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Errors of the majority on the Falklands issue....Cunliffe.

Politica Obrera statement on the Falklands.



## ERRORS OF THE NC MAJORITY ON THE FALKLANDS ISSUE

### FALKLANDS: "COMMUNITY" - OR COLONY?

Time after time from the very first EC draft resolution onwards, the comrades of the majority have begun their analysis of the Falklands events from the position and rights of the islanders. Typically the statement runs something like this:

"The war was about rival claims to the Falklands. The Falklanders are, and for 150 years have been, a distinct community, with a distinct and separate territory, displacing no-one, oppressing no other community. Neither Britain nor Argentina has any valid claim over this community. The rival governments fought for possession of the islands to boost their respective positions at home and to promote themselves as powers in the world (Britain) or in the region (Argentina)."

The sleight of hand is to talk of the islands always in terms simply of people living on them, as some kind of autonomous classless "community". But in fact the Falkland Islands are, and for 150 years have been, a British COLONY offshore from Argentina.

The colony was seized from the young Argentine nation in 1829. The Argentine garrison was evicted by British military force, leaving the islands uninhabited except for British personnel. Only since then has the "distinct community" arisen, made up of British people, who have rigorously ejected any would-be Argentine immigrants. The reason why the islanders "oppress nobody" on the islands is because of this rigorously chauvinist policy of excluding non-British people. The reason why they are "culturally distinct" is this same refusal to allow in foreigners. Their "distinct territory" is not theirs at all, but a British outpost secured - now as in 1829 - by British imperialist armed force, and utilised in two world wars as a strategic naval base dominating the Cape.

The "community" on the islands is today in reality almost exclusively a community of Caretakers for the islands' British owners - the Coalite company and a handful of British landowners. They are no more an "independent" community than the British workers on the Isle of Wight. Their very houses in the company settlements are owned by Coalite - and on retirement they are forcibly ejected from "their" community by the islands' real owners.

And the fact that 1,800 of them still live on the islands - and some, by a bureaucratic quirk in the Tories' latest racist legislation have lost their British passports - does not in the least alter the fact that economically, militarily and politically the islands remain today what they were in 1829 - a British colony seized from Argentina. And the Argentine people have time and again over the past 150 years made it absolutely plain that they regard the issue as a real and a live one, an outstanding grievance against British imperialism.

We, too, should see it that way. The elimination of the vestiges of colonial rule is part of our programme, as well as being a key component in the struggle for national independence.

Does that then oblige us to advocate at all times, under all conditions, the forcible invasion of the islands - or to support such action when taken by the Argentine junta? No, indeed, we can recognise that the issue exists without making it in any way a primary pole of our agitation: the elimination of the British imperialist relic in the Malvinas would for us be one of the later rather than one of the first actions of a revolutionary workers' government in Argentina.

In assessing the importance of the issue, we look first at numerous questions, not at all directly related to the status of the islands or its inhabitants. Does such an invasion liberate sections of oppressed Argentine workers? Does it advance the struggle against the most tangible forms of imperialist oppression and exploitation - the multinational firms and banks, or the military junta armed to the teeth by imperialism? Having retaken the islands, can they be seriously defended against an imperialist military onslaught? Or is it simply an adventure?

Among these considerations there is also the question of the islanders. Revolutionaries do not seek to become "missionaries with bayonets". The struggle against colonial rule should seek to mobilise the exploited masses within the colonies themselves - not simply wage an attack from the outside.

There are conditions, however, where a revolutionary workers' government might disregard the factor in the case of a strategic imperialist outpost like the Falklands: for instance if it became clear that the imperialists were intent upon utilising the islands as a base of operations against revolutionary struggles in Latin America.

But while they represent a moral/political problem, the existence of an expatriate colonial "community" should certainly not be seen as a principled objection to the retaking by Argentina of territory stolen by imperialist armed force.

Our objection to the Argentine invasion should not have been one of principle, but a tactical objection: that this was not the right time or method for retaking the islands; that it was a hopeless adventure and a diversion from the class struggle in Argentina designed to bolster a flagging junta; that it focussed anti-imperialist militancy on the wrong primary targets; and that in doing so it encouraged Argentine workers to ignore the workers on the Falklands themselves.

On balance therefore it was correct to oppose the invasion. But the majority, in deducing this position from the "rights" of the islanders, proceeds to turn upside down its whole analysis of the situation.

Are the islanders entitled to "self-determination"?

For Lenin, the demand of the right to national self-determination was an anti-imperialist demand. To be applicable it required first and foremost to be addressed to a genuine nation - a national minority oppressed by imperialism.

The Falklanders are not a nation - they are an expatriate company work-force sponsored by imperialism. They do not wish to sever their ties with Britain. They are - with the Gibraltarians - among the strongest advocates of British colonial rule. In this sense despite the rudeness and violence of their arrival, and the mess an extended garrison will make, the arrival of the British troops gave the islanders their "self-determination".

The rabid pro-British chauvinism of these islands workers is of course dressed up by the majority as the Falklands "national culture", as something to be defended against the ravages of Argentine nationalists. Indeed while no words seem so scathing for the majority's condemnation of the entire Argentine workers' movement as "chauvinist", the Falklanders' national prejudices - a direct echo of the chauvinism of their British imperialist sponsors - are ignored. Instead we are called upon to uphold this 150-year tradition of racialism and chauvinism as the distinguishing feature of the Kelper "nation". This 'cultural' criterion has nothing to do with Leninism - if anything it is the majority who have reverted to bourgeois nationalism.

But we should also ask the majority where they stand now on the situation in the Falklands. The islanders' self-determination is now the pretext for the development of a substantial imperialist base that will represent a challenge to any developing revolutionary struggles in Latin America and will remain a direct affront to the masses of Latin America.

Should we still say that the "rights" of these British expatriates must still be seen as paramount in the situation - superseding the rights of millions of workers throughout Latin America?

The majority comrades of course opposed the sending of the fleet. But while they have argued strongly for the withdrawal of the Argentine forces from the islands and castigated the "chauvinist" Argentine workers, they have at no point called for the islanders to unite with the Argentine workers' movement in demanding the withdrawal of the British forces, or spelled out a class line for this so-called "nation". The argument about self-determination is thus a classless abstraction, using Leninist terminology to avoid a concrete analysis and tail-end the political prejudices rife in a miniscule company settlement.

Argentina- sub-imperialist or victim of imperialism?

Since the Argentine junta is, according to their view, without justification trampling upon the paramount rights of a small "nation" in the South Atlantic, the majority concludes from this that the invasion - seeking to liquidate a colony - is "mini-colonialism" - or even "sub-imperialism".

"Sub-imperialism" has been utilised as a convenient expression because it neatly evades the question of whether Argentina is in fact an imperialist country or whether in reality it remains a rather stronger and more developed nation among those under the thumb of imperialism.

The evasion is important for the comrades, because they recognise that if we are to follow Lenin's line of analysis, then no matter how reactionary the leadership of the Argentine junta, and no matter whether they indeed struck first at British imperialism and triggered the war, if Argentina is an oppressed rather than an oppressor nation then we are obliged to defend it against imperialist attack.

Lenin for instance in A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism, quotes his own pamphlet on Socialism and War:

"Socialists have regarded wars for the defence of the fatherland, or 'defensive' wars as legitimate progressive and just" only in the sense of "overthrowing alien oppression". It cites an example: Persia against Russia, "etc", and says: "These would be just and defensive wars, irrespective of who would be the first to attack; any socialist would wish the oppressed, dependent and unequal states victory over the oppressor, slave-holding and predatory 'Great' Powers." (p. 10)

Lenin's definition here is useful. Socialists, he argues, favour the victory not simply of oppressed national minorities in struggle for the right to secede from larger states and form their own state, but the defence of politically independent - "oppressed, dependent and unequal states", when they enter a struggle with the imperialists.

Argentina plainly is not an oppressor nation (though the modern state was born from the physical liquidation of the native Indian population); it holds no other peoples in subjugation; it is plainly dependent for its development upon decisions made by the imperialist banks and multinationals; and it is self-evidently unequal to imperialist Britain on any serious comparison. As socialists we should seek the victory of Argentina over the "oppressor, slave-holding and predatory" Britain.

This reference is useful because it undermines the recurrent argument of the majority comrades that in raising the issue of Argentina's dependence upon imperialism we are overstepping the limits of Lenin's call for self-determination. Are we perhaps pursuing some accommodation to the petty bourgeois utopia of economic nationalism and autarchy? Was Lenin's view simply to abandon anti-imperialist struggle once formal political independence was achieved?

One problem in following the debate along these lines is that Lenin is not the most developed source of material on the relationship between national democratic tasks and the socialist revolution: even quite late on in the aftermath of the October Revolution there are signs that Lenin had perhaps not fully grasped the implications of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, which Trotsky himself did not rework fully until 1930.

But we can look to Lenin for a far more rounded approach than is offered to us by the majority comrades. He challenged the ultraleftist positions of Rosa Luxemburg who argued that since there could not be full equality of nations under capitalism because of imperialist economic domination over the backward countries, the demand for political national self-determination was meaningless and should be abandoned.

In answer to her, Lenin argued that self-determination was first and foremost political. He stressed that the demand for formal independence was both necessary and achievable short of the complete destruction of imperialist world domination.

But it is wrong of comrade Carolan to deduce from this that Lenin argued that only political independence is involved in the national struggle. He saw it in fact as a component of the struggle of the masses against the bedrock of imperialist control - the monopoly power of finance capital to dictate the pace of development and levels of exploitation on a world scale. Lenin points out that direct colonial rule is only one of a variety of forms through which finance capital can exercise its control and preserve its system of exploitation. For this reason formal independence, though it may be resisted by the imperialists, does not of itself break the imperialist stranglehold.

And that stranglehold is not simply on the economic windpipe of the "independent" backward countries but through its economic power, imperialism has more or less shaped the political structures and regimes.