

after all.

It might be argued that little has changed precisely because Sean Matgamna does not argue that anything much has. Against this is the fact that Matgamna has made too many mistakes to be taken as correct even in his evasion.

Indeed, much has changed. Britain is no longer the major power it was in Lenin's time. Its economic interests in Ireland are not tied to any military presence and its real military interest has been weakened during the last decade, with the closing of the west Scottish submarine bases, Bishopscoart radar station and the Ballykelly naval base. It has equal status with Ireland in the European Union. Both islands are pluralist bourgeois democracies. While more of the people of the Republic are employed now in industry than in agriculture, the decline of Northern Ireland's staples has tended to weaken the base for Protestant sectarianism. Overall, too, Northern Ireland Protestant job prospects are now better than Catholic ones by just under 2:1 after being 2.5:1 and the ratio could be further reduced if the British military presence (and its employment) falls after a settlement. Such a settlement seems possible because the IRA has failed sufficiently to maximise or extend its support.

None of this is enough. Since the ceasefire, it has been clear that, even assuming sophisticated manoeuvring, the British are not preparing to leave, let alone unite Ireland and certainly not unite the workers of Ulster or of Ireland as a whole. The British government is not going to abandon a 900,000 strong garrison on the far shore of the North Channel, the narrowest, shallowest stretch of water between these islands. (In addition, a disproportionately large section of Britain's rulers favour Unionism, precisely because of its undemocratic nature.) This would not be so bad if Britain could or would extend or guarantee a fully democratic Northern Irish policy, except under pressure. Yet the peace process is aimed at negating this pressure. Britain cannot uphold a fully democratic six county province that might use that democracy to break the connection. Moreover, to create such a society means ending the disparity in jobs and making up for the fall in employment due to the decline in security. With the ending of the EU's gravy train in three years, the lion's share of the costs would fall on the British economy. It is not accidental that the Downing Street Declaration avoids any guarantees for a democratic Northern Ireland pending unity, and that the guarantees of the Framework Document are subject only to qualifications that negate them.

From the opposing point of view, it remains true that there are no other Irish political flashpoints that have the mobilising power of the cause of ending partition.

Compared to other world problems, the partition of Ireland seems small. Yet it is intractable enough to require more consideration (and reconsideration) than appears in the prolix but superficial analysis of Sean Matgamna. ■

The ABCs: 3

Was Stalinism progressive?

By Jackie Cleary

IN the 19th century European capitalism developed industry, cleared away feudal restrictions, and also developed the working class. Marx and Engels argued for a recognition of the progressive role of capitalism and an alliance between the working class and middle-class revolutionaries.

By analogy many would-be Marxists — Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher, for example, and, most crudely and shamelessly in Britain, "Militant" — have argued that Stalinist forces (that is, bureaucracies like the one that ruled in Russia from the 1930s, or the one that rules in China still) developed industry, developed the working class, cleared away old restrictions of landlord or colonial rule, and were therefore progressive.

When the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, for example, Militant and many other "Trotskyists" argued that we should critically support the Stalinists' efforts to drag Afghanistan into the 20th century.

After that stage, so Militant believed, would come the "political revolution" — a revolution in which the working class would oust the Stalinists and create socialist democracy. But in the meantime, for them, the "totalitarian deformations" were a secondary aspect of a fundamentally progressive phenomenon.

Why was this approach wrong?

Under Stalinism the working class is bound hand and foot, deprived of all rights by a highly conscious and militantly anti-working class state apparatus which concentrates the means of production in its own hands, together with immense powers of oppression and terror. The workers have no freedom to discuss, speak, publish, or organise. Instead of having their own trade unions and political parties, the workers are forced into state-controlled "fronts" called "unions" and "workers' parties".

It was possible, within developing capitalism, for Marxists to look to a capitalist evolution and still relate to the working class, support its struggles, and organise it independently. The prospect was not that if the bourgeoisie established their regime, then the working class would be held in a totalitarian vice. On the contrary, even in the worst and most repressive capitalist hell-holes, the working class retained individual rights and could take advantage of loopholes to organise itself.

Bourgeois society offered the possibility of the workers organising

themselves and developing politically and culturally. This did not happen without struggle and setbacks — but it could happen and it did happen even under very repressive regimes like Russia before 1917. And otherwise the Marxist policy would have been a nonsense.

A specific repressive and terribly reactionary regime is inseparable from Stalinism. Economic development was separable from the often repressive early capitalist regimes because the exploitation of the working class did not rest on its legal status but on economic (market) transactions and the bourgeois ownership of the means of production.

Stalinist economic development is inseparable from totalitarian oppression of the working class: the economics are not separable from the regime, and to opt for one is necessarily to opt for both. For this reason, the analogy with the capitalist development of industry is nonsense.

But in the broad sweep of history is it not true that the development of industry lays the basis for progress? In the broad sweep, yes — on condition that the working class liberates itself and seizes the control of the means of production from the hands of the bureaucracy.

But politics is necessarily concerned with a more immediate, sharper focus. In that focus the idea that the suppression (and slaughter, deportation, etc which has been the stock-in-trade of the Stalinist bureaucracies ruling the ex-USSR and other countries) is a detail in the broad sweep of history, is a nonsense.

It loses the viewpoint of the militant who stands with the working class and with the oppressed peoples, trying to organise them to make themselves the subjects of history, not its passive objects. Indeed it adopts the viewpoint of the historian, the man in the ivory tower.

Militants must have an entirely different set of values, priorities, concerns and considerations from people who content themselves with general perspectives as seen, so to speak, from a watchtower above the struggle. Of course Marxist militants inform their work with the general historical considerations. They do not allow them to override their goal of mobilising, organising and rousing up the oppressed. They do not allow the goal of industrial development on the back of the masses to replace that goal. If they do, they break with the real traditions of Lenin and Trotsky. ■