out the problem.

But what about crime? Since all the other parties make this a key issue, it could hardly be ignored. "People want a safer city," comrade German informed us. "Respect believes that we need to prevent crime rather than wait for it to happen." Such a profound statement will undoubt-

edly attract votes by the thousand. But surely Lindsey would not join in the chorus demanding more police? No, what was needed was "more caretakers, more park wardens, more youth workers and more station staff" - that should do the trick.

She concluded: "The strength of our city lies in its diversity, its public services and the people who live and work here. London is one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Why shouldn't the people who live here see some of the benefits? Just imagine what difference that would make to those who really need it.

"The election on June 10 is based on proportional representation. Every vote will count. Make the election on June 10 a referendum on the government's warmongering and privatisation. Vote for change," she urged, as her delivery faltered once again. "Londoners deserve Respect."

Londoners deserve a programme of working class action, not a combination of hollow phrases and empty pledges. Well-meaning platitudes cannot substitute for hard policies - and Londoners know it.

No confidence

The *Weekly Worker* was hoping to carry two interviews with Respect candidates this week. George Galloway had promised to speak to comrade Mark Fischer, while I have been attempting to corner Liz Wheatley, who is standing in the GLA constituency of Camden and Barnet.

Unfortunately comrade Galloway pulled out, citing the "level of personal abuse" in last week's paper. "Personal abuse"? We know he did not like 'Around the web', since he believes it could be read as linking him directly to the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (see Letters). Even if such a misunderstanding might conceivably have arisen, the column carried criticism of Galloway's politics, not his personal hygiene or personal appearance.

Talking of personal appearance, I suppose it is more likely that the image of a heavily pregnant MP for Glasgow Kelvin - cleverly put together (literally) by our design team - might have upset him. George, this is known as *satire* and, once again, aims to expose what we believe is a *political* weakness. As we asked on our front page, "What would it take to persuade George Galloway to support a woman's right to choose?"

After all, Galloway should, in the words of comrade Manny Neira, know "the difference between his individual right to act according to his conscience and the right of citizens to be democratically represented". Why can't he answer such pertinent points, instead of going off in a huff?

Whereas I am sure he had every intention of allowing us to conduct an interview (before he decided to affect hurt, that is), I doubt if you could say the same for Liz Wheatley. SWP members are not usually prepared to enter into an exchange of views with the *Weekly Worker* - the very notable exception being councillor Michael Lavalette, who has consistently spoken to us frankly and openly.

Leading SWP members such as Rob Hoveman and Candy Udwin have in the past only agreed to be interviewed if questions are provided in writing, with the carefully considered responses delivered to us a day or so later. Sometimes they have declined to answer certain questions altogether.

I was a little dubious, then, when the *Weekly Worker* received an invitation to interview comrade Wheatley from Sean Thompson - a prominent, non-SWP Respect campaigner in Camden and Barnet (see Letters, May 6). Comrade Thompson provided me with Liz's mobile phone number and I was determined to ask her views on, amongst other things, the suggestion that she should consider standing down in favour of the Labour candidate, Lucy Anderson, who has a reputation

as an anti-war, anti-Blairite leftwinger. We had, after all, already published comrade Anderson's side of the story (*Weekly Worker* April 29).

I did manage to speak to comrade Wheatley, very briefly, on three occasions (her phone was mostly switched off). On two of those she was "just on my way out", while on the third she could not speak, as she was at work. But she was never able to suggest a time when she *would* be available.

I was very pleased to get hold of comrade Wheatley early on Friday evening, since that gave us the whole weekend to find a suitable 20-minute gap in her busy schedule. Unfortunately, there seemed to be none - all she could suggest was I try again on Sunday afternoon, even though she would probably not be available - a stall had been organised, but she could not remember the time. She rejected my alternative proposal for 9.30 on Sunday morning, since "I have to have some time to myself". Needless to say, her phone was once again switched to voicemail when I tried on Sunday afternoon and she did not return my call.

Why are our SWP comrades so reluctant to be interviewed? Because they know we will ask them about things they would rather not talk about. Such as their diplomatic silence over the question of abortion, or their dropping of once cherished principles like a worker's wage and open borders. They have no confidence whatsoever in their own ability to defend these positions in any genuine exchange of views.

Unfortunately that does not say much for their capacity to act as people's tribunes. Imagine Respect making a national impact and coming under the scrutiny of hostile media hacks. How would Liz fare on *Newsnight*, faced with a predatory Jeremy Paxman? ●

Peter Manson

North East Call for open borders

Respect's campaign road show for the European parliament elections came to Teesside, in the North East regional constituency, for the first time on Tuesday May 18.

Around 40 people attended a rally in Middlesbrough, chaired by local anti-war activist Pete Smith and addressed by the two candidates topping Respect's regional list - journalist Yvonne Ridley and Socialist Workers Party member Yunus Bakhsh.

The North East is probably the region least likely to see electoral success for the coalition because, even if it attracts a respectable vote, it will require nearly a quarter of the total poll to win one of only three seats up for grabs.

Yvonne Ridley, who attracted international headlines after being captured by the Taliban during the Afghan conflict and who has recently embraced the Islamic faith, focused her speech on the hypocrisy of the US-UK justification for the war against Iraq. The only real weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East were held by the world's sixth largest nuclear power, Israel, which she described as a "disgusting terrorist state" that had formed alliances with oppressive rightwing regimes such as Turkey under the generals and South Africa in the apartheid era. "Why should everyone else in the region have to submit to the will of America?" she asked, claiming that the White House was

effectively being run by Israel.

Comrade Bakhsh started with the outrages committed by the US-UK occupation forces, but broadened out the issues to attack New Labour's failure to represent the interests of "ordinary working people". Tony Blair's government, he argued, was a far-right regime modelled on Thatcherism and committed to a neoliberal agenda of privatisation. The UK had the most restrictive trade union laws in Europe and Labour had even criticised a conservative French government for objecting to Marks and Spencers' decision to close its Paris store without consulting the workforce.

The government's approach to asylum-seekers was "feeding hysterical press coverage" that demonised people who came to this country to work and contribute to society and treated them as if they were criminals. He highlighted the problem of Islamophobia, saying that, although he was now an atheist, he was from a Muslim background and he had experienced such prejudice on the streets of Newcastle himself.

Comrade Bakhsh rejected the idea that the Labour Party could be reclaimed by the left, saying that it offered nothing to working class people. Respect, on the other hand, was a "working class organisation" and a "party" that offered a real alternative.

Questions asked from the floor covered a range of issues, including

Respect's lack of a detailed policy programme, environmental concerns, the EU constitution, whether voting Liberal Democrat would be a more effective way of giving Labour a 'bloody nose', and the candidates' views on the principles of a worker's wage for elected representatives and the abolition of immigration controls.

Yvonne Ridley was vague on whether she would accept a worker's wage if elected, arguing that MEPs' allowances should be tripled so that they could employ more support staff to help them research issues more thoroughly and represent their constituents more effectively. Comrade Bakhsh pointed out that the average worker ought to be getting a higher wage than they currently received, let alone what their representatives were paid. There should be no 'political class' at all, he argued: society should be run by ordinary working people, not a higher paid elite.

Both candidates expressed their support for the principle of open borders. Ridley, the first candidate on the regional list, felt that everyone should have the right to move around freely, not just the "boss class". Bakhsh argued that there should be no borders at all because states were artificial constructions. "It's not asylum-seekers who shut down the pits in this region," he observed.

Comrade Bakhsh said that he had never believed in the need for a detailed policy programme or blueprint -



Yvonne Ridley: free movement for all

"Ordinary working people should run society. They'd do it a damned sight better than the people who run it now." Working class people would look after the environment and protect communities from dangers such as the recent factory explosion in Glasgow much more effectively than big business could ever do. The rich were responsible for society's ills: "I don't give a toss what colour they are. They're to blame, not asylum-seekers."

The dreaded 's' word - socialism - was not mentioned by either speaker, but together they articulated views

well to the left of those publicly admitted by Respect's SWP-dominated leadership in recent times. Ridley appeared to believe that a successful electoral campaign could be based on little more than opposition to US foreign policy, whereas Bakhsh was keen to emphasise the need for a more fundamental change in the way society is run, towards one that is controlled by the working class.

It remains to be seen whether their message will have been noticed by North East voters come June 10 ●

Steve Cooke

THE LEFT



seeing red

Regular column of the RED Platform of the CPGB.
For Republicanism, Equality and Democracy!
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Polls apart?

Peter Manson makes a serious attempt to critique the stance taken by Red Platform comrades on Respect (*Weekly Worker* May 6). His argument goes something like this. The political positions taken by Respect do not constitute a qualitative break with the positions taken by a variety of different groups - the Socialist Alliance, Socialist Labour Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales and Scottish Socialist Party - we have critically supported in elections in recent years. Therefore, it is sectarian to place conditions on our support for the unity coalition.

We beg to disagree. Not only does the populist programme of Respect mark a new low in terms of political positions; it also sharply deviates from what made those other formations, despite their obvious political shortcomings, supportable. That is attempting to organise the working class on socialist politics, whilst, in the case of the SA and SSP, a clear recognition of the necessity of uniting divided forces of the left.

Respect, therefore, marks the negation of what might be called the socialist alliance project. Its strategy of uniting with non-working class and non socialist forces marks a qualitative break from the method adopted by socialists in recent years. We do not look at this 'project' as some golden era of partyism and principle, but it marked a real step forward. Respect, in this sense, is a real step backwards.

Let us not underestimate how far the Socialist Workers Party has travelled to the right in recent times. Look at what Tony Cliff had to say about the electoralism of the SLP in an interview with Chris Nineham (*Socialist Review* November 1996): "Scargill's ideas reflect

electoralism. He speaks in parliamentary terms - for example, he says we need a bill for a four-day working week - but what about the real struggle in the here and now? At the SLP conference someone moved a motion against immigration controls and Scargill argued to reject it. Of course he used a leftwing argument - what if a fascist wants to come in? - but everyone knows that immigration controls are used against black people."

How the Old Man was correct! Yet the present-day SWP/Respect has gone way beyond the electoralism of the SLP in its heyday. Even what you might consider less controversial issues, like abortion, do not merit even a mention in Respect's manifesto.

Whatever the economic errors Cliff made to justify not standing in elections, his point was a very good one. Perhaps, I am more Cliffite than today's SWP.

Although the turn to electoralism began when Cliff was alive, its early orientation was rather different than what it is in June 2004. This is what Lindsey German had to write in the late 1990s about the electoralism of some sections of the European far left: "Since the downturn in class struggle from the mid-1970s, some of the biggest groups have retreated into electoral politics as their major orientation. This has not only led them into alliances with non-socialists such as the Greens; it has also led them to judge their success inside the working class movement by the number of votes they receive, rather than by their underlying strength in the factories and workplaces."

"This has led in turn to their elevating individuals who achieve electoral success above anyone else. Yet this only builds up the notion of MPs or councillors as the most important people in the movement" (my emphasis *Socialist Review* June 1998).

From today's vantage point such a statement is comical. Isn't this the Lindsey who was so disappointed when the non-socialist Green Party refused to enter into a pact with Respect? Isn't this the Lindsey who bows and scrapes to George Galloway? Isn't this the Lindsey who has so assiduously courted the mosque, MAB and now, apparently, the homophobic People's Justice Party in Birmingham?

Yet such hypocrisy is not really comical. It is tragic. Today the SWP is a deeply disoriented party, frustrated by its failure to break out of the far-left ghetto, despite its key role in the anti-war movement. For all the hype about being able to humiliate Blair on June 10, its popular frontist attempt to reach out to non-working class forces, reveals a pro-



Tony Cliff:
what about the real struggle?

found pessimism about the prospects for socialists.

It is the business of communists to state the truth about Respect. This is not because we want to score points over the SWP. Rather because we want to reorientate the dedicated militants of the SWP to the principled position of fighting for a unified, democratic centralist, all-Britain Communist Party. This is the future, not Respect.

We do SWP members no favours by claiming that Respect marks no qualitative break from the socialist alliance project. In doing so we demean the achievements of the SA and actually make it more difficult to persuade SWP members that Respect marks a retreat from independent working class politics.

Jack Conrad put it succinctly in 'Party notes' following the January 25 Respect conference: "The willingness, the enthusiasm, to trade away or abandon one principle after another and substitute platitudes for concrete demands is a slippery slope. Both Rees and Galloway appear to think that, the less Respect has to say, the more it will attract votes. Hence principles which are solemnly proclaimed one year become merely matters of private belief, or taste, the next."

"The implication is clear: only by moving further and further to the right can the left garner votes - a caricature of what the SWP used to say about the sorry course plied by successive generations of Labourites" (*Weekly Worker* January 29).

Peter says that we need to start from where the left is, not from where we would like it to be. We disagree with his method. We start from what the working class needs and Respect is not it in any shape or form. This is why Red Platform refuses to give unconditional backing to Respect •

Cameron Richards

Exclusive body language

An open letter to Martin Thomas of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty

Martin

What has come between us, comrade? You never write, you never call ...

It all started so promisingly. Early in 2003, as an 'indie' in the Socialist Alliance, I wrote a letter for publication both in *Solidarity* and the *Weekly Worker*, praising the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the Communist Party of Great Britain for their open press, and criticising them for indulging a foolish dispute about the Leedsgate affair (see both papers *passim ad nauseum*, as *Private Eye* used to say). You rather spoilt my thesis by not printing my letter, which appeared only in the *Weekly Worker* (February 13 2003), but you did reply to me personally.

How we talked. I have kept and treasured every email. They culminated in your personal invitation to the 2003 AWL conference: which I found interesting politically and enjoyable socially. As an IT worker, I even attended your subcommittee discussing work on your website, and am still on your internal *awl-website* electronic distribution list. (I've mentioned this a few times, but these days nobody in the AWL seems to care what I say. I try not to be bitter. But I think comrade Janine Booth deserves better technical support than she's getting.)

I made friends. When I finally decided that my political home was in the CPGB, I was reassured that this wouldn't come between us: but how quickly some forget.

It was with warm anticipation that I emailed you on March 29 seeking an invitation to the 2004 AWL conference. I explained I'd enjoyed last year's event, and wished to write a report of this important gathering of socialists in the *Weekly Worker*. Your curt reply is written on my heart. I quote it in full: "We'll discuss it." Then silence. On April 27 I sent a reminder: still no response. I sat alone listening to *I will survive*. Finally, I cornered you at the London May Day demonstration.

You told me that you had come to a collective decision to refuse me entry. Collective? To be rejected by an individual is painful: but by a formal committee convened for the purpose? That hurts. I asked why.

You explained that you were unhappy with the way the *Weekly Worker* reported AWL events. You had no complaints about my reports in the paper - just unspecified 'others'. I argued that we obviously reserved the right to be critical: surely open political debate was close to both our hearts (you see how I always credit you with the best intentions?)

You quickly agreed, but said it wasn't political disagreement you feared. You were particularly offended by a reference we apparently made to the "body language" of some of your comrades at an AWL meeting in a previous issue.

The phrase stuck in my mind, and so I consulted the *Weekly Worker* archives. You are quite right: Mark Fischer, describing the attitude of AWL members towards the Socialist Alliance, wrote:

"The move into the SA has clearly not been without its problems for this group. Certainly, amongst its leading members in London, it is fairly easy to distinguish those who are more reluctant participants, often simply by negative body language and impatient face-gurning at meetings. Indeed, differences within the AWL have become more pronounced during this fluid and exacting period."

But, Martin, he wrote this on February 8 2001: over three years ago. Aside from



Martin Thomas: never calls

the issue of whether comrade Fischer's rather mild comments really warrant our exclusion, you've been nursing this pique for rather a long time, haven't you? And, as you said, CPGB comrades have been invited to AWL conferences in 2002 and 2003. What is the use of complaining that they didn't take up such invitations and then, when an invitation is actually sought, excluding us?

All of this I could understand if the AWL had simply decided to have an entirely internal event this year. Clearly, every organisation has the right to talk privately. But as fate would have it, as I stood reeling from the shock of rejection amongst the flags of May Day, who should turn up but Steve Freeman of the Revolutionary Democratic Group. Hearing us discuss the conference, he innocently asked, "Oh yes, will I be receiving an invitation?"

If I referred to your body language at this point, would I be reopening old wounds? I don't think I've ever seen anyone struggling with embarrassment quite as exquisite as yours at that moment. You unconsciously took a physical step back, as if considering taking to your heels. "I can't remember what we decided," you claimed. And yet I note that comrade Freeman was invited.

So, to put it simply, it was a political exclusion. How else can I put it? It was not an internal meeting, as at least one other group was present (and how many others have there been, Martin? My blood runs cold) but the CPGB was excluded because you were worried about what we might say in the *Weekly Worker*.

You promised me an email formally explaining your reasons. It never came.

Am I to be left to conclude that, after all, hell hath no fury like an AWLer whose body language has been questioned - and who was determined not to face open political criticism and debate?

Why wasn't I allowed to report the conference, Martin?

With communist greetings,

Manny Neira

Communist Party of Great Britain



Lindsey German:
retreated into electoralism

Postscript: Missing 'Party democracy'?

The Red Platform originally planned to run another article in 'Seeing red', but the editor, comrade Peter Manson, decided that to publish comrade Richards's reply to his own criticism of our politics in addition to our planned 'Seeing red' would give the platform "too much prominence" in this issue, and insisted we ran one or the other. We strongly disagree. The Red Platform represents over a 10th of the CPGB's membership, and democratic norms suggest the right to proportional representation in our paper: actually more than a page every week.

We have, in fact, sought far less than this in the two previous issues, but, as the editor himself chose to write a piece criticising our politics, we feel we should have been allowed a full page this week to deal with his arguments, and continue our series on the points of our founding statement. Given the insistence that we run one piece or the other, we have chosen to reply to comrade Manson's critique here, but our full argument on this question, plus the article we planned to run (ironically, on the subject of 'Party democracy'), can be found on our website, at www.cpgb.org.uk/red/democracy •

ESF

Government and opposition

Members of the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Action are fond of accusing us of writing reports that are “too negative”. Apparently we focus “only on the problems” and “not the progress”. The more inane even say we aim to “destroy the ESF”. And, of course, the fact that the *Weekly Worker* regularly and accurately covers developments in the ESF has been used to impose a veil of secrecy. This absurd control-freakery means that not even affiliated organisations are allowed to know who else has signed up or which organisations have donated money.

But I doubt even those comrades would be able to put a positive spin on what happened at the latest organising committee on May 16. Attended by just over 50 people, the meeting highlighted the fact that relations between the different organisations involved in the ESF are getting worse not better. On the one side there is the SWP-SA ‘government’ and on the other the ‘democratic opposition’ - there are now very few who even try to sit in the middle, not belonging to one camp or the other. Quite frankly the reason for this division lies completely with the SWP-SA who have proved quite incapable of bringing others on board. The only response to criticism the SWP-SA bloc knows is bureaucratic exclusion and ostracism - which unsurprisingly is not taken kindly by an opposition which is both growing and hardening - it now meets before ESF events.

Not that we do not have important differences with some of the forces involved in the ‘opposition’ - a lot come from anarchist backgrounds and have a distinct anti-party (*any* party, not just the SWP) outlook. Others represent the NGO sector and have an approach that is basically reformist. But there are also a good few people who describe themselves as socialists and communists. And all of them are united in their desire to establish a more democratic, open and transparent ESF process. None of them are afraid to openly debate their methods of organisation (as opposed to the SWP and SA) and they have more of a chance of getting new groups involved into the ESF than the ‘government’. Take, for example, the Europe Creative Forum: around 600 people attended each of their two events, which were used to promote the London ESF.

On the other hand, the SWP-SA have focused heavily on getting first Ken Livingstone and then the official trade union structures on board and have been unsuccessful in attracting new forces. Although there is always the possibility that other organisations have indeed affiliated and simply do not show up at our organising meetings. Unfortunately, we are not allowed to know ... anyway May 16 featured all the same old faces.

It got off to a bad start when the agenda was debated for 45 minutes - without a conclusive outcome. Members of the opposition had understood that the agenda - as discussed by the coordinating committee a few days earlier - would focus first on some of the pressing practical issues. How much money has been pledged and by whom? How will the website be run? How are we going to decide who should staff our office? At the moment, it is staffed by four ‘seconded’ volunteers, who have been appointed as a *fait accompli* from amongst the ‘governing’ bloc. Once we have enough money (which is still short), there is supposed to be a formal job application process.

But for this to happen, we would need

With only five months left to go before our European Social Forum in London, things are still lagging behind. The latest meeting of the organising committee on May 16 highlighted some of the problems we still face. **Tina Becker** reports

ESF diary

Every Thursday, 10am - coordinating committee, City Hall, Greater London Authority.
Saturday and Sunday, May 22-23, Rome - ‘Proposals for another Europe - towards the London European Social Forum’.
Saturday and Sunday, May 29-30, Paris - international programme working group. Details to be confirmed.
Saturday and Sunday, June 19-20, Berlin - next European ESF assembly. Friday reserved for meetings of smaller working groups.

to know if and when we can expect any money. Yet this is still being treated as secret information for the eyes of the ‘government’ only. The word is that the GLA will give a (low) six-figure sum, which will be more or less equalled by donations from various trade union organisations. This would come roughly to £450,000 - the rest of the £1.5 million needed would have to be raised from registration fees. But such questions are not for public consumption and so practicalities and finance are always pushed right down the agenda - normally falling off altogether.

Comrades from the SWP and SA therefore insisted that we should focus on the five or six programmatic themes, which will serve as a guide for the ESF programme: the plan is that all plenary sessions, seminars and workshops would fall under one or another of the themes (or axes, as they are called by our European comrades). Not surprisingly, this item turned out to be the only thing we discussed. It is, of course, an important debate. However, not only has it been debated at length by the programme group and the coordinating group, but the themes will almost certainly be changed by our European comrades at the international programme working group, which meets on May 29-30 in Paris. But SA comrades especially were very keen that it should be the main item on the agenda.

By the way, has anybody seen Redmond O’Neill recently? Ken Livingstone’s appointed adviser for transport (and a longstanding member of Socialist Action) has been the leading person in the process right from the start. However, he has not turned up for any ESF meetings for almost a month. The couple of GLA representatives who still attend our meetings generally do not intervene, but play facilitating roles - taking minutes, making photocopies, etc. This is the role they *should* indeed be playing, but it seems Ken Livingstone has chosen to keep a low profile for the time being, maybe because the mayoral and GLA elections are now looming large. Undoubtedly, comrade O’Neill still pulls the strings in the background and makes

sure his SA comrades argue for the things that are important to Ken - although none of them come close to being as eloquent or authoritative as Redmond.

While most of these six themes proved uncontroversial, there was debate around two questions. Naima Bouteldja from Just Peace UK suggested that the anti-racism theme should not just state our opposition to ‘racism, islamophobia and fascism’, but also include ‘anti-semitism’. A muslim herself, she pointed out that anti-semitism is a very real phenomena, particularly in eastern Europe, and should not be ignored. She was backed up by up to a third of people in the meeting, but the SWP - arguing that anti-semitism was not really an issue - would have none of it. The chair, Rahul Patel (SWP and London Union), ruled ‘no consensus’ and so the debate was finished after 10 minutes or so.

However, another suggested amendment received quite different treatment from comrade Patel. Anne Kane (SA and Abortion Rights) reported that a meeting of women’s organisations interested in the ESF had met and decided that they wanted the theme on democracy amended: the formulation ‘Demanding democracy, citizenship and equality’ should have the addition of ‘and justice for women’. Interestingly, the comrades are very much against a women’s day at the ESF, as happened in Florence and Paris - but they are extremely insistent that this particular formulation finds its way into the theme’s title.

A wide range of people spoke against this suggestion - if women are mentioned separately, why not also fight for ‘justice’ for disabled people, migrants or black people? Surely ‘equality’ includes them all in any case? Somebody also pointed out (correctly) that this theme was supposed to deal mainly with the question of Europe, which is not even mentioned in the wording. It is of course possible that any GLA donation is linked to particular themes being highlighted in the ESF programme (which would explain the SWP-SA comrades’ absolute insistence) but they certainly did not say so.

Instead, they resorted to demagoguery. Louise Hutchins, for example, said it was ‘completely outrageous’ that people should argue ‘against what women want’. It was ‘completely absurd’ and ‘destroying the ESF process’ (again). Her SA comrade, Sarah Colborne (officially representing the Palestine Solidarity Campaign), went further: ‘I really cannot understand this. Everybody who opposes this amendment is simply against women’s liberation.’ Obviously this was greeted with the contempt it deserved. Come back, Redmond, all is forgiven!

Instead of ruling ‘no consensus’, noting the disagreement in the minutes and moving on to the next issue, comrade Patel tried over and over again to push the amendment through. After a fruitless debate of more than 40 minutes, he then tried to impose it by stating that ‘only affiliated organisations are allowed to decide on this issue’. This led to predictable



Ken Livingstone: low profile - for the moment

chaos, where both sides hurled abuse containing the word ‘fuck’ at each other in an impressive range of variations (SWP comrades might not dare spell the word, but they certainly know how to pronounce it - though, to be frank, overexcited members of the opposition outdid them in terms of both volume and quantity).

The opposition raised a number of reasons why such a procedure would be highly undemocratic. Not only do we not know which organisations are properly affiliated, but there are a large number of groups who have not yet joined simply because the company structure has still not been finalised. NGOs like Friends of the Earth and the World Development Movement insist they cannot be held responsible for any financial losses - an ESF company is supposed to protect all organisations. Furthermore, affiliation applications are taking weeks to be processed - *Red Pepper* comrades said they were still awaiting official confirmation. Other groups stated that they simply do not want to affiliate just to ‘hand their money over’ to the SWP-SA, who refuse to be held accountable in what they are doing with it. Incidentally, the CPGB was one of the first groups to affiliate, even if it had to be done under the name of *Weekly Worker* (as opposed to the first two ESFs in France and Italy, the British ESF now prohibits political parties from openly participating).

After almost an hour, comrade Patel finally gave up and it was agreed that the formulation would be left untouched - by which time we had exactly 15 minutes left to get through the rest of the agenda. The only item we covered was our representation on the international programme working group. Alex Gordon, for the RMT union, put forward a slate of four people that seems to have been discussed with the SWP-SA prior to the meeting -

judging by the total absence of anybody from the ‘opposition’. He suggested Jonathan Neale (SWP), Sarah Colborne, a trade union rep (“probably myself”) and somebody from the anti-war movement (“Kate Hudson or Andrew Burgin”). Not surprisingly, this was thrown out pretty quickly. All in all, eight people expressed an interest in attending (the other four were Naima Bouteldja, Dave Timms from WDM, Helena Kotkowska from Attac and Anne Kane). However, by this time, the atmosphere had got so poisonous that no decision was made. So it looks like we might get represented by all of them in Paris - at least a fair sign of the mistrust that exists.

Not surprisingly, this mistrust has also led to some groups starting to plan for counter-events and add-on meetings during the official ESF. For example, the semi-attached group, Let’s Link, has recently booked Conway Hall for Saturday October 16. This was described at the coordinating committee meeting of May 13 as “completely outrageous” (Chris Nineham) and “sabotaging the ESF” (Milena Buyum from SA and National Assembly against Racism). Comrade Nineham (SWP) suggested that “we should send them a very strongly worded letter, demanding that they immediately hand over the booking and commit themselves never to do anything like this again”. A typically arrogant formulation, which was quite rightly amended to “We should ask them if they would not prefer to be part of the official ESF structure”, as suggested by *Red Pepper*’s Oscar Reyes.

What this highlights, of course, is that some groups simply do not feel represented by the official ESF structures and will therefore do their own thing. Something best rectified by inclusion and ending control-freakery, not hectoring ultimatums ●

Fighting fund

Taking us for granted

“Well done for taking up the question of abortion rights,” says JP, who shows his appreciation with a £10 cheque, while TL commends us for our stance on Iraq and sends £20.

They were among a number of comrades who sent us gifts via the post - a further five readers mailed us cheques or postal orders for £10. So no big contributions this week, but it still amounted to £80 all told. Meanwhile another tenner was donated over the web, using PayPal - thanks go to comrade RS.

However, once again it has to be said that the facility is very much underused. RS was the only one to take advantage of it last week - incredible, when you consider that 8,498 read us online. While that figure

compares with previous weeks - hits are remaining steady in the mid-8,000s - web donations are few and far between. A case of too many comrades taking us for granted, surely.

And there is no room for complacency - we have just £230 towards our £500 monthly target with two thirds of May already behind us. Doesn’t anyone out there in cyberspace fancy giving us a financial hand in the production of the paper they read so avidly every week? Just scroll down the home page to ‘Your financial support needed’, click on ‘Make a donation’ and follow the instructions - it’s easy, but don’t forget to have your credit or debit card ready ●

Robbie Rix

Ask us for a bankers’ order form, or send cheques payable to ‘Weekly Worker’

COMMENT

Kick 'em when they're down

You know you are onto something when you wake up on a Sunday morning to see Denis Healey on television bemoaning the closeness of Labour's relationship with the United States. This man was one of the main architects of that Atlanticist link. Now he is challenging the entanglement of his party with the US right.

And you also know you are onto something when you read Roy Hattersley in *The Guardian* stating that the big four unions have been too silent in the last year and must now stand up and make their voice heard in the party.

These are both straws in the wind, showing the extent to which the mainstream Labour right have become disillusioned with New Labour and especially with its role in the Iraq war. Clearly Blair is increasingly isolated.

So we need to address this question - to what extent should the left go along with the call for Blair's head, given that, if he goes, he will almost certainly be replaced by Gordon Brown? This is a man who helped create New Labour and has supported it throughout. If anything, on economic questions, he has been to the *right* of Blair in the sense that he has been more ideologically grounded. He has uncritically supported every aspect of Blair's war on Iraq and the subsequent disastrous occupation. Is that who we want to lead the Labour Party?

Hattersley actually refers to this dilemma when he correctly points out that "for a year" the new general secretaries of major unions, "once excoriated as dangerous extremists", have actually "been depressingly silent ... they held on to nurse for fear of something worse" (*The Guardian* May 17).

The answer is a complex one. But I am convinced that we should go onto the attack. We should not only call for Blair to go. To the extent that we are able, we should struggle to take a lead in that campaign. At the same time, we must sow no illusions at all in what will probably come after him, given the current balance of forces in the party. However, we should hit our enemy at their weakest point. The weakest point of the Labour right is New Labour and the most vulnerable part of New Labour is Blair himself, at least for the moment.

By isolating and bringing down Blair, the movement will be playing a role in reasserting the role of the Labour Party as a party of labour, rather than merely an appendage of big business and the US right.

New Labour represents the power of the big bourgeoisie reflected within the workers' movement, in a situation where our movement has suffered decisive defeats, starting with the miners' strike and the rise of Kinnock. It represents the victory of Thatcherism - not only in the Tory Party and the country, but also over the Labour Party itself. As Geoffrey Howe once put it, that was her greatest triumph. In that sense, New Labour *embodies* the defeats of the labour movement.

New Labour's aim is to destroy the Labour Party as a party of labour and to create a US-style system, where we have two explicitly bourgeois parties. It has gone a long way towards success in that reactionary project, but it has not yet succeeded. It is true that Blair, unlike others of the right, including some New Labour people, has always been particularly contemptuous of the structures of the party. He never really had to bother about them.

However, from his point of view that is ultimately a weakness rather than a strength. It is something we have to pay great attention to in our struggle with him and what he represents. Because he is seen as an alien figure, he is unable to call on

centres of support within the movement when New Labour runs into trouble. Therefore, he is more vulnerable in this crisis.

We have to be careful. On the one hand, 'Kick 'em when they're down' is a good Marxist slogan. On the other, what Brown represents is New Labour, but speaking more in the language of the Labour Party itself - a dangerous false friend, in other words. This is the contradiction, of course. Brown does represent New Labour dressed in Labour Party clothes, able to draw on support from sections of the trade union bureaucracy in a way that Blair cannot - indeed has never even seen the need to do.

Yet, even if Brown replaces Blair, we cannot characterise that simply as a negative development. We should give absolutely no political support to Brown under any political conditions. However, the process of bringing down Blair would weaken the right and give impetus to the labour movement and to those who are seeking to reassert the class character of the Labour Party. We should take a full part in the process and seek to put our own - socialist, working class - stamp on the outcome.

Big four make their move

Unison, Amicus, the TGWU and GMB - the big four unions that have been scandalously quiet for the past year - have *at last* come out with a statement that appears to be attacking some of the fundamentals of New Labour and reasserting the party's class character (see Kevin Maguire in *The Guardian* May 18).

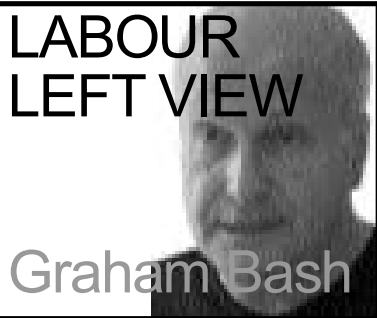
That is very positive, but it does raise some questions for the Labour Representation Committee project (see *Weekly Worker* March 18). It is an opportunity for the LRC to constructively engage with the big four and sections of the trade union bureaucracy moving into conflict with New Labour. However, the fact is that this initiative has been taken separately by these major unions.

The separation is regrettable. We have to combat that through building links between the unions, and between the constituency Labour Parties and the unions. We have to fight for positive *control* over the trade union tops; we can never have any faith or trust in the trade union bureaucracy, however left they pose. But we can make sure that they are subject to the pressures we can exert in the wider movement.

So, the big four development is positive. A section of the trade union bureaucracy is reasserting itself against the New Labourites. But this move to challenge Blairism has been made without any real input or influence from the Labour and trade union left. In effect, we are unable to engage these union leaderships from within; in a sense we are coming from the outside.

It is urgent that we get involved in this process, however. It needs our *politics* in the mix. The trade unions, in the form of the bureaucracies, have started to flex some muscle: good. But the left should not be satisfied with the political programmes of the trade unions leaderships - we have a different, wider agenda.

Labour was born a rotten, bureaucratized, rightwing party. We must have no illusions. Yet the task remains to build a party of labour based on the trade unions. To the extent we can, this must be done through the structures of the one that still exists. If necessary, we must start anew. So our role as a Labour and trade union left must be to set a minimum political programme that *defines* that party of labour. That is what we are in the process of trying



ing to create in the LRC - a minimum *labour* programme, not a Trotskyist transitional programme or anything like it.

This minimum programme sets out the basis on which we could start to rebuild the links between the constituency parties and the trade unions. To what extent we can save the existing structures is something that will be resolved by struggle: if we cannot, then we must build a new mass party of labour with organic links to the class itself.

There is simply no chance that any one of the socialist sects could substitute itself for that process of 'tectonic shifts', to borrow Prescott's phrase, in the class and the mass organisations it has built over generations of struggle.

No Respect

With the 'super Thursday' elections bearing down on us, I have to revisit the thorny question of Respect and electoral challenges to Labour.

The failure of the Socialist Alliance and the looming debacle for Respect at the polls is not primarily the fault of the socialist groups involved, although they make their own contributions of course. As I have said repeatedly in this column, there is simply *no electoral space for them within the movement while the Labour Party remains connected to the trade unions as the party of the organised working class*.

Spain illustrates an important point. There, if you were pro- or anti-war, there were parties that represented your views. If you were anti-, you could vote for the Spanish Socialist Party. In contrast, the British political scene is characterised by a crisis of representation - the working class and the left are totally unrepresented, other than at the margins of the Labour Party and in the wilderness outside it. The only realistic way of even *beginning* to resolve that crisis is to fight to ensure that Labour is that alternative voice of the working class.

I sympathise with socialists who cannot bring themselves to vote for Blairite warmongers, supporters of privatisation and other attacks on the working class. While I do not share their illusion that voting for a far-left sect represents any sort of alternative, I *do* share their revulsion at New Labour.

What I cannot understand is when a *non-Blairite, anti-war* candidate stands in the name of Labour Party - such as Ken Livingstone, for instance, for all his faults - that this is not regarded as significant, or a move forward for the left in general. In these circumstances, how can any socialist who is doing anything other than playing games support the candidature of Lindsey German?

Comrade German played a wonderful role in the Stop the War Coalition, no doubt. But she is not a serious candidate. Now, I am not talking up the numbers of non-Blairite candidates standing on a Labour ticket - but in the case of the London mayor and then one or two other candidates for the Greater London Authority, we do have them.

I make an appeal through this column for some common sense here. Our role as socialists is to critically engage with these people and the forces around them rather than support a no-hope electoral assault on them from a far left that will be lucky to score a couple of percentage points. Martin Sullivan wrote in your letters page last week that our comrades outside the ranks of Labour need to start acting as mature working class politicians rather than the champions of "brain-dead sectarianism" in our movement (*Weekly Worker* May 13).

Well said, that comrade ... ●

What we fight for

■ **Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists, anti-capitalists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.**

■ **The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but 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 have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.**

■ **Communists oppose the neo-conservative war plans of the Project for the New American Century and all imperialist wars 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'. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.**

■ **The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capitalism 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. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.**

■ **The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be readied to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.**

■ **Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.**

■ **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.**

■ **All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.**

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After BJP defeat neoliberalism is alive and well

CPI(M) treads fine line

Passions are running high in India. Last week saw the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress party and its allies defeat the governing hindu chauvinist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) - to the surprise of most of the world. Then there was pandemonium when Sonia Gandhi declined the post of prime minister, thus turning down the opportunity to become the fourth member of the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty to run India. Yes, a week is a very long time in Indian politics.

As the results from India's first all-electronic elections quickly tumbled in - with its 600-million-strong electorate - we saw consternation, mourning and rejoicing in equal measure. We read dramatic newspaper headlines like "Gandhi's communist allies send shares plunging", "Fear of Gandhi government prompts record market fall", "Hindu party to boycott Gandhi ceremony", "Sonia Gandhi promises secular rule", etc. Writing in *The Guardian*, the Indian-born author and 'anti-globalisation' political activist, Arundhati Roy, declared: "It cannot but be seen as a decisive vote against communalism and neoliberalism's economic 'reforms'" (May 14).

It is hard to disagree - either with Roy's assessment or the headlines. Upon hearing that the BJP had lost the general elections, the markets were seized with a "blind fear", as one Indian financial analyst put it. This "fear" was magnified tenfold, of course, by the prospect that a Congress-led coalition government would include the four main leftwing parties: the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the All-India Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party. Collectively this 'Left Front' bloc held 62 seats, representing 15% of the new parliament. The CPI(M) alone has 33 seats, making it the third largest single party in the house and a potential king-maker. Worried, the *Financial Times* speculated about the "risk that the coalition tail will wag the Congress party dog" (May 18). Unsurprisingly, the turmoil and uncertainty provoked by the election had its effect on the markets - on May 17 there was an 11% plunge in the benchmark 30-share Mumbai (formerly the Bombay Stock Exchange index) to 4,505.16 points, costing investors more than two trillion rupees (£25 billion). Naturally, this was immediately dubbed 'black Monday'.

Defence of India's secularist constitutional and political traditions from the ravages of BJP-sponsored hindu chauvinism - and communalism in general - has played a very important part in uniting the new disparate coalition government, which is to be formally known as the United Progressive Alliance. The 57-year-old, Italian-born, catholic-raised Sonia Gandhi had repeatedly emphasised that her coalition would be "inclusive, secular and united" - in stark contrast to the ultra-reactionary BJP, which during its eight years in power launched successive assaults on the idea and practice of secularism and religious pluralism. Indeed, the BJP and its even more crackpot allies have been responsible for promoting a hindu nationalism of the most deranged kind - and have not been shy to encourage, if not actively sponsor, communalist violence and murder. Given the grim and sav-

age communalist record of the BJP, the election of an avowedly secularist government undoubtedly represents a positive development.

However, we should not overestimate the degree of Congress's success, nor underestimate the extent to which the BJP still wields power. In strictly electoral-psephological terms, although Congress has increased its parliamentary tally from 112 to 145 seats, its share of the national vote actually *declined* - from 28.3% to 26.7%. With its 138 seats, the BJP, whose share of the popular vote dropped from almost 24% to 22%, is only marginally smaller than Congress in parliament. For sure, the new UPA coalition government will not have an easy time of it.

Clearly, the BJP has not gone away - nor will its nationalism and chauvinism. Arguably, the very fact that Sonia Gandhi felt compelled to turn down the position of prime minister bears testimony to its continued, baleful influence. From the moment it became evident that Congress had won the election, the BJP mounted a xenophobic propaganda offensive pushing the poisonous message that Gandhi was "not fit" to be prime minister of India because she was a "foreigner". In this vein Tarun Vijay, editor of the main pro-BJP newspaper, *Panchjanya*, fulminated: "We are a hindu nation with a muslim president and about to get a christian prime minister. No other democracy would allow this to happen." Subsequently, the BJP began agitating for a change in the constitution, so that only people born in India can become prime minister - just like in the United States, where only those born in the country are eligible for the post of president. Naturally as internationalists and democrats, communists call for the scrapping of all such nationalist eligibility rules.

Such xenophobic pressure may well have been too much to bear for Gandhi - that and perhaps haunting memories of her husband, Rajiv, and her mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, both assassinated as a result of communalist/sectarian antagonisms and state oppression. Whatever the case, it now seems almost certain that the new prime minister will be the 71-year-old colourless technocrat, and sikh, Manmohan Singh - a huge fan of Margaret Thatcher and one of the pioneers of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, which was taken up with such a vengeance by the BJP. Singh reassured the BBC - and the jittery markets - that the new government would continue to be "very investment-friendly", adding: "I wish to assure the investing community our policies will be pro-growth and pro-savings. We are not going to reverse the good work that was done in the past 10-12 years. Congress was committed to pursuing policies that would ensure that our financial markets perform their allotted tasks with efficiency, with utmost transparency".

The BJP's neoliberalism is dead, long live neoliberalism! Singh's pledge to continue the same economic policies is rather ironic. If Congress had not been able to reach out to the 300 million poor, both rural and urban, who have benefited hardly one jot from the information technology/call-centre 'boom' which has got bourgeois economists so excited, then it is unlikely that they would have won the election.

"India shining" - the BJP's disastrously misjudged campaign slogan - was a cruel slap in the face for the real, illiterate, desperate India that is *not* urbanite, online, hi-tech and happily surfing the web 24-7 in between its video-conferencing sessions and sojourns to Starbucks. Statistics tell a very different - chilling - story. Two-thirds of the Indian population live in the villages. More than half of the dirt poor - urban and rural - have no electricity or running water. They live in thatched houses and perhaps have to walk miles to fetch clean water. Farmers are steeped in debt, and 40% of the rural population have the same grain absorption level as sub-Saharan Africa - 47% of children under three suffer from malnutrition.

Growth in India's agriculture sector accounts for less than a quarter of GDP - even though two-thirds of its people live in the countryside. With annual population growth of 1.7%, this means that the incomes of India's rural masses have barely shifted since 1988.

More than 40% of the world's poorest people live in India - which according to World Bank criteria means living on less than \$1 a day. Of course, the BJP liked to boast of the 8% annual growth since 1998 in India's services sector - led by the computer software industry, most notably the ubiquitous Microsoft. However, India's IT sector amounts to fewer than one million employees in a total labour force of some 430 million people. Over the past five years we have seen India's labour force grow at an annual rate of 2% - thanks to the steady *proletarianisation* of the peasantry. But at the same time employment growth has averaged just half that. In practical terms this means that India is adding five million youths every year to its unemployment total. Depending on seasonal fluctuations, it is estimated that India has between 100 million to 200 million unemployed or underemployed people.

For the downtrodden Indian masses - crushed by poverty, ignorance and state power - the BJP's 'promise' of more of the same was less than inviting. No wonder Congress performed well. But Congress - whether eventually led by Singh or not - just offers up economic BJPism 'with a human face', for all its nice-sounding words about secularism, democracy and pluralism. After all, is this not the same Congress party that campaigned in the 1970s around the laudable slogans, "Remove poverty" and "Food, clothes and

roofs over their heads"?

Regrettably - tragically even - the Left Front parties do not have the politics or programme to liberate the masses. Indeed, in some respects, they have constituted themselves as part of the *problem* rather than the answer. Thanks to their grounding in 'official communist' history and general world outlook, the CPI, CPI(M), etc, still proffer up various reformist and centrist recipes - all of which, ultimately, derive from the JV Stalin national socialist cook book. Whatever the exact ideological, historical, schismatic origins of the two main left parties, they both believe that socialism is something that can be obtained within India itself.

Nevertheless there is a militant and sometimes heroic side to the history of communism in India. The CPI played an outstanding role in the struggle against British colonialism - only to be told by Moscow to align itself with the British during World War II. Despite that the CPI emerged as the second biggest party in elections after Indian independence. Certainly communism has deep roots amongst the organised section of the working class and poor peasantry. However, the main fault of the CPI has been its habitual tailism of Congress - which in the 1950s and 60s claimed to be pursuing a non-capitalist path of development at home and an non-aligned policy abroad. The CPI(M) began as a rebellion against this class collaboration, splitting when the CPI supported India against 'socialist' China in the 1962 border war.

The CPI(M) nowadays claims to "independently apply Marxism-Leninism to Indian conditions". This reflects its historic distance both from Moscow and Beijing. The CPI(M) has been prepared to run state governments - off and on in Kerala in the deep south, and almost uninterruptedly in West Bengal, where it has been in government since 1977. It has delivered some real and meaningful reforms. There was a radical land redistribution which saw the appropriation of the estates of big landlords and there is an inventive programme of food subsidies throughout the state which helps prevent starvation. But, though the organisations of the working class are relatively strong, the state remains desperately poor and millions are jobless.

The CPI(M) has tried to overcome this through encouraging the development of capitalism and, more to the point, by cre-



Sonia Gandhi: no

ating conditions conducive to big business. As *The Guardian* put it, "The party has been pragmatic in power" (May 15). And around half a dozen multinational companies have indeed set up operations in West Bengal. In other words the programmatic limitations of the CPI(M) have led it to adopt policies not substantially different to Ken Livingstone and left Labour in Britain.

The CPI(M) therefore treads a fine line between promoting the interests of its working class and poor peasant base and operating as a party of reform. Quite rightly it welcomes the defeat of the BJP and the return of secular government. It is also quite right to keep its distance from the Congress-led alliance which will presumably form the next government. However it is wrong to seek "a stable and viable government" by extending "support" to Congress "from outside" (<http://cpim.org/>). Any support should be purely episodic and in the general context of trying to build a viable left alternative to Congress. That is the best way to marginalise the BJP and the ultra-chauvinist right •

Eddie Ford

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