Morality, revolution, the Bolsheviks, and us

By Sean Matgamna

“Impartiality in the face of injustice is the virtue of a slave” — James Connolly, October 1915

“Problems of revolutionary morality are fused with the problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics... Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means... which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoes, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns... base means” — Leon Trotsky, 1938

“We live in a labour movement grown spiritually cross-eyed from the long pursuit of realpolitik and the operation of double standards, a movement ideologically sick and poisoned. In terms of moral ecology, the left and the labour movement is something of a disaster area because of the long-term use of methods and arguments which have corrupted the consciousness of the working class. The most poisonous root of that corruption was the Stalinist movement” — Socialist Organiser appeal for support against the libel case brought by Vanessa Redgrave and the WRP, 1981.

“Caesar never did wrong but with just cause” — William Shakespeare [1]

Lacking other than a distant nodding acquaintance here and there with academic philosophy I am reluctant to get involved in a discussion like the one Alan Johnson opens about Norman Geras’s ideas on “The Ethics of Revolution”. I might, I suppose, settle for the short answer: read Trotsky’s Their Morals and Ours again, and leave it at that. But some specific issues focused on by Alan Johnson (Solidarity 487 and 488, bit.ly/aj-0 bit.ly/aj-2) and Norman Geras (quoted by Johnson) deserve specific answers.

First, we need to get something out of the way.

Norman Geras was a member or supporter of the Mandelite International Marxist Group (IMG) at the time when it uncritically hailed the Stalinist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia as socialist and proletarian revolutions. At the time, also, when it supported the Provisional IRA war, and what the Provisionals did in it, uncritically. [2]

Then he moved politically, bit by bit, until in 2003 he was a supporter of the US invasion of Iraq. He was the main author of the 2006 Euston Manifesto, which might charitably be called politically fatuous. Who better qualified to draw up a code of morality for revolutionary Marxists than Norman Geras?

Alan Johnson went from the politics of Workers’ Liberty to — god help us! — Tony Blair, over a decade ago. Who better fitted to be the late Geras’s vicar on earth, to preach a sermon on morality to us, and to the shades of the Bolsheviks, than an old Blairite?

That much needed to be said in obedience to the dictates of my own political morality. Beyond that, I will not argue ad hominem.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

Morality is a grammar of behaviour whose elements relate to each other in shifting patterns that constantly change form and meaning.

It is always a working, conditional morality. It may be wrong to kill; in some circumstances it may be wrong and immoral not to kill.

Vladimir Lenin was fond of citing the basic — dialectical — rule that “the truth is always concrete”. So is the moral truth. What is good or bad in a given situation depends on a number of exigencies. [3]

In terms of our basic morality, of course we have a common humanity and empathy, and the Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do to you.

But we live in a world divided into hostile states, nations, tribes in some areas, national “tribes” of like-thinkers in others, and by sometimes murderous class conflict even in the most civilised nations, in Britain, for example.

We have an everyday code of strict morality which nevertheless has to be modified in our unavoidable conflicts with a ruling class with which we do not, and can not, share a comprehensive, common, all-embracing, morality, least of all during conflicts and revolutions. Our common humanity is refracted through conflict, sometimes mortal conflict.

Our morality is not something calculated and codified abstractly. It is first the morality handed down to us through the evolution of human civilisation, and most recently the evolution of the working class within capitalist society. The “golden rule” of course. The principle of standing up for yourself and for others across lines of nation, gender, skin-colour, sexuality, etc., against oppression. The liberal or libertarian principle that people should be able to do what they want to do as long as it does not do harm to others.

Labour movements have been and are the bearers and practitioners of a high moral code. A basic impulse of solidarity with other workers to oppose the exploiters, or im-
poor earthworm. We must fight, and try to win, but every drop of blood we shed needlessly will cry out against us.

or unnecessary. Those decisions can be made only by way of character of that particular war, and they surely did have the tragedy here, and of course there is a broader morality in that called “the Eleventh Commandment” — do to others what

socialist morality, but with some things in some situations modified or turned on their head by the conditions of insur-

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and rules prescribed in advance, in actual war those will at best be rules of conflict such as the medieval doctrines (or the

but is sometimes right, says Geras. “Caesar never did wrong but with just cause”...

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in 1415 Henry V of England decided to slaughter his aristo-

society itself, was History’s object, not its subject. In Rus-

reigns cannot spontaneously arrived at Marxist conscious-

and philosophy which have to be created and ac-

except, maybe, episodically, in a particular area of conflict, nothing like that regulated competition is possible between insurgent workers — or other insurgents — and a ruling power.

And in that there is what might be called the Madame De Farge factor (after Dickens’s woman who sat next to the guil-

the heads fell, obsessed with revenge on the aristocrats). Then, as the social upheaval, the more likely will be people acting out of primitive revenge against the former dominant power and its collaborators.

In the Stalinist anti-bourgeois revolutions the working class, like society itself, was History’s object, not its subject. In Rus-

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But in even in the case where you have combatants w ho

When did you act? By what criteria? The question is: how should you act? How could you decide whether a certain act is justified for the sake of your own cause, and your people, how should you act? How could such prior limits for moral reasons operate in practice?

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The deeper the social upheaval, the more likely will be people acting out of primitive revenge against the former dominant power and its collaborators.

And even in war you don’t kill or harm people needlessly and wantonly. You don’t ill-treat or kill civilians. You don’t treat civilians and prisoners of war with needlessly cruelly.

But consider this true story [4]. Three soldiers are trying to make their way through the lines. One is wounded and being carried on his back by a comrade. The third is a German pris-

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not provide for future innovations and exigencies. They can - those are and will always be limited, or very limited, and can - would not have done what he did. As I’ve said, different

It was good that the Nazi leaders were tried and many of them hanged after World War 2, even though some of the prosecutors and judges, and the leaders of the victorious powers, most clearly the Russians but also the others, would themselves have stood trial in any properly functioning sys-

tem of international law.

After the experience of World War 1, the Geneva Protocol of 1925 outlawed the use of poison gas in war. As far as I know, poison gas was used by neither side against the other in World War 2 but as was used in World War 1. It was reserved for use against certain civilians, Jewish, gypsy, etc. (It was used in the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-1988 and by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and recently against insurgents in Syria).

Overall, however, the Geneva Conventions did not, for either the war camps, regulate what actually happened in World War 2. There were many atrocities on the Allied side whose perpetrators were not tried like the Nazi leaders, and which were not well known until later. For example, the ter-

tor bombing of Dresden in 1944. For another example, the systematic mass rape of hundreds of thousands of German women in Berlin, Vienna, and other places by the conquering Russian soldiers, with the tacit assent of the Russian author-

ities.

At the end of the war, Churchill, Truman, and Stalin agreed to the recognition of partition of Poland and the expulsion of perhaps 13 million ethnic Germans from the Soviet-occupied East European territories where German communities had lived for centuries. The leaders, cynically, said that those people would be expelled “humanely”. In fact, perhaps half a million of them were killed by revenge-
cravings, others murdered or starved to death. Those who lived through the “human” expulsion went to a Germany which had been ruined by bombs and was now starving.

There are many cases now known of Allied mistreatment of German prisoners of war. As Stalin enslaved millions of Ger-

man prisoners, they were not set free at the end of the war. As late as 1956, the Polish Stalinist government was still trying to negotiate the return of Poles deported and enslaved by Stalin in 1939-40.

When the USA developed a functioning atom bomb, the prospect in its war with Japan was for a prolonged battle for

Russia.

Did Truman therefore have the right to demonstrate the atom bomb by obliterating the population of two Japanese cities? Surely he did not. Truman could have found other ways of demonstrating the power of the bomb to convince the leaders of Japan that it was useless to continue. In any case, what he did expressed a bourgeois, nationalistic, and probably to a serious extent racist morality of war.

Here the dividing line between the bourgeoisie’s morality and ours is decisive. Socialists, humanists, in Truman’s situ-

ation, faced with a very bloody,ragged, and prolonged war, would not have done what he did. As I’ve said, different classes have their own morality, even in war.

There were some useful restraints and proclaimations of morality in agreements like the Geneva Conventions, but those are and will always be limited, or very limited, and can - not provide for future innovations and exigencies. They can -
MORALITY, REVOLUTION, THE BOLSHEVIKS

CLASS AGAINST CLASSEs

The second edition of The miners' strike 1984-5: class against class includes:
A detailed week-by-week history of the strike
Photos by John Harris and newspaper front pages from the time
The story of "Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners"
Analysis and comment after the strike
Order online for £8.99 + £1.20 postage.
www.workersliberty.org/books

Bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope*. In fact she brought bitter and brutal hypocrisy-clad class war.

Years before Thatcher came to office in 1979, the ruling class and their politicians had worked out strategies to defeat the miners in a strike and to destroy trade-union power in general. The Tories used the state mercilessly. "Jacobian-fash-ion", as we said then. They used it against a big part of their own people, whom Thatcher called, with appropriate civilized imagery, the enemy within. If the law, brought down the miners could be taken to embody some moral code, social agreement, etc., then it broke down. The Tory government ignored the law when it was convenient, and the police illegally stopped movement in and out of mining villages. For us, Thatcher, the Tories, and the police were the enemy within. We had a political, and therefore a moral, right and duty to defeat them. A devastating world economic slump came soon after the Tories took power in 1979. They used it to undermine the conditions of the working class and drive workers out of the factories.

Workers acting in solidarity with other workers is the core of trade unionism and the main tool of effective trade unionism. As has been said, it is a very high moral value. The Tories understood that, and they aspired to the state to pervert workers whose conditions of life they were devastating in legal fetters. The whole labour movement was faced with the choice of fighting our "enemy within", which was trying to cripple us, or surrendering. At the start of Thatcher's rule, workers were strong enough to resist, and perhaps could have won, if the labour movement had mobilised and used its strength.

The Labour leaders didn't resist, partly from fear that the ruling class would break all the established moral, political and social rules and make a military coup — that is, that section of the state might tear up the existing rules of political life. [6]

The Tories made social war. At the time we argued — you too, Alan — that the labour movement should fight back using every position of strength it had, including its positions in local government. If the struggle escalated, the labour movement should face its responsibilities. We argued in Socialist Organiser that a system that allowed Thatcher to stay in power was not moral but immoral. Being uncharacteristic of the Bolsheviks' general cast of mind, we were seriously injured, and dozens were arrested on charges bearing heavy sentences.

Seven years later the courts awarded payments in compensation, and miners for injuries they received at Orgreave. That made no difference to the outcome back in 1984 and in all the years after. The brute force of the state had crushed the workers' resistance.

Where was right and wrong in that situation? The tragedy was that the miners were not able to muster enough force to defeat the Tories and the police. That we could not deploy enough effective violence. The miners would have been justified in using more or less any means to defend themselves. Wouldn't they? In November 1984 a taxi driver, David Wilkie, was killed by two miners dropping a concrete block onto his taxi from a bridge as he drove a scab miner to work. Wilkie did that because he had an ideological commitment to defeating the miners.

A moral question arose there. It exercised me at the time. Aside from whether attacking the taxi was advisable then and there, it was right or wrong in principle? Did the striking miners have the right to resort to lethal violence? Suppose the desperate miners had resorted to other such lethal attacks as had not infrequently happened in US labour history, where strikes have often become small civil wars? If that had happened, would we get out a moral calculator and do a sum to prove that such tactics were wrong, were not "British", and therefore, in our augest judgement, were unjustified, and could not be used for moral reasons? I don't think of that, and, to speak of what I can be certain of, I wouldn't, even though the November 1984 incident exercised me.

From behind their massed ranks of heavily-equipped police, the Tories have turned up the volume of their hypocritical denunciations of violence... NUM [National Union of Mineworkers] representatives at all levels have described [Wilkie's] death as a tragedy...

"But let's put David Wilkie's death into context. Five strikers have died on the picket lines. Hundreds are in hospital, many with very severe injuries. The Tories chose open class war... decided to use whatever force was necessary to get every single scab miner into the pits. According to his mother... Wilkie was politically committed to the scabs. He volunteered for the runs through the pickets."

The Tories opted for full-scale warfare. They opted for violence. They have no right to use the casualties to boost their cause. As British industry decays, the padding is being stripped off the class struggle. The Tories are shifting Britain as a weapon against the miners.

"The miners, and the rest of the working class, have no choice but to fight back on the terms that the Tories have set. Moreover, Thatcher has said... to... a "' useful, indeed, to introduce 'any measures necessary' to strengthen the police... The working class must resist by any means necessary. Our resistance has to be organised, disciplined, and well-considered. But we cannot and should not be intimidated by the Tories' attempted moral blackmail". (Socialist Organiser 200, 9 December 1984).

CHILDREN: 1913 AND 1984

Are there then no absolute moral rules? Take the matter of children.

In the morality of civilised grown-ups, any violence, bulling, guying, lying to, punitive exactions on, or sarcastic, mocking, diminishing treatment of children and adolescents, the weakest in the family or in any collective in society, is reprehensible. It is wrong. This is, I think, one of the nearest things to an absolute moral rule. On the level of personal behaviour, I would say that it is absolute.

Socialists, where they have some control over conditions, try to help children (their own and others) grow up as reasoning, decent, employed, non-conformists, non-vindictive, unfschelfs human beings. One of the glories of labour movement history in my opinion is that the newspaper of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, when the union was rousing workers ground down by terrible conditions of housing and work, turned not-work, and the bosses were fighting on labour and "Larkinism", carried an article urging the proper treatment of children: "Are You Making Slaves?"

Yet the ICGWU, the Larkinites, the Connollyites, played a part in inflicting very great suffering on the often shoeless and generally deprived working-class children of Dublin when it took on the employers who wanted to smash the 1913-14 "General Strike" of Irish workers as a "Labour War" of 1913-14.

The ability to starve working-class children was always at that time a weapon in the hands of the employers. The union members had to watch their children hunger and starve.

Donagh MacDonagh's great Ballad of James Larkin puts it well:

"Eight months we fought and eight months we starved; we stood by Larkin through thick and thin." "But foodless homes and the crying of children, they broke our hearts, we could not win".

To fight, the workers had to inflict that, and see that inflicted, on their children.

When an attempt was made to do what had been done in some American strikes and move the children to live with sympathisers outside the war zone, a great sectarian agitation was raised by the priests, in full cry against the union, backed by the Catholic Orange Order, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, then very powerful. The workers had no choice but to fight, but the children's suffering probably did break the spirit of some of them, and no doubt sapped the spirit of all of them.

If you want to translate it into morality, it is that what they fought for was, if they could win, going to be of great benefit to the children, both as children and later as workers. Knowing that did not make the hunger and the "crying of children" easier.

The Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, was a bloody tyrant, and as a human being seemingly had some dimensions missing. But he loved his children. He loved his little haemophilic son and heir.

The Bolsheviks in July 1918 took a decision — Trotsky says Vladimir Lenin and Yakov Sverdlov decided — that kids that entire family, including the blameless children. A terrible, terrible thing.

They fell victim to the laws of dynastic succession. The Tsar is dead! Long live the little Tsar or Tsarina! The Bolsheviks thought there was a substantial risk of the children falling into the hands of counter-revolutionaries and becoming a great strengthening for them. That would have cost the lives of unknowable numbers of workers and workers' children.

Was it moral or immoral to deprive the counter-revolution of a rallying centre by killing the Tsar's children? An answer can be made only according to calculations about the actual or likely victim of counter-revolution in the civil war. People living more or less calmly, as we do, Alan Johnson and I, would find it very difficult to make such a decision. I'm not sure I would ever have sufficient strength and sense of responsibility to make it. I think, however, that the Bolsheviks had the right to make that decision and to carry it out.

The decision the Bolsheviks took was horrible and terrible, but I would not second-guess them, because in the last reckoning I am on their side. Of course historians have a right and duty to portray accurately, analyse honestly, and arrive at a sober retrospective judgment; but I believe they were right to fight the civil war, and in their situation the Bolsheviks probably knew better than Alan Johnson or I can today.

Were such things a matter of the Bolsheviks having a morality which said that anything could go if it served? Here I think translating politics into morality produces a large area of confusion. Anything goes? Were the Bolsheviks, fighting a war in desperate conditions, bound by moral rules which would protect the Tsar's little children?

Given their assessment of the situation and the alternatives, should the Bolsheviks have left a general moral rule not to mistreat (let alone deliberately kill) guiltless young people and children outweigh the likely consequences if the Tsar's children were taken into the camp of those fighting the counter-revolution? It was a horrible choice. But the moral choice just to let it happen — if the counter-revolution gets to use the Tsar's children as a rallying-point, then be it so — that choice, apart from being uncharacteristic of the Bolsheviks' general cast of mind, would be moral but immoral.

I repeat: the moral truth is always concrete.

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Part 2: The Bolsheviks and Lenin

I do not have space to reply to all the points which Alan Johnson claims justify Ernest Erber and tell against the Bolsheviks and Max Shachtman’s defence of them.

I deal here only with the way in which I believe, Alan Johnson misrepresents Lenin. For the rest, I would refer back to Shachtman’s book, which I do not believe Alan answers adequately, and to my own introduction to The Fate of the Russian Revolution volume 1.

The Bolsheviks had the democratic majority, as testified by the votes in the Soviet Congress which opened on 25 October 1917 and even more by the votes at the next Congress in January 1918. The Bolsheviks were soon joined in a coalition government by the Left SRs, by then the main peasant party. On the facts, there is no question but that democratic right lay with them. They acted in accord with the will of the people, for example by legalising land seizures.

Alan Johnson quotes a snippet from Lenin’s Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power? (written in September 1917) to suggest that the Bolsheviks intended to replace the rule-by-force of 130,000 landowners by similar rule-by-force of 240,000 Bolsheviks, only with the assurance that the Bolsheviks’ despotism would be in the interests of the poor.

“Russia was ruled by 130,000 landowners. They ruled by means of constant force over 150 million people … And yet we are told that Russia will not be able to be governed by 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party – governing in the interests of the poor and against the rich”.

The quoted quote misrepresents Lenin’s argument. The sentences cited are a response to the objection: “the proletariat, we are told, will not be able to set the state apparatus in motion”. In other words, to the objection that, whatever the defects of the old ruling class, it knew how to administer public affairs, and no working-class alternative had that competence.

Straight after the sentences cited, Lenin argued that with the Bolsheviks’ wider support “we… already have a ‘state apparatus’ of one million people devoted to the socialist state administration”. In other words, the Bolsheviks could draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration.

“We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration”. But millions could, and millions more could learn quickly. “Is there any other way than by practice by which the people can learn to govern themselves and to avoid mistakes? Is there any other way than by proceeding immediately to genuine self-government by the people?”

Lenin’s argument was that the 240,000 Bolsheviks could lead and inspire the creation of “genuine self-government by the people.”

They made great strides towards that. Then civil war pushed them back. The Bolsheviks had to improvise an unyielding state machine to feed and supply the Red Army and the cities during the civil war. Many of the best worker activists went to fight with the Red Army. Many died. For administration, the Bolsheviks had to call on those of the old officials who were willing to serve.

Four and half years later, in one of his last speeches before a series of strokes disabled him, Lenin ruefully but mercifully assessed the retreats forced by the civil war in terms reminiscent of what Alan Johnson quotes:

“Obviously, what is lacking is culture among the stratum of the Communists who perform administrative functions. If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom?”

“I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.”

“Some thing analogous happened here to what we were told in our history lessons when we were children: sometimes… the vanquished version imposes its culture upon the conqueror”.

FALSIFYING THE PICTURE

Alan Johnson falsifies the picture of the Bolsheviks, what they thought, what they intended, what they did.

His way of quoting radically misrepresent what Lenin wrote. He seems to have had recourse to the Golden Treasury of Patented All-Purpose Quotes and “Quotes” Against Lenin for the Anti-Bolshevik Polemicist.

“Something analogous happened here to what we were told in our history lessons when we were children: sometimes… the vanquished version imposes its culture upon the conqueror”.

The Reds successfully contested with the “Whites” for the allegiance of the peasants in the countryside. They built their apparatus of state in competition with a wide variety of political and military enemies, amidst economic collapse and crushing poverty, and within a culture shot through with violence and death after the years of World War. They could not have prevailed unless they had, in part by demonstrating their indomitable will to win, gained and kept the allegiance of a very large part of the peasants as well as of the workers.

In early 1919, for example, when the civil war was going badly for the Reds, Trotsky succeeded in winning over a crowd of 15,000 Red Army deserters gathered in Riazan (south-west of Moscow), tired of war, sick of conflict, wanting to go home. “I climbed on a table there in the yard, and spoke to them for about an hour and a half. It was a most responsive audience. I tried to raise them in their own eyes; concluding, I asked them to lift their hands in token of their loyalty to the revolution”. And they did.

Looking back at the revolution through an opaque lens smeared with the blood and filth of the Stalinist regime, later commentators have imagined a tyrannical and bureaucratic “Stalinist” state machine inexorably working its tank-like power against the people in a drive to create a totalitarian state. Later in the century, Stalinist armies and parties calling themselves “communist” would do that, taking power as already-mighty military-bureaucratic machines, in Yugoslavia and China for example.

That is not what happened in Russia! To see the civil war that way is to read backwards into past history things that did not and could not exist then; it is to mix up the pages of two different calendars, that of the workers’ revolution and that of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

The party that led the revolution was working-class, unruly, argumentative, and democratic. As late as 1918 its central administration had a staff of no more than a dozen, for a party with hundreds of thousands of members. Bolshevik party centralism did not produce the authoritarian state; it was the exigencies of civil war and invasion that made the Bolsheviks develop a strong centralised party machine in the same process that produced the authoritarian state.

In the first weeks after the decision of the Congress of Soviets in October 1917, the working-class soviets had scarcely
any administrative or military machine at their disposal, and firmly controlled only the cities and the major towns. In July 1918 the Bolsheviks’ erstwhile partners in government, the Left SRs, killed the German ambassador in Moscow and attempted an armed uprising. They wanted to provoke renewed war with Germany in order to avoid peace on terms dictated from strength by the Kaiser.

In September 1918 the Right SRs staged an uprising. They shot and wounded Lenin, and killed other Bolshevik leaders. In order to create the state that existed by 1921, at the end of the civil war, the soviets and their Bolshevik leaders had to win the leadership and support of the mass of the people, the peasantry, in a fierce, free competition of ideas, leadership and arms with their bourgeois-landlord opponents. These were led by Tsarist generals like Kolchak, Denikin, and Wrangel and supported by liberals and some of the anti-Bolshevik socialists. No fewer than 14 states intervened to subvert the workers’ republic. The workers and peasants chose the workers’ republic. The workers and peasants chose the soviets and the Bolshevik workers’ party had not first won the competition for the minds and assent of the rural people, they would never have won the armed contest with the White armies and their foreign allies. The Bolshevik-led Soviets would have been crushed and the workers massacred, as the workers of Paris were massacred in May 1871.

LYING “CONDESCENSION OF POSTERITY”

There is here, for us, another question of morality: the morality of second-guessing the socialists who led the Russian Revolution.

They had a strict code of revolutionary morality, central to which was not giving in, not letting down the workers whom they led, and they acted in the situation they were in as they thought they had to deal with it. Is it moral to assume a moral superiority to them, as if from on high, and certainly from outside, or on the basis of a code derived from medieval Christian doctrine? In my opinion that is not moral.

With Alan Johnson’s quotation from Lenin about the dictatorship of the proletariat — “the scientific term ‘dictatorship’ means nothing more nor less than authority untrammeled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force” — there are the same sort of problems as with his quotation from Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?

The quotation is given as it if it were Lenin’s prospectus for 1917. In fact it is from a 1906 pamphlet, The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers’ Party, discussing the extent to which the Soviets in 1905 had been able to establish themselves as a revolutionary democratic power breaking through all the old laws and rules of the Tsarist order. Lenin quoted his own words from 1906 again in 1920, but in an article about convincing West European Communists about the slogan of “dictatorship of the proletariat”, not about the civil-war regime in Russia.

Moreover, the quotation is from when Lenin’s perspective for the Russian revolution was of a radical Jacobin bourgeois overturn, in which a revolutionary coalition government would — before eventually falling as the Jacobins had fallen in France — clear away all the old feudal rubbish and lay the basis for a wide bourgeois democracy.

In an 1905 article Lenin had cited Franz Mehring discussing the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, edited by Marx in the revolution of 1848: “one of the reproaches levelled at this newspaper by bourgeois publications was that it had allegedly demanded ‘the immediate introduction of a dictatorship as the sole means of achieving democracy’.”

Marx in 1848, too, was advocating “dictatorial” measures by a Jacobin-type government to push through the broadest bourgeois democracy. Lenin further explained in the 1906 pamphlet: “People are accustomed to see only a police authority and only a police dictatorship. The idea that there can be government without any police, or that dictatorship need not be a police dictatorship, seems strange to them.”

“Your say that millions need not resort to force against thousands? You are mistaken; and your mistake arises from the fact that you do not regard a phenomenon in its process of development. You forget that the new authority does not drop from the skies, but grows up, arises parallel with, and in opposition to the old authority, in struggle against it.”

“Unless force is used against tyrants armed with the weapons and instruments of power, the people cannot be liberated from tyrants”.

Alan operates with a “bad Lenin” version of history. Main ideas in Lenin’s head, his morality, shaped events. But does Alan mean to say that revolution in general is impossible?

Part 3: Conclusion

The labour movement and socialism are at their best profoundly moral movements — the bearers of the higher morality which class society (the whole long pre-history of humankind, as Marx described the epochs of exploitation and oppression before socialism) is capable of generating.

In the nature of things, we do not and cannot in periods of revolutionary war have an agreed common morality or rules of engagement with the ruling classes.

The medieval thinkers looked to God and to his one true, holy, and Apostolic church to be legislators and enforcers between rival aristocrats and rulers. But there is no God, and his one true, holy, and Apostolic church is now known to be and have been a fraternity of child rapists, sadists, and moral hypocrites.

We can only have a humanity-based morality. Even in class war, (even perhaps in untypical limitation arrangements) and class civil war, we maintain our morality, even when it is expressed as out-and-out war against an enemy who must be overpowered.

In revolutions, especially, people have to act without knowing the full consequences of what they do, or sometimes even the general situation in which they are acting. What is right and wrong is defined by the exigencies of conflict, and by the revolutionaries’ necessarily political, provisional, and approximate judgment of “what can be spared” and what can’t.

For Marxists, socialism is not mainly a code for living within this system, either in peace or in war, but a militant, warlike code for fighting the class struggle at all its levels.

We must strive to win, and sometimes use “dragon” weapons against the dragons of the ruling class. To repeat, every drop of blood we shed unavoidably will cry out against us.

And so will every defeat our side suffers because the socialists lack the moral backbone to fight seriously.

[1] That’s not the text which has come down to us, but a story told by Shakespeare’s friend Ben Jonson afterwards.

[2] For the attitude of the AWL’s predecessor Socialist Organiser, see appendix.

[3] It is to happen that AWL and our predecessors have always concerned ourselves with morality, and more than once discussed it. See appendix.

[4] One of my uncles may have been involved.

[5] Geras was writing in 1988-9, before the collapse of the USSR and the East European Stalinist states. In Socialist Organiser (forerunner of Solidarity at the time), we were critical of some of the things done in South Africa by insurgents, necklacing for example.

[6] In 1980, Michael Carver, former Chief of Staff, revealed that in early 1974 “fairly senior officers” had talked about a coup. Labour Party leader Michael Foot was more or less explicit at the beginning of 1982 about what he feared: “Those self-styled revolutionaries who speak today too readily of the resort to illegal methods or to street battles... should at least train to become soldiers or policemen — to face the storm troopers”.

[7] And also of unknowable numbers of Jews (the worst anti-Jewish pogroms before Hitler were done by the Whites in Ukraine during the civil war).
The Birmingham pub bombings, on 21 November 1974, killed 21 people and injured 182 others through bombs in Birmingham city centre.

The reaction to the killings included protest strikes; some workers seem to be sympathetic to Irish Republicanism being driven out of its jobs; and drastic curbs on civil liberties through a Prevention of Terrorism Act rushed through Parliament (with no votes against — supposedly as a temporary measure, but renewed again and again over decades until its provisions were folded into more recent “anti-terrorist” legislation).

Six people were quickly arrested and convicted for the bombings, but those “Birmingham Six” were exonerated (in 1991) after a long campaign. It has been said, for example by the former Labour MP Chris Mullin, who campaigned to free the “Birmingham Six”, and without contradiction, that the actual bombers were of the Provisional IRA. The bombing was not ordered by the central IRA leadership, and David O’Connell, a chief IRA leader, made a statement on 8 December condemning the bombing.

Workers’ Fight,先锋 of Solidarity, condemned the bombing immediately. The debate reproduced below was sparked by a letter to Workers’ Fight from Lawrie White, then a leading member of the International Marxist Group, denouncing our condemnation.

It is evidence that Workers’ Liberty, and its predecessors, Socialist Organiser and Workers’ Fight, did concern itself nearly half a century ago with questions of revolutionary morality.

To clarify: when we wrote of supporting the Republicans, we meant support against the British Army, not political identification with the Provisionals or endorsement of them.

Letter: Our first duty

The front page article in Workers’ Fight 78 on the Birmingham bombings makes the correct point that the criticisms Trotskyists make of the IRA should be made clearly in the context of support for the struggle against British imperialism.

However, this is precisely what the very same article fails to do.

It begins by asserting that “Revolutionary socialists... have a duty to denounce (!) and condemn this indefensible hypocrisy and senseless slaughter”. And indeed the whole article was littered with such emotive terms as “carnage” and “callous”, impossible to “explain or justify”, “simply indefensible on any grounds — military, political or moral” etc., etc.

What has happened, comrades? Is it the first time in history that civilians have been killed in a war? Did Workers’ Fight “demonise and condemn the indefensible hypocrisy of the imperialist state” and all its allies in the press and TV? (The deliberate indiscriminate fire-bombing of the entire city of Derry in the last war is worthy of more than a mere aside, comrades).

But on the Birmingham bombings, the hypocrisy you choose to condemn is that of “the workers in the Midlands”.

Physician heal thyself. How can you demand that the masses see through the hypocrisy of the anti-IRA hysteria whipped up by the press when you yourselves make no attempt what soever to unmask it, but in fact merely reinforce it by repeating the same expressions of horror?

But worse. You also join in the universal attribution of responsibility for the bombings to Irish Republicans. You say they were “probably the work of Irish republicans”.

Where is the evidence for this statement? Admittedly at the time of going to press, you may not have heard the news of the Provos’ deniability of responsibility. But even without that it is virtually impossible to conceive of the working class of Northern Ireland (or anywhere in the world) saying to themselves that you cannot see any sense in the bombings. They seem “politically very stupid”. If the work of the IRA, they would “signal an entirely new departure”. Well then, where is the logic in attributing them to the IRA? Isn’t it obvious that there might be something wrong with the premises if the conclusion doesn’t make sense? Especially when you know very well, even if the workers in the Midlands don’t, that the bombings are copy-book examples not of what the IRA is accustomed to doing, but of what the extreme unionist forces like the UVF are up to. Clearly it’s high time we should note that if the bombings were a right wing provocation, they were by no means “politically very stupid”.

The real lesson of the Birmingham bombings is that the British bourgeoisie have demonstrated that if someone lets off a couple of bombs, they can rapidly disorientate the workers movement and open it up to right wing agitation through a press campaign blaming the IRA. And under cover of the hysteria thus whipped up, they can introduce draconian legislation planned weeks in advance.

This means that our first duty is not to “firmly (!) dissociate (ourselves) from any bombing campaign aimed at the civilian population”, but to firmly dissociate ourselves first and foremost from the anti-IRA campaign of the British ruling class. And you don’t do that simply by re-stating your general position on the IRAs role in the struggle, you have to actively take the struggle forward. In this case, it is not possible to disarm the bourgeoisie of its ideological weapons if we do not first train revolutionary cadre to recognise and to resist them.

It is this essential task that you editorial failed to carry out.

Communist greetings, Lawrie White.

Reply: facing the issues squarely

How Lawrie White concludes that we fail to place criticism of the IRA within the context of the struggle against imperialism is rather a mystery.

We have been advised by the NCC [National Council for Civil Liberties, now called Liberty] that the editorial he criticises would be illegal now within the terms of the Jenkins police state law! The only logic to his outpouring is that condemnation of the Birmingham bombings and acceptance of the “probable responsibility” of “Irish republicans” outweighed the fifth of the article that made the basic case for the republican cause! (But we can’t please him there either, since he upholds us for attacking the double standards of British workers in the Midlands who struck work over the bombings, but never bother about the terror by the British army in Ireland...).

When he says that we never spent as much space expressing horror at the UVF-UDA assassinations and the British army terror, he means he’s not been reading the paper or that he is indulging in shoddy and dishonest polemics.

He says that the first duty is to denounce the imperialists for their hypocrisy: we think there are other priorities, like explaining as often as necessary, what the republicans fight for, but whatever the first duty of revolutionaries in Britain may be, it is clear that Lawrie White sees denouncing hypocrisy as the only duty here and now.

At one and the same time he elevates denial of possible Republican responsibility into a principle it is treason to depart from in the “concrete situation”, and goes on to talk about the “first duty” being to “distinguish between the violence of the oppressors and the violence of the oppressed”. So does White think the bombings were “probably” or even “possibly” the work of “the oppressed”... some republicans, perhaps? Even if he has so far kept the dreadfully heretical thought locked in his subconscious, clearly he does think so; for at least it has escaped into his letter, if obliquely.

If there be any sense in the letter and it is other than a piece of IMG sniping or sniping by a member of the IMG not very happy with the way the line of that organisation has wobbled on the issue of solidarity with the Republicans in the last year, it can only be the belief that “the IRA” are never to be criticised, at least in “military matters, and if they do, or may have done, something that is indefensible, then the best policy for British revolutionaries who are in general solidarity with them is to copy the three wise monkeys and hear, and say no, see no evil.

White is correct to say that revolutionaries in Britain must fight the bourgeois ideological domination of the working class specifically, the chauvinism on the Irish question. But for him, the essence of “disarming the bourgeoisie” of its ideological weapons against the Provisionals is to commit the “calamity” of not denying that Irish republicans might indeed have been responsible for the Birmingham bombings. That is a very limited, not to say peculiar and bizarre, conception of the nature and depth of the chauvinist disease in the British working class, of the Workers’ Movement, and of the rôle of the revolutionary Left.

How do we disarm the bourgeoisie of its ideological weapons in this case? It is certainly not done by a Workers Press-type panic stricken scream of “No! — it couldn’t have been republicans, it wasn’t the IRA.” Because it might well have been! It might well have been republicans. It might well have been elements of the repulican population from northern Ireland who, in their justified bitterness and outrage at the British terror, reacted in such a politically senseless, but quite understandable, way.

Our article referred to “Irish republicans”, not any specific section of the IRA, and we would include in that term the smallest sub-grouping that takes up the fight in northern Ireland against British imperialism. The Provisionals are the main force fighting, but they have no exclusive licence to fight British imperialism (or to claim the solidarity of revolutionaries in Britain), nor are they the sole custodians of the right of the Irish people to fight British imperialism.

Isn’t it contradictory. Lawrie White asks, to say the bombings were probably the work of republicans, if they were, unless you have a republican point of view? Unfortunately not. White’s talk of contradictions is abstract, purely formal logic. We are faced with the logic of the various forms of struggle employed by an oppressed people. Those forms of struggle are not, and can never be neatly cut to shape in advance. It is entirely consistent with the desperate plight of the Catholics in northern Ireland that such an outbreak could occur, the work of isolated active service units, splinter groups, or previously inactive republican sympathisers.

David O’Connell no doubt “disassociates” from the anti-IRA campaign of the British press. And he knows that any action such as the Birmingham bombings, by any section of the Catholic republican population, will be laid at the door of “the IRA”, that is, the Provisionals. Yet he condemned the bombings, disclosed that he didn’t know whether or not some members of the Provisionals were responsible, said that if it were found that they were, there would be a court of inquiry and possibly court martial — nor did he wriggle by over-stressing the no-doubt real possibility that it was an anti-republican provocation (see the last issue of Workers’ Fight for O’Connell’s interview).

Unlike the weekly paper of White’s own organisation, Red Weekly, the revolutionary nationalist leader had the guts and the seriousness to face the real possibility or probability that it was the work of republicans. He neither condemned nor did he wring his hands because of it! He condemns it, which is what we did and do. And we don’t change sides either.

It is a short, though logical, step, from resting one’s sup-
posed assault on British chauvinism and anti-IRA hysteria exclusively on saying it wasn’t the IRA to capitulation to that chauvinism. For it is implied in this weighty. Marxist, principled, non-hypocritical, firm, unfilching, unbending, revoluti- onary stance, that if it were really republicans then the general reaction to the bombings, at least, and maybe the wholesale condemnation of everything the IRA stands for, and the whole Irish nation was living as well, are quite justified. That is neither to disarm the bourgeoisie, nor to arm the working class ideologically. It is not even to face the issues squarely, with Marxist honesty — it is to hide in a corner. And that is what the IMG did. And from this lofty moral platform, Lawrence White delivers as a lecture on revolutionary seriousness and principles. If the essence of “disarming” the bourgeoisie is to deny IRA responsibility rather than to reassess the justice of the Republican cause even if the Provisionals were entirely responsible for the bombs — what happens to your credibility with serious workers who read your paper and place confidence in it, if it transpires — say as a result of the Provisional court of inquiry — that Republicans were re- sponsible? What about the crucial problem of educating the vanguard of the British working class to distinguish between the fundamental issues in this war and the "politics of the last atrocity" which, unfortunately, normally determine the ebbs and flows of working-class opinion on it?

There is only one way to disarm the bourgeoisie and plas- cate the anger — the justified anger — of the British working class, and that is to confront the reality as you see it. Don’t try to be “clever” and slippery. Take sides always according to the fundamental issues in the war-defend what can be de- fended, and if something occurs which you find indefensible denounce it. Workers’ Fight wanted to face the issues squarely we assessed them, and as they would appear to our read- ers.

We reiterated our pro-republican stand, irrespective of Birmingham.

Those, like the IMG, who nervously jumped for cover, placed in question what their whole attitude would be if it were shown to be a republican action. Far from arming their readers, they left them floundering with arguments that working-class militants not trained in double think would dismiss as contemptible evasions and which measured against the slaughter of 21 people and the maiming of over 180 were quite obscene.

Presumably Lawrie White wants to attack press hypocrisy to counter its influence, to talk, in the voice of revolutionary socialists. The Huffington Post, in lies and distortions about Ireland, purveys anti-Irish racist double standards. They suppress and lie about the real facts of the Northern Ireland situation. Yes, but in this case, when the press raged — hypocritically — it happened that they merely articulated the feelings of the entire working class. We agreed and agreed with those feelings and we said why. If one uses similar words and phrases, that simply means that the stock of language is limited. If White doesn’t think the events in Birmingham cause for emotion and emotional terms, the mildest comment one can make is that he should examine the state of his emotions, not to speak of his imagination.

To let oneself be swayed by feelings of horror over civilian casualties like the woman and two children killed in the M62 explosion is to lose all political balance. Not to feel at horror at senseless slaughter connected with any military objective is either to be personally unbalanced or to be thrown off balance in over-reaction to the hysteria.

Not to express those feelings, while maintaining the soli- darity position, is to lose the possibility of even talking to or- dinary people. The difference in the treatment of the bombings in Birmingham is a real outrage and must be morally condemned — according to the morality of communists who do recognise that the reality of class society imposes violence upon us.

The charge of moralism implies that one shares the carica- ture view that the IRA is a bunch of murderers, in the so-called Red Week. For English revolutionaries to fear to bend under the pres- sure against the IRA is healthy and politically honourable. But it is essentially infantile and unthinking if it leads to the moral nihilism of an attitude to bombing civilians which is derived from the British RAF’S “Bomber Harris” and other professional imperialist butchers. In their zeal to refuse to condemn such bombing, (which they can hardly really believe could not be the work of certain republicans or pro-republicans) such people slander the organised republican movement, which has a better and a more honourable record precisely because it is motivated by values different from those of the imperialist butchers who casually wipe out whole cities “in order to save them”.

The attitude that would say one doesn’t condemn, one sim- ply says Birmingham was “a mistake”, is another com- petent evasion. We did refer to the possibility that the bombing might have been the result of a ghastly series of er- rors, if the Republicans were responsible. Nevertheless, if what happened in Birmingham was the result of a conscious decision, whether right or not, it was a crime against the British and Irish working class. And it was necessary to say so.

Revolutionary cadres are not just schoolboys playing rugby, trained to resist the pressure of the other side come what may. They have learnt to think, to judge and consider the ebbs and flow of working class opinion on it? White attacks.

A recent incident will illustrate this. A WF militant was shot down in Birmingham during the wave of anti IRA hysteria. Ironically, his first serious stand on Irish politics had been when he attempted to hit someone 18 months ago who sold him a copy of WF containing a pro-IRA article. In a study of the things that flow from that, including attacks on military targets in Britain — even where some innocent victims suffer. A recent WF article of the substance, not the shadow. The immediate ephemeral expression in the press at that point in time was the mere shadow of the alienation and double standards within the working class and the labour movement. We expect hypocrisy from the press, what we at- tempted was to hold a mirror up to our own class. Events like Birmingham are, as we explained, a result of British chauvinism and anti-Republican arrogance within the Irish movement. Fundamental responsibility rests with the British state, as we said and repeat. The events in Birmingham must be seen within this context. But they are events in their own right. As such they demand a response. Some readers think the White article is a cover-up. We have the doublefogging and evasive article by Clarissa H ow ard, or to take the fundamental issues in this war and the “politics of the class ideologically. It is not even to face the issues squarely, and think independently, then they will prove use- less. The Red Weekly method of training cadres appears to be one of dodging the issue while making a fine pretence of prin- cipled politics and world-defying intransigence.

As opposed to this, the proletarian revolutionary organi- sation thinks maintains its political independence, and either defends or rejects action by revolutionary nationalists which whom it is in solidarity We denounced the Birmingham atrocity. Weighing what we denounced against the fundamen- tal issues in the war, we then went on to reiterate our continued support for the republican side, in the same article which White attacks.

We affirm the right of the IRA to fight the British ruling class, to organise for revolution in Britain. We open our right to condemn elements within or on the fringe of that movement if they are, or appear to be, in favour of indiscrimi- nate and senseless slaughter of innocent British workers.

We judged the situation and took our position irrespective of the attitude of the Republican movement. As it happens, we afterwards learned that Provisional leader David O’Con- nelly expressed a similar attitude.

The guerrilla leader O’Connell knows that armed actions either have a purpose or they are senseless; either they are part of a strategy, or they are random and indefensible. He says that the Birmingham bombings are bombings of the bourgeoisie. B ut you remain consistent and consider the defendants in such a trial as victims of British hysteria reflected within the IRA itself? (Thus intimating that even the Provos are not “hard”, ruthless, or “callous” enough for their vicious British sympa- thisers.

Or will they ditch their positions of today, and come to agree with O’Connell — and Workers’ Fight?

• Workers’ Fight 81, 1 January 1975 (by Sean Matgamna)