

# **Marxism and karaoke- Leninism**

**Debates between the Alliance for  
Workers' Liberty and the  
CPGB/*Weekly Worker*.**

**January 2003. £1.50**

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# Introduction

This pamphlet reprints some of the main texts from the polemics between the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the CPGB (*Weekly Worker*) over the last year or so. It includes:

- A summing-up resolution on the CPGB/WW from the AWL National Committee (September 2002);
- “The politics of the a-political”, an article by Sean Matgamna on the issues raised by CPGB/WW's defence and rationalisation of the incident in Leeds on 20 September 2002 where they, on the prompting of Mike Marqusee (former editor of *Labour Briefing* and latterly active in the Stop The War Coalition), organised the exclusion (on political grounds, of our views on Israel) of the AWL from the platform of a meeting on “Marxism and religion”);
- “Never Stalinist?”, a short comment on the CPGB/WW's Stalinist background and their failure to come to terms with it;
- “Critical Notes on the CPGB/WW”, written by Sean Matgamna in September 2002;
- The exchange of polemics which took place between AWL and CPGB/WW in February-March 2002 on the question of a joint paper.

Space precludes printing all the *Weekly Worker* material relevant to these debates; a page of web links to that material is available at <http://www.workersliberty.org>.

## Resolution on the CPGB/WW, AWL National Committee, September 2002.

1. We recognise that the CPGB/WW has moved a great distance closer to Marxist politics in recent years, notably on the Stalinist states, Ireland, Israel-Palestine, Islamic fundamentalism, Europe, and the Labour Party. To the average watcher of the left, the CPGB/WW seems very close to Workers' Liberty and Solidarity. In line with our general advocacy of maximum revolutionary unity where there is agreement, maximum dialogue where there is disagreement, we want to pursue links with the CPGB/WW. We should state that we want to discuss unity, and, therefore, the key issues on which unity would depend.

2. The fact that the CPGB/WW has moved on so many issues indicates an ability to think and reassess on the part of at least its leading people. Such ability is not a common thing on the left.

3. However, there remain important political differences between us and the CPGB/WW.

a) We fight for a workers' government. They propose, as their highest political demand, only “a federal republic”. We are for a democratic federal republic. We are against pretending that republicanism, or federalism, are the key issues (or even the key democratic issues) in Britain today. We are against limiting revolutionaries' summary political demands to political-democratic issues alone.

b) We fight to transform the labour movement, and for the building of a revolutionary party as the instrument to transform the labour movement. The CPGB/WW promotes “building a Communist Party” (“without such a party the working class is nothing; with it, everything”), as if the existing labour movement were a brainless nullity. They have dropped the old baroque formula of “reforging the Communist Party of Great Britain”, but some of the old thinking evidently remains.

c) We follow Trotsky's idea that revolutionaries should “base

their programme on the logic of the class struggle”. The CPGB/WW interprets opposition to “economism” to mean that revolutionaries' task is to push into the working class “political” demands which otherwise would scarcely arise at all and to consider all “economic” concerns strictly secondary. Logically, that means that they base themselves on counterposing democracy to the state, whereas we base ourselves on counterposing the working class to capital (and fighting for consistent democracy in that framework).

d) We believe that responsiveness to the direct class struggle is the first duty of revolutionaries, and accordingly give much of our attention to workplace and trade-union work. Even a small group can make a sizeable difference (examples: our PCS comrades in the Mark Serwotka campaign; our Tube comrades). And even where and when we are too small to affect events on any large level, such work is vital simply for what we learn from it – for the training it gives us in addressing bedrock working-class concerns. The CPGB/WW considers it permissible to neglect such work simply on grounds of resources.

e) We are for developing a higher level of political life in the Socialist Alliance, i.e. developing it towards a party, but for us that policy remains in the context of our general orientation to the labour movement. The CPGB/WW interprets its stance “for an SA party” to mean that the trade unions, for example, should be addressed essentially by way of advocating that the Socialist Alliance does trade union work. If the Socialist Alliance can be got to do useful activity in the trade unions, that is excellent; but it is irresponsible to wait (a long time!) for the Alliance to develop rounded revolutionary trade union work under pressure of our urging, rather than directly discharging our duties ourselves.

4. Those political differences do not exhaust the matter. There are other political differences. Tied up with the CPGB's line “for an SA party” is much wishful thinking about the SWP changing for the better. The CPGB/WW has only moved half way on Israel-Palestine, thinking that they can couple “two states” with continued vague venom against “Zionism” and support for the Palestinian “return”. Their claim that the 1979 Afghan coup was “a real revolution” indicates continued confusion on Stalinism. There are theoretical differences. The CPGB/WW rejects transitional demands and upholds the old Stalinist-social-democratic notion of minimum and maximum programmes. It rejects permanent revolution and upholds the old cod-Leninist notion of “democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”.

And, very immediately, there are “procedural” difficulties.

a) The CPGB/WW said plainly, in a recent private perspectives document, that their aim in pursuing relations with us was to split us. They prosecute that aim, not by open polemic on the big principled questions – which would be entirely their right – but by chickenshit agitation based on scraps of private conversation. (Thus, Mark O being rude about an SWP leader, and Jill saying that she is “cool” about the Socialist Alliance, in private conversation, becomes material for long articles in the WW about the AWL being internally divided on the question of the Alliance. Meanwhile the CPGB/WW makes no attempt at all to engage with or discuss our rather copious conference and public documents on the Alliance).

b) This indicates that they preserve from their Stalinist past not just some theoretical ideas (minimum/ maximum programmes, “democratic dictatorship”, real revolution in Afghanistan) and repulsive idioms (the use of the Stalinist word “Trotskyite” to refer to the Bolshevik-Leninist-Fourth-Internationalist tradition), but conceptions of political morality too.

c) The CPGB/WW are not as open and democratic as they make themselves out to be. Thus, while we invited them to our conference, and all our conference documents are available to all to read, the CPGB/WW's perspectives document is a private text and

their discussions around it were private. That the document came into our hands caused them great chagrin. They do sometimes run internal debates in their paper, but not, it seems, whatever debates they have among their inner core.

d) The CPGB/WW's appearance of being a highly ideologically-trained and compact group selected around a definite set of ideas is also partly illusory. What holds them together is certain buzzwords, a certain "style", and a rather cultist authority granted to their "theoretical compass", namely, the "one comrade" whom they describe in their internal documents as the sole person among them doing serious theoretical work.

5. That the CPGB/WW refuse to call themselves Trotskyist – that, indeed, they choose to use the old insult-word "Trotskyite" – is significant. To call oneself Trotskyist today does not carry much positive meaning. But to insist that one is not Trotskyist means a lot – just as insisting that one is not a Marxist, or not a socialist, or not a democrat, means a lot. In the case of the CPGB/WW, the "not Trotskyist" label serves essentially as a claim to proprietorial rights over ideas which they have in fact learned from the Trotskyist, Bolshevik, Marxist tradition – a claim, in fact, ludicrous though it is when spelled out explicitly, that genuine Marxism somehow "reincarnated" itself (as in Buddhist mythology) in them after 60 or more years' absence from this unhappy planet.

6. We should pursue discussions with the CPGB/WW, making them as open and public as possible, and drawing in as much of the CPGB/WW membership and periphery as possible. Our aim here, whatever the outcomes as regards practical collaboration, is to educate and clarify. We listen and we are ready to learn new things, of course, but we go into the discussions not empty-handed but with a clear purpose to win people, individually if necessary, as a group if possible, to "Third Camp" Trotskyist politics.

## The politics of the a-political

An open letter to John Bridge/Jack Conrad and Mark Fischer,  
by Sean Matgamna

### A note to the general reader.

The incident in Leeds on September 20th 2002 was in itself — if it can be taken "in itself" — pretty trivial.

On a personal level I would, indeed, have had a right to be annoyed at being induced to travel from London to Leeds to speak in a debate on Marxism and Religion when in fact the invitation to speak had been "withdrawn". But if there was no more than that to it, I would have regarded it as only a piece of a-political personal nastiness, and put it down to experience. There would be no point in making "a federal case" out of it. I would not bore others and myself going on about it.

What happened in Leeds was not just a piece of spite by people in the Weekly Worker group whom I had offended — annoying, but of no consequence. The invitation to speak on religion and Marxism had been withdrawn because one of the other speakers objected to aspects of my politics on the Jewish-Arab conflict in the Middle East. It was a piece of political "no-platforming". That is not trivial.

The issues raised by it go to the heart of what the left is, and of what it must be, if it is ever again to become a force in working class life

"No-platforming" has no place in the democratic and pluralistic left which we are trying to build. It is not something which those who want to rebuild a thinking democratic revolutionary Marxist left will tolerate, peacefully submit to, or, when it happens, just let go with a weary shrug.

AWL does not expect to be liked for it when, confronting the dominant politics and prejudices of the left and the pseudo left, we drive wedges into painful contradictions. If there were not

something anomalous and self-contradictory, and thus potentially painful, in socialists advocating, or being willing to accept, the destruction of the Jewish nation state, then things on the left would be dire indeed. The "left" would not be a left. And, really, if you think about it, there would be no point in telling people who would not be upset by it that their politics on the Middle East constitute a variant of anti-Semitism. There would be no point in even talking to such people! I certainly would not want to talk to them.

The question is not whether people like what we say, or us for saying it, but whether what we say — in the pamphlet *Two Nations, Two States*, for instance — is true or false. That must be established by discussion and debate, not by suppression of the criticism — or the critics.

If you arrive at opinions unpopular in your milieu, then you either switch your political mind off and submit to the enervating embrace of the warm, sustaining consensus — the pressure to do this is one of the things which mechanically shores up "established" false ideas and attitudes — or, you follow the advice of Karl Marx in the introduction to *Capital*:

"As to the prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now as aforetime, the maxim of the great Florentine (Dante) is mine: Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti" (Go your way, and let the people talk.)

We will not peacefully let ourselves, or others on the left, be "no-platformed". Even when we shared the "anti-Zionism" which still dominates most of the British left, we opposed and fought against the "no-platforming" of "Zionists" (which in practice is usually the "no-platforming" of Jewish organisations and individuals). We have always defended the democratic rights of such widely disliked people as the "Sparks".

The Leeds incident throws a flood of light on the political culture of those who organised, and now defend, the no-platforming, and on the political culture of a left in which such things are not rare. The attempt by John Bridge/Jack Conrad to justify "Leeds" highlights the dire need, even amongst those who pay lip-service to democracy, pluralism and left unity, for an "educational" discussion on this issue. It also offers an opportunity to engage in it.

### COMRADES,

I had thought you perilously "thin" on real politics. I am, all the same, surprised by just how ridiculously a-political the Leeds affair has shown you to be.

In three months and many polemics you have not managed to respond **as political people** to the issues raised by us in relation to what you did in Leeds. You seem to be **unable to grasp** the politics of it. It seems to have **become a point of honour** with you not to. You bury the politics in obfuscation and increasingly loony self-righteousness.

John Bridge/Jack Conrad has just spent most of two pages (Weekly Worker 458) on "Leeds" without adding anything but obstreperous bluster to what he said weeks ago in his reply to Martin Thomas' letter in Weekly Worker.

### WHY THE NO-PLATFORMING IS POLITICALLY IMPORTANT

Why is any of this important? Why should anybody care? Not because of the inconvenience I suffered in travelling to Leeds only to be told that I had been banned from the platform. Not because the Leeds meeting itself was especially important, or because its small audience was deprived of some extraordinary new idea I had to offer them on Marxism and religion. But because principles are important and indivisible.

1. Because, as I have already said, without free-speech, democracy and pluralism — the things trampled on by the "no-platforming" in Leeds — the left will be neither healthy nor united.

2. Because the future of the left depends on the creation of a socialist movement in which these things have become the norm.

3. Because it is impossible to have a rational, politically healthy, critically self-assessing and self-correcting socialist movement without free speech, and the consistent defence of free speech.

4. Because no healthy organisation or movement can exist without the right to dissent – in this case the AWL's right to dissent from the dominant opinion of the pseudo-Leninist sects on the Middle East, and our right to make and express an assessment of that left and its politics on this question, no matter how unpleasant those so characterised may find what we say about them.

5. Because commitment to free speech, as Rosa Luxemburg used to insist, is either commitment to free speech “for the person who disagrees”, or it is a vicious hypocrisy. It is only tested when you are faced with opinions which you detest, fear, find provocative, chilling, disturbing, you-indicting, you-discrediting, you-affronting, you-upsetting, you-condemning.

6. Because we live in a political culture still saturated with Stalinist and kitsch-Trotskyist hostility to free speech, democracy and pluralism (and if the truth be told, often to reason itself and to a reason-regulated socialist politics).

7. Because we live in an archipelago of monolithic and quasi-monolithic political groups and groupuscules that, typically, are more religious than rational, more governed by feeling, and often by hysteria, than by reason. The members of these groups are schooled and habituated in submission to authority and unquestionable official truths by the prevailing norms and, where necessary, by heresy hunts. (In this case by the prohibition, which has once or twice been enforced by physical violence against AWL people, on naming as anti-Semites those who want to destroy the Jewish nation state, who denounce Jews who support Israel — the overwhelming majority of Jews — as racists, and who have, for example, campaigned to ban Jewish societies on campuses!)

8. Because, without the right of dissent, of free speech, of free inquiry, and of free discussion in the service of reason, it will be impossible to do the work of restoring a living and developing Marxist culture.

9. Because it is inconceivable that the left can unite without free speech, pluralism and reasoned discourse, free from bans and suppressions and from “great men” — and even poor little Mike Marquesees — hurling anathemas that are enforced by sycophants.

10. And finally — to get back to the Leeds affair — because those who understand all this need to practise democracy and not only prattle about it. And because those who are serious about it have an interest in sorting out the honest and consistent advocates of free speech, etc, from the mere chatterers who deal in convenient political patter.

The politics here are clear and plain. Your behaviour in the Leeds affair — that of the “new recruit”, Ray Gaston, the “National Organiser”, Mark Fischer, and the CPGB's certified Sole Maker of Theory, John Bridge/Jack Conrad — and John-Jack's commentary on it afterwards, flatly contradict everything you claim to stand for in this area. One of two things, therefore.

Either you do not really believe in the democratic principles you proclaim (if you understand them).

Or in the Leeds affair you acted in flat contradiction of your proclaimed principles — possibly because you do not understand them. (In his stupefying defence of what you did, John-Jack pisses on them!)

## **A SORT OF PRECEDENT FROM THE HISTORY OF AWL**

The Leeds affair reminds me of an episode in our organisation's history, 19 years ago, when we were in a common organisation with the Thornett group.

Being the inveterate “economists” that we are, we called a conference for trade unionists. It was a sizeable affair, in a period of serious class struggle, involving many shop stewards and industrial militants, filling the large hall at the University of London Union. We were divided on industrial perspectives.

Amongst a large platform, Alan Thornett was due to speak for the minority position — in fact, though it was not billed as that — and myself for the majority.

The hall was filling up and we were near starting time, when Alan Thornett spotted a small knot of members of the Spartacist League in the hall and, in a panic, stormed out of the meeting. He said he would refuse to speak unless they were excluded.

Now, Alan was invariably a subjective man, and not infrequently a silly one, but he had an understandable animosity to the Sparts. They had denounced him unjustly and ludicrously as “a scab” because his section of the Cowley car plant in Oxford had not joined a strike in some other section. There was a long-standing and bitter antagonism.

The Sparts were hated very widely, and banned from their meetings by most of the Marxist groups. We defended their democratic rights — for example, insisting, when we had joint meetings with such as Workers' Power, that their routine ban on the Sparts would not apply.

Thornett's walk out, just as the meeting was due to start, faced us with a major dilemma. He represented a third of our organisation, who would back him, whatever he did.

They were a personality cult, a fan club, around Alan more than a political formation. When he said: “it's black!”, they would all say “it is black, very black!”. Especially those who had, five minutes before, been passionately insisting: “it's white, palpably, astonishingly white!”

There was a great deal of factional tension in our ranks. An immediate split was possible. Our side had spent 18 months trying to avoid a split and it would be another six months before we would give up on them and initiate the unavoidable split. If Thornett had taken his walkout beyond a gesture to bully us into agreeing to ban the Sparts, a sizeable part of the organisation would have gone with him.

A small matter, then, you might think, to bar half a dozen much-despised aggressive sectarians. A small price to avoid disruption.

We did not think so. Important principles were involved. There were massive implications for working class democracy and for the conduct of the affairs of the left in what Alan wanted to do to the people he had good reason to hate. We refused to bar the Sparts.

Now in any political reckoning that conference was at least ten thousand times more important than the parish meeting in Leeds. The empirical case for not risking having it disrupted was proportionately that much greater too. But to surrender the norms of working class democracy for which our organisation — our section of the organisation — stood was, we decided without any hesitation or agonising over it, too high a price to pay. If there was to be disruption, then so be it. We would face it and sort it out.

With the conference ready to start, we convened an emergency meeting of the organisation's Executive and faced down Thornett and his supporters. His nerve failed and he decided to speak after all.

If we had done anything less, it would have amounted to ratting on our own politics in pursuit of a short-term convenience.

## **THE GAP BETWEEN OUR POLITICAL CULTURES**

Talking to you about the politics of the “no-platforming” you organised in Leeds reminds me unpleasantly of the sort of argument which republicans sometimes have to have with a certain type of monarchist — people who have no principles or worked out political philosophy on this question, and with whom we lack both a common political background and a common language.

When we talk about democratic principle, about the negative implications for equality and freedom in our society of the fact that we have a hereditary Head of State, they respond with arguments about the supposed advantages and conveniences of the monarchy (“the Queen”). But doesn’t “The Queen”, “help the country” by boosting tourism? Or — more “left wing” monarchists — “would you prefer to have someone like Margaret Thatcher as President of a UK Republic?”

When we talk about the moral and political repugnance we feel for the idea of hereditary rulers — even token rulers — and the need to promote consistent democracy, our concerns are scarcely comprehensible to them. We say that even if abolishing the monarch would cut tourist revenue, it would be a price well worth paying, that there are higher things involved — and they simply don’t understand what we are talking about, our approach, our mind-set, our principles.

An enormous gap in political culture divides us, it seems.

The AWL-CPGB/Weekly Worker dispute about the Leeds affair has been that sort of discussion. For us the Leeds affair, trivial though the incident was “in itself”, has enormous implications for democracy, pluralism and left unity. You profess to share our commitment to democracy, pluralism, open discussion, left unity, etc. etc., yet you seem quite unable to take in what we are saying. You make no attempt **as political people to political people** to answer us on what concerns us.

And just as one sometimes in exasperation feels like shouting at the obtuse “practical” monarchist: “It is a matter of democratic principle, you obstreperous dim-wit! A question of the health of public life!”, so with you, going on about the petty details and conveniences of Father Gaston organising his parish meeting in Leeds. It is a matter of political principle! It involves the democratic health of the labour movement and of the left!

For us, it is of immense importance that there should be democracy, pluralism, the right to dissent, and the right to offend and outrage the susceptibilities of majorities and their consensus-truths. Without that there can never be a Left worth having, and certainly not a united left.

**We are concerned with establishing democracy and pluralism because we are concerned with selecting, educating and uniting the real revolutionary Marxist left in one Leninist organisation.**

You now say that “Leeds” is an outrage, “a provocation”. **Not what you did in Leeds, but that we indict you for it!** That we call it by its proper name — a “no platforming”. How dare anyone call you, the true and authentic CPGB, to account on a question on which you know yourselves to be immaculate? Working class democracy? It is you. Whatever you do!

A “cock-up” or a conspiracy? You brought in the idea of “a conspiracy”. I think what happened is that you blundered your way into it, with your political wits, and your memory of what you are supposed to stand for, blunted by a combination of bad feeling over my mocking and debunking “Critical Notes on the CPGB/WW”, and an habitually a-political way of relating to people like Gaston and Marqusee; and then, since Popes are infallible, John-Jack found it impossible to admit that he was seriously in the wrong. (Though, of course, the political prerequisite for what happened in Leeds was that both your democratic instincts and your democratic principles are less robust than they need to be for the political work you say you want to do.)

In the interests of a parish meeting in Leeds (and of not falling out with your new recruit Father Ray Gaston) you operated politically motivated sanctions against AWL, trampling on the norms of democracy and pluralism, and on the prerequisites of the left unity you claim to promote.

You also showed yourselves, in terms of the political issue in dispute between Marqusee and us, to be thoroughly unprincipled

people (assuming you understand the political principles involved in the Middle East: increasingly I doubt that you do).

You then ran away from the political implications of what you had done by defining it vaguely as a “cock up” and suppressing discussion of it in your paper. You continue to run away from the politics of the affair now by taking refuge in daffy organisational solipsism: the politics don’t matter any more because now your “Party” is under attack. “Leeds” is a “provocation” against The Party!

## THE BASIC POLITICAL FACTS ABOUT WHAT YOU DID IN LEEDS

The political issues involved in this business are as important as the reiteration of detail is, by now, tedious. **Yet the basic facts that constitute the political core of the case you have to answer are not in dispute** (though some inconsequential detail may be). Evidently, it is necessary to spell out the political issues to you as one would — and this is surely the point — with newcomers to the democratic politics you proclaim. I will go through **the politically important aspects of it** point by point, in the simplest terms, taking nothing for granted.

1. A member of your organisation, Father Ray Gaston, complied with a demand from Mike Marqusee, then a fellow-traveller of the SWP, to exclude me as a platform speaker from his parish debate. Why? Because Marqusee objects to my opinion that those who advocate the destruction of Israel are effectively anti-Semites. The projected debate — on Marxism and religion — had nothing to do with the Middle East.

The customary name for this sort of thing is “no platforming”. **A no-platforming is a politically motivated ban. It can take different forms, from the physical disruption of a meeting to, as in this case, “disinviting” a speaker under pressure of a politically motivated ultimatum.** No-platforming “Zionists”, which in practice has always meant attempting to “no-platform” Jews — for example, banning Jewish Societies in colleges — was an activity of the pseudo-left for many years.

Mike Marqusee demanded the “no-platforming”; but it was the CPGB at every level, from the “new recruit” to the national leadership of your organisation, that organised it.

2. Ray Gaston discussed Marqusee’s demand and its motivation with the Weekly Worker group’s “National Office”, namely the National Organiser, Mark Fischer. The “National Office” endorsed in advance what Gaston proposed to do and undertook to help him by providing a replacement for the “no platformed” speaker. **The national office thereby took political and practical, responsibility for the “no-platforming**

3. Possessing full knowledge of the “no-platforming” and the political motivation for it, John Bridge/Jack Conrad, the acknowledged political leader of the CPGB/WW, helped implement and enforce it by speaking in the debate from which I had been “no-platformed”.

4. When Martin Thomas of the AWL wrote a group-to-group letter to the CPGB/WW protesting at what had happened and asking for an explanation, you immediately published it in Weekly Worker. Evidently **that was a way of avoiding a group to group accounting. You never replied on a group to group level.**

5. At an aggregate of the WW group, held not long after the Leeds affair, people were uneasy about it, and the general feeling was that the no-platforming had been wrong and should not have happened. Those politically responsible apparently offered the throw-away a-political explanation that it was “only a cock up”, a mistake, a bungled action, “not a conspiracy”. This line, “a mistake, but a cock up”, was accepted. It seems to have been understood that the “mistake” was Ray Gaston’s and that the affair concerned only his church.

6. Mark Fischer and Marcus Strom told me (at the Socialist Alliance euro conference), that the CPGB/WW had certainly been

in the wrong, but that it had been “a cock up and not a conspiracy”. They told me that they were willing to say that publicly. Assuming that they were talking for the WW group, I responded with: “All right then, let it go. Shit happens.” That was before I read John/Jack’s statement in the Weekly Worker.

7. In that statement, replying to Martin Thomas’ group-to-group letter, which had been rushed into Weekly Worker, John-Jack paid lip-service to the feeling of the CPGB aggregate that something undesirable had been done. “Leeds” had been a “cock up”, he said.

Having nodded towards “cock up”, he then by way of sympathetic explanation — including a lie to make Mike Marqusee’s posture seem more reasonable — justified and endorsed Mike Marqusee, Ray Gaston, Mark Fischer and himself. A “perhaps it would have been better if...”, here and there, was all he would concede to the idea that anything substantially wrong had actually been done.

It was a “cock up”, but it was a blameless, and, so to speak, a “victimless” cock up. When John makes a cock up, it isn’t a cock up where anything really gets cocked up. John-Jack, like Julius Caesar “doth not do wrong without good cause”. When Jack does wrong, is not wrong! His cock ups are, close up, not like other people’s cock ups! His “cock ups” are literary devices, insubstantial excuses.

In the one area where there was or may have been a real cock up, and where the idea of a cock up might reasonably have been looked to for an explanation of what had happened — Ray Gaston’s failure to communicate with me — John-Jack denied any cock up. He implied that I was lying when I said I received no notification from Ray Gaston, adding a detail I had not heard before: I had not only definitely received a voice-mail message from Ray Gaston, but a “long” one. John-Jack knew.

His sympathetic explanation of Ray Gaston’s point of view, qualified by a not-quite-decided “perhaps it would have been better if...”, added up to the startling argument that a “star draw”, as Mike Marqusee was defined as being, had a right to throw his weight about and have his wishes complied with by Ray Gaston, and by the CPGB/WW. Implicitly, **that there are powerful people whose wishes override the norms of democracy and pluralism and the demands of left unity.** That it is reasonable for realists and “operators” like yourselves to comply with their demands, and out of order for people like us to object to being no-platformed!

In the course of sucking up to Mike Marqusee, Jack-John lied that AWL defines all advocates of a one-state programme for the Middle East — an Arab state with only religious rights for surviving Jews — as anti-Semites. No we don’t. For the politics of the no-platforming episode, it would make no difference if we did say that, but in fact we don’t. (See the pamphlet “Two Nations, Two States”.)

8. You refused to publish my reply to Bridge. The discussion was “closed”. Alternatively, the reply (at about 3,000 words, the length of an average middle-length Weekly Worker article) was too long. (But I was not asked to cut it to a more acceptable length: at any length a critical analysis of the politics of John Bridge’s statement was not acceptable.)

**Having rushed to make the Leeds affair into a public discussion by putting Martin Thomas’ “group-to-group” letter immediately into Weekly Worker, you were equally precipitate in running away from the public discussion you had started.**

That reply (not my “Critical Notes on the CPGB/Weekly Worker”) is the text AWL felt we had a democratic right to have published in the same forum as Bridge’s piece. **Your refusal to publish it was a tacit admission that the Weekly Worker is not the “open forum” for the left which you sometimes like to pretend it is: it is the patrolled property of a sect which will not**

**publish criticism of its leaders which they feel they cannot answer.** John/Jack now says it explicitly.

These eight points tell the basic story and encompass everything in it that is politically important. **The political questions you have to answer arise out of these facts.** They are undisputed. Only detail — like what people’s motives were, what they meant to do, and how much they understood of what they actually did while they were doing it, etc. — are in dispute.

**None of the disputed details affect the politics of the basic story presented in the 8 points above.**

None of the things quibbled about — for example, precisely what passed between John-Jack and Mark Fischer, what exactly happened with Ray Gaston’s “voice mail” to me, etc., etc., etc. — takes from or adds to the basic politics of this story.

**The things outlined here happened. Nobody invented them. Nobody exaggerates them out of their real shape. Nobody denies they happened.**

**Nothing here depends on a special construction put on events that can reasonably be construed otherwise.**

Nothing politically germane is missing.

The politics of the thing would still be the same even if Ray Gaston had contacted me and I had not been allowed to travel from London to Leeds before being told of the “no platforming”. Personally, I have a right to be annoyed at having made a senseless 400 mile train journey to Leeds and back, but politically it would make no difference if I had only walked a hundred yards up the road.

Politically, it doesn’t matter what exactly people’s motives were, or how much they understood at the time of the implications of what they were doing. It doesn’t matter whether or not the Weekly Worker leadership and Ray Gaston said to each other, “Let’s no-platform Sean.” I’d be surprised to learn that you did. Whatever about that, the political point is: “no-platform” me is precisely what you did!

But nothing depends on agreeing to call what happened a “no-platforming”. Even if we were to agree to drop the common name for it, “no platforming”, this suppression of democracy and pluralism by way of a politically motivated exclusion would still be what it is.

The political substance of it will not change if we stop calling it a “no-platforming” and agree to call it “a cock up”.

“No-platforming” describes and defines a political event; a “cock up” is an explanation of how and why it happened. They are not mutually exclusive. If it was a “cock up”, then it was not a “conspiracy”. But the idea that if it was a “cock up” then it wasn’t a “no platforming” is the equivalent of saying: “no, it wasn’t Friday, it was two o’clock!”

It is an attempt to sink the politics of it in personal motivation, to deny its political significance by pretending that nothing matters but what the organisers of the no-platforming tell us were their **intentions.** It is solipsism not politics.

It is to let subjectivism devour politics.

I repeat: the details on to which you have tried to deflect discussion of the affair such as, for example, whether John/Jack heard of the politics of the affair from Mark Fischer or learnt of it only when he **got** to Leeds (when in fact it is not in dispute that he knew before he spoke at All Hallows church) can neither add to nor detract from the politics of the undisputed story outlined above:

**I was “no platformed”; the CPGB/Weekly Worker organised it; it involved not a “new recruit” acting alone, but the core national leadership of the Weekly Worker group.**

Of course many secondary aspects of the affair have been omitted from the bare-bones outline of the story above, including things that are politically significant. Primarily:

1. The fact that neither Leeds AWL nor I were told about the political dimension to it — that Marqusee

wanted me banned from the platform because of AWL's views on Israel, not because of the mysterious "bad experience in the past", which Ray Gaston muttered to me about when I arrived at the meeting – until some days afterwards. (By way of Mark Fischer and John Bridge, speaking to Martin Thomas).

2. The very strange fact that in the basic political dispute between AWL and Mike Marqusee — two states as against the destruction of Israel — the CPGB/Weekly Worker professes to agree with those against whom they organised the "no platforming"! Here, as well as in the "no-platforming", your behaviour displayed a startling lack of political awareness and of political principle.

3. The fact that you insisted until recently that the explanation for the contradiction between Ray Gaston's insistence that he had left a message and the fact that I had not received was that I had, indeed, received a message from Ray Gaston cancelling the speaking engagement and, knowing that, had nevertheless, gone to Leeds. This fed the idea that it was all somehow a contrived, got-up affair, "a provocation against the CPGB"! In my reply to John-Jack which you refused to publish, I listed a wrong number as one possible explanation. John-Jack now says that is what happened. Ray Gaston did in fact phone a wrong number. It is typical of both your political manners, your political morality and your polemical style that there is not one word of retraction or apology for the venomous nonsense of your earlier accounts of my behaviour.

#### **WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE DONE IF YOU WERE PRINCIPLED PEOPLE (OR, PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTOOD THE PRINCIPLES YOU PROCLAIM),**

What would the Weekly Worker group have done if you were principled people who took the politics you proclaim (on both democracy and on the Middle East) seriously?

You would have chosen one of two basic responses to the problem which Ray Gaston took to your "National Office" some days before the date of the meeting.

1. Ray Gaston would have been told that what he did was entirely his own parochial affair; that your organisation neither approved nor would take responsibility for what he proposed to do; that you would not help him in any way to organise or implement the "no platforming"; that you would not defend him afterward. **You would make sure he understood that you were not saying he was right in the circumstances, only that, right or wrong, it was his, not the organisation's, affair.**

2. Alternatively, Ray Gaston would have been told that important principles were involved: that for him and you to comply with Marqusee's ultimatum **would be to let Marqusee impose the norms and procedures of the authoritarian left on the CPGB**, and on relations between the CPGB/WW and AWL; that to accept and implement Marqusee's demand to "no-platform" me was therefore a political act with implications far larger than the petty incident itself; that **such an act could not but be the responsibility of the political organisation to which he belonged; that, this being so, such a thing could not be regarded by you as purely his parish business.**

That, therefore, he had to make a political decision and not an administrative one based narrowly on what he thought best for this parish meeting — **that neither he nor his political organisation could make a choice that would outrage the principles of free speech, pluralism and left unity for which you stand.**

The organisation would have forbidden him to comply with Marqusee's demands and told him to allow Marqusee, if he persisted, to exclude himself from the debate.

If Ray Gaston insisted that the well-being, as he saw it, of his parish meeting was the overriding consideration, he would have been told that **such an argument could not be offered or accepted by serious political people.**

If he still persisted he would be told he was losing the political plot, or had yet to find it. You would see it as important business of yours to help the "new recruit" find it...

In addition, "the new recruit" would have been reminded that in the basic dispute on the politics of the Middle-East, the CPGB shares the AWL's commitment to Two States and rejects and opposes all proposals to deprive the Israeli Jewish nation of national rights.

He would be reminded that advocates of Two States on the revolutionary left are surrounded by vociferous anti-Israelis campaigning for a 'secular democratic state' in all of pre-1948 Palestine, people functioning as vicarious Arab, and often now, vicarious Islamic, chauvinists.

He would be told that it is a prime political duty of an organisation holding your politics on the Middle East to discuss the basic politics of the Middle East and to refuse to let the real or simulated anger of those told by AWL that they are implicitly anti-semitic obscure the basic political issues.

He would be told, to quote J-J, in Weekly Worker 460 (Dec 12th, 2002) that your position is this: "To call for Israel's abolition is unMarxist. Such a programme is either naive utopianism or genocidal". (But for you to tell him the implications of such an idea, you yourself would have to understand it: as it is, this all-conditioning judgement is buried in reams of incoherent bumph in the WW piece).

No principled political organisation would have done anything less.

These were the two basic courses open to you. Plainly number two was the right one. Taking the first would have been politically irresponsible, and it would have involved you in impossible contradictions: it would still have been a "no platforming" organised by a member of your group. If we chose to make a fuss about it you would then either have had to defend Ray Gaston — and your own bizarre decision to leave it to the "new recruit" — or repudiate him, breaking with the "new recruit" and thereby retrospectively (God forbid!) criticising yourselves too.

Even so, if you had taken the first course and stuck to it consistently, up to and including not defending Ray Gaston (still less sycophantically "explaining", implicitly justifying and defending Mike Marqusee!) then your behaviour would have had a sort of coherence.

Even if we thought the decision to leave the "new recruit" on his own a strange and politically irresponsible one, we could not say you were unprincipled, or call you dirty little buggers.

But in fact you mixed up the two options. On the one hand, you took political and organisational responsibility for the no-platforming, and defended it and yourselves afterward. On the other hand, you are still trying to shift the entire responsibility on to the "new recruit".

Whatever happened to the idea that the leaders take overall responsibility? In this case leaders who endorsed the no platforming in advance and helped organise that for which they retrospectively want to lay all the responsibility on the "new recruit". The leaders of a troop of scouts would behave better!

Half-way competent political leaders would have seen the political implication of "Leeds" as soon as they heard what Mike Marqusee was demanding and what Ray Gaston proposed to do. Dim and incompetent political leaders would see the political implications when they were pointed out to them.

If they were honest people who believe in their own proclaimed politics and pursue serious political goals, they would, having made a "cock up", evaluate their own behaviour in the light of their proclaimed principles. They would then extricate

themselves from a politically untenable and destructive position by admitting their deficiency. **By doing that they would be reiterating the principles of democracy, pluralism and left unity, and renewing their own commitment to the norms which were violated in the Leeds affair.**

In that way too, not only would they themselves learn from this episode, but others would not be miseducated by the example of what they had done and their attempts to justify it

### **‘COCK UP’ OR ‘CONSPIRACY’?**

The idea that “Leeds” was on your side an innocent “cock up”, a mistake, a bungled action, and on ours a cynical “provocation” against the CPGB is rooted in a profoundly a-political approach to politics.

A “cock up?” There is only one sense in which it could have been a “cock up” — in fact a series of “cock ups”: if, for reasons of haste or pressure, or whatever, you simply did not properly understand what was being done or its political implications.

For the Leeds business to have been a “cock up”, a bungled action, the following would have to be true. First, the priest in his church, then the National Organiser in his National Office and, finally, John-Jack up in the Theoretical Workshop on Mount Olympus, each of you separately and all of you together, did not know what was being done, or what you yourselves were doing! Each and all of you saw no politics in the imposition of a political ban for stated political reasons!

But none of you acted in haste — you had days before the Leeds meeting to sort yourselves out — or without discussing it with each other. **Mark Fischer and John-Jack did not act under any pressure greater than the urge not to inconvenience “the new recruit” or offend Mike Marqusee.**

Now, I know myself to be someone who has great difficulty doing two things at once: I can not read Lenin and open a packet of gum at the same time! I’m sure that I am capable of absent-mindedly stumbling into half-doing something like you did in Leeds. But I couldn’t possibly do all that the leaders of the CPGB/WW did without becoming aware of it, without catching myself on, however belatedly. The same is surely true of any half-way aware political person.

**The idea that what happened in the Leeds business was just a “cock up” amounts to a plea for understanding and sympathy on the grounds that the leaders of your organisation are prize political idiots!**

Right now, I don’t feel any overwhelming need to disagree with you on that. But you can’t “plead” that and still expect political people to take you seriously.

You put yourself in the case of the repentant ex-Stalinist McCarthyite witch-hunters of whom Max Shachtman said that their “pitch” amounted to saying: “We’ve been absolute idiots during our 20 years as Stalinists, unbelievably stupid, mind-bogglingly slow to understand — until now! Now we know it all! Now we can be trusted to understand and explain everything, especially the international communist conspiracy! Now you must listen to us!” It is nothing more than a “provocation” against the CPGB!

If you were that slow on the uptake and so astonishingly dim about the politics of “Leeds”, if you didn’t understand the issues raised by Marqusee’s demand on you to no-platform me, how can you ask anyone to have political confidence in you on other matters, most of them far more complicated than “Leeds”?

### **WHAT YOU’D HAVE DONE IF IT WERE A ‘COCK UP’**

What would you have done if it really were a cock-up, a mistake, a “bungled action”? What would you have said?

1. If it had been a real “cock up”, a confused, unwitting action, then serious people would have been concerned with spelling out

how and why, politically, you had been wrong, and with undoing the inadvertent damage.

2. You would have coupled the explanation, “a cock up”, with an unambivalent admission that you were wrong, and an account of why. You would not have taken refuge in, “Oh, a cock up!”, as an all-purpose evasion of the politics of what had happened. You would know that without detailed explanation and analysis, talk of a “cock up” here is a form of lying by evasion.

3. You would not have justified Gaston’s decision, or your own role in it and in implementing the “no platforming”.

4. You would not have “explained” and justified Marqusee’s demand for a “no-platforming”, still less would you have lied like sycophants about what we say vis-a-vis the left and anti-Semitism in order to make him seem reasonable in making it.

5. You would have made an honest analysis — in the first place for your own instruction — of exactly **how you could** make a “cock-up” which involved acting in flat contradiction with your proclaimed democratic principles. You would have explained how you could first have suffered such a failure of democratic reflexes — at the very idea of a no-platforming”! — and then forgotten your democratic principles while you worked the “no platforming”.

6. You would, within your own group at least, have analysed the mechanics of what had happened, and indicated exactly who bore what degree of the responsibility for it.

7. You would not have published John-Jack’s statement.

8. You would not have bureaucratically terminated discussion of the issue in WW.

If you had thought that we were artificially inflating the matter for an ulterior purpose, you would have felt confident of being able to demonstrate that, as well as your own political honesty and good will, in the course of a reasoned political discussion of the things which people with whom you still say you want to publish a common newspaper (!) said concerned them.

9. You would not, under pressure, have taken refuge in the a-political hyper-nonsense that “Leeds”, which on your side was only a “cock up”, was on ours nothing but a “provocation against the party”. You would notice that “cock-up” and “provocation” are here mutually exclusive, that they contradict each other: if it was a “cock up” on your part — something that had been done wrong — then it wasn’t a provocation on ours.

### **WHAT HAS GIVEN THE AWL-CPGB/WW DISPUTE ITS DYNAMIC?**

You seem to have a culture in which “leaders” can’t admit (except inadvertently!) to being grossly wrong or protractedly stupid. That, since John-Jack’s response to Martin’s letter, is what has given its underlying dynamic to this conflict. If the response of Mark and Marcus (to me at the SA conference) had been your organisation’s response, then we’d have let the matter drop. They both know I said that to them then: “let it go”.

But John-Jack couldn’t let it go. Why?

The admission that there had been a “cock up” was an admission that something undesirable, and even reprehensible, had happened. In that case, someone was to blame. Blaming — while excusing — the “new recruit” for a political cock up” in which the central WW group leaders had been involved, indeed pivotal, left all the political questions unanswered; and yet, it implied answers.

In any organisation made up of thinking people, if something happens that shouldn’t have happened, if something goes seriously wrong, then the leaders involved in it will, whatever is “officially” said, be known to be responsible. People aren’t fools.

Thus, while calling it a “cock up” served to evade an immediate political accounting, and may have made life easier for the leadership at your aggregate, it did not close off the certainty that the politics, the missing political dimension to the fault already admitted — the “cock up” which was nothing less than the crass



departure from their declared principles by the WW group leaders — would privately be filled in.

The same with the idea that it had only been the concern of Father Gaston's church: in political terms a ludicrous fiction, that every thinking person would see for what it was.

It would leave in some comrades' minds the impression that a serious falling off had occurred from what they think is CPGB policy on pluralism, democracy, etc. Blame for the politics of the "cock up" would naturally and properly fall on the senior CPGB/Weekly Worker figure involved, John-Jack.

The discussion of the Leeds affair at the CPGB/WW aggregate thus contained the seeds of all that has followed.

It made it necessary for "the leadership" to minimise as much as possible the substantive fault being admitted to under the evasive formula, a "cock up".

From that came the character of John-Jack's statement on Leeds in WW. It was John-Jack's "pronunciamento" against AWL, but also against the CPGB/WW aggregate.

It took the modest form of a letter, but it was, so to speak, a papal "letter", an authoritative summing up, after which there could be no discussion (though that was not made clear until I sent in a reply).

Vaguely admitting to a "cock up", John-Jack denied that there had been any substantial fault at all!

This, the rest of the statement that began with mumblings about a "cock up", was at pains to make clear, was that peculiar variety of "cock up", the cock up in which nothing had been done wrong. (Except that I refused to admit that I had had a voicemail from Ray Gaston telling me not to go to Leeds...). Indeed, one could, John-Jack carefully explained, see even Marqusee's point of view...

But evasively admitting to an undefined cock-up while in substance denying that anything had actually been done wrong, was not something that would stand critical scrutiny. Thus the ban on an AWL reply in WW. It was designed to sustain it in the only way it could be sustained, artificially, so to speak, behind high tariff walls, with all competing interpretation of "Leeds" shut out!

(And, by the way, if you are looking for "provocations", in the normal and not the vintage Stalinist-jargon sense of the word, that "letter" is surely a good example. Did you think we would just ignore it?)

Thus, John-Jack dug himself deeper into the political hole and pulled the rest of you in after him. Mark and Marcus turned round 180 degrees and now say the opposite of what they first said: now "Leeds" was nothing but "a provocation against the CPGB" (which shows just what that sort of operation in a cultist organisation can do to your head!)

### **'IT'S A PROVOCATION AGAINST THE PARTY!'**

As you started in this affair, so it seems you mean to go on — determinedly avoiding the political questions. First, you run away from discussing the Leeds affair. But, since we pursue you, clamouring, running away doesn't work. You have to make a stand. So, belatedly you agree to discuss the politics of the affair? God forbid!

No, you will discuss not the politics of what you did in Leeds, but the political significance of the fact that we indict you for it. Change the subject!

Politics? The Party is under attack! That is the important question now, comrades. Politics? The Party!

The politics of your "no platforming" me in Leeds? A "cock up"! The politics of our calling you to order over it? Nothing less than a "provocation against the party"! ("Provocation", as in: "slave labour camps in Russia? How dare you! That's a provocation against the Soviet Union!")

Never mind what's true, just remember which side you are supposed to be on! Rally round the party. Rally round The Leadership! The test of real loyalty is to back them when you know

they are unprincipled, tawdry, wrong on the issue being discussed! That is true partyism!

Thus you seek the equivalent of a shoddy Parliamentary "vote of confidence" inside the "CPGB"!

Where exactly is the "provocation"? In our protest about what you did in Leeds? In our refusal to accept your right to suppress discussion about it?

In our insistence on drawing out the politics of what you want to pretend was a random series of political events which you insist have no political significance?

I have difficulty in grasping why you, self-proclaimedly political people, think you have the right to respond, with this dollop of decrepit old-time de-politicised Stalinist jargon — "a provocation!" — to the political questions raised by us about the Leeds affair.

Or are you still saying — as at first you implied, with your repeated assertion that I went to Leeds despite having had a voice-mail message from Ray Gaston — that the whole thing was somehow "arranged" by AWL to put the Weekly Worker in a bad light?

Unless you are still saying that, then the idea of a "provocation" is only daft rhetoric from the Stalin school of a-political "politics" — mildly paranoid rhetoric.

"My party, right or wrong" will for a while rally loyal members around the "CPGB" leadership. But it is not a cry that will serve you outside your own ranks. Quite the opposite: it will define you as an a-political sect, and with more than your fair share of paranoia.

Observers will not fail to notice that you have substituted an assertion of your own primal importance and an appeal to "party" patriotism for politics. Politics, the politics of democracy, pluralism and left unity? You are above politics! Serious people will draw the appropriate conclusions about the nature of your organisation from that.

### **AND WHAT OF THE FUTURE?**

What of the future?

AWL itself is not organised as a collection of friends and chums, but as a selection of political militants operating according to agreed rules. We work with other organisations not on a basis of being chummy, or a diplomatic agreement to be silent about each others features and faults, but according to political indications.

Where you and ourselves have agreement, there is no reason in principle why there should not be cooperation.

In principle, other things being equal, a joint paper is, on our side, not ruled out. But surely it is ruled out from yours?

Or would you expect in a joint paper to still be able to defend and assert yourselves as you have in the Leeds affair (a papal statement, followed by a ban on discussion, followed by, so far, eight pages of John-Jack Stalinist rantings, which can not be discussed either, except, perhaps, in short letters)? I have difficulty believing you really think you would.

In a joint publication you would have surrendered the power to protect yourselves from criticism, rebuttal and debunking, other than by way of reason and argument. Performances like John-Jack's ridiculous Stalinist war-dancing and chest-thumping in recent WWs would, if we published them at all, be subject, in the same forum, to the ridicule they deserve.

A formation such as the CPGB/WW, the sort of grouping that the Leeds affair and its aftermath has shown the Weekly Worker group to be, could not survive such conditions, either in a joint paper or a joint organisation. In an atmosphere where you could not limit rebuttals and criticism — and ridicule! — to things you felt able to answer, where you would be at the mercy of irony and mockery without benefit of being able to declare such things "anti-party" and suppress them — the sort of mockery and debunking

that so upset you in my “Critical Notes on the CPGB/WW”— you would dissolve and fall apart.

(And you protest your indifference a little too much when you repeatedly insist that the “Critical Notes” did not upset you. Following three pieces by Mark Fischer, a large part of John-Jack’s current series is devoted to answering what you did not dare publish, except in filleted, carefully chosen and, in some instances, trimmed, quotations. If this is how you respond when I write something that fills you with indifference — raging indifference! — what will you do if I ever succeed in engaging your full attention?)

You must, if only instinctively, know all this. Therefore, I suspect, your talk about wanting a joint paper is likely to prove no more reliable than your commitment to democracy, pluralism and left unity proved to be in the Leeds affair.

Simultaneously with any future collaboration, we will of course, continue to try and sort you out politically by way of a criticism and commentary that will be as “rude”, vigorous and uncomplimentary as it needs to be. We recognise, of course, that you have the same right. We will use the occasion, and polemics such as this, for educational purposes.

We will take offence, if we do, not at the fact of your polemics against us, but at their political quality; we will point out the **political** significance of John-Jack’s oracular rantings in the junior-school magazine parody of the Stalinist version of Lenin’s style for which he is justly celebrated.

One potentially good thing about the current flare up is that you have been tempted out of the safety of silence on Afghanistan, and detailed discussion is now possible. You will recall that your refusal to discuss Afghanistan was one of the incidents in the worsening of relations between AWL and your organisation. Progress! Maybe.

Yours fraternally,

Sean Matgamna.

21 Dec., 2002

#### **APPENDIX: DITA SARI AND TONY BENN**

What, asks Marcus Strom, if Dita Sari insisted on no-platforming someone, wouldn’t we comply? This is presented as if the answer is self-evidently: “of course we’d comply”? Would we? All the issues of principle I outline here would still be in play. True, something rather more weighty than the petulance of a Marqusee would be in play on the other side.

Even so, I can’t see that we would allow even a Dita Sari to impose the norms of the authoritarian left on us. In fact, it is improbable that Dita Sari would make any such demand. She is of a labour movement that still has to struggle for such things as free speech...

A more telling hypothetical case is this: what if Tony Benn when, at the beginning of the 1980s, he was leading the Labour left had tried the “no platforming” game?

It was a movement inextricably linked to his personality, and even more so the campaign to elect Benn as Deputy Leader of the Labour Party — a major episode in the history of the political Labour Movement. We, Socialist Organiser, were heavily involved and one of us — John Bloxam — was the National Organiser of the “Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Party Democracy”, which organised most of the Labour left and in which Benn was the “star performer”.

We had sharp and sometimes bitter disagreements with Benn — on the issue of Europe for example (and, oddly, with the ex-government minister of the 1960s and ‘70s, over his softness on the USSR, and even on his attitude to Solidarnosc).

At the beginning of the 1980s, getting Britain out of the European Union was presented as central to defeating the Thatcherites. That was massively the dominant position on the left. We were very much in a minority in rejecting it. The weekly paper Socialist Organiser — which, though it was the paper of the

Labour hard Left, was controlled by us — presented and argued for our politics on the question: for European Union working class unity against the Little Englanders and the Germanophobes.

We did it in part by way of promoting debate and dialogue on the question, including interview-discussions with Tony Benn himself. I polemicised openly against Benn in Socialist Organiser. And the issue was very important to him. In 1975, he had led the Labour left to political disaster by campaigning for a “no” vote in Harold Wilson’s referendum on the European Union. We had opposed and fought against the “No” campaign (we were for abstention).

Suppose Benn had decided he was “tired of being called a Little Englander and a Germanophobe”, and that he wanted to bar those who held that view of him from “his” platforms, his Deputy Leadership campaign, or from his RFMC?

In the real case we could hardly have cheerfully agreed to “no platform” ourselves. (And Benn couldn’t have made such a demand without seriously disrupting the campaign). But suppose we agreed with him on the European Union — or whatever — and he wanted to “no platform” others? Wouldn’t Benn’s centrality in the whole Labour left of the time have made him irresistible on it?

I don’t think so. The principles would have been the same — and just as important. The whole character of the movement we were building would have been posed. If someone had said: “The movement, the enormous meetings Benn can attract, comes first,” that would simply have begged the more fundamental questions: “What sort of movement? Can an authoritarian movement or an authoritarian-personality cult movement do the work we are trying to do?”

We would have opposed Benn. We would either have refused in our capacity as organisers of the campaign to comply with his demands, or, if we were too weak to do that, and, for whatever combination of reasons, had to tolerate it while remaining in the campaign, we would have started a public discussion in Socialist Organiser on the rights and wrongs of “no platforming” — the sort of discussion we initiated on a number of important questions.

Had Benn made such a demand, I imagine that those of us who worked hard at not being “doctrinaire” and inflexible in our relations with Labour leftists we knew to be politically very alien to us (not least in their typical softness on Stalinism) would have tried evasions and manoeuvres to avoid breaking with him.

It is inconceivable to me that, evasions failing, we would have complied, if we complied, in a way that would have involved taking political responsibility; or, having complied — for weakness of character, opportunism, irresolution, bad feeling towards Benn’s target, confusion, or for reasons of rational, politically honourable political calculation, whatever — that we would then have assumed the role of apologists for what Benn had forced through, dwelling on how unreasonable it was of his opponents to call him a Little Englander, a soft Stalinist, or whatever the issue was. We would not in any circumstances have played sycophant, or political sycophant, to him.

In fact, Benn never did anything remotely like that. Occasionally giving vent to ill-feeling and political irritation, as he was entitled to do, he conducted himself as a democrat.

I suspect that some of the Weekly Worker group’s leading people will at this point be muttering to each other: “Rotten Liberal!” No: the rottenness is in the unreflecting authoritarianism, the reflex sycophancy, as inappropriate as it is pitiable, and the poverty of political culture displayed in the Leeds affair and its aftermath.

#### **Footnote**

Of course the bracketing of Mike Marqusee with Dita Sari is preposterous. That idea tells you more about the Weekly Worker group than it does about Mike Marqusee, who has bummed around on the fringes of the left for 20 years, writing “insider”, and

fascinated-would-be-insider, groupie gossip about the Important People in the PLP, mainly in “Briefing”

(Sometimes peddling malevolent nonsense, such as the allegation that the independent-minded right wing, sometime Blairite, MP, Kate Hoey, a Northern Irish Protestant in origin, had been some sort of a state agent in the late 1960s, when, like a lot of other young people of similar background, she joined the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement and then, in Britain, the revolutionary left. My bad conscience that I never got round to writing a letter of protest to Briefing was reactivated recently when the T V News showed Hoey on a fire fighter picket in her constituency and arguing the case for “the full 40 percent and no strings” on camera.)

In politics, Marqusee operates the techniques and modes of a supine careerist, reflecting and expressing the opinions of those to whom he accommodates, the Labour left, latterly the SWP, whatever. Except that he isn’t a conventional careerist. Beyond self-promotion, he pursues no discernible political goals.

In the mid-90s, I analysed Briefing’s and Mike Marqusee’s politics, and their conception of politics, in “Open the Windows” (available at <http://www.workersliberty.org.uk/files/openwindows.doc>). At first I thought that is what the Leeds business was about (and maybe it was, with “I don’t like being called an anti-Semite”, serving as accessible explanation: he has shared platforms on Israel/Palestine with other AWL people, most recently with Clive Bradley, in Hackney...)

One would have to trawl a long way through the pseudo-left before finding anyone more organically alien than Marqusee is to the politics, and the approach to politics, which the AWL represents, and the Weekly Worker group also claims to represent.

But I don’t want to get too far into arguing that “Marqusee is a villain.” A mutual acquaintance told me that he knows almost as much about old movies as I do, so he isn’t entirely worthless! And he does propagate socialism of a flickery sort. He is entitled to decide who he shares a platform with. And why shouldn’t someone who has spent his political life fawning on the Great Ones of the Labour Party take a rare chance to throw his weight around, when you give it to him?

That “Leeds” was not a petulant act of self-exclusion by Marqusee but an act of “no-platforming”, far more significant than the meeting itself, was not determined by Mike Marqusee, but by the leadership of the Weekly Worker group.

## Never Stalinist?

In [WW 403 \(11/10/01\)](#) Mark Fischer proudly introduced a reprint of an article published in 1982 on the April 1978 Stalinist coup in Afghanistan. Mark admitted some “flaws, reflecting the illusions and theoretical errors characteristic of the extreme left wing of ‘official communism’”, in the article, but did not find it necessary to specify those “flaws” further, and on the whole praised the article as excellent proof that the Stalinist PDPA had led “a genuine democratic revolution”. The article itself compared the April 1978 coup at length and without disfavour to October 1917 in Russia.

Sean [*Matgamna*, in his “Critical Notes”] was “astounded... that you still hold to the line on Afghanistan while you held when you were Stalinists”. Mark responds: “We were not ‘Stalinists’ in 1981, when we begun publishing... our previous stance [before the early 1990s, when the CPGB/WW broke from the idea of the Stalinist USSR having been any sort of workers’ state] had far more of ‘Trotskyism’ about it than ‘Stalinism’...”

I turn to *From October to August*, a book published by the CPGB in 1992. “For all his faults, his mistakes, his championing of bureaucratic socialism, nothing should be allowed to detract from the positive developments in the Soviet Union during the years when Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin led the USSR...”

“The conditions were established for a string of socialist states in Eastern Europe and the emergence of the Soviet Union as the second most powerful country on earth. To say the least, this achievement owed not a little to Stalin...”

“Against Gorbachev we obviously defend the Stalin of the five year plans, the Stalin of collectivisation, the Stalin of industrialisation, the Stalin of World War II and the Stalin of the spread of socialism into Eastern Europe. We proudly and unhesitatingly defend the forward march of socialism over which Stalin presided...”

“The Soviet Republic’s war against Poland [in 1920]... was no different in essence from its war against Nazi Germany, except that the war against Poland failed and that against Nazi Germany succeeded. They were both revolutionary wars which from being defensive became offensive. Being an international continuation of the Soviet state’s policy by violent means, the victories of the Red Army of 1944 and 1945 created extremely favourable conditions for the creation of socialist states in Eastern Europe. This is as clear an example as one could want of the class struggle conducted on an international scale by the Soviet Union”.

The book also contained criticism of “bureaucratic socialism” and even of the great Joseph Vissarionovich himself. In 1955, say, that criticism would have got you expelled from the (real) CPGB as “Trotskyites”. By 1992 it was commonplace.

You didn’t see any “Trotskyism” in your views then! “Because of their worship of anti-bureaucratic spontaneity [i.e. their support for elemental working-class resistance to Stalinism] the Trotskyites have always in practice been calling for counter-revolution in the socialist countries”.

That the SWP, in particular, espoused “the most reactionary conclusions” was “clear from its response to the August [1991] counter-revolution [in the USSR]: ‘Communism has collapsed’ it headlined, and this supposed ‘fact’ should ‘have every socialist rejoicing’. The SWP is simply the most explicit anti-communist group on the revolutionary left”.

“There can be no playing ‘Neither Washington nor Moscow’ games when it comes to counter-revolution”, you insisted. “What the SWP indulges in is typical of most of the left in Britain – workerism and a worship of abstract democracy”.

You also denounced the SWP for another of its more creditable activities, its money-raising for an attempted independent socialist-oriented trade union movement in the USSR in 1990. “Communists should guard the unity of the trade union movement in the USSR”.

You took pride in your slogan of “unconditional defence of the socialist countries” – against the working class if necessary. “Tony Chater, the editor of the Morning Star – whom the ignorant bourgeois media dubs a ‘tankie’ – says tanks don’t solve anything. Well, that’s not true. Under certain circumstances tanks do solve things. Ask Stalin. He solved the problem of German invasion with tanks”.

Retrospectively you endorsed the Russian invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). “The only way to save the situation for socialism in Hungary was... a call by the new government, led by Kadar, for Soviet intervention”. “What was posed in 1968 was defending existing bureaucratic socialism or the Dubcek capitalist road. For genuine communists the interests of the world revolution demanded the former and we must have the courage to say that faced with such a choice Czech and Slovak national rights had to take second place”.

You “supported the banning of Solidarnosc in 1981 because of the imminent danger of counter-revolution”. You “support[ed] the presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan”. You semi-supported the

attempted conservative coup in the USSR in August 1991. “The road to counter-revolution in the USSR will not after all be paved with Gorbachevite good intentions. The State Emergency Committee has seen to that. For communists, for all genuine partisans of the working class, anything that, even momentarily, stays the hand of counter-revolution is good!”

You thought that by 1991 the power of bureaucratic tanks to “solve things” for socialism was reaching its limits. “You can only keep the masses passive with tanks if, after you have sent them [tanks, not the masses] onto the streets, you give the population steadily increasing living standards. Yes, that might have been a crude bureaucratic way to handle problems, but as long as bureaucratic socialism was only a relative fetter, it could do it”.

Nevertheless, your chief pride was that even at the last, “genuine Leninists never wavered in our pro-Soviet stance”. Right up to the end, you defended the USSR as “the world revolutionary centre”.

In previous discussions with the AWL, you conceded frankly that you used to be “left Stalinists”. There is no shame in coming to think that one started off at the wrong place in politics, and that one has learned many things since – so long as one’s previous errors are unsparingly recognised and analysed. But how can you learn the lessons of your break from Stalinism if you deny that it ever had to take place?

Martin Thomas

## Critical Notes on the CPGB/WW

By Sean Matgamna

Hello Mark Fischer.

Sacha [*Ismail, of the AWL*] showed me your recent letter, and I take the chance to make a few points on our differences. I think I have said it all before, in debates with you over the last few years. These “reflections on the CPGB/WW” turned out far longer than I intended and, because I am also putting it on the AWL internal internet, I have inserted subheads.

### DISCUSS AFGHANISTAN?

What you say to Sacha doesn’t make sense to me:

“We feel that the suggestion of a forum on [the Afghan Stalinist takeover of 1978 and Russia’s nine year war in Afghanistan in the ‘80s] is prompted by Sean’s claptrap about launching a joint SA minority paper depending on ‘sorting out’ such issues between us. As if such a paper couldn’t have two lines in its pages on this and other questions. We don’t want to give credence to Sean’s sectarian rubbish.”

Where does this come from? I think our different evaluations of the Stalinist coup of 1978 and the later Russian invasion are very important and have extensive implications. But how could I or anyone with a modicum of sense possibly think agreement between us on the nature of the Afghan Stalinists’ military coup 24 years ago, or on the Russian war of conquest that ended 13 years ago, a precondition for a joint AWL-CPGB/WW paper? (Or for that matter, other things being equal, a common organisation).

In principle, of course, a joint AWL-CPGB/WW paper could tolerate two (or five!) “lines” on a matter of history like the Stalinist coup in Afghanistan and the Russian invasion 20 months later. Why not?

Solidarity managed recently to survive heated exchanges between leading members of AWL on the Israeli-Palestine dispute, a highly emotive question of current politics.

(By the way, I can’t recall ever seeing in WW a dispute or discussion, calm or heated, between hard-core members of your organisation like, for instance, yourself, Marcus and John – I don’t count John Pearson, one of your least reconstructed Stalinists. Why not? I know you have had disagreements that have not appeared in WW. “Not in front of the children”? I am not a dedicated reader of WW, so if I’ve missed a dispute of this sort, perhaps you could tell me which issues of WW I’ll find it in.)

I can’t see that there would be any problem from our side about a joint paper publishing a dollop of your unpurged old Stalinism on Afghanistan and Russia’s colonial war. Replying to it would be an opportunity for us to inform the readers of the joint paper on this important episode in the history of Stalinism, and a chance to reeducate the CPGB/WW.

The problem about having “two lines” on Afghanistan in a joint paper would, on present showing, lie with you and not us. Getting you to stop being so uncharacteristically reticent and shy.

A joint paper would in our view need to be more like Solidarity than Weekly Worker But, in principle, there is no reason why we should not discuss this question in Solidarity, now. In fact, I hereby offer you space to present your views. (WW is an uneasy combination of a Private Eye-style gossip sheet and a patchy internal bulletin of, some of, the left: what else is such a thing as reporting part of a private conversation with Mark O, construing it so as to make him seem to hold a political position which he does not hold – what else is that but the lowest form of a-political gossip-mongering?).

I do, of course, think that there are a number of important issues between us the sorting out of which would facilitate joint work, and maybe the fusion of the two groups, and I have indeed said that, but I have never said that a joint paper depends on agreement on such issues. I don’t think that.

### WHY I WANT TO DISCUSS AFGHANISTAN

No, I want the CPGB/WW to discuss Afghanistan with us for reasons far more fundamental than the reasons you (nonsensically) attribute to me.

Because I believe it would in principle, other things being equal, be possible for AWL and CPGB/WW (or most of the CPGB) to unite in one organisation, I want to get to grips with you politically. I was astounded when I discovered that you still hold to the line on Afghanistan which you held when you were Stalinists. (Real, not rhetorical astonishment.)

A discussion on Afghanistan would take us to the heart of the arrested political development and the resultant political incoherence of your grouping. Evidently, you think something like that too, and that, I guess, is why you avoid a discussion of the issues raised by the Stalinist Afghan coup of 1978 and “the Red Army’s” (sic) war there after the invasion of December 1979.

While it would be unfair and untrue to say that you are still Stalinists, and I do not say that, nonetheless, I do say that you are still shaped and still marked by your Stalinist past, and you have not yet fully shed your old Stalinist baggage. You still operate in recognisable Stalinist patterns. I will come back to this below. Afghanistan shows it.

On the one hand, you go on about “democracy”. You are born-again ex-Stalinist democrats.

(In fact, in my opinion, which I have more than once explained in debate with you, unbalancedly so: In practice your operational politics are confined to “democratic questions”, and your “communism” is, for operational purposes, reduced to a thing of shibboleths, symbols, fetishes, nostalgias, mummeries and self-designation. It is the theory of your self-identity rather than what you are in practice. One of the curiosities is that in your operational, as distinct from your, so to speak, reserve politics, you aren’t all that far from the focus on “democratic”, etc, concerns of your old rightist opponents of the real CPGB.)

But on the other hand, though you are vociferous born-again ex-Stalinist democrats, you seem still to support the Afghan Stalinist coup of 1978, and, astonishingly still describe it as a real revolution! These things just don't go together, Mark.

Something is seriously wrong here.

I established in detail, in WL 2/2 (new series), that the Afghan Stalinists' military coup was a caricature and epitome of everything "Stalinist" in the entire history of Stalinism. (I established it first in a series of articles just after the Russian invasion, in January 1980. I won't repeat any of that here.) It is simply impossible to square what you say about Afghanistan with what you say about democracy, and with your claim to have broken with Stalinism.

Trotsky says somewhere that if a textbook on physics contains even a single word on God, then the reader is entitled to brand the author a mystic and a mystifier. What the "democracy-oriented" CPGB/WW seems to say about Afghanistan and Russia's war of colonial conquest brands you as politically schizoid. Or, more charitably, it shows that, though your heads (enlarged with the delusory omniscience and the imaginary virtue of the kibbitzing village gossip, expert at everybody's business but his own) are up in the democratic clouds, your legs are still stuck in the Stalinist shit.

A proper discussion with us on the Afghan coup, and Russia's colonial war in Afghanistan, might help you resolve your contradictions here, and help you ground your subjective revolutionism in consistently Marxist politics.

But – perhaps because a sizeable part of your group, and your periphery, has evolved a great deal less far from Stalinism than people like you and John have? – you continue to refuse to discuss Afghanistan and Russia's colonial war with us.

### THE AFGHAN QUESTIONS YOU ARE KEEN TO DISCUSS

Yet, while avoiding serious discussion with us of the political issues, and the issues of historical perspective involved in our differences over Afghanistan, you are eager to engage in chickenshit agitation, as you do in your letter to Sacha. You say you 'want to clarify' how we could support the Muslim resistance to Russia in Afghanistan and oppose Al Qa'eda and the Taliban recently.

"Questions which we feel we would like to clarify with you such as why you were so slavishly pro-Mujahadeen when they were fighting the Red Army, but so anti-Taliban/al-Qaida, given that these are fundamentally the same political forces."

There is no contradiction.

We explained clearly that the politics of the Mujahadeen were on almost all issues ultra reactionary. But we supported the resistance of the peoples of Afghanistan, led by various Mujahadeen groups, against Russian colonial conquest, just as the Communist International supported Afghanistan against British invasion in 1919, and as the Fourth Internationalists supported the very backward feudal Ethiopia against Italian invasion in 1935. (A few years back, you would have responded to this by insisting that Russian conquest – possibly even the Russian napalm bombs dropping on Afghan villages – represented historical progress: is that still your position? Or is it, perhaps, still there as a stray, underlying half-thought which you haven't purged yet?)

Nothing like that faced Afghanistan in the recent conflict.

During the Bush-Blair war against the Taliban regime, I spoke at quite a few anti-war meetings, and in every one of them – you also spoke at the one in London, so you may remember – I said that as far as I was concerned, if what was happening was an attempt to conquer Afghanistan for old-style colonial exploitation – which is what Russia was trying to do in the 1980s – then Trotskyists in our early Communist International tradition would back Afghan resistance, even under the Taliban (as, for example, we supported Chinese resistance to Japanese invasion in the 30s,

under the leadership of the butcher of the Chinese workers, Chiang Kai Shek). That is not what was happening last year. It is not what has happened to Afghanistan.

By no means all the anti-Russian mujahadeen were the equivalent of al-Qaida or of the Taliban; but in any case the essential point is that the substantial issues were fundamentally different in the two cases. (And in your way of posing it you display the characteristic CPGB/WW vice of dealing in abstractions and generalities and neglecting the real substance of political questions.)

It is also, perhaps, worth noting here that we did not support the Mujahadeen against the Afghan government which the Russians left behind in Afghanistan in the spring of 1989. At that point it became possible to give due weight to the social character of the Afghan forces opposing each other, the cities against the backward countryside, etc. We raised the slogan "Defend the Cities!" Have a look at your files of Socialist Organiser.

You list a sizeable number of questions you say you'd like to discuss with us – The Party, The Programme, Relations with Labour, Democratic Centralism, The Nature of Working Class Politics, The "Lessons of Bolshevism". This is a very comprehensive list. You could say, in the words of the old "News of the World" advert, that "all human life is there". It is not clear to me why "all human life" does not include Afghanistan.

I repeat the suggestion that you should discuss Afghanistan with us.

You think we are keen to discuss Afghanistan for the wrong, "sectarian", and other discreditable reasons? Then serious communists like you will in discussion know how to bring that out. But, of course, to do that you will have to be able to handle the issues we think are important, and demonstrate that we are mistaken. Chickenshit agitation about our 'contradictions', as in your letter, and nonsensical accounts of our "syndicalist opposition", is easier, isn't it.

However, Mark, we'd be quite happy to pursue even this half-thought-out stuff with you as part of a serious discussion of how Marxists should evaluate the events in Afghanistan between 1978 and 1989.

We did, I recall, help you move from your old identikit-left politics on Ireland to a democratic working class position. Some comrades say that you have also modified your position on the Middle East in the same way, but that isn't something I've followed; and it seems to me you will have to be braver, less afraid of offending the "anti-Zionists" who dominate the political world you live in, and altogether more consistent and rigorous, before you will be any good on that question.

### "RIGHT OF RETURN"?

I suspect that here too you still carry a lot of old Stalinist baggage you haven't got round to jettisoning yet. Collective Palestinian "Right of Return" is properly part of programmes that include the elimination of Israel, the "Secular Democratic State", for example.

Marxists propose "Two States" as the only programme that could allow Israelis and Palestinians to establish a modus vivendi, and Arab and Jewish workers to begin to unite. For fifty years "Right of Return" has, to Jews and Arabs alike, implied the opposite of Two States: the dissolution, in one way or another, of the Jewish state.

"Two States" and "Right of Return" are starkly at odds with each other. The Jewish state and the right to collective resettlement of millions of Palestinians in Israel – that is what the Right of Return has meant – are simply incompatible. Recognition of the Jewish state established in the 1948 war, and trying to reverse the outcome of that war, are mutually exclusive programmes.

You can't be for both a "Two States" solution and for collective Palestinian "Right of Return" without reducing yourselves to political oxymoronism.

I understand the difficulties some young comrades have in accepting the harsh logic and imperatives of the situation that exists between Palestine and Israel. But you pride yourselves on dealing in "Marxist Propaganda", "Programme", "Theory", and all the big, capital-letter things like that.

A would-be propaganda group holding such contradictory positions shows – unless it is a very dumb propaganda group which simply doesn't understand the meaning of what it says – that it takes neither "Right of Return" nor "Two States" seriously. And that it doesn't take its responsibilities as a Marxist propaganda group seriously either.

Nor are you helped by saying, as I have heard some of you say, that "Right of Return" is now a safe set of meaningless words to juggle with for political advantage, "because it can never happen".

Think about it. Can serious Marxists safely avoid repudiating and combating a political slogan which:

a) they know to be nonsensical and unrealisable (short of full Arab conquest of Israel: "Right of Return" implies, and always has implied, that),

b) in both logic and in what it has meant in history for over half a century, flatly contradicts what they think is the correct slogan, "Two States", and,

c) is being loudly advocated by the numerically dominant forces on the British ostensibly revolutionary left, and is understood by them and those they infect to be the opposite of the "Two States" solution we advocate?

Not if we take our own ideas seriously, we can't.

It is, I repeat, political oxymoronism.

(And yes, Mark, you do know that "Right of Return" flatly contradicts the Two States programme you support, as is shown when you respond to points like these with the assurance that the "Right of Return" can't be taken literally and therefore you do not have to argue about it with young people who do take it literally, and, more serious-minded on this question than you are, logically understand that it is incompatible with "Two States" – that if it means anything, it is the opposite of Two States.)

Here you indulge in the mind-rotting perennial method in politics of the late Tony Cliff. When we are too small to affect events, we don't have to be rigorous and honest in our slogans and proposals (that is, in our programme). Safe in the knowledge that what we "demand" can not happen, that what we say will be of no practical consequence, we can be as irresponsible and illogical and as demagogic and unserious as we find it useful to be. We can "militantly" advocate what we know to be nonsense if we think it will "catch the mood" we want to catch. That's what it always came down to with Cliff.

The clearest example I know of was their very militant advocacy in the '70s and '80s, in Socialist Worker headlines, of "Troops Out of Northern Ireland Now!" Troops out without a political settlement would have meant immediate civil war and bloody repartition in Ireland. They knew that, and they certainly didn't want that. So they usually accompanied the headlines with the demand, in the small print of articles, that the Brits should first disarm the Protestants before they left. That would have meant even more British troops and a prolonged military campaign. But never mind. "Troops Out Now" looked good in headlines that allowed the SWP to seem very "militant" – and the ruling class was too strong for the SWP's nonsense-slogans to affect what would happen in Northern Ireland.

That was an invidious way for "Marxists" to behave. It always struck me as deeply shameful and incompatible with political self-respect in those who did it. More than that, though: the cumulative effect on the education and on the minds of the SWP cadres

helped produce the septic political culture that is the SWP and its periphery today.

On such things, Marxists say what they mean and mean what they say. And if they don't, they are not Marxists but opportunists.

Now, of course "creative ambiguity" has a place in politics. In a strike, one would be entitled to use all sorts of evasive formulas and slogans to avoid the strikers dividing, on religion for example.

In the big Belfast strike of 1907, Jim Larkin led a 12th of July march involving both Protestant and Catholic strikers: the Protestants marched, as they were wont to do, in honour of "King Billy" and his victory over the Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, and the Catholics, inspired by the Catholic Larkin, marched with them to honour the Pope who had been the international ally of William in the war with France of which the Battle of the Boyne was a subsidiary part. The only test of such a thing is whether or not it works, and for a while, it did.

Working class victory in that strike movement, and the experience of a successful united Protestant-Catholic action, would have done a lot more to clear away sectarian animosities than a head-on propaganda assault on Orange – and Catholic – bigotries could possibly have done.

Different rules apply to the work of a Marxist propaganda group.

If you were trying to unite striking Jewish and Arab workers, and the Israel-Palestine conflict threatened to set them at each other's throats, only an idiot would quarrel with juggling both slogans (if it made sense in that situation: in fact it would not, because the strikers, Jews and Arabs alike, would know that these two things are incompatible.)

You are a small propaganda group. So, though we do more than propaganda work, for example, trade union work, are we. Our prime concern is political and programmatic clarity. When something is important, we dig in and fight for it. We operate by reason and argument, not by way of evasion and smart-arsery. Or rather, that's what AWL does; and on this question CPGB/WW operates by evasion, double-talk and oxymoronic politics.

### **"RIGHT OF RETURN" A MERE DETAIL OF "TWO STATES" PROGRAMME?**

A while back, I saw a polemic against us on this question in WW. By insisting that "Right of Return" is incompatible with "Two States" we had drifted, said the writer, over the line into Israeli nationalism. In what seemed to me to be a deliberate or unconscious parody of something Lenin wrote in a polemic against Rosa Luxemburg in 1916, the writer said that we should not get involved in discussing such detail and practicalities: proclaiming the principle is all that is required (I am summarising from memory).

That's fine, if it covers the case. After all, we have never involved ourselves in speculation or discussion about the precise details of Protestant-Unionist self rule in a constitutionally rearranged Ireland. Proclaiming the principle of the right to self rule for the Irish minority is sufficient. (Though AWL has insisted, and we do insist, that the Six Counties could not be the unit of democratic Protestant-Unionist self-rule).

However, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "Right of Return", the collective "return" of the 3.7 million Palestinians recognised by the U.N. as "refugees", is, as I have already argued, the flat opposite of your guiding slogan (or what should be your guiding slogans), "Two States". It is used in opposition to "Two States" by forces on the left which are vastly bigger and qualitatively more audible than you are.

I find your idea that the "Right of Return" is a mere detail of the diametrically opposite programme, "Two States", simply mind-boggling! Such an idea testifies either that you don't understand what you are saying and don't care what you say, or that you take neither "Two States" nor "Right of Return" seriously.

And what does this strange idea, that what has been historically and is logically the opposite of “Two States” can be treated as a mere detail of it, signify for you in practice? It functions to allow you to avoid conflict with those who express their rejection of two states in the demand for the “Right of Return” – that is, it allows you to avoid doing the proper job of the sort of propaganda group you proclaim yourselves to be.

You join the large choir thundering out “Right of Return!”, and its logical corollary, “Smash Israel!”. You sing along with them for “Right of Return”, but, when the others chant “Smash Israel!” you substitute “Two States!” in a very small voice, and thereby think you have done your political duty! If you really believe that that is enough, then it is sad as well as unserious.

What do you think Lenin would say of the performance I analyse here? Wouldn’t he denounce you for soft, centrist evasion and obfuscation, and for an opportunist approach to the numerically dominant forces on the left?

Wouldn’t he say that if you know what the role of a Marxist propaganda group is, that then you don’t take the Two States programme seriously; and that, conversely, if you take the Two States programme seriously, then you don’t know what the proper role of a Marxist propaganda group in such conditions as ours has to be?

Wouldn’t he say that when you invoke stuff like his polemic with Rosa Luxemburg on “details” and “practicalities” in national conflicts, to evade the issue, that you are indulging in opportunist phrase mongering?

(Have a look at the discussion on the “Right of Return” and its incompatibility with a “Two States” position in the second, expanded, edition of our Middle East pamphlet, which will be out soon.)

### **AWL’S “SYNDICALIST OPPOSITION” AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT**

One way of measuring what you are politically is to examine your commentaries on our affairs.

Your stuff in WW and elsewhere to the effect that Jill M., Mark O., and others, are a “syndicalist” opposition to AWL involvement in the Socialist Alliance is not only entirely inaccurate, but very, very odd. Where does that come from? (It is, incidentally, the precipitating reason for this letter.)

Of course, it is one of your almost endearing characteristics that you always get things a little, sometimes a lot, often completely, and, not infrequently, comically, wrong! You habitually get in your own light. You project your own, often peculiar, constructions on to the picture that you are supposed to be drawing from life. You relate to things as you find it convenient to see them, making a sometimes fantastic and nonsensical (but I presume comforting) picture of the world around you.

Your daft comments on our affairs is a useful reminder to AWL people of how much salt one needs to take with anything you report.

The nonsense about a syndicalist opposition is, however, something more than just a typical bit of CPGB/WW incapacity to get out of your own light and let yourselves look at something besides your own projections. Think about it.

You observe that we are not all equally enthusiastic about the SA, or equally involved in it, or equally happy to be linked to the Popular Frontist SWP. (If you had properly emancipated yourselves from your Stalinist past, you might find our concern over such things as the SWP’s popular fronts, easier to understand.) Truth. Matter of Fact. No dispute.

(But do all CPGB/WW people exactly share John Bridge’s and your picture of the SA and your enthusiasm for it?).

Yet, isn’t it true that in any living organisation of thinking people there will always be degrees of such differences.

These implicit differences of approach, it is true, may at a later stage become important: it is one of the characteristics of the sectarian pedant in politics that he tries to anticipate such possible future differences in a preemptive, artificial, and usually destructive way.

You have been to our conference, to our summer school, and you read Solidarity. Neither in conference, school nor paper, not in speeches, writing, or whispered comments have you seen, heard or read any evidence of Jill’s and Mark O’s “syndicalist opposition” to AWL involvement in the SA. Neither of them, it is true, quite share your views on the Socialist Alliance, but they are not opposed to it or to our involvement in it. (What would constitute a “syndicalist opposition” to the SA in your eyes? The counterposing of trade union work to SA work? Concern with anything other than the SA?).

You couldn’t have found evidence of a “syndicalist opposition” that does not exist, and which never has existed. So how do you get from your observation of different degrees of AWL enthusiasm for, and involvement in, the SA to the nonsense you published in your paper about a “syndicalist” “opposition” around named leading members of AWL?

Your Weekly Worker report of our summer school has praise for the “openness” and “democracy” of our affairs. So how, having seen, heard and read nothing of Mark’s and Jill’s “syndicalist” opposition, can you let yourselves go on writing and talking about it?

Where is it? If we are as open and democratic as we are and as you insist we are, how, if it exists, could you not have seen or heard some sign of it? In an organisation whose members have a constitutional right to have minority positions published in the paper (a right CPGB/WW members don’t have; or do they?) why has this “opposition” made itself silent and invisible? As JP Cannon said of something else: “It’s like the famous purple cow. Everybody’s heard of it but nobody has ever actually seen it”.

(As it happens, a, so far smallish, discussion on the SA has recently started in AWL. But your comments were made before it started. There is nothing “syndicalist” about those who are not so keen on SA, they do not include the people you have been citing as our “syndicalist opposition”, and we have no desire or intention to hush up the discussion: why on earth should we? Keep reading our press!).

Cynical mischief making is probably what you think you are about, and on the surface it is just a revealing bit of a-political “stirring”, in the typical style of WW, which mistakes tendentious tittle-tattle and sub-political gossip for politics.

One of two things, Mark. Either you knowingly invent all this stuff, or you really believe it (and I’m not sure which would add up to a worse picture of you.)

There is of course an element of invention in it, or anyway, of reckless disregard for what is true, approximately true, or likely to be true. But I think there is more to it than straight invention and mischief-making – a small mystery, in fact.

Is it that as well as what you see and hear (conference, school, paper) you think there is another, secret, parallel, hidden AWL? You think we run a parallel underground “real” AWL as well as the one that exists in public? You deduce that it exists! Is that it? That would at least allow you to reconcile what you see and hear with what you say you believe.

There is no hidden AWL. Our NC minutes are circulated. EC minutes go to NC members. Members of leading committees can release themselves from “committee discipline” and collective responsibility by a simple declaration in the relevant committee that they are doing that.

And the CPGB/WW? Is there a hidden, parallel organisation as well as what you choose to show in public? For all your lip-service to “openness”, you have never invited us to your equivalent of our Conference; and you were, I recall, upset and agitated to



find that we had acquired copies of the private reflections and calculations in your conference documents.

Is there a hidden CPGB/WW?

If your assumptions about AWL are spun from your own practices, that at least would take what you say about us out of the realms of invention or delusion. It would then be just another example of you projecting yourselves inappropriately on to other things.

### AMATEURS, ECONOMISTS AND SOUL-MADE MANTRA-MONGERS

Much of your politics, as I have argued in debates with you more than once, consists of symbols and fetishes. A useful indication of the fetishistic way you function in politics is to be found in your strange choice of the word “amateur” with which you repeatedly describe our trade union work.

When I first came across your use of this term to dismiss our trade union work, I momentarily forgot who I was dealing with, and took it at its everyday meaning: something in our trade union work struck some of you as “amateurish”. I thought maybe that an issue of one of our Trade Union bulletins struck you as badly produced, or something like that.

But still, it was an odd comment on our trade union work, coming as it did from people who, though some of your members are in trade unions, do no organised communist trade union work at all. From people who, if you were to start doing our sort of trade union work yourselves, could surely expect that your own work would, at least initially, be more, not less amateurish than ours is – a lot more, if your performance in the things that interest you, like “Leninism”, is any indication.

“Amateur” in such a context sounded vaguely familiar. Then I remembered where it comes from, and reminded myself of how the CPGB/WW operates in politics.

The description of our trade union work as “amateur” is a typical bit of CPGB/WW kitsch-Leninism, and, though in itself it is pretty trivial, it will be instructive to examine it.

It is transcribed, cribbed, copied out from Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* – maybe unconsciously – and applied without any reference to the concrete situation you are supposedly dealing with or the one Lenin was dealing with; used, in fact, as auxiliary psychological buttressing for yourselves and those who will get the reference and the “Leninist” authority it conveys. “Amateur” is this context is for you a special word, a fetish word, a magic “Lenin” word.

It is a mildly bewildering, but I think representative, piece of CPGB/WW political fetish-mongering. Recite a suitable bit of “Lenin” mantra and all will be well! Find a plausible parallel in Lenin for any current dispute and, hey presto!, you can recite, or parody, “Lenin”, and thereby win the argument! Stalinist scholastic Leninism rules – OK.

In *What Is To Be Done*, Lenin discussed the experience of isolated, “amateurish”, local socialist circles in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. He was not deriding “trade union” work – illegal pre-trade union work was all that was then possible in Russia – as necessarily amateurish; still less was he commenting on the quality of the AWL’s trade union work a hundred years in the future. Nor was he sending a letter across time to tell Jack and you that, yes comrades, you are right to ignore the economic class struggle and the British labour movement.

The early socialist circles Lenin was describing were not yet bound into a party, and had not had a political newspaper to unify their efforts and tie them together politically and ideologically. Their work was, typically, producing factory leaflets, which, often, did not rise to the level of communist (Lenin, of course said, Social Democratic) politics.

Some of them were influenced by the idea that because Russia, as all Marxists then thought, faced a bourgeois and not a socialist

revolution, the working class should leave politics – all questions of the overall running of society, including such questions as the fight to establish the bourgeois-democratic republic – to the bourgeoisie, and concentrate on the economic struggle and the organisation of the working class.

Lenin was arguing that these circles should organise themselves around the newspaper *Iskra*, which Plekhanov, Martov, Lenin and others were producing, and urging them to join in creating the centralised revolutionary party which the *Iskra*ites did establish in 1903.

That, a properly organised party producing literature that embodied the best that the movement as a whole could create and which dealt with all the political questions confronting Russian society from a consistently Marxist and working class point of view – that is what Lenin counterposed to the “amateurism” and “economism” of the circles. In no sense was he against what they had been trying to do, nor did he think it premature (Lenin himself had produced factory leaflets; some of them are in his *Collected Works*.)

Far from denouncing the work these circles did in “going to the working class”, Lenin had a great deal of praise for their work, only deploring the one-sidedness that had developed in the absence of a party and a “central organ”, and urging on them the overdue elevation of their work to the higher level *Iskra* was trying to promote.

Lenin’s denunciations were reserved for the “ideologists”, the people, as he nicely put it, who were “infatuated with their own inadequacies”, and reluctant to move on, those who believed the outmoded approach of the circles to be the best possible approach.

To Lenin, incidentally, the mirror-converse of the economists were those such as Peter Struve, a prominent Marxist in the 1890s, who, starting out as Communists, had come to counterpose the political struggle for republican democracy against the Tsar to organising the workers. To Lenin, the “economists” were errant comrades, but the Struveite “democrats”, even before they had fully hatched out as Liberals, were on the other side of the class line.

### MIMICRY AND MUMMERY

Marxism is not what you people too often seem to think Marxism is: mantras, mimicry and mummery! One of Lenin’s favourite and most characteristic sayings was: “the truth is always concrete”. Lenin used Marx as a guide to concrete analysis of his own conditions, not as a source of ready-made recipes and mantras – not as magic but as science in the making. There is no other Marxism. Or Leninism.

Your underlying idea on “amateur trade union work”, etc., etc., seems to be that because Lenin criticised the political trend in Marxism which he called “economists”, he was therefore at that time against “going to the working class”, and therefore you do not have to, and everything is in order if you apply “Leninist” terms like “amateur”, which Lenin 100 years ago used in the way I have described above, to the work of those who do not limit themselves as you do to a bit of propaganda – and gossip-mongering! – in and around the Socialist Alliance.

This isn’t just bad politics. It also testifies to an astonishing incapacity to understand the history of our movement.

It is a question of whether we go to the history of our movement, to such experiences as that of the Russian movement 100 years ago, to study and learn, or to cull mantras, fetish words and suitable Lenin-certified curses.

The issue of whether or not socialists should do work other than the sort of stuff you do on “the political front” – that is, do class struggle and labour movement work – is, to my mind, a dispute that involves nothing less than the to-be-or-not-to-be questions of Marxist politics.



The idea, which I have heard from some of you, that it is a question of resources and of priorities, really will not wash. It is a question of politics and of political understanding, and of what one thinks even a small revolutionary organisation must be, or try to be.

It is a strange experience, to find oneself having to convince self-proclaimed Marxists and Leninists of the need for serious involvement with the actually existing working class and its movement. I can't recall encountering such an attitude as yours to the labour movement and "economism" since the last of the once-numerous space-cadet Maoists of the 1960s and 70s did everybody, especially themselves, a mercy and disappeared up their own "theory". You are not precisely on that level, but you too "theorise" yourselves into a sterilising "anti-economism" that amounts to a false and self-mutilating attitude to the working class and its movement.

In any case our differences can only be resolved by bringing our supposedly common principles, concerns and objectives to bear in concrete analysis of our specific conditions. Instead you put on the invisible imaginary mantle of "Lenin" and speak in tongues: "you are amateur because you are not us."

The business of you denouncing our T. U. work as amateur is, of course, trivial, but it points to what is, as far as I can see, your dominant method and psychology in politics. This is what I meant by "mummery" above.

For me it conjures up images out of an old Hollywood movie, or an old-style kids' serial, in which the seemingly inoffensive little man with the fez or the turban suddenly goes blank eyed, raises himself up to his fullest height and, transcending himself, speaks in a voice not quite his own: "You are Economists! You are amateur! When I speak in this voice and paraphrase sacred texts, I partake of the nature of the sacred texts and of the Deity, I speak in the name of the Deity. The sacred words give me the strength of the Deity. Occasionally, I become the Deity. Lenin c'est moi!"

You seem to live in the delusion that by citing bits of Lenin like that, out of context – and sometimes, perhaps unconsciously – as mantras, you acquire some of Lenin's qualities, and your arguments thereby acquire what Lenin's arguments acquired from concrete analysis and a coherent sense of the great project "The truth is concrete". Lenin used Marx as a guide to analysis, not as a source of magic mantras; and he didn't use Marx's words as a Catholic uses his rosary beads, for comfort and reassurance.

This, I submit, is your approach; and, I submit, it is ridiculous: witch-doctor stuff.

### **ALL MONARCHS ARE MONARCHS, BUT SOME ARE LESS MONARCHICAL THAN OTHERS!**

I've debated with you half a dozen or more times in the last few years. Time and again I've made the same point: you do not when you are being "Leninist" translate Lenin out of the Russian specifics of his time and place into circumstances that are ours and were not Lenin's and apply the principles, traditions and methods of Marx and Lenin to a concrete analysis of our conditions. You transcribe Lenin, literally and often foolishly.

You mimic Lenin. Frequently one can identify the text of Lenin's you are mimicking and parodying, as with the text on Rosa Luxemburg referred to above (from which you spin not Leninist political hardness, sharpness and clarity but a centrist evasion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and the stuff about "amateurism".

Take another example of your habit of operating by transcribing Lenin literally, with little reference to concrete analysis, of either Lenin's conditions or your own – the Monarchy. I've made this point in a number of debates with you, because the question of method which it brings out clearly seems to me to be central to your entire politics, and at the root of most of what divides CPGB and AWL politically.

We too, of course, want to get rid of the monarchy. (But so does Rupert Murdoch.) In a revolutionary situation, the reserve powers of the monarchy would, indeed, be a weapon for the reactionaries, etc. Even so, the British monarchy could be sloughed off tomorrow with little else of importance changing in British society. And the chance that communists could put themselves at the head of a vast anti-monarchist movement so roused up on "The Democratic Questions" that a profound social reorganisation might thereby become possible, is nil. Absolutely nil.

(I suspect that your strange vision of Britain here can only be understood in terms of the old Stalinist dogmas about a two-stage revolution, even in advanced countries – see below – and some background, or subconscious, notion that because the monarchy and other pseudo-feudal relics have survived – through three and a half centuries of bourgeois rule! – the "bourgeois-democratic revolution" has yet to be completed in Britain. This strange notion is less of an eccentric rarity than it should be. It was in circulation outside Stalinist ranks, amongst the New Left Review people, in the mid-sixties. E. P. Thompson debated it with them, and they later shamefacedly admitted that Thompson had been right.)

The British political system does not, whatever the constitutional conventions say, really revolve around the monarchy. It was different in Russia, where the Tsar was an absolute monarch, and then a "slightly constitutional" ruler. Lenin and the Bolsheviks related to that monarchy as what it actually was. If we follow Lenin's method instead of literally transcribing what Lenin truly said about the Russian monarchy, we will relate to Britain's monarchy as what it is, not as what Tsarism was. We will, as Lenin did, analyse our own real political world and develop politics appropriate to it.

Instead, the CPGB/WW transcribes and mimics Lenin and the Bolsheviks on the Russian monarchy as if doing that can tell us about our own situation.

You try to relate to the British monarchy, and through it to British society, in a way that would only make sense if that monarchy is something like the monarchy Lenin confronted, which it certainly is not, and if British capitalist society is something like the society Lenin confronted, and truly described as "semi-Asiatic", which it certainly is not.

By avoiding concrete analysis, and behaving as purely textual "Leninists", you develop what are essentially fantasy politics about British society and about the British monarchy (as you do about Scots nationalism, and other "democratic" questions).

Fantasy politics is passive politics, rearranging things – in this case, old texts – in your head. The point, Mark, as Marx didn't quite say, is not to juggle with images of reality in your head, or with old texts that once reflected now vanished realities, but to come to grips with your own reality as it is in, so to speak, its own right. The Marxism and Leninism that can help us in this work consists of the method of analysis, and the help in using it that can be got from study of the analyses made by a Marx or a Lenin – not the mimicry and mummery and the priestly arts of Stalinist "textual" Leninism.

Transcribing rather than translating Lenin from Russian conditions to British conditions, what you miss out, for Lenin on Russia and yourselves in Britain now, is precisely this heart of Lenin's, as of all real Marxism – concrete analysis.

Pursuing the childish politics of mimicry and transcription, you let it crowd out the real stuff and proper concerns of serious Marxists and communists in our conditions, the labour movement and the class struggle on all its fronts, including the trade union front.

It vitiates even your concern with the democratic questions: instead of relating to issues of substance – like, for example the accelerated erosion of even the older British bourgeois democracy – you focus on "big" empty questions that your method of cribbing from old Russian texts suggest to you are of fundamental

importance (and whose analogues were of fundamental importance in Russia), like, for example, the breadth of the choices in the referendum on Scottish devolution – pursuing, it seemed to me, the mystical dimension of this Big, BIG, BIG question that would have brought out its real revolutionary potential, trying, somehow, to take it out of the hands of the Blairites.

It is exaggeration, but I think, permissible exaggeration, to say that at the heart of what divides the CPGB/WW from AWL politically, is your incapacity to work out the implications of the fact that you do not live in Russia in the year 1903.

Your “Leninism” is to Leninism what karaoke is to proper singing! (Possible title of someone’s future memoirs: “From ‘The Leninist’ to the Lenin Karaoke Club”!).

Your addiction to the politics of fantasy-projection, mimicry and Karaoke-Leninism stands between the CPGB/WW and growing up to authentic Marxist politics! I mean, of course, Trotskyism; the politics of those who fought Stalinism from the beginning.

### **THESE PROBLEMS ARE ROOTED IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION YOU CLAIM**

Our root differences in method and in politics lie, as far as I can make sense of your tendency, in the fact that you are formed in Stalinism and still display the patterns of Stalinist politics.

I am not, of course, dismissing you as just Stalinists.

Afghanistan notwithstanding, you have come a long way from Stalinism. Yet, keeping that in mind, you are, it seems to me, still recognisably an ex-Stalinist formation. Like John Cleese’s famous “ex-parrot” which even after it had lost the power to squawk and hop about as it used to, was still identifiable by its shape, anatomy and plumage as a sort of parrot, you too continue to have a recognisable physiognomy.

You are one of the vast legion of tendencies that have, at different times over many decades, come out of Stalinism politically perplexed and clueless about authentic communist politics, but still hypnotised by the democratic and “national liberation” slogans, demands and concerns which, from the mid-1920s onward, have formed the “operational” politics of the Stalinist parties.

Such politics were initially flags of convenience, but, over time, they entered into the bone, flesh and mind of the Stalinist parties. This politics became dominant even in a country like Britain in the second half of the 20th century, where the real CPGB campaigned for “British independence” from the USA. The “Communist” Parties did the same in every country of Western Europe.

Essentially for these parties – or for most of them most of the time – “Socialism” was something being built in the ‘Soviet Union’. The rest of the world was different.

Not only in Britain, and France and Italy, and Ireland, etc, etc, in the second half of the 20th Century, but even in Germany as early as the years before Hitler took power, even when they were crazily ultra-left, the Stalinists centrally concerned themselves with advocating “democratic” slogans, like “national liberation of Germany” (from the Versailles Treaty imposed by German imperialism’s conquerors in 1919).

The typical ex-Stalinist tendencies consisted of people who had burned away most that was specifically Stalinist – though rarely all of it, as your continued insistence that the Stalinist 1978 coup in Afghanistan was a real revolution demonstrates startlingly – and were left only with a substratum of their old politics, the pseudo-democratic concerns typical of the operational politics of the Stalinist parties.

The (real) CPGB were the pioneers of Scottish, Welsh and regional self- government – in fact, curiously, of much of the Blairites’ programme on such things. The sort of stuff you come out with, about, for example, Scotland, is the direct continuation of

the politics of the organisation whose name you are inexplicably proud to claim as your own and of the Stalinist tradition in which it was rooted! And in which you are, despite everything, still rooted.

### **RIGHT WING COMMUNISM: A STATE OF ARRESTED POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

If there are differences between you and the real CPGB on these questions, they are only differences of detail.

The important difference I can see is that with you these things are far more the only operational focus. The old CP had other irons in the fire; and, unfortunately, they did organise in the labour movement.

(And, in justice, while for the Stalinist parties in their prime, talk of democracy, etc., was double-talk and manipulative gobbledegook, in your own way you do seem to be trying to take democracy seriously: but then the typical democratically inclined ex-Stalinists habitually do, and typically wind up as some species of bourgeois democrat.)

Exactly when you ceased to be overt Stalinists, I don’t know, but I’ll be surprised if it was before the collapse of the USSR in 1991. What you are now is an organisation that has to be bracketed, in terms of the history of Stalinism and ex-Stalinist groups, politically with those rightwards evolving ex-Communist groups turning themselves into bourgeois democrats. (Which is not necessarily to say that you will eventually become just bourgeois democrats, or that all of you will.)

I have repeatedly said in debates with you – and never received a serious reply – that your concentration on “democratic questions”, together with your bigoted neglect of the economic class struggle and the bedrock labour movement, means that for you, your “operational” communism is only a thing of names, symbols and fetishes.

The entire range of your up-front operational politics consists of “democratic” and “national democratic” questions around which you spin political fantasies – around Scottish nationalism, for example. Politically, you are on the far right of any “communist” spectrum. I made this appraisal of the CPGB /WW in a debate with John-Jack, and I can’t recall that anything he said in response made me think I am mistaken.

You remain subjectively revolutionary, but in your operational politics, as I said above, you stand curiously close to the right wing of the old (that is, the real) CPGB. who, of course, were not as you are subjectively revolutionaries and communists, but, at the end, bourgeois democrats.

The point is that, so too are you – if you are to be characterised by your “operational” political concerns, as distinct from what you say of yourselves, and your, so to speak, reserve “Communist” politics.

The essential difference is a subjective, not a political, one. It is a matter of symbols like the hammer and sickle, words like “Communist”, feelings, nostalgias, shibboleths – and names: the CPGB.

A political tendency can not subsist for long on such a basis. The contradiction between what you are subjectively and what you are in objective political terms, will resolve itself, one way or the other.

Because of your fetishistic approach you elevate even things of tenth-rate importance, such as the hammer and sickle, fealty to which you passionately defended in one of our minuted discussions, into things of the first importance, as essentials of “communism”. You think that names, symbols, fetishes and mantras magically makes your operational “democratic” politics into “Communism”.

Secure in the possession of your icons and fetishes you feel you can neglect the labour movement and the working class, and,

spitting Lenin-fortified curses about “economists” and “amateurs” contemptuously over your shoulder, still think yourselves “Leninists” and “communists”. “Communism”? It is you.

One consequence is that your idea of the “revolutionary party” has been allowed to shrink down until you are left with the conception of the revolutionary party as, in essence, an a-historical fetish: no more than the bearer of anointed symbolic things.

For Marxists, the measure of whether an organisation is communist, is not what it says it is, but what it is in practice; its real programme is not only stuff written down somewhere, but the sum total of what it is and does.

You are communists in Lenin’s sense, if you do the work of communists. If not, not. We have to win the socialist future. Nothing is predetermined or preordained. Faith and works; theory and practice! James Connolly said it best: the only true prophets are those who carve out the future they announce! Mark, the “operational politics” of the CPGB /WW, not to speak of your fetishistic conceptions, etc., will never build a serious Leninist organisation.

### **THE OLD CPs HAD A GRUESOME POLITICAL COHERENCE WHICH YOU ENTIRELY LACK**

There is a radical, a fundamental, difference – other than your size – between an old CP with roughly similar democratic operational politics and the CPGB/WW.

Those CPs could play manipulative games with “democratic demands”, and still think they were thereby promoting “socialism”. Such concerns as national independence, etc, helped them in their primary work of backing USSR foreign policy and work to rouse the people in the bourgeois-democratic states against the USSR’s main enemy, the USA. (And, of course, it helped some of them, in countries like Yugoslavia and China, to come to power as national saviours at the head of non-proletarian forces).

An old Stalinist Party could focus on “democratic questions” secure in the knowledge that the “socialist dimension” of things was simultaneously being taken care of. The “Soviet Union” was building socialism. Eventually, somehow, that would lead to socialism in Britain, or wherever. Someone else was “looking after” the “socialist side of things”. The example of the “Soviet Union” would eventually win world socialism.

There was a grotesque – though of course delusory – coherence to it.

And you? You continue the “democratic-demands-up-front” tradition, but without being able to believe that others are looking after the “socialist side of things. You entirely lack the, sort-of, coherence your mentors thought they had.

“Democracy”-up-front politics coupled with “the USSR is leading the world to socialism”, is one thing. Your democracy-up-front politics coupled with a few tawdry “communist” shibboleths – that is something else again.

It is one measure of how preposterous it is for people who do only what you do, to name themselves “communists.

### **SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY**

“Democracy” is what the long-time core members of the CPGB WW formation are left with from your history, a pretty typical history of would-be-revolutionaries trying to reorient, without having fully emancipated themselves from the Stalinist tradition.

For the individuals who have joined the ex-Stalinist nucleus, the narrow focus on “democracy” means as many different things as there are individuals. The point is that “democracy” cannot be the prime definition of a communist current.

Democratic questions are of course a central part of our politics – “consistent democracy” to my mind can be a useful synonym for socialism. We raised the question of defending and extending democracy 20 and 25 years ago. We raised it in the big struggles of

the early 80s (see the files of Socialist Organiser and the WL pamphlet on democracy, consisting in part of articles I wrote at the beginning of 1982.)

There is, in my opinion, scope for campaigning in Britain now around the democratic issues raised by the accelerated bureaucratisation of bourgeois politics. In his “Action Programme For France”, written in 1934, Trotsky showed how such issues of democracy can and should be raised within bourgeois society, at that time in France, by communists who thought that the struggle for power was very near. We were guided by it when we raised questions like the undemocratic character of the Thatcher government, in the early 1980s (have a look at it).

But even though AWL and CPGB/ WW agree in general that the defence and expansion of democracy within bourgeois society is important now, we parted company on what it means. With such nonsense as – on Scotland – your conjuring up of “communist” fantasies around variations on what the Blairites were actually doing, you managed to parody old-style Stalinism.

### **A “VARIEGATED COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUALS” IS NOT A LENINIST PARTY!**

Your organisation fits the description which the comrades of Lutte Ouvriere once justly used to describe the “pre-Leninist” (pre-1968) IS/SWP – “a variegated collection of individuals” – a collection of politically very different individuals from all over the spectrum of the left, within which a small core group who have evolved from a once hard-nosed Stalinism, hold sway.

A strange hybrid political formation: in sentiment revolutionary, rightist in operational politics; in politics poor, rich in symbols, fetishes and mantras! In political terms you have travelled a great distance from your starting point. It is, I think improbable that you have stopped travelling and have reached equilibrium.

One of the most curious relics of this history is your organisation’s preposterous attempt to argue that the old CPGB heritage is something revolutionaries can defend and should lay claim to. Heroically – stakhanovistically! – fetishistic, long after the real CPGB collapsed with a stench, you devotedly maintain “The CPGB” (but it is a sort of “Wizard Of Oz CPGB”: – nothing, as little Dorothy discovered, behind the façade!)

I don’t know enough of your history to form more than a general opinion of precisely what your trajectory is, but I doubt that the “variegated collection of individuals” coalescing in the CPGB/WW around “democracy” and a few fetish-objects of Stalinist “communism”, can travel the same road for long.

The fact that you are, as far as I can see, sincere about “democracy” is one reason why the hard core CPGB/WWs should not be regarded as politically stable. It is also the reason why we can hope that you, or some of you, can be won to the consistent Marxism of AWL.

On a certain level, I think you know that as well as I do, and are correspondingly wary of “difficult” questions like Afghanistan. We’ll see.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite all this, Mark, I do not conclude that the CPGB/WW is useless or that we should give up on trying to win you, or some of you, to comprehensively revolutionary Marxist politics! Despite the deficiencies I discuss above, you are, subjectively, communists; you want to be Leninists. That makes all sorts of things possible.

I still think that not only a joint paper but, in a favourable evolution, a common organisation between AWL and CPGB/WW would be possible, if we had plausible agreement on certain conditions: fundamentally, if we could establish and maintain a regime of open and honest political discussion; if we could agree on joint involvement in the class struggle; if we could establish and

maintain as our common method in a joint organisation, honest political accounting and honest dealing.

My conclusion is that we should resume the close-engagement discussions. I think that if we don't do that we will find the distance between us growing, not lessening. Your silly, but also malevolent, gossip-column stuff on AWL in WW, is an indication of it.

And yes, we should discuss Afghanistan, and soon. In the question of the Afghan coup and Russia's colonial war in Afghanistan, nothing less is involved for you than whether or not you are to complete your break with Stalinism and consolidate as a genuine revolutionary socialist tendency (what we would call a Trotskyist tendency; small 't' Trotskyism, if you insist).

A political tendency that has understood that no serious, non-schizoid, people can pursue revolutionary working class politics in the 21st Century and still go on claiming as their political lineage and tradition the rag, tag and bobtail of Stalinist organisations in the line of which you claim to stand. (And, unfortunately, do, to an often debilitating extent, still stand.)

There is no extant revolutionary tradition on which a mass democratic working class communist movement can be rebuilt except that of those who broke with and fought the Stalinist bureaucracy from the start, in the 1920s – the tradition of Trotsky's Left Opposition.

That is what gives the question of Afghanistan its importance for you, and for us in relating to you.

Regards,  
Sean Matgamna.

## Letter to CPGB from AWL, February 22 2002

Dear comrades

We've been discussing the 'unofficial Socialist Alliance paper' project, in the light of our recent meeting with you. Our conclusions are as follows.

At present there is no sufficient body of unaffiliated SA members actively committed to this project to create a broadly-based unofficial SA paper. There is a fair scattering of SA members who would like to see an unofficial SA paper come into existence, but no halfway substantial body of such members with acknowledged and reliable representatives who would be active in the actual production of the paper. Nor is there any short-term prospect of finding such a body of members by further phone calls, leaflets, or visits.

The 'unofficial Socialist Alliance paper' project thus reduces itself, in the short term, to the project of a merger of the *Weekly Worker* and *Solidarity*, with the active support of a scattering of other SA members.

That might be fruitful. We want more collaboration and discussion between your tendency and ours; we would like to develop a sound basis for fusion of the two tendencies. However, an immediate merger of our papers would be, so to speak, 'adventurist' in this context. Rather than aiding political clarification, it would probably impede it by enmeshing it with the administrative and organisational difficulties and disputes inevitably accompanying a merger of publications.

Specifically, our differences on 'partyism' would cause difficulties with such a merged publication. Your stated view is that: "Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything." Even leaving aside the crotchet whereby the future revolutionary working class party is given a name which in all living memory except those of the most aged denoted something

very different, this is a bad way of arguing the need (on which we emphatically agree) for a revolutionary party.

The working class is not "nothing" without a revolutionary party. If it were, it is hard to see how such a party could be created. And what the working class can become with an authentic mass revolutionary party depends on what that party does, how it responds to the working class and innovations from the working class – how it deals with the crises in its own midst which would almost certainly accompany a revolutionary crisis in society.

In short, your concept of 'partyism' seems to us fetishistic. But then you translate that general fetishism into a particular fetishism of the Socialist Alliance. Since the Socialist Alliance is the nearest thing we have to a party – which it is in approximately the same sense that one or two ex-army comrades are the nearest thing we have to an armed wing – therefore the putative paper should deal with every question through the prism of "what should the Socialist Alliance do about it".

We do not believe that the future revolutionary party will emerge through straight-line development of the Socialist Alliance. By force of reality, not by force of us not being 'partyist' enough, the Socialist Alliance actually is "one area of work" at present. It is not irrelevant in trade union struggles, for example, but quite often it is not central.

We should discuss this further and best in the form of a direct discussion of principles, rather than via wrangling over headlines of articles, and suchlike, in a joint paper set in motion without adequate political preparation.

A casual glance at the *Weekly Worker* and at *Solidarity* reveals a great difference in orientation. We agreed, in the joint leaflet we put out at the SA 'independents' conference, that the proposed paper would have to be one "primarily oriented to working class concerns and battles, to the labour movement, and to other struggles of the oppressed, a paper which could be sold at workplaces, in trade union branches, on the streets and door to door, rather than one focused on internal disputation in the SA". Yet you have objected when we have deduced that this means a paper substantially different in orientation from the present *Weekly Worker*. This needs more discussion, too.

We propose, therefore, that we:

(a) continue the argument for a Socialist Alliance paper, and for an unofficial Socialist Alliance paper; but explain soberly that at present there is no sufficient body of SA members actively committed to the project of an unofficial paper to make it viable. We remain ready to assist any body of SA members making real moves in that direction.

(b) continue or, rather, step up, the broad political discussions between our two tendencies.

(c) examine other possibilities of collaboration: eg, in making sure that the paper that the Welsh Socialist Alliance has decided to produce actually appears, and exploring whether it can be used outside Wales.

Best wishes,  
Martin Thomas  
for the AWL

## Reply to Martin Thomas

Jack Conrad, *Weekly Worker* 421

Your letter is disappointing. The political situation in Britain cries out for a viable leftwing alternative to Labourism. Not a day passes without New Labour revealing its craven attitude towards big business and contempt for the working class. Tony Blair and his cabinet colleagues befriend and fawn before billionaires. Meanwhile trade unionists are denounced as wreckers.

No wonder there is an ongoing and constantly deepening crisis of auto-Labourism, initially amongst the left groups, now in the trade unions. The Socialist Alliance was born and can grow into a substantial social force from these conditions.

Yet the Socialist Alliance project will never take off without a serious political paper in which, like the *Weekly Worker*, debate and controversy are the norm, not the exception. No political paper – no consistency in principle, no organisational girding, no dialogue with the working class. Under the short-sighted leadership of the Socialist Workers Party and their camp followers there exists a real danger of the Socialist Alliance quietly sinking into oblivion as an ineffective, on-off electoral front. Clearly the SWP is both the Socialist Alliance's biggest asset and its biggest problem.

An unofficial paper is therefore a matter of urgency. Frankly to be lackadaisical or nonchalant about this, as is the AWL, is to be irresponsible. Such a publication must set its sights on swiftly transforming the Socialist Alliance. The Socialist Alliance needs a collective agitator, educator and organiser now, not at some vague time in the future.

By providing a lead on every issue – secularism, anti-capitalism, trade union struggles, tenants' rights, the national question in Scotland and Wales, the NHS, the fight for substantive equality between men and women, the war on terrorism, immigration, etc – by building a nationwide network of supporters and by recruiting a whole new layer of activists, the Socialist Alliance can be made into the foundations of a revolutionary party. All the while the hand of friendship and the prospect of unity in a single organisation must be held out to the comrades in the Welsh Socialist Alliance and the Scottish Socialist Party.

Does the initial wherewithal for such a paper exist? Undoubtedly. The CPGB already produces the *Weekly Worker*. This paper has achieved a moderately healthy sale for its print version along with an impressive number of hits on the web – monthly readership is approaching 15,000. Because of sales and readers' donations the paper is financially self-supporting. Our organisation has moreover pledged to devote all the resources of the *Weekly Worker* in terms of finances, subs and personnel to an unofficial Socialist Alliance paper.

Incidentally, despite comrade Thomas's insistence, we have no intention of dismissing or belittling the *Weekly Worker* and its steadfast orientation towards the Socialist Alliance. An unofficial paper must be pro-Socialist Alliance and include open polemics. But it can, and surely will, concern itself too with "working class battles" and "other struggles of the oppressed" and be designed to be sold "at workplaces, in trade union branches, on the streets and door to door". That perspective has, of course, been fully explained in our recent book *Towards a Socialist Alliance party*.

Then, in terms of resources, there is, or should be, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and its fortnightly *Solidarity*. The comrades routinely boast to us about the brilliant trade union and student work conducted through their paper. Combined, the efforts of what are two of the Socialist Alliance's five principal supporting organisations would surely prove to be greater than the sum of their parts. Together we would attract a far wider audience and body of active support.

Comrade Thomas reverses this line of reasoning and descends into tailism. He willingly pulls the plug on an unofficial paper because there is no "halfway substantial body" of "unaffiliated" Socialist Alliance members "actively committed" to it. There are, he says, no "acknowledged and reliable representatives" who would be "active in the actual production of the paper". A merger of the *Weekly Worker* and *Solidarity* "with the active support of a scattering of other SA comrades" would be "adventurist". There would be "administrative and organisational difficulties and disputes".

Of course there will be "administrative and organisational difficulties and disputes". But, comrade, when they arise problems

must be calmly and quickly overcome, not turned into insurmountable obstacles before we even know what they are. Nor should we look forlornly to the so-called 'Nanas' – the National Association of Non-Aligned Socialists – to be the answer. On the contrary the CPGB and the AWL, as strong Socialist Alliance factions, should combine efforts and provide the lead. Courage inspires courage in others.

The Socialist Alliance independents are flotsam and jetsam. Ideologically incoherent, organisationally ineffective, they are often half-burnt out because of profoundly negative experiences in one or another of the confessional sects – WRP, IMG, SPEW, SWP, etc. Comrades such as these cannot be expected to provide the lead. Nor, let me stress, do we have any desire to create a "substantial body" of independents. By organising an ever wider body of Socialist Alliance comrades through an unofficial paper a pro-party faction and a new leadership is forged.

Comrade Thomas is right when he says differences on partyism distinguish the CPGB from the AWL. True, the comrades pay lip service to the revolutionary party. However, their commitment is platonic, abstract and shows the continuing hold of a sect mentality – and life in, and adaptation to, Labourism. In May 1997 the AWL enthusiastically urged a New Labour vote and then celebrated Tony Blair's triumphal entry into No10 Downing Street with unconcealed joy.

Straight lines and direct routes aside, the Socialist Alliance is for them a site for recruitment, primarily from their SWP rivals, not the "nearest thing we have to a party". Dismissive talk of "two ex-army people" and an "armed wing" sadly indicates how casually the AWL regard what has been achieved already – the almost unprecedented unity of left groups that have over many decades been bitterly opposed, a unity which acts as a beacon, attracting socialist intellectuals, former Labourites, prominent trade union militants and even has the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain now seriously discussing entry into our ranks.

Comrade Thomas does his best to muddy the waters. He lambastes the formulation, "Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything." The name 'Communist Party' is irredeemably associated with Stalinites, he objects. Why should we want to reforge – ie, remake through revolutionary means – the Communist Party of Great Britain?

Unfortunately his intention is to create confusion, not bring enlightenment. Like a naive philistine the comrade proceeds to tell us that the "working class is not 'nothing' without a revolutionary party". If it were, "it is hard to see how such a party could be created", he argues. Needless to say, we have fully answered such essentially trite points and corrected comrade Thomas's evident confusion. Polemical exchanges become sterile if one side refuses to listen to, and therefore properly and constructively reply to, the actual argument.

Old ground must therefore be revisited.

A tremendous victory was scored for the whole revolutionary left by the success our organisation had in recovering the title 'Communist Party' from the opportunist traitors who, yes, for many years dragged it in the mud. Joseph Stalin and Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in China, and John Gollan and Nina Temple in Britain were anti-communists who nevertheless portrayed themselves as communists and hence the legitimate heirs of Marx, Engels and Lenin. They were not. And we were correct to fiercely dispute their right to call themselves communists.

By implication comrade Thomas would leave them and their reputations as communists intact. Stalinite ghosts cloud his brain. Why not abandon the appellations 'Marxist', 'Leninist' and 'Bolshevik' to them as well? What about the red flag, the clenched fist and the hammer and sickle symbols? Then there is the Internationale anthem. Should we junk everything from a hotly

contested past and leave our entire heritage to the surviving remnants of 'official communism'?

Things are not cut and dried. Comrade Thomas's claim that 'Communist Party' is a "name which in all living memory" denoted "something very different" is actually far more problematic. Yes, bureaucratic socialism and 'official communism' were alien to proletarian socialism and human liberation and brought great discredit to communism and as a result give succour to the bourgeois. But countless people, including today's anti-capitalists, come to authentic communism, despite the crimes of the past, not least by reading and thinking for themselves. The Manifesto of the Communist Party, written by Marx and Engels and first published some 150 years ago, still sells in huge numbers and exerts enormous intellectual influence.

Marx and Engels were insistent throughout their adult lives in describing themselves as communists – not international socialists, or social democrats, or revolutionary libertarians. When their German followers adopted the 'social democratic' moniker for their party, Marx famously called it a "pig of a name": eg, see the 1875 Critique of the Gotha programme. Engels in his turn mocked 'social democracy' as totally inadequate in more popular form in 1894.

Lenin must also be recalled. In 1917-18 he urged that the Bolsheviks rename themselves 'Communist Party' – following the example of Marx and Engels. Why? Two main reasons. Firstly, the term 'social democrat' had been thoroughly discredited "throughout the world" in the course of World War I because of the venal actions of Philipp Scheidemann, Georg Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky and their like (VI Lenin CW Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p24n). Secondly, Communist Party is "correct scientifically". It simultaneously defines our organisation as the advanced part of the working class and its overriding political mission.

We too strive to go beyond the confined limits of capitalist and socialist democracy to a stateless society which operates according to the motto, 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need'. Lenin and the Bolsheviks are still thought of in the popular mind as communists. They were, and today so are we.

Yes, our immediate aim as CPGB members is to reforge the CPGB. Why? Because the working class in Britain, and elsewhere, requires the highest form of organisation if it is to fight capitalism and win. Fear not: necromancy holds no attraction for us. The CPGB of 1920, 1926, 1935 or 1977 can safely rest in its grave. The poetry we write is of the future, not the past. A Communist Party that has a revolutionary programme and is based on the principles and practice of democratic centralism is a precondition for a victorious socialist revolution. No-one is wedded to the name as a matter of unbending principle: 'Socialist Alliance Party' is a "pig of a name" but would do. Nevertheless, as we have seen, for Marx and Engels, and after them Lenin, 'Communist Party' is correct scientifically. What of our contention that without a Communist Party the working class is "nothing", but with it "everything". For comrade Thomas "nothing" simply means 'nullity'. How can a nullity, the comrade asks, become anything, a something, let alone everything? Of course, as he knows full well, this formulation of ours is directly adapted from Lenin. He spoke of the "working class mass" being "nothing" without organisation. With organisation "it is everything" (quoted in C Silahtar *Party discipline* London 1979, p24).

Far from using "nothing" in comrade Thomas's prosaic, everyday sense, Lenin and ourselves philosophically recognise that every "nothing" must by definition be a something and as such is in the process of becoming. The beginning of any process therefore contains both being and nothing: the unity of being and nothing, or being which is at the same time non-being.

The same can be said specifically of the working class. Without a Communist Party the working class is a slave class. As a

class in itself it is nothing. But with a Communist Party the working class can become a class for itself: ie, a class that knows itself and its historic task of fighting for universal freedom. Between nothing and everything there is a process of becoming.

We do not start with a finished Communist Party as something outside the working class. The Communist Party is the leading, vanguard, part of the working class and comes into being through the class and the class struggle – not, as comrade Thomas suggests in his criticism of us, from the outside. A working class that has formed itself into a Communist Party is everything, but again is in the process of ceasing to be and becoming something else. As the working class liberates humanity and in the process itself, workers cease to be workers and simply become associated producers and, more to the point, rounded and thus for the first time fully human beings.

So the fight for the Communist Party and the correct revolutionary programme is not "fetishistic". No, on the contrary, the party question is in current circumstances for revolutionaries the main immediate task, the key link, from which everything else follows. Unless we succeed here and make a serious step towards overcoming the sects then we will be doomed to a never ending cycle of amateur attempts at revolutionary trade union work, fragmented interventions amongst students, etc. That is why we are committed to the Socialist Alliance and an unofficial political paper.

The CPGB is more than willing to engage in further discussions with the AWL comrades. We sincerely want to see the merger of the two groups in the fight for a Socialist Alliance party. In the meantime our comrades will give backing to all local and regional Socialist Alliance publications, including the Welsh Socialist Alliance paper.

However, we communists are obliged to press ahead with the campaign for a Socialist Alliance political paper and in the absence of an official paper we shall argue for, and work towards, the launch of an unofficial paper – with the AWL if possible; without it if we must.

## Stalinism and the return of the repressed

Reply to Jack Conrad by Martin Thomas, 12 March 2002

Jack Conrad is rattled. Why? He puts on the robes of a high priest scourging an apostate. Responding to the letter I wrote on behalf of the AWL to register that the project of a new 'unofficial Socialist Alliance paper' has in fact narrowed down, for now, to the hypothesis of a merger between Solidarity and the Weekly Worker, and to propose that we must work through some big political issues before such a merger, he intones that my 'intention is to create confusion'. 'Needless to say', he has already 'fully answered such essentially trite points and corrected comrade Thomas's evident confusion' (WW 421).

Well! Why is Jack so rattled? I'll first review the immediate practical issues, and then the underlying political questions.

For the Socialist Alliance conference in December 2001, the AWL submitted a proposal for a Socialist Alliance newspaper, which the CPGB supported. It got wide support but was defeated. At a fringe meeting after the conference both Jack Conrad and I spoke in favour of organising an unofficial Socialist Alliance paper. We were both talking about a publication of the broad spectrum of Socialist Alliance members who saw the need for a paper – with due space for controversy and minority views – not just a merger of Solidarity and the Weekly Worker.

We put the idea about. We – the AWL and the CPGB – produced a joint leaflet on the idea for the Socialist Alliance ‘independents’ conference on 19 January.

Maybe Jack Conrad’s scorn for the ‘independents’ reflects his disappointment at their response: ‘flotsam and jetsam... ideologically incoherent, organisationally ineffective... often half burnt-out’.

Be that as it may, the possibility within grasp now is a merger between the Weekly Worker and Solidarity, with some support from others, rather than something broader. Jack describes my letter as ‘disappointing’ but, in fact, concurs with my conclusion. The possibilities of a new paper which he discusses are those of a merger of the Weekly Worker and Solidarity.

If there is no common paper of the Socialist Alliance – and still less, one adequate as regards openness, liveliness and political alertness – then the Alliance’s political life must rely heavily on its various ‘unofficial’ papers. Both Solidarity and the Weekly Worker are ‘unofficial Socialist Alliance papers’, contributing to that life in our different ways. And so, in its own yet different way, is Socialist Worker.

A merger between Solidarity and Weekly Worker could contribute better. But the discussions we’ve had with the CPGB about it suggest to us that there are serious political issues to thrash out first, and therefore ‘an immediate merger would be, so to speak, ‘adventurist’.

Jack overlooks the word ‘immediate’ and quotes me as claiming that any merger would be ‘adventurist’. From that point, he quickly launches into apostate-scourging mode: we are ‘lackadaisical... nonchalant... irresponsible’, whereas Jack’s ‘courage inspires courage in others’.

What does he think such ranting inspires? A full merger of Weekly Worker and Solidarity – not just collaboration between the CPGB and the AWL within a much broader Socialist Alliance effort, or in the production of this or that occasional joint publication, but a merger of the two organisations’ regular staple publications – would be 90% of a merger between the two organisations. Good. There is much common ground: Ireland, Israel-Palestine, Europe, opposition to ‘reactionary anti-imperialism’, support for consistent democracy... However, the difficulties are not a matter, as Jack puts it, of us inventing ‘insurmountable obstacles before we even know what they are’. We have a pretty good idea of what the issues are, and what the problems with an immediate common paper would be. Jack’s article develops some of them.

They should be tackled, as my letter said, ‘in the form of a direct discussion of principles’, rather than by way of day-to-day disputes where the basic politics would inevitably become entangled with quarrels about why this article rather than that has been shelved or lopped for lack of space, why this headline rather than that has got the front page, and so on.

There are straightforward political questions. Would the new paper limit itself in its chief political slogans, as the Weekly Worker does, to the formal-democratic call for a federal republic? Or would it, without neglecting formal democracy, venture to agitate for a workers’ government? Would it give space and emphasis to trade-union struggles, or scorn them as ‘economistic’?

More. A merger can take place with disagreement on many political questions, just by providing space for controversy in the paper on those questions. It cannot happen, however, without some agreement on what sort of common paper we should produce.

Solidarity and the Weekly Worker are very different papers. Weekly Worker is a paper geared to internal disputation in the Socialist Alliance. I do not sneer. That is valuable. However, in the AWL’s activity – regulated by our understanding of our responsibilities to the class struggle around us, not by a ‘sect mentality’ – we find we need a paper that also orients more broadly and deals directly (not just by refraction through critique of the

Socialist Alliance’s activity, or lack of it) with trade-union and student battles, struggles over public services, and so on. We believe that sort of broader-oriented working-class paper is also what the Socialist Alliance needs.

At the earlier stages of the discussion on the ‘unofficial Socialist Alliance paper’, we thought the CPGB was saying that the Weekly Worker is as it is primarily because of the CPGB’s small size, not because of any larger political principle. In the more recent stages the CPGB has rejected the notion that a new paper should be substantially different in orientation from the present Weekly Worker – arguing, or seeming to argue, that the WW’s orientation is a matter of ‘partyist’ principle rather than of limits chosen because of the CPGB’s small size.

As far as I can see from Jack’s article, there are two areas of dispute about ‘partyism’ – general conceptions of a party, and specific deductions in relation to the Socialist Alliance.

The results from the general election of June 2001 showed us that the Alliance is still marginal in working-class politics. The preparations for the Socialist Alliance trade union conference on 16 March have shown us that the Alliance is miles from a coherent intervention in the unions, and has no collective understanding of how to help the working-class base of Labourism assert itself and break through the New Labour shell.

We fight to help develop the Alliance into a rounded party. The issue revolves around establishing the centrality of independent working-class representation in politics. To confine ourselves to debating with the other components of the Socialist Alliance on this would indeed be ‘sect mentality’. We have a duty to be active on our own account, in the broader labour movement. The AWL strives to discharge that duty. That is why we want a broader-oriented paper.

Jack is scornful about our ‘amateur’ trade union work and ‘fragmented’ interventions among students. But what does he recommend instead? Not doing any such work at all, abstaining, and instead issuing advice on how the Socialist Alliance – in practice, for the most part, the SWP – should be active!

The less-than-party approach here seems to me to be the CPGB’s. Lenin wrote against Kautsky: ‘We have any number of promises to be a Marxist some time in another epoch, not under present conditions, not at this moment. For tomorrow we have Marxism on credit, Marxism as a promise, Marxism deferred...’ Isn’t there more than a trace of that here? Shying away from supposedly ‘amateur’ intervention in basic working-class struggles now, and instead offering promises that someone else will do it ‘professionally’ some time in the future?

The substitution here of dressed-up ideal constructions for real solutions is, I think, connected with the fact that the CPGB’s concept of ‘partyism’ carries stultifying traces of your tendency’s Stalinist past.

Jack’s disquisition on how Marx, Engels and Lenin called themselves communists is beside the point. We are communists in that sense, just as we are also social-democrats in the best sense of that word. Your aim is to build a communist party, small c, in the sense that Marx understood communism rather than in the Kremlin sense? Fine.

But you say that your aim is ‘to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain’, specifically. And, to nail down the point, your 2002 perspectives cite, as what you reckon to be your main strength – above and before any item of political acuity, or meritorious activity – your ‘name and the traditions associated with it’. ‘The gathering pace of inquiries about our Party underlines the fact that the CPGB was the only genuine working-class party built in the last century, a body that occupied a strategically important role in the workers’ movement’.

But no-one today can have any living memory of the CPGB’s ‘role in the workers’ movement’ as other than vile and corrupt. To

remember any other 'CPGB' you would need to be at least 90 years old.

In what way was the CPGB, after a few early years, a 'genuine working-class party'? Its social composition was no better than the Labour left. Its politics, after 1935 at latest, were distinguishable from those of the worse sections of the Labour left only by occasional episodes in which it was worse, not better, such as the Hitler-Stalin pact. As early as 1938, Trotsky rightly pointed out that even the right-wing Labourites like Herbert Morrison were then to the left of the CP, which advocated a Popular Front with Liberals and 'progressive' Tories.

The only way in which the CPGB was closer to being a 'genuine working-class party' than the Labour left was the forms, the trappings and the insignia of 'partyism'. The clothes, however, had no emperor. To think otherwise is irrational reverence for tokens and signs, in abstraction from real content. And, worse, it is Stalinist-tinged fetishism, because even in formalities the bureaucratic centralism of the CPGB was very different from a revolutionary working-class party regime.

Your tendency has, to its credit, made a long way politically from your Stalinist beginnings. Jack's argument reveals that you have not cleared all the old fetishes out of your minds.

Thus, you fetishise the symbols – hammer and sickle, red flag, the title 'Communist Party of Great Britain', and so on. Not to claim those, writes Jack, is to abandon 'our entire heritage'. Entire! No, the substance of our heritage is not in such symbols, but in the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, and the rest, and, for those who consistently stand for what both the AWL and the CPGB want to stand for, in the struggle of the uncorrupted communists around Trotsky. If we can conveniently reclaim some symbols, like the red flag, which was never narrowly tied to Stalinism, all the better. If others go the way of the 19th and early 20th century usage of revolutionary socialists calling each other 'Citizen' and singing the Marseillaise, so be it.

Arguing for the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) to change their name to Communist Party, Lenin told those who were 'loth to cast off the 'dear old' soiled shirt' that it was 'time to cast off the soiled shirt and to put on clean linen'. The blouse of 'Communism' is a thousand times more encrusted with filth – and workers' blood – from the direct crimes of 70 years of Stalinism than was the chemise of Social Democracy from its complicity with bourgeois crimes in two and a half years of World War 1. To see the wearing of the 'Communist' shirt as the main strength and asset of a working-class tendency today is fetishism.

Fetishism of symbols – and then fetishism of the 'party' form, expressed as fetishism of the Socialist Alliance. Just as Jack sees two CPGBs in history – the actual one, which was 'in the mud' for decades, and an ideal one, 'the only genuine working-class party built in the last century' – so also he sees two Socialist Alliances today.

One of them comprises the actual components of the Alliance – the SWP ('short-sighted' and liable to reduce it to 'an ineffective on-off electoral front'); the 'independents' ('incoherent', 'ineffective', 'burnt out'); and various 'confessional sects' sharing, so the CPGB's 2002 perspectives opine, an 'economistic, sub-reformist consensus'.

The whole is more than the sum of its parts? In Jack's vision it becomes something flying in a stratosphere far above its parts. The 'other' Socialist Alliance is 'a beacon attracting socialist intellectuals, former Labourites, prominent trade union militants'; it is almost-a-party, capable of being made into 'a substantial social force' straight off by a good push from inside. This is not far from the sort of vision which sees priests as venal and bossy, the laity as credulous or cynical, and the prelates as corrupt, but the Church they collectively comprise as God on earth.

Within this dual vision of the Socialist Alliance, Jack also seems to have a dual vision of the SWP. With his eyes open, he

sees an SWP with 'crazy perspectives', a 'sect-building project', 'no party democracy', and 'a high rate of turnover' around a core which 'comes to see what exists around itself in a cynical, manipulative way', as the CPGB 2002 document puts it. With his eyes shut, in the visions that his brain projects onto the back of his eyelids, he sees an 'other' SWP, one which good polemic and advice will turn into the core of the 'other' Socialist Alliance.

These dual visions expressed themselves, in our recent AWL-CPGB face-to-face discussions about a new paper, in the idea that such a new paper should generally cover class battles through the prism of advice and critique about what the Socialist Alliance should do or is doing about them.

Jack's argument about a new paper is that the Socialist Alliance cannot develop without one – and so one must be launched, 'with the AWL if possible; without it if we must'. This is rather like the idea that calling yourself the CPGB and referring to it as 'our Party' makes you more of a force than you actually are. The Weekly Worker could be renamed 'Socialist Alliance Weekly', but the pretence involved would hinder rather than help the passage from the real Socialist Alliance of today to the 'other' one etched on the back of Jack's eyelids.

Jack transcribes formulas from another period and other circumstances, rather than translating basic ideas into the language of our circumstances. We, AWL and CPGB, have already discussed this in relation to the way the CPGB transcribes polemics about 'economism' from early 20th century Russia to early 21st century Britain, with little regard for the fact that the monarchy in Russia then had a different political and social significance from the monarchy in Britain today.

Jack's picture of the new paper and its role is transcribed from the history of Iskra, a paper of which 51 issues were published by Lenin and others between December 1900 and November 1903. Iskra played a big role in pulling together the then scattered local groups of Marxists in Russia into a coherent party with common politics. Though the party-founding conference which it prepared, in summer 1903, produced two factions (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) rather than a united party, and the Mensheviks appropriated Iskra, the paper had played a great role in promoting 'consistency in principle... organisational girding... dialogue with the working class'. Lenin's pamphlet 'What Is To Be Done?', published in spring 1902, was in large part a polemic for the idea of organising around Iskra as against haphazard local agitation.

An Iskra for the Socialist Alliance? It is not possible. A Socialist Alliance paper with the SWP – i.e., in the present or short-term foreseeable circumstances, one dominated by the SWP – could not be Iskra because it would have some SWP-appointed functionary in place of Lenin. A Socialist Alliance paper without the SWP could not have the authority of Iskra, which started with not only Lenin but also Plekhanov, Zasulich, Martov and others as editors.

Fortunately it is possible to make progress in other ways than by re-enacting historical drama. It is entirely possible for the Socialist Alliance to develop through the interplay and dialogue of a variety of publications. That is how the German Marxist movement developed up to 1914 (and that development produced much more than just those leaders who would back the World War in 1914); that, indeed, is largely how the Russian Marxist movement developed between 1903 and 1917.

Jack paints rosy prospects for the Socialist Alliance – 'a beacon', 'can grow into a substantial social force from these conditions' – but then stipulates, as a precondition for those prospects, something which we cannot get.

'The Socialist Alliance project', he writes, 'will never take off without a serious political paper'. He means one which provides the 'organisational girding' for the whole Alliance, not just one that is 'serious' in the way that Solidarity or the Weekly Worker already are.



That sort of 'Socialist Alliance Iskra' is not a feasible next step from where we are now. It would have to start from somewhere other than where we are now. Even the best new paper formed by merging the WW and Solidarity, immensely useful though it would be, could not be that 'Socialist Alliance Iskra'.

That leaves Jack with two options. One is to give up; the other is to resort to pretences and the substitution of fetishised formulas for real political solutions. He cannot make the Weekly Worker really become a 'Socialist Alliance Iskra'; he can, however, by appropriating symbols in the way already practised with the names 'CPGB' and 'Daily Worker' and the hammer-and-sickle emblem, emancipate himself from mundane realities and declare it such.

In the spirit of hyping up the CPGB as the 'real' Socialist Alliance, and dismissing the rest, the CPGB's 2002 perspectives document says that 'the AWL's 'transitional method' compass pitches them up on an even more right-wing shore than the others' [in the Socialist Alliance]; that what they loftily call our 'relatively healthy approach' on democratic openness is probably just 'a product of liberal/semi-anarchist appetites in [our] ranks'; and that we are 'ripe for a split'.

Why do the CPGB think that the AWL is 'ripe for a split'? 'Its adoption of the demand for a federal republic along with its call re: revolutionary unity takes it onto our political terrain – and our theoretical compass is rather better and more accurate than theirs'.

We have argued for revolutionary unity for rather a long time now (our first 'Open Letters' on the subject date from 1967 and 1974). We have known about the importance of formal democratic demands for a long time, too, and can take up another one without any of us lurching over into a repudiation of all so-called 'economistic', i.e. capital vs labour, concerns. We are capable of criticising our previous positions, and recognising that hostile tendencies were right against us on some issues – as we did, for example, when in the mid-1980s we renounced the call for a single joint Arab-Jewish state in Palestine, and came over to advocating self-determination for both nations there – without collapsing. You have managed to come over to our views on Ireland, on Israel-Palestine, and, at least partly, on the Labour Party, without splitting.

Your boast that revolutionary unity and a federal republic are © CPGB, marking out terrain where people are bound to get lost without your fine 'theoretical compass', reads extra oddly after the rueful admission, just a couple of pages earlier, than you have 'only one comrade undertaking serious theoretical work'. We not only have a small group as 'the Communist Party', and the Weekly Worker (with a suitable facelift) as Iskra, we also have your 'one comrade' as the 'theoretical compass' of our era!

If the AWL can see more clearly than others, and we believe we can, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants. Our stock of ideas is not our work alone, but a development of a tradition which we trace through many contributors – Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, Cannon, Craipeau, Shachtman, Draper, and others. The CPGB's view of Marxist tradition, by contrast, postulates a single sudden leap from the shoulders of Lenin, straight over the decades of official Communism (solidly, genuinely 'working class', but intellectually yielding only 'great discredit') to the navigator's seat where the 'only one comrade' perches today.

Children are said to develop their personalities in part by copying and adapting elements from their parents' personalities. We can emancipate ourselves from that impress, to the partial extent actually possible, only by consciously understanding and acknowledging it. The person who proclaims that he or she carries forward the name of his or her parents, but owes nothing to those parents in the cranky and dismal later years which are all that living memory retains of them, and only reprises their bright and exuberant youth – that person is the most likely to be the helpless victim of parental influences. So also with the CPGB.

Your statement, 'What we fight for', declares that: 'Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything'.

Jack tries to present and defend a non-Stalinist reading of those sentences. To do it he has to resort to tortuous reinterpretation. 'Nothing' is not 'nullity'. It 'contains both being and nothing: the unity of being and nothing, or being which is at the same time non-being'.

The sentences, however, make perfect, literal, straightforward sense in a Stalinist reading. I know Jack would reject that reading. My point is that his thought is still trapped in formulas which belong to that reading.

In the Stalinist reading, the continuing core of 'the party' is constituted by means of the prestige, financial subsidies, and paid agents of the Kremlin. To gain any weight it must latch on to causes with popular support; but it is not in the least necessary for it to be built with a working-class membership, or through support for working-class struggles. The PDPA in Afghanistan could build itself up to a strength sufficient to take power by recruiting instead from the army and airforce officer corps. The CPGB, fortunately, never got anywhere near taking power, but it achieved its maximum growth in the period when its policy was most directly opposed to independent working-class struggle (in the years after 1941).

In the major Western capitalist countries, where other social layers like the officer corps were 'already taken', the CPs often used working-class demands – within limits – to win support. The Kremlin's antagonistic relation to the bourgeois capitalist states allowed the CPs to do that. But it was by no means the essence of 'party-building'. In fact, full success for a CP – its seizure of state power – required the working class to be weak or passive. Wherever the working class was strong, active and self-confident, that fatally limited the prospects for a Communist Party.

In the Stalinist vision, everything depended on the party-building. 'With the party' – or, to take the 'best' outcome, with the party gaining totalitarian state power – the working class would be 'everything'. It would have the joys of communism, even if the actual workers were reduced to slave labour.

'Without the party' – or, worse, against the party, as when the workers of East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, or Poland in 1980-1, rose up for their own demands – the working class was 'nothing'. If working-class demands ran counter to Kremlin foreign policy – as they did in Britain, for example, in the period of the CPGB's greatest growth in the 1940s – then those working-class demands were worth 'nothing' and to be opposed.

The CPGB today agrees with us that the Stalinist states were not workers' regimes but bureaucratic, exploitative systems. It has not thought it through. Jack writes about Stalin and Mao being 'opportunistic traitors', who thus gave 'succour to the bourgeoisie'. They were not 'traitors' to their own bureaucratic ruling classes; as for the bourgeoisie, sometimes they gave succour to it, but sometimes they fought, overthrew and crushed it. The Stalinists were most virulently anti-working-class in those times and places when they were also most anti-bourgeois – when they took power. But Jack's thought is still shaped by a picture of the 'official Communists' as bad and opportunist leaders of the working class against the bourgeoisie.

The CPGB has undoubtedly moved a long way politically. It retains, however, as points of honour, much Stalinist debris: minimum/maximum programme, in opposition to the method of transitional demands; 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', in opposition to permanent revolution; and a fetishised concept of 'partyism'. Your recent reassertion of the idea that the April 1978 coup in Afghanistan was a genuine social revolution is startling new evidence that the debris is still there. (Presumably that would make Afghanistan 1978 the one genuine communist revolution of the 20th century, after 1917? I am

reminded of those ex-Maoists who – having first repudiated the USSR’s claim to be socialist, and then reluctantly having had to reject China’s claim too – finally settled on Albania as their model. As with the ‘pro-Albanians’, the acceptance for remote and obscure circumstances – then Albania, now Afghanistan – of the revolutionary working-class credentials of the Stalinist politics which gross evidence has made the comrades repudiate for the ‘big’ Stalinist states indicates that they still have not fully understood what Stalinism meant in the large. To be fair, I assume that you developed your views on Afghanistan against the ‘opportunist’ old CPGB in 1980, and have not yet rethought the question).

Again: ‘the working class is nothing without a party’. Even on the most generous reading, this notion feeds straight into the CPGB’s extravagant anti-economism and its disdain (in recent months partially corrected, but only partially) for the existing labour movement. A working class with no organisation, and a working class with developed trade unions but no revolutionary party – are they both equally ‘nothing’?

The CPGB, as we have seen, chides the AWL for ‘liberal/semi-anarchist appetites’. Yes, within the framework of class-struggle politics, and with an understanding that the framework precludes any one-sided elevation of individual desiderata above the overall needs of the struggle, we do have an ‘appetite’ for the ‘liberal’ and ‘semi-anarchist’ values of individual freedom and minority rights. Doesn’t the CPGB?

At the Socialist Alliance structure conference in December, the CPGB argued against any guarantees for minority representation on the Alliance executive on grounds of ‘partyism’ and ‘centralism’, and cast its second-preference votes for the SWP’s draft constitution with the argument that its admittedly bureaucratic centralism was nonetheless better, since it was centralism of some sort, than the looser structures of other drafts.

It was good, at the Alliance executive meeting on 9 March, to see the CPGB shifting on this question, and coming out in support of guarantees for minority representation in Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance. It makes no sense that such guarantees are good in Bedfordshire, but bad in the Alliance nationally. The CPGB is caught in contradictions here because of the conflict between its sense of reality and the fetishes and dual visions which clog its thinking through the ‘return of the repressed’ from its Stalinist past.

Those fetishes and dual visions affect both the CPGB’s general politics – the idea that ‘federal republic’ is the most that can be proposed for now, the repudiation of the fight for workers’ representation and a workers’ government, the extravagant ‘anti-economism’, its retrospective endorsement of Afghan Stalinism, and so on – and its conception of the sort of new paper we need. We need to discuss these things.

In final paragraph Jack writes: ‘we communists are obliged to press ahead... we shall... work towards the launch of an unofficial paper – with the AWL if possible; without it if we must’. What does this mean? Spurn the ‘flotsam and jetsam’, dismiss the supposedly ‘lackadaisical and nonchalant’ AWL, and declare the group round the Weekly Worker to be the ‘real’ Socialist Alliance, as it has already declared itself to be the ‘real’ CPGB? Is that what he really means? Much better to descend from the pretences and discuss with us the substantive politics that can lay the basis for a real step forward.

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