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**worker**



**Jon Lansman rushes to catch up with rank and file on Labour rule changes**

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# ISRAEL IS A RACIST STATE



**Labour's adoption of IHRA definition is a shameful betrayal of the Palestinians**

# LETTERS



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

## Zionism

It is a pity that some Muslims have picked up on European anti-Semitic tropes, perhaps on the basis of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. This is counterproductive to the Palestinian cause, as it gives the Israeli government yet another stick to beat them with. It can also tend to alienate the many Jews worldwide who support the Palestinians in their struggle.

That an element of anti-Semitism has been taken up by some is not all that surprising - after all, an enemy being fought has always tended to be demonised and racially denigrated. It is regrettable and undesirable, though not perhaps as undesirable as dropping a shell into a group of children running along a beach or making a national hero of a medic (a medic?) who shoots dead a wounded and unarmed prisoner.

But the bar is now set exceptionally low for someone to be charged with anti-Semitism, as Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party has discovered. After all, according to chief rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, "Zionism is a belief in the right to Jewish self-determination in a land that has been at the centre of the Jewish world for more than 3,000 years. One can no more separate it from Judaism than separate the City of London from Great Britain" (*The Daily Telegraph* May 3 2016).

In response a letter to *The Guardian*, signed by 88 British Jews, pointed out that opposition to Zionism was not anti-Semitism. Zionism is a political position, not an attribute of Jewish identity: "Rabbi Mirvis attacks the Labour Party by launching a defence of Zionism, which turns it from a political ideology (that can be supported or opposed) into a religion that is beyond question. We British Jews reject this categorically" (May 10 2016).

But in the *Jewish Chronicle* it is constantly argued that Zionism and support for the state of Israel are part of being a Jew. For instance, Josh Jackman (October 10 2016) quotes Marie van der Zyl, then BoD vice-president, who claims, "For the vast majority of British Jews, political, cultural and religious affiliation with the state of Israel is a fundamental part of their Jewish identity."

So Zionism is just another name for Judaism and anti-Zionism is just another name for anti-Semitism? This is nonsense. Zionism is, now at least, the assertion that Jews are entitled to take and live in the lands previously known as Palestine. It is a political assertion and as such there is no reason whatsoever why it should not be opposed without such opposition effectively being labelled 'immoral'.

And then there is the report of the Home Affairs Committee's 'anti-Semitism inquiry'. According to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, "The report states what should be obvious, but sadly is not - that the starting point for any discussion on anti-Semitism should be what the Jewish community and Jews themselves feel is anti-Semitic" (*Ha'aretz* October 16 2016).

This seems to be based on a perverse reading of the Macpherson report, which held that the police should investigate an incident as racist if the victim thought it was. But it is ridiculous to go on from there to accept all such accusations as true.

Using the same logic, the starting point for any discussion as to whether any action or words addressed to or about a Palestinian is racist should be what the Palestinian community and Palestinians themselves feel is racist -

at least "in western political discourse" anyway. And Marc Wadsworth should perhaps call out his expulsion from Labour as "racism": if he says it is, how can anybody deny it?

Zionism was never, over centuries, a part of being a Jew: there are now strenuous efforts to make it so, largely on account of widespread opposition to the policies of the state of Israel - no-one should be surprised that the history of this venture has called forth anti-Zionism. However, it is absurd to say that the wish to take over Palestine is essential to being a Jew. There can be lots of reasons why calls for a 'homeland' might be opposed, but such opposition cannot be defined in itself as 'racist' - and neither can political opposition to Zionism be called anti-Semitic.

Jonathan Freedland wrote an article published in *The Guardian* on April 30 2016, most of which I thought was nonsense. There was an eloquent response a few days later from professor Kamel Hawwash, which covered many of my objections, but made no comment on this paragraph in the middle of Freedland's article:

"As for the notion that Israel's right to exist is voided by the fact that it was born in what Palestinians mourn as the Naqba - their dispossession in 1948 - one does not have to be in denial of that fact to point out that the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile and countless others were hardly born through acts of immaculate conception. Those nations were forged in great bloodshed. Yet Israel alone is deemed to have its right to exist nullified by the circumstances of its birth" (May 2 2016).

This to me adds insult to injury. Freedland must be aware that these countries were indeed "forged in great bloodshed", largely between two and five centuries ago, by Europeans who saw the native inhabitants as savage, uncivilised, brutish and pagan: they were, in other words, inferior beings in every respect and therefore had no rights - indeed any attempt at self-defence only proved their lack of 'civilisation'. The indigenous populations of many of these countries were wiped out, in large part by the diseases the Europeans brought with them, but also through massacre and overwork.

While it may be that the Hamas charter called for the expulsion of Jews from Palestine, this was not a realistic policy back in the day, never mind now. There is a Jewish entity in Israel (perhaps an Israeli Jewish nation), which has put down roots. But it is not the only such entity - in the struggle against Israel, Palestine has become a nation too. Yes, greater crimes are committed by other countries of the world, but Israel not only displays a 19th century imperial arrogance, but also tries to claim some kind of moral authority for its crimes.

Its main claim is, of course, the holocaust: nothing else could even come close to excusing the crimes committed against the Palestinian people. But how could massive hurt grant the right to hurt others? Whatever the mufti of Jerusalem may or may not have done in World War II, the Palestinians were not responsible for the holocaust. Even some of the survivors were opposed to the use of the suffering of themselves and their fellows for narrow political ends.

There are many Jews who are anti-Zionist: some of the most orthodox see the 'return' by force of arms, rather than through the messiah, as blasphemy. But the most virulent and eloquent - in the English language anyway - opponents of the Israeli state and of Zionism are American, British and Israeli Jews. They are clearly not anti-Semitic, so they have earned the even more ridiculous label of 'self-

hating Jews' - itself an anti-Semitic jibe. I must admit that in my reading about the holocaust, Israel, Palestine and American politics - in books by respected Jewish and non-Jewish, Zionist and non-Zionist, historians and other commentators - I have come across several such 'self-hating Jews' and I can only admire their courage.

So what is this 'anti-Semitism in the Labour Party' all about? Despite being the only nuclear power, having the most effective armed forces in the region and having the world's 'super-power' covering their back, it seems that Israel is facing an existential threat due to boycott, divestment and sanctions. The Israeli political elite is afraid of what they call 'delegitimation' - its main thrust internationally being the BDS movement. But it is also afraid that the Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, might move away from the US foreign policy umbrella into support for the rights of Palestinians. Hence all this 'anti-Semitism in the Labour Party' nonsense.

The real movement of socialists, and many democrats, worldwide is for the state of Israel and its Zionist supporters to treat Palestinians as fellow human beings. Those socialists and democrats are anti-Zionist, but also anti-anti-Semites. By contrast the Zionists now have a White House team led by pro-Zionists who are also largely anti-Semitic.

The Zionists feel that Israel is the natural 'home' of the Jewish people everywhere, but the question must be asked, 'What about the Palestinians?' But the answer of the state of Israel, the Zionists and the rightwing Christian nutters in the US is, "What about the Palestinians?"

And these racists have the nerve to call us anti-Semites.

**Jim Cook**  
Reading

## New regime?

The wording of recent pre-disciplinary warning letters being sent to Labour Party members from Sophie Goodyear - "head of complaints" at Labour's HQ in Southside - shows that the witch-hunt of socialists in the party continues unabated, albeit in a modified form. It is directed particularly against those who forthrightly challenge the racism inherent in Zionist ideology and Israel's apartheid laws and practices.

Iain McNicol's notorious "complaints unit" appears to have been replaced, under Jennie Formby and legal guru Gordon Nardell, by a "national complaints team" - but the stench of hypocrisy reminds us that a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet. Healthy discussion of political issues is still being blocked by chilling complaints, which are all too often taken seriously. Instead of debating the content of differences, the right make complaints about the manner of expression. Instead of stating their views openly in the press, on social media and in party meetings, the right make cowardly complaints to party officials.

The good news is that automatic exclusions and disciplinary action before due process appear to have ended - one of the key demands of Labour Against the Witchhunt at its formation in October 2017. At least in some cases, suspension from membership is no longer the first resort of the party's apparatchiks.

Suspension normally involves removal from all posts. This not only removes the rights of the suspended member, but also directly negates the democratic rights of the party members who elected them to those posts. It also involves a ban on attending party meetings, thereby removing the best form of education and re-education - discussion of a member's issues with

their peers, their comrades in their local branch and constituency party.

The previous "head of disputes", Sam Matthews, used to suspend you on the basis of "serious allegations", which had not yet been investigated. Sophie Goodyear, while not suspending you, nevertheless finds you guilty (presumably using comrade Nardell's prescribed nostrums), as displayed in this exquisite example of 'safe spaces' double-think:

"It has been brought to the attention of the national complaints team that you have posted offensive comments on your social media - copies of these are included in this letter. These comments have caused offence.

"The Labour Party should be the home of lively debate, of new ideas and of campaigns to change society and we appreciate that this does lead to discussions where those involved hold differing opinions. For a fair debate to take place, people must be able to air their views in a safe space and an atmosphere of respect. Abuse of any kind - whether direct attacks or pejorative language, which may cause offence - is not acceptable and will not be tolerated in our party. Language that may be perceived as provocative, insensitive or offensive falls short of the standards expected of us as party members.

"I am therefore writing to you to remind you that comments such as those below are not what we would expect from members of the party and ask that you refrain from making comments of this nature in future. Please be aware that any repeat of this conduct may lead to formal disciplinary action."

Being found guilty *without due process* and threatened with future disciplinary action chills the heart of the accused, but leaves them none the wiser as to what exactly is deemed unacceptable in what they have said. Attaching copies of one's "social media comments" still leaves one guessing, afraid and silenced.

What remedy is available to those who receive such a letter? I suggest: (a) publish the warning letter; (b) write a reply complaining of being found guilty without due process, asking who complained and precisely which words the complainant found unacceptable and why; (c) raise the issue in your party branch or constituency meeting.

**Stan Keable**  
LAW secretary

## Not so unique

In his report (September 6) on my talk, 'Labour theory of value for the 21st century', at Communist University 2018, comrade Danny Hammill complains that I made things difficult for the audience "by the way [I] used terms and concepts in [my] own unique way. For example, comrade Machover uses the words *value* and *abstract labour* in such a general way that value and abstract labour have always existed and will continue to exist under communism" ('From Trump to quantum', September 6).

While Emmanuel Farjoun and I explicitly depart in our work from Marx's version of the labour theory of value in several respects, the way I used the words mentioned by Danny is not one of them, and is most certainly not unique to me. This issue came up in an exchange of letters between Karl Marx and his friend, Ludwig Kugelmann. Marx deals with it in a letter dated July 11 1868. He stresses that the value of a product - the amount of labour needed to produce it - is a concept that applies under any form of social organisation. The letter is worth reading in full, but here is a key excerpt:

"And every child knows, too, that the amounts of products corresponding to the differing amounts of needs demand differing and quantitatively

determined amounts of society's aggregate labour. It is self-evident that this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labour in specific proportions is certainly not abolished by the *specific form* of social production: it can only change its *form of manifestation*. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all.

"The only thing that can change, under historically differing conditions, is the *form* in which those laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself, in a state of society in which the interconnection of social labour expresses itself as the *private exchange* of the individual products of labour, is precisely the *exchange value* of these products" (all emphases in the original).

**Moshé Machover**  
London

## PCS corrections

There were a couple of editing mistakes in my article on the Public and Commercial Services union, 'Left in disunity' (September 6).

It is not the case that Socialist Caucus (forerunner of today's PCS faction, Independent Left) stood against current general secretary Mark Serwotka in his first election in 2000. The Socialist Caucus were the ones actually leading and pushing Mark's candidature against PCS Left Unity's favoured candidate at the time, Hugh Lanning (a Blairite full-timer), in order for members to have a socialist candidate to vote for. Mark got the support of activists and duly won.

When I mentioned that those in the Socialist Party today (Fran Heathcote, Kevin McHugh) were arguing in their 'Socialist View' bulletin (the grouping supporting Janice for assistant general secretary against current incumbent Chris Baugh) why Mark Serwotka favoured a merger of PCS with Unite, they were saying what the Socialist Party line was at that time. Although still in the SP today, they are backing fellow SP member Janice Godrich against their official party candidate, Chris Baugh, for the 2019 AGS election. There should be a lot of expulsions from the SP for this, but there seem to be so many long-serving SP activists backing Janice that if they did expel them all for breaking the party line they'd surely lose control of the only union they dominate.

Since my article I have been reminded of a rumour that Mark Serwotka, having been allowed back into the Labour Party, is seeking to become an MP and so wants president Janice Godrich to take over from him; and the easiest way to do that is to get Chris Baugh out and Janice in as AGS, ready for that eventuality. I cannot prove this, but it would explain why Mark is ready to cause so much disunity amongst the left over one full-time elected senior officer position. Mark is welcome to deny this in the *Weekly Worker*, of course.

The SP also did not tell us, when reporting that Chris and Janice both had ample time to argue their candidatures before the SP made their decision, what Janice's platform was, what criticisms, if any, she had of Chris and what Chris had to say for himself. Shouldn't we all be told before we cast our vote? I understand that the tiny PCS Democrats - part of the Democratic Alliance electoral pact for the national executive with Left Unity - has not taken sides, as they will be doomed if they back the losing candidate. However, they may be condemned by both candidates' supporters for not backing either, when it comes to the NEC elections in May 2019.

I will certainly miss all this when I retire in November after 37 years as a union activist.

**David Vincent**  
Manchester

## ISRAEL

# A racist state

Labour's adoption of the IHRA definition was a shameful betrayal of the Palestinians, writes **Tony Greenstein**



**Police drag away Khan al-Ahmar protestor**

As Labour MPs voted to adopt - by 205-8 with 12 abstentions - the full International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, which conflates it with anti-Zionism, Israel's colonial high court was giving the go-ahead for the demolition of Khan al-Ahmar - the West Bank village between Jerusalem and the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim - to proceed. In its place will be built Jewish-only settlements.

By what definition can this *not* be racist? If Jews in Britain were evicted to make way for non-Jews, would this not be racist? Only a dedicated racist could pretend that Israel is not an inherently racist state.

Two months ago, Khan al-Ahmar's demolition was only stopped after a worldwide storm erupted. This was because if it is demolished there can no longer be any pretence of a two-state solution. At that time, Wes Streeting, the anti-Corbyn MP, called for sanctions - something which under the IHRA definition would be deemed 'anti-Semitic'.

Labour MPs voted to endorse the IHRA without even the slightest caveat about free speech. This follows the national executive committee vote, which endorsed the definition in totality - effectively rejecting a statement from Jeremy Corbyn, which would have allowed members to call the founding of the Israeli state racist.

It should be noted that Corbyn's statement was extremely weak in itself. Nonetheless, it did accept that people had the right to argue Israel's founding was racist and it also accepted the existence of non-Zionist Jews. But, instead of accepting it, the NEC agreed a weak 'free speech' caveat.

However, for the Zionists all talk of a free speech clause was anathema. Jennifer Gerber of Labour Friends of Apartheid Israel "claimed the 'freedom of expression' clause 'totally undermines the other examples the party has supposedly just adopted'". The Jewish Labour Movement stated: "The only speech that IHRA definition seeks to limit is anti-Semitism." The bigger the lie, the more often these racists repeat it.

Israel is racist - systematically and institutionally - in a hundred different ways. It is the most racist state in the world. That its defence minister - a fascist called Avigdor Lieberman - wishes to transfer Israel's Arab population into a West Bank Bantustan should be reason enough to affirm this. A few weeks ago hundreds of Jews

demonstrated in the northern city of Afula against the fact that an Arab had bought a house in a hitherto 100% Jewish city. Hundreds of communities in Israel are Jewish-only by virtue of the law. In cities like Safed a paid state official - its chief rabbi, Shmuel Eliyahu, issued a religious edict forbidding the renting of flats or apartments to Arabs.

Every Labour MP who voted for the IHRA, which outlaws calling Israel a racist state, can be taken to have endorsed Israel's virulent racism. MPs like Wes Streeting who criticise individual instances of demolition, yet endorse the Zionist state itself, are nothing but hypocrites. They condemn manifestations of racism, whilst endorsing the ethno-nationalist Jewish state, which so regularly indulges in such acts.

The reason that the IHRA definition has been pushed so strongly by the Zionist lobby is that it renders criticism of the state an expulsion offence. Zionists hate free speech, whether it is in Israel or the UK. The NEC, by endorsing the IHRA, has endorsed Israel's racism.

### Despicable

No-one could be more despicable than Momentum's Jon Lansman, who is a Jewish Zionist. Lansman is fully aware of the racism of Zionism. Only last month he accepted that "It cannot possibly be anti-Semitic to point out that some of the key policies of the Israeli state, observed since its founding days, have an effect that discriminates on the basis of race and ethnicity."

Of course, Lansman, being a sickening hypocrite who supports a Jewish state, avoided saying that an entity which consistently discriminates against a minority population must be inherently racist. He therefore pretends it is the 'policy' of the present government rather than a function of Zionism itself.

Nonetheless, after visiting Israel, Lansman stated: "Those I met - Jewish as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel - spoke about racist state policies, not just in relation to the occupation and settlements, but also within Israel itself: the segregation of housing, education, employment and systematic economic disadvantage."

Lansman is not stupid, whatever other qualities he has. A state that systematically discriminates against its Arab population, which has segregation at its heart, is not a normal 'western democratic state'. Segregation equals apartheid. Yet Lansman, being

a supporter of a settler Jewish state, refuses to accept that Zionism itself is racist. That is why at the NEC he stabbed Jeremy Corbyn in the back.

Corbyn has brought many of these problems on himself. If from the outset he had responded by saying that he condemned both anti-Semitism and also its weaponisation against critics of Israel, then he would have escaped a lot of the grief of the past three years. He compounded this mistake by coming out in support of the IHRA definition.

The claim is often made that the 'Jewish community' endorses the IHRA. This is a lie. Most Jews have not even read it. In any event even if the 'Jewish community' did agree with the IHRA definition, that would be no reason to adopt it. Racism is not made better because Jews agree with it.

We also face the hypocritical situation where it is anti-Semitic for anti-Zionists to compare Israel with Nazi Germany - but there is no such prohibition on Zionists comparing their opponents to Nazism. For example, when Margaret Hodge was playing the martyr, she compared the threat of her being disciplined by Labour to the abuse suffered by Jewish refugees escaping Nazi Germany.

All 13 of Israel's Arab members of the kneset wrote to *The Guardian* at the beginning of September in support of Jeremy Corbyn, stating: "We stand in solidarity with Jeremy Corbyn and we recognise him as a principled leftist leader who aspires for peace and justice and is opposed to all forms of racism, whether directed at Jews, Palestinians, or any other group." And two weeks ago 84 black and ethnic minority groups wrote to *The Independent* making clear their opposition to the IHRA. Suffice to say, both the NEC and Labour's MPs ignored Britain's black communities.

I am therefore proposing a statement to be endorsed by at least 500 people, asserting that Israel is a racist state. This is what I propose:

We, the undersigned, believe that Israel is and always has been a racist state, whose mission was summed up in the Zionist slogan, 'A land without a people for a people without a land'. As Anita Shapira, a prominent Zionist historian, wrote, "The slogan ... was common among Zionists at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century."

If you agree and wish to endorse this, please contact me: <http://azvsas.blogspot.com/> ●

## ACTION

### London Communist Forum

**Sunday September 16, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimtz's *Lenin's electoral strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917*. This meeting: 'Legal and illegal work' (continued).

Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1.

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

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

### Radical Anthropology Group

**Tuesday September 25, 6.30pm:** Series of talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. This meeting: 'Did patriarchy ever exist?' Speaker: Chris Knight.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

### Don't let the racists divide us

**Saturday September 15, 1.15pm:** Counterdemonstration, Keel Square, Sunderland SR1. No to the Democratic Football Lads Alliance.

Organised by Sunderland Unites:

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

### For mandatory reselection

**Saturday September 22, 3.30pm:** Labour Party conference fringe meeting, Quaker Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1.

Speakers include: Paul Mason, Chris Williamson MP and Tosh McDonald (Aslef).

Organised by Labour Open Selection:

[www.labour-open-selection.org.uk/openselectionfringeevent](http://www.labour-open-selection.org.uk/openselectionfringeevent)

### The World Transformed

**Saturday September 22 to Tuesday September 25:** Momentum's festival of politics, art and music, running alongside the Labour conference, Liverpool, various venues.

Organised by The World Transformed: <https://theworldtransformed.org>.

### Welcome to Liverpool

**Saturday September 22, 6.30pm:** Fringe meeting, Friends Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. Speakers include Diane Abbott MP, Dave Ward (CWU), Mick Whelan (Aslef), Daniel Blaney

Organised by Campaign for Labour Party Democracy: [www.clpd.org.uk](http://www.clpd.org.uk).

### Labour Against the Witchhunt

**Sunday September 23, 7pm:** Fringe event at Labour Party conference, Roddick Rooms, 54 St James Street, Liverpool L1. Speakers include Chris Williamson MP, Jo Bird (Jewish Voice for Labour), Alexei Sayle.

Organised by Labour Against the Witchhunt:

[www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org/events](http://www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org/events).

### Why we need an anti-war government

**Monday September 24, 5pm:** Labour Party fringe meeting, suite 3, Jurys Inn, 31 Keel Wharf, Liverpool L3.

Speakers: Chris Williamson MP, Lindsey German (Stop the War),

Andrew Murray (Unite). Organised by Stop the War Coalition:

[www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

### Briefing for delegates

**Monday September 24, 6.30pm:** Round table, Friends Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. Speakers include Jean Crocker and Teresa Clarke (women's conference CAC).

Organised by Centre-Left Grassroots Alliance: [www.clga.org.uk](http://www.clga.org.uk).

### Failure or success?

**Tuesday September 25, 6.30pm:** Review of conference, Friends Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. Speakers include Emma Hardy MP, Diana Holland (Unite), Kate Osamor MP

Organised by Campaign for Labour Party Democracy: [www.clpd.org.uk](http://www.clpd.org.uk).

### Remember Tommy Hepburn

**Saturday September 29, 9am:** Memorial march. Assemble Wardley Colliery, 'miner's lamp', Wardley Lane, Gateshead NE10 for march to St Mary's Church, Shields Road, Heworth, NE8. Service commencing 11 am, followed by reception at Wardley Club, Sunderland Road, Gateshead NE10.

Organised by Durham Miners Association: [www.durhamminers.org](http://www.durhamminers.org).

### End austerity

**Saturday September 29, 12 noon:** Demonstration, Conservative Party conference, Assemble Victoria Square, Birmingham B1.

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

### Pinter's Nobel lecture

**Tuesday October 2, 6pm and Thursday October 4, 6pm:** Performance of *Art, truth and politics*, Harold Pinter theatre, Panton Street, London SW1. Starring Mark Rylance, in aid of Stop the Wear Coalition.

Organised by Harold Pinter theatre: [www.haroldpinter.theater](http://www.haroldpinter.theater).

### Windrush 70

**Tuesday October 9, 7pm:** Lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker: Wilf Sullivan, TUC race equality officer, to mark Black History Month on the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush.

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

### No to racism and fascism

**Saturday October 20, 10am to 5.30pm:** International conference, Friends Meeting House, 173-177 Euston Road, London NW1.

Organised by Stand Up To Racism: [www.standuptoracism.org.uk](http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk).

### Socialism 2018

**Saturday November 10 and Sunday November 11:** Socialist Party school, Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, Bloomsbury, London WC1. Organised by Socialist Party in England and Wales:

[www.socialism2018.net](http://www.socialism2018.net).

### 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.

**LABOUR**

Keynesian economics are a con

# Too modest by half

John McDonnell's 'radical' plans to overhaul company ownership forget about the state - **Jim Grant** argues that the state will not forget about John McDonnell

**O**f all the problems with John McDonnell's proposal for employee-ownership funds,<sup>1</sup> the first one to jump out is that it is a little unexciting under the circumstances.

With Westminster aswirl with talk of suicide vests and dirty tricks, accusation and counter-accusation being hurled around the Tory benches, a series of vague aspirations about corporate structure are a little weak-tea. There is also a particular eddy in the hurricane, which is hardly irrelevant here - the screeching hysteria over supposed anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Yet clearly enough the time is approaching for eye-catching policy statements, or attempts at the same. The government does not look terribly likely to last just at the moment; and, however many crocodile tears are blubbed in the lobby about Boris Johnson's 'offensiveness', he is surely right that Theresa May's Brexit plans are more of a hindrance than a help to her.

She herself knows it - we have only recently had her plan to shake up the railways, whose perpetual dysfunction since privatisation has become the Anfortas wound of British neoliberalism, unhealed despite endless tinkering and plainly on the brink of collapse. (Apparently some polling wonks have suggested that Jeremy Corbyn's gesture in favour of renationalisation might be enough *on its own* to deliver him to No10 - probably an exaggeration, but still quite something.) Having succeeded in dragging May and her unmerry men onto their turf on the railway issue then, this starts to look like another gambit to force the Tories to confront social democratic corporatism on principle.

McDonnell proposes that companies be required to set up a fund in which shares would accrue, which would be owned collectively by the business's employees. They would not own the shares individually, and would not be able to sell them, but would be paid dividends, and exercise control in proportion to the fund's holdings.

Pitching it to *The Observer*, McDonnell emphasised the radicalism of the proposals, but surely a part of their 'cleverness' consists in their modesty. What we have before us, in

reality, is a variation on the policy of workers' representatives on the boards of companies, a form of industrial cooperation found in Germany and some other countries. Variants of this have already been touted by McDonnell, and even - tellingly - Ed Miliband in the run-in to the 2015 election. The novelty, such as it is, is the combination of that centrist social democratic warhorse with the extension of share ownership, which is a *Tory* theme. (Readers will remember George Osborne's attempt at a similar scheme, which saw him declaim to a befuddled parliament: "Workers of the world, unite!") And the current batch of proposals are lifted wholesale from a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research - a think-tank of a traditionally soft-Blairite orientation, which has perhaps drifted left under the pressure of events.<sup>2</sup>

Another indicator of 'moderation' on this front is that - for white-collar workers and professionals, at least - some token equity is commonly on the table anyway, without the inducement of government. It is worth looking at this a little more closely, since the existing arrangements among the professional middle class highlight some difficulties.

## Demoralisation

It is first of all worth noting that equity is offered very commonly as an *alternative* to a higher salary or some other benefit. An alternative not in the sense that a prospective employee is free to choose, but rather in the sense that company stock is used as a sweetener to an otherwise unattractive offer. There are situations in which this trade-off is quite explicit. We will take as an exemplary case technology start-up companies - exemplary because professional software engineers are presently in an extremely good negotiating position, thanks to an underserved labour market. (It is also your humble correspondent's line of business.)

Equity is a big thing in start-up land - the dream is to work for the next Facebook and make off like bandits. And the trade-off mentioned above is commonly understood to be part of the deal. Young companies with little investment are typically unable

to compete on salary with established firms, so generous options are offered to early employees instead. (Later employees will be given much stingier shares.)

The first major problem is a simple fact of life. Most start-ups fail, making those options worthless. So even good equity offers are essentially lottery tickets - which, remember, employees are expected to take instead of actual money in the pay cheque; money which they could perhaps use to buy more reliable investments.

The second problem, more pertinent to our present discussion, is that the game is rigged. The tricks are manifold, but there are two main ones. Such companies typically have two or more stock classes. Employees, apart from very early (and lucky) ones, will get common stock. Investors will get preferred stock. That means that employees will not get a penny from an 'exit' before Wall Street and the City have been paid in full. On top of that, the options granted will be highly illiquid. It is hypothetically possible to exercise them at any time and sell the shares on the secondary market, but buyers are hard to come by for all but the most dazzling unicorns. In practice, one must wait for a 'liquidity event' or 'exit' - a merger, acquisition or public offering - at which time vast armies of lawyers and accountants will conspire to rob blind anyone who is not personally paying them. (That means you, J Random Programmer.)

Add it together, and contracts are often drawn up in such a way that the stock offers are basically fraudulent; it will be vanishingly unlikely for anyone apart from the founders and investors to get any money, and the legal naivety of the average employee will be exploited in order to make them believe they are getting something of value. This, in fact, is widely understood. We engineers are generally paid well enough that we can breezily joke about how worthless these options are and go about our pleasant bourgeois lives; but there are typically many others in lower-paid, lower-status white-collar jobs in the office - HR, finance and what have you - making a great deal less, and having it topped up with the same Monopoly money. For admin juniors

on £25k it really is a bit of a shafting.

There are clear differences with the IPPR-McDonnell scheme, of course. The shadow chancellor, as we have seen, wants his ownership funds to be held in trust, rather than granted to individuals as such, and presumably envisions an elaborate legal regime to make sure of it. Any serious legal obligation on this point would be an opportunity to stop the sort of fraudulent practices mentioned above. In that respect, it would certainly be better than the present situation - especially if extended beyond the smashed-avogobbling hipster-yuppie set.

Yet the lesson of existing arrangements is surely that the devil is in the details. Almost by definition, details are a little thin on the ground for now; but we can be quite certain that the world's lawyers and bean-counters will pull out every stop to undermine any legislation that dilutes the day-to-day power of the capitalist class. There is also the small matter of the *governance* of these funds. If they are supposed to give workers a seat at the boardroom table and a say in corporate affairs, then who gets to take up that seat? A trade union rep? An elected delegate? Elected by whom? Again, we suspect that the bureaucratic engineers of the other side will have a great deal of fun getting patsies in charge of things.

There is a more profound practical objection. It is best framed strategically. The approach of the Corbyn/McDonnell leadership is to fight exclusively on the ground of economic reforms, with other issues receiving little more than feel-good bromides by way of front-bench attention. The Tories, it is argued, are weak on bread-and-butter issues due to their commitment to neoliberalism. That is where to beat them.

Tacitly assumed in this outlook is the idea that neoliberalism is a sort of accident. It is the ideological blinkers of the Tories, or perhaps their personal distance from everyday concerns, that leads them to their policy choices, and the British people to the baleful consequences.

The root of the matter, however, is more serious. That is the small fact that the political regime as such is one of capitalist class rule. It is not the being

of the professional caste of politicians that determines their consciousness so much as the interests of the British bourgeois state. The swarm of minor practical objections we raised earlier have as their hidden basis the fact that the civil service and judiciary are *systematically biased in favour of employers*, and against employees. This is not merely an obstacle to socialist change - remember that Franklin D Roosevelt had to threaten to pack the supreme court before the New Deal could become reality.

A scheme like McDonnell's, then, is liable to have a coach and horses driven through it by lawyers and bureaucrats, because British law is a thoroughfare built to measure for such passengers. Factor in Britain's international role as first among tax havens, and we discover that opaque, owner-friendly corporate structures are our very stock-in-trade, which McDonnell does not seem overflowing with ideas to replace.

The stubborn refusal of Corbyn/McDonnell to get 'sidetracked' onto the question of the state - abandoning symbolic commitments to republicanism, British and Irish; grovelling before fabricated allegations of anti-Semitism; even the 'studied ambiguity' over Brexit is of this sort - is thus perhaps clever tactics, but stupid strategy. Let us imagine that it *was* a huge vote winner. What happens when the draughtsman's office makes a Swiss cheese of chancellor McDonnell's big idea? When the lawyers rip it apart, and the Sir Humphreys and Dame Henriettas of Whitehall refuse to defend it, and the law lords strike it down?

The idea floats around the far left that this sort of thing has an educative effect - for all we know, John McDonnell still tells himself that sort of story to reassure himself of his virtue - but the greater part of the evidence suggests that, in the absence of a *pre-existing* understanding of the class nature of the state, demoralisation will be the result ●

## Notes

1. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/08/john-mcdonnell-labour-proposal-workers-ownership-funds](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/08/john-mcdonnell-labour-proposal-workers-ownership-funds).
2. [www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice](http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice).

# Democracy, reselection and Omov

Carla Roberts of Labour Party Marxists looks at some of the rule changes before this year's Labour conference

First, a note of caution: this will *not* be the final list of constitutional amendments before delegates at this year's conference in Liverpool (September 23-26).<sup>1</sup> Some of them will be composited with similar amendments and there are indeed a few where that makes entire sense - as opposed to contemporary political motions, which are usually composited into bland, motherhood and apple pie statements.

We also know that some amendments coming from Constituency Labour Parties will be superseded by the recommendations and proposed rule changes coming out of the Party Democracy Review (PDR) run by Jeremy Corbyn's right-hand woman, Katy Clark. Unfortunately, it looks like the first delegates will get to see of them will be at conference itself - the national executive committee will take another look on September 18. Those recommendations will be discussed on the Sunday, the first day of conference, with the rest of the rule changes to be debated and voted upon on the Tuesday.

In accordance with one of the plethora of undemocratic clauses in the Labour rule book, proposed constitutional amendments from CLPs are parked for almost 14 months before they can finally be discussed by delegates. Among them is motion 10, which proposes to do away with this crassly anti-democratic delaying rule.

CLPs are only allowed to submit either one contemporary motion or one constitutional amendment per year, which means that any reform attempts from below take an incredibly long time to filter through. And, once conference has voted on an issue, it cannot be revisited for another three years - even if it only deals with the same question tangentially. The result is a ridiculously long, overcomplicated travesty of a constitution. Yes, the PDR will push through a number of changes (including, apparently, the abolition of the three-year rule). But clearly, the whole thing should be ripped up and replaced by a new, streamlined constitution that is fit for purpose.

We will look at the recommendations from the PDR as and when they are finally published, but, judging from the leaks,<sup>2</sup> it is fair to say that it will probably *not* contain many of the radical proposals that would be needed to transform the Labour Party into a real party of the working class. This would require Jeremy Corbyn and his allies making a conscious decision to put two fingers up to the right inside and outside the party.

No, the most radical proposals come from below, from CLPs. For example, in order for Labour to become the umbrella organisation for all trade unions, socialist groups and pro-working class partisans, all undemocratic bans and proscriptions must be abolished. Constitutional amendment number 6 from Mid Worcestershire, Rugby, Truro & Falmouth, Bexhill & Battle makes a useful start in that direction. It wants to remove the first part of the infamous rule 2.1.4.B ('membership conditions'), which bars from membership anybody who "joins and/or supports a political organisation other than an official Labour group or other unit of the party".

Although we fear it is unlikely



Jon Lansman is being forced to change

to win a majority, it is an important debate to have. Jon Lansman has already made it clear that Momentum would oppose such a change, as "this could benefit groups who are opposed to the party".<sup>3</sup> What, like Progress and Labour First? Of course not.

Lansman knows very well that this rule has been applied in an entirely one-sided way against leftwingers only - among them supporters of Socialist Appeal, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and Labour Party Marxists. Groups such as Progress and Labour First remain untouched and can continue to operate freely and in a highly organised fashion. And what about members of Stop the War Coalition or Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament? Surely they are also examples of a "political organisation"? This rule should go. Labour would be positively transformed by allowing members of left groups - who are often very dedicated - to operate freely in the party.

Instead, Lansman seems to have inspired rule change number 7 from Broxtowe, which adds a few words to the first sentence: "joins and/or supports a political organisation *that is in conflict with the aims and principles of the Labour Party*". This formulation has been used, for example, to expel supporters of Socialist Appeal because, rather than recognise "the importance of the enterprise of the market", the organisation wants to "consign the market economy to the dustbin of history".<sup>4</sup> The amendment carries that distinct danger and should therefore be opposed.

## Mandatory reselection

The Parliamentary Labour Party urgently has to be brought under democratic control. The majority of Labour MPs have been shamelessly plotting against Jeremy Corbyn and sabotaging him at every turn. They are far to the right of the Labour membership and, once elected, usually enjoy a 'job for life'.

It is unfortunate that Jeremy Corbyn - after all, he is the central target of the right - has refused to take up the challenge and include mandatory reselection in the Party Democracy Review. Nevertheless, there are eight rule changes, submitted by 13 CLPs, dealing

with the subject of how and when the party selects its parliamentary candidates. If we ignore the rule changes that tinker with some of the less important issues around this question and combine similar rule changes, we can see that there are two clear alternatives.

● Option 1: Rule changes 24 (Portsmouth North, Rochester and Strood) and 26 (Labour International) want to do away with today's trigger ballot - which makes it more or less impossible to replace a sitting MP - and instead introduce mandatory reselection, where all those interested in becoming a candidate (including the sitting MP) participate in a democratic selection process.

● Option 2: Rule changes 27 and 28, on the other hand, also do away with the words 'trigger ballot', but not the undemocratic concept. If a sitting MP receives more than 66% of "nominations" from party branches and affiliated organisations, the MP would automatically be reselected.

Such a system would still be hugely in favour of the sitting MP and could easily be rigged by affiliated unions and societies. Much better to have an open and democratic contest between all candidates, to be decided by Labour members - as envisaged by rule changes 24 and 26.

Option 2 smells heavily of Momentum's original plan. Instead of doing away with the undemocratic trigger ballot altogether, Jon Lansman merely drew up a lame proposal to raise the threshold from Tony Blair's 50% back to Neil Kinnock's 66% - ie, two thirds of local branches and affiliates would have to vote in favour of the sitting MP, otherwise a full selection process would begin. Lansman even had this proposal sanctioned by the membership in one of Momentum's tortuous and clearly biased online "consultations".<sup>5</sup>

But he seems to have undergone a mysterious change of heart and we can only speculate about the reasons behind it. He has certainly not explained them to Momentum members - or bothered to mention that there even *has* been a change. Lansman has still not told members which of the rule changes he wants them to vote for, but option 2 is clearly not it.

This week, he sent another email to the membership, informing them that Momentum now favours a system that gives

a fair chance to all candidates and does away with this negative, divisive stage of campaigning - so it's an open contest from the start, and there are no 'jobs for life'. That way, local members and the sitting MP can compete for the Labour Party's backing at the general election, and run positive campaigns about issues local voters really care about.

Momentum has even set up a petition on the issue.<sup>6</sup> Would it be petty if we thought this was a neat way of harvesting more data, while simultaneously jumping on an increasingly successful bandwagon?

Evidently, the increasingly vitriolic nature of the civil war in the Labour Party has given the campaign for mandatory reselection a new lease of life. With the support of Unite, the Fire Brigades Union, presumably the vast majority of CLP delegates and even the timid backing of Jeremy Corbyn himself,<sup>7</sup> it has a good chance of winning at conference (even though John McDonnell managed to disappoint once more by declaring his support for the existing system<sup>8</sup>).

## Omov not the answer

It is understandable that a good deal of proposed rule changes want to extend the use of 'one member, one vote' to elect NEC representatives (rule changes 1, 2, 3 and 4) and even the party general secretary (18 and 19). After all, this is the method that allowed Corbyn to become leader.

This trend is also reflected in the recommendations that are expected to be in the PDR. The *Huffington Post* published a leaked summary, which apparently includes recommendations for "more digital democracy", including "secure online voting systems for CLPs developed for policy and other matters".<sup>9</sup>

However, in our view there are some serious problems with Omov. As a general principle we should be against plebiscites in the party - for electoral contests or otherwise. There is a good reason why the

move to Omov for the election of the party leader began with the likes of Neil Kinnock and John Smith, and culminated in Ed Miliband's Collins review - it was a rightwing ploy to dilute the working class nature of our party.<sup>10</sup> It atomises comrades and makes serious political engagement very difficult. For example, how do you question a candidate when all you have is a short statement and s/he does not reply to emails? In terms of making policy, how can you effectively move an amendment when you do not have the possibility of talking to people and explaining some of the nuances?

Take the contemporary motion on Brexit pushed by People's Vote. *On paper*, many lefties and Corbyn supporters find this entirely acceptable - allowing the people a say on the final Brexit deal sounds democratic, doesn't it? Until you explain to them that this is clearly part of the coup against Corbyn, to embarrass him even further by undermining his pretty successful strategy of letting the Tories tear each other to pieces, while keeping all options open. Having to come out for a People's Vote is likely to cost him in terms of votes.

Comrades should also bear in mind the farce that was Lansman's Momentum coup,<sup>11</sup> cynically wrapped as it was in a veneer of 'democracy from below'. In fact, this pseudo-inclusive manoeuvre crushed the embryonic democratic structures of the organisation and substituted online voting by the entire, atomised and easily steered membership. Omov in Lansman's hands was the vehicle for a profoundly undemocratic plot against the interests of the membership - one that stymied Momentum's potential to be an effective, dynamic left trend in the party.

Online voting also marginalises the role of the unions in the party. Yes, the representatives of rightwing unions have played an entirely negative role on the NEC and when it comes to trigger ballots. But in general, the affiliation of unions is an enormous strength of the Labour Party. While they should not be allowed to stop the democratic selection of parliamentary candidates, unions have clearly played an important role in preserving the character of the Labour Party as a *workers'* party, even under Tony Blair. In fact, we should fight for a serious commitment to a vigorous national campaign to affiliate *all* unions ●

## Notes

1. The full list, together with voting recommendations, can be viewed at the Labour Party Marxists website: <http://labourpartymarxists.org.uk/rule-changes-2018>.
2. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jun/26/labour-proposals-all-but-guarantee-left-wing-corbbyn-successor](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jun/26/labour-proposals-all-but-guarantee-left-wing-corbbyn-successor).
3. <http://labourpartymarxists.org.uk/lansman-and-witch-hunting>.
4. <https://www.socialist.net/my-mp-plotted-to-expel-me-from-the-labour-party-and-i-have-the-evidence.htm>.
5. <http://labourpartymarxists.org.uk/lansman-and-witch-hunting>.
6. <https://actionsprout.io/7DD807>.
7. [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-labour-mps-deselection-momentum-nec-vote-conference-a8521141.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-labour-mps-deselection-momentum-nec-vote-conference-a8521141.html).
8. [www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/11/john-mcdonnell-labour-mps-should-not-fear-party-activists?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/11/john-mcdonnell-labour-mps-should-not-fear-party-activists?CMP=share_btn_fb).
9. [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labours-democracy-review-backs-online-voting-plan-to-give-jeremy-corbyn-supporters-new-power-over-policy-full-leak\\_uk\\_5b5f7a19e4b0de86f49a0174](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labours-democracy-review-backs-online-voting-plan-to-give-jeremy-corbyn-supporters-new-power-over-policy-full-leak_uk_5b5f7a19e4b0de86f49a0174).
10. 'Unions vote to be distanced' *Weekly Worker* March 6 2014.
11. <http://labourpartymarxists.org.uk/jon-lansmans-coup-in-momentum>.

**STRATEGY****People's Vote: bourgeois politics on the streets**

# Against referendums

Despite the TUC vote in Manchester the left should reject referendums as a matter of principle. **Jack Conrad** puts the Marxist case for extreme democracy

**P**eople's Vote is a many-headed, highly coordinated, well-financed campaign, designed to keep Britain in the European Union. Ultimately the whole operation is run in the interests of big capital. Launched in April 2018 by MPs Chuka Umunna (Labour), Anna Soubry (Tory), Layla Moran (Liberal Democrat) and Caroline Lucas (Green), People's Vote calls for a referendum on Theresa May's final Brexit terms.

On June 23 2018 - the second anniversary of David Cameron's unexpected referendum defeat - People's Vote took 100,000 people down the 800 metres - an exceedingly short march - from London's Trafalgar Square to Parliament Square. Speakers included Tony Robinson, Gina Miller, Vince Cable, David Lammy, Caroline Lucas and Anna Soubry.

Every People's Vote turn, every People's Vote ploy, every People's Vote initiative is meticulously prepared, planned and plotted. Just a few days before the opening of the TUC's Manchester congress, YouGov issued its "bombshell" poll finding.<sup>1</sup> No surprise, members of Unite, Unison and the GMB favour a second referendum by a margin of 2:1. Ask a few thousand people a

loaded question and you generally get the result you want. Though the TUC resolution was a classic fudge (if, if, if ...), it will be notched up by People's Vote as yet another brilliant success. With big business safely on board and the Lib Dems loyally serving as the - largely unrewarded - organisational core, the next strategic goal is breaking Jeremy Corbyn's policy of 'studied ambiguity' at Labour's conference in Liverpool.

People's Vote is, of course, the flagship of an organisational armada: Labour for a People's Vote, Best for Britain, Best for Europe, European Movement UK, In Facts, Open Britain, Our Future Our Choice, Scientists for EU and Wales for Europe. All work closely together under the overall direction of the Grassroots Coordinating Group - Chuka Umunna is registered as the official leader.

The campaign boasts plush offices in Millbank Tower and there are said to be 150 local groups and 500,000 supporters. George Soros's Open Society Foundation has donated more than £800,000 to such anti-Brexit causes (including £400,000 to Best for Britain, £182,000 to European Movement UK and £35,000 to Scientists for EU).<sup>2</sup> Topping that,

Julian Dunkerton, co-founder of the fashion label Superdry, handed People's Vote a cool £1 million in August 2018: he wants a polling blitz.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly no-one on the principled left should have anything to do with People's Vote. Marching alongside the Lib Dems, the Labour hard right, Tory rebels and Green naives on June 23 2018 was to march in the interests of big capital. Ditto, promoting subsidiary organisations - eg, Labour for a People's Vote - is to constitute oneself a junior partner. But, pathetically, that is exactly what Dave Prentis of Unison, Dave Roache of the GMB and Manuel Cortes of TSSA have done.

## Hard Brexit

It is still highly unlikely that there will be a second referendum. Theresa May will not go for it ... though she would be exceedingly glad if Jeremy Corbyn fell into that particular elephant trap.

Yet imagine, for one moment, that People's Vote succeeds. What would the result be? Labour, presumably, is hammered in any subsequent general election: seven in every 10 of Labour's constituencies voted 'leave' in June 2016. Meanwhile, though

opinion polls show clear majorities wanting a "say" on any final Brexit deal, the actual result, if there was a second referendum, is far from certain. The last two Survation polls (September 1 and September 7) could hardly be narrower: 47% 'remain' and 47% 'leave'; and then 47% 'remain' and 46% 'leave'.<sup>4</sup>

Both Tony Blair and Justine Greening have, therefore, proposed a three-option referendum (obviously in order to guarantee their wanted result). Option one: agree with the government's final Brexit terms, as negotiated with Michel Barnier and the EU 27; option two: leave the EU without an agreement; option three: remain in the EU. In other words, soft Brexit, hard Brexit and no Brexit.

Through perpetuating such a blatantly dishonest trick, argues David Jeffrey, a lecturer in politics at Liverpool university, it is theoretically possible for just 34% of voters to decide the "winning option".<sup>5</sup> Such a referendum would see two bitterly opposed 'leave' camps and a comparatively aloof 'remain' campaign. The calculation being that on the Brexit side issues of principle will clash and ending up in a hopeless muddle.

If a preferential vote is added into

the formula, then the least popular option would be eliminated and there would be a count-off between the last two questions ... and, so 'remain' could emerge the winner with over 50% of the vote.

Even barring such transparent forms of cheating, say 'remain' narrowly won in a straightforward two-option referendum, what do we expect the 49% (or whatever) - ie, those who vote leave - to do?

There are those on the left - many of them good people - who believe that Brexit represents an existential threat. Brexit, they say, points squarely in the direction of a low-tax, low-regulation, low-rights economy. The working class can only but suffer. Already Brexit has made Britain poorer, reduced investment and squeezed the tax revenues vital for public services. Migrants and minorities get the blame. So, runs the argument, it is vital to fall in behind Chuka Umunna, Gina Miller and Vince Cable, in order to defeat Brexit.

But will the forces of chauvinism and xenophobia easily surrender? *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, the Tory right, Ukip, Ulster Unionists, Britain First, the Football Lads Alliance will surely bang the "grand betrayal" drum as loudly as

they can.<sup>6</sup> The leave campaign won the June 2016 referendum fair and square. The votes of 17.4 million people have been betrayed, ignored, treated with contempt. Britain remains shackled to Europe because of a dastardly conspiracy hatched jointly by Brussels bureaucrats, George Soros, Whitehall mandarins, the self-serving political elite, the City, big business, trade union bosses ... and their leftwing allies.

Sinclair Lewis chose the ironic title *It can't happen here* for his 1935 bestselling novel. The plotline has a charismatic and crazily ambitious American politician, Berzelius 'Buzz' Windrip, promoting traditional Christian values, denouncing Jews, fuelling hatred for Mexicans and promising impoverished electors instant wealth. In short, America will be made great again. Buzz easily defeats Franklin Delano Roosevelt for president and goes on to establish a horribly plutocratic regime. Opposition is crushed with the help of the Minutemen, a ruthless paramilitary force. Many thousands are interned and many more flee north to Canada.

Could it happen here? Following the script carefully crafted by the master of the dark political arts, the election 'guru', Sir Lynton Crosby, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson - otherwise known as Boris - has skilfully blown the anti-Muslim dog whistle: "letter box" and "bank robbers" in the context of the burka; "suicide vest" in the context of Brexit negotiations.

This year or next, Johnson is expected to launch his leadership bid against Theresa May. His narrative? Muslims as other, Brexit betrayal and the magic of free trade. If he can secure enough Tory MPs to get into the final two-horse run-off - a big ask - Johnson would be odds-on to win by a mile. He is hugely popular amongst the "fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists" who make up the Tory rank and file ... and, given a contest, it is they who make the final decision. Johnson will get their votes. Not Sajid Javid. Not Andrea Leadsom.

Johnson would then be driven to Buckingham Palace, where he would seek permission from the queen to form a government. The monarch, of course, retains the constitutional right to choose the prime minister.

Meanwhile, a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn - a Labour Party that has been manoeuvred, albeit against his better judgement, into a commitment to hold a second referendum - would surely find itself badly positioned and vulnerable. Prime minister Johnson would, doubtless, call a snap general election in the name of securing a hard Brexit and establishing a Global Britain.

Not that our objection to a second EU referendum is based on getting Jeremy Corbyn into number 10 or appeasing Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Ukip, etc. True, we want to win over, or at least neutralise, the popular support base the Brexiters enjoy at this present moment in time. We do not dismiss the 51% who voted 'leave' in June 2016 as a single reactionary bloc. Nor, for that matter, do we consider the 49% who voted 'remain' enlightened, progressive and inherently internationalist.

## Undemocratic

Referendums, by their very nature, are undemocratic. They bypass representative institutions and serve, in general, to fool enough of the people, enough of the time. And yet referendums have the great virtue of appearing to be the epitome of democracy. That explains why Harold Wilson, Tony Blair and David Cameron have used them. Complex issues are simplified, drained of nuance, reduced to a crude choice

that cuts across class loyalties. Hence, today, one half of the working class is found in the 'leave' camp. The other half is in the 'remain' camp.

Our objections to referendums are principled and long-standing. We opposed the operation in relation to the 'Vote for the crook, not for the fascist' presidential election in France in 2002. Before that we urged an active boycott of Tony Blair's 1997 referendum in Scotland. Then the 1998 Good Friday referendum in Ireland and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. All offered a bogus choice. In June 2016 we called for an active boycott. Admittedly our results were very modest - 25,000 spoilt ballot papers. Nonetheless, David Cameron's objective was, of course, not to give power to the people. On the contrary, he calculated on outflanking Ukip, wrong-footing Labour, satisfying his Europhobes ... and hanging on as prime minister. No reason, therefore, to give him any support whatsoever.

Antonio Gramsci, writing in June 1921, can usefully be cited here:

The communists are ... on principle opposed to the referendum, since they place the most advanced and active workers, who make the greatest sacrifices, on the same plane as the most lazy, ignorant and idle workers. If one wants direct, individual consultations, then this must take place in assemblies, after an organised debate, and a vote must presuppose knowledge of what is at stake and a sense of responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

However, it ought to be emphasised, this general principle does not translate into automatically refusing to call for a referendum vote under all circumstances, nor does it translate into a general principle of always responding to a referendum organised by our enemies with a corresponding call for an active boycott. To vote this way or that way, to set about an active boycott campaign, etc, is always a tactical decision.

Eg, we urged a 'yes' vote in Ireland's May 2015 referendum on gay marriage, the same with Ireland's May 2018 referendum on abortion. And, in the UK, while being critical of the Liberal Democrat proposal for reforming the parliamentary voting system, the CPGB called for a 'yes' vote in the May 5 2011 referendum. Despite the glaring inadequacies, our judgment was that, on balance, getting rid of the 'wasted vote' syndrome would be a "small gain" and provide better conditions for the left to develop than the first-past-the-post system.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, we are programmatically committed to a thorough-going proportional representation system, party lists and the right of the party to recall MPs, MEPs, councillors, etc.

The Lib Dems wanted an alternative vote system. Voters would be asked not to opt for a single candidate, but tick candidates off in an order of preference - 1, 2, 3, etc. If standing under such a system we would advise voting: (1) for the CPGB candidate, (2) for the Labour candidate ... but no vote for bourgeois or out-and-out reactionary parties. True, calling for a 'yes' vote lined us up with the Lib Dems, the Greens, Ukip, Sinn Féin and Plaid Cymru. Labour adopted no official position, while Respect, the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales and the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain supported the Tory 'no' campaign.

However, our principled opposition to referendums stands. They are not a higher form of democracy than the election of well-tested working class representatives, communist politics and extensive public debate. Referendums, on the contrary, tend to divide the working class, weaken its

party spirit and produce the strangest of bedfellows: eg, in 2011, the CPGB with Ukip; the SWP with the Tories.

In terms of our tradition, things unmistakably date back to Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. The Marx-Engels team knew all about the undemocratic nature of referendums, given the bitter experience of Louis Bonaparte and his 'self-coup d'état' in 1851, and then his self-elevation to emperor in 1852 (each autocratic power-grab being legitimised by a referendum). Bonaparte went on to impose press censorship, restrict public gatherings, savagely repress political opponents (mainly red republicans) and force thousands to flee into exile - amongst them the celebrated writer, Victor Hugo. Initially a supporter, Hugo furiously denounced Bonaparte's referendums as a means to "smother men's minds".<sup>9</sup> In the same defiant spirit, George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin), damned them as "an infamous snare".<sup>10</sup>

Marx and Engels, along with their co-thinkers, Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, presented their alternative to the post-1871 third republic - in essence a reformed version of Bonapartism - in the minimum section of the *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*. Here it is explained that the creation of a workers' party "must be pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal, including universal suffrage, which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation". The party will fight for the confiscation of church wealth; remove restrictions on the press, meetings, organisations, etc; and abolish the standing army and replace it with the "general arming of the people".<sup>11</sup>

The Marx-Engels position opposing referendums became the common sense of the Second International, including both its far left and its far right. Arturo Labriola, the Italian syndicalist, wrote his *Contro il referendum* in 1897. He castigated referendums as a cruel trick. In 1911 Ramsay MacDonald, Labour leader and future prime minister, came out in similar terms: referendums are "a clumsy and ineffective weapon, which the reaction can always use more effectively than democracy, because it, being the power to say 'no', is far more useful to the few than the many".<sup>12</sup>

Note that the - still widely venerated - constitutional theorist, AV Dicey, promoted an-all UK referendum in the 1890s as a means to scupper Irish home rule; Ulster Unionists ran with his referendum proposal and demanded that it be integrated into the constitution; in 1910 Stanley Baldwin included the promise of a referendum over tariff reform in the Tory manifesto, and challenged the Liberals do the same with Irish home rule; in 1911 Lord Balfour tabled his 'people bill' in the House of Lords, allowing 200 MPs to petition the crown for a referendum and thereby potentially block unwelcome government legislation; in 1913 Lord Curzon floated a referendum as a democratic way to prevent the extension of the franchise to women; and, as the reform bill giving women over 30 the vote was passing through parliament in 1918, 53 peers wrote to *The Times* urging a referendum.<sup>13</sup>

However, there were those useful idiots on the left who were attracted by the idea of referendums and the right of the people to initiate referendums. Karl Kautsky, the celebrated pope of Marxism, chose Moritz Rittinghausen, a German social democrat, as his main polemical target over the issue.<sup>14</sup>

Kautsky's *Parliamentarism, direct legislation by the people and social democracy* (1893) was designed to shoot down referenda nostrums and uphold the strategic perspective he

outlined in his hugely influential commentary on the Erfurt programme, known in English as *The class struggle*. Even if referendums could replace existing representative institutions, as extreme 'against elections' advocates still want, this would represent not a step forward for democracy, but a *step backward*.

Kautsky fields three main arguments.

Firstly, Kautsky stresses that there are very few situations where there is a simple binary choice in politics. Eg, even assuming that there is a straightforward 'right thing to do', it is rarely obvious what the right thing to do is. Very frequently, there is not a choice to be made between option 1 or 2, but options 1 to 7 and within these options, 1 (a) (i), 1 (a) (ii), 1 (b) ... and so on and so forth. To reach a decision, then, it is necessary to reduce the range of options. That is, of course, why Kautsky advocates extending representative democracy and the process of debate, motions, detailed votes and binding legislation.

Secondly - and this is no less important - Kautsky wanted to strengthen the system of party politics. In the transition period between capitalism and communism, it is, he said, vital for the broad mass of the population to think about, to organise around and to vote for competing party outlooks. That has the advantage of bringing to the fore class divisions. Referendums, on the other hand, have the disadvantage of blurring, overriding, deflecting, the fundamental conflict in society between class and class, and the respective conflict between party and party: precisely the *opposite* of what Marxists want to see.

Thirdly, Kautsky stresses the point that Marxists strive - particularly through their emphasis on a working class party - to bring about a situation in which the state is as weak and the people are as strong and organised as possible. He draws a vital distinction between, on the one hand, 'the people' as an unorganised mass who do not think about national or global issues in a coherent fashion, and 'the people' organised into, or by, a workers' party. One is to be perpetual victim of lies, fraud and humbug. The other readies itself as the future ruling class.

## Memory loss

The reason why the left has largely forgotten the history of opposing referendums in the name of *extending representative democracy* results from a number of factors. Above all, though, it is the decline in our political culture. A working knowledge of Marxist theory and socialist history can no longer be taken for granted. There is certainly no common understanding of the necessity of a minimum programme and emphasising the battle to win democracy.

Once there were mass parties; now we have confessional sects. They produce little or nothing worthwhile in terms of ideas. Sharp arguments, open polemics and drawing clear lines of factional demarcation are viewed as a danger to be avoided at all cost. Instead there is a fixation on economic strikes and the next demonstration. Identity politics and an obsession with gender and race 'representation' fills the vacuum. Then there is the claim that a Labour government can deliver full employment, an equal society and an economy that works for all. All that without ending the system of capitalist wage-slavery. And, of course, some on the left call it 'socialism'. A testament to complete disorientation.

The less added claim justification with reference to the early Communist International, which in 1919-22 declared in one thesis and one resolution after another that revolution in the west was an immediate prospect. Communists had to prepare the working class for

a frontal assault on the citadels of bourgeois power. The constitutional demands of the minimum programme therefore seemed to be of secondary importance. Even a barrier. Such an assessment doubtless appeared well-founded amidst the storms and turmoil that accompanied the immediate aftermath of World War I. However, such perspectives had become a nonsense even by 1923. The entirely artificial attempt to make revolution in Germany ended in a predictable fiasco.

And yet today we find the more excitable sects - inside and outside the Labour Party - telling their members and supporters that we in Britain live on the cusp of our version of the October revolution. A violently distorted view of reality, which ultimately stems from the so-called 'transitional method' developed by post-1945 Trotskyists.

While many of the 'transitional demands' hammered out by Comintern's 4th Congress in 1922 might well have their appropriate place in the modern communist programme - eg, the call for a workers' government and workers' control over production - the post-1945 'transitional method' turns out to be merely an attempt to trick the working class into taking power by defending existing constitutional arrangements and taking up everyday economic demands.

In other words, the 'transitional method' is a mere variation of the line advocated by the Russian economists of the early 1900s. Journals such as *Credo* and *Rabochaya Mysl* argued that Russian workers were far from ready for the sophisticated social democratic politics that had become so popular in Germany. No, before that, social democrats would have to help organise Russian workers around their immediate economic interests: eg, building trade unions and taking strike action against the employer. *Iskra's* insistence on placing the demand for the overthrow of tsarism and a democratic republic at the centre of its message would find no mass hearing and criminally it ignored "the enormous educational significance" of economic struggles. Getting rid of tsarism and achieving a democratic republic were long-term goals and were anyway mere bourgeois tasks.

Modern leftwingers too often denounce constitutional demands and the patient work of transforming the Labour Party into a united front of a special kind as not being revolutionary enough. Meanwhile, they give a revolutionary gloss to routine pay disputes, pacifist protest marches, liberal anti-racism campaigns and the nationalist project of breaking up Britain. Hence the *immediate* demand for a federal republic is counterposed to the *maximum* demand for a socialist republic. The result, in programmatic terms, is a combination of tailism and a refusal to even countenance an *independent* working class challenge to the existing constitutional order. ●

## Notes

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12. See L Morel and M Qvortrup (eds) *The Routledge handbook to referendums and direct democracy* Abingdon 2018.
13. See V Bogdanor *The people and the party system: the referendum and electoral reform in British politics* Cambridge 1981, pp9-94.
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## TORIES

# New leader in waiting?

Far from being a loose cannon, Boris Johnson's every move is well thought out, writes **Eddie Ford**



Left must take him seriously

**M**aking his ambitions clear, Boris Johnson hit the headlines yet again over the weekend with a full-scale assault on Theresa May's Brexit strategy. Writing for the *Mail on Sunday*, the former foreign secretary declared that the prime minister had "wrapped a suicide vest" around the British constitution and "handed the detonator" to Michel Barnier, the European Union's chief Brexit negotiator.

At every stage of the talks, continued Johnson, "Brussels gets what Brussels wants" - for instance, the British government accepted the EU's timetable and agreed to hand over £39 billion "for nothing in return". The EU is "bullying" the UK, yet so far the response from the Theresa May team has been "utterly feeble". Rather than getting a "generous free trade deal", complained Johnson, "Britain is saying, 'Yes, sir, no, sir, three bags full, sir'" to Brussels. This is a "humiliation", Johnson wrote, that makes Britain "look like a seven-stone weakling being comically bent out of shape by a 500lb gorilla".

For him, the main explanation for the government's behaviour is the "insanity" of the backstop agreement last December, by which Northern Ireland remains in "full regulatory alignment" with the EU in case no agreement is reached by the deadline - thus in theory avoiding the need for a hard border in the statelet. This is "completely unacceptable", fulminated Johnson, as it would mean a border down the Irish Sea and gives Barnier a "jemmy with which Brussels can choose at any time to crack apart the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland". Theresa May herself had said this was unacceptable, but she is allowing Brussels to push her around. And now, Johnson stated, the British government is trying to come up with a solution that is "even more pathetic" - proposing its "own version" of the backstop, which sees "the whole of the UK" remaining inside the customs union and single market. In that way, the "great British Brexit" has been reduced to "two appalling options": either divide the union or accept EU law forever.

Johnson ends his article with a rallying cry to "scrap the backstop", "fix the borders for frictionless trade" and "get back to the open and dynamic approach" outlined in May's original Lancaster House speech - meaning a "big, Canada-style free trade deal".

Of course, this latest salvo against the prime minister follows on from his September 3 *Daily Telegraph* column in which he said that the Chequers deal "means disaster" for Britain and "victory" for the EU. Merrily mixing his metaphors as usual, Johnson wrote that "the whole thing is about as preordained as a bout between Giant Haystacks and Big Daddy" - the UK is going "into battle with the white flag fluttering over our leading tank". Johnson claimed that the UK has agreed to hand over billions of taxpayers' money "for two-thirds of diddly squat". As for the Northern Ireland border, the British government has been "rumbled" - it is using this as an excuse to "stop a proper Brexit". Instead, Johnson believes that a hard border would not be needed after Brexit, as there would be a common travel area.

Further fuelling speculation about his ambitions, Johnson's latest *Telegraph* column argues that the UK should follow Donald Trump's example and slash taxes to create a "happy and dynamic economy" - he also attacked the HS2 high-speed rail project on the grounds that its total cost could rise to £100 billion or more (which might well be the case, it has to be said). Supporters of Boris Johnson say he will continue to "throw rocks" at Theresa May's Chequers plan in the weeks running up to the Tory conference, but apparently has no plans for an *immediate* leadership bid.

### Positioning

Telling you all you need to know, Johnson is now being advised by the master of darkness himself, Sir Lynton Crosby - the so-called election guru who helped the Tories win the 2015 general election and ran two successful London mayoral campaigns for Johnson. We discover in *The Sunday Times* that Crosby has sent David Canzini - a senior member

of his "polling and market research firm", CTF Partners - to work with the European Research Group headed by the Brexit ultra and all-round reactionary weirdo, Jacob Rees-Mogg. CTF Partners gained a certain notoriety in 2010 by advising private healthcare providers on how to exploit perceived "failings" in the national health service, and Crosby issued *The Guardian* with a legal challenge over its reporting.

Anyway, Canzini is partnering Steve Baker, ex-Brexit minister and a key organiser in the Vote Leave campaign during the referendum. Baker caused a stir on September 10 by telling the BBC that the Tory Party faces a "catastrophic split" if May relied on Labour votes to push her Chequers proposals through parliament. Baker claims that "at least" 80 Conservative MPs would be willing to vote against the plan, including some of his colleagues, who backed remaining in the referendum, but would prefer the UK to leave without a deal rather than sign up to the current proposal to maintain a "common rulebook" with the EU.

In other words, think back to Boris Johnson's now almost legendary burqa article in *The Sunday Telegraph* about letterboxes and bank robbers (August 5). These were not just witticisms conjured up by Johnson alone in his book-lined study, but rather a very clever move prepared in advance after consulting Crosby and other advisors and confidantes. It positioned him as leader of the Tory Party right, or the anti-Chequers party - but at the same time as a liberal with a sense of humour (What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?). On the other hand, all the bigots who really want to ban the burqa now regard Boris Johnson as their champion - making the original article a smart manoeuvre to secure a wide base of support both within the Tory Party and wider society.

Then take the news of his divorce from Marina Wheeler, his wife for 25 years - they issued a joint statement after a story appeared in *The Sun* detailing allegations of infidelity on the part of Johnson. Issued via a family friend, the statement said the pair had

decided several months ago that "it was in our best interests to separate" - but "as friends we will continue to support our four children in the years ahead". As was widely noted in the media, this statement had little to do with the ending of their marriage, but everything to do with Johnson's preparations for a leadership bid.

Of course, predictably, the other side of the Tory Party - the Downing Street wing - is now attempting a rather unsavoury smear campaign against Johnson, circulating in Westminster a dodgy dossier about Johnson's personal life, which was first created in 2016 by a member of May's leadership campaign team. The Johnson camp believes, not unreasonably, that No10 and Tory Party HQ are planning to "build on it" over the next period. An angry Andrew Bridgen, the Eurosceptic Tory MP for North West Leicestershire, protested that they "have released their attack poodles" - the dossier is "Project Smear Boris". Since most of the stuff "has been out there for a very long time", you "have to ask yourself: why now, and in whose interests would it be?" Naturally enough, No10 has strenuously denied having anything to do with the dossier now being recirculated in parliament. An unnamed senior aide told *The Sunday Times*: "It is genuinely offensive and categorically untrue that we have done anything to *update* this document" (my emphasis). From which you can only conclude that the May wing may indeed have had something to do with the original version.

But such tactics do not have the shock value they might have had 50 to 60 years ago. Boris Johnson is not entirely faithful to his wife and is going out with a younger woman - so what? Look at Donald Trump, who is backed enthusiastically by Christian *evangelicals*: they do not seem remotely concerned about his pussy-grabbing and so on. The straightforward reality, as the former foreign secretary well knows, is that people are going to back Boris Johnson because he has a rightwing agenda and wants to get Britain out of the EU - and they could not care less about who

he might be having sex with.

### Calculation

Going back to our original point, the fact that Johnson is being advised by Lynton Crosby means that every move is well thought out - Johnson is not just a loose cannon firing out in all directions, as is sometimes suggested. However, he has a big obstacle to overcome. According to Conservative Party rules, a leadership contest can only be triggered either if the leader resigns or if 15% of Tory MPs (currently 48) write to the chair of the backbench 1922 Committee, demanding a vote of no confidence. Following a successful vote, the MPs whittle down the contestants to a shortlist of two, with the membership then getting to decide who becomes the new leader.

But Theresa May only needs a simple majority to see off a leadership challenge and Downing Street is confident rebel Tories do not have the numbers to topple her. If she defeats a no-confidence vote, the prime minister cannot be challenged again for another 12 months - *timing* is everything. There is no doubt that Johnson is very popular amongst the membership, but, when it comes to MPs ...?

The calculation must be to build up a head of steam, so that local constituencies start lobbying their MPs demanding that Boris Johnson must be on the ballot paper. After all, that strategy worked for Jeremy Corbyn - the left knew that the arithmetic amongst the PLP just did not add up, so pile on the pressure in the CLPs. Hence "the morons" - those MPs who thought it was a good idea to allow a leftwing candidate to be included on the ballot. Of course, they never thought in their worst nightmare that Jeremy Corbyn would actually win - thankfully, they were extremely naive. The same sort of approach goes for Boris Johnson, who obviously needs the backing of the rightwing press, but also the local constituencies and membership - *activated* and demanding that he gets the chance to run ●

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TURKEY

# Fire burn and cauldron bubble

Esen Uslu looks at the rival state interests involved in the struggle to control Idlib

The forces of Bashar al-Assad and his allies, Iran and Russia, are poised to strike deep into Syria's Idlib province - the principal remaining area controlled by the jihadi Islamists, supported by their allies in the Gulf region through Turkey.

The last-ditch efforts to stop or delay the attack seem to have been thwarted. However, the balance of power between the major players, which have been attempting to redistribute between themselves their zone of influence in the region, may still delay, blunt or limit the attack.

The Astana peace process, which brought Russia, Iran and Turkey together as strange bedfellows, has apparently run its course, and after the last Tehran summit, where the deliberations were broadcast live to a startled world without consulting the participants, seems to have no further practical role.

Turkey has been shedding crocodile tears on behalf of the civilians of Idlib province, but its call for the suspension of all armed actions has fallen on deaf ears - Russia and Iran are both spoiling for a fight with the jihadists. And for Russia's special envoy, Alexander Lavrentiev, "It is up to Turkey to separate Islamist militants from the moderate opposition."

So, having done that, it would be Turkey's task to deal accordingly with the two factions. If the terrorist jihadists were eliminated, the armed opposition would be converted into a "moderate" Sunni opposition working within the confines of Assad's new set-up.

A meeting of the UN security council, which was summoned after the failure of the Tehran summit, also failed to come up with anything practical - apart from reiterating

the US and European position of promising to respond forcefully if any chemical weapons are employed.

## The cauldron

On September 4 the Russian airforce resumed its air strikes in Idlib. The deployment of troops along the demarcation line indicated that it was poised for a ground offensive. And after the Tehran summit the strike rate increased.

Russian ground attacks seem to have been proceeding along the M4 road connecting Latakia, the principal port on the Mediterranean coast, to Aleppo on an axis from south-east to north-west, and along the M5, travelling north from Hama to Aleppo. The M4 joins the M5 at Saraqib just south-east of Idlib city.

There are a myriad of side roads and dirt tracks criss-crossing the area, but those two routes are key to controlling the countryside to the south and east of Idlib. Therefore the preliminary targets of the coming attack seem to be the towns of Jisr al-Shugur on the M4 and Khan Shaykhun on the M5. The first wave of air strikes will probably be concentrated on those areas.

There are also two 'Turkish observation posts' on those routes. One of them is near Jisr al-Shugur and the other is at Morek on the M5, just after the demarcation line. They are among twelve established following the Astana process. While Syrian forces and their allies were mopping up pockets of resistance to the south, and Turkish forces were invading Afrin, the Idlib area was left in peace for a while - the observation posts on all three sides were established to maintain the truce. There are about 1,200 Turkish troops stationed at the 12 posts.

While the European press describes Idlib as the "last stronghold" of the jihadi Islamists, to the north the regions of Afrin, al-Bab, Jarablus and Azaz are controlled by the Turkish armed forces. In those regions there are about 35,000 opposition troops - restructured by Turkey as the 'Syrian National Army'. At present they are

protected by Turkish air cover. But these are the so-called 'moderate Islamists' - much more acceptable than the die-hard jihadists.

The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS - Levant Liberation Committee), which has overall control in Idlib, was dominated by al-Nusra, an offshoot of Al Qa'eda. It has a force of about 20,000 foot soldiers. The Astana process put pressure on Turkey to persuade the HTS to dissolve itself into the National Liberation Front, and allow its soldiers to be enlisted into the Syrian National Army under Turkish control. The initial moves failed to bring about the desired solution, so Turkey formally declared the HTS a terrorist organisation.

By doing so it was trying to divide the HTS and bring at least some sections of it under Turkish control. However, the main bulk was unimpressed by Turkish machinations and declared their willingness to fight to the bitter end.

A video circulating on social media shows a jihadi standing near the notorious border wall between Turkey and Syria, next to the entrance to a tunnel running under it. He shouts: "If Turkey sells Idlib out, we will be in Reyhanli [a border town in Turkey, which was the scene of a car bomb that caused severe loss of life a couple of years ago] in 20 minutes, and in Ankara in a couple of days!" The message was heard loud and clear by Turkey's native Islamists, including those in government.

While Turkey has played on the European fear of a new wave of immigration, the threat of an uncontrolled flow of Islamist jihadists into Turkey itself threatens its own stability,

as it could disrupt relations between the military and security bureaucracy and the AKP government - the principal players forced to find a *modus operandi* to keep the rebellious Kurds down.

At present Turkish efforts under the Astana process seem to involve negotiating a limit on the military actions of the Assad regime by persuading the jihadists to cede control of the countryside south of Idlib town, while continuing to operate in Idlib and the area to its north under their control. Even though it seems far-fetched at present, that proposal may provide an interim solution that could allow some breathing space for both sides before a possible showdown.

Despite all its posturing, the regime and its allies are not quite in the position of strength they claim. They too may be looking for an alternative to an onslaught on Idlib that may provoke pro-US forces in the region to act. Would Russia risk a major escalation of its conflict with the US? Such an escalation could be very costly - just about every European power would fall in behind the US, while Israel is lurking in the corner, blatantly provoking such an outcome.

## Boiling point

The US has indicated its intention to remain in the region for the foreseeable future. While Idlib is preparing itself for an assault, the US and its ally, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have started a joint operation aimed at defeating pro-Islamic State forces in their pocket on the eastern bank of the Euphrates at Hajin town near the Iraqi border. Previously there were only special forces units in the region, but now the US Marines are deployed there for the first time.

They recently carried out a military exercise from their al-Tanf base near where the borders of Syria, Iraq and Jordan join. This followed an incursion of Russian forces under the pretext of a hot pursuit of terrorists.

The US has carried out joint patrols with Turkish troops in the Mumbij area on the western banks of the Euphrates, while ensuring that the Turks are kept out of Mumbij town. The US is poised to capitalise on any collapse of the Astana process, and is playing cat and mouse with Turkey. The position of the Kurds within the new Syrian set-up after the armed conflict ends is one of its bargaining chips.

If the Kurds find a resolution to their grievances within the new Syria, the evacuation of the Turkish-occupied zones would be the next step. Turkey would be more and more isolated and would be left without an alternative, since Russia and Iran would be calling the shots in the new Syria, while Kurdish-controlled zones would provide the US with a pretext for staying long term in the region.

So the dream of Turkey's Justice and Development Party leaders at the beginning of the Syrian conflict of performing Friday prayers in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus would be shattered, and all the territorial gains would be lost. The rapprochement with the Gulf states would end in tears, and all relations built up with the jihadists would turn into dust. So Turkey is desperate to keep the conflict alive without turning it into a full-scale shooting war.

In the cauldron of Idlib there are around three million civilians, but they are the least of anyone's worries. Things are boiling up under the benign gaze of the US, thanks to the actions of the Russians, Iranians, the merciless Syrian army and die-hard jihadists from all over the Islamist world. These range from a strong contingent of Turkic Uyghurs, forces of the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Uzbeki Katibat Imam al Bukhari, as well as those of various Arab groups. The cauldron of Idlib is nearing boiling point and Shakespeare reminded us in *Macbeth* what ingredients are needed to cause it to boil over: not just the "liver of blaspheming Jew", but the "nose of Turk and Tartar's lips" ...

Double, double, toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble ●



Hassan Rowhani, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin: summit broadcast live

**POLEMIC**

# Grappling with the party question

Mike Macnair looks at two very different documents from two very different organisations

Two recent articles have some mildly interesting things to say about the idea and tasks of a party of the far left. The two are: 'Why revolutionaries organise', proposed for the Alliance for Workers' Liberty's coming conference and published in *Solidarity* (August 29); and 'Parliamentary action and social struggles - the experience of the Portuguese Left Bloc' by Francisco Louçã, written in March this year, but translated and published on the *International Viewpoint* website (the English-language publication of the Mandeliste Fourth International) on September 7.

The AWL author repeats the sterile orthodoxies of the British far left - but identifies some specific difficulties of left politics in the early 21st century. These difficulties do not seem to be unique to a 'left' group (the AWL) which has committed itself to campaigning for the Atlanticist and pro-EU views of the Labour right.

Louçã, writing about a much larger organisation (which has thousands of members and holds 19 seats in the Portuguese parliament) has more substantial things to say. However, his article addresses the difficulties of an organisation which was elected to give critical support to a Socialist Party government, even though in substance it is implementing the European Union's austerity diktat.<sup>1</sup> It also displays typical Mandeliste diplomatic code-language, from which it is not easy to decipher what is really being argued - or what the other side of the argument might be.

## AWL

The AWL document begins with the correct assertion that "The working class has the potential to become a great power in society, but can make that potential a reality, even on the most limited scale, only by organisation." The explanation offered is not - as it should be - that workers are forced to organise collectively because capitalism separates them from their means of production. Instead it is that workers are affected by "relative poverty, cultural and educational restrictions, insecurity and exhausting work burdens of parcelled tasks". All of these characteristics also affect peasants and master craftspeople (and other small businesses), whose dynamics of social struggle are very different from wage workers.

This defective explanation of workers' need to organise is then used to explain "a bias towards the rank and file being relatively inactive and unconfident in [workers'] organisations. Control over the leading officials and parliamentarians becomes weak, even if the organisations have good democratic forms on paper ..." The officials and parliamentarians "organically gravitate towards politics of bargaining within the system".

The solution to this problem is then proposed to be:

the creation of an organisation of the most committed and best self-educated labour-movement activists, which, drawing nourishment from all the social rebellions of the working class and its allies, small and large, builds itself into a revolutionary party capable of transforming the labour movement and thwarting those organic trends of weakening.

But how are we to know that these individuals are, indeed, "the most



Reading books, but no understanding of party or programme (artist: Manuel Archain)

committed and best self-educated labour-movement activists"?

The organisation must be clear about its aim and active in promoting it, rather than hoping for it to be achieved by roundabout ways. That includes defining and polemicising about the gulf between working class socialism and all the other ideologies which have come to adopt the word "socialism".

This still leaves very unclear what the 'revolutionary party' is for. The document goes on to argue, correctly, that the AWL is not such a party (put another way, would not be such a party even if it had not committed itself to scab politics), but a "political-educational campaign for a revolutionary working class party". Still, what for?

While we have a fundamentally educational role, the AWL is not a discussion circle. We also attempt to act as a lever to catalyse, and shape, workers' struggle: as revolutionary activists in our workplaces and unions, and within the broad labour movement around us.

We attempt to act as a 'memory of the class', retaining the accumulated memories of struggles won and lost, so that their lessons can be learnt and applied in our struggles today.

This conception of the party builds in syndicalism at its most fundamental level. There is to be 'activity' and 'education' - but not a struggle for a definite political programme or an intervention at the level of high politics.

In reality, of course, the AWL does attempt to make an intervention at the level of high politics. It is just that it

does so in the interests of the Labour right's commitments to the EU and of the Labour right's commitment to US and British state policy in the Middle East.

In fact, this choice flows from the conception of the "revolutionary party" as an organisation which acts "as a 'memory of the class', retaining the accumulated memories of struggles" - "struggles" means trade union struggles, not struggles over foreign policy or laws. Disputes over foreign policy or laws are not seen in terms of issues affecting the state power, but merely in terms of short-term advantages for a workers' movement "bargaining within the system".

Just as the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party has attempted to make the issues of nukes, Middle Eastern wars and Palestine go away by making concession after concession, so the AWL has followed the logic to its ultimate conclusion and come on board with British state policy on these issues, in the delusive belief that doing so will set it free to pursue a 'revolutionary' (meaning, if it is to mean anything, direct-actionist) policy on economic and social issues.

With these fundamentals set, the document's next step is to argue for the policy of unity in action and freedom of criticism, quoting Lenin; and for the importance of small organisations, quoting Trotsky (unsourced) as alleging that "in 1910 in the whole country there were a few dozen people" (and so on).

If Trotsky was not merely mistaken on this front, he must have been thinking of Lenin's direct correspondents; otherwise, the election results in the 1912 Fourth Duma elections, in which the Bolsheviks won outright in the workers' 'curia' (class constituencies) would be incomprehensible (imagine a group of "a few dozen" winning all the working class

constituencies in London ...). The story of the micro-Bolshevik Party, only reaching "8,000" (this document) in February 1917 and winning the masses thereafter, is one with which Trotskyists have been consoling themselves for decades. The reality is that the Bolshevik-led 'Prague conference' RSDLP was already a party with mass support (under illegality) in 1912-14, being temporarily knocked back by the war and rapidly recovering in 1917.

Why does the AWL feel the need to state this myth yet again? The answer, it turns out in the second half of the document, is that it does not feel it is doing that well in current politics. The "Corbyn surge" turns out to have a "low political temperature", and

the ideologies and political 'teams' that the new young Corbyn supporters, and the older people pulled back from political retirement, found to hand were Stalinist or Stalinoid politics - mediated through the *Morning Star*, but also through the activity of outright Stalinists in the leader's office - and 'NGO politics' (the leftish NGO as a model of political activity, the career in leftish NGO offices as a model of individual activism), which easily meshes in with the Stalinist ideology.

Hence, the AWL does not expect to win mass forces from the Corbynistas. But even at the level of winning "the dozens and the hundreds" the document's authors are dissatisfied; and the explanation they offer is that the AWL has not turned sufficiently vigorously to "the activity which is specific to an organisation working effectively to build a revolutionary party: getting our individual activists known as part of a purposeful collective with known ideas and visible collective activity; circulating

and getting discussion on literature; drawing people into activities with us; organising political discussions."

The argument now turns to the AWL's own members:

A small organisation cannot hope to make progress towards building a revolutionary party just by having its individual members run good campaigns, or be admirable trade unionists. It can do it only by showing people around it that it has world-changing ideas, getting them to study those ideas, convincing them.

The first condition here is that the organisation's own members are well-schooled in its ideas. (That does not exclude members disagreeing with the majority on particular policies; it does mean that those members study the majority view thoroughly and strive to formulate their own, differing, ideas in well-worked-out form). And for that we need, above all, to read books.

And, finally, the AWL needs to fight for the revival of democratic culture in the labour movement more generally.

But both these arguments are paradoxical. The ground of a party which has been offered at the outset is, precisely, the need for activism and the incarnation of the memory of 'struggles'. So it is hardly surprising that the AWL's members should imagine that their job is indeed to "run good campaigns, or be admirable trade unionists".

Equally, the party has not been posed as "revolutionary" because of its opposition to the constitutional order of the UK state (or the international order); and the labour bureaucracy is criticised as tending to "gravitate towards politics of bargaining within the system" - not as

# What we fight for

upholding undemocratic institutional forms (influenced by the capitalist state's regulatory conceptions). Indeed, the AWL is engaged in indirectly supporting the labour bureaucracy's campaign against freedom of speech in the movement, on the ground of the supposed anti-Semitism of anti-Zionism.

So the foundations of the party concept proposed in the AWL document are a swamp, into which the practical conclusions will inevitably sink without trace.

## Left Bloc

The Portuguese Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda) was formed in the late 1990s by the unification of the ex-Maoist União Democrática Popular and the Mandelista Partido Socialista Revolucionário (itself a fusion, in 1978, of the Mandelista Liga Comunista Internacionalista and the Morenista Partido Revolucionário dos Trabalhadores). Francisco Louçã, the author of the IVP article, is a long-standing leader: having been general secretary of the LCI in the 1970s, and Left Bloc candidate for the Portuguese presidency in 2006, he stood down as party chair in 2012. In parliamentary elections the Left Bloc got 2.4% of the vote in 1999, 2.7% in 2002, 6.4% in 2005, 9.8% in 2009, 5.2% in 2011, and 10.2% in 2015 (slightly above the 8.3% achieved by the Communist Party-Green coalition).

Louçã's article studies the general problems posed by the relative electoral success of the Left Bloc. He insists that its strength has been in its "institutional presence and reference": ie, its electoral and parliamentary work. This is, he argues, because "Institutional and electoral representation is the normal form of political action in the eyes of the majority of the population." Direct membership in associations - for example, trade unions - are much weaker (now 15% of workers); and in the anti-austerity struggles in 2011-13, "the trade unions have been stronger in organising demonstrations than in trade union practice and grassroots organisations".

It is worth at this point pausing briefly to notice a point made by Leon Trotsky in the 1938 *Transitional programme*: "Trade unions, even the most powerful, embrace no more than 20% to 25% of the working class, and at that, predominantly the more skilled and better paid layers ..." The very marked decline of trade unions since the 1980s - not just in the UK, but more generally - thus represents a *return to normality* after the exceptional conditions of the cold war period.

Louçã goes on to argue:

5. A popular party must seek electoral representation. It is not successful if it does not succeed in creating a political balance of power and if it does not express it through confrontations that lead to results. An alternative strategy of social struggle without representation would be little more than a justification for isolation. A socialist leftwing party fights for the majority and does not allow itself to be won over by the minority complex or by the anarchist or autonomist vision of a presumed social world outside the electoral confrontation, within which one would have to go into exile. The idea that the bourgeois state would collapse if many people abstained is inoperative and does the bourgeoisie a favour ...

Nonetheless, he draws attention to a number of problems of the Bloc's electoral success. The most experienced activists have been drawn into the 'institutional' work. There is pressure here for forms of

adaptation to the regime:

resignation to very limited measures in the name of maintaining the positions acquired; refusal to criticise the institutions or their management in the name of possible future agreements; the idea that politics advances in small steps; fear of public opinion, which leads to not presenting a socialist alternative, which leads to other institutional forms; desire to avoid the risk of conflict for fear of losing.

A non-obvious comment is:

8. Political zapping is another form of adaptation and not the least important. Getting used to a mode of political expression that depends on the circumstances and opportunities, or even on the agenda of the institutional protagonists or the press of the day, carries a risk, because it can dissolve the strategy in the agenda of the day. If the movement were everything and the programme were nothing, there would be no socialist policy to organise the workers' and people's movement.

I take it that "political zapping" here means spectacular denunciations of particular policies and politicians. If so, the point is a strong one and very applicable to the extra-parliamentary left in this country. Opposition to racism, austerity, globalisation, and so on, in and of themselves lead only to tail-ending one or another fraction of capital's political representatives.

"The Bloc has made little progress on social representation" - its organised forces in the trade unions, etc, have not strengthened; it needs to find ways to the youth and students. There is an eerie echo here, from a more influential organisation, of common complaints of the British left.

And yet, at the end of the day, in point 12 Louçã argues:

the success of this electoral option does not demonstrate that representation is a sufficient condition for socialist politics. Designed as an instrument to accumulate forces, it is useful. Conceived as a form of conditioning and loss of critical sense and social alternative, it fails. The left only exists through social protagonism, through conflict or strategic intervention in class struggle. In other words, it needs to be part of the class movement. This is how it always measures its strengths.

This seems to come back to the same foundational idea as that in the AWL's document - it is the (extra-parliamentary) "intervention in class struggle" which is the 'real point' of the party.

The explanation is probably the impasse into which the Bloc has got itself by giving critical support to the Socialist Party's minority government. The Bloc has a programme, but no *minimum programme* nor understanding of what such a thing is - the minimum conditions for participating in government. It has marketed itself as a force to the left of the 'official' Communist Party, and has a much smaller membership - as of 2016 the PCP had 54,000 members, while the Bloc in 2009 had under 7,000. In this context, to be, in effect, in coalition with a government which is managing austerity (even if it is mitigating it) necessarily weakens both the Bloc and the plausibility of its electoral project as such.

## What's it for?

Back to the beginning. What is the point of a workers' political party? Karl Marx had something to say

about this, quite late in his life and following on the debates with the Bakuninist opponents of working class political action. In an 1871 letter to Friedrich Bolte<sup>2</sup> he wrote:

The political movement of the working class has as its object, of course, the conquest of political power for the working class, and for this it is naturally necessary that a previous organisation of the working class, itself arising from their economic struggles, should have been developed up to a certain point.

On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc is a purely economic movement. On the other hand, the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc, law is a political movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a political movement - that is to say a movement of the class - with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous organisation, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organisation.

Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power - ie, the political power of the ruling classes - it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes. Otherwise it will remain a plaything in their hands, as the September revolution in France showed, and as is also proved up to a certain point by the game Messrs Gladstone and co are bringing off in England even up to the present time.<sup>3</sup>

To paraphrase: workers' *political action* is action with the object of winning workers' interests in a general form - that is, in particular, legislation, such as for a maximum

working day, factory and other safety legislation, and so on.

A revolutionary workers' party is 'revolutionary' not because of a particular *means* chosen, but because its *programme* has at its core the overthrow of the *constitutional order* under which the capitalist class rules, the conquest of power by the working class - the working class taking over and holding the middle classes in subordination (and, following on from that, beginning the socialist reconstruction of society).

It is, in fact, this character of being *founded on a political programme* which makes possible the line Lenin drew in 1906 (quoted in the AWL document) that "Criticism within the limits of the principles of the party programme must be quite free ... not only at party meetings, but also at public meetings [but] the party's political action must be united ..."<sup>4</sup>

If the party is founded (as the AWL claims to be) not on a definite written programme, but on "the whole record of Trotskyist anti-Stalinism and anti-capitalism" and its purpose is not to fight for a definite platform, but "to act as a 'memory of the class', retaining the accumulated memories of struggles won and lost, so that their lessons can be learnt and applied", such a distinction simply fails to work in practice. This failure is, in fact, "the whole record" of the Matgama tendency's failed fusions and splits between 1976 and the recent past.

From this point of view the AWL document comes nowhere near understanding what the point of a workers' (or revolutionary workers') party is. Louçã is a lot closer to this understanding. But the real core of the idea remains muddled, and there seems to be a reversion at the end of the text to the routine, modern far-left 'anti-parliamentary cretinism'.

This may be an understandable response to the Left Bloc's present difficult situation - but not one which leads anywhere ●

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## Notes

1. See, for example, C Principe, 'The Portuguese Myth' *Jacobin* June 2018.
2. Marx to Friedrich Bolte, November 23 1871: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm). The bulk of the letter is an outline and critique of the ideas of the Proudhonists, Lassalleans and Bakuninists.
3. That is, Gladstone and the Liberal leadership were drawing the trade unions in behind the Liberal Party by promises of legalising them and strike action - and by forms of agitation about the Tories as a threat.
4. 'Freedom to criticise and unity of action': [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/20c.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/20c.htm).

## Fighting fund

### Acceleration

Following the successful end to the CPGB's Summer Offensive fundraising drive, I am sure readers are only too pleased to welcome me back - not to mention contribute to the *Weekly Worker's* fighting fund!

Just a reminder that our paper needs to raise £1,750 every month over and above the money received from subscriptions and sales, and last week a (slightly disappointing) total of £260 came our way. It was a good job that comrade KC was so generous - his £100 cheque accounted for a rather large proportion of that! Another cheque - for £20 - was sent in by comrade VN, while BS (£25) and RS (£10) clicked on that PayPal button on our website.

But this time of the month is pretty slack when it comes to standing orders - there were just

five of them. Thanks go to NH (£30), BL (£25), GD (£25), DV (£20) and SM (£10), but it goes without saying that if anyone out there fancies joining them ... Yes, you can fill in the form on the back page of our paper or set up a standing order yourself if you have an online account. Make it payable to 'Weekly Worker' (sort code 30-99-64; account number 00744310).

Anyway, the September total now stands at £720 - which means we still need just over £1,000 in not much more than two weeks. A bit of acceleration is called for, so please do what you can to help us get there ●

Robbie Rix

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# weekly WORKER

**Gestures  
earn  
McDonnell  
ovation**

## Edging towards a second vote

The EU was a central theme for the second successive year, reports Peter Manson

June 1868 marked the formation of the Trades Union Congress and so the 2018 gathering - held in Manchester between September 9 and 12 - marked 150 years since the TUC was formed.

But unfortunately the anniversary has not been marked by an upsurge in union militancy or an agreement on united action to defend and advance workers' conditions. And the TUC congress was dominated - just as in 2017 - by arguments around Brexit: should the unions throw their weight behind the call for a second referendum of one sort or another?

The overwhelming majority of union bureaucrats believe that a withdrawal from the European Union will adversely affect working conditions. Typical in this regard is Manuel Cortes, general secretary of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, who wrote in the *Morning Star*:

My union has long argued that Brexit should be stayed. Not because we had any illusions in the EU as a socialist nirvana. But because, imperfect as it is, it offers workers better protection than any Tory government ever would (September 10).

The opposite viewpoint - published in the same edition of the *Star* - was put by Mick Cash, general secretary of the RMT transport union: "... politicians want us in the EU, so that the EU can stop Jeremy Corbyn's plans for nationalisation and for state aid and for workers' rights". Which means that we must do the opposite and support Brexit.

But TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady was having nothing of that. The protection of state-run enterprises and pro-worker legislation are perfectly possible within the EU, she insisted. In a sense she is right: in reality, both the EU and the UK are, in their current form, institutions that serve the interests of capital and, of course, improvements in working conditions and the ability to win concessions depend on the organisation and strength of our class.

However, along with the other anti-Brexit bureaucrats, she believes that a UK withdrawal would produce detrimental conditions from the unions' point of view, and so she told congress that Theresa May should "take her deal on the terms of Brexit and put it back to the people". If the deal "doesn't deliver justice for working people, if it doesn't protect jobs, rights at work ... then the TUC will throw our weight behind the call for a vote on the terms of Brexit." In other words, a 'people's vote'.

In contrast to all this, it was refreshing to read the opinion of Dave Ward, general secretary of the Communication Workers Union:

For the past two years I have been clear that our responsibility must be to bring our members together, whether they voted 'leave' or 'remain'. I don't believe we do that by elevating the debate



TUC: swinging behind anti-Brexit faction of bourgeoisie

about a second referendum, or a 'people's vote', or on the details of our relationship with the EU, above all other issues.

During the referendum campaign the truth is that the country had a choice between two Tory alternatives: the status quo or a Conservative-led Brexit. Neither option will deliver the change in the country our members need and I believe it is a mistake to continue to allow the terms of the debate to be dictated to us in this way (*Morning Star* September 10).

Quite right. As comrade Ward put it, "The only way to unify people in this country is to make clear that the fight for workers' rights does not start and end in Brussels."

But, in the end, delegates voted to ratify a general council statement, which declared that another referendum, giving people the "final say" on the terms of Brexit, should not be "ruled out". Only RMT voted against.

It seems that this year it was the likes of Dave Ward who were calling for joint action from the public-sector unions on pay. "... the CWU is pushing for unions to come together and agree a plan for a day of action in early 2019." Mick Cash also called for "a national campaign to smash the pay cap, which will include the use of coordinated industrial action if required ..." (*Morning Star* September 10).

But such a specific call was

conspicuously absent in the *Star* article by Mark Serwotka. He talked more vaguely about "ideals of bringing workers together under one roof to fight for fundamental economic and social change", which he hoped would be "revitalised at this year's congress" (September 10). But the priority for Serwotka - who on September 11 was elected TUC president - now seems to be the next general election: "PCS is looking into how, as a non-affiliated union, we can practically support the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government." It was in this context that he added: "One way would be to win the arguments for unity with all those experiencing the effects of austerity and organise them into effective action."

However, there was no motion before congress for a day of action or some other form of united fightback. This despite the possibility that there could now be a renewed attack on public-sector 'facility time', whereby union representatives are released from work to carry out their union duties on full pay. This has already been partially curtailed in various government departments, where the main union is PCS, but - following the release on the eve of congress of figures showing the millions in wages paid over the last year to union officers while carrying out their union duties in the public sector - several Tories expressed outrage. James Duddridge, who has occupied several minor ministerial

posts, contended: "No-one should be paid by the state to be a full-time union official."

### McDonnell

Also given a lot of publicity on the eve of congress were extracts from the speech John McDonnell was due to deliver on September 11, in which he pledged that Labour would oversee an "irreversible shift in wealth and power in favour of working people". However, the shadow chancellor seems to have had second thoughts about that phrase. In the event, he actually told delegates rather less ambitiously: "When the balance of power shifts so dramatically away from workers, as it has done today, it is time for us to *tip it back in the direction of the workers*" (my emphasis). Labour would aim to "restore the balance between employer and worker" through "a significant extension of trade union rights". And the word 'irreversible' appeared in a less specific context: Labour will "transform irreversibly the workplace and our working lives".

A Labour government would ban zero-hours contracts and introduce a "real living wage" of £10 an hour, as well as scrapping "anti-trade union laws". Despite the use of the plural, he mentioned only one piece of legislation: "We will repeal the Trade Union Act in our first hundred days" - presumably leaving all previously enacted anti-union legislation in place. For example, it was clear that the requirement for a ballot before any strike would remain: "We

will legislate to secure *online and workplace* balloting for industrial action votes" (my emphasis). The pledge to introduce online balloting is in line with the demand put forward by comrade Serwotka, who believes PCS would have reached the required 50% participation threshold this year if voting for strike action had not been restricted to a postal ballot.

Despite the modesty of such pledges, McDonnell declared that under Labour the "anti-trade union era will end" and there will be "the biggest extension of independent collective rights that our country has ever seen". There would also be an end to private finance initiative schemes in the health service, etc and government contracts would only be awarded to companies that recognise trade union representatives.

He also mentioned £500 billion to be "invested over 10 years in our infrastructure, road and rail, digital, research and development and, yes, alternative energy sources". But he claimed that such spending was approved by organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry: "That is a figure supported by the CBI, who, again, we are working alongside to develop our proposals."

After having outlined plans to force companies to issue shares to their workers, he ended by promising his support if there were "further strikes in the railway industry this winter" - "I'll be on the picket line with you." That was enough to ensure he got a standing ovation.

Modest as these commitments were, they were not to the liking of the rightwing press - another reason why a Labour government must be prevented at all costs. According to an editorial in *The Daily Telegraph*, "Jeremy Corbyn owes his position to the efforts of leftwing bosses such as Len McCluskey ..." and McDonnell's pledges represent "payback time for the union bosses for bankrolling the takeover of the party by the hard left". The paper warned: "... if Labour wins the next election, the hard-left unions will once again be driving the government's social and economic policies" (September 11).

If only the unions really were "hard-left". Nevertheless, the opposition of the media - echoed in various ways by the Labour right - emphasises once again that the Labour Party should be seen as the main focus of the class struggle at this time ●

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