

Union also to blame

IT seems to me that Paul Cooper [‘How not to lead a strike’, WZ41] in his haste to pin the blame for the defeat of the Southwark strike on the SWP completely fails to put the leadership of NATFHE in the frame.

Wasn't it they who pulled the plug on the dispute by refusing to pay sustentation, despite a vote at conference for £50 per day? Isn't it also the fact that their refusal to challenge the trade union laws and luke-warmness about strike action meant that the dispute wasn't spread to other inner London colleges? It would have been quite impossible for ELS to organise scabbing had that occurred.

Almost all the publicity I received came from the strike committee itself. NATFHE's leadership did not seriously mobilise people for the demonstration at Southwark or organise the fundraising effort which kept the strike going for so long.

As a small union in the ‘Cinderella’ sector of education, NATFHE has real problems at the moment. Management provocation is intense and branches such as Accrington were unable to respond with strike action even when their secretary, NEC member Pat Walsh, was sacked last Christmas.

Ideally, I would regard it as unwise tactics for branches to engage in local disputes in the current climate. But what exactly are you supposed to do if members are victimised, as happened to Chris Ryan at Southwark? Or if a college announces a section is closing, or agency staff are introduced on pay of £5 an hour less than established teachers?

Certainly you could make criticisms of the SWP's role in the union — despite being in a position to do so, they have failed to build a serious rank and file opposition. Their work in the union consists of sporadic forays rather than consistently building a network of activists. This is in line with the policy of the national organisation which is to project the party first and foremost, rather than build semi-permanent union oppositions which link party and non-party people.

Like a lot of current disputes, such as Liverpool dockers, Magnet and Hillingdon hospital, the Southwark strike was a local issue which attracted widespread support both inside and outside the union. People have demonstrated, donated and rallied in support of these disputes, but they have not been able to alter the balance of forces ranged against trade unions. In this respect I agree with Paul Cooper's final statement about the need for “broad campaigns which attempt to unite the labour movement”. Such campaigns will of course need a determined fight against the union bureaucrats like Monks, Bickerstaffe and Morris and their buddies in the leadership of NATFHE.

John Kreeger, Branch Secretary
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New Australian Labour Party?

AS Bob Leach says, the ALP has always been liberal rather than socialist, and the recent Hawke/Keating governments delivered more pain than gain to the ALP's working class supporters. Yet, explicitly socialist groups in Australia have remained small and ineffective. Why?

Bob Leach's answer to this question appears to be that the socialist groups have based themselves on Leninist politics, instead of accepting the framework of parliamentary democracy. This answer cannot be easily dismissed. A large part of the problem with the

revolutionary groups is their interpretation of Leninism, which sees parliamentary democracy as nothing but a fraud.

Accordingly, the New Labour Party is a social democratic (not revolutionary socialist) group. However, we then have another problem: what is wrong with the ALP? Bob Hawke wanted nothing more than to be loved by everybody; he would have delivered more benefits to workers if he had thought this could be done. What little he did deliver was (in his opinion) the best that could be done, given the imperative to internationalise the economy.

The ALP Left was ineffective because they had no viable alternative to the Hawke/Keating strategy. They wanted to continue to shelter the Australian economy behind a tariff wall, and to bargain with the capitalists for a better slice of the national cake. They had no convincing answer to the argument that a sheltered economy would stagnate, and there would be a smaller cake to share. Bob Leach offers a “new protectionism”. He is quite right to oppose the provisions of GATT which disallow trade discrimination against environmentally damaging production methods, or against failure to meet minimum labour standards. However, these things should be opposed irrespective of whether Australian or overseas firms are the perpetrators. It is quite misleading to present the issue as “protectionism”.

Thus it is not clear if New Labour has any policies that could not be argued for within the ALP. Indeed, the issue of labour standards has been raised far more clearly by Gough Whitlam. In a recent speech, reported in *Labor Herald*, Whitlam said: “We must never accept the idea that the internationalisation of the economy forces us to accept lower industrial standards. On the contrary, the internationalisation of the economy is the strongest argument for the internationalisation of industrial standards. The instruments for such a course are already in our hands. The International Labour Organisation conventions provide us with the best possible method of ensuring that international best practice in industrial affairs is applied throughout Australia”.

This proposal to ratify and vigorously enforce ILO conventions will no doubt be met with a storm of objections on the grounds that “Australian jobs will be lost”. The labour movement needs a strategy to oppose a “strike” by capital. Public ownership is part of the answer, so is solidarity with actions to enforce ILO conventions in other countries. But it is difficult to see how protectionism helps. It simply isn't true that only nasty foreign capitalists will resist legislation to raise labour standards.

Instead of offering a clear alternative to “state liberalism”, Bob Leach's New Labour offers a variant of it. Then, perversely, he assumes that what he has to say is far too “advanced” for rank and file ALP members to comprehend, and gives up on the ALP. Perhaps something like the New Zealand New Labour Party might have been formed here in 1989. But if the opportunity was there, it has been well and truly missed. The only conclusion Bob Leach seems to have drawn from this experience is that New Labour should proscribe other left-wing groups — just like the ALP!

Roger Clarke

SWP thuggery

This letter was sent to the SWP's executive committee. I am still awaiting a reply.

I WRITE concerning an attempt by some of your members to break up a fringe meeting our comrades organised at your recent Marxism '97

event (5pm, Sunday 6 July) to promote the Free Trade Unions conference being hosted on 19 July by Liverpool City UNISON and the Welfare State Network.

I will not waste my time in complaining about things that are now traditional at your Marxism events: swearing, bureaucratic messing about (including threats to set the police on socialist staffing stalls outside), attempts to stop our people from selling papers or handing out leaflets, carving up the sessions in the most heavy-handed manner. I assume you not only condone this sort of thing, but actively encourage and organise it.

But Ian Mitchell and Yunis Baksh went beyond what has become “normal” for your organisation and had a good go at breaking up our fringe meeting. They behaved like nutters — Mitchell in particular appeared to have lost control of himself.

After the main speakers had ended their contributions, Mitchell and others stood up, started shouting and refused to accept the right of the chair to organise the discussion. They were either attempting to make the meeting so unpleasant that the SWP members there would leave, or to force us to close the meeting down. Eventually they left, having largely failed: the remaining SWP members, to their credit, then denounced their behaviour.

Their five minutes of ranting was captured on video, tending to suggest they are not only thugs, but that they are also more than a bit dim.

You may remember that these two idiots were responsible for one of the physical attacks on our comrades during Marxism '93. I understand they are quite senior in your organisation — if they are that says quite a lot about your “party”.

The point of this letter: given their lunatic behaviour I can quite imagine Mitchell and Baksh attacking our members again. Now, I guess you don't give a damn about any of this. You may however take notice of this: we are sending a copy of the video of these idiots in action to all the major UNISON branches.

So, why don't you sort them out and get them to calm down? Appeals like this have fallen on deaf ears in the past, so I will add: why don't you sort yourselves out?

Mark Osborn

Scots nationalism

The Mass in Latin?

AT the outset of his non-review of my most recent book *The Very Bastards of Creation: A Scottish-International Radicalism: A Biographical History 1707-1995*, a strange “reviewer” writing under the fictitious name of Patrick Avakuum (*Workers' Liberty* 40) introduces the spectre of the Israel-Arab Six Day War of 1967 in order to display his dubious polemical “ability” to rubbish both me and the Scottish national question. By consciously trying to raise the polemical temperature and by expressing his preference for Brit heat rather than socialist international light, he is not even aware of his own muddled-headedness. Defending Israel's right to exist as an imperialist State, Avakuum then denies Scotland's historical identity as a nation during the last 300 years without acknowledging the role of British/English imperialism in 1707.

To grasp the particular “socialist” mentality behind the fictitious review — or was it just the reviewer's name that was fictitious? — of my book *The Very Bastards of Creation*, I am forced to cast my mind back to Ignazio Silone's novel *Midnight in the Century*. In his superior capacity of what Silone called one of “the guardian angels of the new mythology and the guardian angels whose task is to lead the believers along the right path to orthodoxy and to protect them” from heresy — and too



Megan's Law no answer

THE demand for "Megan's Law" — named after the American girl murdered by a known sex offender who moved into her neighbourhood — is a call for the names and addresses of convicted child abusers to be circulated around the communities in which they live. Its motivation is entirely understandable, but I believe that this demand is mistaken.

It is certain that if the names of convicted child abusers were published, unacceptable vigilante action would follow. A released offender could easily be the target of violent attack once his/her name is known. Should a local child be attacked, it is highly likely that the "local abuser" will be blamed and persecuted, even if there is no evidence or indication that s/he attacked the child. If s/he were not responsible for the attack, the real attacker would have a big headstart in escaping justice, and there would be sure consequences for the accused person's safety and behaviour (*Prime Suspect* comes to mind).

The suggested law will be perceived by some as an invitation to "deal with" the named abuser. How long before some people decide to "deal with" perceived potential abusers who do not appear on any list? In a recent incident in Hackney, a man was attacked because someone had spread a rumour that he was a child abuser. There have been other similar incidents lately: it is no coincidence that this accompanies public discussion of naming child sex offenders.

But if someone living in the community is a threat to children, isn't the solution to name him/her publicly? No — they should not be living in the community, able to pose a threat to children.

There is a big problem with the judicial system and the nature of sentencing. A judge cannot possibly know at the time of passing sentence precisely how long it will be until an offender is ready for release. Although the parole system gives some flexibility, the sentencing set-up inevitably means that there are people in prison who no longer need to be there, and people released who are very likely to reoffend. This is the failing of a system geared to punishment rather than reform.

The judicial system should be able to deal with people who have abused children in a different way — using whatever treatment is possible and effective, and a release date decided at the appropriate time by the informed opinions of those who can best judge, not by the expiry of a pre-set time-span.

The probation service should monitor convicted abusers after their release and, if it is considered necessary, release should include conditions. These could include requirements that the person does not live or work within a certain radius of any school; cannot be employed in certain jobs; must not share accommodation with children; continues appropriate therapy.

If an offender would remain, with all this in place, a real threat to children, then it is in the interests of both the potential child victims and the potential abuser that s/he be kept in custody rather than released into the community wearing a label marked "lynch me".

There are many failings in our social and political conditions that point to other measures that can — and must — be taken. Social Services are starved of money, social workers overstretched and unable to properly look out for kids' well-being. Refuges for women and children fleeing abuse wage a continuous struggle to raise funds and

keep providing their vital service. Crowded classrooms make it impossible for teachers to give children the attention they need. More social care for youngsters — playschemes, nurseries, etc. — would help develop their confidence and bring them into contact both with other children and with adults other than their parents (who are, after all, their most likely potential abusers). More rights for children in many areas of their lives — and honest sex education with no parental opt out — could make children less vulnerable to abuse.

And although explaining the causes of child abuse is a complex task beyond the scope of this article, those causes must be tackled. What makes some people so horribly abuse the power they have over kids? How can we break the cycle of abuse that turns many victims into perpetrators? What prevents some adults being able to form meaningful, consensual relationships with other adults?

Ignoring social factors and blaming crime on individual psychopathology — defining every abusive act as the doing of a naturally, unchangeable 'evil' person — puts up a big obstacle to tackling the prevalence of abuse.

The killing of Jamie Bulger was a tragedy. A second tragedy is that the hurt, anger and outrage it caused has been focused into a crusade to keep Jon Venables and Robert Thompson locked up for life, instead of asking: how has our society become so brutalised that two 10 year olds kill a toddler?

Action is needed to protect children from abuse. In deciding what that action should be, it is important not to simply pick the "toughest" option to prove how strongly we feel about the deplorable crime of child abuse, but to work out what action will be effective. It is a deeply sad comment to have to make, but our children must be made aware of the potential threat to their safety not simply from one named individual, but from any stranger — since most children who are abused suffer at the hands of someone they know — from their own family and acquaintances. I do not believe that publishing the names and addresses of convicted child abusers after their release would be effective in protecting children. The proposal from the government has not conceded to demands to publish names of all such offenders. A register will be kept and individuals' details published in "exceptional circumstances". I cannot imagine what exceptional circumstances would make this measure more effective than other measures proposed in this article.

A postscript. Counted amongst convicted "sex offenders" are people who have abused no one. The 17 year old who slept with a 15 year old, the man who had sex with a 17 year old man, the 34 year old woman who eloped with a 14 year old youth. Consenting sex should not be a crime, because a crime should have a victim. Until such time as the law ceases to make criminals of such people, their names must never appear on lists alongside convicted abusers.

Janine Booth

Whose right to hunt?

BOB YATES [WL41] says that to ban fox hunting would be unjust as it would discriminate against one particular cruel sport. He goes on to say that while he would never go hunting himself he sees no reason why we should prevent others from doing so, as human beings have a 'right' to do things even if they are disapproved of by the majority in society.

There is some confusing logic at work here.



Those who support fox hunting often argue that the Labour Party's policy of support for a ban is based on class hatred. For one thing, if this were true it would make it unique among Labour's current policies. For another, there is a historical element missing from the pro-hunt lobby's arguments.

They are quite correct to say that the recreational cruelty of the aristocracy and that of the rural working class have been treated differently. However, the comparison should not be between hunting and fishing (both of which are, at least to some extent, bourgeois pastimes — think of salmon fishing), but between hunting and, say, badger-baiting. Country sports that were cheap to participate in, and therefore predominantly working class, were outlawed as part of the 'civilising' process which has gone on over the past two centuries: bear-baiting, cock-fighting, badger-baiting, dog-fighting — all are now against the law. Hunting is the odd one out, and has survived only because hunts are crowded with judges, politicians and the well-to-do. If Bob Yates really wants to defend the right of people to indulge in cruel sports, he should be campaigning for the legalisation of badger-baiting and dog-fighting.

This brings me to the idea that human beings have a "right" to hunt. It should not take much argument, in a Marxist magazine, to dispel the notion that human beings have any "rights" beyond the rights bestowed in the context of the society they live in. If workers in 20th century Britain do not even have the right to a job, or a decent home (which they clearly don't), then how on earth can they be said to have a right to go hunting? Where, for example, does an unemployed bricklayer get the horse from?

Bob Yates compares hunting to eating meat — and misses the point that eating is not something done purely for entertainment, as hunting is. The defence of hunting that it is good for the environment is now pretty much an exploded myth: a recent meeting of the NFU in Leicestershire — the hunting county — when pushed to come up with evidence to support this view could offer only the fact that hunt workers will remove dead livestock from farm land used by the hunt, as a "favour" to landowners who give the hunt access. Is this really the best they can do?

Meat-eating may well be uncivilised, and a future society may well decide not to do it. But to argue that because a majority in 1990s Britain eat meat, we cannot restrict other aspects of cruelty to animals is to advocate a religious rather than a materialist approach: "Let he who is without sin..."

Bob says that rather than supporting an end to fox-hunting, we should support the campaign for public access to the great private estates. But these are not contradictory goals. A civilised society would have neither the mindless cruelty nor private ownership of land. By all means campaign for the right to roam the countryside in peace, but let the foxes roam in peace too.

Nick Holden

cowardly to write under his own name — the fictitious Patrick Avakuum unwittingly helps to rubbish the *Hibertian* socialism that some of us have invested our lives in.

WHEN Silone published his review of Serge's novel in *Mass and Wert* at the beginning of 1940 under the title of "The Mass in Latin", Silone insisted on unpalatable truths and the need to highlight the fact that "Serge's dissidents" were reflecting "the image of that very society which they allegedly want to destroy". Furthermore, it strikes me as curious and interesting that no English or American socialist magazine has ever published a translation of Silone's review of Serge's novel. With an eternal wisdom that is particularly applicable to the Toy town British imperialist "Bolsheviks" like Avakuum, Silone criticised the practitioners of an amoral left-wing sectarianism: "But unfortunately, though they possess the spirit of sacrifice, they lack the daring and the creative intuition of the pioneers, which are necessary if one wants to lead the people into the future. They are nothing but Epigones, and only the initiated can understand the formulas of their secret liturgy."

It is probably futile to protest against Avakuum's irrational, vicious, nasty, opportunist, amoral and *ahistorical* caricature of the arguments in my book, and I am conscious of swimming against the dominant "socialist" current of our time. But in a time of reaction and sloth such as Silone faced in 1940, the practitioners of "The Mass in Latin" (as distinct from the *vernacular* of working people) have always been comparable to, in Silone's words, "the first Christians who believed that God's Kingdom on earth must come here and how". And in criticising the stultified "socialist" tradition now personified by Patrick Avakuum and all those opposed to real workers' liberty, Silone said: "It is always a sign of a great weakness of any system of ideas, if there is an obvious contradiction between it and the practical stance of its adherents, if it does not succeed in making their sacrifices, their doubts, their defeats comprehensible. Luckily human beings are often worth more than the phrases which they have been taught".

Avakuum is, of course, theoretically incapable of even beginning to explain nationalism from a socialist viewpoint, and he *has* to rubbish my contribution to historical scholarship and humane learning. Ignoring the vast literature on the historical relationship between capitalism, nationalism and the struggle for socialist internationalism, *Workers' Liberty's* chief ideological policeman is not even aware of classics such as *Nationalism and the Class Struggle* (1905) by Ber Borochov and *Confound the Wise* (1942) by Nicolas Calas. If Avakuum would make the effort to cast off his inherited authoritarian and elitist *certainly* of knowing everything without taking the trouble to do research, perhaps he might eventually grasp the significance of Borochov's comment that: "Nationalism, therefore, first became manifest not in the external politics of the ruling class, but in the internal struggle of the oppressed classes. Nationalism, in the present sense of the word, was carried over to the sphere of external politics only later, when the national question make its full appearance".

Besides, in his brilliant essay titled "Towards a Socialist Theory of Nationalism", Shlomo Avineri wrote: "It [the orthodox Marxist theory of nationalism] left a problematic heritage to the socialist movement, with a veritable 'black hole' where a confrontation with one of the most potent social and political forces of the 19th and 20th centuries should have been". Yet, in spite of the theoretical guidance provided by Borochov's insights into nationalism and socialism after the deaths of Marx and Engels, for much of his adult life Marx saw nationalism, in the words of Avineri, "as a modern superstructural expression of the bourgeois need

for larger markets and territorial consolidation".

I have been forced to make such general theoretical points simply because Avakuum has yet again treated his long-suffering readers to his version of "The Mass in Latin" — sorry, his exclusive "Marxist" theory of nationalism in the modern world — without once examining the careful arguments in *The Very Bastards of Creation*. However, when your readers are presented with Patrick Avakuum's theorised version of Scottish history, in which certain "Marxist" concepts become a substitute for a knowledge of the historical facts, I am almost rendered speechless. Ignoring my research and documentation to the contrary, he insists that "You would have to do great violence to history — or identify the 18th- and 19th-century Gaelic Highlands with mainstream Scotland, which is the same thing — to classify Scotland as an oppressed nation which needs separation to achieve liberation. Scotland has, on the contrary, been the partner in everything — including the crimes — the British Empire has done in the last 300 years". (Incidentally, though I have no desire to evoke the spirit or mentality of "The Mass in Latin", perhaps Avakuum should ponder what Leon Trotsky said about the Scottish national question in his book *Whither England?* (1925)! Besides, in his pamphlet on the Jewish question, the "Old Man" confessed that the experience of fascism had destroyed his earlier optimism and had convinced him that the Jews could not be assimilated into Western societies.)

JUST as I was reading Avakuum's *ahistorical* musings in which he displayed his very crude and insensitive indifference to the suppression of the two 18th- and 19th-century Scottish languages, Gaelic and "Lallans", I received a letter from Laurens Otter in which he mentioned Angus Calder's "thesis that English oppression of the Celts in these islands was a rehearsal for the wider imperialist atrocities". Of course, if I pushed Avakuum too far theoretically, I am sure that the Toy town "Bolshevik" who disapproves of the 1930s nationalist Pan-African advocacy of CLR James inside the English socialist movement would endorse the Duke of Cumberland's imperialist butchery at Culloden in 1746.

Though he is indeed one of Silone's Epigones — and one of those who substitute religious faith for rational debate — in his passionate denial of the reality of Scotland's historic oppression, our Patrick identifies with the very English imperialist tradition of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, GDH Cole, Raymond Postgate and the Brits' *Labourism*. (This was the same imperialist Left which condemned the revolts of Africans and African Americans.) Moreover, in the 1930s socialist classic *The Common People* (1938), GDH Cole and Raymond Postgate defended "Butcher" Cumberland's brutal atrocities at Culloden as a significant landmark in the development of British capitalism. Like the Black people in the 1930s West Indies who, in the words of Sylvia Winter, "represented the zero term of culture", so Cole and Postgate justified the mass slaughter of Highland peasants in 1746 because their "primitive" and "backward" society — a society they traced back to "the apes" — stood in the way of a *civilised* capitalist mode of production.

Moreover, in Avakuum's elitist, authoritarian and *totalitarian* thought-world, there is no room for him to acknowledge the introductory chapter of *The Very Bastards of Creation* in which the major conceptual problems at the heart of interpreting modern Scottish history from a socialist standpoint were identified and discussed. Unable to discuss the book in his studiously "clever" non-review for heresy-hunters — the book is only mentioned in his last paragraph — he cannot admit to the Scots' greater and more principled opposition to British imperialism from the advent of the Friends of the People, Thomas Muir of Huntershill and James

Thomson Callender in the 1790s right through to our own times.

Instead of celebrating the Radical Revolt — or *Scottish* Insurrection — of 1819-20, Avakuum *pretends* that it did not exist. And yet it was a time when significant numbers of Scottish working men and women struggled in solidarity with their counterparts in England and France and shed their blood to create a Scottish Republic. Indeed, as the gifted Scottish radical poet George Donald wrote in 1820:

"By royalty deserted, our Parliament defeated, // Our nation thus converted, to a province with decay // While Scotsmen a' disdainin', in their native place remainin' // To Lunon with their siller will hie them away."

Moreover, Avakuum will not face up to the reality around him, whether past or present, and he is of no use to a socialist movement weakened by New Labour's success in lowering democratic consciousness. But in the light of his *ahistorical* assertion that Scotland was not an oppressed nation in the last century, I challenge him to explain why, in the words of Thomas Johnston, author of *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, "Neilston musicians [were] arrested for playing 'Scots' Wha Hae' at a meeting at Meikleriggs" during "The Scottish Insurrection of 1820"?

When he was on the more familiar historiographic territory of the 19th and 20th centuries, I would have expected our ideological cop to have come up with more convincing arguments. However, for some inexplicable reason Avakuum cannot acknowledge the conflict in either the Social Democratic Federation in the 1890s or in the communist movement in Great Britain in the early 1920s over the Scottish national question. The former conflict played a role in persuading most of the Scottish Marxists in the SDF to break away to form the De Leonist Socialist Labour Party. Furthermore, even before John Maclean formed the Scottish Workers' Republican Party in 1923, a minority of Marxists in the early communist movement argued for national independence. For anyone struggling to build or rebuild a socialist movement in the Athens of the North in the late 20th century, an awareness of the real history of Scottish-International radicals and socialists who have grappled with the Scottish national question will eventually break through the imperialistic Brit Left's censorship and suppression.

THE struggle to interpret the world in a socialist way — and it is, as Silone understood, a *real struggle* — is a part of the process of changing it. Therefore, totalitarian modes of thought are as useless as learning by rote or by repeating "The Mass in Latin". And how else can one describe Avakuum's mentality when he offers his readers the superior "wisdom" that socialists in Scotland in 1997 should respond to the mass democratic agitation for Scottish self-government by saying "If they want it, let them have it". If Avakuum's portrait — really a caricature — of an implicitly *racist* Scottish nationalism is so obvious as he asserts without one iota of evidence, this is surely the equivalent of telling English workers that "If they want fascism, they [too] can have it".

What is really frightening is that only ruling classes have the power, and the imperialist mentality behind that power, to assume they are capable of granting freedom or self-government to those who demand it. How such attitudes can be reconciled with basic socialist or democratic principles is beyond my understanding! Fortunately, I belong to the admittedly dwindling and democratic — and militant — socialist tradition of Ignazio Silone, CLR James and those who devoted their fruitful lives to the assumption that the function of a critical socialist is to "turn answers into questions".

James D Young