

Parliaments, workers' and bourgeois

By Martin Thomas

I'M GLAD the gap has narrowed in my debate with Alan Johnson about Parliament (WL22,18; *Socialist Organiser* 616,617,619). I think I can narrow it still further.

In 1917 not only Russia, but also most European countries, lacked much experience with universal suffrage. Even a rough-and-ready workers' council system could clearly represent wider democracy.

After the last 50 years and more, however, "one person, one vote" has become an established minimum of politics.

Given the difficulties of compiling an accurate and comprehensive electoral register based on workplace, any workers' regime designing a new national assembly would probably have it elected by similar procedures, on similar electoral registers, to the old parliament, although with shorter, fixed terms; right of recall; workers' wages for MPs; abolition of monarchs, presidents, Upper Houses, etc; fusion of legislative and executive powers, so that the executive no longer stands above parliament; etc.

Since the working class cannot exert decisive class power within a system of formal equality in the same way as the capitalist class does through wealth, education, etc., the workers' regime would probably want to institutionalise workplace-based councils with powers to speak on industrial issues and call MPs to account. In constitutional law, the system might look pretty much like a combination of parliament and workers' councils.

To say that we should aim for a combination of parliament and workers' councils is still false because it glosses over the question: which parliament? whose parliament?

Alan's article makes revolution sound too much like a seminar in comparative constitutional law, a debate about whether "workers see their democratic rights... as best protected by the existing state institutions or by the new workers' councils". The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself, which means that a revolutionary workers' regime must be made by organisations of the working class itself which are flexible, responsive, widely representative, not bureaucratised, and not dominated by a privileged minority - in short, workers' councils, soviets, or some similar form.

Those workers' councils may establish a new workers' parliament, but only after

overthrowing the old bourgeois state, in which the old parliament is embedded.

The existing parliament, with all the checks and balances built into it and around it by ages of bourgeois rule, is a bourgeois parliament. Certainly revolutionaries should seek to work within it and to fight for democratic reforms of it. But a parliament so totally reformed within capitalism as to allow the working class real control? or one which elects a hard, solid, revolutionary majority? These are about as unlikely as a peaceful overthrow of capitalism. If the working class were revolutionary enough to go about imposing such things, it would already be strong enough to take power directly; and if when strong enough it did not seize the moment to take power, then it would be crushed.

A parliament with a left-labour majority radical enough to destabilise it as a bourgeois parliament is another matter. But then it is crucial that revolutionaries argue for no reliance at all on the leftist parliamentary leaders, not for "combining" with them.

Can socialists forgive sectarians?

By Annie O'Keefe

JOHN MCNULTY [Platform, WL22] raises serious and important questions: in its general form it is this: can socialists "forgive" people who have been sectarian paramilitaries; if they "convert" to socialism, can socialists work with them?

His answer for this is an emphatic "no" — it is, he says, a scandal that Militant has anything to do with them. What is his answer when the paramilitaries in question are Provisional IRA or INLA or IPLA? The opposite of what he says about the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP). For John McNulty it depends on which side of the sectarian divide the paramilitaries were on.

The organisation of which he was secretary for many years in the '70s and '80s, PD, the predecessor of the ICMP, fellow travelled with the Provos and INLA and was not inaccurately described as a group which functioned as a specialist propaganda agency of the Provos. McNulty will reply: but they were anti-imperialist fighters. PUP are not, they are pro-imperialist killers of Catholics.

It is true that the Provisional IRA and the INLA spouted anti-imperialist rhetoric, and paid lip-service to the equality and unity of the Irish people, of the need — as the 1916 Declaration of the Irish Republic put it — "to treat all the children of the nation equally."

Some of them were even "socialists." The

point, however, is that much of what the Provisional IRA and, often more so, what the "revolutionary socialists" of INLA did, was also sectarian killing, of Protestants.

These organisations proceeded from a radically false definition of the situation in the Six Counties, defining the fundamental issue as one of "British occupied Ireland". In fact the central question is division in the *Irish* people, the fact that one million *Irish* people refuse to go into a United Ireland and want to remain British. The real logic of the situation led the Provisional IRA — despite its republican "ideology" and the sincere republicanism of its activists — to target the Irish minority. Towards the end they claimed — and exercised — the right to kill even carpenters and plumbers servicing RUC barracks.

Shooting down Protestants in any way connected with the state before the eyes of their own small children became *routine*. The "Marxist" INLA sometimes faced the brutal truth and openly justified attacks on Protestants as Protestants — in 1987 they attacked a Protestant church and sprayed the assembled Protestants with bullets.

Much of what these two organisations did can be separated from the work of Protestant paramilitaries only by the political and ideological gloss one puts on it.

That the Provisional IRA and INLA people who ordered and did these things paid lip-service to better ideals, higher goals and fine republican traditions, while the Protestant paramilitaries prattled on in the washed-out jargon of traditional master-race British imperialism does not, if you think about it, testify in the "republicans'" favour: *they* should have known better!

To a considerable extent the "republicans" — and PD's too — denunciation of Protestant sectarianism served as no more than a justification for *the sectarianism of their own side*, their own pursuit of Catholic communalist goals.

When did the Provisional IRA weekly *An Phoblacht* ever indict, denounce or even report sectarianism on their own side? For that matter, when, after the early '70s, did PD?

What the Protestant paramilitaries did is to my mind indefensible. Some of them acted, or thought they acted, in the hideously mistaken belief that what they did — attacking Catholics — served to defend their own people.

If some of them now take a fresh look — I don't know enough about them to assess whether they really have or not — then socialists *should* talk to them and where appropriate, work with them. Just as we should work — and no doubt John McNulty thinks we should — with the Provisional IRA.

You could argue — I'm not sure I want to, but you could — that such people, if they learn about socialism and the real traditions of Tone-Connolly republicanism, will be a lot purer and more wholesome than the "socialists" and even "Marxists" — in INLA, for example — who functioned as sectarians *after* they had "become socialists."