

A letter to readers from the editorial board of Workers' Liberty

What will you do for socialism?

"Contemned and despised though he be, yet, the rebellious docker is the sign and symbol to all that an imperfect civilisation cannot last, for slavery cannot survive the awakened intelligence of the slave.

"To increase the intelligence of the slave, to sow broadcast the seeds of that intelligence that they may take root and ripen into revolt, to be the interpreter of that revolt, and finally to help in guiding it to victory, is the mission we set before ourselves."

James Connolly



THE world in which we live is torn by terrible crises — by protracted economic depression, by wars, by famine and starvation, in Africa and elsewhere, by ecological disasters now and the certainty of even more terrible ecological disasters to come. The list could be made much longer.

Capitalism, which dominates the world, and Stalinism, which used to dominate a large part of it and still controls China, are the causes of these horrors. Socialism is the plain and obvious answer to the problems our world faces. It is the answer to such obscenity as 1 in 3 children in Britain today living below the poverty line. It is the alternative to a robotically inhuman market system that starves hundreds of millions in the Third World — killing by needless poverty tens of millions of children each year — while pampering a few rich areas of the world.

By socialism we mean the putting of market forces under human control so that we can have rational, democratic planning of our social and economic affairs — which here means also of our ecological affairs — and the application of consistent democracy instead of war to solve national and ethnic conflicts such as those of the former Yugoslavia, in Ireland, in the Middle East, and in all the numerous other places where different peoples have not yet learned to live together in amity.

Socialism — working-class socialism — remains the best answer to the world's problems, but it is less of a force now than it has been at any time this century so far. Stalinism, which Trotsky called the "syphilis of the labour movement", undermined, sapped, butchered and discredited the old socialist movement. The successes

after World War II of reformist 'socialism' domesticated the official labour movements to such an extent that in Britain in the '80s and '90s it did not know how to defend itself when the bourgeoisie turned openly barbaric once more.

The collapse of Stalinism has cleared the way for us to rebuild a real mass socialist movement. But, for now, the unfaltering socialist must live amid the ruins and the devastation, the discouragement and self-doubt produced by the poisonous vapours of Stalinism and the disintegration of reformism.

You must live under, and respond to, incessant bombardment by propaganda from the capitalists and their agents and collaborators in the labour movement. The burden of their message is that socialism — and even trade-unionism — has failed. The entire premise of the New Labour "post-reformist" project, and now of the New Labour government, is that socialism was a mirage, and reformism a profligate and morally dubious departure from sound bourgeois economics.

In their day, the leaders of the Stalinist counter-revolution in the USSR, having overthrown the rule of the working class, rewrote history to suit themselves, proclaiming that Stalinism was the natural and inescapable outcome of the Russian workers' revolution of 1917.

Today, the anti-socialists too say that Stalinism was socialism; Stalinism was Bolshevism; the Stalinist states were Marxism come to life — and therefore? Therefore, socialism, Bolshevism and Marxism are now deservedly dead and rotten: socialism is impossible. Even old-style 1945 Labour reformism is impossible.

This is the era of the new Popular Front of the Liars Against Socialism!

The capitalists have taken over Stalinism's lies as they have taken over its other bankrupt stock. But we — the heirs of those, in the first place, Leon Trotsky, who fought Stalinism to the death — know better: we know that the Stalinists killed more communists and workers than any reactionary regime in history, not excluding Hitler's. We know that Stalinism had nothing in common with either the aims or the methods of real communism.

We know that reformist tinkering with capitalism was not socialism. We may say, after Karl Marx, that the welfare state provisions secured after 1945 were a little bit of the political economy of the working class, won by the labour movement, within capitalism, but our movement knew and said that no such gains would be secure while the commanding heights in economy and state were held by the bourgeoisie. We know, despite the bourgeois demonisation of the trade unions, that it was trade unions that won for workers the broader levels of civilisation experienced in the decades after the war.

WORKERS' LIBERTY believes that only stubborn resistance to those lies and stubborn reiteration of the truth about socialism, about Marxism, about trade unionism and about the real history of the workers' movement, including the history of the Russian revolution, can stop these lies from continuing to poison the ground on which the new working class socialist movement must be built.

We believe that only organised work by Marxists in the working class and the labour

movement can secure victory this time round for the ideas of unfalsified socialism, and honest historical accounting.

Modern socialism is the working class struggle made conscious of itself and with help of organised groups of socialists imbued with collective memory and the power to learn from its experience. That struggle will go on as long as capitalism goes on. The revival of a mass socialist movement is therefore inevitable. The revival, perhaps slow at first, of working class struggle in Britain, is likely to be stimulated by the election of a New Labour government. But how it revives, and when it revives, and how quickly it revives, depends very much on the capacity and the will of the socialists who work for it to help it revive.

The vigour, or lack of it, with which socialists go on an offensive against capital and stand up to the mudstorm of anti-socialist lies and abuse, will speed up or delay the inevitable socialist revival.

But what can serious socialists do? What can we do *now* to move the mountain of dead dogs and fragmented myths under which the 20th century seems to have buried socialism? What can we do to rouse the working class and revive mass working class politics? What is *Workers' Liberty* doing? What coherent notion do we have of what we do that makes sense of reality now and offers hope for a future change for the better? In the beginning was the class struggle! The class struggle is waged in industry and society, in politics and on the level of ideas. That is what we do: we help workers fight the class struggle on the three main fronts of struggle. What we do was long ago summed up in these three words — "Agitate! Educate! Organise!". We do it in *Workers' Liberty*, in factory bulletins and through broader publications in which we collaborate, such as *Action*. New opportunities for expanding and intensifying our work have been created by the upsurge of hope generated by the defeat of the Tories on 1 May.

You will find those three words — agitate, educate, organise — emblazoned on labour movement banners today. You will find them in files of old socialist newspapers, decade after decade, back for 150 years.

You will find them spread in socialist literature across the world, in the writings of Lenin, for example. These words sum up what a socialist does and what socialist organisations exist to do.

What do they mean? Take them one at a time.

AGITATE means to move, to stir up. It means:

- that you object to the way people are treated, and that you urge them to fight

back;

- that you expose and show up in detail the human meaning of capitalist exploitation, oppression and indifference;

- that you expose and bring to light conditions in factories, offices, colleges, housing estates;

- that you expose the brutalities and injustices of the police and the law courts;

- that you point out the exploitation and corruption at the heart of the capitalist economic system on which all our lives depend.

It means, in short, that you, as a socialist hold a mirror up to the world around you, draw people's attention to the details of capitalist exploitation and oppression to show them their situation, and urge them to act. You stir them up. You tell them not to accept this state of affairs. You move things out of the congealed social inertia that holds the capitalist wage-slave system in place.

But don't people already know their own situation? Don't they know that they are badly treated and oppressed?

Of course they do! They know it in the pores of their daily lives. They feel it minute by minute doing jobs that do not interest them; when they are driven into degrading

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drudgery for money which too often does not even buy them all they need; when they are forced to live on the dole, or made homeless and forced on to the streets; when they experience the countless grades and degrees of humiliation and exploitation that working-class people are heir to. Of course they know!

But it is not as simple as that. People get used to terrible conditions, even when they directly experience them as terrible.

Things are now accepted in Britain that would, 18 years ago, have provoked outrage and spurred the labour movement into vigorous action to end them. The hordes of young people sleeping out on the pavements of our cities are one example; the vast growth of a cheap-labour, sweatshop, un-unionised economy is another. If enough people had kicked up a fuss, if the trade union leaders or Labour leaders like Foot and Kinnock had done their job, these things would not have come to be so widely and fatalistically accepted. The shout of

anger, protest, outrage — even if for the moment it changes little — is a great creative force in human life.

LEARN from history! One of the most important strikes in British working-class history was the famous "matchgirls" strike at Bryant and May's works in 1888. It was the start of mass trade unionism. It was sparked by left-wing agitation.

Annie Besant wrote an account of the conditions in which the women worked producing matches, of their poverty, their exploitation, and the terrible diseases they contracted working with sulphur without protection. Reading Besant's account of their own lives those women were spurred into action. Their strike was the first of a wave of strikes — the following year the London dockers struck — that led to the creation of the great general trade unions, that is, to the creation of the modern labour movement and, indirectly, of the Labour Party.

The women had suffered for years. They had seen their sisters sicken and die young from sulphur poisoning. Of course they knew all about their own conditions!

They had experienced what Besant wrote about, and knew it in a way that Besant never could know it; but the mirror held up by Besant's articles sharpened their perception, clarified the way they saw their conditions, and let them see their lives through the eyes of someone coming fresh upon conditions to which they had had to grow accustomed. They were stirred up — agitated.

Just as in a personal quarrel or conflict of opinion you can be vastly strengthened in your intuition, feeling or conviction by a friendly voice of agreement, so also workers who already feel oppressed can be roused by agitation to do something about it. They can be shown their conditions starkly and freshly by comparison with others more fortunate. They can be encouraged by a show of anger to raise their own voices. Agitation can free them from the hypnosis of familiarity, the submission generated by hopelessness and the inability to see an alternative, even if only a slightly better one.

Experiences like the matchgirls' strike — 'new unionism' — are likely to be repeated in the Britain of the 1990s, where traditional trade unionism has been uprooted across large swathes of industry to make way for casual working and very intense exploitation.

The agitating socialist is the probing, implacable accuser and prosecutor of capitalism as it impinges on particular lives and specific groups of people — in the first place before its victims, our class. As James Connolly once defined this work of ours:

CLEARING THE DECKS

"The men and women of your class, show them their wrongs and yours

"Plant in their hearts that hatred deep that suffers and endures."

To rouse, "agitate", people into action even for a small change or a petty reform is to help them start down the road to outright opposition to capital and all its works.

There is much to "agitate" about in 'New Labour' Britain, after 18 years of Tory rule!

TAKE the second big word, *educate*. What is education? Agitation is education. But it is not rounded, deep, broad education. And that education is needed, too. For socialism, as distinct from trade unionism, it is irreplaceable.

To urge revolt against particular conditions is good. Hatred of the conditions which add up to much of the reality of working class life under capitalism — that is the beginning of wisdom for the socialists themselves. If they lack that hatred, if they let it fade, if they do not keep in their minds all the time the bitter details of capitalist reality, then they themselves will soon wither and die as socialists.

Yet it is not enough. It is also necessary to understand *why* things are as they are, how and why capitalism oppresses people. For this you must educate yourself and educate others, who will then educate yet others.

Workers react against particular outrages. They fight. They strike, demonstrate, lobby MPs. They feel burning indignation. There will be much more of this in the period ahead than in recent years.

But unless they are educated to see how their concern — what "agitates" them — fits into the whole capitalist system, and educated, too, to see capitalism for what it is — a temporary phase in history — then they will never go beyond blind reaction to this or that aspect of capitalism. No matter how violent and spectacular that reaction may be — think of the riots of the early 1980s or the poll tax riot, for example — it cannot change society fundamentally, even where it wins partial concessions.

The workers will get what they want, or fail to get it, or get some of it, and that, perhaps, only temporarily. They will never understand the system. They will never fight capitalism, as capitalism, in all its aspects, but only in one. And they will never fight to replace it.

Militants in one cause will not "make the connection" between their concerns and the concerns of others of the oppressed. They will not become socialists.

FOR example, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of the most consistently militant workers in Britain,

London dockers, marched through London in support of racism and racist politicians. They were militant on wages and conditions, and even on broader questions like asserting a high degree of day-to-day workers' control in their industry. But they were politically backward, they were not educated — though their day-to-day leaders were members of the Communist Party — in the general socialist view that matched their outlook on immediate industrial issues.

Worse, they were poisonously *miseducated*, because they lacked an adequate overall view and were part of a widespread wave of working class militancy that lacked it too. That determined that ultimately they were unable to defend themselves even industrially: they were crushed in the 1980s.

The other side of such phenomena as militant workers who hate the Tories but who are also racists is that very often black militants, seeing only their own large concern, are one-sided too, lacking both an overall view and a view of where they fit into the capitalist social system. They do not orient to the working class or labour movement to change it and make it serve their needs.

Without rounded socialist education, all the agitation in the world will not change capitalism or replace it. Blind agitation on particular issues, separated off from other agitation, and not integrated into a coherent outlook on the world can even strengthen capitalism by pitting one group of disaffected people against another. The organisation of politics in the USA by way of ethnic blocks is probably one reason why no Labour Party of the British, Dutch or Belgian type has yet emerged out of the US trade unions.

Most people involved in direct action of the sort that occurs spontaneously and which we try by agitation to evoke, tragically never attain any overview. It is the job of socialist education to help them develop such an overview.

SOcialist education is necessary not only to help workers make sense of the overall position but also to help militants avoid what is often the nonsensical picture they would get by extrapolating from immediate impressions.

It is not enough to urge people to be guided by mere instinct — by such rules of thumb as siding with the oppressed, opposing what the ruling class wants, supporting militancy, and being sympathetic to our rulers' enemies.

Of course you should side with the oppressed! As James Connolly once rightly said: "Impartiality as between the strong and the weak is the virtue of the slave". But what does it mean to side with oppressed people? Do you adopt their views? But their

views may be, and usually are, sectional, one-sided, narrow-minded, or even blindly self-centred and chauvinist.

For example: the Palestinian Arabs are oppressed. History has dealt with them very harshly, and, in general socialists should support them.

But for decades their leaders proposed a solution to their condition based on destroying the state of Israel and subjugating its Jewish inhabitants. That was to be done by the surrounding Arab states.

Until the late 1960s, this was expressed in the crudest terms by Yasser Arafat's predecessor Ahmed Shukhairi: "Drive the Jews into the sea!" Thereafter it was proposed in the disguised form of calling on Israel to abolish itself and cede its territory to a new Arab state of Palestine, in which the Jews were to be guaranteed religious, but not national, rights. That too could only be achieved by Arab subjugation and conquest, but it sounded better.

It was not only an Arab chauvinist programme; it was, in the circumstances, so unrealistic that it helped Israel's chauvinists isolate the Palestinians for decades. Whatever that position did, it did not serve the interests of the Palestinian people.

We advocate two states for the two peoples living in the area — as the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) has done since 1988.

The point is that without all-round socialist education in the history of the conflict and in the general principles and politics which Marxists bring to bear in all such conflicts — consistent democracy and compromise where the conflict is one of right as against right — you could not make sense of the issues. You could not arrive at rational solutions. To endorse the old PLO programme because it was the programme of the oppressed would have been to substitute other concerns and principles for socialist and democratic concerns and principles. Many socialists — including ourselves for a time — did exactly that.

The same follows for all the other crude rules of thumb. Support militancy? Yes; but the most militant in a national or communal conflict are likely to be the reckless chauvinists.

Side against the ruling class? Yes, but if we just say yes when the ruling class says no, and no when it says yes, then we surrender all independence and become a negative imprint of the ruling class. We abandon all objectivity and all attempts at an independent working-class outlook on the world. We implicitly surrender the fight for working class independence.

For example, large sections of the British left have responded to the fact of European semi-unity, organised by the capitalists, with the knee-jerk slogans "Britain

Out!", "No to the European Community!" — when they should instead have been fomenting cross-Europe unity of the working-class.

Therefore all-round Marxist education is as essential as the independent working-class outlook it helps produce.

WHAT about the third big word, organise? So we expose, pillory, and point the finger of accusation at the horrors of life under capitalism. So we educate young people and militants into a rounded view of society, fitting the things we denounce into the whole picture of capitalism and fitting capitalism itself into a conception of history and the role of the working class in history. We urge the need to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism.

What then? We urge people to organise alongside us to achieve these things. Without organisation the rest is incomplete.

Socialists organise on many levels. We organise trade unions that fight to get the best price for our labour-power. We organise broad trade-union-based parties like the Labour Party. We organise for specific goals in the Labour Party and in the unions — to defend the welfare state or fight for free trade unions. We organise the rank and file for trade union democracy. We organise ourselves, the hard-core socialists, in our own organisation.

Workers' Liberty, the industrial bulletins *Workers' Liberty* supporters produce, and *Action*, the paper we, alongside other socialists, support, are the means by which we organise or help organise these things. So are meetings, pickets, demonstrations.

These, schematically divided up, are the three main things socialists do. Where does

the magazine *Workers' Liberty* fit in?

Workers' Liberty structures our work. It ties us together in a common endeavour. It gives us a common voice. It allows us to talk to and educate each other by way of debate and persuasion. Persuasion, discussion and debate are the tools of socialism. Without them, without dialogue and debate, the left will never advance beyond its present tragic fragmentation.

Free debate is essential. The left itself is still marked by the scars of the Stalinist ice age.

We live in a world where the left, after so many decades of Stalinism and after so many defeats, is in a condition of corruption and decay, so we must regenerate the left by way of honest debate and polemic.

THE precondition for effective socialist activity is the existence of a distinct working-class world outlook. This has not only to be propagated. It has to be tested against reality, and developed in line with reality. Our socialist movement is first of all a movement of ideas, proposals, memories and historic perspectives. That is why the polemical and discussion element in *Workers' Liberty* is irreplaceable for our work.

For, of course, what we argue for in the working-class movement and the ideas in which we educate those who respond to our agitation are not entirely given and fixed in advance. They are never frozen, or "finished". Not everything is known, or can be known. Marx died 114, Trotsky 56 years ago. An essential part of the work socialists do is to keep reality under review, to register, discuss, and assess new things in society and in the continuing experience of our class.

We argue our views as sharply as we think necessary, and, while advocating left unity in action, we debate with other socialists. But we aspire to be neither Popes, Cardinals nor the one true Church of the left. *Workers' Liberty* is not a closed monopoly but an open vehicle for honest and free discussion.

We organise ourselves as tightly as necessary, but all our work is aimed ultimately at serving the broad movement of our class.

We teach the working class, and try to be "the memory of the class" — but we also learn from the working class and codify that learning. Thus we work to prepare the future by fighting in the struggles of the working class now and by socialist education.

We are, we believe, the bearers of a socialist culture and of a Marxist outlook on the world, and therefore we believe that our magazine, like our work in general, is of great importance for the future of the labour movement.

The conclusion to which all this is leading will have occurred to you already. It is an appeal for help. Help us to do the work outlined above! With the defeat of the Tories after nearly a generation in power, a new period opens up. The left will have to reshape and redefine itself around new axes and new issues.

If the Blairites kill the Labour Party as any sort of workers' party then we will not retreat into a sectarian ghetto, but organise in the trade unions for the recreation of a mass working class party based on the trade unions, this time with better politics. That is now the great dividing line on the left.

Other articles in this magazine discuss other aspects of the politics of the post-Tory situation, and sketch in some of the work of which *Workers' Liberty* is the centre.

HERE we ask you to understand the need to develop the organisation around *Workers' Liberty*, and to develop the magazine itself.

In a letter appealing to the Spanish anarchist trade union, the CNT to join the Communist International, in 1919, the Chairman of the International, Gregory Zinoviev said: if we miss this chance at overthrowing capitalism, it may go now and not come again for decades. He was absolutely right. The chance was missed.

1997 is not 1919. But in Britain it may be a major turning point.

If the advocates of a clear-cut, working-class, revolutionary socialism, untainted by Stalinism or by the sectarianism and cultism that deform most of the neo-Trotskyist tendencies, do not succeed in propagating their ideas in the present post-Stalinist and almost post-reformist period, so that these ideas inform, guide and shape the self-renewing labour movement, and in renewing socialism, then a singular opportunity will have been missed.

Not to miss it requires of you, we respectfully suggest, that you help us to Agitate! Educate! and Organise! If you think we are in politics disablingly wrong write and tell us in what way, and why. We will publish your response. If you disagree with us on things you think important, then engage in joint work in the campaigns we help to build — the Welfare State Network, the Campaign for Free Trade Unions, etc. — or in our trade union work, and engage in dialogue with us.

Help us to build up the circulation of *Workers' Liberty*. Take the decision to become a militant in the fight for human liberation! Join the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

**Yours for socialism,
the Editorial Board of
*Workers' Liberty***

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