

Anti-racism is indivisible

By Sean Matgamna

LET us start where this debate started, with Cliff and the SWP. There was a sea-change on the Israel-Palestine question in the post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement in the middle and late 1940s. Tony Cliff, who left Palestine in September 1946, played a central role as an ideologist of this change. His pamphlet *Middle East At The Crossroads* (1946) was published in at least three languages; he was boosted in the SWP-USA's internationally-circulated *Militant*, after the Cannonite fashion, as one of the Great Marxists whose "method" allowed him to understand things obscure to everyone else, etc. etc. In the SWP-USA internal bulletin Cliff functioned as a hatchet-man against an opposition (Goldman-Morrow) sharing the Shachtmanite Workers' Party's support for free Jewish immigration into Palestine, which was a big issue between the WP and the SWP-USA.

Cliff's 1946 pamphlet does not deal at all adequately with the political questions in the Middle East, having more to say about the price of oil than about the rights of national minorities. Where concrete politics should have been, there was a vacuum; and, to fill that vacuum, the "official" Trotskyists took the Arab nationalist line against the Jewish minority in Palestine. In the US *Militant*, for example, it was said candidly that any line other than opposition to Jewish immigration and to a Jewish state would isolate the Trotskyists from the "Arab Revolution". This catch-penny opportunist adaptation to Arab chauvinism foreshadowed later attitudes.

Between 1948 and 1973, however, there was in the Trotskyist press a tacit



The Histadrut trade union organisation exhibits in Moscow in 1923

acceptance of Israel's right to exist. In 1967, after the Six Day War, Tony Cliff wrote a pamphlet which is closer in its political conclusions and implied conclusions to what *Workers' Liberty* says than to what the SWP and Jim Higgins say now. The decisive shift came after 1967, and was brought to the present level of nonsense after the Yom Kippur war of 1973. The "honour" of having established the post-1973 IS/SWP line belongs, I think, to none other than Jim Higgins (in an article in *IS Journal*).

Obviously, the "objective" explanation for the shift is the fact that pre-partition Palestine had once again been united, but under Jewish rule — brutal, predatory colonial rule in the Arab-majority areas. It had, however, been prepared for by decades of ambivalence and confusion. There was a general

drift on the left, an often unexamined acceptance of the new Palestine Liberation Organisation policy of a secular democratic state as the solution.

We (the forerunners of *Workers' Liberty*) went along with the drift, for the same reason, I guess, as everybody else — hostility to Israel's brutal colonialism and wishful thinking about what a secular democratic state meant. In my own case, that was the culpable delusion that it could mean a state in which Jew and Arab could be equal citizens.

Cliff's personal role in this history has been a big one, and not only in Britain. Now I don't share Jim Higgins's feelings of being cheated and betrayed by Cliff, since I was never other than politically antagonistic to him. The old factionalism in IS was by its nature often nasty, but there was not on Cliff's part much gratuitous nastiness. God

knows what 25 years of being Tsar and Caliph of the SWP has done to his head by now, but I found him then a more than halfway decent human being.

Yet Cliff has been a carrier of a poison to the left he influences. He gets away with it, to a large extent, because of his origins in Palestine. In practice he is an unteachable Arab chauvinist. That is paradoxical only if you don't know the history of the Communist Party of Palestine, in which Cliff claims to have received his political education. Take Cliff at his word that he was in the CPP in the mid 1930s, and you have a self-portrait of someone who, a Jew, was part of an organisation in which young Jews were heavily brainwashed into extremes of hostility to the Jewish community.

Cliff first appears in the English-language Trotskyist press in 1938-9, in

discussion pieces in the American magazine *New Internationalist*. It is serious work by a young man trying to think things through. The political conclusions are vague and unclear, yet he is for the right of Jews to go to Palestine as a refuge from persecution.

He next appears in the English-language press in 1944, in the British *Workers' International News* (it is an unsigned article, but the scissors-and-paste technique, incorporating bits of his 1930s articles, strongly suggests Cliff) as a fierce, almost modern-day, "anti-Zionist". In this article, aimed to influence British labour movement opinion, much is made of a Jewish demonstration against Arab produce being on sale in what they wanted to be a Jewish-only area. This, in a world where the Holocaust was still going on, and where Jewish refugees were being killed and interned, as a result of British state policy, when they tried to get into Palestine! Cliff would regale audiences in the late 1960s with the same story. The sense of proportion and perspective are, as always, crazy. The publication of that article then in the Trotskyist press was, in my opinion, evidence of the movement's radical disorientation.

Later, with the 1946 pamphlet, Cliff became one of international Trotskyism's two "authorities" on the Palestine question (or, with Ernest Mandel, three). The other was Abram Leon, who died at the hands of the Nazis in 1944, and whose unfinished historical writings, shaped and edited by Ernest Mandel, were published posthumously, eventually in book form (*The Jewish Question*). Neither the dead Leon nor the living Cliff had much to say about the politics of national conflict in Palestine.

Leon had an account of Jewish history which quickly became an article of factional faith for people who had no independent means of judging it (though in my view Maxime Rodinson makes a convincing case against Leon's thesis). Cliff offered mainly an economic analysis, slotted into Arabist anti-imperialism.

Whatever intrinsic merits they may have had, for the purposes of politics the writings of both Cliff and (though the dead man, unlike Cliff, can hardly be blamed for it) Leon were a species of pseudo-knowledge, offering no political answers. The political conclusions were filled in by chameleon adaptation to Arab nationalism, which was seen as part of the "colonial revolution" segment of the imminent world revolution. There was a clear parallel between the method of the disoriented Trotskyists and that of Third Period Stalinism after 1929. Post-Trotsky Trotskyism, in its degeneracy, had found a use for the personal history and prejudices of Tony Cliff!

Cliff separated from Mandel and the "official" Trotskyists in 1950. After a silence of two decades on the Israel/Palestine question, he resumed in

1967 and after as if he were still in the 1930s, fighting old factional battles with Zionists in Palestine. At the end of the 1960s, he revived what had been mid-1930s CPP policy on Palestine. Others did the same, but Cliff had a special authority. Cliff could get away with bias, double standards, Arab chauvinism, and outright hatred of the Israelis, where others could not.

It is to Cliff's credit that as a youth he sided with the most downtrodden people around him, the Palestinian Arabs. It was not enough, however, and his present attitude probably has twisted roots. Cliff is obviously guilt-stricken about the fate of the Palestinian Arabs, but that does not explain his savage hostility to the Palestinian/Israeli Jews. Isn't there in his attitude also guilt about surviving the Holocaust, safe, as it turned out, in Palestine? His feelings about the Jewish national minority in Palestine were, after all, formed for the pre-1946 Palestinian-Jewish national minority — those who, like himself, survived; and he experienced a violent and, in the circumstances, startling shift between 1939 and 1944. Cliff's vicarious Arab chauvinist hatred for Israel may well be a somewhat unusual form of self-hatred. Long-range "assassin psychoanalysis" is of course of limited use, though Cliff's role demands and licences it and strips away his right to privacy on this issue.

II

It is a pity that Jim Higgins's 'humour' has gone and is replaced by choleric, rodomontade, unleavened abuse, some of it purely personal, and by evident social embarrassment before his SWP friends and former comrades. Protesting that Paul Foot, Tony Cliff, and the SWP are "a matter of supreme indifference" to him, he is nevertheless at pains to explain publicly how he came to get involved in a discussion with vile people like ourselves. He seems to offer an over-the-shoulder apology for it. Who to, I wonder?

It did take a long argumentative letter from me to persuade him to reply to my reply. I hoped for serious argument. In vain. He declines to take up the reasoned case I made over three pages of the last *Workers' Liberty*, and focuses instead on repeating points made or conceded¹, and on red herrings. He has neither time nor space to deal with the central thing I said, and argued in some detail — that the appearance of a Jewish state in the middle of the 20th century can be understood only in terms of a complex history and not in terms of a demonised devil-ex-machina "Zionism." I asked the serious, and not entirely rhetorical, question why the Jewish minority, a third of the population of Palestine in the 1940s, did not have national rights there. He declines to reply. Did they or didn't they? If not, why not? If they did, then they had a right to defend themselves in 1948, and the entire

elaborate scheme in which "Zionism" is the cause of all evil dissolves into a series of concrete questions, on each of which Israeli policy can be evaluated and if necessary denounced — as we denounce Israel's behaviour in the occupied territories, for example.

Jim Higgins does have time and space, however, to protest that I killed the very obscure and never very strong joke he put as a headline on his piece. (It was in Latin: Tridentine Trotskyism?)

With more justification, he is angry about the headline we put on his piece. He says we misrepresented his position. That is true, but it was editorial mishap, not deliberate misrepresentation. I offer him my apologies. But I can not see that the mistaken headline strengthened the case for my allegation that Jim Higgins (and Cliff and Paul Foot) are Arab chauvinists.

III

JIM Higgins wrote — and, of course, we printed — "What is needed is a secular Arab-Jewish state based on socialism and democracy in all of Palestine". I take it that he means by socialism what I mean: democratic working-class power. If so, then there are two problems.

Everywhere the Arab working class is in the grip of Islamic chauvinism, or at best secular populism. It has been and is crushed, politically, under the weight of dictatorial states. It is potentially very powerful, but it has as yet scarcely begun to realise itself politically, or to emerge as a "class for itself". It will, but we cannot gauge how soon.

Therefore, as any sort of immediate solution, socialism in the Middle East — if you mean working-class socialism — is a non-starter. Suppose, however, that there were a powerfully organised and more or less international-socialist working-class mass movement in the Middle East now, with a real possibility of taking power in the short or medium term. What would be its programme for the smaller non-Arab nationalities in the Middle East — Jews, Kurds, Armenians? What programme would we advocate? One of two things: either this mainly-Arab socialist working-class mass movement would be suicidally poisoned by Arab (and probably Muslim) chauvinism and obscurantism, or it would have a Leninist policy on the non-Arab peoples.

"Socialism" would resolve the issues in Israel/Palestine only if the mainly-Arab socialist mass movement had such a Leninist, that is a consistently democratic, working-class programme. The Bolsheviks in 1917 did not only say to the oppressed nationalities in the old Tsarist empire: "Socialism is the answer". They had a democratic — Leninist — programme on the national question. They advocated the right of self-determination for all peoples where they were the compact majority; preached the indifference

of consistent democrats and socialists to existing state borders; repudiated all national revanchism. On that basis, they built the unity of the working class across all national and communal divisions, and consistent socialist politics.

Jim Higgins will agree with that in general — but he will exclude the Israeli Jewish nation from the application of the general principles. For them, the film of 20th century history will be rolled back. To the Israeli Jewish workers, though to the workers of no other nation, international socialism will be presented as an ultimatum. Dissolve your national state — instantly! now! — or be forced to. Surrender your right to be a compact nation, or be forced to.

The secular democratic state meant — whatever various left-wingers understood it to mean, and wanted it to mean — an Arab Palestine with religious (not national) rights for such Jews as survived the process of Arab conquest necessary to get their state dismantled. If the solution Jim Higgins favours — “a secular Arab-Jewish state based on socialism and democracy in all of Palestine” — is really democratic in the sense that Lenin’s, Trotsky’s, and the Communist International’s national programme was democratic, then, even after the working class in the whole region has taken power, it will include the right of the Israeli Jewish nation to keep its own state, and the right of the Kurds, Armenians, and others to set up their own national states. If it does not do that, then it will be neither democratic nor socialist.

The “smash Israel” policy can not be squared with socialist or democratic politics by reference to the Palestinian Arab refugees. For here, too, the “solution” favoured by many socialists is unique to Israel. Nobody on the left argues that the Poles, in what is now western Poland, should make way for the ten million Germans driven out of what was then East Prussia in 1945, or for their many millions of descendants — or that we should

insist on a joint Polish-German state to allow for it. Nobody on the left argues for reclaiming the Sudetenland for the three million Germans driven out of what was then Czechoslovakia in 1945, or their many millions of children. Nobody on the left has any time for the German revanchists who talk of such things. Israel is special.

Socialism in its early stages will radically soften national antagonisms, but it will not dissolve nations. The socialists who would inscribe on their banners or their VDUs the demand that nations should immediately dissolve — in this case, that one nation amidst competing nations should dissolve — would be not Marxists but anarchists. Their attitude would be wildly ultra-left in theory, and in practice mean vapid self-removal from real politics, leaving a vacuum to be filled by something other than the consistent democracy in these affairs which Leninists argue for.

The entire tenor and substance of what he wrote in *WL* 33 — malignantly anti-Israel and wildly prejudiced comic-book history — suggests that Jim Higgins agrees with the SWP, whose essentially meaningless “socialist” solution leaves them free to back Arab chauvinists and militarists against Israel?² Or does he have nothing to say at all about immediate politics except “socialism is the answer”? The outright Arab chauvinists, Cliff and Foot, draw their conclusions. When Jim Higgins says that their practical politics do not define them as Arab chauvinists, that seems to brand him as one too. Can it be that you don’t know that, Jim?³

IV

The pre-1929 Communist International rejected, opposed and denounced the Zionist project. I said this, and then asserted that nevertheless neither they, nor Trotsky in the 1930s, opposed Jewish migration into Palestine, as the post-1930 Stalinists and the “orthodox” Trotskyists from the mid-’40s

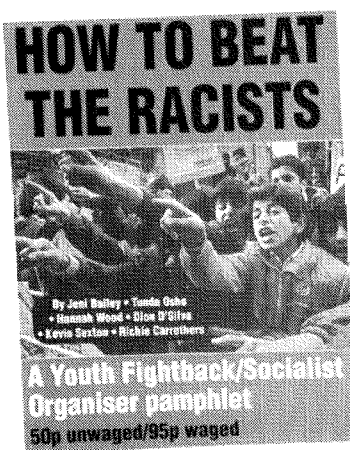
did. The Leninists and Trotskyists believed in the free movement of workers to Palestine as elsewhere in the world. Higgins replies by citing evidence for what I said, in the form of quotations. Thank you Jim! The political descriptions and denunciations he cites are about Zionism as a political ideology and a practical project which involved a favourable attitude to British imperialist occupation of Palestine. Of course the Communist International was against British occupation, which the Zionists then favoured — and that is what the quotation about “Anglo-Zionist occupation” means.

When the Communists appealed to Jewish workers to stay in the class struggle in the countries where they were, and not to go in for utopian-socialist colony-building in Palestine, Higgins equates that with advocacy of the exclusion of Jews from Palestine. In doing so, he is reading later attitudes backwards, anachronistically. Jews were not, and were not considered to be, identical with Zionism. Most Jews, including Jews fleeing persecution, were then, unlike now, not Zionists. The Communist International’s opposition to Zionism did not take the form of advocacy of or support for the exclusion of Jews, still less of support for Arab/Muslim chauvinism against them.

The Communist Party of Palestine was throughout the 1920s almost entirely Jewish, beginning as a break from the socialist Zionists, Poale Zion. Against Zionism, they advocated Jewish-Arab worker and peasant unity in Palestine. Demonisation was not part of it, though rough polemic was. The Histadrut could, for example, take a stall at a workers’ gathering in Moscow in 1923.

The Communist Party of Palestine competed with the Zionists for the allegiance of the Jewish workers: they advocated neither their own expulsion — though the British were normally eager to expel Jewish Communists — nor the exclusion of Jewish workers who, for whichever of many possible reasons, wanted to enter Palestine. According to one report, when the anti-Jewish movement began in 1929, the small Executive Committee of the CP, all Jews, was meeting in an Arab village and had to be rescued by the Jewish defence force, the Haganah; the CP turned over guns to aid the Jewish self-defence. Then the line was changed in Third Period Moscow and the pogroms were redefined as part of a holy anti-imperialist crusade. After a post-1929 Stalinist “Arabisation” drive which insisted that the main leaders be Arabs in a party of supposed equals, most of whose members were still Jews, Jews were made second-class citizens in the Communist Party of Palestine.

The Trotskyists at the time opposed the Stalinist line on the 1929 Arab movement (see Max Shachtman, *Militant*, October 1929). Later, in the 1930s, the



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SWP-USA's *Socialist Appeal* (6.6.39) published an outraged report, based on an article by ex-Stalinist Malech Epstein in the social-democratic Yiddish daily *Forward*, that the Communist Party of Palestine was sending young Jewish members to plant bombs among Jews.

V

The Deir Yassin massacre was denounced by the mainstream Zionist leaders when it happened. I neither defended nor justified nor excused it, though I did put it in its historical context. Deir Yassin was the work of a Jewish group against which the mainstream Zionists were prepared to wage civil war a few months later!

Higgins raises it again because it is easier to beat the reverberating drums of big atrocity than to reason about the overall picture. He says he raises it because it was an act of racism — “these people died because they were Arabs” — though how to distinguish between ideological racism and nationalism in a “civil war” situation like that of 1948 might perplex a more cautious man. “Racism is indivisible”, he says. “Just one dead child because he or she is an Arab, or a Jew, or Irish or a Red Indian, is exactly one more than any self-respecting socialist can countenance and is quite enough to condemn the perpetrator.”

Agreed! I'll vote for that with both hands; and, if it will carry greater conviction, prick my thumb and sign a resolution to that effect in my own blood. But what is this fine universalist principle doing in this debate, in the mouth of someone who is a passionate partisan of one side, to the extreme of wanting to force “the other” people to dissolve as a national entity? How does it square with the double-standard-skewed one-sidedness of what he says about the Arab-Jewish conflict? Can Jim Higgins really think that no Jews have died because they were Jews at the hands of Arabs and Muslims? In which case he needs only to be reminded that, for example, 60 Jewish religious teachers and pupils were massacred in Hebron in 1929 — they were not Zionists — and he will change sides, or understand that socialists need an overview and an overall programme for the whole complex of issues.

In fact, though, the universalist principle is just empty rhetoric, isn't it? It is a common enough gambit. The Provisional IRA's paper, *An Phoblacht* has, for example, a convincing line in anti-sectarianism — directed against the other side and used to bolster with self-righteousness bigoted and sectarian attitudes on its own side.

Anti-racism is indivisible, Jim, but someone who uses talk of its “indivisibility” as a means of damning one side in the interests of the other, which has also killed children, is a hypocrite.

It is “absurd but evidently necessary”

to point out to you, comrade Higgins, that though one dead child may be and is enough to condemn its killers, the idea that their cause — or in this case the entire people to which the killers belonged — is thereby condemned, is either the theme of a note resigning from the sinful human race before going into the desert to found a utopian-socialist colony, or something you write just before you blow your brains out. Otherwise it is a lot of flabby-minded old guff. Hypocritical or hysterical guff.¹

I accused Jim Higgins of being “awash with prejudice”, citing his demonising “history” as proof and refuting it. Now he passionately defends himself — and, I think, some of his old friends in the SWP — against a charge I never made, that of “racism”. No, Jim, I don't think you, or the SWP, are racist, or that you subscribe to zoological theories about some peoples being inferior, or that you are predisposed to be hostile to individual Jews. I know that I was not a racist when I held views very like yours.

The views you hold about Israel do, however, commit you to a pretty comprehensive hostility to Jews who will not endorse your fervently held anti-Zionism or join you in branding Israeli-Jewish nationalists as racists — Jews into whose identity Israel has been incorporated and who will, not always gently, defend Israel's right to exist. Your views commit you to making the Israeli Jews an exception to the general principles you proclaim for every other nation. They commit you to advocating the destruction

of the Israeli-Jewish state: you can not believe that in the calculable future the state of Israel will voluntarily be liquidated and subsumed into something higher. They commit you to an emotion-charged propagation of Arab-chauvinist myths and thinly made-over old-fashioned anti-semitic caricatures of Jews.

All that, Jim, may not be anti-Jewish racism, but it shares the essential element common to all the various anti-semitisms of history, be they religious, nationalist, or zoological-racist: comprehensive hostility to most or all Jews alive. The tub-thumping and fulminating that you are not a racist can not suppress the fact that your attitude is a form of anti-semitism. Since you want Jews to “convert” from the identification with Israel which a terrible history has stamped on modern Jewish consciousness, your attitude has more in common with the old Christian anti-semitism, which wanted to save the souls of Jews even if it had to burn their bodies, than with the racism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Insisting that you are not a racist is here a means, and perhaps also an internal psychological mechanism, for evading the plain implications of what you say. Even if you draw no practical conclusions from your demonisation of Israel, others will and do. At best there is a division of labour.

Higgins in an earlier contribution to *Workers' Liberty* showed undisguised bitterness towards Tony Cliff. He doesn't seem to notice that the worst thing Cliff did to him was to poison him with anti-semitic anti-Zionism.

Footnotes

1. My original article confused things by hanging the story on the date of Israel's declaration of independence. I argued that this was of no consequence for the process described. Jim Higgins ignores that, but repeats the point. Yet he himself made a similar inconsequential slip, seeming to date the United Nations resolution on partition not in November 1947 but in April 1948.

2. You might, developing Lenin's analysis of “Economism” and then “Imperialist Economism”, call this line “Arab Nationalist Economism” — a happy marriage of the general economic method of the SWP with Cliff's personal prejudice.

3. Of course I hold no brief for the idea that the ousted one-time leaders of the IS/SWP possess special, or even ordinary, levels of sharpness in political understanding. Rather the opposite. In a reasonably wide experience I have never elsewhere encountered anything like the Malvolio-like snobbery, self-satisfaction, and brain-pickling collective conceit, built on small achievement, that I saw in the leading circles of the IS group. Disdaining any attempt to be consistent Leninists, this group of eclectic sectarians found themselves in the late 1960s, unexpectedly and against all their previous expectations, in very favourable circumstances. They blundered about for a while, helped Cliff create a monstrosity of an organisation, wasted a tremendous and perhaps unique opportunity, and then, most of them, abandoned the field of politics to Pope Tony and his toy-town Bolshevik “party”.

They could not understand what was happening in the organisation they “led”, not even when it was pointed out to them in reasonably plain English; and they have not understood it yet. But Jim, even you can not but know that if socialism and democracy is the answer, then it can only be in the sense of working-class politics and equal rights for all nations, and therefore that demonisation of Israel is no part of it. You can not but know that what you write is grist to the mill of the SWP who would back Saddam Hussein and Assad of Syria against Israel.

4. There is a subtext in this discussion: repeated attempts to cite Hal Draper as a high authority for us against what we say now. This is a misunderstanding. On the concrete questions of the Jewish-Arab conflict such as the right of Jews to go to Palestine, the Shachtman organisation was right, in my opinion. Draper was generally right in his criticism of Israel, though a lot of what he wrote on Israel reminds me of the legendary bird without feet unable to alight, doomed forever to hover high above the ground. Draper was on our side as against Cliff, Higgins, et al. He was in favour of Israel's right to exist. James D Young tells a story of an encounter between Cliff and Draper on the question in the late '50s. After a meal in London, Draper, Cliff, Young and others are sitting around a table, the taciturn Draper silent, the talkative Cliff talking — about Israel. Suddenly Draper turns on Cliff in irritation and repudiation, and accuses him: “You want to destroy the Israeli Jews! I don't!”