

weekly



# Worker



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No 1477 February 8 2024

Towards a mass Communist Party

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**SPEW's farcical  
Labour Party  
mark two**

## LETTERS



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

## Now communist?

As a long-term *Weekly Worker* reader I would like to register my disappointment that the world-altering transition between Socialist Appeal and the launch of the Revolutionary Communist Party has barely been touched upon in the pages of your esteemed organ. I will rectify this now with a partial summary of their reasoning for this party turn and review of the first ever edition of *The Communist* (January 24).

First, a mention of the context, the public reasoning for this change. Revealingly, Socialist Appeal described the relaunch in an early December issue as "a fresh communist uniform to replace our well-worn socialist clothing". A costume change clearly doesn't justify an announcement that you have become a "party" surely, comrades?

The comrades have preempted my criticism and assure me that "*The Communist* is not a rebranding exercise". In a moment worthy of the 1990s satirical TV show *Brass eye*, the comrades reveal the precise number of their group in an attempt to convince doubters that they are uniquely placed to lead the working class - "On the back of a bold recruitment drive and years of determination, the International Marxist Tendency has now reached 1,101 comrades in Britain."

Let's leave aside for a moment that it is bizarre to name a precise figure rather than say "more than 1,000 comrades"; and that the word "bold" is used very often in SA/RCP material, and is a standing joke in my union from years of SPEW/Socialist Alternative using it as a cover for any ideas of how to actually achieve victories - 'bold leadership' always being the answer. If we assume that Socialist Appeal were probably muddling along with around 200 comrades before their recent spate of recruitment (largely on university campuses), this is an impressive level of growth.

But they cannot seriously believe that just over 1,000 comrades can claim to form the party of the working class in Britain. The comrades claim that "it is time for a new revolutionary weapon", but declaring a party is only an effective weapon in the class struggle if it represents a serious step forward in the political representation of the working class. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being a successful fighting propaganda group for socialism (or 'communism', if they prefer, though I don't see what has changed in their programme to justify such an assertion). To declare yourself *the* party of the working class with such a level of membership just smacks of unseriousness.

In a way I can very well see why the CPGB-PCC have not been engaged especially closely with SA's rebranding. To alter a name, to cynically rebrand as communist without changing their programme, to retain absurdities like nationalising the top 100 monopolies and pretending this is 'communism' is risible, so we are right to mock and I have done so too. However, in the same way you are receiving some pushback on your allegedly overly robust attitude to 'Talking About Socialism', there has to be a serious political assessment and engagement with any group which has grown fivefold over this current period.

I was sold a copy of *The Communist* No1 (no doubt a collector's item for the future) by a young man in my workplace who joined the Labour Party under Starmer because he was

too young to be really politically active under Corbyn - and had since moved left. Those of us who've been around the far left for a long time would do well to grasp just how heady it must be for a small group to suddenly find themselves in the position SA/RCP do with this level of sudden growth - when did the last such upsurge happen and what can we learn from it, other than simply remembering the mistakes of the Workers Revolutionary Party and Socialist Workers Party suddenly claiming to be parties? I'd be glad to hear from comrades within and without the CPGB-PCC on this.

On page 2 of their new paper, the comrades quote Lenin; "If we join forces to produce a common newspaper, this work will train and bring forward not only the most skilful propagandists, but the most capable organisers, the most talented political party leaders capable, at the right moment, of releasing the slogan for the decisive struggle and of taking the lead in that struggle."

It should be obvious to members of this group that "join forces" in the context above should not refer merely to their own paltry 1,000 members, but to all the thousands of trained Marxists from whatever background currently active. The demand from the rest of us presumably should be; open your letters pages to proper discussion and debate, not necessarily as fully as the *Weekly Worker*, who openly allow RS21 members to denounce them as dickheads, but at least to the point where different views are expressed. The current message is "Forward to 1,400 members!" Talk about poverty of aspiration. A true Revolutionary Communist Party will be formed when a serious unity campaign of the actually existing organised Marxists can be launched. The sooner, the better.

Sean Carter  
email

## Marxist polemic

I am glad to read that Archie Woodrow is "a great admirer of Mike Macnair's writings on strategy" - I hope they're useful to you, comrade (Letters, February 1). But he needs to be aware that my *Revolutionary strategy* book could never have been published without the character of the *Weekly Worker* as a paper of "Marxist polemic and Marxist unity" (emphasis added), of which he complains.

As Karl Marx wrote in 1842, "you cannot enjoy the advantages of a free press without putting up with its inconveniences. You cannot pluck the rose without its thorns!" The book originated as a series of articles in this paper polemicising with the 2006 debate on strategy in the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and Alex Callinicos's interventions in this debate. Both the Ligue and Callinicos would certainly have regarded the articles as "rude" if they had bothered to respond at all.

Majorities usually regard minority views as rude, condescending and "abstract and self-important polemicising". This is just the normal left-bureaucratic or debating-society method. And the demand for "politeness" is in reality the same demand made by the Labour right against the left (compare my article, 'Attempt to outlaw justified anger', October 20 2016) - just on a smaller scale.

Obviously, we in this paper may get things wrong, and if we have got things wrong we are happy to be corrected. I am very glad to be told that RS21 is not a student-based organisation - I agree: that was my impression not just from Oxford, but from reports from elsewhere from the time of the split a decade ago. I am not persuaded that what we said

about TAS is a "misrepresentation", because comrades Wrack and McMahon in their response defend the bureaucratic method they used in Left Unity's Socialist Platform, rather than indicating that they have any second thoughts about this operation.

Mike Macnair  
Oxford

## RS21 insults

A recent member of Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century casually throws around insults like "small", and attributes to (presumably RS21) comrades the insults of "sectarian", "abstract" and "no presence in the trade unions or social movements" (Letters, February 1). The writer says these are "grossly unfair mischaracterisations rooted in prejudice and ignorance".

I have heard these insults for a long time from the SWP. So does the apple fall from the tree in respect of the allegedly "non-dogmatic, non-sectarian, forward-thinking" RS21?

Jon D White  
email

## Factions

Andrew Northall has modified his position on factions somewhat, but still focuses on the negative side. (Letters, February 1) The comrade is moving to a more dialectical position, away from the Orwellian-style totalitarianism, which Lenin mistakenly led the Soviet Communist Party into. Andrew is no longer arguing the absolutist anti-faction line.

Comrade Andrew concludes his letter thus: "Clearly, factions are sometimes a historical necessity - some members of such would argue that in the CPGB in the 1980s, and certainly for the Bolsheviks in the early 20th century. But they should never be seen as the ideal - something to be aimed for or constitutionally enshrined."

This is an improvement on his previous stance. The comrade now recognises, correctly, in my view, that sometimes factions are an historical necessity - something no communist can deny at certain stages in the political struggle. Andrew points out, again correctly in my view, that they should never be seen as an ideal, or something to be aimed at or constitutionally enshrined. I am not aware of the Bolsheviks having a law enshrining factions, but they were allowed before 1921. It wasn't positive developments that led Lenin to ban factions, but negative events.

Andrew needs to make clear whether he believes that factions should be allowed. The problem with his argument is that if the comrade believes that factions are sometimes historically necessary, but not allowed - that is to say, the right to form a faction is banned by the party - this means that, although it may be necessary at a certain stage to form a faction, the party constitution makes it illegal. Those who see the need to form a faction will have to break the rules of the party. If comrade Andrew found it necessary to form a faction, he would be exposing himself to possible expulsion from the party. My view is that there is no need for a law enshrining or banning factions.

This contradiction in Andrew's argument can only lead to two results. Those who see the necessity to form a faction, when it is banned by the party, will either have to do so secretly, or will have to resign and form another party.

Where will it end, when one Communist Party gives birth to many more because factions are banned. Which is better: to have a single Communist Party with temporary factions, or separate communist parties which exist because the original party bans factions? Clearly banning factions can lead to the unnecessary

proliferation of parties. But allowing factions doesn't mean that we should view them as an ideal.

Comrade Andrew assumes that those who defend the right to form factions are addicted to them. But factions can play a positive or negative role, depending on the situation or which class interest they express. If you are on the left, in the debate about factions you simply need to address one simple issue, which is: what side do I support: democratic socialism or the totalitarian banning of factions.

If we support the totalitarian banning of factions, forcing them underground, or to split off and form separate parties, we would only have ourselves to blame for a divided communist movement. One of the reasons why so many Trotskyist sects exist is because they do not have a relaxed attitude to factions.

Andrew should take into account that the bourgeoisie can rule society through a Communist Party, something which Mao was fully aware of. Communist officials can turn into a privileged bureaucratic caste, alien to socialism. Stalin was aware of this too, but rejected Trotsky's approach to the problem. It is stupid to think you can solve the problem of bureaucracy with a political revolution, as Trotskyism suggests. Trotsky's solution was pure ultra-leftism.

The thing is, if you ban factions in a Communist Party and a bourgeois faction takes over, this plays right into their hands. The struggle for socialism is a struggle against the counterrevolutionary elements of the bourgeoisie inside and outside the party.

We can't be certain that those who genuinely represent working class interests will always have the ascendancy in the Communist Party. It is for this reason why I argue that we should take a more relaxed attitude to factions. The fact that the Bolsheviks could without banning factions make a revolution - and then go on to defeat a counterrevolution, which had the backing of at least 14 capitalist powers - is a strong argument in favour of a more relaxed attitude to factions.

In reality, rather than a threat to party democracy, the ban on factions is the first step on the road to totalitarianism. We need to think about which interest the ban serves the most: the working class itself, or the conservative, bureaucratic elements in the party and socialist state.

Tony Clark  
For Democratic Socialism

## Oppressor state

By 1920 and the Second Congress of the Communist International Lenin was sounding very different from Stalin's position on the national question in 1913:

"First, what is the most important, the fundamental idea of our theses? The distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations. We emphasise this distinction - in diametric contrast to the Second International and bourgeois democracy. In the epoch of imperialism, it is particularly important for the proletariat and the Communist International to establish the concrete economic facts."

There is no doubt that from its Zionist roots to its foundation in 1948 the state of Israel was and is not an oppressed, but an oppressor, state. It is therefore not a genuine nation-state at all - simply an artificial imperialist outpost, just as Northern Ireland, Ukraine after the US-sponsored counterrevolutionary coup in 2014, the Confederate States before the US civil war were and are not genuine nation-states.

Israel is not just strategically backed by the US: in 1982 secretary of state general Alexander Haig described

Israel as "the largest American aircraft carrier in the world that cannot be sunk". In October 1993, in his visit to Israel after October 7 Joe Biden stated: "I have long said, if Israel didn't exist, we would have to invent it". Back in 1986 Biden made a speech in the US Senate spelling out why the US backed Israel, "It is the best \$3 billion investment we make. Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region."

So, whenever the fundamental interests of the US are at stake, Israel complies. Israel could not continue to exist without US arms, subsidies and favourable trade deals. This is the lesson of the war of 1956, when France and Britain allied with Israel to seize the Suez Canal and stop Egypt nationalising it. The US had far more effective financial means of subduing the third world (or 'global south', as it is known today) and the colonial era was over, Eisenhower ordered Israel, Britain and France to withdraw. They had to comply, thus openly acknowledging the US as the neo-colonial global hegemon - although this temporarily strengthened Khrushchev's relationship with the colonial world in general.

The conflict between the 'left' of Zionism - David Ben-Gurion, the Histadrut (General Federation of Labour) and the Haganah - and the right fascist elements in the Stern Gang and Irgun was only skin-deep, as evidenced by enthusiastic participation of all of them in the Nakba of 1947-48, in which some 15,000 Palestinians were murdered and 750,000 driven from their homes and land, which was immediately seized, stolen and granted to the invading Zionists.

The Stern Gang initially sought support from Hitler, then shamefully got it from Stalin after the Nazis, then Britain and France, and then the USA; it was always an imperialist project and outpost. The liberal mass media in the west openly designated Irgun as a terrorist organisation back in the 1940s; it was subsumed into the Israeli Defence Forces after 1948, along with the Stern Gang and the Haganah, just as the Azov Battalion and other fascist formations were integrated into the Ukraine army - in both cases politically dominating their armed forces.

The Histadrut founded the Haganah and so it was never a genuine trade union federation; it was a capitalist enterprise and owned many businesses and only accepted Palestinians as second-class members.

Although Hamas and the Houthis are reactionary on social issues, nevertheless they are fighting Israeli terror now, unlike the US/Israeli quisling, Mahmoud Abbas, and his bogus Palestinian Authority, which is openly collaborating with them. Hamas and the Houthis express the anger of the oppressed, so they deserve unconditional, but critical, support against Israel and US imperialism now.

The two-state solution is utterly reactionary. This would be a constantly bombed Bantustan for the Palestinians, and Israel would remain the unsinkable US aircraft carrier there.

The great demonstrations in the Arab street and throughout the world put these reactionary Arab regimes under great pressure and threaten revolutions. Only a defeat in a war with the risen neighbouring Arab states can begin to overcome the dominating 30% Ashkenazi, white, Israeli supremacist attitudes held by most of the Israeli working class - not only to the Palestinians, but also to the 60% majority Mizrahi Jews (who thereby justify their own oppression), Ethiopian Jews and other Jews of black and west-Asian descent and other black immigrants in Israel.

Although the South African case

before the International Court of Justice is very welcome, we must point out that it did not make the elementary demand on Israel for a ceasefire now. Abolishing apartheid in Israel will not solve the oppression of the Palestinian and oppressed working class in the Israeli state. SA apartheid may be gone, but its Gini Coefficient shows it to be the most unequal country in the world: the black masses are now worse off than under apartheid. But Ramaphosa's brother-in-law, Patrice Motsepe, is a billionaire - Ramaphosa himself is 'only' half a billionaire. Almost all leading black politicians in South Africa are millionaires - supported by the white apartheid ruling class in grateful appreciation for saving them from socialist revolution. Similarly many Hamas leaders are millionaires now.

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Centrist

Daniel Lazare says: "Marxists should shout the Leninist principle ... that bourgeois nationalism, Islamism ... can only lead to catastrophe" (Letters, February 1). I daresay he lacks knowledge about the relationship between the Bolsheviks and Islam, and I'm scratching my head about his "Leninist principle". Further, I think Lazare is a centrist and bourgeois pacifist in socialist clothing, when it comes to the Palestine question.

The Bolsheviks understood the class loyalties of the Muslim organisations which they were involved with, and they understood that national self-determination - a bourgeois objective - could only be resolved by socialist class struggle; Lenin viewed socialist revolution in the east as completely linked to the capitalist situation in the west.

Ben Fowkes and Bülent Gökay in *Unholy alliance: Muslims and communists* write: "Bolshevik leaders issued a call for a 'holy war' against western imperialism. Lenin asserted that it was necessary to support Islamist movements under conditions in which they contested local ruling classes, colonial control, or both". Grigory Zinoviev says to Muslim attendees at the Baku Congress of the Communist International in Azerbaijan in 1920: "Brothers, we summon you to a holy war, in the first place against British imperialism!"

In fact, there were some of Lenin's comrades who thought he went too far with his support. But the Bolsheviks knew they had to try to influence, recruit, appeal to, etc the impoverished, oppressed Muslim masses who suffered under tsarist colonialism and any anti-imperialist, liberal nationalist forces which existed - the reason being that they strongly believed in national and religious freedom and wanted to advance the class struggle.

According to Lenin in 1909, "We are absolutely opposed to giving offence to religious conviction", but they were fully aware of and ready to combat the reactionary aspects of religion. (Their intentions didn't always translate to the political finesse necessary to secure the support of many Muslims, who were suspicious of Great Russian chauvinism.) Gilbert Achcar, Lebanese socialist academic and writer, says socialists shouldn't mix religion and politics. I think the Bolsheviks accomplished this and were still able to bring large numbers of Muslims from central Asia into the socialist fold, many of whom helped win the civil war.

Interestingly, the (self-described Marxist) Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which is part of the Palestinian resistance, has said in the past that the class struggle must wait for the difficult national issue to be solved. Initially, they saw no contradiction between Arab nationalism and socialism.

Lazare says: "... the only way to achieve national self-determination

and equality is through international socialist revolution". It sounds good, but this wasn't on the agenda post-1917, as the Bolshevik revolutionaries had realised, and it's not on the timetable now. We work with what we have - a Palestinian resistance movement led by Hamas, an Islamist, anti-colonialist organisation with reactionary characteristics (ie, their policy toward women; also their engagement with regional, reactionary leaders, etc - although this doesn't necessarily mean that Hamas has no independent agency). Hamas and connected groups are under extreme, deadly attack by the Zionist *Blitzkrieg* and stormtroopers, but they are holding up courageously and valiantly with no appreciation coming from Daniel Lazare.

Writing in 2000, Khaled Hroub said the core problem for Hamas was "the multidimensional issue of usurpation of Palestinian land and the basic question is how to end the occupation. The notion of liberating Palestine has assumed greater importance than the general Islamic aspect" (*International Socialist Review* No78).

Lazare likes to blame Hamas for everything: for example, anti-Semitism. He should know that colonialist people can despise their emasculating oppressors and this can take pernicious forms, while, typically, the colonialists claim victimhood. At the same time, to this day, the abhorrent label of 'racist' is lodged against dispossessed South African dissidents, just as 'anti-Semite' is used against anyone who resists the pathology of political Zionism: All meant to muzzle the political and social justice movements against colonialism.

The fact is, it's the Zionists who conflate Zionism with Jewishness and this is what spawns anti-Semitism. The Zionists have destroyed or damaged 1,000 mosques in Gaza with their recent murderous rampage; isn't it they who have waged a religious war? Why is hatred of Islam, ignored by Lazare, less important than any anti-Semitism which logically might exist in the national psyche of the subjugated colonised? I'm afraid that Marxist methodology doesn't resonate in Lazare's thinking.

For Lazare, Hamas is the overriding bogeyman - the symbol of evil who he has accused of every violent crime against humanity, right out of the Zionist playbook. His pastime is demonising Hamas, who I would guess he'd like to see defeated by settler-colonial Israel. He doesn't want to be seen as pro-Zionist, as he indicates in his letter, but he continues to verbally assault and slander the Palestinian resistance movement mercilessly. He says Hamas is to blame for the "unparalleled disaster for the Palestinians", but the Zionist state receives no mention as being the true cause of the catastrophic bloodletting which followed October 7 - a continuation of the atrocities which are fundamental to Zionism.

GG  
USA

## Self-defence

We salute the courageous and principled stance you take in Paul Demarty's article, protesting the state ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir ('First, they came for ...', January 25).

The government does indeed use the "thin end of the wedge" - unpopular and marginal organisations - to outlaw protest against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The use of anti-terrorism legislation to ban HT, and arrest comrades of the CPGB-ML and the Revolutionary Communist Group is a dagger aimed at the workers' movement, the left and anyone who opposes British foreign policy.

The principled stance you have taken is a good beginning. The next step would be to exert pressure on other organisations and individuals to follow suit and publicly defend

targeted organisations. Ultimately, what is needed is *common action* by the workers' movement in opposition to state repression. We hope to work with the CPGB towards this aim. After all, how can we ever talk about communist unity if the workers' movement can't even unite in its own self-defence?

**Kate Klein**

Partisan Defence Committee

## Not anti-Semitic

It is magnificent news that David Miller has won his industrial tribunal against Bristol University. He had been sacked for his anti-Zionist views, and commented after his victory, in a statement agreed with his lawyers:

"I am extremely pleased that the tribunal has concluded that I was unfairly and wrongfully dismissed by the University of Bristol. I am also very proud that we have managed to establish that anti-Zionist views qualify as a protected belief under the UK Equality Act. This was the most important reason for taking the case and I hope it will become a touchstone precedent in all the future battles that we face with the racist and genocidal ideology of Zionism and the movement to which it is attached.

"... I also want to note that this verdict is a massive vindication of the approach I have taken throughout this period, which is to say that a genocidal and maximalist ideology like Zionism can only be effectively confronted by a maximalist anti-Zionism. Apologies, debate and defensiveness of the sort illustrated by many on the left, and even in the Palestine Solidarity movement, will not work. The Zionist movement cannot be negotiated with. It must be defeated."

In particular, the legal precedent that anti-Zionist views are a protected characteristic under British law is a real advance and conquest, and complements the previous victory won by Keith Henderson in a 2013 industrial tribunal that leftwing socialist beliefs are also such a protected characteristic under the same laws.

I would observe that David Miller's victory is no thanks to some sections of the left, including Jewish Voice for Labour, the SWP and the *Weekly Worker* - who, even when David was waging his ultimately successful campaign, joined in the witch-hunting by denouncing him as 'anti-Semitic' for making factually correct statements about the material basis of Zionist social power in countries outside Israel. All of those attempted to scandalise him for the following observations in a tweet:

"1. Jews are not discriminated against. 2. They are overrepresented in Europe, North America and Latin America in positions of cultural, economic and political power. 3. They are therefore, in a position to discriminate against actually marginalised groups."

While covering itself in a bourgeois-libertarian position of defending the supposed democratic rights of all racists, including even fascists, the *Weekly Worker* solidarised with the SWP's own wretched attacks on David Miller thus:

"*Socialist Worker* offers good grounds to suppose that the tweet was anti-Semitic: eg, his words 'lump together all Jews without any recognition of class or other differences. Miller targets Jews, not the actual ruling class, and plays on the idea of Jews as ultra-rich and manipulative'" ('Anti-Semitism of useful idiots', August 31 2023).

This is simply a smear and a non-sequitur - an example of liberal-moralist, Zionist-influenced prejudice on the part of the SWP, *Weekly Worker* and Jewish Voice for Labour, who make similar points.

**Ian Donovan**

Consistent Democrats

# ACTION

## Israel: the making of a racist state

**Saturday February 10, 3pm:** Pamphlet launch, Mary Quaile Room, Mechanics Institute, 103 Princess Street, Manchester M1. Author Neill Rogall and local Palestinian activist Hala Marshood discuss the settler-colonial entity and prospects for Palestinian resistance. Organised by Greater Manchester rs21: [www.facebook.com/events/6930144407076984](http://www.facebook.com/events/6930144407076984).

## Fighting for anti-racist workplaces

**Sunday February 11, 11.30am to 4.30pm:** Conference, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. To discuss strategies and actions to combat racism in the workplace and shed light on the challenges faced by marginalised communities. Registration £6.13. Organised by Stand Up To Racism: [www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=722090956701977](http://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=722090956701977).

## What it means to be human

**Tuesday February 13, 6.30pm:** Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'The three enchanted princes: ritual syntax and the interpretation of fairytales'. Speakers: Chris Knight and Helena Tužinska. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/1149977223048483](http://www.facebook.com/events/1149977223048483).

## Stop bombing Gaza; stop bombing Yemen

**Tuesday February 13, 7pm:** Public meeting, Friends Meeting House, Ship Street, Brighton BN1. Stop the escalation of wars in the Middle East. Oppose the wars, the arms trade and nuclear weapons. Organised by Brighton and Hove Stop the War: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events](http://www.stopwar.org.uk/events).

## The secret US-UK nuclear weapons agreement

**Thursday February 15, 6.30pm:** Webinar. The Mutual Defence Agreement is a little known US/UK treaty that controls their nuclear collaboration. It's coming up for renewal in parliament later this year and has to be challenged! Speakers from Declassified UK. Organised by Declassified UK and CND: [cnduk.org/events/exposed-the-secret-us-uk-nuclear-weapons-agreement](http://cnduk.org/events/exposed-the-secret-us-uk-nuclear-weapons-agreement).

## Israel-Palestine: oppression and resistance

**Thursday February 15, 7pm:** The deception of the Oslo Accords - one state, two states or something different entirely? Speaker: Ghada Karmi. Part of an online education and discussion series. Organised by Labour Left Alliance and Why Marx?: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](http://www.whymarx.com/sessions).

## Stop bombing Gaza; stop bombing Yemen

**Thursday February 15, 7pm:** Public meeting, Mechanics Institute, 103 Princess Street, Manchester M1. Despite the ICJ ruling, Israel continues its brutal assault on Gaza. The UK and US governments have responded by ending aid to Gaza and more bombing of Yemen. Organised by Greater Manchester Stop the War Coalition: [www.facebook.com/events/862028949053206](http://www.facebook.com/events/862028949053206).

## The Workers' Committee

**Friday February 16, 7pm:** Pamphlet launch and social, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Reprint of JT Murphy's 1917 pamphlet, which delves into the struggles and triumphs of the early shop stewards networks. Tickets £5 (free). Free refreshments. Organised by Strike Map: [www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=688785040119446](http://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=688785040119446).

## Revolution! Imperialism and the political crisis

**Sunday February 18, 12 noon to 5.30pm:** Conference, SOAS University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Israel's assaults on Gaza and the West Bank have created a global crisis. Millions have taken to the streets and the risk of a wider war grows. Hear the causes and consequences of the crisis and how to strengthen resistance. Registration £15 (£5). Organised by Counterfire: [www.facebook.com/events/235140999630540](http://www.facebook.com/events/235140999630540).

## Apartheid off campus

**Tuesday February 20:** Student day of action on campuses nationwide. Sit-ins, walk-outs, teach-ins and other protests. An end to university research, commercial and institutional partnerships with Israel. Full divestment from weapons and tech companies arming genocide in Gaza. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/apartheid-off-campus](http://palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/apartheid-off-campus).

## Armaments and global trade

**Thursday February 22, 7pm:** Online and onsite lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker: Andrew Feinstein - writer, campaigner, ex-ANC MP and author of *The shadow world: inside the global arms trade*. Registration: £5 (£3). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/451](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/451).

## Ukraine: how to stop this war

**Saturday February 24, 2pm:** Online rally. Two years into Russia's invasion of Ukraine and hundreds of thousands are dead. The west is supplying Ukraine with huge amounts of weaponry to further Nato's expansion plans, with no end in sight. Speakers include Jeremy Corbyn, Boris Kagarlitsky and Lindsey German. Organised by CND and Stop the War Coalition: [cnduk.org/events/ukraine-how-to-stop-this-war](http://cnduk.org/events/ukraine-how-to-stop-this-war).

## Lakenheath: its role in the US war machine

**Monday February 26, 7.45pm:** Webinar. US nuclear weapons are returning, putting Britain in the front line in any future US-led war. How does the base - RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk - fit into the USA's wider military plans? How do we stop this? Organised by CND: [cnduk.org/events/lakenheath-its-role-in-the-us-war-machine-cnd-webinar](http://cnduk.org/events/lakenheath-its-role-in-the-us-war-machine-cnd-webinar).

## CPGB wills

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

**LEFT**

# Farcical Labour Party mark two

Tusc's February 3 convention was, by any objective assessment, an abject failure. Most of the organisations represented amount to no more than political dust, reports **Carla Roberts**

Leaders of the Socialist Party in England and Wales cannot possibly be happy with the outcome of its 'Convention to organise a working class challenge at the general election'. Staged by its electoral front, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, it attracted little support and little enthusiasm.

Yes, the event managed to take a few decisions and agreed to "attempt to contest" enough seats to reach the "fair media coverage threshold" that would give Tusc the right to a TV broadcast. It also agreed a set of "minimum policies" for Tusc candidates, while confirming that they can still "campaign independently" and "beyond the core platform"<sup>1</sup> (more on that below).

For months, SPEW's Clive Heemskirk had been writing to all and sundry, urging them to mount a united challenge at the next general election. And yet, only 10 groups were represented by the 50 or so people who had travelled to the Carrs Lane Church Centre in Birmingham (another 23 attendees watched on Zoom) - and that includes 10 delegates each from SPEW, its youth wing, Socialist Students, and the 'Tusc Independent Socialists'. Of the seven remaining groups, only one was what could be called enthusiastic about Tusc - the born again Spartacist League.

"We were not actually invited and had to fight to be here, but we are here with the full 10 delegates and we will do everything to build Tusc", longstanding SL member Eibhlin McDonald announced. A slightly embarrassed Dave Nellist had to assure the convention that this was not down to sectarianism: "We only invited groups who had previously stood in elections, but of course you are welcome," he said rather unconvincingly. After all, previously Tusc had insisted on organisations having what were called "social roots", which would nowadays bar SPEW from affiliation, let alone the Sparts.

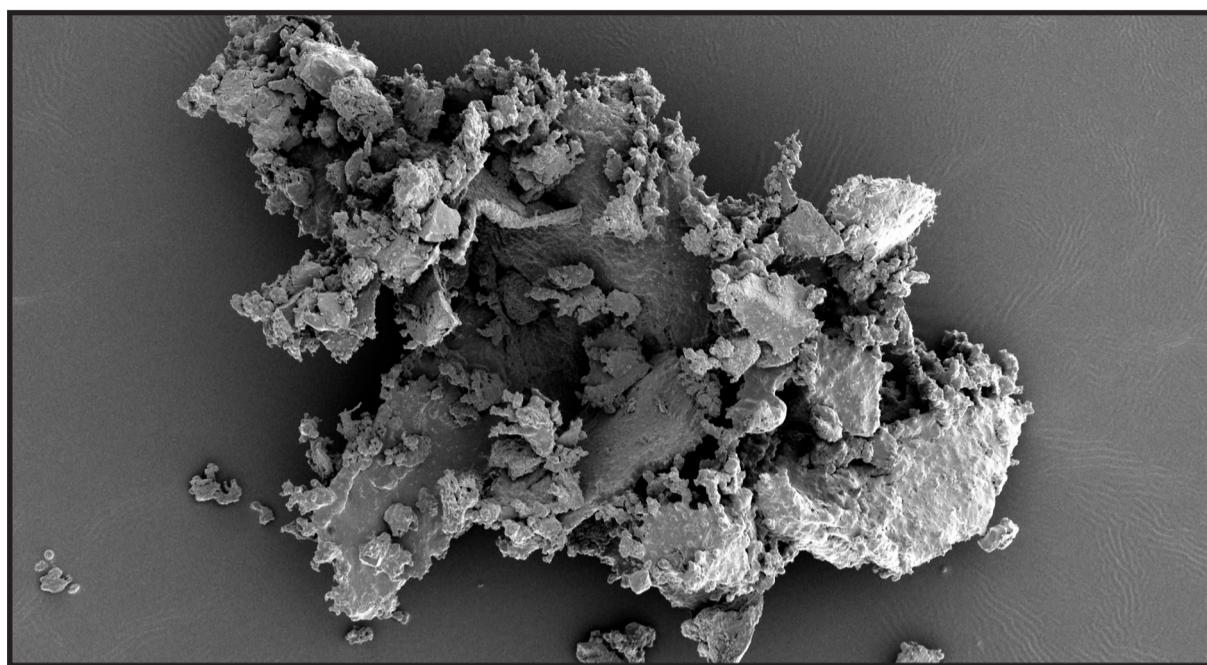
## Eccentric

Nonetheless, they had submitted a couple of amendments and were allowed to make an intro speech of seven minutes, they were, however, the only group present that was *not* listed in the pre-meeting blurb online and in Tusc's many emails.<sup>2</sup>

It transpired that, although they had "applied to join Tusc", a decision has not yet been taken by the executive - and it is easy to see why. SPEW will be seriously worried that the presence of one of the more eccentric sects on the British left will tarnish its campaign, which is floundering as it is.

But, to make matters worse, Tusc also rather idiotically organises on the basis of "consensus decision-making", which sounds ever so democratic, but is anything but. In theory, it gives tiny sects like the Sparts a veto (though comrade McDonald actually said in her speech that "we are not demanding a veto"). In reality, of course, it means that the majority is likely to pressurise a minority into shutting up. Much better to have the open clash of different ideas, with minorities being able to put their dissenting views forward, have them voted on and publicly recorded.

In any case, the Sparts were the only non-SPEW group that showed up with more than one or two delegates. They are planning, if allowed, "to stand one candidate under the Tusc banner, because Tusc draws a class line", according to comrade McDonald.



House dust as seen under a microscope

Most of the other organisations present seemed to have come along merely to explain why they were *not* going to get involved with Tusc:

■ George Galloway's Workers Party of Britain announced: "We will not be standing under the Tusc banner. We want to keep our own identity, but that might change in future."

■ The newly founded Transform (which is 'the Breakthrough Party' plus a few odds and sods<sup>3</sup>) was represented by Nick Long, who said that "we want to get the name of our new party out there. The results that Tusc has been getting are poor, not to say piss poor". Another Transform member on Zoom later clarified that the organisation's "executive committee has not yet made a formal decision regards Tusc".

■ Asa Jones from the tiny Social Justice Party said that it is "up to our members to make the decision to participate or not", but later clarified that the party only has two branches, in "Scarborough and Whitby".

■ Roger Silverman from the Campaign for a Mass Workers' Party said on Zoom that he was just there to observe.

■ System Change was presented by Peter Foster ("I'm kind of the leader"), who admitted, "we are what is left of Resist" (which is clearly not very much after the departure of Chris Williamson, who has since joined the Workers' Party). In his unfocused opening remarks, he did not really clarify if System Change ("which is now registered as a party again") would join Tusc or is even considering standing candidates.

■ The snappily-titled Organising Corbyn-Inspired Socialist Alliance (OCISA) seems to have attended only to move a (successful) amendment to ensure that Tusc will not stand against its sole candidate in Keir Starmer's seat of Holborn and St Pancras.

SPEW is still waiting on 'big hitters' (this is all relative!) like the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Workers Party to change their mind and get involved - but it appears they did not even reply to Clive Heemskirk's emails.

One would be hard-pressed to find a rational argument explaining why all these organisations continue to insist on doing their own thing. The left in Britain is currently split into more sects, grouplets and 'parties' than for many years - some old, some new. It is certainly not that their programmes are miles apart from one another - in fact, pretty much all of these groups agree that the working class can only cope with warmed-up Keynesianism. After

the failure of the Corbyn movement, much of the left has kept his sub-reformist programme in the mistaken belief that it was *For the many, not the few* (2017) and *It's time for real change* (2019) that explained Corbynmania and not the fact that Corbyn was in a position - unlike today's tiny left groups - where it looked like he could actually implement some minor changes.

Accordingly, the convention was dominated by rather eccentric participants representing tiny groups and 'pop-up parties' - or just themselves. For example, most of the amendments to the six 'convention propositions' prepared by SPEW were submitted by "individual members of Tusc", including a parish councillor from Kegworth. They were displaying a lot of confusion - reflected in the convention itself - about what Tusc actually is and what this event was supposed to achieve.

After a few speakers argued that Tusc should help build a "new umbrella organisation" for the general elections, "bringing together the left", SPEW general secretary Hannah Sell insisted that, don't you know it, "Tusc already is an umbrella organisation and you should all consider joining".

But particularly since the departure of its only union affiliate, RMT, in July 2022, Tusc has struggled to shake off its image as a mere SPEW front - and this convention showed once again that that is exactly what it is. Any amendment arguing that it should not be the "unsuccessful" Tusc moniker on the ballot paper, but a name like "Independents", "Left Bloc" or one "yet to be democratically agreed" was voted down by the clear majority of SPEW members in the room.

Comrade Sell clarified the real purpose of the convention: "The Socialist Party is planning on standing 40 candidates as Tusc, but we need 98 people standing under the same name and on the same programme in order to get a TV broadcast." Dave Nellist further explained:

Tusc might not find financial resources in the coming general election to achieve that - we would need around £60,000 to pay for deposits and such. In the general election of 2015, we stood 135 candidates and 619 council candidates, which made us the sixth biggest party in the country in terms of number of candidates.

There is no chance of that happening now, he admitted, explaining that

it "is much easier today though to stand candidates in the local elections. No deposits are required and it only needs two signatures per seat. 340 council candidates standing on the same platform would get us a TV broadcast." And yet, judging by the February 3 event, this seems like a long shot.

## Corbynism

Tusc went into hibernation when Corbyn was elected Labour leader. SPEW decided to apply to affiliate to Labour ... but heaved a sigh of relief when they were turned down by Jennie Formby. But effectively sitting out Corbynism has done the organisation no favours - like many groups, it has shrunk (the CWI split and the formation of Socialist Alternative certainly points to that conclusion).

And yet Corbynism has clearly infected SPEW too. The convention's proposition 3 states: "The joint election challenge will not in general seek to contest seats against leftwing Labour candidates or left MPs or ex-MPs standing as independents."<sup>4</sup> Socialist Students put forward a successful amendment that "encourages local Tusc groups to send delegations to Labour prospective parliamentary candidates to ask where they stand on Corbyn's 2019 manifesto".

While it can be a good idea to challenge left Labour candidates, we could think of many better questions, particularly considering the current genocidal campaign by Israel against the Palestinians. In his speech moving the amendment, Adam Powell-Davis (national organiser of Socialist Students), told the convention:

Corbyn's programme moved the consciousness of a whole generation. He put forward the answers to the crisis in today's society. He pointed to the super-rich and said let them pay for it. The Corbyn programme is a good standard for anybody standing in elections.

I am not sure the comrade has actually read *It's time for real change*. I did and, I have to admit, I did not spot any convincing "answers to the crisis in today's society". Sure, the Corbyn leadership wanted to reverse some of the austerity politics of the Tories and increase the economic role of the state, while repealing some anti-trade unions laws. But, as the CPGB/Labour Party Marxists theses on Corbynism pointed out, the programme was committed to Britain "continuing wage-slavery,

the monarchy, a member of Nato and armed with US-controlled nuclear weapons".<sup>5</sup>

The role of socialists surely is to critically examine such sub-Keynesian, illusory attempts to run British capitalism on behalf of the working class, rather than simply celebrate them. But the amendment was, of course, overwhelmingly carried.

## Core principles

The "minimum policies" or "core principles" that Tusc candidates are supposed to agree to are dominated by SPEW's illusory and long-standing belief that it can nationalise its way to socialism - which is here defined as "bringing into democratic public ownership the major companies and banks that dominate the economy, so that production and services can be planned to meet the needs of all and to protect the environment".<sup>6</sup>

Amazingly, there were also no amendments to the short point dealing with Israel's war on the Palestinians, which parrots imperialism's ludicrous pretence that there is any chance of a two-state 'solution': "Justice for the Palestinians, lift the siege of Gaza and the occupied territories, recognise the state of Palestine."<sup>7</sup>

This is a long-standing, if increasingly idiotic, SPEW policy. As the CPGB/LPM thesis on the question comments,

We cannot expect Israel, as presently constituted, to concede the territory necessary to create a viable Palestinian state. Without a serious transformation of the regional, and indeed global, balance of forces, any such solution will simply not happen. Benjamin Netanyahu has the virtue of making that abundantly clear.<sup>7</sup>

There were only two slightly interesting amendments to the "minimum policies", which focused on proportional representation and union rights for prison officers.

Both the Social Justice Party and Michael Westcombe ("Tusc individual member") wanted to delete the demand for "proportional representation, for local, regional and national elections" - with some of the most absurd arguments I have heard for a long time. Apparently, according to the speaker from the SJP, "in every part of the world where PR has been introduced, it moves society to the right". Michel Westcombe claimed that "PR is the engine of fascism"! You see, it is not about failed revolutions or street-fighting gangs trying to smash the organised working class or the inability of capitalism to rule society directly - no, fascism is driven by PR. Bizarre ●

## Notes

1. [www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TUSC-draft-GE-platform-for-2024.pdf](https://www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TUSC-draft-GE-platform-for-2024.pdf).
2. [www.tusc.org.uk/20213/01-02-2024/convention-gathers-in-birmingham-to-discuss-united-general-election-challenge](https://www.tusc.org.uk/20213/01-02-2024/convention-gathers-in-birmingham-to-discuss-united-general-election-challenge).
3. See 'Sixty seconds and no politics' *Weekly Worker* November 30 2023: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1469/sixty-seconds-and-no-politics](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1469/sixty-seconds-and-no-politics).
4. [www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Convention-Agenda-document.pdf](https://www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Convention-Agenda-document.pdf).
5. 'Critical but not unconditional', *Weekly Worker* May 2 2019: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1249/critical-not-unconditional](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1249/critical-not-unconditional).
6. [www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TUSC-draft-GE-platform-for-2024.pdf](https://www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TUSC-draft-GE-platform-for-2024.pdf).
7. 'Israel-Gaza war and communist strategy' *Weekly Worker* January 25: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1475/israel-gaza-war-and-communist-strategy](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1475/israel-gaza-war-and-communist-strategy).

LABOUR

# A culture of apology

David Miller is worth more than the whole pack of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs put together. Apologising makes you complicit, but taking a stand brings vindication, writes **Eddie Ford**

As commented upon many times in this publication, *politically* there is very little that separates Sir Keir Starmer from Rishi Sunak. But when it comes to their internal regimes the contrast could not be greater. Liz Truss and her PopCons are just the latest Tory faction to enter the fray. By contrast Sir Keir and his general secretary, David Evans, operate a policy of zero tolerance, at least when it comes to anyone vaguely on the left.

After the 2015-20 years of Corbyn they need to prove to the capitalist media, the boss class and the administration in Washington that they would provide an utterly safe, an utterly reliable government. Israel, Palestine and so-called anti-Semitism is the litmus test (Israel is, after all, America's most important ally in the oil-rich Middle East).

The latest person singled out for sacrifice is Kate Osamor, the Edmonton MP and member of the Socialist Campaign Group. As the great and the good prepared to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27 (the day in 1945 when Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet forces), she shared a photograph of herself signing the commemoration book in parliament and distributed a message in her weekly mailout to local party members, saying:

Tomorrow is Holocaust Memorial Day, an international day to remember the six million Jews murdered during the holocaust, the millions of other people murdered under Nazi persecution of other groups and more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and now Gaza.

This seemingly worthy remark got her suspended from the Labour Party "pending an investigation", even if it essentially reproduces what is on the home page of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust's website that says the day is also to remember "the genocides which followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur".<sup>1</sup> But, of course, it was her addition of Gaza to the list that generated the howls of outrage.

The Trust itself described her remarks as a "painful insult to survivors of the holocaust", with its chief executive telling *Jewish News* that this "disgusting post" was "a malicious distortion of the truth". As for the Board of Deputies of British Jews - always in a hurry to be offended - it called her comment "disgraceful" and stated that they "unreservedly condemn the attempts by Kate Osamor to link the holocaust to the current situation in Gaza". Meanwhile, the Jewish Leadership Council accused her of "abusing" HMD in order to attack "the Jewish state", declaring that "Holocaust inversion is anti-Semitism". Naturally, the Jewish Labour Movement thought her message was "wholly inappropriate", on the basis that "unilaterally coopting the war in Gaza" on to that list is "wrong and offensive". Jonathan Reynolds, the shadow business secretary - fresh from his trip to Davos, where he rubbed shoulders with the filthy rich - said it was "not acceptable to equate the holocaust to the situation in Gaza".

It is quite apparent though that Osamor did not equate Gaza with the Nazi genocide - she *did not* say that the



Alphonse Legros 'An apology' 1868

mass extermination of Jews between 1941 and 45 was the same as what was going on now, or that the Israeli Defence Forces were the equivalent of the SS. That indeed would have been a nonsense. Whatever the horrors, there are no extermination camps or trains being diverted from the front in order to take people to their deaths.

## Offence

Sadly, however, unlike David Miller who successfully stood up to Bristol University and has just won his case in an employment tribunal, Kate Osamor grovelled. She *apologised* for "any offence" caused by her message. But why on earth did she apologise? Would anyone apologise for upsetting a fascist by saying the Hitler regime was a death cult? Should Steven Spielberg apologise for making *Schindler's list*, or Jonathan Glazer for *The zone of interest*, because it upset a Nazi? Would you apologise for "any offence caused" to China and the US by reminding them that they diplomatically and militarily backed the Khmer Rouge killers who wiped out nearly a third of Cambodia's population? You should be *glad* to have given offence, as they fully deserve it - the same going for Israel and Zionists.

You do not have to share David Miller's particular brand of anti-Zionism to admire his backbone and welcome his courtroom success as a victory for free speech. He is certainly worth more than the whole of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs put together.

In the same week that David Miller secured his 'landmark' decision, the Birmingham Hall Green MP, Tahir Ali - yes, another Socialist Campaign Group member - accused Rishi Sunak of having "the blood of thousands of innocent people on his hands" during prime minister's questions. This was during a debate about recently released documents revealing that the foreign office had concerns over

Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law in its ongoing Gazan onslaught as part of a legal challenge to the business department's decision to continue arms export licences to Israel. The licences were eventually continued after the foreign secretary, Lord David Cameron, advised they should, but be kept "under review".

Angered, Ali said the documents had been "hidden from parliament", whilst Sunak had "boldly stated his confidence in Israel's respect for international law" - arguing that since then "the scale of Israel's war crimes in Gaza have been revealed to the world, thanks to South Africa's case to the International Court of Justice". Hence his accusation against the prime minister.

He had every right to be angry, of course, as the British government's justifications for arming are totally revolting and built on a transparent pack of lies. But his remarks were deemed "clearly inappropriate" by a Labour spokesperson and, with the party whips breathing down his neck, Ali too took to X to apologise - this time "for the way in which I described the prime minister in my question" (though he added: "I do not resile from my strongly held views on the situation in the Middle East"). While Tahir Ali has not been suspended yet, for whatever reason, the fact that the Labour bureaucracy brings massive pressure upon people to apologise for telling the truth tells you everything about the state of the party today. Under Tony Blair there was relative toleration for the likes of Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, no longer. Under Sir Keir, a former Socialist Alternatives Trotskyite, there is what amounts to a form of McCarthyism.

Not that long ago, as readers will remember, Andy McDonald, the MP for Middlesbrough, was suspended for his "deeply offensive" comments during the massive London anti-war/pro-Palestinian demonstration in October. The words in question

were: "We will not rest until we have justice. Until all people, Israelis and Palestinians, between the river and the sea, can live in peaceful liberty." McDonald was obviously not calling for the destruction of the Israeli state, whether merited or not, let alone the mass extermination of all Jewish people in the region - an insane interpretation. Rather, as he said afterwards, his words "should not be construed in any other way than they were intended: namely as a heartfelt plea for an end to the killings in Israel, Gaza and the occupied West Bank, and for all peoples in the region to live in freedom without the threat of violence". He even tried to sue Tory MP Chris Clarkson, who accused him of "seeking to justify the murderous actions of Hamas", using "a deeply sinister anti-Semitic trope"! Regardless of the truth though, as Lord Peter Mandelson said to the host of ITV's politics show, *Peston*, McDonald used language that "would be interpreted as calling into question the existence of Israel", which "necessitates that person being put outside the tent" - which is precisely what Keir Starmer has done.

But at least McDonald did not apologise, even if his tone was unduly ameliorative, saying he was "saddened" to have received the news about his "precautionary suspension" from the party chief whip. Hardly a cry of defiance.

## Useless

On one level, it is hard to understand people who cannot stand up for what is right - having the whips threaten your career prospects hardly amounts to torture. More than that, apologising makes no difference. In the case of Osamor, the Board of Deputies immediately issued a statement saying they "view her apology as utterly hollow", because "we believe that Ms Osamor was perfectly aware of what she was saying". Similarly, the Jewish Labour Movement said

her "subsequent non-apology rang hollow". Whatever you might say, whichever way you might squirm, they will *always* come after you - the apology just encourages them. If you are apologising, then surely you must be guilty of something.

Crucially, apologising sets up the next victim - as we repeatedly saw during the witch-hunt conducted by Jennie Formby under the Corbyn leadership. Therefore it is an uncomradely act. What you need to do above all is to tell *the truth*, no matter what the political consequences: solidarity, not evasion.

Of course, what a suspension means in the Labour Party of today - given that this is going to be an election year, unless there is some freaky set of circumstances - is that you will not be allowed to stand as a Labour candidate, with Osamor joining the growing list of MPs who have been suspended or had the whip withdrawn, most notably Jeremy Corbyn himself.<sup>2</sup> The Labour leadership has made it perfectly clear that any MP who lost the whip or made 'controversial' statements not fully in line with party policy - like Tahir Ali - will be prevented from standing for Labour and new candidates will be selected instead. All the rest of the MPs in the Socialist Campaign Group are under threat. You speak your mind, you come out against the possibility of genocide in Gaza, you protest against ethnic cleansing and the deaths of over 27,000 people - then you lose your position as MP.

But what is the use of you as an MP if you keep your mouth shut under these circumstances? We now have the absurd situation where Gary Lineker appears to have more political courage than the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, daring to 'like' a tweet from a Novara Media presenter defending Kate Osamor from the "insane" suspension - causing the so-called Campaign Against Antisemitism to say that Lineker's action demonstrated his "utter disregard" for both the Jewish community and also "the BBC and its rules".

No, you are completely useless as an MP if you do not openly express your opposition in parliament or elsewhere to the Israeli terror against the Gazan people - it makes you *complicit*. You are not going to get killed or dragged off to prison: it is only your precious career that takes a hit - along with your £86,584 a year salary! But people in Gaza are dying right now, and the chances are that very soon the death toll will go up incredibly rapidly - it is hard to understand why the official statistics have remained so low, given the war waged by Israel. A war that will never achieve its stated aim of "eradicating" Hamas.

This is clearly a situation where we are on the cusp of deaths on a huge scale. Already the death toll per capita in Gaza is higher than was suffered by London or even German cities such as Dresden in World War II. The future looks utterly bleak for the people of Gaza, who are at risk of death from hunger and disease ... that or being pushed into Egypt's Sinai desert in a second Nakba ●

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## Notes

1. hmd.org.uk.  
2. labourlist.org/2024/01/suspended-expelled-quit-who-are-the-mps-sitting-without-the-labour-whip.

**NHS**

# Best of times, worst of times

Saving the NHS will undoubtedly be a key issue in the coming general election. Ian Spencer analyses the recommendations of the Times Health Commission

**T**imes Newspapers established the Times Health Commission in January 2023 to “learn the lessons from the best examples in this country and abroad in a dispassionate, clear-sighted, non-ideological fashion”.<sup>1</sup>

The commission was made up of the great and the good recruited by *The Times* from the worlds of “business, medicine, science, food, sport and policy”. Their mission is to “save the NHS” by putting forward a series of policy proposals that could be “taken up by any political party” - a phrase which probably says more about the state of current mainstream political parties than it does about the Times Health Commission.

Commissioners include, among others, a collection of retired presidents of assorted Royal Colleges (nursing, physicians, GPs and the Royal Society of Medicine), some of whom have been ennobled for their pains (considered by some to be the going-rate for leading a ‘Royal College of something-or-other’). The business contingent includes a former director of the Institute of Fiscal Studies, Paul Johnson, the chairman of Asda and “former M&S boss” Lord Rose of Monewden. Then there is paraolympian Baroness Grey-Thompson; Lord Darzi of Denham, “surgeon and former health minister” (under New Labour); and Waheed Arian, “Afghan refugee, doctor of the year and *Times* person of the year”. All of this is chaired by Rachel Sylvester, a “*Times* columnist”. You get the picture.

The commission’s report is 100 pages long - written in the style of a government white paper, but with more pictures and snazzy insets, illustrating what it is like ‘on the front line’. It includes interviews with paramedics, surgeons using laparoscopic (or as *The Times* prefers, “robotic”) surgical techniques and stories of Ukrainians having to return home (temporarily) to visit a dentist because of the non-availability of one on the NHS. This latter inset is a damning indictment of the steady destruction of NHS dentistry - without ever suggesting that has been a direct consequence of successive Tory and Labour policies, of course.<sup>2</sup>

The commission’s report has provided a rich source of self-referential copy for *The Times* for a while now, and is clearly timed to form a political intervention into the coming general election. For example, there is the headline, “Jeremy Hunt backs no-blame compensation scheme for medical errors”. This is a proposal which is “one of 10 key recommendations that will be made by the Times Health Commission, a year-long inquiry into the NHS and social care”.<sup>3</sup> We are invited to believe that the government is considering introducing a no-fault system, in which compensation payments for those who have suffered harm because of mistakes in the NHS are “standardised and based on need”.<sup>4</sup>

The cost of litigation is acknowledged by the commission to be a major drain on NHS resources. For example, NHS financial liabilities, for obstetric litigation alone, has risen from £14.9 billion in 2016 to £41.5 billion in 2022. The human cost is also featured: “There are about 11,000 avoidable deaths every year in the NHS due to patient safety failings.”<sup>5</sup>

Anyone looking at the way the government has handled the compensation payments to those who have been harmed by the Post Office



**Aneurin Bevan: turning in his grave?**

may be entitled to be a little sceptical. Is the aim to expedite claims made by people to meet needs or to protect the private sector from liability in an increasingly privatised system? In so doing, will it be, yet again, the privatisation of profits and the nationalisation of liabilities - namely, compensation for harm done by clinical services and a reduction of payments to those injured?

The proposal is typical of the other “key recommendations”, to do something, which sounds new and the consequence of the careful deliberation of the commission, but is, in fact, as old as the hills. For example, a no-fault compensation scheme was a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Civil Liability and Compensation for Personal Injury. This took into account a welfare state and the vast savings that could be made in lawyers’ fees, if claims for compensation were removed from an adversarial system.

The point about the welfare state is that, where needs are met from central funds - for example, for home modifications for someone left disabled by medical negligence - winning payments through litigation becomes unnecessary. The time-consuming, expensive and distressing process can be avoided, and the victim helped sooner. However, it reported in 1978, just as the post-war Keynesian consensus on the welfare state was being superseded by the current consensus for a dismantling of workers’ gains made since 1945.

## Profits

Another example of the report’s recycled insights is the criticism of the NHS as being far too focused on secondary care in general and hospitals in particular. It asserts that the NHS is a “national illness service”. A superficial flick through the literature will see the same point made by jurist Ian Kennedy in his *The unmasking of medicine*.<sup>6</sup> However, it would be churlish to argue that everything in the commission’s report is nonsense. It would clearly be a great benefit to have a system of no-fault compensation. The problem arises from the political-economic context of a declining capitalism.

Similarly, hospitals in their current form are as much an expression of social relations as a factory, church or school. The appalling idea that the elderly - particularly those with cognitive impairment - can simply be stored in institutions, as they were in the old asylums, was a feature of the development of the Poor Law. The commission acknowledges that the “state must underwrite the costs of social care, because the private

sector will never take on such an unpredictable risk”.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, like the ruling class as a whole, it is wedded to the idea that the private sector has a role to play. After all, there are profits at stake. The heart of the contradiction is that, as human needs increase, a failing system is unable to meet them, without extracting a greater proportion of surplus from a working population - made more difficult by a tendency of the rate of profit to fall with the increasing use of technology.

At the heart of the commission’s proposals is a private system of excellent care for those that can afford it and a safety net for the rest. There is a world of difference between a privately owned care home and another that is effectively paid for by a mixture of local taxation and the partial expropriation of the dementia sufferers’ estate. No-one wants to go back to care in asylums, but in fact the asylum has merely changed its form!

The other “key recommendations” by the Times Health Commission include the advocacy of technological solutions (presumably forged in the ‘white heat of technological revolution’); tackling waiting lists; reforms to general practitioner contracts; the writing off of the student loans of some clinicians; a “National Care System” (a phrase that was a feature of the Corbyn manifestos); guarantees on the provision of mental health support; that old favourite, ‘tackling obesity’; incentivising NHS staff to take part in research; and establishing a “Healthy Lives Committee” to “empower by a legally binding commitment to increase healthy life expectancy by five years in a decade”. It is interesting that there is a need to have legal compulsion to increase life expectancy, but then Britain is unusual in starting to see a decline in life expectancy.<sup>8</sup>

And here is the rub: many of the recommendations are framed in such a way as to seem reasonable, fair and achievable - they even include the post-mortem endorsement of Aneurin Bevan on the back page. I can only imagine what the so-called ‘architect of the NHS’ would have made of a report which is written with the express purpose of showing how the NHS is failing, in desperate need of reform, and endorsing the need for a social care system “delivered by a mixture of public and private sectors”.<sup>9</sup>

The report is also interesting for what it does not say: that the problems faced by the NHS - the high turnover and loss of staff, worsening health outcomes and rising health inequalities - are direct consequences of successive Labour and Tory government policies. Waiting lists are partly attributed to

clinicians’ strike action, without ever addressing the declining pay, which also does not feature in an explanation for the hemorrhaging of NHS staff. Instead, the problems of staffing are attributed to “cultural” issues, such as workplace bullying and high rates of sickness.

## Commodity

Then of course, there is what *The Times* could never say. The real costs of healthcare that is run on the basis of commodity production is measured in hundreds of thousands of excess deaths. For example, in England alone, “the many people who are currently dying prematurely each year because of health inequalities would otherwise have enjoyed, in total, between 1.3 and 2.5 million extra years of life”.<sup>10</sup>

It is not that the commission does not address the question of inequalities in health. After all, it is hard to avoid. Britain has a very long history of solid empirical evidence that class is the most important social determinant of health. The report devotes five pages to inequalities in health and makes the well-known point that “Men living in the poorest areas can expect to die 9.4 years sooner than those living in the richest areas and the difference for women is 7.7 years”. The focus on geography and the gap between poorest and richest effaces the importance of class and invites the suggestion that this is the consequence of local policy measures, which are amenable to reform, or lifestyle choices. It also leaves out the fact that there is a class gradient in almost every area of mortality and morbidity.

While a series of sweeping reforms aimed at reducing inequality would undoubtedly improve health overall, it informs no part of the commission’s perspective. Increasing inequality is made to appear as a natural feature or, at best, a regrettable failure of policy. Therefore, among the report’s recommendations are addressing

the rates of obesity by means of “expanding the sugar tax, taxing salt and implementing a pre-watershed ban on junk food”.

In other words, the commission dishes up the usual mess of pottage. Personal responsibility, combined with innovative means of funding and technological innovation are the key to ‘saving the NHS’. This shows that health is something that is far too important to be left to bourgeois politicians or journalists. The solution to the question of health and social care is the radical transformation of society, where all production is to meet human need. Liberation from wage labour and the drastic shortening of the working week, will do more to improve health than any number of reforms to the NHS.

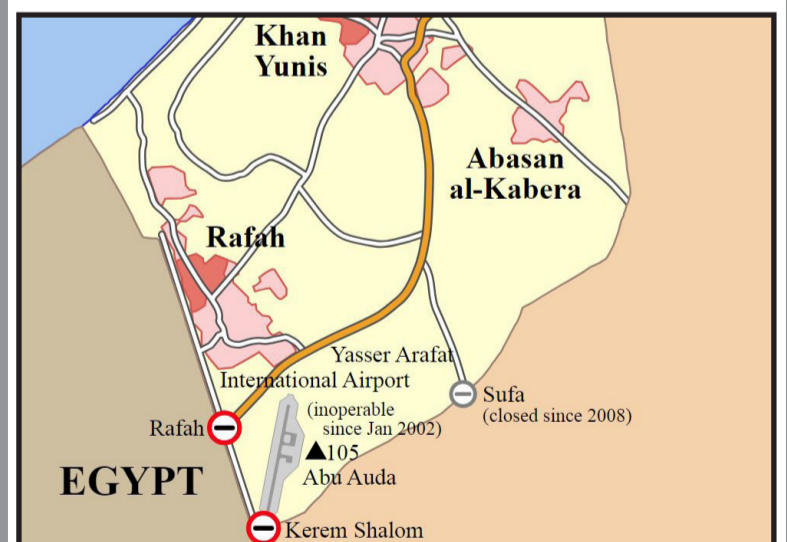
In the meantime, the vast amount of money that is currently being poured into the pockets of clinical negligence lawyers, owners of private healthcare facilities and shareholders of big pharmaceutical companies is a fruitful place to start, when looking for additional, creative forms of funding. That needs to start with paying all workers more.

We know that greater equality is good for health. We also know that the ruling class, which finds its interests expressed in the mainstream media, will never willingly concede it ●

## Notes

1. *The Times* February 4.
2. ‘The Times Health Commission: a report into the state of health and social care in Britain today’, p36.
3. *The Times* February 2.
4. The Times Health Commission *op cit* p49.
5. *Ibid* p51.
6. I Kennedy *The unmasking of medicine* London 1980.
7. The Times Health Commission *op cit* pp65-66.
8. *Ibid* p5.
9. *Ibid*.
10. [www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-exec-summary-pdf.pdf](http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-exec-summary-pdf.pdf).

## Online Communist Forum



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TECHNOLOGY

# Monkey see, monkey do

Revolution or vapourware? Paul Demarty assesses brain-computer interfaces and Elon Musk's hype

There has been a renewed wave of attention to so-called brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) in recent years. This is due no doubt in some respect to significant advances in the field, but all the more so to the identity of their latest major proponent: Elon Musk.

In his inexhaustible enthusiasm for making the tropes of pulp science fiction a reality, Musk founded yet another of his many companies: Neuralink. The dream would be to develop a workable, commercially viable solution that would allow people to control devices by the power of thought, through an intracranial electronic sensor. He claimed, a few years ago, that Neuralink had successfully installed one of its chips in the brain of a pig, and - with that slightly-chilling billionaire whimsy of his - more recently announced that he had, in the same way, gotten a monkey to play video games. And now, they have implanted an electrode into a human brain.

It is difficult, when Musk's name is involved, to suppress a certain scepticism. Many of his grandiose ventures have failed. His big idea for mass transit - the 'hyperloop' - has been attempted by many bright young things the world over (he did not claim any monopoly over it, for once), all of which have failed, and none of which have ever looked like a better bet than old-fashioned high-speed rail. SpaceX makes its money from military contracts, doing boring things like launching satellites, and - we confidently predict - will never result in a Mars colony.

BCIs, however, are a longer-standing field. Serious research began, on the Defence Advance Research Projects Agency (Darpa) dime, half a century ago (Darpa - perhaps the paramount example of the so-called 'entrepreneurial state' - has a far better record of turning science fiction into science fact than any number of two-bit Edison wannabes like Musk). Over time, some promising applications have been found, notably in medical treatment.

It is not hard to think of examples. A BCI that allowed fine motor control of a prosthetic limb would be an excellent addition to the surgeon's arsenal, and - supposing such things were available to the general population - could potentially improve the lives of many millions, seeing as how the human species does have a regrettable habit of maiming its members in frequent and large wars. Or we can picture the late Stephen Hawking, using the last of his motor functions to select words from a list of a few thousand to be spoken by a speech synthesiser: could we produce a sensor accurate enough, and a software system sophisticated enough, to turn brain activity into fluent natural language?

Perhaps, perhaps ... We are unsurprisingly a lot closer to the first of those, where the desired outputs are relatively simpler. There are major technical challenges at both ends of the pipeline: creating sensors that can be safely and durably integrated with the human brain, yet still be close enough to the action to reliably pick up electrical signals sometimes measured in the microvolts, is a formidable difficulty. *Interpreting* an endless stream of electrical signals and mapping them onto human intent is another one. There is a great deal of excitement about advances in machine learning (ML), and what that might be able to do on the output



Monkey operating a robotic arm with brain-computer interface

side. Well trained ML models, after all, take a bunch of meaningless *stuff* and impose meaning on it by way of known historical examples; advanced medical technologies seem a more profitable use of such methods than asking ChatGPT to write a sonnet about Ant-Man.

An interesting article in the *Financial Times* interviews several people working in the field, about what ML has achieved recently, and about the problems that excessive hype can bring.<sup>1</sup> It is also oddly paradigmatic of the bourgeois media's technology coverage. A great deal of space is given over to (admittedly interesting) portraits of the lines of research these people are doing (or claim to be doing). In spite of the negative spin, Musk looms absurdly large over proceedings. One interviewee claims, no doubt accurately, that none of the great breakthroughs claimed by Neuralink are actually novel, though she concedes that their work is "state of the art". (It certainly is not the first outfit to implant a sensor into a human brain.) Another worried about "a huge weight of over-expectations" falling on the field. Something like that is - at least in computer folklore - supposed to have resulted in the 'AI winter' of the 1980s and 90s.

## Social context

Relegated to our peripheral vision is the *social* context of the technology. It is notable that all but two authorities quoted are working in private companies (one welcomed the fact that Musk had "really put a spotlight on this field and it's bringing the capital in"). Yet by placing the focus entirely on the *tech*, the article is extremely typical. There are two other aspects to the question we might want to examine: the conditions under which this development is undertaken; and the ideological motors driving it.

So far as the first of these is concerned, we have already mentioned the fact that we have yet another example of the private sector sweeping in at the last minute and taking credit for developments largely undertaken by the state (and, as is often the case, undertaken by the in-house and contracted boffins of the *armed* wing of the state). There are very different incentives at work here, let us say, when dealing with your intrepid journalist. Military discipline abhors leaks, and generally prefers to

preserve its competitive advantages in the interests of strategic or even battlefield surprise. Earlier research was not exactly done in secret - papers were published, conferences held, and so on. Yet there was no need to shout it from the rooftops. The excitement was limited to professional and lay science nerds.

The chief executive officer, especially the start-up CEO, has instead the need to make a big performance out of innovation. Musk has made a career of it, as we have noted. The mini-Muskos do the same thing, however. The gulf between biotech bullshit and reality has sometimes been known to grow to criminal dimensions - as in the case of Elizabeth Holmes, whose company, Theranos, imploded when its "revolutionary" blood-testing technology proved to be wholly fraudulent, landing her and certain *consiglieri* in prison. Less dramatically, the thing operates like a 'Nigerian prince' scam: an extraordinary and lucrative breakthrough is around the corner; we need only *one more round* of venture capital funding ... In the new, VC-unfriendly macro environment, there is still more incentive to be as *loud* as possible, as companies squabble for funding like baby birds screaming for a worm from their mother.

In most sectors of the tech industry, this sort of thing is mostly harmless - an illustration of the old proverb that a fool is easily parted from his money (unless he can sell on to a greater fool). When medical applications are involved, more troubling issues arise. Theranos, after all, sent bogus test results back to actual patients, resulting in obvious harm to them. The clearest ethical dilemma on the BCI front is experimentation. There was a brief round of Neuralink news when it was revealed that their tests had killed 1,500 animals in their hurry to market, including many of those *Pong*-playing monkeys, possibly violating animal welfare laws in the States.

Experiments on animals of this sort, public or private, are seldom free of the taint of cruelty; those who support such tests do so in the name of the greater good of medical breakthroughs for humans. Granting that, however, there is still the problem of *human* experimentation. The incentives are the same, although

the penalties for regulatory violations obviously greater. Do we trust Musk's hirelings to fiddle with people's brains? Do we trust his competitors? Do we trust the bourgeois regulators and justice system to suitably punish negligence?

## Ideology

That depends on what the stakes are for the people in charge. Beyond the narrow pecuniary interests, there are, of course, the ideological drivers.

Neuralink, like its competitors, leads its charm offensive with the revolutionary medical technologies we discussed above, as well they might. But nobody could accuse Elon Musk of being a private man. For him, the endgame is a seamless interface between the meat-world of embodied human identity and the digital one. The stakes are little short of a back-road to immortality.

He is not alone. Bryan Johnson - another tech billionaire - has recently attracted attention for his individual quest for perpetual youth, up to and including regular blood transfusions from his teenage son. Larry Ellison, another, invests heavily in research into prolonging life: his, presumably. (As one of his former employees famously quipped, "Do not make the mistake of anthropomorphising Larry Ellison.") Many others look up to the eccentric futurologist, Ray Kurzweil, who expects death to be abolished - for some - in his lifetime, although the clock is ticking for him.

There is an overlap with the strange subculture that has built up around the idea of a coming 'singularity', in which artificial intelligence will suddenly and rapidly overtake human capacities and thereby sweep away all the prior antagonisms, whether by way of merging with us and giving us immortality or by wiping us out to remove obstacles to whatever stupid, petty aim the AI was given in advance (the usual example is maximising the output of paperclip factories, thanks to a famous thought experiment of the similarly minded Nick Bostrom).

With the recent success of large language models, these debates have once more penetrated the mainstream. Most versions of the AI apocalypse are of the fear-mongering sort, and so various worthies urge greater regulation of the field. Many are united by two utilitarian philosophies, called

effective altruism (the idea that philanthropy must be guided by evidence of empirical effectiveness) and long-termism (the idea that future pleasure and pain count for as much as present pleasure and pain). Thus 'altruistic' billionaires are justified in spending their wealth on attempting to prevent unlikely long-term scenarios, since a 1% chance of 100 million people dying is worth more utility points than the certainty of a thousand people dying.

Yet this outlook now has a rival - 'effective accelerationism', in which the *upside* of such eschatological technological changes is highlighted, with a corresponding moral duty to *accelerate*, rather than arrest, the pace of development. It has found a champion in the person of Marc Andreessen, a prominent venture capitalist and the same sort of narcissistic bloviator as Musk.

Why are these men not horrified by their own dreams? There is an underlying factor: the legitimating ideology especially of the tech mogul: that it is their purpose to conquer new frontiers and specifically *not* be intimidated by the small concerns of small people. It is an ideology traceable back to Friedrich Nietzsche, but more directly to Ayn Rand, whose hyper-capitalist utopianism openly scorned altruism (unlike, say, the Austrian economists who believed their theories to be the best for everyone).

The great satire of this outlook is not a book or a film, but - suitably - a computer game, 2007's classic *BioShock*, in which the player is stranded in the ruins of Rapture - a Randian utopia at the bottom of the ocean floor, whose society has fallen apart, as it is stratified by increasingly horrific body modifications. It must fight its way out through the hordes of post-human mutants which roam the swish art-deco setting. The BCI-AI singularity is a strange objective, which would only occur to people who could play *BioShock* and earnestly wish it was real.

Yet the capitalists are quite as trapped by capitalism as the working class - albeit in very comfortable house arrest - and none more so than these self-absorbed tech types. The laws of the system, even the mere laws of popular esteem, constrain their actions. Their money is in the gift of wholly bureaucratized institutional investors, or else state largesse. Their 'inventions' are purloined from academia. Every limitation is an intolerable insult. They long for freedom, and the dignity due to them. ("Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?") Rapture's founder asks the player rhetorically at the beginning of *BioShock*. Randianism has always, in practice, the whiff of the worst kind of slave morality.)

To them, we are mere lab monkeys, to be played with on the way to some unsurpassable horizon of self-actualisation. Can we really object, Nietzsche asked, to the sacrifice of thousands so that one overman might arise? Yet the overman *never* arises - instead, we get Musk and Andreessen, dressing up for the part in the shadow of Blackrock, the Pentagon and the Public Investment Fund ●

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## Notes

1. www.ft.com/content/da52aa61-4b9a-435a-aa5c-caf4c6e01dcb.

## MIDDLE EAST

# Sound and fury of battle

Once pan-Arab socialism counted as a real force in the world, its most famous leader being Gamal Abdel Nasser. **Yassamine Mather** looks back at his heady rhetoric and ultimate failure

**B**efore examining the role of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, I will start by discussing the Ottoman empire, because it is essential to comprehend the broader context of nationalist movements and anti-colonial uprisings. The army officer movement led by Nasser in the early 1950s and, to some extent, the Arab Ba'athist movement, primarily opposed the colonialist powers that succeeded the rule of the Ottomans.

The empire's origins go back to Anatolia in the late 13th century, when Osman Ghazi established the Ottoman state. In 1453, Mehmed II conquered Constantinople and declared the foundation of the empire. Its decline began in the late 18th century. Economic stagnation and conflicts with Russia further weakened the empire, while efforts to modernise and reform (known as the *Tanzimat*) proved futile, and the goal of catching up with the western world seemed ever more unattainable.

Spanning a vast territory, from the gates of Vienna to present-day Iran, and from Algeria to Yemen, the empire housed diverse nationalities and religions. It relied on a military bureaucracy to maintain control in the absence of geographic or national cohesion, facing constant wars and rebellions. The corrupt and ill-equipped state earned the title of 'Sick man of Europe' and its survival was mainly due to inter-imperialist conflicts.

During its peak, the Ottoman empire governed using the concept of the 'millet' - each religion forming a separate group. For instance, orthodox Christians constituted one millet, while Jews formed another. Each millet appointed its own religious leader and enforced its religious laws - so, for instance, Sharia or Islamic law did not apply to non-Muslims. Besides that, the empire was organised into 32 provinces (*eyalets*), each governed by a *wali* (administrator).<sup>1</sup>

In 1517, the Ottoman empire conquered Egypt, defeating the Mamluk dynasty that had ruled the country for centuries. Egypt held a crucial position within the empire due to its strategic location and economic importance. It was a hugely significant producer of cotton, grains and textiles, contributing substantially to the empire's coffers. Moreover, Egypt played a role militarily. Egyptian troops were frequently used in various campaigns, including conflicts in the Mediterranean and the Arabian peninsula.

Egypt attracted the interest of 19th century Europeans as a strategic gateway to the Orient. It was the first Arabic-speaking region to experience rival colonial incursions by European powers. Egypt gained a degree of autonomy within the Ottoman empire under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-48), but from 1852 Britain significantly increased its presence in northern Egypt to safeguard its overland trade route to India and oversaw the construction of the Cairo-Alexandria railway - the first such British project on foreign soil.

In the same period, French investors financed the construction of the Suez Canal, connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. As *khedive* (ruler), Isma'il Pasha sold Egypt's shares in the Suez Canal Company to Britain in 1875 due to a financial crisis. Growing discontent with European and Ottoman influence in Egypt culminated in a nationalist revolt in 1879. In response, the British occupied



Nasser waving to crowd in Mansoura, 1960

the country in 1882 to safeguard their financial interests, resulting in a new round of revolt. Britain emerged victorious, and restored khedival authority in Cairo, establishing a 'veiled protectorate' that endured until the outbreak of World War I. The occupation led to an increase in archaeological excavations, tourism and irrigation projects, aimed at boosting Egypt's cotton production to feed the Lancashire mills.

In 1914, due to the declaration of war against the Ottoman empire, to which Egypt was nominally connected, Britain openly declared Egypt a protectorate. They deposed the anti-British *khedive*, Abbas Helmy II, and replaced him with his uncle, Hussein Kamel, appointing him sultan. As a consequence, Egypt formally declared its independence from the Ottoman empire.

The end of World War I marked the final collapse of the Ottoman empire - the culmination of long term decline. Many of the regional wars, civil conflicts and disputes in the Middle East today can be traced back to the creation of numerous new 'states' with arbitrary borders by France and Britain following the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement.

Mass demonstrations took place in Egypt from March to April 1919 - the 1919 Revolution. Women played an active role and the British authorities were taken aback as a result. These women were led by Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), who became a prominent feminist figure in Egypt during the first half of the 20th century.

In February 1921, the British parliament approved a compromise deal but Egyptian prime minister Adly Yakan Pasha refused to sign it because of differences over who would maintain control over the Suez Canal zone. By December, the British authorities in Cairo had imposed martial law, which provoked further demonstrations and violent suppression.

In response to the increasing

and throughout the Arab world for the events leading up to and during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The conflict was a direct consequence of the United Nations' 1947 decision to partition British-ruled Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, escalating tension in the entire region and culminating in the 1948 war.

With Egypt's lacklustre performance in the war, the Egyptian king faced criticism from various quarters. Despite numerical advantage and material resources, the Egyptian military was clearly not prepared. Sections of the army blamed this on inadequate training and outdated equipment, all highlighting the failures of Farouk's government.

In July 1952, the Free Officers Movement overthrew Farouk and took power. They declared Egypt a republic in June 1953. Nasser already had a following in the Arab world and beyond because of the successful overthrow of an aristocratic monarch and British puppet, but within a few years he had acquired the status of a Bonapartist 'charismatic leader', not least due to his commitment to Arab socialism.

From that time till his death, Nasser's call for pan-Arab unity influenced politics in the entire Arab world. In some ways Egypt became the model for military republics that styled themselves as anti-imperialist or even "socialist" - in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, South Yemen, Libya and Sudan. Of course, the economy of all of these countries was state-capitalist - nothing to do with working class socialism: they were authoritarian, with repressive internal security apparatuses that policed society, its culture and intellectual life, and crushed all manifestations of opposition.

In many countries in the global south, the working class was weak. Leftwing parties were suppressed, while the military played a key role as the largest, most organised, modern national institution. Young officers forged alliances with anti-colonial forces and at times took the lead. Of course, invariably, as soon as they took power, they suppressed former allies, accusing them of being agents of imperialist powers. Nasserites frequently used the slogan, 'No voice louder than the voice of the battle', in their efforts to emphasise the primacy of military action, in order to maintain control and quell dissent.

These military rulers often enjoyed the backing of the Soviet Union, which labelled them as 'progressive' for following a so-called 'non-capitalist road to development'. In some cases, when these rulers fully aligned themselves with its foreign policy, they were even referred to by the USSR as 'socialist'.

The Soviet Union purposefully cultivated misconceptions about its cold war allies, fostering a tendency to overlook the distinction between anti-colonial sentiments and authoritarian practices.

It is generally known that Nasser and the majority of the Free Officers were actually *anti*-communist. Some of them, including Anwar al-Sadat (president from 1970-81), had previous affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, one of the junta leaders, Khalid Muhyi al-Din, and a number of low-ranking officers were close to the Democratic Movement for National Liberation.

DMNL was founded in 1947, as two communist factions - the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation

and Iskra - merged. Soon after its foundation it had a membership of around 1,400, making it the largest communist organisation in Egypt at the time and its weekly publication, *Al-Jamahir* (generally considered to be of a reasonable standard) had a circulation of around 8,000. The paper addressed working class issues and the party distributed it free of charge outside factories, etc. Before the 1952 coup, DMNL experienced a number of splits. However, both the Muslim Brotherhood and DMNL initially supported the coup - only to end up opposing the new republic less than a year after it was formed. Members of both groups were declared 'enemies of Egypt', facing imprisonment and torture. In fact, as early as 1953, all political parties were banned and Egypt was declared a one-party system under the short-lived 'Liberation Rally', whose general secretary was Nasser.

The new government suppressed working class protests. The army was used to attack striking workers in outer Alexandria. Nasser and his military allies were also keen to prove to the United States that they were not communists. In their efforts to demonstrate this, the junta hastily convened a military tribunal to try 29 workers. Among them, Mustafa Khamis and Muhammad al-Baqari were falsely convicted for premeditated murder and labelled 'communists'. They received death sentences, and on September 7 1952 they were executed.

In 1952, Egypt's economy was predominantly agrarian, with its primary source of wealth coming from the cultivation and export of high-quality cotton. However, the rural population endured widespread malnutrition, illiteracy and health issues - often contracting diseases from parasites in the stagnant waters of irrigation ditches, where they toiled barefoot for extended periods.

In the final years of the monarchy, political power and wealth had been concentrated among approximately 12,000 affluent landowning families - constituting less than 0.5% of the rural population, but owning around 35% of the arable land. At the other end of the agrarian hierarchy, 60% of rural households neither owned nor rented land, working instead as wage labourers. Furthermore, approximately 72% of landowners (roughly two million families) possessed plots of less than one feddan (just over an acre), barely enough for subsistence.

The Free Officers platform aimed to dismantle what they termed 'feudalism', referring to the political and economic dominance of large landowners. To achieve this goal, they implemented a relatively moderate land reform, which was much less radical than similar post-World War II measures overseen by the US in countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

The 1952 Land Reform Law restricted individual land ownership to 300 feddans for a family - considered a substantial holding by Egyptian standards. Initially, this reform led to the expropriation of land from approximately 1,700 landowners, including 425 members of the royal family, resulting in the redistribution of 10% of arable land.

Nasser claimed he had a deep understanding of the people's needs. He would often encourage his fellow citizens with the simple yet powerful words, *Irfa' ra'sak*

nationalism, the British unilaterally proclaimed Egyptian 'independence' on February 28 1922 and, following this, Sultan Fuad I was crowned king of Egypt.

However, Britain did not fully withdraw its military presence until after the Suez Crisis of 1956. Despite so-called independence, Britain maintained a significant influence. British representatives provided 'guidance to the king' and Britain's military retained control over the Canal Zone.

King Fuad died in 1936, to be replaced by Farouk I, who was only 16 at the time. He later signed the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, which stipulated that Britain would withdraw all its troops from Egypt by 1949, with the exception of those stationed at the Suez Canal.

Throughout the World War II, Egypt served as the primary base for British forces and, although British troops were partially withdrawn to the Suez Canal area in 1947, anti-colonial sentiment and nationalist movements continued to gain momentum.

## Republican Egypt

Gamal Abdel Nasser was amongst the first group of lower-middle class cadets who were admitted to the military academy in 1936. This was a consequence of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty signed that year, which scaled back the extent of the semi-colonial military presence established in Egypt following Britain's invasion in 1882.

Following World War II, Nasser and many of his contemporaries were calling for "complete withdrawal" of British forces and the attainment of Egypt's "full independence". Nasser firmly believed that the military should take the lead in ousting the British, dismantling the influence of their local collaborators, and instigating radical political and social reforms. It was with the aim of achieving these objectives that he helped establish the Free Officers Movement.

King Farouk was blamed in Egypt



ya khuya ('Lift up your head, my brother'). But his political project was constantly changing. Some - including his successor, Sadat, and the renowned liberal writer, Tawfiq al-Hakim - supported him during his time in power, but after his death they criticised him as a dictator. When it came to independent Marxists - those not following the USSR - some initially labelled him as a fascist, but later praised him during the 1960s and beyond.

The land redistribution efforts primarily benefited medium and affluent peasants who had access to credit and could acquire additional land. Key provisions of the law aimed at improving rural living standards included limiting agrarian rents to no more than seven times the annual tax value on the land, and establishing an agricultural minimum wage.

The Egyptian revolution had no coherent economic policy or political ideology. It had not been brought to power by a popular social movement or a political party, and it was not accountable to any such movement. Nasser consolidated his authority in March 1954 by outmanoeuvring his rivals. His dominance was further solidified several months later, when he fulfilled a significant promise by signing a treaty that ensured the evacuation of British forces by June 1956.<sup>2</sup>

Nasser supported Algeria's National Liberation Front in its war for independence from France, offering various forms of assistance, including an office in Cairo, a radio station, military training and arms. He used Egypt's *Voice of the Arabs* radio station to broadcast appeals directly to the Arab populace, encouraging them to reject the Anglo-American-sponsored, anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact. Iraq withdrew in March 1959.

The Egyptian president gained international prominence when he participated in the Bandung Conference in April 1955. This conference promoted "positive neutralism", emphasising anti-colonialism, non-aggression and mutual non-interference in domestic affairs as an alternative to Cold War alliances. In September 1961, along with India and Yugoslavia, Nasser helped establish the Non-Aligned Movement, which aimed to provide an alternative path for developing countries in the midst of Cold War rivalries.

Probably one of his most enduring legacies is the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company. This led to a crisis that escalated, partly because of tensions with Israel, and eventually resulted in the invasion of Egypt in October 1956 by France, Britain and Israel. Despite military victory, the US ordered a withdrawal - a significant political victory for Nasser.

## Arab socialism

Nasser embarked on a path of building a significant public sector in Egypt, initially without a clear plan. He started the process by nationalising the properties of British and French nationals after the Anglo-French aggression. Subsequently, in 1960, due to the reluctance of the local business classes to invest in industry, Nasser nationalised the Banque Misr, the largest bank in the country, along with all associated industrial, financial and commercial assets. This move was accompanied by the adoption of a five-year plan to drive economic development forward.

The 'socialist decrees' enacted in July 1961 involved the nationalisation of most non-agricultural enterprises. Additionally, they imposed a limit on the individual ownership of agricultural land. In 1962, the National Charter declared 'Arab socialism' as the official ideology of the state and established the Arab Socialist Union as the sole political party.

'Arab socialism' in Egypt, along with other anti-Marxist forms of 'socialism' in the third world, aimed to achieve economic development following the Soviet model of rapid industrialisation, while also improving the living standards of the general population. Realising this ambitious project would require expropriating large landowners and pursuing a more radical agrarian reform, given Egypt's limited capital. However, Nasser was cautious about mobilising the peasant majority for a class struggle against the entrenched pillars of the old regime.

Egyptian 'Arab socialism' exhibited similarities to the USSR model, including anti-democratic practices. High-ranking military officers with limited economic experience were appointed as managers of large public-sector enterprises, leading to the formation of an at times inept or corrupt state bureaucracy.

It did, however, bring improvements to the lives of workers in public enterprises and the state bureaucracy, offering them stable employment and social benefits like healthcare and pensions. It also ensured that all Egyptians had access to subsidised basic commodities and free public education.

In February 1968, Egyptian workers and students initiated the first major demonstrations against the Nasser regime since 1954. The protests were triggered by the lenient sentences given to airforce commanders who were on trial for their incompetence during the 1967 war with Israel. Over time, the demonstrators began to articulate broader demands, including freedom of expression, democracy and constraints on the power of internal security forces.

The demonstrations continued for nearly a week, resulting in two workers killed and dozens of injuries in clashes with the police. While it is an open question whether Nasser personally ordered his forces to fire on students in Alexandria, these events certainly underscored the shortcomings of the so-called 'Arab socialist' project.

Nevertheless, Nasser's personal prestige remained sufficient for him to mediate the November 1969 Cairo Agreement. This gave the Palestine Liberation Organisation responsibility for Lebanon's 300,000 Palestinian refugees and outlined the terms under which Lebanese authorities would tolerate Palestinian attacks on Israel. At the September 1970 Arab League summit, he dedicated long hours to securing a ceasefire that ended the Palestinian-Jordanian civil war and organised the evacuation of armed Palestinian groups from Jordan to Lebanon.

The strenuous diplomacy during these efforts took a toll on Nasser's health, which had been declining for years without public knowledge. The strain culminated in a fatal heart attack on September 28 1970.

When it came to regional interventions, Nasser had harboured ambitions for regime change in Yemen since 1957 and attempted to put these plans into action in January 1962 by providing support to the Free Yemen Movement. Several factors led him to send expeditionary forces to Yemen, including the dissolution of his United Arab Republic due to the unravelling of the union with Syria in 1961, which damaged his prestige. A swift and decisive victory in Yemen could have helped him regain leadership in the Arab world. Additionally, Nasser aimed to fulfil his reputation as an anti-colonialist, with a specific focus on removing British forces from South Yemen and its strategically significant port city of Aden.

Nasser's willingness to confront western powers and Israel indeed garnered him widespread support in the region, particularly during the early years of his presidency.

However, the defeat in the Six-Day

War of 1967 was a significant blow to Nasser and his leadership. The loss of the Sinai and the Gaza Strip dealt a severe blow to Egypt's military prestige. The simultaneous defeat of the Egypt, Syria and Jordan pact shattered the image of Arab military prowess and exposed weaknesses in Nasser's strategy and preparedness.

Defeat in the Six-Day War severely undermined Nasser's credibility both domestically and internationally. In response he made a dramatic offer to resign as president. This move was said to reflect his sense of responsibility for the defeat and his willingness to be held accountable.

However, Nasser's offer was met with mass demonstrations, urging him to remain in power. The public sentiment expressed through these demonstrations underscored the enduring support and belief in Nasser's leadership among many Egyptians.

Ultimately, Nasser withdrew his offer and remained in power till his death in 1970. The final years of his rule were marked by a more subdued atmosphere, as he grappled with the aftermath of the Six-Day War and sought to rebuild Egypt's military and diplomatic standing in the region.

## Communists

The Egyptian Communist Party was established during the period 1918-20, but it remained relatively inactive until after 1939. During this period, from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, Egypt had several communist organisations, with the Democratic Union for National Liberation being the primary one.

Nasser's regime took repressive actions against communist activists, including the arrest and imprisonment of individuals associated with communist organisations. In late 1958, several communist groups coalesced to form a rejuvenated Egyptian Communist Party, motivated in part by their opposition to the formation of the United Arab Republic with Syria, which they viewed as a consolidation of power under Nasser's leadership.

The Nasser regime viewed communism as a threat to its authority and stability, particularly in the context of cold war dynamics and regional power struggles. As a result, the regime responded harshly to the emergence of the Communist Party and its activities.

On New Year's Day 1959, the Nasser government launched mass arrests, targeting members of the newly reformed Communist Party. Many individuals were detained and sent to concentration camps as part of the regime's efforts to suppress communist influence and dissent. These actions reflected Nasser's determination to maintain control and suppress opposition, including from the left.

Most of those detained were eventually released in 1964, marking a period of relative relaxation. However, the crackdown on communist groups during this period underscored Nasser's authoritarian tendencies and his willingness to use repressive measures to maintain his grip on power.

During the 1960s and 70s, the Egyptian Communist Party experienced a series of changes, dissolution, and reconstitution under the political dynamics of the time. In 1965, facing pressure from the Nasser regime, the leadership decided to dissolve the party. This move was likely influenced by the Nikita Khrushchev leadership in Moscow and its desire to keep Nasser on side. Party members were encouraged to join the Arab Socialist Union, the sole legal party in Egypt at the time, as individuals. However, not all members agreed with this decision. Some refused to dissolve the organisation or join Nasser's party.

In 1976, the Egyptian Communist Party was reconstituted by former cadre, both within Egypt and abroad. Internationally, it maintained close ties with the Soviet Union - a common trend among 'official communist' parties, of course. This alignment with the Soviet Union helped the party to gain support and solidarity on the international stage.

Within Egypt, the reconstituted party had fraternal relations with the Progressive Assembly of National Unionists, indicating a degree of cooperation and alignment with other leftist groups. However, the party also faced challenges from splinter groups and competing organisations on the left. In 1978, one such splinter emerged, also calling itself the Communist Party. Additionally, the Communist Workers' Party, an independent and anti-revisionist grouping, emerged as a significant competitor on the left during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This organisation represented an alternative vision of communism and attracted members who were disillusioned with the mainstream communist parties.

Overall, the dissolution and reconstitution of the Egyptian Communist Party, along with the emergence of competing groups, highlight the complex political situation and ideological debates within the Egyptian left.

## Palestinians

Nasser's stance on the Palestinian cause changed over time, reflecting political calculations.

During his early career, his position on the Palestinian issue was not as assertive as it later became. In fact, he initially showed pragmatism and a willingness to engage in talks with Israel. In the early 1950s, Nasser was even viewed, according to western intelligence reports, as a moderate leader who might consider agreements with Israel.

In 1952, there were reports of clandestine talks between Nasser and Israeli representatives, suggesting a degree of pragmatism and an interest in seeking a political solution. Additionally, Nasser's statements to the press at the time indicated a desire for peace and a recognition of the potential benefits of cooperation with Israel.

Regarding the treatment of Palestinians under Egyptian rule, particularly in the Gaza Strip, Nasser's actions were often criticised for their lack of substantive improvement for the population. Despite the formation of the All-Palestine Government in 1948, which nominally asserted Palestinian sovereignty, it was effectively controlled by Egypt, with little real authority. Nasser, who inherited this situation, did little to change it and eventually abolished the All-Palestine Government in 1959.

The Palestinian population in Gaza was not granted Egyptian citizenship and remained in squalid conditions, used as a political pawn against Israel. Egyptian governance in Gaza was marked by heavy restrictions on political activities and freedom of movement, further exacerbating the plight of people living there.

It was not until the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, that the situation for Palestinians in Gaza changed. Nasser's approach to the Palestinian cause evolved over time, becoming more assertive and confrontational towards Israel, particularly in the aftermath of the 1967 war.

Overall, Gamal Abdel Nasser epitomised the aspirations of formerly colonised nations in the global south to assert their sovereignty in a non-bipolar world. His international achievements both defined and were facilitated by the era of decolonisation and its limitations. Nasser forged a strong emotional connection with the Egyptian people and improved the lives of many. However, his lack of confidence in their agency had ultimately contributed to his failure as their leader ●

This is an edited version of Yassamine Mather's talk to 'Why Marx?' on February 1 2024. The ongoing discussion and education series takes place every Thursday at 7pm. See: [www.whymarx.com](http://www.whymarx.com)

## Notes

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## Fighting fund

# Up the pace

Regular readers of this column will know that the *Weekly Worker* is potentially facing a substantial increase in its printing costs, following the problems encountered by our previous printers. We've not yet found a permanent replacement, although hopefully that will be rectified very soon.

Thankfully, though, our supporters understand only too well the situation we are in - which is why so many of you are determined to help us overcome the financial challenge through your contributions to the fighting fund. For example, in the first week of February, 22 comrades have chipped in with their donations. The most generous was AC, who donated a magnificent £100, while the others helped ensure we started the month with a bang.

Another 19 comrades contributed by either standing order or bank transfer - thank you, BO (£35), CG (£30), RG, NR and GD (£25 each), BK (£20), BG and MT (£15), TM (£13), MM (£11), AN, CP, DI,

YM, IS and SM (a tenner each), DC and JS (£6), and finally AM (£3). On top of that, MH and GW both donated £10 via PayPal.

We're so grateful to all those comrades, who have really showed their backing for this paper and its commitment to the single, united Marxist party that we so desperately need. But, although 22 comrades is a very satisfying number, I do have to point out that all those contributions come to just £409 towards our £2,250 target, with a quarter of the (admittedly very short) month already gone.

So now we really need to up the pace with some even more substantial donations. Can you help us out? To find out how, go to the web address below and choose the method you want to use to do that! ●

**Robbie Rix**

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310 To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate)

## PROHIBITION

# Why is there a drug war?

Mass incarceration and police brutality are no answer to either the gangs or drug-related health issues, argues Daniel Lazare

In a recent article about the gang violence enveloping Ecuador, Eddie Ford described the international war on drugs as “an insane exercise” that has “brought disaster whenever it has been tried” - but one that governments insist on pursuing regardless.<sup>1</sup>

He could not be more correct. In one country after another - not just Ecuador, but Haiti, the ‘northern triangle’ of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the Dominican Republic, etc - governments are busily destroying society in order to ‘save’ it. But this begs a question: why? Although Ford mentions “a combination of venality, desperation and self-interest” that is fuelling such scorched-earth tactics, it is unclear, exactly, where the self-interest lies in capsizing entire nations. If today’s ultra-imperialism is all about exporting capital and shifting manufacturing to low-wage nations, why demolish such societies instead of putting them to work? Wouldn’t US multinationals wring more profits out of Ecuador if it were peaceful and law-abiding rather than gang-ridden and ultra-violent?

Indeed, every month seems to bring news of some fresh drug-war failure. Despite decades of interdiction and eradication, cocaine production in Colombia has risen seven years in a row and is now at record levels. Relative to population, more people around the globe are using coke than ever before, while ever-inventive manufacturers are continually coming up with new ways of enticing them - with 87 new drug products introduced onto the market in the year 2021 alone. Instead of giving in, *narcotrafficantes* (drug lords) are diversifying and switching to synthetic substitutes like fentanyl that are hyper-potent and virtually impossible to intercept.

As the UN puts it,

Synthetic drugs offer criminals several advantages: namely lower operational costs, fewer production impediments and reduced risks of detection, interdiction and prosecution, because they can be produced closer to destination. Supply reduction efforts may be increasingly challenged, as criminals employ new means of manufacture that are easier to conceal, use chemicals that fall outside of existing controls or access inputs within expanding chemical and pharmaceutical sectors, where it becomes easier to conceal diversion. Synthesis of drugs offers additional flexibility in terms of having no fixed geography and much shorter production times. Interdiction of drugs may be less effective, as illegal manufacture can be relocated and product quickly replaced.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of traffickers, it should be the drug warriors who are running up the white flag. Although no-one knows how big the illicit drug trade really is, a 2014 study put it as high as \$652 billion a year.<sup>3</sup> Adjusted for inflation, that is roughly what the US spends annually on the Pentagon. The result is an army of gangsters whose job is to manufacture, distribute, bribe and intimidate - as well as to rip each other off at every turn and shoot any and all innocent bystanders who get in the way.

“Fifty years into the world ‘war on drugs’, the drugs are winning,” a health-policy journal observes.<sup>4</sup> So, again, why do governments stick with



**Bricks of cocaine: a form in which it is commonly transported**

a losing cause?

The answer is that it is a mechanism that bourgeois society is using to propel itself to the right. Capitalism has set itself a number of goals in an era of neoliberalism. It wants to discipline the working class, envelope society in a straitjacket of police repression, and neutralise what little remains of political democracy. The drug war is one of the major ways of achieving those goals.

### Historic roots

The drug war’s roots are impeccably racist and imperialist. They go back at least to the 1870s and 80s, when a growing enthusiasm for drug and alcohol prohibition intersected with similar efforts against prostitution and pornography. With its vast, moralistic and politically-attuned middle class, a newly-powerful United States helped lead the way.

In 1901, the US Senate adopted a resolution calling for “the destructive traffic in intoxicants” to be banned in black Africa. In 1902, Congress banned the sale of liquor to Pacific islanders, while in 1906 Theodore Roosevelt issued a call for “the universal prevention of liquor and opium traffic with all uncivilised tribes and races”.<sup>5</sup> America banned the internal consumption of alcohol in 1919 and prohibited marijuana in 1937. In 1951, Congress hiked penalties for both pot and heroin on the grounds that blacks and Latinos were “pushing” them onto ‘innocent white teenagers’.<sup>6</sup>

But it was not until the onset of neoliberalism - indeed, slightly in advance of it - that the movement really took off. Richard Nixon began the process by launching Operation Intercept in 1969 - a 20-day shutdown of the US-Mexican border aimed at closing off a tidal wave of marijuana that was supposedly fuelling unrest on college campuses. Traffic backed up for miles, yet border guards seized no more pot than before the embargo.<sup>7</sup>

Undaunted, Nixon declared a national emergency in 1971. “If we cannot destroy the drug menace in

America,” he proclaimed, “then it will surely in time destroy us.”<sup>8</sup> Two decades later, John Ehrlichman, a top Nixon aide who served 18 months in prison for his role in the Watergate break-in, shed light on what was going through his boss’s mind. He told a reporter in 1994:

You want to know what this was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or [anti-] black, but, by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalising both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.<sup>9</sup>

The US prison population sextupled from 1971 on, while blacks wound up behind bars at five times the rate of whites.<sup>10</sup> Yet, like scratching away at a rash, the effect was not to shrink the drug trade, but to inflame it. When the US began spraying Mexican marijuana fields with the weed killer, paraquat, in 1975, consumers responded by switching to the much-coveted Colombian Gold. But when president Julio Turbay launched a crackdown on Colombia’s Guajira peninsula, the centre of the marijuana trade, dealers responded by switching to cocaine, grown and processed in the Andean highlands hundreds of miles to the south. Coke is odourless, compact and hence easier to smuggle. It was also “worth almost six times its weight in gold”, as *Time Magazine* helpfully informed its readers.<sup>11</sup> So it was far more profitable.

Prices thus plummeted, usage soared, and Democrats and Republicans competed with one another to see who could denounce the

new evil of crack more vehemently. One of them was a senator from Delaware named Joe Biden.

“If you have a piece of crack cocaine no bigger than this quarter that I’m holding in my hand, if you’re caught with that, you go to jail for five years,” he said in 1991. “You get no probation, you get nothing other than five years in jail. The judge doesn’t have a choice.”<sup>12</sup> Those who received such sentences were overwhelmingly black and poor. Needless to say, Biden’s son, Hunter, was not among them, even though he would later confess to smoking crack “every 15 minutes, seven days a week”.<sup>13</sup>

The poor go to prison, while the rich go to rehab. The upshot decades later is akin to a case of cancer that has spread to every part of his body: brain, lungs, kidney - you name it. In 2003, some 100,000 “social justice warriors” descended on Porto Alegre, Brazil, to hear people like Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali and Arundhati Roy address the World Social Forum. “[W]e are a gathering force which might one day prove unstoppable,” gushed George Monbiot.<sup>14</sup> Fifteen years later, Porto Alegre was overrun with coke and violence and was a Jair Bolsonaro stronghold.<sup>15</sup> In the 1990s, Sweden had the lowest gun homicide rate in Europe.<sup>16</sup> But now, with Helsingborg (located across the Öresund from Denmark) emerging as a major cocaine hub, it has the second highest.<sup>17</sup> Drug violence has fuelled the rise of the ultra-right Sweden Democrats - now the second largest party in the Riksdag. With the SD declaring that Sweden has become a “breeding ground for international leagues, drug syndicates, terrorists and criminals”, the Social Democrats, not to be outdone, are calling for the army to be sent in as well.<sup>18</sup>

### Harsh penalties

Yet the drug warriors want more. Noting that fentanyl’s inroads into the American market are causing excess cocaine to wash up on European shores, the neocon Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington recently recommended that the EU emulate US policy by ratcheting up penalties and policing. Where America “spends an average of \$11 billion on supply-side reduction each year,” it says, the European Union spends just \$3 to \$4 billion - “an amount that ... only allows border security forces to interdict around 10-12% of the total flow of cocaine into the continent”.

Since “light penalties in Europe incentivise drug traffickers to continue their illicit trade,” CSIS adds, Europe should adopt “harsher penalties” so as to “deter subcontractors in the collection and distribution stages of the cocaine supply chain.”<sup>19</sup>

Bottom line: more cops, stiffer laws, bigger prisons and “coordinated cooperation among US, Caribbean and European stakeholders”: ie, following US *diktat* to the letter. If a US level of fatal drug overdoses - 106,000 per year according to the latest count<sup>20</sup> - is what the EU wants, then that is what it will get if it follows CSIS advice and adopts the US model.

With America on the verge of a Trump takeover and far-right parties surging in the polls in Europe as well, rightwing authoritarianism is what it will get as well. Drugs, crime and immigration are not only roiling the waters from Rotterdam to the Rio Grande, but are shaking up Latin America too. After arresting more

than one percent of the population in response to a terrifying wave of drug violence, El Salvador president Nayib Bukele won re-election on February 4 by a mind-boggling 87% margin. When drug gangs are recruiting your 12-year-old sons as hitmen and your daughters as prostitutes, Mussolini might not look so bad after all.

All too predictably, *Bukelismo* is sweeping the region. Peru wants to build a monument in his honour, Honduran politicians imitate his tough-guy and even his youthful fashion style, while protestors have taken to the streets in Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia and Guatemala to call for adoption of his policies. In Ecuador, where the government has imposed a state of emergency, a poll last summer found that Bukele was twice as popular as any politician at home.<sup>21</sup>

This is what drug prohibition leads to. If the outsourcing revolution of the 1980s and after has led to stepped-up coordination of production across the neo-colonial world, the drug war has led to stepped-up coordination of prisons and policing. The aim is to globalise an approach based on mass incarceration, police brutality, economic polarisation and rightwing populism. Nations cannot resist the trend individually, since they will be overwhelmed with drugs and violence the moment they let down their guard. Rather, the proletariat can only resist it internationally by defeating US imperialism as a whole.

It is either them or us, which is to say either the drug warriors and their policies of mass destruction or society in general. The goal should not be to liberate humanity from drugs so much as to liberate it from the drug war, which is many times worse ●

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## AUSTRALIA

# Risks and horrors of AUKUS

Labor's 'left' faction around Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong has openly and unashamedly embraced the alliance with US imperialism, now it is in government, says **Martin Greenfield**

Australian-Chinese writer Yang Hengjun has been handed a suspended death sentence by a Chinese court for spying for an unspecified foreign power. The sentence has thrown Australian-Chinese relations into a spin after years of 'on again, off again', that has seen finger-pointing over Covid, trade bans and calculated snubs.

China is Australia's largest trading partner and the Labor government of prime minister Anthony Albanese has sought to repair relations since it was elected in 2022 after a partial freeze during the Covid period. This is despite Albanese throwing his lot in with the Anglosphere powers via the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) nuclear deal, aimed squarely at containing China and defending US interests in east Asia.

Albanese now has to handle the highly awkward situation where, during a visit to Beijing in November, he invited president Xi Jinping to visit Canberra. The rightwing opposition Liberal Party will no doubt insist that this invitation be revoked.

Dr Yang, who moved to Australia in 1998, was arrested in 2019 after flying into Guangzhou from his home in New York. He was accused of having "endangered national security with particularly serious harm to the country and the people". Dr Yang is a former member of the Communist Party of China and worked for the Chinese ministry of state security.

Reuters reported in 2020 that he had told a supporter he was previously a Chinese spy. And, since leaving China, he has written a blog at times critical of China, and penned spy novels in which the main protagonist is a double-agent named Yang - a common Chinese family name. Now, after five years languishing in prison, he faces life imprisonment, if he passes a two-year 'good behaviour' period, having been found guilty of spying and 'betraying' China.

Of course, just what form that betrayal was will likely never be known, as national security cases are held in camera. While the secret nature of these 'trials' are a travesty and the Chinese court system is completely undemocratic, the hypocrisy of western commentators and governments knows no bounds on this matter.

In Australia itself, the case against 'Witness J' (or 'Prisoner 123458') was held in total secrecy, as was his sentencing to 15 months imprisonment. It has never been revealed for which service this veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan worked, or what secrets he revealed. His entire case was not even known about until after his release. Only partial details have since been made known.

Similarly the ongoing prosecution of former military lawyer David McBride, who assisted in the exposure of war crimes by Australian SAS officers in Afghanistan, show that the country has no leg to stand on in condemning other countries' lack of democratic justice.

It is impossible to know the facts of the case about Dr Yang, an honorary member of Australia's journalists' union, MEAA. To some extent, it is politically immaterial. But Dr Feng Chongyi, Dr Yang's PhD supervisor in Australia, said the case relates to "something he said to a Taiwanese intelligence officer",



Anthony Albanese at AUKUS meeting on March 13 2023

while he worked for the ministry of state security in Hong Kong. But "the real target is to silence his political voice".

### Kowtowing

While that is no doubt part of Beijing's motivation - the CPC brooks no dissent - the main point is that Dr Yang is the latest pawn in big power rivalry between China, the US global hegemon and its loyal lapdog, Australia.

What is known is that the case will be used by 'China hawks' in Australia to ramp up the pro-war rhetoric. This has already started. As has the slandering of peaceniks, anti-imperialists and even left nationalists who oppose AUKUS on the basis of Australian sovereignty. The hawks call them appeasers and pro-Beijing dupes.

No doubt devastating for Dr Yang and his family, his case highlights the fact that the governments of Australia and the USA (and the UK through AUKUS) view China through 19th century-style 'great power' politics. And they are in danger of taking us to war to protect their global dominance.

For the Australian Labor Party leadership, it means the final transformation of the parliamentary 'left' faction around Albanese and foreign minister Penny Wong into an openly pro-imperialist grouping (if they were ever anything else!).

For Albanese himself, he is acting like a war-hawk US Democrat: imperialist foreign policy abroad, while pursuing soft social reform at home. But there has been precious little progressive change at all under his government: this month, his 'tweak' of tax cuts for the rich was so mild that the opposition will let them sail through.

The prime minister has a simplistic view of the world, almost at the cartoon level of Ronald Reagan-type 'goodies and baddies'. Albanese has outlined his foreign policy as recognising there is a democratic world and an autocratic world - and Australia is in the democratic one, of course. For him, it is that simple.

When asked about why he is throwing his lot in with the USA through AUKUS, he has replied that "Australia made that decision in 1942", referring to when wartime Labor prime minister John Curtin refused a request from Winston Churchill to deploy Australian troops to Burma after the fall of Singapore and instead to focus on a Pacific alliance with the USA.

Albanese's trajectory to pro-USA

cheerleader might be surprising to many - his mentor was the late giant of the ALP left, Tom Uren - an anti-Vietnam war veteran and MP, who would no doubt be turning in his grave - but it is the logical destination for people unable to see outside the framework of nationalism.

The point for socialists, communists and consistent democrats is that neither Beijing nor Washington offer a way forward for humanity. We must fight for the end of the system of nation-states and a world without war. Those unable to imagine a world beyond the current system of a nuclear-armed and dangerous hierarchy of nations are doomed to be trapped by it and to reinforce it.

Nonetheless, there are stirrings in the ALP against the rampant Anglosphere war drums. Former prime minister Paul Keating and ex-foreign minister Bob Carr, both from the party's right, have been openly caustic about the support of Albanese and Wong for the AUKUS pact, which will cost Australia at least \$A368 billion over 30 years. Keating and Carr are no internationalists, but their voice shows how subservient the current government is to America.

As a rising Young Labor left hack in the 1980s, Albanese cut his teeth against the 'rightwing' New South Wales ALP machine of Paul Keating and Laurie Brereton. In his anti-AUKUS speech to the National Press Club in 2023, Keating said the following:

[Albanese's support for AUKUS] says something about the left in Australia. You know politically in the Labor Party I fought the left most of my life, mostly on behalf of the United States. But the two principal people on the left in Australia are now Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong and what they've done, they have essentially accommodated the strategic wishes of the United States uncritically ... But if you look at me or Laurie Brereton, we look like Bolsheviks compared to them, Bolsheviks, so where does that leave us?

The abandonment of any pretence to be leftwing by Albanese's faction has created something of a vacuum in the ALP. Other left parliamentary factional fragments with historic animosity to the Albanese faction have rallied to some extent and are openly speaking out in solidarity with Palestine and against AUKUS. But they are small, inadequately organised and still hidebound by

the Laborite poison of wanting to manage capitalism - a political stance that took Albanese to where he is now.

Rank-and-file members have formed Labor Against War, with an explicit call against conflict with China, no nuclear subs for Australia and a rejection of the AUKUS pact. From a standing start last year, it forced a debate onto the floor of ALP national conference and won a good slice of the vote, albeit a minority. A member of the federal ALP caucus, Josh Wilson from Western Australia, broke ranks and spoke against AUKUS.

Despite passing anti-AUKUS motions through dozens of branches nationwide - including in the prime minister's own electorate - the opposition group remains marginal (but spirited). Many of the unions, however, are facing both ways, talking against AUKUS, but positioning so as to not lose access to related jobs, should they eventuate. Meanwhile, the anti-AUKUS forces outside the ALP are largely veterans of the 1980s anti-nuke and 1990s/2000s anti-Iraq war campaigns.

Without a definitive political centre based on principled, consistent and independent working class politics, the fight to link the struggle against imperialism in the ALP with broader non-ALP socialist forces will prove an uphill battle. But it is a battle that must be fought.

While the liberal-'left' Green Party will absorb some of the anti-imperialist sentiment, it will package it into a nationalist verbiage. With a few exceptions, the Greens have been remarkably mute on the politics of AUKUS - beyond economic observations that the billions spend on nuclear submarines could be used for socialised dentistry or education. That is because the Greens have a significant base that is anti-Chinese over issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang, etc.

### Chinese Ozzies

There are more than a million Australians with Chinese heritage, so their electoral weight matters. The little polling that has occurred shows many are not happy with the AUKUS stance of the ALP. It is important to remember that the ALP won government in 2022 in part because some Chinese-Australian voters dropped previous support for the Liberal Party government of Scott Morrison.

The ALP won a handful of seats off the Liberals in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia with significant Chinese-Australian communities. And Albanese has a slim majority in parliament. That is why AUKUS and relations with China will remain one of the main strategic political questions in Australian politics for many years.

While China is no doubt flexing its muscles and might be prepared to use force to secure unity with Taiwan, the main threat to the region is a bellicose US empire, willing to throw Australia into the front line to maintain its power in east Asia. In other words, the drive to war comes from a global power facing off a local threat.

And, with the real possibility of a second Trump presidency, who knows what horrors the AUKUS alliance might deliver? ●

### Notes

1. See [www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-05/witness-j-revealed-secret-trial/11764676](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-05/witness-j-revealed-secret-trial/11764676).

## 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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# weekly worker

Working class  
in Britain needs  
to take up  
constitution

## Not within touching distance

Sinn Féin might appear, to some, to be on the cusp of realising the long-held dream of Irish reunification. However, if it happens, there would be a huge price to pay, argues **Anne McShane**

**S**aturday February 3 2024 was indeed a historic day. Northern Ireland - legislated into being in December 1920 as a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people', thereby allowing British imperialism to dominate the whole island of Ireland - now has a republican first minister, Michelle O'Neill.

The initial breakthrough came in the May 2022 assembly elections. Sinn Féin was returned as the largest party, beating the Democratic Unionist Party into second place. For the DUP, having withdrawn from power-sharing in February 2022 in protest at the post-Brexit protocol on trading arrangements, this was a resounding slap in the face. Its stand-off had backfired and it now faced the horror of having to go into a power-sharing government as second in command to republicans. Belligerent as ever, the DUP continued to refuse, much to the frustration of the people of the province, who had to suffer chaos and severe shortages in the health and social welfare systems in the absence of appointed ministers.

Finally, in January 2024, DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson caved in under pressure from Westminster and announced that a deal had been done, which would allow his party to return to power-sharing. A DUP deputy first minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, was put forward, who is from a staunchly loyalist background. Her father, Noel Little, was a leading member of the loyalist paramilitary group, Ulster Resistance, and was arrested for gunrunning in the 1980s. He was also a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment - a Protestant-dominated regiment in the British army (which unlike other British regiments was never used for crowd control or riots in cities). However, along the border and in the countryside the UDR earned a reputation for undisguised sectarian behaviour, including the killing of Catholics because they were Catholics. Many UDR members had links with illegal loyalist paramilitary groups.

Little-Pengelly has a long association with the DUP's core leadership, having been special advisor to Ian Paisley and Arlene Foster. In the grand tradition of unionism, she obdurately holds the IRA responsible for all the "terror" of the past. In her inaugural speech she declared that, while she is committed to work with Michelle O'Neill to solve the internal problems in health and social provision, she will never compromise on the union with Britain. No doubt Donaldson hopes she has the right background and attitude to satisfy those within his party who are openly critical of the return to Stormont.

In contrast, O'Neill made a far more conciliatory speech, presenting herself as a first minister for both republicans and unionists, and making it clear that, as far as she was concerned, the institutionalised inequality on which the statelet was founded has been eclipsed. She declared: "Yesterday is gone. My appointment reflects that change." As a Catholic and republican



Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill

she would not discriminate against unionists: "To all of you who are British and unionist: your national identity, culture and traditions are important to me. I will be both inclusive and respectful to you". She was "sorry for all lives lost during the conflict - without exception". Her appointment represented a "new dawn" for politics in Ireland and unity across the political spectrum was vital - not least to deal with the crisis in the health service.

### Border poll

Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald welcomed O'Neill's appointment with a pronouncement that the event signalled the advent of a new era for Irish politics, with the prospect of a united Ireland being "in historic terms ... within touching distance". As leader of the all-Ireland Sinn Féin, she has been pushing hard in recent years for a border poll under the terms of the Good Friday agreement. But the procedure to trigger a poll makes it clear that it is entirely down to the discretion of the Northern Ireland secretary. Only if he or she decides it is likely that "a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland" do they need to consider making an order to allow one to take place.

And there is little or no clarity on what should inform the Northern Ireland secretary's decision. Some constitutional lawyers have argued that it could be triggered by a nationalist majority in the assembly or a Catholic majority in the census. In 2021 the census reported for the first time that the "proportion of the resident population which is either

Catholic or brought up Catholic is 45.7%, compared to 43.48% Protestant".<sup>1</sup> And, while Sinn Féin is the largest party in Stormont, nationalist assembly members are still in a minority. And that does not include the Alliance Party, which is effectively unionist. In any event, as its leader, Naomi Long, has made clear, her party is not interested in being part of a united Ireland.

So the Northern Ireland secretary, Chris Heaton-Harris, is unlikely to be under real pressure any time soon. And it is clear that he and his government would be deeply resistant to any bid to reunite Ireland. The British establishment is not only committed to holding onto Northern Ireland because it is constitutionally an integral part of the United Kingdom. There are strategic considerations too. The military top brass consider Ireland vital to defending the western approaches to the British Isles and are therefore committed to beefing up the naval and air presence in Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup> That will not change. Only if the working class in Britain breaks with the consensus over Northern Ireland and commits itself to fighting for a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales and a united Ireland should we expect worthwhile change.

### Down south

While Sinn Féin is still ahead of the governing parties in the Republic of Ireland, it has recently dropped significantly in the polls. Its leadership clearly hopes that success in Stormont will inspire an improvement in its standing down south in the months leading up to a general election later this year or in early 2025.

Its aim to be in government north

and south is not an unrealistic one, but it will be in coalition in the south too. There is an ongoing debate over who its likely partner or partners will be. The Socialist Workers Network-led People before Profit has called for Sinn Féin to form a "left government" with various minor parties, including PBP. I think that this is an unlikely outcome, but if it happens, and it could, Sinn Féin would surely drag the left to the right, rather than the left dragging it to the left. Up to now neither of the main governing parties has needed or been willing to countenance government with it. But, with Sinn Féin becoming ever more mainstream, and having an all-Ireland profile, that view may well change.

What is certain, however, is Sinn Féin's search for acceptability and therefore respectability, not least in the eyes of US Democrats. This was demonstrated recently in a controversy over Irish politicians going to the St Patrick's Day celebrations in the United States.

Every year government leaders travel to present a bowl of shamrock to the US president and smile for the cameras. This year is no exception. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar will travel to meet Joe Biden, despite calls for a boycott in protest over US arming of and support for the Israeli genocidal attack on Gaza.

Yet Michelle O'Neill and Mary Lou McDonald have also announced they are going to Washington. This is despite opposition from a number of Sinn Féin members, and numerous petitions presented by members of the public. McDonald wants to be taoiseach and is determined to present herself to the leader of US imperialism as a loyal friend and ally. She reassures her critics that she will

take the opportunity to have a word in Joe's ear. As if that will make any difference when it comes to Israel and Palestine. However, Joe might also have a word or two to say in Mary Lou's ear: how about America agreeing to Irish reunification if Sinn Féin commits to Nato membership and spending enough to make a meaningful military contribution in the north Atlantic. Since 2000, Ireland has been allocating no more than 0.5% of its GDP to defence: to reach the Nato target would mean a four-fold increase. Westminster might then conceivably be won to accept a border poll (though it would surely campaign for a 'yes' vote for the status quo).

Kowtowing to the Americans has shocked many, who have seen Sinn Féin consistently identify with the Palestinian cause. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael prevaricated over whether to back South Africa before the International Court of Justice, Sinn Féin urged it on. But now this all seems like shadow boxing. TD Paul Murphy and others from PBP have called for Sinn Féin to reverse its decision to go to Washington. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign too. Perhaps Sinn Féin will relent at the last minute, but for now it does not look like it.

### Migrants

There has also been a shift in its stance over immigration. Sinn Féin's recent drop in the polls is said to have been at least partly due to a belief that it is soft on immigration. According to a *Business Post*/Red C poll conducted in 2023, Sinn Féin had the highest proportion, out of all the main parties, of supporters (83%) who believed Ireland had taken in "too many" refugees. It was behind only the independents (87%), many of whom have been notably more vocal on immigration.<sup>3</sup> In response to the fact that the rise in antagonism towards migrants was finding reflection among its voters, McDonald has now pledged that a Sinn Féin government would reduce the number of refugees by making the immigration process "more efficient". A "system that is fair, that is efficient, and that's enforced" was needed, she claimed.<sup>4</sup>

So, before it is even in government, Sinn Féin is giving a glimpse of what is in store, and it does not look good. Fianna Fáil, the traditional party of constitutional nationalism, has presided over and oppressed working class people down the generations, and has always been completely beholden to US imperialism.

There is every chance that a Sinn Féin government will be no different. And it could even be worse ●

### Notes

1. www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-62980394.
2. policyexchange.org.uk/publication/closing-the-back-door.
3. www.businesspost.ie/article/the-right-turn-inside-sinn-feins-shift-on-immigration-as-make-or-break-elections-loom.
4. www.msn.com/en-ie/news/other/mary-lou-mcdonald-government-has-not-handled-the-immigration-question-well/ar-BB1hLsnv.