

# Anti-semitism and the Left

## An open letter to Tony Cliff of the SWP

Dear Cliff,

The present nightmarish reawakening of the furies of Judeophobia in Eastern Europe demands of honest socialists whose commitment to the destruction of Israel puts them in an attitude of comprehensive hostility to all but a handful of the Jews alive in the world today that they look at their own political features in the mirror of these events.

After Hitler, anti-semitism disguised itself, and drew new nourishment from the conflict between Arab and Jew in the Middle East which had been intensified by the Holocaust. It was a doctrine that dared no longer speak its old name except in whispers and occasional back-alley fascist shouting; but by the '70s it had another name which it dared to speak, indeed to shout, in a loud chorus in which participated most of the governments and states of the world, including some of the worst governments in existence. A new name: anti-Zionism.

Of course, not all anti-Zionists were, or are, anti-semites, but almost all anti-semites were, by the '70s anyway, anti-Zionists.

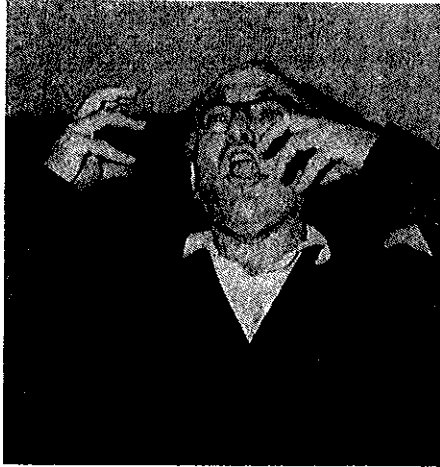
That allowed them to enlist in the vast chorus of *progressive*, anti-colonialist, humanity. It conferred a new self-righteousness, and a new broad respectability, on their Judeophobic obsessions.

From obscure, intellectually low-grade, and discreditable theories about economics, and from racial myths which flew in the face of science and everyday experience as well as contradicting all hopes of human equality and solidarity, anti-semitism had risen to a higher plane of existence. It found a place on the revolutionary left it never had before.

After the 1967 war, Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the manifest intention of some forces in Israel progressively to annex those territories, outraged the powerful mid-20th century sentiment of anti-colonialism. All democrats and liberals, Israelis too, and of course other Jews, condemned it, or aspects of it.

The hardened anti-semitic "anti-Zionists" could sing along in chorus, sharpening the note and intensifying the beat of the political chant here and there.

At the time of the June 1967 war the far left still universally accepted the right of the Israeli Jews to a nation-state, and demanded changes on that basis. Afterwards the left passively absorbed the new Palestine Liberation Organisation policy



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of the 'secular democratic state' (i.e. an Arab state over all Palestine, with religious rights for Jews).

To Israel was posed the ultimatum that its citizens must surrender self-determination and the possibility of defending themselves, and dissolve their nation, settling for the rights of a religious minority in a projected Arab secular democratic state — which Arab state, by reason of size and the military force required to establish it, would be at the mercy of the bigger Arab states like Iraq or Syria, not one of which recognises minority rights.

To Jews who identify instinctively with Israel, most of the left is inexorably hostile. And none more hostile than the SWP, Comrade Cliff! The relationship is symbolised for me by lines of Socialist Workers Party members at the conference of the National Union of Students, many of them in the regulation tough-guy 'revolutionary' leather jackets, harassing young Jews about the Middle East.

Your stance, I contend, is anti-semitic. It packages a comprehensive hostility to most Jews — that is, what has always been the content of anti-semitism — in socialist and anti-imperialist verbiage. Those in the Second International who tried to express hostility to capitalism through hostility to Jews ("the Rothschilds", etc.) were aptly described as preaching a "socialism of idiots". What much of the left says today about Zionism, Israel and imperialism is the anti-imperialism of idiots. A central part of your political work for decades, comrade Cliff, has been to cultivate and spread that idiocy.

We should support the right of the Palestinian Arabs to have their own state; but to deny the Israeli Jews the same right, and to advocate a Socialist United States of the Middle East without self-determination for *all* the small nations in the region, is to step from democratic politics into the politics of communal and national revenge, and implicitly to assert that there is such a thing as a "bad people" undeserving of rights.

You, comrade Cliff, consider those politics Trotskyist. You consider especially intense, militant advocacy of those politics to be a hallmark of Trotskyism. In fact they stem more from Stalinism than from Trotskyism. It spread to the left from the USSR and the satellite countries, where, after World War 2, official government anti-Zionism provided a new flag of convenience for the Judeophobia long endemic there. (See Stan Crooke's article in *Workers' Liberty* no.10).

This official left "anti-Zionism" spread from the East throughout the labour movement. It spread to the non-Stalinist left partly by way of Stalinist influence, partly as a by-product of the left's proper involvement with campaigns against colonialism and imperialism.

You, comrade Cliff, bear a great deal of the responsibility for this state of affairs. The shift after the 1967 war from radical criticism of Israel to support for its destruction happened almost imperceptibly over time, almost by political osmosis between the left and militant Palestinian Arab nationalists to whom the left adapted itself.

But that happened because the left had been "educated" on this question by "anti-Zionist" horror stories in such works as your 1967 pamphlet *The Struggle in the Middle East*, which were completely devoid of any proper historical perspective on the events of the Jewish-Arab conflict and, while confining themselves to radical criticism of Israel and not supporting its destruction, were ambivalent at best on our programme.

The position we took on the June 1967 war put the finishing touch in practice. In 1948 the Trotskyists had sided with Israel or been for the defeat of both sides. In 1967 we came out for the destruction of the Israeli Jewish state and nation. One could not be defeatist here as, say, you could be defeatist for France or Germany, where even the worst defeat would not lead to national destruction. For Israel it would.

In 1967 we had all felt obliged to differentiate from PLO leader Ahmed Shukhairi, with his chauvinist calls for "driving the Jews into the sea". But soon we endorsed the call for the complete subjugation of the Jews in its new "reasonable" packaging — the call for a secular democratic state.

We thereby took our place in one of the strangest parades in history — the march

of anti-semitism from the condition of utter disorientation Hitler left it in back to respectability.

No people in recorded history ever did anything comparable to what you ask the Israeli Jews to do: surrender their state, disarm, and place themselves at the mercy of their bitter enemies of many decades. And if you want pioneering gestures arising out of boundless self-sacrifice or confidence in human goodness and solidarity, only a fool would go looking for them from the relatives of those who died in Hitler's murder camps!

Of course nobody expects it, and all such talk is just the build-up of moralistic lubricant for the real conclusion: that the Arab states should be supported against Israel.

In SWP-speak that conclusion is hedged about with ifs and buts and hopes and fantastic aspirations for a socialist solution to magically change the terms of the problem. The Arab working class will solve things.

I too fervently wish that the powerful Arab working class should emerge as an independent force. Like you I believe that the Arab working class will change the situation and that the Arab working class will win socialism in the Arab countries. But to invoke the Arab working class as the element which will wipe away the national conflict is a strange mixture of political sleight of hand, muddled thinking and wishful thinking.

Think about it. So, the workers of the different Arab countries become politically active and independent? But what will their programme be for the Jewish-Arab conflict? What should international socialists propose to the Arab workers that they should do about the Jewish-Arab conflict?

In fact, Cliff, your own programme is identical to the Arab nationalist programme! You cannot advocate that the Arab working class breaks with its own bourgeois nationalists' programme!

In response to the charge that the SWP is effectively anti-semitic, Chris Harman wrote in *Socialist Worker* some time back that the National Front was always denouncing the SWP as Jewish because many of its leaders are Jews. This was a not quite delicate way for Harman to say that some SWP leaders are Jewish. As if that was decisive, as if that wiped out the comprehensive hostility to most Jews and the unique attitude to Israel!

It is a good example of the self-deception practised on the left on this issue. We are not Nazi-style racists, or any sort of racists; we are not against Jews; some of us are Jews, and would be or are persecuted by Nazi-style racists; and we are not Christian bigots hostile to Jews — ergo, we *can't* be anti-semites!

But you are comprehensively hostile to almost all Jews! You want to destroy the Israeli Jewish state and the Israeli Jewish

nation. A sizeable part of the left considers Israel to be imperialist-racist evil incarnate, deserving of nothing but fire and sword in a holy war!

The left now is in the same moral position vis-a-vis individual Jews as the medieval Christians who could say honestly that they wanted to save the Jews from themselves. They wanted to convert them. They loved and tried to save the sinners, while hating the sin. The obdurate sinners in the dungeons and fires of the persecution probably didn't find that much compensation.

The "anti-Zionist" left thinks of itself not as persecuting but as the opposite; not as hate-mongering, but as promoting love and solidarity with the oppressed; not as murderous but a protest against murder and a crusade to stop it.

And yet... and yet... at its heart it proposes policies which amount to the murder of a nation, a nation which arose out of the ashes of the greatest mass murder in recorded history. And yet it does preach hate for a whole people, for a nation and for its diaspora of supporters around the world who will not "see reason". And yet, it does side with the potential oppressors of that nation.

Honest and uninhibited people, like Tony Greenstein and Uri Davis, face this straight: they say that anti-semitism does not matter now. Implicitly they say, as you do, what one of the world's biggest neo-Trotskyist groupings (the "Morenists") says explicitly: "Today Arab racism against Israel is progressive".

In which case we have just seen a 'progressive' political wave sweep across Europe! And things may get a lot more progressive yet.

Cliff, I suggest that your politics on this question are the opposite of the general Marxist teaching on how to resolve national and communal conflicts. I suggest that your approach to the question is not that of a Marxist at all, but that of someone who is rabidly subjective on the question — someone who is still fighting old faction fights with Zionists back in the Palestine of the 1930s and '40s.

If that isn't so, if your position on this question is derived from Marxist and socialist considerations and not from special feeling, then why, Cliff, don't you advocate the collective right of return for the ten million and more Germans driven out of Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War? Why do you not demand that Gdansk be renamed Danzig and returned to Germany?

You have not always had your present position. You did not have it even as late as 1967. Another article in this magazine (by Robert Fine, page 22) shows that you had radically different views back in 1938.

Yet — and I'll finish on this point — you now consider seriously mistaken the position you took in the '30s and '40s in favour of the right to enter Palestine for

Jews who could get out of the clutches of the Nazis (and who had nowhere else to go). So you said in an interview published in the SWP magazine a while back.

In retrospect you think that the British imperialists were right to shut the door in the face of Jews facing death! Let them die if the alternative is letting them into Palestine! Those *were* the alternatives, and that — in retrospect: you had better instincts at the time — is your choice. Could anything show more clearly the monstrosity of the position you now hold than that retrospective judgment?

Cliff, the fact that you are a Palestinian Jew has given what you say on this question an authority which you have not had to win by argument. Your nationality disarms the obvious criticism. But you left Palestine in 1946. You could get a passport and the means to come to Europe. What should the other Jews in Palestine have done then? Emigrated too? But nobody would have taken them, any more than they would have the many thousands of 'displaced' Jews then languishing in refugee camps in Europe.

I recall a passage in Trotsky's writings about Germany in the early '30s. He pours scorn on Communist Party officials who "are very much inclined to spout ultra-radical phrases beneath which is concealed a wretched and contemptible fatalism". Meanwhile "they get their passports ready".

**"Worker Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for any place; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle".**

The Jews in Palestine couldn't leave either, Cliff. There were "not enough passports", just like in the '30s. The "merciless struggle" followed and goes on. There aren't "enough passports" now for the Jews migrating from Russia.

In that struggle you do not now represent the internationalism which the isolated and heroic (though I think in some respects politically mistaken) Trotskyists in Palestine defended in 1948; you have slipped back to communalism and nationalism. Only you have "changed peoples", and now function as an Arab chauvinist, the mirror image of the Jewish chauvinists you broke with in your youth. In your youth you despised the chauvinists on both sides; now you are a propagandist on one side.

It is time that you stopped miseducating young people on this question, Cliff, including some young Jewish people revolted by the brutal realpolitik of Israel. High time. There is no solution, still less a socialist solution, in Jewish or Arab (or vicarious Arab) chauvinism. Cut it out, Cliff!

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