

Critical notes on the CPGB/WW

Hello Mark Fischer!

Sacha 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 organization)?

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 organization 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 organization, 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 recognizable 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 sizable 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-Mijahadeen 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 Mujhadeen 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 sizable 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 N. 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 S. W. P to seem very "militant" - and the ruling class was too strong for the S W P 's nonsense-slogans to affect what would happen in NI.

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 S. W .P. 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 summarizing 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 recognized 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 analyze 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 frontism, 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 organization 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 S A 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 organization 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. E C 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 organization 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-MAILED 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 organized 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" in 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 - O K!

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 organization of the working class.

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

That, a properly organized 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 Tzar to organizing 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 organization 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 sterilizing "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 reorganization 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 Tzar 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 Tzarism 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 recognizably 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 recognizable 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 hypnotized 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 Blairite's 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 organization 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 gobbledygook, 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 organization 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 characterized 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 C P G B!

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 organization 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 bureaucratization 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 defense 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 organization 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 traveled 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 organization'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 CP GB" (but it is a sort of " Wizard Of Oz CPGB": - nothing, as little Dorothy discovered, behind the fa ade!)

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 organization 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 organizations 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 rebuild 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.