

Break with police state "unions"!

THE OFFICIAL British labour movement does not seem to want to know about or concern itself with the conditions of the working class in the Stalinist states, or with their struggles for basic liberties and the right to form trade unions for self-defence against the bureaucratic state. From Bill Sirs [Iron and Steel Confederation leader] on the right, who openly defended his 'colleagues', the strike-breaking Polish 'trade union' leaders, during the strikes, [of Aug 1980] to Alex Kitson [TGWU] and Mick McGahey [NUM] on the left, large sections of the British labour movement indulge in the pretence that the official 'trade unions' in the Stalinist states are real working-class organisations — when in fact they are part of a police-state 'Labour Front' apparatus for controlling and policing the working class *and for preventing real trade unions and an independent working-class movement developing*.

It is not just that many bureaucrats of our trade unions feel an impulse of solidarity for and have a real feeling of fellowship with the ruling Stalinist bureaucrats — though they obviously do. Nor just that many left wing officials are of a generally Stalinist persuasion — as are Kitson and McGahey.

Most importantly, the reason why they get away with it is that many rank and file militants, too, don't want to come out against the 'trade unions' in the Stalinist states and against the British trade union leaders who aid those police-state 'unions'. Many who consider themselves anti-Stalinist revolutionaries take the same view.

They would feel uncomfortable at having to say on this question something like what Margaret Thatcher and [ultra-right elect EPTU leader] Frank Chapple say. This is understandable, but it is a really trivial consideration in a situation where the workers of the Stalinist states need our moral and practical support. We have a duty as basic as not crossing a picket line to give it to them.

As people who believe, with Marx and Engels, that the emancipation of the working class can only be achieved by the working class itself, we would be obliged to support *any* independent workers' movement against the police state even if we considered its politics to be seriously mistaken and wrong.

That a real labour movement should exist is much more important than any social transformations achieved apart from or against the working class.

Some in the labour movement believe that contact with the 'institutions' of the states in the Stalinist bloc is a force for peace ('peaceful coexistence') and against war. If that view encourages the pretence (and the facts are too well known today to make such an attitude other than a pretence) that the Stalinist states are not savagely oppressive; if it leads to ignoring the fact that the 'trade unions' there (and most other social institutions as well) have nothing in common with things of the same name in Britain; if it blinds us to the fact that they are 'anti-unions' and

'counter-unions' rather than working-class organisations — then it amounts to a *craven siding with the oppressors against the oppressed in those states*.

Yet other militants believe that socialists should refrain from stark condemnation and denunciation of the Stalinist regimes because they are relatively progressive and/or because socialists should defend the system of state-owned property in those states against any attempts by NATO to restore private ownership of the means of production.

Many who do know about Stalinism, who are influenced by Trotsky, and who even commit themselves vaguely and abstractly to the working-class struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy recoil from the demand that the British workers' movement should have no dealings with the Stalinist labour fronts. For example, *Socialist Challenge**, which, in general, favours self-governing trade unions in the Stalinist states. Something fundamental [is] involved: the attitude we try to get our own labour movement to take to the struggle of our class in the Stalinist states, and to their oppressors. To fudge that class issue *is to do the opposite of the work of Trotskyists* — which is to fight for international working-class solidarity with the real labour movements in the Stalinist states, or with their pioneers, like Klebanov**.

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To fear to call the Stalinists what they are for fear of chiming in with the reactionaries, and to thus endorse the links our own scabbing bureaucrats maintain with the Stalinist 'unions', is to adopt the stance of those 'Friends of the Soviet Union' who called Trotsky a reactionary for speaking out in the '30s.

This amounts to playing Pontius Pilate with the affairs of our own class in the Stalinist states.

Trotsky would turn in his grave at the notion that attitudes such as those of *Socialist Challenge* have anything to do with the politics he fought and died for. Trotsky argued that the USSR was a 'degenerated workers' state' which should be defended against the military onslaughts of imperialism. So does *Workers' Action*. But that does not mean that we regard the USSR (or the other Stalinist states) under the bureaucracy as 'better'. Far from it. The bureaucratic USSR is only to be defended insofar as it is a

product of the struggle against capitalism, and *against* being conquered by imperialism — not 'for itself'. In most respects it is the opposite of the ideal socialists strive for.

Its collectivism has more in common with the caricature evoked by enemies of socialism like Von Hayek than with what socialists want to achieve.

Trotsky took sides — and tried to get the international labour movement, whatever its given political coloration at that moment, to take sides — squarely with the workers of the USSR (and with the oppressed nations within the USSR, like the Ukrainians) against the totalitarian regime.

He never allowed the need to distance himself from the imperialist and pro-imperialist critics of the USSR to determine what he said. *The Russian reality and the duty to tell the truth to the labour movement did that*.

A major psychological reason why there is reluctance to call things like the Russian 'trade unions' by their proper names is probably the fear of thereby praising by implication the regime which our movement exists to fight — that of 'liberal' capitalism.

But the choice is not confined to either Thatcher and Reagan or Brezhnev and Honecker: there is also the possibility of a working-class socialist democracy.

In fact, irreconcilable working-class and socialist opposition to our main enemy at home cannot be stable or politically serious if it is based on anything other than a clear and independent working-class view of the world, and on the experience of all the struggles of the working class throughout the world.

Therefore we must not block out of our consciousness a real awareness of what our class faces under the Stalinist regimes. We must not mollify or console ourselves with half-conscious assumptions that the totalitarian Stalinist regimes are really not so bad, are really rather benevolent and paternalistic to those they deprive of civil rights and personal and group autonomy, and are not really dripping with the blood of workers who have dared to stand out against them.

They do really drip with workers' blood. We must actively support the workers in Russia and the other Stalinist states, and that means opposing their oppressors in every way we can.

It means rousing the anger, the hatred and the active hostility of the labour movement against them.

It is, to repeat, as basic as not crossing a picket line. And as basic as the attitude one takes to those who do.

By John O'Mahony. Extracts from *Workers' Action* 182, March 1981

* *Socialist Challenge* was a predecessor of *Socialist Outlook* and *Socialist Action*; *Workers' Action* was a predecessor of *Workers' Liberty*.

** Klebanov organised an independent miners' union in the Ukraine. For this he was locked up in an asylum by the authorities for many years.