

weekly **worker**



Mike Macnair brands Tory free speech tsar Arif Ahmed a free speech for Tories only tsar

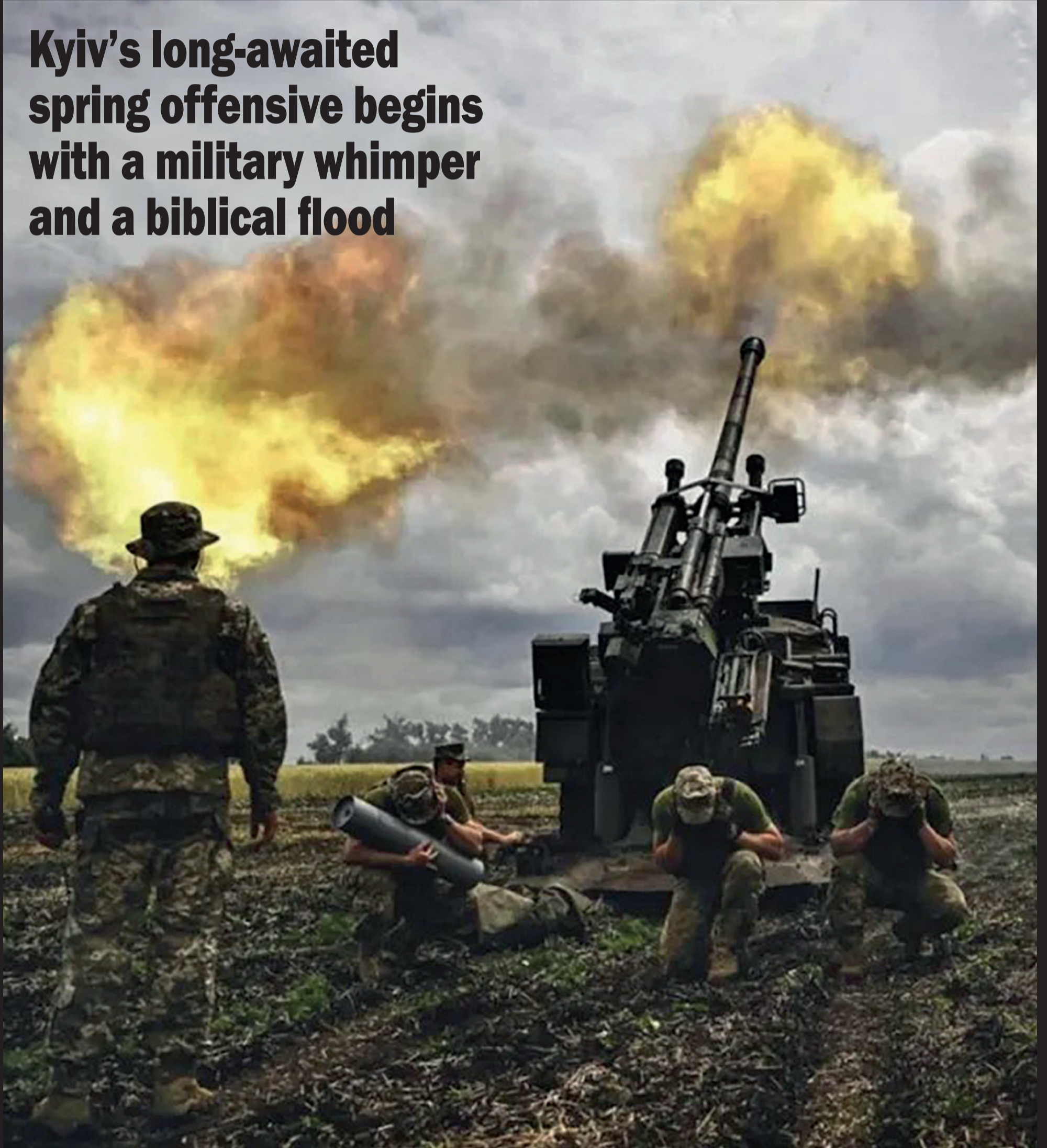
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No 1446 June 8 2023

Towards a mass Communist Party

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Kyiv's long-awaited spring offensive begins with a military whimper and a biblical flood



LETTERS



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

Diverted

Marx made assertions throughout his work, likely the result of time and space. I think he expected a level of honest intellectual discourse that is simply not possible in this day and age.

One of the assertions made by Marx is that oppressed nations stand in the same relation to oppressor nations as does the proletariat to the bourgeoisie. Marxists have spent a century and more putting the meat onto those bones.

But where is this monetary theory of inflation that Marx presents us? Where is the outline? Marx was clear that things that appear as monetary phenomena - that present themselves as monetary phenomena - are in fact the surface appearance of a deeper truth.

The monetary theory of inflation as an excess of liquidity is not a Marxian theory, but a bourgeois one, stemming from all their prejudices, interests, superficiality and false assumptions, and can be read in any of the mainstream, corporate media. One of the false assumptions is that these phenomena are somehow natural, eternal and always applicable to every given situation. They just arise like the seasons.

This bourgeois theory of inflation was trotted out endlessly to explain the inflation in Zimbabwe, for example - presented as a problem with the economic and financial mishandling of successive governments, rather than the result of western sanctions, US imperialism and economic warfare imposed on the nation, as well as droughts and other impacts. Reading between the lines of the oh-so-woke west, the natives simply shouldn't be trusted with important things like land ownership or financial instruments, and instead should leave everything to the higher beings! And if that makes me a Mugabe apologist so be it.

There are no monetary phenomena as such (though they can develop a life of their own): this is just the form of appearance or the mask, behind which lie power structures, social relations, system prerequisites, production processes, global institutions and rules, military bases, etc. Arthur Bough, in his reply to me (Letters, June 1), wants Marx to remain at the superficial level of analysis, as it serves the apologia.

To say that inflation is a monetary phenomenon based on excess liquidity is the distortion of Marx by Bough that I was referring to. In fact, it is a typical attempt by Bough to water Marx down - to reduce him to the level of an econometrician, rather than a radical critic with an historical perspective and understanding of power relations. Under Bough, these power relations become irrelevant, and everything boils down to technical, financial management.

I have criticised this about Bough before - the way he tries to reduce Marx to the bourgeois level. Bough seems intent on rescuing Marx from Marxism and reassuring the bourgeois that Marx is really just like them. I seem to remember Bough going out of his way to argue that Marx had a theory of inelastic demand, as if this was a pressing issue of Marxism! You really have to laugh.

I am happy to be called a Beijing apologist, as the battle currently taking place between the US empire, with assistance from its client states and the oppressed nations, is one between a future based on profit-

driven, neoliberal, hegemonic supremacy and a people-based, mutually cooperative, planned, anti-liberal order. It comes as no surprise which side of the fence Bough stands on.

I fully expect that Bough subscribes to the irrationalist, woke ideology and has absolutely nothing to offer in the way of criticism, as this is the perfect accompaniment to his pro-neoliberal, pro-imperialist outlook.

Steve Cousins
email

Trotskyist error

Mike Macnair makes a classic Trotskyist error when he suggests "Stalin made a zigzag" and "proceeded to steal a version of their [ie, the Left Opposition] clothes", when he launched the programme of mass collectivisation and rapid industrialisation from April 1929 ('A hundred years of muddle', May 15). This implies such a programme would have been correct in 1922-23 when it was indeed advocated by the Left Opposition, but that is absolutely wrong and reflects the errors made by the 'lefts' then and later by the 'rights'.

The programme of the 'lefts' in the early 1920s completely ignored the damage done to the Soviet economy in both industry and the countryside by the civil war. It would have led to economic disaster within the young Soviet Union, having to rely on its own resources to fund industrialisation, which could only have come from a shattered, shrunken peasant economy, which surely would have been completely destroyed by any attempt to collectivise and introduce socialist farming.

But that was always the 'left's' grand scheme. Socialism in one country was for them impossible, so why bother to even try? Let's nationalise everything that moves, let's completely abolish the market, let the state control every aspect of what little economic activity was taking place - this will either stimulate proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries or we will go down to heroic defeat.

However, this was *never* the strategy of the Leninist core of the Communist Party, headed first by Lenin, then later by Stalin. The New Economic Policy period initiated was intended to represent a *whole period* of "restoration of the national economy", where market relations were allowed to a certain degree, but only within certain limits: the state ensured that private trade remained within certain limits, that the role of the state was as a regulator of the market.

The so-called 'left' saw the NEP unambiguously as a 'retreat' which should be ended as soon as possible and mass collectivisation and industrialisation launched. But Lenin saw the NEP dialectically as a programme with specific aims and objectives: eg, "We are now retreating, going back as it were; but we are doing this in order, by retreating first, afterwards to take a run and make a more powerful leap forward. It was on this condition alone that we retreated in pursuing our New Economic Policy ... in order to start a most persistent advance after our retreat" (speech at a plenary session of the Moscow Soviet, November 20 1922).

It was precisely by the late 1920s that industry and agriculture as a whole had recovered to such a degree, that the party had made such good use of the NEP, that it became possible to organise that *change*, to successfully launch

that *offensive* against the growing capitalist elements in both town and country that Lenin had talked about. In fact it not only became *possible* but *essential* to launch mass collectivisation and rapid socialist industrialisation, to move from the period of restoration to a period of socialist reconstruction of the entire economy, to wage class struggle on a very broad front - against *all* the capitalist elements in the economy.

Lenin had *always* advocated a class alliance between the industrial proletariat and the mass of poor and middle peasants, against the capitalists, the landlords and the rich exploiter peasants, the kulaks - an alliance, of course, always opposed by the Trotskyists. Read any of Lenin's writing on the peasantry after 1917 and he *consistently* argues that the soviet regime had *first* to rely on the peasantry *as a whole*, including through immediate land reform, but, over time, to encourage the development of agriculture, which would itself lead to greater class differentiation and proletarianisation among the mass of the peasantry, and *then* enable the class struggle to be taken to the kulaks and socialist agriculture fully established and developed.

By 1928, capitalist elements in both industry and agriculture were growing in absolute terms (but not in relative terms, compared to socialist sectors) and, critically, were becoming strong enough to actively resist and oppose those socialist forms of ownership, production and distribution and the Soviet state itself. In the towns and cities, there were increased attacks and sabotage of socialist industry. In the countryside, while the richer peasants, the kulaks, had previously freely given grain to the Soviet state up to 1927, from 1928 this was being withheld due to the pricing policy of the state, and the kulak class by now had sufficient strength to manipulate the market and in effect threaten to starve the urban population.

Of course, by then, the 'left' had been completely routed and dispersed; the principal danger was from the 'right', who made the precise equal and opposite error to the 'left', having complete faith in the market to develop the productive forces in both town and country and that the economy would somehow 'grow into socialism'. Plus, they completely failed to understand the rising class danger from the capitalist elements in both sectors and their relations with ominous class changes at the international level.

The 'right', of course, opposed the mass collectivisation and rapid industrialisation launched in 1929, which both rapidly transformed and developed the whole socialist economy *and* represented that very broad class offensive against the capitalist elements Lenin had talked of earlier as part of the NEP strategy.

It's fascinating that both the so-called 'lefts' and the 'rights' appeared incapable of dialectical thinking: every process or event has a dual aspect, interacting and determining each other, and in an ongoing process. That evolutionary changes can both create the conditions and necessitate revolutionary changes to those conditions. Fortunately Lenin and the Leninist core of the party headed by Stalin *were* capable of the dialectical thinking, theory and practice that is essential for any socialist revolutionary.

It would have been wrong to completely abolish the market in 1922-23 and implement total socialist relations of production. The market had both positive and negative aspects, which had to be kept under

tight state control and regulation. It would have been dangerous, indeed fatal for socialism, to have allowed market relations and the capitalist sectors to continue to grow after 1928.

By 1928-29, the economic conditions for socialist transformation *had* been created *and* it had become essential to launch socialist revolutionary transformations in both the industrial and agricultural bases of what then very quickly became a strong and mighty, socialist USSR.

Andrew Northall
Kettering

Peace-bringers

Class politics is the only game in town. The mental infrastructure of the western so-called 'middle class' is diseased and provides every atom of the 'atom bomb approach' of western regimes. This ideological insanity is most pronounced in the UK and US - the biggest nutcases on the planet.

They're taking the human race to the edge of nuclear extinction through their concocted confrontation with Russia and China. We will never get working class militias in the UK until the colonial regime is destroyed. This calls for a resistance movement similar to the French resistance in the war against Hitler's Nazi Germany. Whether this would involve sabotage of the industrial machinery is open to question.

We are up against depraved beasts who need incineration before they incinerate the human race in a nuclear conflagration. Russia is acting on behalf of the world in military resistance and China through its economic superiority. They are proving themselves as peace-bringers in many regional conflicts.

The only political party in Britain that has the requisite understanding of working class power is the Communist Party of Britain - a product of Lenin's supreme vision and Stalin's extraordinary success as leader of the USSR in destroying Hitler's hordes and wiping out the mass majority of the vermin who dared to challenge the working class. We need a regimented approach and this is being supplied on the streets by the Young Communist League in their uniform marching.

We need the end of liberalism as well as the end of conservatism. Let's plan for victory.

Elijah Traven
Hull

Tony's shortfall

The Combahee River Collective has an important place in the history of socialism and black women's struggle in the United States, but Tony Greenstein mischaracterises and stereotypes the CRC (Letters, May 31).

They were a socialist-feminist black lesbian organisation whose politics developed out of their personal experience: "Identity politics grew out of our objective, material experiences as black women," they say. I don't find it to be egregious or a contradiction for them to say that their radical politics did not come from "working to end someone else's oppression". Their personal experience led to socialist formulations, actions and alliances, and therefore, in my mind, the CRC has been vindicated in the validity and import of their personal struggles.

The problem I have is that Tony paints the CRC with a contemporary 'identity politics' brush. They coined the term, but they are not responsible for how they have come to be defined, exploited and coopted. As a matter of fact they did not "go on to counterpose" their radicalisation "to

ending someone else's oppression" - Tony is patently mistaken. The CRC used its radicalisation to produce a socialist analysis which opposed the multidimensional issues of racism, heterosexism, classism and gender oppression. These aforementioned concerns were reflected in their strategy of making alliances, and coalition building with other organisations, oppressed groups, etc. Their identity politics and intersectionality were organically a part of their politics - not as a function of an anti-revolutionary or bourgeois programme. They were socialist 'warriors' who championed the rights of others and who believed in collective liberation for all people by challenging the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and imperialism.

Tony could be right that, for the CRC, class may not have been the "central means of understanding oppression", but to say that they were "lost in a sea of subjectivity - complete conceptual chaos" strikes me as a gross exaggeration. They were a product of their time and their politics does not conform to our modern standard of theorisation. I have a problem with his unambiguously negative reaction to the CRC, which has no room for acknowledgment of accomplishments - only room for the levelling of criticism.

My view is that "personal identity struggles within a socialist movement can only strengthen that movement", but Tony says this is not true. My statement is meant to indicate that a socialist movement needs to be inclusive of all identity struggles: ie, trans, queer, cis, bisexual, whatever. Identity struggles (as opposed to current identity *politics*) is simply another term for the alteration of consciousness: how does that *not* involve the masses and how is that *not* part of socialism? I expect that there *will* be a growth of consciousness and revolutionary process within a disciplined organisation.

Tony has expert knowledge of Zionist colonialism and the Palestine question, but he betrays a shortfall in knowledge when it comes to women's (gender) liberation. He appears to have no notion of the foundation, and methodological basis of second-wave feminism (initially a serious fight for liberation) and its unqualified genius, which was indeed the method known as consciousness raising - the premise was that the personal was political and the political was personal. This approach was a reinvention of the Marxist linkage between theory and practice; the Marxist mode of analysis was used by the second wave movement to look at how personal life was related to the social structure of society, and political action necessarily followed. Tony's cursory statement which denigrates the 'personal is political' concept is ill-informed. And "personal selfishness" wasn't an issue which existed at the beginnings of the movement and wasn't caused by the small consciousness-raising group.

Unfortunately, the second wave women's movement failed (although there is a large grassroots legacy), because it was a very difficult task in the given historical period to change gender organisation and the relations of power. Mistakes need to be analysed without a deterministic attitude, in regards to both the second wave women's movement and the Combahee River Collective, in the light of an historical, materialist view that fosters insight and the socialist way forward.

GG
USA

LABOUR LEFT

Gloomy shades of death

Attended by a maximum of just 19 members, the online AGM testified to complete strategic failure. Kevin Bean reads the last rites

The demoralisation and disintegration of what remains of the Labour left gathers pace. Momentum's cossetted team of petty careerists regularly sends out reassuring messages to a noticeably passive membership, asks for money, pleads for conference suggestions ... and pretends that the left is making gains on councils and in constituencies. We all know otherwise.

Same with the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and the Centre Left Grassroots Alliance. It is business as usual. The witch-hunt is ignored and the call is made to back model motions and tinker with the party's rules. Then there is the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs. It is certainly not socialist, but nor is it campaigning. As for being a group, even when one of their own faces deselection, they look the other way. SCGers are only focused on keeping their own seats. Solidarity be damned.

To this sorry picture of decline and defeat we must add the Labour Representation Committee. It held its annual general meeting last Saturday online. Just 19 comrades attended ... a figure which fell to 13 in the final session. Not surprisingly only half of the national executive committee positions could be filled. Everyone, it seems, is a chief, now that the rank and file has gone Awol.

LRC AGMs were once graced with various 'big' name parliamentary, trade union and campaigning names. No longer. John McDonnell did not show, nor Jeremy Corbyn. Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi of Jewish Voice for Labour did though ... but not for long. And who can blame her.

While debate in the LRC was never at a high level, and always bureaucratically squeezed, there was at least the pretence of it. This year was utterly desultory. Under the guiding hand of Terry Conway of Anticapitalist Resistance, there was a vote on disability rights. But the give-away politically was the call to arm the Zelensky regime (including, one presumes, the fascist Azov regiment) "from wherever possible" - that and reaffiliating to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign.

So is the LRC in favour of more arms spending in Britain? Expanding the military industrial complex? Increasing taxes to subsidise Ukraine? Such questions went unaddressed. However they will not go away.

One delusional speaker compared the role of Ukraine in this conflict with the struggle against US imperialism in the Vietnam war! But Ukraine is backed by US imperialism. Acts as a US proxy. Nonetheless, the LRC lines up alongside Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak, Giorgia Meloni, Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen. Another equally well informed speaker told us that revolutionary defeatism was not appropriate for the British working class, because this war was solely between Russia and Ukraine.

But where the LRC is at organisationally as a result of such crass social-imperialism was candidly summed up by Pete Firmin. Moving the main political statement, he admitted to a tsunami of resignations which has left the organisation bereft of the resources necessary to print its magazine *Labour Briefing*. Nor does the



Michael Wolgemut 'Dance of death' 1493

LRC have the ability any longer to continue with Jackie Walker's 'ever so exciting' replacement, Red Line TV. No great loss for the movement. But a fitting reward for past sins.

When you cannot do the absolute basics it is surely time to put the LRC out of its misery and read the last rites. But no, like Mr Micawber they think something will turn up. Sir Keir will piss off the unions, Sharon Graham will discover political engagement and ride to their rescue, Jeremy Corbyn will make a triumphant return, etc, etc. All unlikely, all pathetic, all proof of abject strategic failure.

Previous role

Before we turn away from the death bed, however, we should do the decent thing and properly mark the passing of the LRC and all that it represents for the Labour left.

The brainchild of people like John McDonnell and Graham Bash, the LRC was founded in 2004. It was seen in some quarters as an alternative to Ken Livingstone and a left which had been badly holed when Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council on April 1 1986. Either way, the LRC attracted a good smattering of left activists, trade unionists and councillors in the period of high Blairism, when many on the left feared that Labour would be 'deLabourised' and its links with the organised working class finally broken. The LRC attempted to be some kind of life raft.

There was initially some studied ambiguity about strategy: its name was a conscious echo of the historical body founded in 1900, and, in the event of the total triumph of Blairism, it was suggested, the LRC could form the nucleus of a new, reborn Labour Party. Although it had affiliates and individual members who were outside the Labour Party and who claimed to be Marxist, the dominant politics and organisational perspectives were always thoroughly Labourist.

For all intents and purposes it functioned as a pressure group. Simply put, its perspectives were building the influence of the left within the party and working for the election of a Labour government, any Labour government, because

the belief was that any Labour government would be a prelude to that wonderful day when there would be a left Labour Party that would commit itself to socialism ... and get elected. A complete fantasy, of course. Labour governments are not a prelude to a left Labour government; no, they are prelude to a Tory government.

As for the left Labour Party committed to socialism, well that was tested to destruction with Jeremy Corbyn and the crushing general election defeat in December 2019. The LRC was never able to predict this predictable outcome, nor explain it. Hence its rapid decline and effective demise.

John McDonnell's role in the witch-hunt perhaps best encapsulates where the categorical imperative for unity and concessions to the Labour right leads: remember how he intrigued with pro-capitalist Labour MPs and held back CLP activists who wanted to deselect anti-Corbyn MPs? Even before his abject capitulation to Starmer's witch-hunt, McDonnell (and Corbyn, for that matter) were quite prepared to throw genuine socialists and former comrades under the bus in an effort to placate the Labour right.

The LRC's Labourism meant they, in effect, followed suit. The influx of the Corbynistas into Labour entirely bypassed the LRC; it failed to grow in the period after 2016, when Momentum and other left currents in the CLPs were taking off. Moreover, it took no political or campaigning initiatives or an active part in the fightback against the witch-hunt. Initially the group's leadership hoped that, if they kept their heads down, it would all go away and that the wrath of the Labour right would pass over them.

However, belatedly, when some of their own comrades came under attack, the LRC made some rather muted and timid protests, but it was a case of too little, too late: the time had passed and the witch-hunt was now in full spate. The quietist Labourism of the LRC and its uncritical trailing behind Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell was not only futile as a response to the witch-hunt, but it led them into a political dead-end ●

ACTION

50th anniversary of Critique

Saturday June 10, 10am to 5pm: Online and in-person conference, Thai Theatre, New Academic Building, 54 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2. Celebrate 50 years of *Critique journal of socialist theory*. Sessions include Hillel Ticktin on 'Back in the USSR' and Mick Cox on 'Russia, China and the war in Ukraine'. Entrance free. Organised by *Critique*: www.facebook.com/critiquesocialistjournal.

How we fight, how we win

Saturday June 10, 10.30am to 5pm: Rank-and-file organising conference, Rich Mix, 35-47 Bethnal Green Road, London E1. With the biggest strike wave for 30 years, workers are rediscovering the power of collective action. Workers from across the strikes and the unions meet to discuss how to coordinate, link the struggles and escalate the fight. Registration £5. Organised by Counterfire: www.facebook.com/events/703891511738707.

Oppose Nazis in Leeds

Saturday June 10, 12.30pm: Counter-protest against the neo-Nazi 'Yorkshire Patriots', Victoria Gardens, The Headrow, Leeds LS1. Organised by Leeds Stand Up To Racism: www.facebook.com/events/3455053531400025.

What it means to be human

Tuesday June 13, 6.30pm: Series of talks on social and biological anthropology. This talk is online only, via Zoom: 'Lunar timekeeping in Upper Palaeolithic cave art'. Speaker: Bernie Taylor. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/3111685625797921.

Defend the right to protest

Tuesday June 13, 7.30pm: Public meeting, BMECP Centre, 10a Fleet Street, Brighton BN1. We are facing unparalleled threats to civil liberties, the right to protest and the right to strike. Speakers include Tony Greenstein, awaiting sentence following the trial of Palestine Action supporters. Organised by Socialist Labour Network: www.facebook.com/dave.hill.948011.

Who are the new far right?

Thursday June 15, 7pm: Public meeting, Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2. The government's scapegoating of refugees, migrants and Muslims, and the 'war on woke', are giving confidence to a new far right. How do we stop them gaining support in communities, workplaces and campuses? Registration £5 (free). Organised by Stand Up To Racism Manchester: www.facebook.com/events/637888078206640.

Stop the war in Ukraine: peace talks now

Thursday June 15, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Friends Meeting House, 6 The Friars, Canterbury CT1. The proxy war between Nato and Russia is causing misery for the people of Ukraine and plummeting living standards across Europe. Speakers: Prof Richard Sakwa, Kate Hudson (CND) and Chris Nineham (Stop the War). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/cities/Canterbury.

What would Marx and Engels say about today?

Friday June 16, 1pm: Online meeting. Globally, the economic crisis deepens, reflected in the cost-of-living emergency in Britain. Were Marx and Engels right about capitalism, and how do we understand today's crisis? Speaker Michael Roberts, followed by questions and discussion. Registration free. Organised by Arise: A Festival of Left ideas: www.facebook.com/events/987247025792339.

Jarrow rebel town festival

Saturday June 17, 10.45am: Parade, speeches and musicians. Assemble pedestrian tunnel, Tyne Street, Jarrow NE32. Led by Felling Silver Band. Speakers include Kate Osborne MP, Alan Mardghum (Durham Miners' Association) and Alex Gordon (RMT). Organised by The Seven Lads of Jarrow: www.facebook.com/events/983544752661029.

Orgreave 39th anniversary

Saturday June 17, 1pm: March and rally. Assemble City Hall, Barkers Pool, Sheffield S1. Demand truth and justice for striking miners brutalised by the state at Orgreave on June 18 1984. Organised by Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/601193785380443.

Why the Met Police must be disbanded

Thursday June 22, 6.30pm: Public meeting, Indian YMCA, 41 Fitzroy Square, London W1. The Met Police is racist, sexist, repressive and institutionally rotten - can it be reformed or should it be disbanded? Registration £5 (free). Organised by Counterfire: www.facebook.com/events/579611230952724.

National Shop Stewards Network

Saturday June 24, 11am to 4.30pm: Conference, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Bringing together active rank-and-file trade unionists from across the movement. All union members are welcome to attend and to participate in the discussion. Registration £6. Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: www.facebook.com/events/1595519607615141.

Boycott Puma

Saturday June 24, 12 noon: Day of action, Puma Flagship Store, Carnaby Street, London W1 and stores/stockists nationwide. Demand Puma ends its support for Israeli apartheid. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign UK: www.facebook.com/events/420750110177209.

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.

POLITICS

Labour and Lubner's millions

Starmer's new megadonor threatens to outweigh the influence of the unions, argues Paul Demarty

Eyebrows were raised in the Westminster press lobby on June 4, when one Gary Lubner announced millions of pounds in donations to the Labour Party.

Lubner told the *Financial Times* that he had given £500,000 to the party in the first three months of the year alone, and was steadily increasing his generosity, as the next election approached. As he made clear to the pink 'un, this support was hardly unconditional: he could not have donated when Corbyn was in charge:

His grandparents were Jewish refugees from one of the pogroms in Russia in the early 20th century and his grandmother saw her parents shot in front of her. When anti-Semitism surfaced in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, he was appalled.

"I was horrified by what was going on," he said. His youngest son, a Labour student activist, was "abused, pilloried, attacked" during that period. With reference to anti-Semites in the Labour Party, he added: "Starmer got rid of them, to his credit. It was a real cancer in the party."¹

Few people with £5 million burning a hole in their pocket choose to hand it over to the Labour Party, of course; not even one as cartoonishly business-friendly as is the regime of Brave Sir Keir. And the *FT* profile does a reasonable job of making Lubner sound sincere. He made his money essentially from Autoglass and its surrounding companies - a good old boring car repair chain - rather than from asset-stripping or creative tax accountancy. He is retired, and giving away his money to the usual array of 'good causes', among which he seems to count punishing the Tories for Brexit. He denies that he is fishing for a peerage, and would support the abolition of the Lords - "in an ideal world", whatever that means. And, indeed, his fortune is measured in the modest hundreds of millions, rather than billions, of pounds - there being only so much money in windscreens repair, at the end of the day.

He is thus perhaps the acceptable face of capitalist Labour donors, then - more acceptable than David Sainsbury, supermarket tycoon and financier of the Blair project (Sainsbury also recently gave £2 million to Labour); and less clownish than Alan Sugar's brief dalliance with the party. His announcement cannot have been made without the say-so of the leader's office. The whole interview is so trapped within classic Starmerite parameters that it is difficult to believe otherwise. A snipe at the old regime, check; criticism of the Tories' handling of Brexit without any call for its reversal, check; indeed, no specific demands on Labour at all.

Trumpeting donations of this sort does Starmer a favour in a very specific way: it sends out a very clear signal that the party is 'under new ownership' and is therefore safe to the capitalist businesses that *really* make a difference to its chances of success - the press barons. The intended audience is Rupert Murdoch, or whoever succeeds him, when the reaper finally catches up with him; and, we suppose, the *FT* itself.

Beyond that, the sheer volume of cash being thrown around here has its own significance. Suppose that Lubner really does splash out £5 million over 18 months: between his and Sainsbury's donations, they



'Millions back me' (after John Heartfield - 1931)

are close to matching Labour's income from affiliated unions in a typical 18-month period - although that will no doubt increase in election season, we must also take into account that Unite has been tapering its contributions due to political disagreements with the Starmer leadership.

Significant shift

This is a significant shift in the weight of financial backing, exacerbated by the significant reduction in membership numbers under Starmer (as disaffected Corbynites are scattered far and wide). It is a reminder that the peculiar form of the Labour Party - administered by professional bourgeois politicians, but composed in large part of affiliated organisations of the labour movement - is a historic accident, and inherently unstable. There is no inherent *need* in bourgeois politics for a party that represents workers' organisations, treacherously or otherwise: the ruling class prefers ultimately to offer us all a choice like that in the United States, of more-or-less liberal and conservative parties of the bourgeoisie. The Labour-Tory split in British politics is not *quite* that, and the principal reason for that is Labour's link with (most of) the trade unions, rather than any matter of substantive politics.

For that reason, the link is endlessly in the crosshairs of the bourgeois media. Labour leaders are relentlessly hectorated for being in the pocket of union barons. Absurd pseudo-scandals, like that around the Falkirk by-election selection process in 2013, are blown up into political crises. Anything to sever that link! Some Labour leaders and leadership

hopefuls have been happy to broach the subject, and it was, after all, the dream of Tony Blair: the construction of a US-style Democratic Party by way of reversing the split between labourism and liberalism, with the unions' largesse retained largely because what else are they going to do? Vote Tory?

It should be noted that the question *may* not be completely rhetorical. Though the union bureaucracies in the US are largely politically pliant before the Democrats, the appeal of a politician like Donald Trump to some blue-collar voters poses awkward problems. Many of the so-called 'national conservatives' foresee a kind of post-war corporatist settlement to replace the present neoliberal dispensation, and a much stronger role for labour as a part of that. They have no vehicle to deliver such an outcome, of course, Trumpism in power being something of a mirage; but the idea is not wholly nonsensical. Notoriously the Teamsters endorsed Richard Nixon in 1960 and 1972, although the extent of that union's corruption at the time makes it an unusual case. The point remains: sooner or later, those with nowhere else to go find somewhere else to go.

The lesson is more urgent for the left than the right, however, which can always reform itself, amoeba-like, around some new conception of order. Today's nationalist-corporatism supplants yesterday's libertarianism, to be replaced by who knows what horror on the morrow. The left in this country has never quite been able to get its head around the Labour Party - there are, of course, no end of confidently-stated theories of its nature and strategies to

deal with it, but these have a habit of being shown up by surprises in the tangled thread of the party's history.

Such arguments obviously date back to Labour's founding, with the Social Democratic Federation walking out almost immediately in high dudgeon; and then with its refounding as a more centralised national organisation in 1918 (which occasioned the famous polemics in the nascent Third International). The pattern on the revolutionary left ever since has been one of sharp lurches - from some version of the idea that Labour is completely moribund as a sphere of working class political action to some version of the idea that separation from Labour is inherently sectarian.

We may concentrate on the more recent past: in the 1990s, and especially after the Blair years began (and still more intensely after the invasion of Iraq), the first idea spread very widely on the British left. Militant Tendency - later to become today's Socialist Party in England and Wales - was an 'early adopter'. Kinnock after the Liverpool council disaster gave him the excuse, and Militant's later success with the anti-poll-tax movement. From 1996 to roughly 2015, left-of-Labour electoral challenges were offered by a range of parties and ad-hoc alliances, from Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, through the Socialist Alliance and Scottish Socialist Party, Respect, and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, to that strange gaggle of Mandelites and identitarian oddballs called Left Unity.

Then came Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, and the whole premise - that Labour was moribund - was

proven decisively to be false, and therefore to have been false in the whole period it had been adopted as dogma by SPEW, the Socialist Workers Party and so on. Those who course-corrected at this point largely dissolved into Labour, their grander political commitments having lost their justification; those who stood aside, like SPEW and the SWP, no doubt looked very stupid to the shrinking numbers who cared who they were, and suffered splits, but learned nothing - yet, now that Corbynism has given way to Starmerism, their false perspectives once more look more plausible.

Philistines

In those two decades between Blair's election as leader and Corbyn's, it became more and more common to welcome union disaffiliations from Labour as a political step forward - no longer were organisations of working class economic power hostage to "the worst kind of reactionaries" (as Lenin famously put it, having in mind Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Henderson and the like - god knows what he would have made of Peter Mandelson²), and they could now fight for true working class politics (leaving aside that what was usually meant by this was Trotskyists pretending to be Bennites). In every case, in fact, it is clear that disaffiliation (or, in the case of the Public and Commercial Services union, which is legally barred from affiliation, a failure to fight to overturn this anti-democratic ban) has been a *step backwards*. Militant unions were simply absent from the scene when the left was suddenly thrust into the party leadership, and SPEW strained every sinew to ensure that they remained absent.

The surprise election of Sharon Graham as Unite general secretary in 2021 was likewise welcomed as a victory for 'the left', but in substance was a victory for the sort of transactional, petty-bourgeois philistinism in relation to high politics urged on unions by SPEW members in the New Labour years ('What have you done for my members lately?'). This was not the *achievement* of SPEW, to be sure, relatively marginal as it is in Unite; but an indication that SPEW's approach puts a 'Marxist' gloss on what is an intrinsic limitation of 'pure' trade unionism. Graham's substantial reductions in Unite funding to Labour will no doubt make Lubner's millions all the more welcome - and influential. It will thus embolden Brave Sir Keir, as he hammers her members in due course.

Could all this really betoken the delabourisation of Labour for real? It certainly should not be ruled out. The left has consistently confused a fairly predictable political cycle within Labour politics for historic shifts of quantity into quality; but the cycle is an effect of an intrinsic contradiction in its class composition, and we should not suppose that this will go on forever. The final end can only be either 'delabourisation' - or alternatively the revolutionisation of the party and the excision of its bourgeois wing altogether. It is clear which outcome is more likely just at the moment: and equally clear that the wider left will fail to recognise this for what it would in fact be - a *defeat* ●

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Notes

1. www.ft.com/content/103ec036-c3aa-424a-86f9-71292b334f05.
2. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm#fw6.

UKRAINE



Notes on the war

With Kyiv's long-trailed military offensive now seemingly underway, Jack Conrad warns that we should still expect a prolonged, bitter war of attrition and eventually a US attempt to encircle and strangle China

Well, we have just a few weeks left before summer officially begins and news is finally coming in of Ukraine's long awaited *spring* offensive - but no confirmation from Kyiv officials. However, Russian and western military observers alike report that there is fighting in various sectors along the Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhzhia fronts. Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner group, bitterly complains that Berkhivka, a little village three kilometres northwest of Bakhmut, had fallen. But other than the breaching of the Nova Kakhovka dam and the biblical-scale flood, there have been no major developments.

Maybe the promise of a game-changing spring offensive helped persuade the US and its allies into stumping up extra high arms deliveries: Leopard 2 battle tanks, long-range Storm Shadow missiles and F-16s. But if there was no 'big push' then there existed a real risk of a loss of morale amongst Ukraine's armed forces and the wider Ukrainian population itself. War enthusiasm, in many ways justified, the yearning for revenge on the Russian invaders, could conceivably give way to dejected war weariness.

There was, too, the risk of some sort of a crisis of expectations amongst Nato powers - not least in America, where the hard-right Republicans (crucially former president Donald

Trump) are questioning the budgetary, diplomatic and strategic worth of providing Ukraine with an iron-clad guarantee as it tries to regain every inch of territory lost since 2014. Isolationist Republicans care little about "a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing" (Iran and China are, strangely, another matter entirely).

Volodymyr Zelensky has, of course, been sending mixed messages: that Ukraine has everything it needs, that the offensive is ready to begin, that Ukraine still does not have everything it needs, that it is running low on artillery shells, SAMs and drones. Either way, he is sort of obliged to do *something*.

So, what to expect? Kyiv is thought have three or four newly formed tank brigades and 12 combat brigades - three of them trained in Ukraine and nine trained and equipped by the US - specifically available for the offensive. However, the idea of a "decisive" breakthrough, while possible, is surely unlikely. A sober-minded assessment, found in the Pentagon papers leaked back in April, predicted a "stalemate".¹

Ukraine lacks the element of surprise, the necessary hardware and the *overwhelming* (3:1) manpower advantage recommended by military theorists, when it comes to a war of the offensive, as opposed to a war of the defensive. The name, Frederick

Ukrainian forces will have to overcome more than a few sleepy border guards before pushing down to the warm water of the Black Sea for a paddle

Lanchester (1868-1946), ought to be mentioned in this context: he produced a whole series of neat mathematical formulas.²

The actual ratio on the frontline is more like 1:1. Besides that, as discussed in my last 'Notes on the war', there has, on the Russian side, been a "significant build-up of trenches and other fortifications" since October 2022.³ The BBC provided, having studied hundreds of detailed satellite images, a real insight into what awaits advancing Ukrainian forces.⁴ It is certainly not a few sleepy border guards before a quick drive over green fields and a paddle in the warm waters of the Black Sea. No, Ukraine's tanks and infantry face a fearsome array of defences. Typically, first a deep anti-tank ditch, which is followed by rows of 'dragons teeth'. These 3-4 foot high pyramid shaped concrete blocks are likewise designed to impede tanks and other military vehicles. Next come successive lines and networks of trenches and bunkers. Likely there will be hidden mines too. Behind those obstacles there are well-protected artillery positions. The Russians will attempt to funnel Ukrainian forces into pretargeted killing zones.

The BBC website provides a useful map, which shows such defences in place "along the whole of the Russian frontline in Ukraine and all the way up the internationally

recognised border between the two countries". It should be noted that in my last article the word 'to' was unfortunately inserted into this sentence: "... along the whole of the Russian frontline in Ukraine and all the way up to the internationally recognised border between the two countries" (corrected online). If the print version was accurate, then general Valery Gerasimov and the Russian high command would indeed be very stupid - much more stupid than I take them for anyway.

All Ukraine's offensive would have to do is open a new north-eastern front and circumvent Russian defensive lines in the way the Germans did *twice* against France: first in August 1914 and then in May 1940. Eg, Hitler Germany's initial thrust against France avoided the heavily fortified Maginot Line and came via the *neutral* countries of the Lowlands. This diverted French and British armies northwards. Only then did Germany's concentrated panzer divisions, strongly supported from the air, strike through the wooded countryside of the Ardennes, cross the Meuse and, without waiting for the infantry, push towards the heart of France itself. Despite the relatively small number of German forces engaged in the north, the governments of the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium promptly surrendered and the German general, Heinz Guderian, long an advocate of

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Blitzkrieg, kept moving in the centre, till he “produced the most sweeping victory in modern history”. French prime minister Paul Reynaud phoned Winston Churchill on May 15 to say: “We have lost the battle.”⁵

Ukraine can do nothing like that. Not just because of a comparative lack of manpower, armour, artillery, missiles and aircraft ... and Russian defence lines. The simple fact of the matter is that no Ukrainian *military* offensive could deliver a direct *political* knock-out blow on Russia. The aim, after all, is to retake the Donbass, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Crimea. Not take Moscow.

Without a doubt, though, wars are not decided by abstract 3:1 formulas. Personnel numbers, food, fuel and ammunition supplies, and the quantity and quality of equipment count, but so too do intangibles, such as imagination, chance and morale. A point emphasised again and again by the Prussian military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, in his classic, 1832 study, *Vom Kriege*: “in combat the loss of moral force is the chief cause of the decision.”⁶

Boosting morale, despite the risks of retaliation, surely explains why Zelensky has given the nod to drone strikes on the Kremlin and the outskirts of Moscow, assassination attempts on Putin’s far-right allies and attacks on Belgorod oblast launched by the Freedom of Russia Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps. Ben Wallace, UK defence minister, seems keen on such provocations, but the US defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, less so.

Either way - and this is the crucial point - everything shows, for the moment at least, that the war in Ukraine is at a strategic impasse. That is what Ukraine’s predictable determination to resist Russia’s invasion, plus the west’s Stingers, Nlavs, Switchblades, Himars, Patriots, Storm Shadows, Abrams, Challengers and Leopards have achieved - despite widespread initial expectations of a swift Russian victory, mostly because of the sheer size of its armed forces. As repeatedly argued here, a long war of attrition looks to be on the cards - three, four, many more years.

So it is unlikely that the US-UK axis is banking on an outright Ukrainian military victory in what is now widely recognised to be a full-on proxy war. No, the thinking is to get Russia bogged down in a quagmire - an unwinnable war - which will create the conditions for regime change in Moscow (a rollback strategy mapped out by the likes of Zbigniew Brzezinski and proclaimed by Jimmy Carter in his State of the Union Address on January 23 1980). That strategy worked like a dream in Afghanistan and is now being applied to the rump Russian Federation (the main inheritor state of the former Soviet Union).

Not only have Nato and the EU been steadily extended eastwards all the way to the borders of Russia itself, but Vladimir Putin and his generals were lured into a bear trap: launching an ill-advised, ill-prepared, full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The ‘special military operation’ proved, predictably, to be an utter disaster. No wonder members of the US think tank-administration-military apparatus are now excitedly talking about the “beginning of the end” of Putin’s *siloviki* regime and the coming “break-up” of the Russian Federation.

Break-up

Take the Anglophile, Luke Coffey, of the Hudson Institute - he once worked for Liam Fox when he was defence secretary and, before that, Conservative Party HQ. He tells the *Daily Mail* that failure in Ukraine will split the Russian elite into two hostile camps.⁷ Those whom he calls



Russia has been putting in place fearsome defence systems, including rows of ‘dragons teeth’. Three or four feet high blocks of reinforced concrete, they are designed to stop or slow tanks and other military vehicles

the hardliners - eg, Prigozhin - will say that the war could have been won if only they had been put in charge and allowed to impose martial law, go for a war economy and full mobilisation. The other section, the so-called oligarchs, will look to safeguard their ill-gotten wealth and seek a rapprochement with the west. Meanwhile, embittered soldiers returning to the regions will “rise up” against Moscow and help break the Russian Federation up into a mosaic of easy-to-control states.

Attempts to Balkanise Russia, oft flagged up here, it would appear, are already being actioned by bodies such as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Center for European Policy Analysis, the Jamestown Foundation and Executive Intelligence Review. Last year the CSCE hosted a conference in Washington DC titled ‘Decolonizing Russia: a moral and strategic imperative’. The final resolution calls for:

all citizens of indigenous peoples and colonial regions to immediately begin active actions for the peaceful decolonization, liberation, declaration/restoration of sovereignty and independence of their countries [and on] the peoples and governments of the UN member states to support and assist us ... in our efforts to streamline the uncontrolled process of disintegration of a nuclear state.

That assistance must include official recognition of the independence and sovereignty of the following states of indigenous peoples and colonial areas: Tatarstan, Ingria (a historical region in the north-west of Russia, including the current St Petersburg region), Bashkortostan, Karelia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, the Baltic Republic (Königsberg, East Prussia), Komi, Cherkessia, Siberia, the Urals, the Republics of Don, Tyva, Kuban, Dagestan, the Pacific Federation (Primorsky Territory and the Amur Region), the Moscow Republic, Erzya Mastor ([in] the territory of Mordovia), Sakha, Pomorie, Chuvashia, Chernozyom region, Mordovia, Volga region,

Khakassia, Udmurtia, Tyumen Yugra, Mari El, Altai, Ingushetia, etc.

The resolution likewise encourages the formation of ‘National transitional governments/administrations’ and for regional parliaments to “declare state sovereignty and start inter-parliamentary consultations on a mechanism for seceding from the Russian Federation; and constitutions to be prepared.” Chillingly, an accompanying ‘Northern Eurasia 2023’ map depicts a would-be “post-Russia” utopia with 41 new states carved out of the Russian Federation.⁸

True, there are influential voices - eg, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former Yukos oil tycoon - who warn that the ghastly consequences of the break-up of the Russian Federation would be “dangerous for the west”.⁹ One can easily imagine nuclear armed warlords, crashing living standards, millions of economic refugees and descent into utter barbarism.

Naturally then, Brussels, London and Washington are doing their best to corral the disparate Russian opposition into agreeing a common programme. While they do not want to name a single charismatic individual as leader, the agenda is surely clear: getting their man into the Kremlin - say, the already presidential Alexei Navalny. Historically their model is Boris Yeltsin - a dupe of US imperialism and a hero for disorientated western leftists such as Tariq Ali.¹⁰

With a pliant satrap such as Navalny successfully crowned through a colour revolution election and a humiliating withdrawal from Ukraine, a Versailles-type peace treaty would be imposed. Russia would be obliged to pay huge reparations, forgo nuclear weapons, shut down its high-end arms industry and accept its status as a US-dominated oil- and gas-producing neo colony.

Xi Jinping is unlikely to sit idly by while such a scenario is played out. He knows perfectly well that the main strategic target is China itself. The US has already set up Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang in pursuit of instituting its “new

world order”.¹¹ Joe Biden hopes that, by first seeing off Russia and then surrounding and strangling the People’s Republic, the US will be able to “manage” the Eurasian world island for the benefit of its giant corporations, plutocrats and great-power interests - as envisaged by Zbigniew Brzezinski.¹²

Of course, the US does not want a generalised nuclear exchange and Mutually Assured Destruction. Doubtless that is why everything is carefully calibrated. Ukraine is being supplied with enough military hardware to resist Russia, but not enough to actually decisively win. Doubtless, that approach also explains the recent visit of CIA director Bill Burns to Beijing. China can benefit from cheap Russian oil and gas, but must be persuaded to have a “predictable” relationship with the US and back off from any direct military involvement with its Austria-Hungary. There is already a mounting sanctions war, and China should not risk a hot war. A message that seems well understood by China’s newly appointed defence minister, general Li Shangfu. Speaking in Singapore, he said war with the US would be an “unbearable disaster”.¹³

Not that we want to paint a picture of everything going the way of US imperialism. Far from it. Politically the US is increasingly dysfunctional. January 6 2021 even saw an attempted self-coup by the president himself. With the absolute limits imposed by nature, the continuation of capitalism poses an existential threat to human civilisation. The Earth Commission group of scientists reports that “safe boundaries” have already been crossed in climate, biodiversity, water, land use, etc.¹⁴ Biden’s August 2022 ‘Green New Deal’ is clearly “insufficient”.¹⁵ The proxy war in Ukraine has certainly triggered an inflationary spiral, a cost of living crisis and added to the hell of precarious employment and homelessness. Millions of ordinary Americans turn to alcohol, prescription opioids and street drugs. Meanwhile, much of the so-called global south, including the once completely servile Saudi Arabia, refuses to join the anti-Russia crusade. The old world is visibly

crumbling, decaying, putrefying.

Therefore, the possibility - *warned* about by Yevgeny Prigozhin, but *wanted* by us - of events culminating “as in 1917 with a revolution” ... and not only in Russia, but the USA, Britain, France, Germany, Brazil, China, South Africa, etc, etc.¹⁶ Of course, the new world will not be born without in each country a mass Communist Party serving as midwife. Although at the moment it is easier to imagine nuclear war or climate breakdown than a socialist revolution, for the sake of humanity that is what *must* happen. The first step being summoning the subjective will on the left to break with the bureaucratic centralism of the confessional sects, broad frontism and tailing the liberal bourgeoisie in the name of lesser-evilism.

Imperialism

Mention ought to be made the routine charge that Russia is imperialist and is engaged in an imperialist war. A trope that effortlessly trips off the lips of just about every mainstream bourgeois politician. Of course, nowadays the words ‘imperial’, ‘imperialist’ and ‘imperialistic’ carry entirely negative connotations. Long gone are the glory days of direct European colonialism and the white man’s burden. Hence when it comes to the leading capitalist powers - eg, the G7 - they proudly boast of being democracies, and imperialism is used either in reference to what is admitted as a slightly guilty past or, more likely, wielded as an ideological weapon against current and future rivals.

Naturally enough there is a philistine current on the ‘left’ which apes and echoes the dominant ideology and therefore openly or sneakily sides with their ‘own government’, when it comes to foreign policy. So here in Britain, while Rishi Sunak’s stonewalling over public-sector pay and clampdown on protests, free speech and trade union rights is routinely denounced, the same ‘left’ urges him on over Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions on Russians. As if foreign and domestic policy were not inextricably connected - foreign policy being a continuation of domestic policy.

Once, this ‘left’ would have advocated what was called a ‘positive’ or ‘socialist’ colonial policy in the name of internationalism, enlightening backward natives, securing vital raw materials and developing the means of production on a global scale. Whatever the horrors, the depravity, the crimes of *actual* colonialism, the notion was that, with the influence, the help of socialists, colonialism could be carried out in a benign manner that benefited everyone. A lie upheld by, amongst many others, Eduard Bernstein in Germany and the Fabians in Britain. Come August 1914 and this current instantly morphed into full-blown social-imperialism that justified the predatory war aims of their ‘own’ capitalist country with all sorts of tawdry ‘socialist’ excuses - even quotes plucked from the writings of Marx and Engels.

It is the same today. There exists a distinct social-imperialist camp. Not, as we have repeatedly explained, Sir Keir and the Parliamentary Labour Party! Obviously not. Any such suggestion is really dumb. There is nothing remotely social(ist) about them. They are just plain, everyday, bourgeois career politicians and, as such, just as committed to the Atlantic alliance and the total defeat of Russia as is the Joe Biden administration and the Rishi Sunak government.

No, on the far right of the far left we have the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign - along with a rogues’

gallery of affiliates, supporters and outriders, eg, the Labour Representation Committee, Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Anticapitalist Resistance, Emancipation and Liberation, RS21, John McDonnell, Nadia Whittome and Gilbert Achcar.

For the lot of them it is an open-and-shut case: Ukraine is fighting a justified war of national defence and Russia is an imperialist country conducting a war of imperialist aggression. Science, though, is noticeably lacking. Imperialism is simply equated with territorial expansionism, even if it is defensive expansionism. Nato, though it is expanding, becomes a purely defensive organisation.

If one wants to define imperialism as nothing more than invading another country and grabbing extra territory, so be it. The Athens of Pericles, the late Roman republic and Tudor England were imperialist. No problem. Imperialism existed well before modern capitalism, even before capitalism itself. But Marxism has done the great service of locating imperialism in the context of a capitalism dominated by finance, giant monopolies and a system of global domination and exploitation. Competition within the nation becomes competition between nations. Inevitably, this gives rise to a definite, but always contested, pecking order, with at the top a dominant nation. Hence in the 17th century England successfully challenged the Dutch for global hegemony, Britain saw off the French challenge in the 19th century and the German challenge in the 20th century, but finally succumbed to the United States in the 1940s.

However, the crucial question is not one of semantics, but operative conclusions. Frankly, whether or not Russia should be categorised as an imperialist power is an entirely secondary matter for us, which we shall, nonetheless, discuss below. No what really matters is excusing, urging on, promoting the so-called western powers and the US empire of the dollar, military bases, alliances, institutions and treaties: eg, the G7, World Bank and IMF, Nato, the Five Eyes and AUKUS, through which today hegemony is exercised.

Here Paul Mason can be used to show the logical outcome of social-imperialism. His political origins lie in the Socialist Workers Party, after which he split and split again. First heading Workers Power, then Permanent Revolution, before getting a well-paid job on BBC 2's flagship *Newsnight* programme. After that it was to the right via anarchistic posturings to capitalist accelerationism, till he arrived at his present-day position of advocating an ideological and organisational war against the left. It should be added that the renegade is still frantically hawking himself around various Constituency Labour Parties in the attempt to get himself adopted as a parliamentary candidate for the forthcoming general election. He obviously fancies himself as a cabinet minister with the 'defence' portfolio.

Stung by the 130:121 vote in the University and College Union to back a Stop the War motion calling for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine and opposing Nato escalation, Mason demands that no union leaders should share a joint platform with StWC, no invitations to speak on picket lines be given and that unions "stop collaborating with their mouthpiece, the *Morning Star*". In that McCarthyite spirit he insists: "All unions should disaffiliate immediately from Stop the War."

As for the Parliamentary Labour Party, he wants to go much further than Sir Keir has been prepared to go ... so far. Labour's election manifesto, he rightly says, will back increased

defence spending, continued support for arms to Ukraine, a strengthened Nato and nuclear deterrence. Therefore - and here comes the rub - "every Labour parliamentary candidate will be required explicitly to support that" manifesto and therefore it is "reasonable", says Mason, "to ask for every Labour MP to make a statement in support of those policies now".¹⁷

A barely concealed call for Sir Keir to extend his purge to the 30-strong Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs. True, the lot of them have been utterly spineless over the Ukraine war (and just about everything else, for that matter). But, and this is no fantasy, Sir Keir might well take his lead from Paul Mason on this issue. The last thing he wants is a narrow Labour majority and a situation where the SCG holds him to ransom on this or that parliamentary vote. So maybe it will be a case of break them, or if that fails, see the back of them ... this side of the general election.

Naturally the likes of Mason 'disappear' imperialism - except when it comes to Russia and China. Yet the US, though it maintains no vast colonial bureaucracy, unmistakably exploits the world with a callous ruthlessness unequalled in human history. US banks and corporations suck in wealth from other countries like a never-quenched vampire. Britain is the junior partner, which benefits through the City and plays the role of yappdog, when it comes to wars such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Failure to place the Russia-Ukraine war in this context is not only to desert Marxism, but reality. Ukraine cannot be seen in isolation. Behind it there stands the unmatched might of the dominant imperialist bloc. Having violently pulled Ukraine out of the Russian orbit with the 2014 Maidan coup, the US, move by move, directed it as a pliant pawn in the great game to dominate the Eurasian space.

Sympathising with ordinary Ukrainians who have been killed, injured, lost loved ones, fled abroad, etc, is perfectly natural. War is horrible. But to wish for Ukraine's victory, to support its war aims - not least imposing Banderite rule over Russian-majority Donbas and Crimea - to demand that Nato 'Arm, arm, arm Ukraine' and call 'Putin, Putin, Putin, out, out, out' is not to see the wood for the trees. More important than that, it is to scab on international socialism and to act as an agent for the imperialism of the US and its allies. In Russia it might well be the case that principled communists would say that they 'prefer to see a Russian defeat than its victory'. But, to state the obvious, we are not in Russia.

Russia

There can be no doubt that historically tsarist Russia was a colonial power and built a vast prison house of nations. Beginning as the autocratic feudal principality of Muscovy, there were, especially with the decline of the Mongol empire, leaping expansions to the east and the south. Tsarism dismembered Poland, took over the Baltics and established its rule over Finland too.

Naturally, Lenin roundly condemned Russian colonialism and saw tsarism as both socially and politically anachronistic - but also increasingly as a servant of big capital. In his *Imperialism*, though, Lenin included Russia amongst the great imperialist powers, almost wholly because of its colonial possessions. In terms of colonial territory and subject peoples it ranked between Britain and France: ie, ahead of Germany, the US and Japan (1914 figures).¹⁸ However, its large-scale industry and banks tended

to be foreign-owned - or dependent - and the tsarist state was massively in hock (mainly to the French financial oligarchy). Overall the country was dominated by peasant agriculture and characterised by extreme economic backwardness. Exactly why Leon Trotsky wrote about Russia's course of development, giving it a "semi-colonial" character.¹⁹ In other words, Russia was a semi-colonial colonising power.

I shall not set out my views on the nature of the 1917-91 Soviet state here, except in terms of negatives: eg, post-1928 and the first five-year plan ideas about a workers' state, degenerate or otherwise, are simply not credible. Instead let us skip straight to the character of the Russian Federation presided over by Putin. Towards that end Andrew Murray acts as a useful interlocutor. Who is comrade Murray? He is, of course, a former Straight Leftist, a regular writer for the *Morning Star*, a partisan of the Communist Party of Britain and has been a leading member of StWC since its foundation.

Having returned to the ranks of the CPB after a brief period of entry work in the Labour Party (he served as a key advisor to Jeremy Corbyn), this self-declared Stalinite now routinely classifies the Russian Federation as "imperialistic".²⁰ Why? Because monopolies are the "essence" of imperialism and the Russian Federation, irrefutably, has its share of monopolies: eg, Gazprom, Rosneft, Lukoil and Sberbank.²¹ That, however, would make countries such as India, Brazil, South Africa and even Ukraine imperialist too. After all, each has its own batch of home-grown monopolies (ie, oligopolies, to use standard bourgeois economic jargon).

Without in any way treating Lenin's *Imperialism* as a bible - it contains some clearly mistaken arguments - it is worth quoting in this context. For Lenin, imperialism is not only about monopoly and finance capital. It is the scale, proportion and the dominance of overseas interest payments, dividends, rent and such. Hence Lenin emphasises *parasitism* and the fact that in imperial Britain the "income of the rentiers is five times greater than the income obtained from the foreign trade". "This", he declares, "is the essence of imperialism and imperialist parasitism."²²

America, it should be noted, pulls off exactly the same trick - and then one. With the dollar serving as the world's reserve currency, the US government can run a trillion dollar deficit through recourse to the simple device of what used to be called the printing press. Other countries thereby pay for Uncle Sam's profligacy.

Clearly, Russia does not parasitically exploit the world, or even its near abroad, in any meaningful way. Despite its 150 million population it has a GDP that ranks far behind Germany, the UK, France, even Italy. No, it is in the third division, down with countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia. Even taking into account oil and gas, geographic size and nuclear weapons, it is most decidedly not a serious rival to the United States.

Murray could be echoing his friends in the Communist Party of Greece, who rightly adopt, albeit for the wrong reasons, a 'plague on both houses' approach to the Ukraine war (damn both Putin's Russia and Nato's proxy). But more likely he has fallen under the spell of John Rees and Lindsey German through close association with them in StWC. Despite their schism with the SWP, this power couple remain loyal to Tony Cliff's theory of bureaucratic

state capitalism. That is not to suggest that Murray is an empty vessel. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union he has lost his ideological moorings, that is for sure.

If Putin's Russian Federation is to be classified as non-imperialist, there is, remember, a left which considers itself duty-bound to offer 'military' support. Actually, this has nothing to do with raising an international brigade or sending money to buy arms. No, of course, military support is political support: ie, articles in the press calling for 'Russian victory'. We therefore have a pro-Kremlin left. However, if the Russian Federation is safely classified as imperialist, then the StWC can carry on holding protests which feature 'Russia out' as a lead slogan.

Either way, Murray is opposed by a CPB majority that, while upholding the same StWC social-pacifism, inclines in the direction of the pro-Kremlin left. Hence Martin Levy's *Communist Review* had Stewart McGill explaining why Russia cannot be counted as imperialist and Marc Vandepitte explaining the "real reason" why Russia invaded (Nato expansionism).²³

Obviously, the essence of modern imperialism is no longer colonial possessions. They do not belong in the American century, as the British and French found to their cost with the 1956 Suez crisis. Undoubtedly there are, dotted here and there, a few surviving genuine colonies: mostly, however, they are tax havens, which, especially in the case of Britain, provide the means for the City of London to skim off profits from high-level state and business corruption, criminal operations such as the drugs trade and perfectly legal tax-avoidance dodges.

No, the essence of modern imperialism is unequal exchange, the export of capital and a global pecking order which allows the G7 imperialist countries (headed, of course, by the US) to hold the non-imperialist countries - call them neo-colonies if you will - in structural subordination.

What Russia's so-called oligarchs typically exported ('so-called' because they do not rule) was money,

not capital (ie, self-expanding value). Their wealth - well, till they were sanctioned - generally took the form of swollen offshore bank accounts, swish London and New York properties, English football clubs and luxury yachts.

China is another matter. It is no match for the US and allies. Nonetheless, it can be classified as imperialist *in the modern sense*, because it not only exports commodities, but capital (not something that either Andrew Murray or the thoroughly prostituted CPB wants to investigate, naturally enough) ●

Notes

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FREE SPEECH

Knavery and folly

Mike Macnair considers the latest stage in the Tory culture-war campaign for freedom of (only) Conservative speech

Last Thursday (June 1) saw the latest choreographed steps in the Tories' campaign around 'no-platforming' at universities and other higher education institutions. Cambridge academic philosopher Arif Ahmed was announced as 'director for free speech' at the Office for Students under the new Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, and gave an interview to *The Times* which indicated his agenda.

The same day, Kathleen Stock came to speak at the Oxford Union Society, the Conservative Party's Oxford institution for training future party leaders in dishonest political methods. Stock is an 'icon' of cancel culture, having been driven to resign her job at Sussex University in 2021 after a 'cancel campaign', including threats of violence. This was predictably a provocation to Oxford student (and some academic) 'trans rights' activists, and thus produced not merely protest, but also before the event a campaign to demand withdrawal of the invitation, and on the day an effort to disrupt it by an activist gluing himself to the floor. This could then be given wide prominence in the media as an example of why the HE(FS) Act is necessary.

The exercise is one of knavery on the Tory leadership's part. The HE(FS)A preserves the existing legal grounds of 'cancel culture', and is designed to secure freedom of speech *only* for those independently wealthy or backed by the state or the Tory Party. The fair words about freedom of speech conceal foul deeds.

"Folly is the cloak of knavery", as William Blake said (though probably not with the sense I am using here). In this case the Tories' knavery is cloaked by the folly of *both* gender-critical feminists, who are lending political support to people who are in the long run their enemies; *and* leftist and trans rights advocates of no-platforming, who are setting themselves up to be no-platformed by people who have far more power to enforce this than does the left itself.

Free speech tsar

A convenient place to begin is with the 'director for free speech', who has been widely characterised in the press as the "free speech tsar".¹ This concept is a remarkable contradiction in terms. The tsarist regime before 1917 was precisely characterised by an extreme censorship (except when radically weakened in 1905). Suppose that we forget the actual tsarist regime, and imagine that 'tsar' means merely a person on whom all authority rests, in order to act decisively and without delay. This concept is *still* radically antagonistic to freedom of speech: if the 'tsar' is to act individually and decisively, what is the point of freedom of speech in this decision process?

Ahmed in fact gave one interview on his appointment, to *The Times*. *The Guardian* reports that "The OFS said that, having talked to *The Times*, Ahmed would not make any further comments to the media until later in the summer" and comments that this is hardly consistent with the idea of a champion of free speech. *The Times* was once upon a time the UK government "newspaper of record" before it was bought by Rupert Murdoch, but since then has



Desiderius Erasmus 'In praise of folly' (1728 frontpiece)

been as unequivocally a Tory paper as the *Express*, *Mail* and *Telegraph*: Murdoch's temporary support for Blair reflected Blair's commitment to Thatcherism.

Ahmed's statement to *The Times* contains a revealing comment:

The public sector equality duty means institutions must "have due regard" to the need to achieve certain equality aims. They must recognise the desirability of achieving equality aims, but in the context of the importance of free speech and academic freedom. Similarly, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition is an important tool for understanding how anti-Semitism manifests itself in the 21st century. Adopting it sends a strong signal to students and staff facing anti-Semitism. But it must not restrict *legitimate* [emphasis added] speech and protest. I will act impartially.²

This is not the language of a philosopher, or of the campaigner who fought to replace Cambridge University administration's proposal to require "respect" for others' views with requiring "tolerance" of them.³ Even if Prof Ahmed has entirely

written it himself and has done so without advice, it is the language of a legally-advised manager who sees in everything a balancing exercise. It expresses the views of a government whose legislation has *left intact* section 26 of the Equality Act 2010 - the usual legal basis of 'cancel culture'. And it is the language of a public official who is committed to defending the massive cancel-culture no-platforming exercise which has been conducted since 2015 in the name of fraudulent allegations of anti-Semitism, without openly admitting the nature of this exercise or its conflict with freedom of political speech.

To oppose the mostly ineffective efforts of the left and trans activists at no-platforming, while maintaining a diplomatic silence about the massive and largely effective campaign of the British state and its auxiliaries, and the conservative press, to no-platform anti-Zionist speech, is not to oppose no-platforming at all, but merely to cast a false veneer of liberalism on what is actually a censorship regime. 'Free speech tsar' is thus an entirely appropriate title in all its oxymoronic banality.

Knavery

The 'free speech tsar' oxymoron is also an entirely appropriate symbol

effect of - (i) violating B's dignity, or (ii) creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive [emphasis added] environment for B.

And (4) In deciding whether conduct has the effect referred to in subsection (1)(b), each of the following must be taken into account - (a) the perception of B [note that this appears *first*]; (b) the other circumstances of the case; (c) whether it is reasonable for the conduct to have that effect.

(5) The relevant protected characteristics are - age; disability; gender reassignment; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.

Thus it is sufficient that the conduct - which includes speech - has the effect, whether or not intended or just careless, that it creates an "offensive" environment (whatever "offensive" means). And the *first* matter to be taken into account is the perception of the person who claims to be harassed. Hence it is the effect of section 26 of the Equality Act 2010 that anti-Zionist speech amounts to harassment of Jews, and that "transphobic" speech amounts to harassment of trans people. Such speech is therefore unlawful.

Now it would be possible for a court to 'read down' section 26 under the Human Rights Act 1998: ie, narrow it in some way, on the ground of its plain inconsistency with European Convention on Human Rights, article 10:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

To do so, however, would demolish the legal grounds of not merely the no-platforming of 'transphobic' speech, but also the no-platforming of anti-Zionist speech. Hence it has not been. Not surprising. When the argument for speech controls from an anti-discrimination approach started in this country with the incitement to racial hatred provisions of the Race Relations Act 1965, one of the early people convicted was the black power advocate, 'Michael X'. When Canada adopted a variant of the Dworkin-MacKinnon definition of pornography (as being a kind of discrimination against women), one of the first publications prosecuted under the new definition was a lesbian sex magazine (a lesbian-feminist one, not men's porn about lesbians).

The appendix in the February 2021 consultation paper which was the beginning of HE(FS)A posed the question of speech as harassment, and said that in the government's view it is only harassment under the Equality Act if it is targeted on a particular *individual*. But that is not what the section, quoted above, says.

Thus, the argument that there is a lot of speech which is offensive to people, but is not illegalised by the provisions of the Equality Act, is not true. The reality is that in the Equality Act the term 'harassment' is defined excessively broadly, because the prior legislation under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 *did*

(1) A person (A) harasses another (B) if - (a) A engages in unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, and (b) the conduct has the purpose or

require the conduct to be targeted on the person harassed, and in addition required a “course of conduct” involving more than two occasions. This is the background to the fact that late in the Brown administration the Equality Act, generalising discrimination law, included a definition of harassment so broad that it is actually inconsistent with any general freedom of speech.

Secondly, and probably equally important in practice in limiting freedom of speech and association in higher education institutions, is the ‘Prevent duty’ under the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015. This is a general duty on public institutions of one sort or another to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. It includes universities and other HE institutions, and the governing body of the institution is required to have regard to guidance issued by the home secretary when carrying out the duty and so on. Before the present act, it was possible to argue that the ‘Prevent duty’ did not impliedly repeal the duty to secure freedom of speech under section 43 of the Education No 2 Act 1986. But paragraphs 14-17 of the schedule to HE(FS)A now make provisions which make clear that freedom of speech is merely a consideration in the context of the ‘Prevent duty’.

Other forms of speech, not mentioned in the 2021 consultation paper, are also ‘outside the law’. Defamation, for example, is unlawful. But what is defamation? Until Robert Maxwell fell off the back of a boat, saying that “Robert Maxwell is a crook” was defamation - and there are a whole raft of other examples of the use of ‘gagging injunctions’ adopted by people and firms wealthy enough to afford defamation litigation to prevent speech. Speech or publication which is in contempt of court is also ‘outside the law’ - so not merely in the case of ‘gagging injunctions’, but also violation of the courts’ indefensible extensions of rights to non-reporting of judicial proceedings. Equally, contempt has been used to silence those who seek to rely on *Bushell’s Case* (1670) and the very long-standing right of jurors to refuse to follow judges’ moral judgments.⁴

Or, under the Treason Felony Act 1848, section 3, “compassing” the deposition of the monarch, including calling for the abolition of the monarchy, in particular in print, gives rise to liability to imprisonment for life or any lesser term. *The Guardian* in 2003 attempted to litigate the consistency of this provision with article 10 of the Convention on Human Rights, but the courts refused to rule on the claim on the ground that *The Guardian* was not immediately being prosecuted under the act.⁵

So “freedom of speech within the law”, is certainly ‘weasel words’: because it does not propose cutting down the over-broad scope of the harassment definition, getting rid of the ‘Prevent duty’, cutting down the courts’ powers to restrict reporting of their proceedings, or making clear that freedom of speech within the law means freedom of speech subject to the risk of being sued for defamation, but that risk of being sued for defamation is not a reason why the institution should shut down public meetings or discussions. So ‘within the law’, without proposals to restore the range of permitted freedom of speech by cutting down the vague limitations on freedom of speech in current law, leaves intact most of the real reasons actually offered for suppressing speech in universities and other HE institutions, and puts the question wholly into the hands of ‘m’learned fiends’ and the deep pockets that pay them. The act therefore only appears

to promote freedom of speech in HE, but does not actually do so.

Section 4 of HE(FS)A provides for a civil action (for a ‘tort’, in lawyers’ jargon) for damages or an injunction to lie in favour of people who claim to have suffered loss as a result of a cancellation. ‘Loss’ is defined by section 4 (2) to mean “loss of any kind (pecuniary or nonpecuniary)”. ‘Pecuniary’ losses are out-of-pocket expenses: the organisers of meetings who have been cancelled and have then had to pay money for rooms which they have booked and have lost that money; speakers who have incurred travel costs, and so on. But what are “non-pecuniary” losses? In cases where an accident causes injury, this includes “pain and suffering” and “loss of amenity” - such as disabilities inflicted. It does not include disappointment or distress: these do not count as “loss” in tort. Fairly clearly, what must be meant is *reputational* damage. Hence the claim, though it is not strictly one, is like a defamation claim (libel).

Selling justice

The background to creating a new civil action is that the courts have previously ruled that section 43 of the 1986 act does not create a civil (tort) liability. This is part of a much more general phenomenon of the courts trying to limit the scope of tort liabilities for ‘breach of statutory duties’. The purpose of this general policy, which started in the later 19th century, is to protect businesses against being liable to compensate workers for breaches of the Factories Acts and later safety legislation, or neighbours in relation to “statutory nuisances” (forms of pollution), or ‘statutory undertakers’ like water companies against liability for failing to maintain a sufficient water pressure for fire brigade use (the original case).⁶ Because there is not a tort liability, the only remedy is judicial review proceedings. There is *merely* a right to apply for the decision to be quashed by the court - useless *after* the meeting has been cancelled. So creating a new tort liability is supposed to be beneficial in deterring anti-free speech decisions.

How will a tort liability be enforced? In theory, if it is for a small amount of money, it can be brought in the small claims court, but it is always possible to argue that it raises ‘difficult issues’ which need to go to the high court - or to run up costs by appealing - in spite of the relatively small amounts of money involved. Since these claims almost certainly have to be treated as analogous to defamation claims, they will almost certainly wind up being taken over by specialists in defamation.

The best description of the activity of these specialists is to say that the house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha/Windsor has since the middle of the 19th century been selling and denying justice in violation of Magna Carta chapter 29, which is one of the few parts of the Magna Carta which has not been repealed: the crown promises that they will not sell or deny justice. Litigants do not personally pay the king, as people used to personally pay King John for expedited treatment, or to stop their opponents’ judicial proceedings. Queen Victoria, Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII, George VI and Elizabeth II (Charles III will presumably continue the policy) have not *personally* been taking money for selling and denying justice. Rather, they have been *franchising* the sale and denial of justice to the Bar of England and Wales and the Law Society through the ‘free market in legal services’ - and in particular in relation to defamation claims. The extortionate charges of barristers and solicitors concerned in dealing

with defamation claims operate both to price lower-class claimants, and lower-class defendants, out of any right to their day in court.

It is, of course, not just in defamation, but more generally true that usually in litigation ‘deep pockets win’; the research has not been done in this country, but it has in the USA, and it turns out that it is predictable who will win in public nuisance cases in connection with pollution on the basis of who spends more. Out of court, Hazel Genn’s 1987 book *Hard bargaining*⁷ demonstrated empirically that tort claimants in relation to industrial and road traffic accidents usually wind up settling for much less than the law says they should get for their injuries, because the ability of the defendant insurance companies to exhaust the resources of the claimant’s lawyers is so effective. Again, Vince Cable’s wizard wheeze choked off most employment tribunal applications by pushing the fees up so that people could not afford them - to the point that finally the UK Supreme Court struck it down as being an abuse of the power to set fees.⁸

So the new tort liability under section 4 will be under the control of this mechanism. Indeed, the ability to use ‘scorched earth litigation tactics’ in this field will be *accentuated* by the fact that, before suing for damages, the claimant will have to exhaust both the institution’s internal complaints procedure and a new complaints procedure to be run by the Office for Students. In the absence of any limit on the use of lawyers in these procedures, more costs can be run up in this process.

Tort liability as such is necessarily controlled by this mechanism of the use of legal fees to choke off or facilitate access to justice. This was also apparent in relation to the Labour Party’s disciplinary proceedings in the campaign of defamation using ‘anti-Semitism’ allegations: the litigation brought by supporters of the witch-hunt was heard very rapidly and involved very substantial sums of money spent on litigation. The people who were penalised, on the other hand, had much smaller resources and any legal proceedings they brought were more delayed.

St Peter’s College in 2021 saw off an attempt to no-platform Ken Loach, but how many universities will be able to do that? And, if it came to litigation with someone backed by the government (as the ‘anti-Semitism’ no-platform advocates are), would the institution be *allowed* to spend the money to litigate? Christ Church College, which is one of the richer colleges in Oxford University, has seen a conflict between the dean, the head of the college, on the one side, and the governing body, on the other side. The Charity Commission intervened to query whether the governing body might have inappropriately spent the college’s money on litigating with the dean, suggesting that that expenditure might be a breach of trust. Suppose that the Board of Deputies, who backed the campaign to no-platform Ken Loach at St Peter’s, had actually funded litigation on the basis of the Equality Act, section 26: might the Charity Commission not have said to the college that ‘It’s your duty as charity trustees to roll over and comply with the demands rather than waste money on legal costs’?

In short, the tort remedy under the HE(FS)A will *by its nature* secure the right of Tories, the wealthy, and those bankrolled by these or by US lobby groups not to be cancelled - and to continue to cancel others. There can be no *actual* fight for free speech within this framework.

This choreographed culture war has as its long-term aim to secure full control of permissible speech by

the Conservative Party, its donors, the advertising-funded media and, more generally, the wealthy. Immediately targeted are a minority - trans people - who are politically vulnerable because they *are* a small minority, and because they have ‘set themselves up’ by asserting the ‘gender recognition’ paradigm political line that ‘A trans woman is a woman; a trans man is a man’, and by attempting to no-platform those who disagree with this political line. But for the Tories, trans people are only the *immediate* target.

In this context, the Tories’ knavery is cloaked by two sorts of folly. The first is that of ‘gender-critical feminists’, like Kathleen Stock, who have allowed themselves to be used as provocateurs and as the Tories’ ‘entering wedge’.

That this is folly is visible immediately in the nature of the Tory press campaign round the Scots Gender Recognition reform bill. As I discussed back in January, ‘gender-critical feminists’ may be tempted to treat the Scots trans prisoners issue as an ‘I told you so’. They should pause to think that the press technique used in these stories is *identical* to the Tory press giving excessive prominence to the microscopic numbers of false allegations of rape, with a view to spreading the idea among lawyers and jurors that such false allegations are much more common than they actually are, and hence making actual convictions of rape extraordinarily difficult. Lending feminist names to a Tory press campaign of this sort is to *support* one of the fundamental mechanisms of ‘rape impunity’ in modern law.

Second Level

At a second level, the Tory campaign around no-platforming - and the no-platformers themselves - fail to distinguish between *protesting against* speech you disagree with and *attempting to prevent it by cancellations or immediate obstruction*. The first is plainly legitimate. Speech control in capitalism works by allowing the capitalist an amplifier - advertising and other corrupt institutions - which can drown out opposing voices. *Assembly* in as large numbers as possible, petitioning, and so on, are necessary means to resist this drowning-out effect. If the Tories are allowed to smear all protests as no-platforming, they obtain practical control of speech. What will they do with it?

The Tory Party has *throughout its history*, going right back to the 1680s, been the party of censorship. The very immediate forms of the HE(FS)A show that they want to pose as champions of free speech, while still defending an absolutely immediate exercise in censorship - the no-platforming of anti-Zionists. In this context, ‘gender-critical feminists’, or other free speech campaigners who lend themselves to Tory provocations, are only temporary ‘useful idiots’. Once the Tories’ objective of obtaining control has been achieved, they will be dumped and targeted - as ‘feminazis’ were before they were useful to witch-hunting the trans minority.

Equally folly and equally ‘useful idiots’ for the Tories are the no-platforming efforts of trans rights activists against ‘transphobes’ and the tendency of the left to tail these. Stock’s case is in this exemplary. The suggestion that Stock’s political ideas made Sussex University an unsafe space for trans people is obvious crap. So, too, the suggestion that her speaking at the Oxford Union Society made Oxford an unsafe space for trans people. “Our existence is not a debate” - the slogan chanted by Oxford trans rights campaigners

outside Stock’s meeting⁹ - is either meaningless (there is no such debate, since no-one doubts the *existence* of trans people; they merely doubt that trans people are *for all purposes* members of the destination sex/gender); or, if “Our existence is not a debate” means that these questions *may not be debated*, the supporters are demanding not merely minority *rights*, but minority *rule*.

But the ‘minority’ which will actually ‘rule’ under any present-day regime of ‘minority rule’ is the capitalists and their chosen bribe-takers. And this, right now, means the supporters of “unchangeable genetic sex”, “traditional gender roles” and (from the ‘national conservatives’) that women should be forced to have more children.¹⁰

What cancel campaigns do is to *legitimise state, media and Tory no-platforming*. And the efforts of the left to cancel ‘transphobes’ are limited and ineffective, given the massively greater resources of the right and the state. What they legitimise is the right and the state deploying its (vastly greater) resources, to no-platforming the left - as we have seen in the ‘anti-Semitism’ smear campaign.

As Rosa Luxemburg wrote in 1918,

Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of ‘justice’, but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when ‘freedom’ becomes a special privilege.¹¹

We - the workers’ movement and the left - desperately need the right to free speech, the right “to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”: it is necessary to add, ‘without drowning out and no-platforming by advertising-funded media’. We can only possibly hope to achieve this by fighting *consistently* for freedom of speech for all ●

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Notes

1. Eg, ‘Rishi Sunak to announce first free speech tsar: Cambridge professor Arif Ahmed will be tasked with waging the “war on woke” - with the power to investigate universities that censor academics’ *MailOnline* May 28; ‘Free-speech tsar Arif Ahmed set to defend all views’ *BBC News* June 1; ‘England’s “free speech tsar” named in announcement to one newspaper’ *The Guardian* June 1; ‘New government free speech tsar professor Arif Ahmed says “democracy is at stake”’ *Evening Standard* June 1.
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3. www.varsity.co.uk/news/20334 (December 11 2020).
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6. *Atkinson v Newcastle Waterworks* (1877) 2 Ex. D. 441, the Conservative Lord Chancellor Lord Cairns unusually sitting in the Court of Appeal to rule against the claimants.
7. H Genn *Hard bargaining: out of court settlement in personal injury actions* Clarendon Press 1987.
8. Discussion in M Macnair, ‘Rhetoric and political realities’ *Weekly Worker* August 3 2017 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1166/rhetoric-and-political-realities).
9. ‘Oxford students hold trans+ pride march as Kathleen Stock speaks’ *Socialist Worker* May 31.
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USA

Biden dodges a bullet

While an immediate financial abyss has been avoided, Daniel Lazare sees all the tell-tale signs of long-term imperial decline

Amid warnings of impending financial doom, Joe Biden and Republican speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy avoided a federal default on May 28. They cobbled together a last-minute budget deal, allowing the US treasury to continue borrowing more than \$1.4 trillion a year to feed a federal debt bubble projected to reach 195% of gross domestic product by the middle of the century.

The press touted the deal as a super-win for Biden and a humiliating loss for the Freedom Caucus - a far-right Republican faction whose 45 members claimed not to care about plunging the country into a financial abyss, as long as social spending was cut to the bone.

But the caucus blinked, as the showdown neared, and key members like Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (of Jewish space laser fame) and Jim Jordan of Ohio peeled off and voted for the Biden-McCarthy package after all. Two-thirds of Republicans followed suit, allowing the deal to sail through the House by 314 votes to 117 and then to triumph in the Senate by 63-36. After endless warnings that international capitalism was about to go off a cliff, the lopsided victory was more than a bit anticlimactic. But no-one cared, because disaster had been averted.

The result was a long-awaited progressive win after seemingly endless setbacks and defeats, right? Er, not quite.

In truth, the agreement confirms that America is following a time-honoured pattern of late-imperial decline, as it tries to outrun a growing list of problems at home by heading off in ever more bellicose directions abroad. Despite the venomous rhetoric on Capitol Hill, agreement on a few basic principles was surprisingly widespread. One was that key welfare programmes, such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, should remain off the table, as far as budget cuts were concerned. Another was that the military budget should remain off-limits too.

That meant that only a few items of "non-military discretionary spending" remained on the chopping block, along with a few other rollbacks. Conservatives, for example, pushed to expand work requirements for childless adults who receive federal food assistance. Where recipients between the ages of 18 and 49 must now put in 80 hours a month, they called for extending the mandate to age 54. This is a nasty piece of legislation that will force thousands of people to work for the equivalent of \$3.51 an hour - less than half the federal minimum wage! - in return for benefits totalling \$281 a month. But, while Democrats said yes regardless, the Biden administration was still able to win exceptions for veterans, the homeless and others that will allow thousands more to enrol.¹

So it was a giant "eff you" to the poor - as *Jacobin*, the semi-official house organ of the Democratic Socialists of America, put it.² But it could have been worse.

Eager to protect billionaire tax cheats, Republicans also tried to slash \$80 billion that the Biden administration had set aside for stepped-up tax enforcement. But the White House was able to pare that back to a \$21 billion cut over the course of a decade - a relatively paltry sum, whose short-term impact



January 6 attempted coup

will be minor. Republicans tried to cut billions in leftover Covid relief funds, but the administration was able to hold them to a minimum there as well.

That was it. The ferocious cuts that Republicans demanded across the board faded to near-zero, as Dems outmanoeuvred them at every turn. The Freedom Caucus ended up looking foolish, while Biden - a man who can barely read off a teleprompter or mount a stage with stumbling - wound up looking smart and in control.

Retirees could meanwhile heave a sigh of relief that Medicare and Social Security had survived. So could 86 million people who cannot afford private insurance and are therefore dependent on bare-bones Medicaid coverage, whose total cost is nonetheless nearing \$600 billion a year.

Decline

But they were not the only ones who will benefit. So will Wall Street, which will have no shortage of treasury bonds to process, sell and profit from, as the federal government piles on another \$20 trillion or so in debt by 2033. Arms manufacturers and military contractors will see their fortunes soar, as the outlook for war grows increasingly bullish. The same goes for pro-war think-tanks like the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Atlantic Council - all of which will continue benefiting from the defence overflow.³ After rising by better than 5.5% per year since 2017, military outlays are expected to jump another 6.4% to \$815 billion in the current fiscal year and then hit \$909 billion in the fiscal year, 2024 (which begins this October). And this does not include aid to Ukraine, which will undoubtedly grow too.

The American military juggernaut will thus continue growing at a rate greater than the next 10 countries combined. US defence spending will

continue at 10 times the Russian pace and three times that of China. While the United States accounts for only four percent of the global population and roughly 25% of global economic output, it accounts for 39% of world military expenditures - a level per capita that puts it 50% above global norms.⁴ This is why America feels it can continue exercising not only political and economic hegemony, but military hegemony too.

After all, world domination does not work if you do not have muscle to back it up. As secretary of state Antony Blinken recently explained, America's goal is not to keep other countries down, but merely to see to it that everyone plays by the same rules - rules that America happens to lay down for purposes of its own self-aggrandisement:

Our purpose is not to contain China, to hold it back, to keep it down. It is to uphold this rules-based order that China is posing a challenge to. Anyone who poses a challenge to that order, we're going to stand up and defend it.⁵

China is free to do whatever it wants, in other words, as long as it leaves US supremacy intact. It can grow as much as it wishes, as long as it understands that America must grow even more. The status quo must remain unchanged - not today or tomorrow, but forever. Since China cannot possibly countenance such an arrangement, the Blinken formula is a recipe for a military clash in the western Pacific, whose likelihood is growing by the month.

What makes this classically late-imperial is the domestic decline that goes with it. Everyone knows about America's long list of woes. The 2.7-year drop in US longevity since 2019 - due to a grossly-mishandled Covid epidemic, as well as 'diseases of despair', such as suicide, homicide, alcoholism and drug overdoses - may not be as bad as the 8.5% decline

that Russia saw during and after the Soviet breakup in 1989-95. But it is disturbingly close.

Other symptoms of decay include a gun crisis that continues to worsen, as mass shootings proliferate; political rhetoric that grows ever more poisonous and a constitutional crisis that has only intensified in the wake of the attempted January 6 2021 coup d'état. Yet every attempt at amelioration makes matters worse. The only thing a badly-fractured capitalist power structure can agree on is to try to keep a lid on at home, while engaging in increasingly dangerous adventures abroad.

But the process works in reverse as well, as military adventurism abroad adds to social tensions at home. Guns proliferate both internationally and domestically, along with violence and irrationality. Poverty intensifies, as productivity stagnates and the economy grows more militaristic, hollowed out and one-dimensional.

Debt plays a major role. Since only the wealthy can afford the bonds and T-bills that the US treasury pumps out in growing quantities, the effect of federal debt is to redistribute wealth and income from the lower class to the upper. This is why the top one percent of American households have seen their wealth more than quadruple since the late 1990s while federal debt levels more than quintupled. With wages stagnant, it is also why the bottom 50% saw its share of national wealth shrink by more than 12%.⁶

In asking how the US wound up with so much red ink on its hands, *The New York Times* pointed to a series of missteps and reversals. The 'war on terror' led to a \$6 trillion debt increase, while George W Bush's tax costs added \$5.6 trillion more. Obama pushed through nearly \$800 billion in tax cuts and spending in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown, while Trump contributed \$1.2 trillion in additional tax cuts, plus another \$3

trillion to counter Covid. (Some 1.17 million Americans ended up dying regardless - the worst performance per capita in the advanced industrial world.) Biden added a further \$1.9 trillion to the pile with his March 2021 stimulus package, whose chief effect so far has been to aggravate inflation.⁷

Wild card

The pattern is clear. Turbulence in the form of war, disease and economic breakdown leads to mounting debt, as the US tries to borrow its way out of trouble. Debt leads to economic polarisation and hence to renewed turbulence, as social conflict mounts. War leads to social breakdown and then to more war, as the ruling class tries to compensate by adopting an ever more aggressive posture abroad. The vicious cycle intensifies, as each new effort at self-stabilisation causes the US to wobble ever more violently out of control.

Add to that a constitutional breakdown that has only intensified since the January 6 uprising, and 2023 is beginning to bear a strange resemblance to 1905. All it would take is a Chinese hypersonic missile laying waste to an aircraft carrier or two in the South China Sea for the picture to be complete.

The working class is meanwhile the wild card. With strike activity plunging to ever more negligible levels over the last half-century, the bourgeoisie would seem to have the problem well in hand. American workers seem to be dull and unresponsive, held back by a two-party system that requires them to choose between equally reactionary candidates and a labour leadership that has never been more timid or conservative.

But that could change on a dime, as the economy deteriorates and endless warfare makes itself felt more and more acutely. The Biden administration is following a carefully-calibrated strategy aimed at steering neatly between the two extremes, but the effort is looking more and more tenuous. No-one knows what would happen if Washington provoked a war with China or stumbled into a conflict that no-one wants (other than a tiny layer of arms manufacturers and military contractors). The consequences could be catastrophic for those in the line of fire, for the working class in general and for members of the bourgeoisie in think tanks and boardrooms.

Turbulence, debt and military conflict are all of a piece. The more one grows, the more the others grow with it, which is why American imperialism's long-term indicators continue pointing downward. As the machinery of state deteriorates, society deteriorates - a process of mutual decline that only a militant working class can cut short ●

Notes

1. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-30/biden-mccarthy-debt-limit-deal-puts-government-services-on-a-diet.
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POLEMIC

Charting a difficult course

How to move the DSA away from the Democratic Party's left fringes? The answer lies in democratic centralism. Parker McQueeney answers Red Labor

Comrades Kent Kiser and Awi Blanc of the Red Labor Caucus are correct when they charge that the debates within the Democratic Socialists of America around the 'party question' are couched in abstract and vague terms ('Party, unions and programme' *Weekly Worker* May 11). Unfortunately, the rest of their article - supposedly a response to my 'Principled partyist strategy' (December 8 2022) - does not say much at all, at least in terms of a critique of the Marxist Unity Group's position. It is almost entirely a straw man.

Each DSA tendency seemingly has its own description of party strategy - from 'dirty break' to 'dirty stay', 'party surrogate', 'realignment', etc. Even worse, each of these 'strategies' has its own varying meanings that seemingly change from individual to individual. We in the MUG have mainly stayed aloof from promoting a vague title, and instead have been arguing for the necessity of genuine democratic centralism (ie, revolutionary parliamentarism - not the sect version inherited from the 1921 militarisation of the Soviet Communist Party) and a vision of party work based on the revolutionary social democracy outlined in Lenin's *What is to be done?* and Kautsky's *The road to power*.

These debates are usually formalistic, but I suppose one could call MUG's strategy 'party surrogate in form, clean break in content' (which itself could be described as a variant form of the 'dirty break'). The Red Labor comrades charge us with wanting to break with the Democratic Party, but not yet. Not so. This misunderstanding comes from their formalistic reading of the 'party question', and a confusion of strategy with tactics - both things that nearly the entire US left is guilty of.

The DSA is essentially already a political party in the Marxist sense. It has a mass (though still small), dues-paying membership, a platform (even if it is mostly ignored), an elected leadership body, varying levels of bureaucracy, etc. What it lacks is a separate legal shell. This is important: we want to stand under



There is a prize to be won

our own flag as much as possible. But the bigger question is, what class do you operate under the discipline of? It is *theoretically* possible for the DSA to have legislative fractions across the country operating in the same manner that the RSDLP's duma representatives did without a DSA ballot line. In other words, under genuine democratic centralism, as a *pure opposition*, there to conduct mass agitation against the constitutional order and for the establishment of a democratic republic. They could refuse to join the Democratic Party (and Progressive) caucuses once elected and instead only caucus with other socialists, foregoing committee assignments, contracts for their constituents, etc in order to be an effective people's tribune and organ of mass revolutionary agitation modelled after Wilhelm Liebknecht, as described by Lenin and in *What is to be done?* The crux of the issue is

not the legal shell we operate under, but rather the strategy pursued, once elected.

Toothless

It is possible - actually inevitable - that a legally separate bourgeois labour party would operate under the same toothless popular front strategy pursued by DSA electeds. That is why the MUG stands for a Marxist party rather than a labour party (the socialist lawyer, Louis Boudin, made this argument excellently in 1910¹). What usually fails to get mentioned is that DSA members elected in municipal elections often do so *not* as Democrats, because many local elections are non-partisan.

I do not mean to suggest that we should not put effort into building ballot lines or running legally independent campaigns, or that there would not eventually need to be a total legal separation. But the ballot line is a secondary, (mostly) tactical issue, compared to that of operational discipline and parliamentary strategy. The popular front strategy entails the suspension of criticism of liberals in order to fight the far right. On a rhetorical level, only the fringe, rightwing North Star caucus of the DSA is willing to openly argue for this. Yet not many tendencies are willing to require that electeds use their position to *constantly indict both capitalist parties*.

While the 'squad' will occasionally do something they are not supposed to that makes the Biden regime squeamish, like their recent and very late defence of Julian Assange and Wikileaks, for the most part they operate as the left edge of the Democratic Party, and even as the 'strongest fighters' for Biden's agenda (Build Back Better, etc). This is not a problem of the legal shell they are elected under, but rather the class under whose discipline they operate.

I am not sure that the Red Labor comrades closely read my article. Their digression on trade union politics and the rank-and-file strategy is not at odds with what I reported or the MUG's position paper on labour strategy.² In fact, I strongly criticised Jonah Furman - a star representative

of the post-Shachtmanite left labour reform movement - for running left cover on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's rail vote. It is true that many DSA leftists and champions of the rank-and-file strategy take an over-optimistic and uncritical view of Teamster president Sean O'Brien and other reformers that sometimes verges on 'trade union liberalism'. Yet the union reporting of *Cosmonaut*, including some by MUG members, has been explicitly critical of this.³

The sections of my article on the fight for expulsion is another tactical question. However, how Marxists relate to the state-loyalist wing of the workers' movement is strategic. My view is that this was best theorised by champions of the Comintern's united front strategy, including Trotsky, who advocated it in the 1930s, as Stalinism was swinging wildly between third periodism and the popular front.⁴

The tactics I argued for in my article are downstream from this strategy. If Marxists in the US are going to be successful in putting forward a pro-party and revolutionary vision in the DSA, we must have the ability to distinguish form from content and tactics from strategy. Unfortunately the article from the Red Labor comrades falls far short of doing this ●

Notes

1. www.marxists.org/archive/boudin/1910/04/labor-party.html.
2. cosmonautmag.com/2023/03/letter-marxist-unity-group-labor-strategy-position-paper.
3. See Edgar Esquivel's piece on the Teamsters (cosmonautmag.com/tag/edgar-esquivel) and MUG member Shuvu Bhattarai's article on the railworkers fiasco (cosmonautmag.com/2022/12/how-the-rail-carriers-wall-street-and-the-us-government-crushed-class-i-freight-rail-workers).
4. A good interpretation of Trotsky's united front policy is Ian Donovan's 1998 article for *Revolution and Truth*, 'Trotskyism, the united front and the popular front: against class collaboration and sterile sectarianism'. Ian republished the article here: socialistfight.com/2018/10/25/from-the-archives-spartacism-vs-trotskyism-on-the-popular-front. John Riddell's writings on the united front are also useful - see, for example, J Riddell, 'Birth of a tactic' *Weekly Worker* September 24 2020 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1316/birth-of-a-tactic).

What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Fighting fund

Help us get there

As I write, after exactly seven days of our June fighting fund, we've already received £641 towards our £2,250 target. But, of course, the beginning of each month always sees a disproportionately high number of standing orders and PayPal transfers and this month has been no exception.

Let me go through them in order of size. The largest was from Irish comrade AM, whose euro payment came to £75. Then there were AC (£60), EW (£55), BO (£35), ST, CS and CG (£30 each), as well as comrade AN, whose monthly standing order of £10 was this time augmented by an extra £20 - so £30 from him too! Other transfers came from GD (£25), BK and MS (£20 each), RG and MT (£15), TM (£12), MM and GB (£11), a tenner each from CP, BG, DI, YM and SM, plus £6 each from

DC and JS.

On top of that, comrade TDB came up with £60 (actually an annual subscription, which the comrade is still paying, even though he now reads us online and doesn't want the print copy!), while NW (£25), SK and MH (£10 each) also came up with the goods.

Thanks very much for each one of these comrades for their excellent donations, which have taken us up above the going rate. But now we have a job to do. We really must shoot past that £2,250 barrier in June after the disappointments of the last few months. Can you help us make sure we do just that?

Please do your bit ●

Robbie Rix

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

weekly worker

Internal weaknesses fuel drive to war

Dreadful notes of preparation

Yassamine Mather looks at the high-stakes diplomatic game being played out and the danger of cold war turning into a hot war

On June 4, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu renewed his threats to attack Iranian nuclear facilities in Natanz and elsewhere, lambasting United Nations nuclear inspectors for failing to confront Tehran. All this was discussed in a security cabinet war meeting convened in an underground command centre, for a 'mock assessment' of what the current Israeli government calls a "multi-front war exercise". The particular focus was on the northern frontier (Lebanon) and Iran.

A few days earlier, on May 29, the Israeli Defence Forces had launched a two-week military drill entitled 'Firm Hand' - conducting a simulation of an airforce strike against 'strategic' targets in enemy territory, as well as a navy mock offensive and defensive actions, in what are actually exercises preparing for a possible all-out war. Starting the meeting, Netanyahu referred to European and US attempts at reviving the Iran nuclear negotiations and reaching a diplomatic solution. He ominously said: "We are confident we can handle any threat on our own."

Sanctions

Of course the military exercise and cabinet meeting were pre-planned, but they came during escalated tensions over Iran's nuclear programme and Israeli warnings that a broad conflict could break out.

In April, the website *Axios* reported attempts by the US administration to discuss proposals for an interim agreement with Iran's Islamic Republic, which would include lifting some sanctions in exchange for freezing parts of the country's nuclear programme. By all accounts the Biden administration tried and failed to get Israeli support for this plan. Then on June 3 the *Financial Times* reported:

US and European powers have resumed discussions on how to engage with Iran over its nuclear activity, as fears mount that the Islamic republic's aggressive expansion of its programme risks triggering a regional war ... there has been contact with Iranian officials in recent months, including a meeting in Oslo in March between officials from the so-called E3 (European 3) - France, Germany and the UK - and Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran's nuclear negotiator. Rob Malley, the US's Iran envoy, has met several times with Iran's UN ambassador, Amir Saeid Iravani, who was a senior official at the Supreme National Security Council before being posted to New York.¹

These discussions are the first direct talks between the US and Iran since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) during Donald Trump's presidency. We should also remember the charade of last year, when, during nuclear talks in Vienna,



Israel is a nuclear power, Iran is not ... yet

Iran and the US refused to meet face to face and we had a bizarre set of meetings, where both sides only spoke to the European delegations in separate meeting rooms - one for Iran and the Europeans and the other for the US and the Europeans. As most people familiar with international relations know (but often fail to admit), global diplomacy remains a secret 'art', hidden from the public and media.

These 'secret' negotiations do not mean we will definitely see a resumption of the nuclear negotiations. The US administration is unlikely to embark on such an endeavour this side of the 2024 US presidential elections. In fact, as always, the 'carrot' of possible reduction in sanctions comes at the same time as the 'stick' - the threat of military attack, thanks to state department warnings. Addressing the pro-Israeli American Israel Public Affairs Committee on June 5, secretary of state Antony Blinken said: "If Iran rejects the path of diplomacy, then, as president Joe Biden has repeatedly made clear, all options are on the table to ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon." All this at a time when the US military is publicising the launch of what *The Eurasian Times* calls a "massive ordnance penetrator bomb that can 'wipe out' Iran's nuclear facilities".

The paper reports:

On May 2, the US military released images of the GBU-57/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator bunker buster, or MOP, at the Whiteman US Air Force Base in Missouri's Facebook page. The facility houses US B-2 bombers - the only aircraft capable of dropping the MOP bomb.

In a caption, the base stated that it had received two MOP bombs, so a munitions squadron could "test their performance". However, the photos were deleted shortly after to prevent the leak of sensitive information about the composition and payload of the weapon.²

As always, there are conflicting reports about Iran's nuclear capability. According to western security agencies, Iran has managed to enrich enough uranium to 60% fissile purity, although further purification would be needed to achieve weapon-grade uranium, which is supposed to allow Iran to construct two nuclear bombs in around two weeks. According to a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency, compiled in January 2023, uranium particles enriched to 83.7% purity were found in Iranian plants (uranium enriched to 90% purity is considered weapon-grade). The Islamic Republic denies these

accusations, but Israel is using such reports to threaten pre-emptive military strikes. On June 5 Rafael Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told a news conference that "Iran's enriched uranium reserves have increased by more than a quarter in the last three months", adding that his agency has installed monitoring equipment in some of Iran's nuclear facilities and is investigating matters.

Agendas

If all this was not enough to raise the risk of confrontation in the Middle East, on June 7 Iran demonstrated its first hypersonic missile capable of outpacing missile defence systems. The Fattah ('Conqueror') missile was unveiled in a ceremony attended by Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi and leading officers of the Iran Revolutionary Guards Command. It is claimed by Iran that the missile can attain a speed of over 5,000 metres per second, with a range of 1,400 kilometres.

Of course, any major conflict involving Iran, the US and Israel would have different contenders - with contradictory agendas. For the Islamic Republic - which is facing continued unrest and a young population refusing to adhere to 'correct' Shia social behaviour - it would be beneficial to create a diversion via yet another international

crisis. According to sections of the ruling clerics, the religious state can be saved by continuing a state of cold war with the 'foreign enemy' - Israel - and the US, the 'great Satan'. This group considers the threat of a cold war (even escalating into a real war) to be a blessing, so it will continue taking risks in the shape of continuing nuclear development, rattling hypersonic missiles and selling drones to Russia.

The embattled Netanyahu government in Israel is also keen to continue a cold war, and some members of his rightwing government clearly believe an attack on Hezbollah and a possible 'all-out war' on Iran would have many benefits - not least allowing the current coalition to remain in office. The mass demonstrations of a few weeks ago are currently on hold, as the coalition has delayed its judicial overhaul. However, the delay cannot continue forever. A war with Hezbollah and subsequently Iran will be 'god's gift'.

The United States is keen to support Israel, its main ally in the region, but a war in the Middle East is the last thing it wants. US diplomats travelling to Jerusalem have a single message: the US is dealing with Iran, so Israel has to show patience and trust the US administration.

For the three European countries involved in the Iran nuclear talks - the UK, France and Germany - the main concern is guaranteeing access to cheaper fuel next winter. Given Saudi plans to cut oil exports by one million barrels a day from July, in line with recent Opec decisions to curb oil exports, a resumption of oil exports from Iran (currently halted because of US sanctions) would make a significant contribution to reducing fuel bills. However, the three European countries have divisions of their own. Although France and Germany do not seem too concerned by Iran's endless supply of drones to Russia (used in the Ukraine war), the United Kingdom, with its current bellicose position regarding that war, is more likely to take a pro-Israeli position.

All this is contributing to more uncertainty, a continued cold war and the possibility of actual war in the Middle East ●

Notes

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