

Paul Foot, philo-semite

By Sean Matgamna

DEAR PAUL FOOT,

In your *Socialist Worker* column (16 May) you print a letter in response to what you said about Israel on *Any Questions* headed "Mr Foot, Do You Hate The Jews?", and reply: "No, I don't hate Jews at all."

Of course not. Who could possibly suspect you of hating Jews — you, a life-long socialist, and for 30-odd years the most prominent acolyte of Tony Cliff, who is in origin a Palestinian Jew? No.

You deny the right of Israel to exist. You are hostile to Jews (and others) who are "Zionists", that is, to Jews who defend Israel's right to exist, which means most Jews alive. You engage in blinkered, savagely partisan, propaganda against Israel on the radio, on TV, and in newspaper columns. Against Israel you support even such an Arab Hitler as Saddam Hussein. Of course you do not hate Jews!

To tell you the truth, if I didn't know you for a socialist I might conclude: "Typical upper-class twit giving vent to the ingrained prejudice of his sort — a bit like the people who run *Private Eye*, perhaps — part of the romantic Arabist strain of British upper-class anti-Jewish feeling." But I know you for a member of the Socialist Workers' Party. You do not hate Jews.

But substitute hate for being bribed, and the position is rather as described in this well-known comment, Hilaire Belloc's I think: "You simply cannot bribe or twist/ The honest British journalist./ But seeing what unbribed he'll do/ There's really no occasion to."

You consistently reject the only socialist approach, Arab-Jewish working-class unity and consistent democracy as a means to achieve that unity — that is, the most equitable settlement possible in this tragic conflict: two states for the two peoples and full equality for Jews and Arabs in each others' states.

Your column is astonishing in its ignorance of or lack of concern for truth — astonishing not according to the standards of a high-profile bourgeois journalist, but according to the standards of someone who might possibly consider himself a Marxist.

You say socialists sympathised with the idea of a safe home for Jews after "the long years of Nazi persecution." In fact, 12 years. You substitute an exaggerated measure of time to avoid mentioning the relevant measure: six million Jews murdered and many others uprooted.

You say the "chosen homeland", Palestine, was "already populated" by Palestinian Arabs. But the Jews were by 1947 a big national minority, about one-third of the population: why did they not have rights, including the right to separate, and the right to defend themselves?

"The Jewish state could not be created without the forcible expulsion from their homes of a million people." In fact, Israel was proclaimed, in May 1948, in territory allotted by the United Nations, without any Arabs being expelled. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs *did* flee — the great majority not expelled — after Arab states, with the backing, naturally enough, of the Palestinian Arabs, invaded Israel. If Israel had not won that war, then the Jews would have been massacred or expelled: indeed, in the following years, almost as large a number of Jews were expelled from or fled Arab countries. It would have been better if no-one had been expelled, but what sense other than malevolent Arab chauvinism can there be

in such distortions of history — if you yourself know the history, such lies — for the too-tolerant readers of *Socialist Worker*?

The Six Day War of June 1967 did become a war of conquest by Israel, but the moves that triggered the war came from Egypt, which blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba. Until the Egypt-Israel treaty of 1979, all the Arab states — and, until 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organisation — took as their goal the complete destruction of Israel and the subjugation of its people. That being so, to talk as if the long conflict came only from Israel's "unashamedly imperialist aggression and occupation of neighbouring territories" is to be the socialist equivalent of a *Sun* journalist, a shameless lawyer for a preconceived view rather than an objective analyst.

Israel has been moving — though the 30 May election may change that — towards withdrawal from the occupied territories, trading land for peace. If the Arab states and the PLO had been willing to make peace in the aftermath of the 1967 war, then Israeli withdrawal from those territories would have been the immediate result, and without the painful uncertainties that accompany the process three decades later.

The cycle of terrorism and counter-terrorism did not begin with Israel's "shameless imperialist aggression." It began way back in 1929, or earlier, with Muslim chauvinist pogroms against Jewish settlers (who were not always "Zionists", either).

"The persecuted became the persecutors, the oppressed the oppressors." Yes, tragically, that was the experience of the Palestinian Arabs. Yet all this occurred in the context of Arab invasions, threatened invasions, or foiled invasions. "Jews are far less secure in Israel than they are, say, in Britain and the US." Yes indeed: in other words, Arab chauvinism is a real threat. But in the 1930s and '40s, when Israel was shaped, all major countries — from the US to Stalin's Russia — kept out the Jews threatened with annihilation. Britain kept them out of Palestine.

For years after the Second World War many thousands of Jews languished in Displaced Persons' camps — often former German concentration camps — or in British internment camps in Cyprus. Some Jews going home to Poland from Hitler's camps met with pogroms and murder.

What should the Israeli Jews do now? Pack up and move?

It is not you, so you say, who connect Israel, and your hostility to it, with Jews in general; rather, it is those who say that your attitude to Israel is anti-semitic. But can you possibly fail to understand that since Israel has come to be central to the identity of most Jews alive — a few religious people and revolutionary socialists excepted — the distinction you make is spurious and false? Isn't it no more than a smirking smart-arse hypocrisy, the equivalent of saying "if the cap fits, wear it"?

By her attitude to Israel, you say, your correspondent is "cutting herself off from the best Jewish socialists and reformers." They have "consistently been anti-Zionists." Some of your best friends are Jews, eh? These are "some of the fiercest fighters for human emancipation." "All... are anti-Zionists."

Is it that you don't notice that here you automatically label almost the entire Jewish population of Israel — workers, socialists, the lot — as reactionary, together with most Jews worldwide who are not "anti-Zionist", and write them

out of the forward march of humankind? Surely not! You are no mere critic of Israel: you want Israel destroyed. Even a Saddam Hussein is to be supported in such an enterprise.

You probably are unaware that since Trotsky, continuing to follow the pre-Stalinist line of the Communist International, supported the right of Jewish migration to Palestine (as to Britain, the US, etc.), he would not qualify as a latter-day anti-Zionist, and that in SWP terms his credentials as a "fierce fighter for human emancipation" would have to be severely reviewed, if not revoked!

It is you, let me suggest, and Cliff, your mentor, who part company with the fight for human emancipation. That, ultimately, is a fight for socialism. It will not be waged under the banner of Arab nationalism or of any other nationalism. In practice you are vicarious Arab nationalists.

For you, Israel is to blame even for Arab chauvinism. "Arab nationalism... and Arab socialism have been sidetracked and contained by the very existence of Israel." Israel, and the Jewish settlers before that, are to be blamed for not letting themselves be crushed? Comrade Foot, isn't this a disgraceful exhibition of British bourgeois Arabism disguised as socialism and licensed for socialist consumption by the strange figure of Cliff, the Palestinian-Jewish Arab chauvinist? Cliff gets away with training people like you in such politics because it is hard to pin the proper anti-Jewish tag on him. Cliff is an Arab chauvinist.

Nonsense? Recall the interview with Cliff about his history in the SWP magazine in which he criticises himself for believing in 1938-9 that Jews should have a right to flee from Hitler to Palestine (*Socialist Review* 100).

Think about it. What is he saying here but that, if countries like Britain and the US could not be persuaded to let Jews in, then it would have been better that they were left at the mercy of Hitler than that they should go to Palestine? The interview is very sloppily done, but the implication is clear — and it fits the vicarious Arab chauvinist politics which Cliff purveys and has educated you and others in.

Cliff presents himself as having been in the Stalinist party in Palestine in the mid-1930s. If that is true, then he was brainwashed, like other young Jewish members of the CP, into Arab chauvinism. (Some were sent to plant bombs in Jewish quarters: if you want more details, see the article on "Trotsky and the Jews" in *Workers' Liberty* 31.) Even if he did falter in 1938-9, for 30 years now he has spread an updated version of such politics. Your politics on Israel/Palestine, Paul Foot, are rooted in Third Period and then Popular Front Stalinism in Palestine!

I repeat, contrary to the SWP's vicarious Arab chauvinism, the only socialist policy for the Jewish-Arab conflict is the fight for Jewish and Arab working-class unity on the basis of mutual recognition of national rights: two states for the two peoples!

For sloppiness, double standards, misrepresentation, and plain mendacity, it would be hard to find so large a concentration in so small a number of words as your column contains. But still, you are not anti-Jewish. Some of your best friends are Jews! You, comrade Foot, are for the Jews what Belloc's journalist was for the truth.

"I really must refute your views: / Believe me, I don't hate no Jews; / For seeing what pure love will do, / What need have I for hatred too?"