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Letters

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Threadbare

I fear that Andrew Northall's defence of Stalin and the *Yezhovshchina* is becoming increasingly threadbare ([Letters, October 16](#)).

In my letter of September 25 I made the comparison with Nazi Germany because the Stalinists both in the Kremlin and around the world were condemning the violence of Nazi Germany against its opponents whilst denying that there was anything untoward happening in the Soviet Union - apart from the dispatching of a few 'wreckers' who were deserving of their fate. I could compare Stalin's Soviet Union with the capitalist democracies of its time, but what would that show other than to put Stalin and his crew in an even worse light? For, whatever the deprivations suffered by the workers in those countries, they were not generally subjected to fake trials, intensive interrogations and mass executions. As for tsarist Russia, it was indeed a backward, repressive police state, but it did not repress or eradicate its opponents quite on the scale of Stalin's regime. Lenin was arrested and sent into exile, but he was neither tortured into giving a false confession nor worked to death cutting timber in Siberia or digging for gold in the frozen soil of Kolyma.

I did not 'soft-soap' the Nazi regime. What I stated was that *during the period of the Yezhovshchina* of 1936-38, the number of inmates of the Nazis' camps and the deaths of political opponents was a small fraction of those incarcerated and killed by Stalin's secret police. It is true that there were other forms of official repression during that time, most notably the institutionalised harassment of Jews. Nevertheless, it was not until World War II, which opened several months after Yezhov was exposed as a traitor (and would this not invalidate all the convictions and executions when he headed the secret police?) that the Nazi camp system mushroomed into systematised slave labour, and not until after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 that it took on an open and deliberate genocidal role with the extermination of Jews, Roma and Slavs (mainly Russians). Mass murder on an ethnic basis was implicit in the Nazi programme, but it did not become a reality until after 1941.

Nazi Germany fell in mid-1945, and a bourgeois-democratic form of rule was re-established in the western sectors, and a Stalinist one in the eastern part. The left in West Germany, particularly the Communist Party, suffered various degrees of harassment, but the terrors of the Nazi regime were not repeated. In the Soviet Union, however, the immediate post-war period was marked by a resurgence of repression. Hundreds of thousands of returning Soviet prisoners of war found themselves incarcerated, including many who had refused to collaborate with the Nazi authorities and had

Fighting Fund No Olegs

Try as I might, I just cannot find a Russian billionaire to donate £50,000 to the *Weekly Worker*.

Unlike shadow chancellor George Osborne, of course, who allegedly spent a good deal of time on Oleg Deripaska's £92 million yacht moored off Corfu soliciting money for the Conservative Party. Unsurprisingly, though, Osborne denies it, since donations to political parties from foreign citizens are illegal.

For my part, I would be quite happy to accept a contribution from comrades of any country or nationality. The *Weekly Worker* speaks for workers and so has to rely on workers for financial support wherever they live - like comrades TG and GR, who both provided us with brilliant £50 donations this week. And comrade FT, who sent a £20 cheque. Also added to the pot were new standing order from JD and DW (£9 extra between them) and a handy £25 from SD, who used our online PayPal facility.

SD was one of 17,894 internet readers over the last seven days - the upward trend continues. We have £618 towards our £1,000 monthly fighting fund target. But there is only a week to go to get the best part of £400. We need comrades who were thinking of helping us out to do so right away. We cannot afford a deficit for two months in a row!

Robbie Rix

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remained in the dreadful Nazi camps.

A telling example is the recently deceased Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He did not start as a raving anti-communist; rather, it was his experience of being arrested, tried and sentenced for making a few mildly critical comments about Stalin in a private letter - hardly the work of an authentic traitor or wrecker - that set him on a path that saw him reject not only Stalinism but Marxism and even modernity.

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Marxists do not dismiss the necessity for repression: any genuinely socialist regime will meet with the violent resistance of the displaced ruling class, and the working class and its organisations must be prepared to prevent counterrevolutionaries from overthrowing the new society. The young Soviet regime was faced with such a threat and successfully resisted it, although one can justifiably criticise some of the methods used. The Soviet regime was far more secure by the mid-1930s than it was during its first few years. There was discontent, there were citizens who were critical of this or that feature of society; there were some who opposed the system as a whole. The same could be said about bourgeois democratic Britain or Nazi Germany. So why did Stalin and his cohort feel the need to arrest 1.5 million people and execute 700,000 of them, including 30,000 officers, a purge unique in military history? A "minuscule proportion" of the population maybe, but much bigger proportionally or absolutely than in other countries at the time.

Andrew Northall and the other members of that dwindling band of Stalin fans fail to recognise that the sight of a state claiming to be socialist that was at times not merely more repressive than the bourgeois democracies, but at its peak of repression of 1936-38 was actually jailing and executing more people than Nazi Germany at that point, was and remains a somewhat negative advertisement for socialism. Socialism equals mass arrests and mass executions: that will really attract the masses to our banner.

Paul Flowers

London

Wonderland

Andrew Northall's letter relates an almost Alice in Wonderland concept of Soviet society.

The policy of forced collectivisation failed catastrophically to secure and socialise the farming sector, allowing the existing market economy to surreptitiously survive and grow. This had a detrimental effect on the ability of the Soviet Union to industrialise; leaving the urban working class bearing the burden of primitive socialist accumulation, the chaos and the black market, inflation, a drop in the value of wages, and material scarcities.

Despite the unbalanced, unrealistic and inflexible nature of the five-year plans, the Soviet economy did make impressive and far-reaching advances in many sectors. However, because of the forced character of collectivisation the link between town and country always remained weak, condemning the Soviet economy to continually underperform.

Comrade Northall's crass and pitiable comments linking Trotskyism to anti-communism and pro-Nazism sounds as if they came straight from the lips of that much respected and eminent theoretician and revolutionary, Andrei Vyshinsky. The Moscow trials of August 1936, January 1937, and March 1938 were a reflection of the isolation, cultural backwardness and brutality that still persisted in Soviet society even after the revolution. They also demonstrated the inherent weakness and instability of the Soviet bureaucracy and of Stalin himself in their positions of power.

The show trials were of course based totally on manufactured confessions and falsifications from broken and dejected men. The prosecution put up not a single authentic document or shred of evidence to substantiate their accusations.

It is perhaps a paradox of history that Trotsky was one of the few who gave critical support to the Soviet Union during the war against Finland, the intervention into the Baltic States and indeed to Stalin's alliance with Nazi Germany.

Colin McGhie

Glasgow

No-platformed

On October 18, over 200 people, mainly students, took to the streets to protest against a demonstration in Leeds by the self-proclaimed Nazi British People's Party; a group whose local organiser had just been imprisoned for having nail bombs ready to attack mosques, and a computer containing over 40,000 images of children being abused and raped. The BPP had planned to hold a demonstration against 'black rap' outside HMV as any opportunity to push its white supremacist views, and to see what response there was before their main national demonstration; this provoked outrage, and the BPP failed.

A counter-demonstration was called. Though it was split into several parts by the police, the main student section managed to push through police lines and occupy the area where the BPP had hoped to be for over two hours. Eventually the police brutally split this part of the demo and forced it to both ends of the street. It was only then that the BPP were allowed to hold their protest - little more than 10 of them. The problem for them was, there were at least 40 police officers at either end of the street with anti-fascists behind them. They could hand no leaflets out, and their shouts and even their megaphone were drowned out by the chants of the anti-fascists. So, despite the fact that they were physically there, they had been in effect no-platformed. What's more, the public who were even further back behind police lines, were chanting *our* slogans.

The main movers behind the counter-demonstration, and those who led the student contingent, were not the usual Unite Against Fascism, but Workers Power's youth group, Revolution. UAF were present, but there was very few of them. As opposed to the UAF approach of merely saying the BNP and BPP are Nazis, but going no further in an attempt to keep the movement 'broad', Revo put forward their own politics.

They blamed capitalism for all the problems that the BPP/BNP seek to capitalise on, and that the only way to beat them would be to unite as workers in a new party. This is something that would never be heard at a UAF-dominated rally, where all politics would be watered down; here there were attempts to put working class politics into the anti-fascist movement.

The whole affair itself does highlight a few things though. At first sight, the response to the BPP's attempt to distribute their leaflets may seem a bit hysterical, but understandable. There is no *mass* fascist movement, one that is overtly British, and not a pale imitation of a German one 70 years ago - yet. This, of course, is not to say that we should wait until there is one. But it does pose the question of what we do *now*. Though there is merit in the idea of no-platforming the far right in cases such as Leeds, this should not be our only tactic. This certainly shouldn't be the main focus of our activities.

What is more pertinent is the fact that the far right will grow at our expense unless we set our own house in order. This should be our main priority. Before we can seriously challenge the far right, we need to examine what alternative we are currently projecting to the working class at the moment. If the average worker looks at us, what do they see? A left that won't promote its own politics, and is divided into a myriad of sects that fight each other, even though they have remarkably similar politics. In times of crisis, we cannot blame people for looking to the right rather than the left. In this sense, the rise of the far right is as much the *fault* of the far left as it is the mainstream parties.

Robbie Folkard
Manchester

Backsides

With great respect to both your sects, the CPGB (PCC) and the AWL are collectively disappearing up each other's backsides. I'm amazed at this internecine spat between a handful of far-left 'tops' on who invited whom to debate first, whether it's about Iran, Israel and Palestine, or if Hopi approves. And, knowing you both, this CPGB-AWL brawl could run on for years, with the letters page and any other available columns filled up with this garbage.

This is where your *raison d'être* of being a democratic scrutineer of the left, in the fine old tradition of *Iskra*, just falls apart. For so long, while the prospects of revolutionary change have seemed as far away as the Bolshevik revolution, there hasn't been much else to do than keep each other entertained by these self-important rows. That's why your online hits topped 40,000. Until recently.

And it's why they've now plunged to 17,000. You haven't moved on, but the world has, and we have. Instead of looking inwards - your field of vision - we in the left are mobilising

against the utter catastrophe about to befall our class. Outside your ivory tower, thousands of workers are losing their homes and jobs, while inside you waste your time in bourgeois dinner party bust-ups - to the particular delight of the security services, your biggest fans and most ardent online readership.

We go for our information these days to Workers Power, the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and, yes, the *Morning Star* and your arch-enemies, the Communist Party of Britain. They all have some links inside the working class movement. Of course, they are still tiny sects, but they are coming out of over two decades of retreat and decline following the disastrous defeat of the miners' strike. The next 10 years are going to be years of global recession - some would even argue depression - and, as the class struggle intensifies, so the membership of these fighting organisations will dramatically increase.

There will be mergers and alliances between them and a real need for unity in theory and action - not Stalinist unity (which I know you abhor), but necessary working class unity. The *Weekly Worker* and the CPGB will find itself more and more isolated and irrelevant, and will be seen as damaging that solidarity in what will be desperate times for our class. Do you understand how desperate? Or are you completely unaffected?

You will want to maintain that your excoriating exposés of strategy and tactics among the leadership of the various sects is essential to democratic openness and debate. But the *Weekly Worker* is not a democratic voice for the rank and file in these sects. You may have been that once, but now you are simply being used by factions within factions trying to damage their enemies and aware that in the *Weekly Worker* they have an eager if unwitting ally. As readers, we know we are only getting a narrow perspective, without context, so your exposés are of little use to us. And, anyway, journalists everywhere are every day tipped off about this or that scandal. They know better than anyone that they are being used. Most of these tips are simply set aside and never see the light of day.

You are still left - just. But these days it is more 'left behind'. Wake up, *Weekly Worker*. Reinvent yourselves as a voice of our class. Start supporting the SWP, Workers Power, the Socialist Party, the *Morning Star* and the rest - no matter how much it sticks in your craw. Turn your prodigious intellectual fire and ire on the ruling class and the City, and on demolishing the New Labour elite. That's where the real scandals are.

Witness this weekend's sudden switch of New Labour tactics to focus on immigration. A plain brutal, irresponsible and appalling attempt to make immigrants the talking point at a time of crisis in homes and jobs among the poorest in our toughest working class communities. We know where that leads. It is also a grotesque attempt at switching the debate and moving the media on from the real story - the national and international disaster of New Labour to Britain and those who mimicked it in Europe.

The world has turned upside down. But for you it still seems like a *Channel 4 News* story about the City and bankers and bonuses. It's an academic question. You can't quite believe it, can you? You are rubbing your eyes and saying to yourselves and to us, 'No, this isn't really happening. It won't change anything anyway. Capitalism will recover. It always does. This is normal. Now, let's get back to these bloody AWLers.'

My message to you is simple. Forget left-bashing. Use the *Weekly Worker* exclusively to offer Marxist analysis of the crisis, so that when we need intellectual armaments for the debates and discussions in our workplaces we have another place where we can come for them. At the moment, you are clearly being used. It's boring for me as a reader and it's not helping the class struggle. And I'm not a 'left top' of anything by the way, so I have no vested interest.

Otherwise, I fear that online readership figure of yours will shrink to nothing, as the desperate need of our class for unity, theory and news of revolutionary praxis will be met elsewhere.

Mark Lewis
email

Detached

Attending the Israel and Iran debate on October 12, I was struck not so much by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty's rage as by their detachment. Members referred to Zionism as just another bourgeois nationalism and the Iranian regime as clerical fascist.

If that's so, why indeed should we make a commitment? It's as if, in 1939, we'd been

asked to warn and protest about the Polish cavalry taking out a German panzer unit.

Of course, if Zionism is - and always was - a colonialist project and Israel is an imperialist ally of the United States, we certainly shouldn't be indifferent to a first strike on Iran.

Mike Belbin
email

Clarification

In a short and inadequate contribution during the Matgamna-Machover debate, I made two separate, unrelated points that have led to confusion - at least for one blogger. I would therefore like to clarify the issue.

Colonialism, imperialism, the establishment of the state of Israel, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan have all strengthened political Islam. However, I have always maintained that the majority of the working class in Iran did not support it. The supporters of political Islam in the 1980s were from the shanty towns and urban poor, as well as sections of the bazaar and petty bourgeoisie.

On a completely different matter, the Iranian working class remembers the traditions and history (leftist, not Islamic) of 1979. The radical left in Iran has historic connections with the Palestinian movement: Fedayeen, Peykar, Rahe Kargar and Communist Unity all had very close links with the PFLP and the PDFLP. They spent a lot of time with Palestinian groups in Lebanon, Yemen and Jordan. The association of the Iranian left with the issue of Palestine has nothing to do with political Islam.

Furthermore, many sections of the working class that are Muslim don't support political Islam, as they associate it with greed, duplicity, repression and non-payment of wages.

For the working class movement in Iran and for the Iranian left, the issue of Israel-Palestine has a regional secular political significance, in the same way that the coup in Chile affected Latin American leftists. This has nothing to do with 'clerical fascists' or religious states.

Yassamine Mather
Glasgow

Revolution

The article by Chris Strafford on the Convention of the Left had the headline, 'Left doesn't unite' ([Weekly Worker September 25](#)). In reality, the left inside and outside the Labour Party is continuing to unite; there is a recall conference on Saturday November 29 and I went to a local meeting on October 21 attended by 30 people to plan for that conference, discuss the political situation and what we will do about it in Manchester.

Some speakers at the meeting advocated that the convention unite around a series of demands, although they didn't make it clear whether they would like transitional or reformist ones. I opposed this approach, instead arguing that we should point out the need for a sudden, thorough change of society (a revolution, even if some don't think we should use that word) to achieve socialism.

With the Tories and Lib Dems proposing similar levels of spending to New Labour, socialists should avoid the trap of simply calling for even greater public spending (and hence greater borrowing), but instead argue for a socialist revolution! If we do propose reforms, simultaneously arguing for the need for socialism, then we should not neglect the opportunities presented by the recent/upcoming bank nationalisations.

Steve Wallis
Manchester

Opportunity

Nick Rogers says that to play the games of the bourgeoisie is to patronise the working class and collapse into rank opportunism ([Letters, October 16](#)). If this is his interpretation of Chris Knight's 'October theses' ([Letters, October 9](#)), then he is not listening to what the working class are saying.

In the past couple of weeks we have seen spectacular injections of money to keep afloat corporate parasites that charge the working class for borrowing from them! Does Nick not realise that the working class is outraged by this capitalist communism which has created disillusionment and anger with the system? There is a tremendous opportunity for the left to get its act together and actually lead the working class, or does Nick not think that this is the time for action?

Nick Rogers appears to think that Chris Knight endorses war if it is endorsed by the UN. This is not the point - we are against the war, full stop, but we have to show the contradiction of our imperialist rulers who supposedly represent this country and us. What Nick appears to be doing is inverting what Chris Knight has written, turning the positive into a negative and putting forward reasons why the capitalist system should be kept in place.

Capitalism is in crisis, and when that happens the working class comes together to negate the capitalist leech. Our answer is to respond now to the revolutionary potential and show the capitalist class that we can organise. We outnumber the police and the army, or have some forgotten that?

Now is the time to show maximum solidarity, organise and say no to exploitation.

Simon Wells
East London

Suggestion

One remark in comrade Mike Macnair's article on the economic crisis caught my attention: "But in the meantime the present crisis is unlikely to be the occasion of the workers taking power in Europe or elsewhere. The crisis will therefore play out in ways dominated by the choices made by the capitalists and their governments. The immediate tasks of the workers' movement are therefore to organise itself for defensive struggles ..." (['Responding to the crisis', October 16](#)).

While talk of taking power is premature, there are other offence-oriented demands, both political and economic, outside that scope, such as the worker buyouts suggested in my October 9 letter. Another offence-oriented demand I'd like to suggest is something that was raised in the Erfurt programme itself: direct proposals and rejections, at the national level, regarding all tax rates on all types of income - such as employment income, individual property income such as rent, both individual and corporate business income, both individual and corporate dividend income, and both individual and corporate capital gains - annual votes which include the right to raise upper tax rates, alternative minimum tax rates, and non-employment income gross-ups or multipliers.

Also, unlike Trotsky's formulation, consider the extension of the sliding scale of wages raised as a legislative demand, since this is already widespread (office workers, for example).

Jacob Richter
email

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