

More loyalist than the loyalists

Recent articles in *Workers' Liberty* have challenged the common left attitude to Ireland. Geoff Bell believes these articles have gone too far. Sean Matgamna replies.

There is nothing wrong in reassessing Marxist interpretations, but where this has led *Socialist Organiser* as far as this particular exercise is concerned is to the other side of the class divide. This is illustrated in the January edition of the magazine *Workers' Liberty* and an article therein by Sean Matgamna.

This is entitled 'Ireland: lies the left tells itself'. A more fitting headline would have been 'Ireland: examples of the lies the right tells itself'. For what has now emerged from what at first was a sloppy and impressionistic analysis is the one which stands four square with the opinions of the British ruling class.

We are told that there would be a bloody sectarian civil war if British troops left the north of Ireland, that those troops have every right to be there anyway because 'Northern Ireland has been part of the British state since the 12th century', and that Britain has no political, economic or military interest in staying in the north of Ireland.

The reason they do so apparently is because of the 'power of the Orangeists on the ground', and it is this power which if British troops did leave, would result in all sorts of nasty things happening to Catholics.

Not only do we have a series of views which suggests the role of the British army is to keep two sets of mad paddies apart, we have an additional reactionary bonus. This is that Protestants in the north of Ireland are quite right to resist any attempt to submit them to the rule of the Irish majority because they are British, have always considered themselves so and because they are faced with 'Sinn Fein's Catholic Irish nationalism' which is alien to them and their 'traditions'. These politics of Sinn Fein are also something which break from the traditional republicanism of Wolfe Tone which contrary to Sinn Fein's version, was non-sectarian.

There is, in all this, so much disinformation it is difficult to know where to gasp most. But, for example:

• 'Northern Ireland' was only part of the British state in name



Photo Andrew Moore (Reflex)

since the 12th century. Ulster was so resistant to British occupation that it did not happen in reality until the 17th century when the native Irish were driven from their land and were replaced by English and Scottish settlers.

• The Protestant community of the northeast of Ireland have rarely considered themselves as 'British' in the sense that term is understood in Britain. From the Home Rule Bills of the 19th and early 20th centuries to the Anglo-Irish accord of today they have continually resisted the 'right' of the British parliament to rule them. Moreover, historically speaking, the protestants in

Ireland as a whole have generally defined themselves as 'Irish' or some variant of that — 'Anglo-Irish', 'Scots-Irish', 'Northern Irish' or 'Ulstermen' (sic). Even today the majority of northern Irish Protestants reject the view that the British parliament has the right to tell them what to do. They also toy with advocating an independent Ulster (the UDA) or Ulster as a British dominion in the way Canada is (Ulster Clubs).

• The notion that contemporary Sinn Fein republicanism is different from that of Wolfe Tone is an historical illiteracy. Sad to say, but in fact the examples of anti-Protestant sectarianism in Wolfe Tone's 1798 rising were much more commonplace than in the present IRA's campaign, although in both cases such sectarianism was no part of the politics of the vast majority of those involved.

• To define Sinn Fein as 'Irish Catholic nationalism' is slander. Irish nationalism has often had a rather right wing and Catholic side to it, but Sinn Fein in word and deed has resolutely opposed it. If there are present day Catholic Irish nationalists they are most likely to be found in the SDLP in the north or Fianna Fail

in the south.

• The attempt to justify the presence of British troops in the north of Ireland by raising the spectre of the Protestant backlash is rather old hat these days. Let us remember that the troops went onto the streets in 1969 because the loyalist security forces had been defeated. And today the political unity which would be necessary for the Loyalists to be a real threat to Catholics in the event of British withdrawal is completely missing. The failure of the Loyalists to defeat the Anglo-Irish agreement is just one example of the limited capability of the 'Protestant backlash'.

In seeking to minimise British responsibility for the situation in Ireland, in suggesting that, for the good of the Irish, British troops must stay, in painting the 'Loyalists' more 'British' than they paint themselves, *Socialist Organiser* ends up calling for the extension of both Loyalist 'rights' and the British presence.

The advocacy is for Protestant self-rule — in other words, a statelet drawn up purely on a sectarian headcount. This statelet would apparently be part of a federal Ireland. But then comes the biggest howler. There have to

Socialist Organiser and Ireland:

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A sample of views on the situation in Ireland from the traditional right wing of the British press, the *Sunday Times*, which in the words of James Connolly, defined the 'Orange working class' as 'the only class in the country which has been and is being oppressed'.



A loyalist band prepares to march in the streets of Belfast.

From *Socialist Outlook*



be 'ties of some confederal sort between that united Ireland and Britain'.

In other words, Brits into the south of Ireland. Wave the Union Jack and pass the ammunition.

Geoff Bell

Marxism or Catholic chauvinism?

If it was worth Geoff Bell's while to respond to my article, then it was worth doing properly — especially, perhaps, given that he and I are an Irish 'Protestant' and an Irish 'Catholic' arguing the 'wrong' way round, and that can't have happened very often in the last 100 years.

It is a shame he didn't. But he scarcely bothers to argue. He hunts heresy and denounces as from a pulpit, and none too

scrupulously — as if guided by the injunction that the faithful are not obliged to keep faith with heretics.

He nit-picks and goes off at tangents. Even if he were right that 'Northern Ireland' was not really in the 'British' state until the 17th century — essentially he isn't — would that make a difference now to our attitude to Ireland's Protestant minority, which certainly dates only from the 17th century? You could throw the pedantry back in his face. He equates British 'occupation' (of Ulster) with colonisation: so was the uncolonised (or unsuccessfully colonised) part of Ireland never 'British-occupied Ireland'?

Geoff Bell further argues that the Protestants are not British because they will not obey the British Parliament. So what were the British colonists in America in 1776 when they declared independence from the British government? Or the British colonists in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in 1965 when they made their Unilateral Declaration of Independence? Some notion of development and dialectics would help here, Geoff.

He uses strong words without

in his text justifying their use. I am on "the other side of the class divide". Yes I am, if vicarious Catholic Irish nationalism is the working-class side; but if it isn't, on what side of the class line are Geoff Bell and the others who 'forget' Marxism and a large part of the Irish working class, and embrace Catholic nationalism garnished with misleading (and, in the circumstances, irrelevant and even deceptive) socialist phrases and aspirations.

Geoff Bell tries to damn what I say by association. I stand "four square", he says, with "the opinion of the British ruling class". If true, that literally means that I support the status quo. Of course, he means that I recognise that the pressing and irreducible problem is the division among the people who live in Ireland.

Is it true or isn't it? That is the question. Geoff's best approach to an argument here is a quibble about whether the Protestants think they are British or not "in the sense that term is understood in Britain". For sure they don't consider themselves Irish in the sense in which that term is understood in Dublin!

He translates what I say into the language of crude British chauvinism: Britain "keeps two sets of mad paddles apart". He then contradicts himself in the next sentence by angrily accusing me of saying that the Protestants are anything but mad to resist being reduced to a minority in a Catholic-dominated state.

Geoff Bell goes in for rewriting history, too. He writes that "the troops went onto the streets in 1969 because the loyalist security forces had been defeated". Some of the Protestant state forces were beaten back in Derry in 1969 — but the resources even of the Six County state were not exhausted; and the Orange forces had not been beaten in Belfast.

Geoff insists that "the examples of anti-protestant sectarianism in Wolfe Tone's 1798 rising were much more commonplace than in the present IRA's campaign". Which "Wolfe Tone rising" is he talking about? There were at least three disparate movements in 1798. Indeed there was sectarianism in the risings. But there was no sectarianism in the programme of Tone's United Irishmen, which counterposed to existing and old divisions the goal of replacing the denominations of "Protestant (Anglican), Catholic and Dissenter (Presbyterian)" by the common name of Irish. There is sectarianism in the programme of the Provisionals — which is a programme for the majority to incorporate the minority into a unitary state, leaving them no protection if the majority choose to override them.

If Gerry Adams had any serious aspirations towards Wolfe Tone's politics, would he go around in Northern Ireland

parading his religious creed, as when he publicly explained his escape from assassination by his going to Mass regularly? Sinn Féin has "resolutely" opposed sectarianism in words, especially in words for export. Deeds are another matter.

"If there are present-day catholic Irish nationalists", writes Geoff Bell, "they are most likely to be in the SDLP". Read the papers, Geoff. In the spate of elections triggered by the Unionists in March 1986 to have, in effect, a referendum on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, Sinn Féin — which opposed the Agreement — proposed a common front to the SDLP, which supported the Agreement. This common front could only be on the basis of Catholic head-counting, as the gleeful John Hume pointed out.

You could — though I don't especially want to — make a case that, taken all in all, what they do as well as what they say, the SDLP, despite being a narrow communal party, is nearer to Wolfe Tone Republicanism than the Provisionals are.

Geoff Bell cites "The failure of the loyalists to defeat the Anglo-Irish Agreement" — which has little practical consequence for them so far — to argue that they would be no "real threat to Catholics in the event of British withdrawal". So they would not try to hold on to what they have? They would not resist incorporation into an all-Ireland Catholic-majority state? Draw comfort from that sort of reasoning if you can, Geoff. I take it as proof that you can't face the facts.

One of the strangest reactions to the Anglo-Irish Agreement was that of People's Democracy, the Irish group linked to *Socialist Outlook*. Criticising even the Provisionals for softness on the Agreement, they denounced the Dublin government for betraying 'the 1937 Constitution' — that same Constitution which contemporaries, including at least one writer in the leading Trotskyist magazine of that time, the *New International*, denounced as clerical-fascist in tendency. (To this day the Irish Senate is chosen on the basis of the Catholic corporatism dominant in the '30s).

In the same vein Geoff Bell throws back his ears and gives out an angry philistine bray at the idea of some revived — confederal — link between Britain and Ireland. What does he think of that dirty old West-British shoneen Karl Marx, who came late to support for Home Rule and then disgraced himself by arguing that "after separation may come federation"?

We have to raise the issue of confederal links between Ireland and Britain because over 100 years of political struggles have proved that Irish unity and Irish independence are incompatible. In a different historical and political world De Valera tried to

Ireland and Sri-Lanka an analogy

AN ANALOGY may help to explain the issues — the case of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. I assume Geoff Bell and *Socialist Outlook* are in favour of the right of the Tamils to secede from the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan state and set up their own state. But how did things in Ceylon/Sri Lanka turn out like this? Look at the history.

Some of the Tamils were a favoured minority under British rule. Does that not morally condemn them and deprive them of minority rights, like the Protestants? Why shouldn't the Tamils submit to "the Sri Lankan majority", as you say the Irish minority must submit to the Irish majority (and to hell with all that Leninist nonsense about consistent democracy)?

To people of Geoff Bell's political outlook, Ireland and Sri Lanka are radically different questions. In fact the parallels between them are instructive. The main difference lies in the way the conflict evolved. The split in the British ruling class on Home Rule in 1886 and up to World War 1 heated up the intra-Irish division before any part of Ireland became independent. In Ceylon/Sri Lanka the division heated up after independence, under majority rule.

Ceylon became independent in 1948 under a capitalist ruling class led by a British-educated elite consisting of both Tamils and Sinhalese, in the United National Party (UNP). Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinism developed initially as a grass-roots cultural movement.

Soon the demands for a Buddhist 'Sri Lanka' and for privileges for the Sinhalese language were voiced. The political elite split. Solomon Bandaranaike founded the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1951. A process of communal conflict began which led to civil war.

Socialists should have advocated Sinhalese-Tamil unity. In fact the Ceylonese Trotskyists destroyed their once imposing organisation by accommodating, from the mid-'50s, to Sinhalese chauvinism. The Trotskyists of the LSSP were part of Geoff Bell's international tendency, which covered for them for almost a decade, until the LSSP broke away from the Mandeliste 'Fourth International' and entered a Sinhalese-chauvinist coalition government in 1964.

When immediate Sinhalese-Tamil unity became impossible, socialists should have supported the Tamils' right to secede. To do

less would be to break with the very ABC of Leninism on the national question.

In Ireland the sort of communal split that has broken the political unity of the island of Sri Lanka emerged before independence. It was manipulated by the British ruling class. It was made the basis of a peculiarly unjust Partition, which created a second, artificial, Irish minority, the Northern Catholics.

Suppose it had been different. Suppose Ireland had got Home Rule in 1886 — or 1893, when a House of Commons majority



**Tamil refugee
Photo Andrew Moore**

voted for it — and then gone the way Sri Lanka went. Suppose the Catholic majority had begun to push for special privileges the way the Sinhalese did. Suppose the sort of Catholic Church encroachment on civil society that we had in the independent South from the 1920s onward had occurred in a united Ireland.

I can see reason for believing that the tensions would have died down if Ireland had got Home Rule in the early 1880s. A big Protestant minority in a united Ireland might have helped preserve or re-establish the pluralist values which had vanished in the South by the 1930s. But, for the sake of the argument, suppose that the Catholic majority had pushed aggressively.

Suppose the systematic imposition of a Catholic-confessional framework — abolition of the right of divorce, and so on — which culminated in the De Valera constitution of 1937, had applied to the whole island (as in-

deed that constitution claimed to.) Suppose the attempt by the 26 County state to revive the Gaelic language — which for generations of Irish children like myself, whose native language was English, meant that our schools produced 'illiterates in two languages' — had happened in an all-Ireland state; suppose it was used to discriminate against those of a non-Gaelic background.

Wouldn't all that have led to a Protestant movement something like the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka? If not, why not? Because the Irish are better than the Sri Lankans? Because we're not "mad paddies", but white Europeans, and therefore we do not behave like Asians, those 'lesser breeds without the law'?

If it sounds far-fetched, remember that the revivers of Gaelic games 100 years ago, the Gaelic Athletic Association, were virulently exclusivist. Remember that modern historians point to the way boycotting during the Land League wars helped the burgeoning Irish Catholic bourgeoisie to defeat Protestant competition in nationalist Ireland. Recall the debate on divorce in the South 4 or 5 years ago when the majority of voters ignored appeals from Protestant and Jewish leaders not to enshrine Catholic theology as the law of the state.

Suppose all that had happened in a united Ireland over the decades. It would have generated a Protestant national consciousness, as surely as the actual events in the 26 Counties have hardened the Six County majority's commitment to staying with Britain and determination not to go into a Catholic-dominated united Ireland.

How could any Leninist refuse to back the Protestant minority, in the areas where it was a majority, in the demands that would arise for exclusion from the writ of the majority — in certain questions, and maybe in all? You could not, any more than you can in Sri Lanka refuse to back the Tamils — some of whom were once favoured by Britain, and some of whom now commit terrible sectarian acts against Sinhalese.

Things did not go that way in Ireland. We do not have a revolt of a Protestant-British minority against a Catholic-majority state. We have the revolt of an artificially created second minority, the Northern Catholics. We should support that revolt — but we should do it as Marxists who take a broad historical overview. There are enough Catholic nationalists and Catholic chauvinists. What are lacking are Marxists, internationalists, and consistent democrats in Lenin's tradition on the national question.

come to terms with the problem in 1921, when he came out for 'external association' with the British Empire, primarily as a means of maintaining a common framework between the Irish majority and minority. For the same reason he was privately against Ireland's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1949.

You might remain on Marxist, internationalist ground, and oppose confederal links between Ireland and Britain because a process of necessary separation had not had enough time to do its healing and reconciling work. Northern Ireland cuts across all that.

Part of Ireland remains in the UK. It is torn apart between two communities, one of which is determined to remain with Britain and the other to link up with independent Ireland. These facts, which are likely to remain immutable for a whole historical period, point unmistakably towards the recreation of a broader framework within which to seek a solution to the Catholic-Protestant impasse in Northern Ireland. Even within a Socialist United States of Europe, Britain and Ireland would still stand in a specially close relationship to each other.

The ruling classes have begun to re-knit links. Under the Anglo-Irish Agreement provision is made for a British-Dublin-Belfast Interparliamentary Committee, which draws the two islands politically closer than at any time in 65 years.

Why should the Irish Marxists be like mystical Irish nationalists, and take their stand on complete Irish separation and independence as an absolute principle outside of history? That absolute independence has nothing more to give the Irish people, and the Provisionals' drive for it helps prime a sectarian civil war.

Opinion polls tell us that a big majority in Catholic Ireland does not want, or radically fears, a united Ireland. Election results tell us that in the North the Provisional Republicans have the support of little more than one Catholic in three. Their support in independent Ireland is minuscule — less than two per cent in elections.

Of course, moods can change and swing, and in Ireland they do tend to swing according to what we call 'the politics of the last atrocity'. Opinion swung to the Republicans after the Gibraltar killings and the Milltown massacre, against them after the two soldiers were spectacularly killed at a funeral, and so on.

But in the last 20 years those shifts have not changed the rocky underlying facts of communal antagonism, nor altered anything fundamental. 20 years of the IRA's war have resulted in stalemate and stasis.

The lesson of this last 20 years is the same as the lesson of the

100 years since Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill: the goals of Irish unity and Irish independence flatly contradict each other. They are irreconcilable. The linked aspirations of the Irish majority for independence and for unity are incompatible.

The Irish minority, define them how you like, will not have a united independent Ireland, and, if they are thrown entirely on to their own resources, they will fight to prevent it. Of course, in the past sections of the British ruling class stirred up and used that Irish minority, playing the 'Orange card'; but the minority had to be there in the first place to be so used. It is still 'there' now that the British ruling class is united in policy for Ireland as it never was between 1885 and 1922, and no section of that ruling class has any use at all for the Irish Protestants.

The British-designed Partition put a proportionately bigger Catholic minority in the 'Protestant' state than the Protestants would have been in an all-Ireland state. The Northern Catholics were oppressed because they were seen as a threat. The consequence has been the prolonged Northern Ireland Catholic revolt and the partial destabilisation of the state system established in 1920-22 by the British and the different sections of the Irish bourgeoisie.

It is necessary to support the half-million Catholics in their opposition to the unjust settlement of 1920-22; but it would be no solution to force one million Protestants into an all-Ireland state against their will and leave them feeling — and maybe reacting — as the Northern Ireland Catholics do now. The Leninist policy for situations like this is long-established and very much to the point. As Trotsky summarised it: 'In so far as the various nationalities, voluntarily or through force of necessity, coexist within the borders of one state, their cultural interests must find the highest possible satisfaction within the framework of the broadest regional (and, consequently, territorial) autonomy, including statutory guarantees of the rights of each minority'.

Now it is absurd to say that Partition helps either capitalism or imperialist domination of southern Ireland today. But even if it did, socialists could still not dismiss the legitimate democratic claims of the Irish Protestant minority. In such conflicts between communities — in Ireland, in Palestine, in Sri Lanka, or anywhere — Marxists recognise that all the antagonists have rights and seek working-class unity across the divide on the basis of justice, conciliation, and whatever state structure the peoples concerned find most acceptable and least divisive.

The idea that there are good and bad — or 'imperialist' and



Photo Dereck Spiers (Report)

'anti-imperialist' — nations or countries comes from narrow irredentist and populist nationalism (sometimes in Maoist or other versions), not from Marxism, Leninism or Trotskyism. These are the Marxist policies for Ireland:

- Consistent democracy,
- Conciliation,
- Defence of the oppressed Catholics,
- Guarantees for the Protestants who fear oppression by the Catholic Irish majority,
- Working-class unity on a programme of democratic rights,
- And on that basis a struggle for socialism. In the language of the Trotskyist movement: a programme of democratic and transitional demands.

My *Workers' Liberty* article spelled out the false ideas and assumptions which — I believe — bewilder the far left and turn them into cheerleaders, usually ignorant cheerleaders, for Sinn Féin. Geoff Bell has written books and pamphlets which codify the dominant ideas of most of the 'hard left' about Ireland. How does he respond to my systematic listing of arguments against those ideas? Take them point by point.

• Southern Ireland is not a neo-colony, and in any case, with most foreign investment in Ireland American and German, not a British neo-colony. Geoff Bell is silent about this.

• Northern Ireland is not merely 'British-occupied Ireland', unless the desires of the Six County majority count for nothing. Geoff Bell's only relevant comment is to quibble about the length of time Northern Ireland has been linked to Britain.

• Ireland is one island, but plainly not one people. To pretend that Ireland is one unit is a to confuse geography with society, nationality, and politics. Geoff Bell pretends it is, but de-

fend the pretence he does not.

• It is not just bigotry or irrationality which motivates Protestant resistance to a united Ireland. The laws of the 26 Counties impose Catholic morals even on those who reject them, banning divorce for example. Geoff Bell is very contemptuous about this argument. He ignores the Protestants, and implies that they should be ignored by claiming that the Provisionals are not in any way sectarian and that Protestant resistance to a united Ireland would not be substantial.

• To pretend that Protestants are only concerned to protect their job privileges is to ignore the distinct history and insistently-proclaimed distinct identity of the Six County Protestants. Geoff Bell is positively heroic in his determination to ignore it!

• Marxists cannot see the issue as just Irish majority rights. No majority — neither in Northern Ireland nor in all of Ireland — has a right to oppress a minority community. We are concerned with minority rights, too — with consistent democracy. Geoff Bell's programme is not that of a Marxist, but of an adoptive Catholic-Irish nationalist. He is, rightly, concerned with the second, artificial, Irish minority, the Northern Ireland Catholics; but, absurdly, he is indifferent to the concerns of the much bigger basic Irish minority, the Protestants.

• The Orange veto depends on the threat of Orange resistance. It is not something Britain grants. It has been coupled since 1976 with a Catholic veto over internal political arrangements in Northern Ireland. That Catholic veto is based ultimately on the armed strength of the IRA. My argument on the Orange veto makes Geoff Bell indignant. He does not, however, try to refute it. Why not?

• Britain does not gain economic advantage from Northern Ireland (yes or no, Geoff?), but pays out £1.5 billion a year.

• Far from giving overall military advantages to Britain, control of the Six Counties has deprived NATO of the 26 Counties for 39 years. True or not, comrade Bell?

• The existing Six County state is indeed an artificial, unviable entity; but nevertheless a viable Orange entity is possible if Northern Ireland's borders are moved north and east, shedding the mainly Catholic areas. Such a new 'Northern Ireland' would be the certain result of sectarian civil war. It was recognition of this fact that led De Valera and other mainstream bourgeois Republicans to rule out violence as a means of uniting Ireland. They knew it could not work. What makes you think it could work, Geoff?

• The Protestant community organised, threatened, and armed

to stop a united Ireland, and settled reluctantly for Partition in 1920-22. They smashed the Power-Sharing Agreement with a general strike in 1974. The Anglo-Irish Agreement remains intact, and Protestant opposition to it is ineffectual; but it has not had much real effect yet. Northern Ireland remains under the control of the British government which, despite everything, the Protestants consider their own.

If the British state abdicates, leaving the Protestants the choice of incorporation in a Catholic state or resistance, they will resist. At the very least a proportion of them equal to the IRA's proportion of the Catholic community will resist.

At the *Socialist Organiser* summer school in 1986, Geoff Bell admitted that civil war would probably break out — but he said he thought it would be a small, controllable civil war. What if it isn't controllable? Who will control it? Southern Irish troops? UN troops? British troops? The common demand that Britain should 'disarm' the Orangeists before going implies that we rely on British troops to control the civil war; it also implies not fewer, but more British troops, and for a long time to come!

• Troops out without a political settlement will not lead to a united Ireland, but to sectarian civil war and bloody repartition. It will not lead to self-determination for the Irish people as a whole. It can only set the Protestants in motion to secure their self-determination — against the Irish majority.

I would be happy to be convinced that this nightmare is not the certain consequence of troops out without a political settlement. Geoff Bell seems sure that it will not be, but the only reason he cites for his sureness is that the Protestant resistance to the Anglo-Irish Agreement has been limited.

• The thin veneer of left activists who form one facet of Sinn Féin's public face make it a socialist organisation only for those who want to be convinced. Sinn Féin is confined to the Catholic community; its leaders, like Gerry Adams, publicly parade their Catholicism; it has no interest in the Protestant community; its policies leave it no possibility of even talking to the Protestant community; some of the IRA's killings are scarcely-disguised sectarian acts, and all of them are seen by the Protestant community as sectarian acts.

Much space in the Provisionals' paper *An Phoblacht* is given to denouncing 'sectarianism'. But does it ever denounce sectarianism on its own side? Why not? Does no sectarianism at all exist on the Catholic side? Denouncing the sectarianism of the others can also be a means of appealing for communal solidarity and of incitement against the

other community.

Unlike most of his political tribe, Geoff Bell does know something about the real Ireland, as distinct from the fantasy Ireland in the collective mind of the 'anti-imperialist' British left. Is it unreasonable to conclude that his flaccid performance in this polemic says something about the nature of the position he wants to defend? Is it an accident that he ends his article with a piece of Gerry Healy level misrepresentation of what I advocate?

Geoff Bell says I advocate "Brits into the south of Ireland. Wave the union jack and pass the ammunition". Where did I advocate that? When? Confederal links between Ireland and Britain could not mean that. Nothing I say can be loyally read as advocating or implying it. Confederal links imply voluntary association of the sovereign Irish and British states.

Bell is indulging himself in ridiculous hyperbole. But there is more here than a confession that he can't handle the facts, the issues, or the arguments.

Some readers of *Socialist Outlook* are bound to think — on Geoff Bell's authority, and not having read my article — that I really do advocate something like 'British troops into the South'. I've grown used to boneheaded and malicious sniping and misrepresentation, but this, I repeat, is Gerry Healy stuff.

The chain of publications put out by Geoff's tendency over the years — *International*, *Red Mole*, *Red Weekly*, *Socialist Challenge*, *Socialist Action* — have not, in my view, contributed much to political enlightenment, least of all about Ireland, but they did not deal in shameless factual lying and outright misrepresentation like this. You should not start now, Geoff Bell.

A few words, finally, about the broader issues involved in this discussion. It links, obviously, with similar debates like that on the rights of the Jewish nation in Palestine.

Our attitude to these questions is all of a piece, and so is that of *Socialist Outlook* and the 'kitsch-Trotskyist' political culture of which it is part. Geoff Bell and his friends are comprehensively wrong. The issue goes way beyond Protestant and Catholic Ireland and Arab and Jewish Palestine.

Vast areas of the world are now covered by multi-national states — many of them old colonial units of more or less arbitrarily grouped peoples which have remained units after colonialism and become bureaucratic states. Almost everywhere in these states there is the domination, sometimes genocidal, of people over people, nation over nation or fragment of nation.

The Marxist programme for this vast area of world politics

has already been outlined — consistent democracy. Depending on circumstances that may mean the right of various peoples to full independence, to local autonomy, or to special cultural rights, etc.

The alternative to this Marxist approach is to decide that some peoples are bad and some good, to ascribe some universalist and transcendental 'world-revolutionary' significance to the nationalisms of chosen nations, and to deny any collective rights to other nations.

Of course, on some issues you have to take sides, sharply and clearly, as we side now with the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli occupation, and as the tendency to which I belong has always supported the Northern Ireland Catholics in struggle against the British state and against the oppression to which Partition consigned them. But you must do that within the political framework of the Marxist and Leninist programme for resolving conflicts like those between Arabs and Jews and between Catholics and Protestants.

Where the only proper Marxist approach in national conflicts is to argue for the equality of peoples — and in the first place for equal rights and unity within the working class — the kitsch-Trotskyists pick and choose, designating 'good' and 'bad' peoples, 'pro-imperialists' and 'anti-imperialists'. They do not know it, but they are in the tradition not of the mature Marx or Engels, or of Lenin and Trotsky, but at best of the young Frederick Engels, who in 1848 denounced "small, pig-headed nations" in Europe. (Engels argued that such nations would inevitably serve as the tools of reactionaries wanting to obstruct the then progressive unification of the big nations of the continent).

More :Geoff Bell and his friends hold to the view of a 'world revolution' marching inexorably ahead as if guided by some god of history. This teleological view lends itself especially to the approach that designates some nations 'good' and others 'bad'. The nationalism of the 'good' nations is in the camp of the 'world revolution'; the nationalism of the 'bad' nations is in the other camp, of 'imperialism'.

In Geoff Bell's case, this approach leads a member of the Protestant Irish minority not to rise above the tragic communalism dividing the people of our island to working-class internationalism — or even Wolfe Tone Republicanism — but simply to swap communities. Communalism is the problem. Consistent democracy, and the fight for working-class unity on that basis — that is, socialist Republicanism — is the answer.

Sean Matgamna



They were the bad old days

Belinda Weaver ("Big Screen Blues" — *Workers' Liberty* No. 8), contends that films today are worse than those of the past and that this is because they are made to a simple formula that exploits the audience. I disagree.

The formula, epitomised in the rash of sequel films, includes big stars, exotic locations, simple (or simplistic) story, a hit song and a massive advertising campaign.

The main reason given for this is that the film industry has been taken over by people whose chief interest is not films, or telling stories, but rather maximising profits.

Undoubtedly there is an element of truth in these assertions

but I think it relies on a view of the past that is distorted. It's a view that is reminiscent of that hoary old myth that things were better in the old days.

It is very easy to rattle off a list of awful films that satisfy Belinda's criteria. And yes many of them are sequels — *Superman*, *Rocky*, *Police Academy*, *Porkys*, *Star Trek*, etc., etc., etc. They are lowest common denominator films aimed at a predominantly young audience, but this is neither new nor does it tell us much about contemporary film.

It's just as easy to make an equally long list of atrocious films made in Hollywood's boom days — Hopalong Cassidy, the Andy Hardy series, Francis the talking mule, Ma and Pa Kettle, Batman, cowboys and Indians, John Wayne World War II movies, etc. And are we really to believe that today's 'stars' are really worse actors than Alan Ladd, Audie Murphy, Gary Cooper, Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, to mention only a few?

The point is that poorly made stock films are not new.

Hollywood absolutely dominated movie making for thirty years, and in that time made some outstanding movies, but also made many more films that were dreadful. They were totally

commercial, full of sexist, racist, heterosexist and chauvinist stereotypes that were thankfully consigned to the archives.

Profit was just as big a motivator for the likes of the Zanucks and Cohens and the other company moguls as today. It is not true to say that today's companies are run purely by managers whose sole interest is in the bottom line.

Regardless of what one thinks about their material, people like David Puttnam, Dino de Laurentis, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, who are now major producers and company directors, are primarily movie makers.

They, and other contemporary directors, are responsible for many outstanding films, too long to list. If Belinda's contention about the predictability of the formula is true then why are there any flops? Why do we regularly see the so-called 'art house' and non-Hollywood films (such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Mad Max*, *My Life as a Dog*, *Le Cop*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *Room with a View*, *The Gods must be Crazy*, *Jean de Florette* to name a few) break through and become big hits? The claim that there are basically two types of cinema — commercial (bad) and art-house (some of which are good) — apart from being too simple, doesn't really tell us very much.

The article in general is too conspiratorial. Basically we are asked to believe that film companies are controlled by men (e.g. Murdoch) who are only interested in profit and have made films a commodity which is therefore exploitative and alienating. But the market dominates all artistic endeavour in capitalist economies. It's not an invention of the past thirty years. Does the market's existence mean then that no worthwhile art can be produced under capitalism? Does this also hold true for literature, music, art? Surely not.

I think that there have been two fundamental changes in contemporary film-making that give some explanation of the differences on the modern screen. Firstly the total dominance of 'realism' as a technique, and secondly the development of national theatres in the wake of Hollywood's decline.

Today's audiences, unlike those of forty years ago, will only accept physical 'real life' on the screen. Near enough is not good enough. Whether it is sets, costumes, accents, or language everything has to be real to be believable. So in a film like *'Raging Bull'* Robert de Niro puts on the necessary five or six stone in weight in order to play Jake La Motta.

Similarly George Lucas and then Steven Spielberg made it mandatory for movies set in space to be like space. This has

not only meant that costs have soared, but more importantly it has changed the way that people see films now.

One of the consequences of this devotion to physical realism which Belinda has identified is a corresponding lack of attention to the story or plot. Too often the plot is neglected in favour of some of the whiz bang gadgetry or make-up.

But should those who pioneer technical breakthroughs be blamed for how they are used?

Spielberg is singled out for special attention in the article, accusing him of rehashing the past and only gaining respect because of his money-making abilities. Ironically the US Academy, those who should be most impressed by these very qualities, have gone out of their way to ignore Spielberg. But there seems to me no doubt that Spielberg has had more influence on current American cinema than any other director.

Gone With the Wind's success was due not only to its romantic epic script, but also because of its technical breakthrough. There had not been anything to compare with its scope or grandeur and it revolutionised film-making in the 1940s.

Spielberg's *Star Wars* had a similar impact. No-one before had contemplated or carried off such a spectacle, and it also revolutionised film-making. To disregard this and other outstanding films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Duel*, *Sugarland Express* and *Close Encounters* is to pay scant regard to Spielberg's directing, writing, technical ability and imagination.

Secondly, there has been a great diversification in film making. Belinda concentrates solely on Hollywood film making while ignoring the most dynamic contemporary centres.

The French New Wave were the first to make radically different films, and were soon followed by the German and Polish New Wave and more recently by Australian, New Zealand and British cinemas. Indeed directors like Fassbinder, Schlöndorff, Wenders, Von Trotta, Wajda, George Miller, Beresford, Armstrong, Weir, Schepisi, Puttnam, Merchant and Ivory etc., are among the most popular modern film-makers.

More importantly the strength of their work has enabled them to reach large international audiences while telling stories pertinent to their own environments.

This, along with the growing independent American cinema, the freer East European cinema and the rapidly developing Asian cinema, means that Hollywood's stifling, homogenous cinema of the 1930s-1960s is looking to be a thing of the past. And this is something that should be acknowledged and welcomed.

Tony Brown

Confusion and Palestine

The five-month-old uprising, or 'intifada', by the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation, has focused very sharply the national question at the heart of the conflict.

The central demand of the uprising is clear: Israel should get out of the West Bank and Gaza, and allow the Palestinians living there the right to self-determination, i.e. to their own state.

Most of the international Left has supported this demand. Yet many hedge it around with 'radical' qualifications that



destroy its content.

The programme endorsed by most of those people aiming to be Trotskyists is for a single state in Palestine, amalgamating the two peoples, who would live as equal citizens. Usually the formula used is the PLO's — a 'secular democratic state'. Sometimes Trotskyists add the word 'socialist' or substitute some other formula, but the gist — one state — is common to most.

It is a programme of abstract internationalism, which counterposes a future in which nations no longer exist to present-day reality. There are *two* nations in Palestine, and simply to demand the 'abolition' of one or both of them is utopian. If it is meant as an immediate demand, it can in practice be endorsed only by ultra-nationalist Arabs who deny the Israeli Jews are a nation with rights, and want to see them 'smashed' by military force — force which could not be that of the PLO, but rather of the combined Arab governments. Alter-

natively, it plays into the hands of the Israeli *right wing*, who also, of course, want 'one state'.

The acceptance by many Trotskyists of the one-state programme leads them, inevitably, to regard a Palestinian state next to Israel with great suspicion. The British Socialist Workers' Party and Socialist Action devote great energy to *opposing* the 'two state' programme at the same time as they call for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories.

Socialist Action and Socialist Outlook have carried long articles comparing Israel and South Africa — a superficial and misleading equation — and concluding that an independent Palestine is just what imperialism wants (although George Shultz does not seem to have realised this yet) and so on.

The main 'world Trotskyist' group, the Paris-based United Secretariat of the Fourth International, does not, in fact, support the one-state programme. It recognises the right of the Israeli Jews to self-determination — once the 'Zionist state' has been destroyed. This is an evasive formula, leading them to argue in maximalist fashion that no national struggle or demand is worthwhile short of socialism.

Instructively, the Israeli section of the USFI argues:

"We think that after 20 years of occupation, it is much more realistic, more reasonable, to start raising demands against the anti-democratic and religious sectarian system imposed throughout the territory, demands that people in the whole territory (i.e. Israelis and Arabs) can mobilise behind, than to call for a Palestinian state alongside Israel" (International Viewpoint no.134).

This position is actually reactionary. It is not the role of Israeli socialists to tell the Palestinians that an independent state is 'not realistic' and that they should prefer to be equal citizens in Israel. But it is also at least a *consistent* position, drawing out the logic of the one-state programme once it is taken seriously.

For the other, Arab-chauvinist, logic, we need look no further than the other main 'world Trotskyist' group, the International Workers' League (IIT), based in Argentina. They also want a 'democratic, secular and non-racist Palestine' — but with no rights for Jews! An article by their deceased leader Nahuel Moreno argues against the slogan of a constituent assembly even after the destruction of Israel.

"[This] is precisely the shameful manner to support the Zionists and justify their presence, giving a 'democratic' veneer to their fascist usurpation. If you want to insinuate that this assembly would be made with non-Zionist Jews... these imaginary inhabitants do not exist" (Correo Internacional, March 1988).

Moreno puts forward the slogan, consequently of unambiguous meaning, 'Zionists out of Israel', and goes on to say: *"Tomorrow [we will also oppose] Arab racists. But tomorrow, not today. Because today Arab racism against Israel is progressive"*.

Moreno is not just endorsing the nationalist militancy of Palestinian youth. It is relevant to remember that Argentina, Moreno's home, is one of the most anti-semitic countries on earth.

The French group Lutte Ouvriere provides a voice of sanity in this madness.

"[The Palestinians] should tell the Israeli masses... that they do not fight to oust the Israelis from the land they live on, nor to prevent them from speaking their own language, or from having their own state and their own national existence if they so desire". (Class Struggle, no.16).

Unfortunately LO adopt a rather abstract approach, calling on the Palestinians to 'spread the revolution' to the Arab countries. Of course revolutionaries do want uprisings in the Arab countries — and not only in the Arab countries. But it is absurd to call upon the dispersed Palestinian nation — all classes of it? — to act like a proletarian vanguard. Why not suggest that the answer for Northern Ireland is for the dispersed Irish to lead a socialist revolution in Britain and the US?

Also calling for 'spreading the uprising', though rather more absurdly, is the British SWP. The SWP puts forward the defeatist argument that the Palestinian uprising is doomed unless, effectively, there is a revolution in Egypt (and how the Palestinians are supposed to start a revolution in Egypt is not explained). And they forthrightly reject any role for more than a handful of the Israeli Jews in this panorama. The Jews are just going to have to wait until the 'Arab revolution' smashes their state for them.

That this Third-Worldist, Arab-nationalist drivel can pass as revolutionary socialism is a tragedy.

But it is also revealing. The 'secular democratic state' is advocated on the one hand by those who counterpose it to a Palestinian state because they believe that by making the issue individual democratic rights they can mobilise the Israeli Jews. On the other it is advocated by those who consider the Israeli Jews too reactionary even to talk to.

A socialist programme needs to include the immediate democratic demands of the Palestinians, and to develop practical steps for their realisation. Beyond that, it must deal with a whole range of other democratic issues, and give answers to pressing economic and social problems.

It must point the way to a

socialist federation of the region in which all people can enjoy equality and national freedom. So far 'world Trotskyism' has not worked out such a programme — because it has lost its bearings on the national question.

Clive Bradley

Islam in Gaza

I think there is need for more discussion about the involvement of Islamic fundamentalists in the current unrest in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

According to the Observer (10 January), for example, *"the strike in Gaza was called by members of the Islamic Jihad... Jihad's success in organising the strike implies a significant shift of loyalties away from traditional organisations like the PLO..."*

Young Palestinians who hoisted the Palestinian flag shouted religious slogans as they clambered up telegraph poles".

One would have to be blind not to recognise that the 'anti-Zionism' of Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalism is straightforward anti-semitism with a long tradition: even when the Shah was in power, Khomeini used anti-semitism to strike up opposition to him, likening him to a Jew and suggesting that pieces of his legislation were 'perhaps drawn up by the spies of the Jews and the Zionists'.

Khomeini was equally open about his support for destroying the state of Israel, referring to the need to "uproot this germ of corruption", which was run by "a gang of Jews", from the Islamic world. The perpetuation of such an outlook today is reflected in the fact that the Khomeini agent recently expelled from France, Vahid Gorgi, used Iranian money to finance French pro-Nazi newspapers.

Now it is certainly true that the PLO retains the support of the majority of Palestinians, whatever the exact extent of the growth in influence of the Islamic fundamentalists in the Gaza Strip. It is equally true that the role of the Islamic fundamentals does not alter the fact that the Palestinians are an oppressed people whom socialists must support in their struggle against oppression.

But the confusion on the Left in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 is surely also a warning against any facile belief that mass struggle against oppression (whether that of the Shah of Iran or that of the Israeli occupation) will automatically result in a government of liberty and enlightenment — especially where Islamic fundamentalism has any say in the matter, as it clearly now does in the Gaza Strip.

The growth of fundamentalist influence should especially provoke some self-critical thought on the part of those socialists who see their role merely as being cheer-leaders for the Palestinians. Or would the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Action have us believe that Islamic fundamentalism is now playing a 'progressive' and 'anti-imperialist' role not just in the Gulf War but also in an Islamic Jihad (holy war) against Israel?

Stan Crooke

Angry slogans

It is hardly surprising that Tony Greenstein (WL7) pounces on John O'Mahony's condemnation of Jim Allen's "Perdition". Greenstein is merely following in the footsteps of the other ardent supporters of "Perdition", who substitute for serious analysis with angry slogans and charges of plots.

It is ridiculous for Greenstein to ignore the hard realities that have emerged out of the "Perdition" affair. At the press conference launching the publication of "Perdition" by Ithaca Press, Jim Allen referred to a "Zionist conspiracy". Allen later denied that he implied a "Jewish" conspiracy; nevertheless he utilised the language of anti-semitism in order to justify his charge that Zionist pressure led to the cancellation of the play, a charge that is in the main false. Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre condemned the play's "latent anti-semitism", whilst a Royal Court Theatre spokesperson described the play as "third rate". Indeed the Royal Court's Stafford Clark is on record as saying that Zionist pressure had no effect on the play's cancellation.

The sweeping statements against Zionism contained in "Perdition" are also highly questionable. Director Ken Loach spoke of Zionist leaders doing deals with the Nazis, whilst the Jewish workers fought in the streets; in fact, the Jewish working class was swiftly rounded up when the Nazis arrived in Budapest. Ironically, the play also leads us to investigate another aspect of the Third Reich's relationship with Palestine that has so far been ignored; the collaboration between the Nazis and the Palestinian national movement.

Anyone familiar with the history of Nazi Germany will have seen the photo of Hitler shaking hands with a smiling Haj Amin-al-Husseini, the Palestinian Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In the Mufti's eyes, the Palestinians were natural allies of the Nazis,

since both were engaged in fighting Jews. He wrote "this brings our ideologies closer together and facilitates co-operation". Hitler himself replied, on the issue of Palestine, that: "Germany has no other interest here, other than the annihilation of the power protecting World Jewry". For Allen, the idea that Israel is a racist state is a logical consequence of the ideological similarities between Nazism and Zionism, and the alleged collaboration between the two. Surely, then, by that same logic, the Palestinian national movement, because of its Nazi connection, is also racist.

John O'Mahony is right on commenting on Allen's Stalinist type amalgam between Zionism and religion. Indeed, Allen's idea that Zionism is "tied to God through its religious faith" is reminiscent of the statement made by the Russian Stalinist Vladimir Begun, that "Zionist gangsterism is rooted in the scrolls of the Torah and the Talmud". Indeed, there are strong elements of anti-semitic imagery in "Perdition", with references to "crucifixion" and "polluted wells". In one line, Allen echoes the pathos-ridden words of the stereotyped Shylock in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice". Varn, speaking of Scott, comments "I felt he was ramming spears into my body". In the "Merchant", Shylock cries to Antonio: "Thou stick'st a dagger in me!". Thus, Allen reproduces the worn-out picture of the weak, defeatist Jew.

The tragedy of "Perdition" is that through both historical discrepancies and appallingly wooden literary technique, Allen has helped neither Israeli Jews nor Palestinian Arabs. And there are no lessons in "Perdition" for those of us struggling for peace between the two peoples and for socialism in the Middle East. Benjamin Cohen, Jewish Labour Caucus

John Maclean

I am presently writing a biography of John Maclean (1879-1923), the Glasgow Marxist teacher who had six trials in his short life in and out of the courts.

It is not generally realised that John travelled the country, north and south, England, Ireland, and Wales, touring and speaking.

If any of your readers has any information about any of his contacts in Trades Councils, trade unions, etc. I would be glad to receive them. Perhaps there may be references to him in old Minutes Books. He was particularly popular among miners.

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