

Peter Taaffe equates Libya's rebels with Nicaragua's contras

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For the first time, I think, in 45 years of political conflicts with the AWL and its forerunners, the Socialist Party (formerly Militant) has explicitly polemicised against us.

They always used to hide behind bluster against "sects on the fringes of the labour movement". Now they have been forced into the open. The May edition of the SP magazine carried an article by SP leader Peter Taaffe attacking AWL (and, secondly, the Marxist of Lebanese origin Gilbert Achcar) for failing to express "absolute opposition" to the NATO "no-fly zone" in Libya.

AWL has written to the SP and Peter Taaffe challenging them to a face-to-face debate on this in front of AWL members and the left at our summer school, Ideas For Freedom, on 8-10 July in London. The SP has not yet responded - generally they are far from brave about such things - so we are also replying in writing.

AWL sides with the rebels against Qaddafi. Although the evidence is that the rebel leadership includes a miscellany of bourgeois tendencies, they lead an elemental democratic revolt, with potential for development and liberation, against the dead hand of Qaddafi's autocratic police state.

The bulk of the Libyan armed forces has stuck with Qaddafi. The rebel-held cities thus faced the threat of attack with planes and heavy artillery, with little more than hand weapons to resist with.

For their own reasons, the NATO powers have intervened on the side of the rebels, bombing Qaddafi's air bases, tanks, and command centres. Because we support the rebels, we welcome that.

We do not endorse or support the NATO powers, because we know that they will serve their own interests. Their concern is to get well-positioned to do a deal with a post-Qaddafi regime in Libya, and if they can to shape that regime to suit them.

But we are in favour of stopping Qaddafi's planes from bombing the rebel-held cities, and if the NATO powers do that, for whatever reasons, we do not want to deter or obstruct them.

It would be different if one NATO power or another were to invade Libya and try to establish a colonial-type occupation there. But they are not doing that. There is no sign of them doing that.

The US administration, as Taaffe himself notes, is very explicit that it does not want the risks and troubles of putting US troops in Libya. It is hard to imagine Norway and Denmark, the NATO powers which have dropped most of the bombs against Qaddafi, invading. It is hard to imagine Britain, France, and Italy, the three big European powers jostling with each other for favour with the rebel leaders, agreeing to have one of them lead an invasion, or forming an "equal" alliance for an invasion. Sober bourgeois figures are lucid and forceful about the risks and pitfalls of anything like an invasion.

On the evidence so far, Max Hastings, writing in the Financial Times (20 April), was right: "The real mission of the British and French military 'advisers' being dispatched to the rebel camp is to explore what the west might do to get out of it".

"Absolute" support, "absolute" opposition - and other things

Taaffe misrepresents our opinion, saying that we "justify" and "support" "imperialist intervention".

The difference between not wanting to obstruct or stop the NATO action, and supporting it, is perhaps subtle, and may seem evasive. But a couple of examples will show that political life requires more responses than just "absolute" opposition and "absolute" support to the complexly-various actions of bourgeois forces.

In December 2009 the English Defence League marched in Nottingham. Anti-fascists counter-demonstrated. Most of them were kept by the SWP-led "Unite Against Fascism" campaign in a police "kettle".

Some of the demonstrators, led by AWL members, broke out of the kettle and reached the streets where the EDL was demonstrating. At the point they reached the EDL, they found themselves a small group facing a large group of aggressive EDLers.

But the police's decision, that day, and at that place, was to turn against the EDL. Serious street-fighting between the cops and the EDL followed, disrupting the EDL's demonstration.

Socialists could not have "supported" the police in Nottingham. The police were keeping most of the anti-fascists "kettled". But it would be idiotic for a socialist to rush forward when the cops turned against the EDL to express "absolute opposition" to what they were doing and demand that they withdraw.

Take another example, from international politics this time in case Taaffe would argue that the issue of imperialism wipes out all such nuances.

The political forerunners which AWL and SP have in common, the Trotskyists of the mid-1940s, did not support the British and American armies in World War Two. They called them imperialist.

But they did not "absolutely oppose" the entry of American and British-sponsored French forces into Paris in August 1944 to defeat and oust the Nazi occupiers on the back of a popular rising which had started a few days before.

On the contrary, if the Americans had stopped their advance and camped outside Paris until, maybe, the Nazis had crushed the uprising - as Stalin's army camped outside Warsaw from August 1944, letting the Nazis exterminate a popular rising before the Russian army finally entered to push out the Nazis - the Trotskyists would have denounced the Americans.

Superstitious syllogism

Taaffe claims that "a child of ten" would insist on a simpler choice of attitudes, midnight-black or gleaming-white.

He quotes Sean Matgamna of the AWL saying that general political opposition to the British, French, etc. governments does not imply that we must "stridently oppose... every military action", and retorts that "support" - so, "not stridently oppose" is indistinguishable from "support" - "support for military action of whatever kind is 'positive political support'."

Instead, he pleads for "absolute opposition" to the no-fly zone.

"Most unstable and untrustworthy", wrote Trotsky, "is revolutionary radicalism, which finds it necessary to keep up its morale by ignoring the dialectic of living forces in economics and politics alike and by constructing its prognosis by means of a pencil and a ruler". Taaffe will have none of that. His primary argument for "absolute opposition" to the no-fly zone is the superstitious syllogism that anything other means absolute support for Britain and France - becoming "the political attorney and apologist for France and Britain".

Sensing that this will not quite do, he has a rich variety of other arguments, some of them contradicting each other.

Like a student scratching for excuses for a missing assignment - "I was ill", "my computer crashed", "the cat crapped on it" - Taaffe thinks offering a heap of arguments will compensate for the weakness of each one taken individually.

War is barbaric. And Qaddafi's regime?

First reason: we should oppose the bombing just because it is bombing. It is war. "War is the most barbaric of all human activities".

But a NATO pullback would not bring peace. It would bring continued war between Qaddafi and rebels, on terms more to Qaddafi's advantage. If that brought peace on Qaddafi's terms, the crushing and slaughter of the rebels, it would be more "barbaric" than the current war.

Does Qaddafi represent a revolutionary "process" which NATO wants to "halt"?

Second reason: the no-fly zone is "a lever" for "capitalism and imperialism" "to halt the process and hopefully reverse it", "the process" here being "the sweep of the revolution in Tunisia and Egypt".

But the rebels, not Qaddafi, represent the "sweep" of the democratic rebellion in the Middle East and North Africa. What might "halt the process" is victory for Qaddafi, signalling to the rebels in Syria and Yemen that tyrants can endure and crush revolt.

If Taaffe could write passable English, or think other than in formulaic and quarter-understood phrases, then instead of "capitalism and imperialism" he would have written "the USA and the West European states". He can't actually believe that Qaddafi's Libya is not capitalist, or that its role in Chad, for example, has not been imperialistic.

The USA and the West European states did not like the sclerosis of the old dictatorships, nor the fact that their repressive rigidity incubated a danger of Islamist triumph after their inevitable gradual hollowing-out. They will be

happy with the revolutions if they lead to workable forms of market-friendly bourgeois democracy. They have real hopes that they will. They do not want to "halt the process and hopefully reverse it".

However, while the dictatorships remained in control, the USA and West European states supported them, courted them, did deals with them, aided them. The revolutions caught them out.

They are scrambling, in competition with each other, to establish credit with the new governments. That is one reason why they declared the no-fly zone. The other, it seems, is that they thought Qaddafi would fall soon, and the no-fly zone would win them credit with Libya's rulers after Qaddafi.

Libyan rebels = Nicaraguan contras?

A third reason: the rebels are similar to the contras, the right-wing counter-revolutionaries financed by the US in Nicaragua after the Sandinista revolution of 1979 and until 1990; and Qaddafi is similar to the left-wing, socially-reforming Sandinistas.

Taaffe's prose is obscure here, but it makes no other sense. He has already written that NATO's motive in bombing Qaddafi's command centres is to "halt the process" of revolution.

He adds: "Imperialism has not hesitated to use mercenaries to overthrow a regime it did not favour or to stymie a revolution. Such was the policy of Ronald Reagan's administration in using... the contras... Imperialism has been forced into the latest stand by the fact that Gaddafi appears to be winning".

Democratic social reform, based on mass popular support, and even with the Stalinoid tinge which the Sandinistas had, is not the same as Qaddafi's autocracy. The democratic miscellany of Libya's rebellion is not the same as the brutal counter-revolutionism of the contras, whose core was provided by the remnants of the National Guard of Nicaragua's old dictator, Anastasio Somoza.

Would voting against the Spanish Republican government's military budget imply not backing the Republic against the fascists, or "absolutely opposing" military aid to the Republic?

For a fourth reason, Taaffe dips into Trotsky's writings - and gets his blundering hand bitten off.

"To show how far these latter-day 'Trotskyists' [AWL] are removed from Trotsky's real views on war, look at his position... on the military budget of the Republican government [in the Spanish Civil War]". Trotsky advocated that socialists in the Republican parliament vote against the government's military budget, on the grounds that "we have not the slightest confidence in the capacity of this government to conduct the war" against the fascists.

This might be relevant if AWL were calling on MPs to vote for the Tories' military budget. Hardly! Or if Trotsky were arguing for socialists to "absolutely" oppose the Republican side in the civil war and all its military actions. He wasn't...

Where does Taaffe stand on the rebels and Qaddafi? The equation of the rebels with the contras, and of Qaddafi with "the process" which "imperialism" wants to halt, suggests he sides with Qaddafi. Other passages point another way. Taaffe concedes that a massacre by Qaddafi of the people of

Benghazi would be bad. He writes that he gave "political support... to the people of Benghazi" in February.

But he complains that "petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces" now dominate in Benghazi (as if there was a working-class socialist leadership there back in February! There wasn't!) The implication is that now he does not side with the rebels against Qaddafi, or possibly even sides with Qaddafi against the rebels. Nothing is stated clearly, and maybe Taaffe does not know himself.

No-fly zone = invasion?

Fifth reason: the no-fly zone is sure to lead to an outright invasion of Libya. Taaffe claims that "the masses in Benghazi" oppose, or opposed, the no-fly zone.

Taaffe may fumble in Trotskyist theory, but he reckons himself a whiz at telepathy-in-Arabic. He assures us that "the masses" in Libya "correctly feared that a no-fly zone... would lead to an invasion".

Correctly? So far the no-fly zone is leading to embarrassed attempts by the NATO powers to extricate themselves with minimum damage, and not to an invasion. Taaffe is very indignant against Sean Matgamna of the AWL writing that: "There is no reason at all to think that the 'Great Powers' want to occupy Libya or are doing other than a limited international police operation..." But the evidence so far is that Matgamna was right, and the-masses-via-Taaffe were not "correct".

Trends could change. We will respond if they do. We distrust the big powers. But there is no basis for campaigning against the no-fly zone on the grounds that it is inseparable from an outright invasion and colonial-style occupation of Libya.

Taaffe's evidence on the thinking of "the masses in Benghazi" is "slogans on the walls [which] read, in English, 'No to foreign intervention, the Libyans can do it themselves'." So "the masses in Benghazi" conduct all their political affairs in English? So convenient!

In fact such slogans are reported from leaders ("petty bourgeois and bourgeois" leaders) of the rebels in the early period after the revolt started in mid-February. (Irish Times, 2 March, for example). Then they thought they could sweep Qaddafi from power quickly.

After Qaddafi's resistance proved stronger the leaders (and, as far as we can tell from talking to people who've been in Libya, "the masses") changed their opinion.

Oil

Sixth reason: the US and West European governments are cynical and hypocritical. "The Benghazi rebels are so much small change in their calculations. Only yesterday, these 'powers' embraced Muammar Gaddafi... The real reason for intervention in Libya... is... oil".

Plainly the NATO powers hope that their action will win them a good place in negotiations over oil with a post-Qaddafi Libyan regime (though they must know that not all of them can win the plums).

If the NATO powers were bombing the rebels to help Qaddafi - who, Taaffe tells us, "appears to be winning" - that action too would have oil as its "real reason". But there is a difference!

If the SP-dominated PCS union leadership calls a strike cynically and hypocritically - as it often does, using PCS members as a stage army to boost the SP's prestige and with

no realistic thought of winning anything - that is not the same as that leadership calling off a strike cynically and hypocritically, as it also does.

Generalities about the cynicism and profit-hunger of the bourgeoisie, and generalisations about the opportunism and imbrication with the union bureaucracy of the SP, are not enough to tell us about particular cases.

Neither NATO, nor Qaddafi, but... a Libyan Durruti Column?

Seventh reason: Qaddafi could be dealt with better than by the no-fly zone. "On the basis of mass workers' committees, a revolutionary army... could have been mobilised... [as when] José Buenaventura Durruti [a left-wing, almost Trotskyist, anarchist leader] formed a revolutionary army" during the Spanish civil war.

Towards the end of his article Taaffe concedes that a massacre of the people of Benghazi by Qaddafi's army would be bad. Why, if the Benghazi people are analogous to the contras and Qaddafi to the Sandinistas (as in the third line of reasoning)? Anyway, Taaffe concedes it would be bad. He concedes that Alex Callinicos's sneeringly lofty attitude - "massacres are a chronic feature of capitalism" - is unsatisfactory.

But then he really goes over the edge with the "answer: a Libyan Durruti" thing. He recalls the cure-all slogan which the SP (then called Militant) had for Northern Ireland in 1969 and after, "for a united workers' defence force", and thinks he's found the answer for Libya: "a similar approach... adapted to the concrete conditions in Libya".

Once having evoked that "united workers' defence force", Taaffe is off. Qaddafi's army fades under the clumsy brushstrokes of Taaffe's formulaic scenario-painting. "Imperialism will not be able to stop the forward march of revolution... The revolutions... will lead to a strengthening of the working class... new powerful trade unions... socialist transformation, accompanied by democracy..."

The "united workers' defence force" was fantasy and evasion in Northern Ireland because if that force were to emerge and become a major, or the major, military power in Northern Ireland - as it would have to do, in order to be a "solution" - then it would have to make political choices on the national and communal issues. To emerge, it would have to be sustained by a prior political unity of at least a decisive section of the Northern Ireland working class, Catholic and Protestant, around a common political programme.

If that political unity had existed, then the communal semi-civil-war in the Troubles would never have started in the first place! The Militant/SP "solution" to the problem was a roundabout way of saying that if the problem didn't exist, then you could solve it.

But there was then a strong trade union movement in Northern Ireland, more or less united at least on "economic" issues. That gave the "united workers' defence force" slogan a superficial shine of realism. Again, the famous Durruti Column emerged from a strong and lively workers' movement in Spain, with a rich history - not from zero.

In Libya? There is no workers' movement there yet. There are not even small socialist groups, Libyan analogues of the SP or the AWL. At best there are scattered individuals of a leftish turn of mind.

That could change quickly, but not in the time it would take for bombs falling from Qaddafi bomber-planes to reach the people of Benghazi and Misrata. Taaffe advises the

people of Benghazi that they should chase away the NATO planes, or encourage the SP to chase them away, and instead deploy, as their answer to Qaddafi's bombs, the plan of first creating a workers' movement and then from that generating the "united workers' defence force" which the SP and Militant could not evoke, even in the tiniest embryo form, over decades of effort in the far more favourable conditions of Northern Ireland.

Any difference between this and Callinicos's lofty "tough luck, massacres happen" line is notional.

"Third Camp", escapist-style

Workers' Liberty, as regular readers will know, sometimes borrows a phrase from Leon Trotsky, Max Shachtman, and others to describe our politics as "Third Camp".

Trotsky wrote: "The attempt of the bourgeoisie during its internecine conflict to oblige humanity to divide up into only two camps is motivated by a desire to prohibit the proletariat from having its own independent ideas... The whole of the politics of [Marx and Lenin] was directed towards this, the fetishism of two camps would give way to a third, independent, sovereign camp of the proletariat, that camp upon which, in point of fact, the future of humanity depends".

In conflicts between different reactionary alternatives, we do not seek the "lesser evil", but strive for a path of development shaped by the self-assertion of the working class as an independent force.

That is a powerful idea, and one which the SP would do well to learn from, instead of (for example) rallying to the reactionary "No to EU" camp on the pretext that it is a lesser evil than the EU.

But even in the SP's line on the EU there is a sort of addled Third-Camp-ism - Third-Camp-ism as political escapism.

Challenge the SP on "No to EU", and they will protest that their alternative to the EU is not the actual one (capitalist Europe with higher borders between countries) but "a socialist United Europe".

Tea or coffee, comrade Taaffe? Neither! Socialism is the only road! Qaddafi or Benghazi? Neither. Bring back Durruti to lead the "united workers' defence force" in Taaffe's head.

Our "Third Camp" politics is about advancing alternatives based on the real logic of the class struggle, starting from the realities of today. Taaffe's escapist-Third-Campism is about advancing empty maximalist formulas to evade all the logics of development inscribed in reality.

The Labour Party Young Socialists dominated by the SP/Militant for almost two decades lived through the 1970s and 80s, in peaceful coexistence with the Labour Party machine, on a diet of exactly that empty maximalist escapism. "Socialism" - otherwise formulated as "the nationalisation of the top 200 monopolies" - was counterposed as "the alternative" to every sharp and concrete struggle.

The state, contradictions, anarchism, and pseudo-anarchism

The bourgeois state is the executive committee of the ruling class. Insofar as the working class can pull itself together as a cohesive class aware of its distinct historic interests, it must stand in irreducible class hostility to the bourgeois state.

But capitalist society is not simply the working-out of the will of the ruling class. Nor is it even single-combat between capitalist class and working class: the capitalists also, for example, develop potentially-emancipatory new technologies, which we do not "absolutely oppose", though they always do it in ways shaped by the class struggle.

The bourgeois state is also, as Engels put it, the "power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the [class] conflict and keep it within the bounds of order". It condenses and adapts to the class struggle.

Specific acts of the bourgeois state are shaped by class contradictions. Sometimes working-class struggle can (directly or indirectly) extract from the bourgeois state laws which we positively support - for limiting working hours, for guaranteeing trade union rights, for establishing universal free education for children, for example. There can also be actions of the bourgeois state which we welcome, or do not try to obstruct, while not endorsing them.

We can and must respond case-by-case, and sometimes subtly, to the varied measures of the bourgeois state, while at the same time sustaining our principled hostility to the bourgeois state as such.

Purist anarchism advocates flat opposition to every measure of the bourgeois state, no matter how advantageous it seems - action, if possible, to obstruct or sabotage it. Astute anarchists have moved on from that. The SP is very un-anarchist in domestic politics.

Too un-anarchist, indeed! To this day its "where we stand" defines socialism as "a socialist government... tak[ing] into public ownership the top 150 companies and banks", without questioning the nature of the state that will do that nationalising.

For international politics, however, the SP switches into a sort of addled anarchism. It advocates purist-anarchist "absolute opposition" (Taaffe's words) to all actions of bourgeois states - or, rather, to all actions of some bourgeois states, those which it defines as imperialist.

And it tends to support the actions of other bourgeois states - to have towards them the usually supportive attitude which Militant had to the international actions of the Stalinist states before 1991. (For example, Militant supported the Russian war in Afghanistan after 1979).

The other bourgeois states towards which the SP is so very un-anarchist are those it defines as anti-imperialist. Taaffe's contortions over Libya come from the fact that he is not sure whether to define Qaddafi as anti-imperialist (like the Sandinistas) or to concede that, whatever about and regardless of Qaddafi's conflicts at various times with the big powers, he is a deadly enemy of the working people of Libya.

Taaffe: <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/print/11905>
<http://www.workersliberty.org/system/files/taaffe-libya.pdf>