By Sean Matgamna

Peter Taaffe of the Socialist Party has now added a second article to the one about AWL's approach to the Libyan crisis which https://www.workersliberty.org/libya/

This time, it ranges far and wide, from Northern Ireland to the early history of the AWL tendency and that of this writer. For reasons of space and time, I will not here take up all the many issues he raises or half-rises.

First, I should undo an injustice by Martin Thomas against Peter Taaffe and the Socialist Party (and its predecessor organisations). It isn't the case that Taaffe's effort was first polemic against us. Their first public polemic, perhaps. But they have long polemised against us and others on the left privately and secretly, inside their own organisation.

The way they would not have to face responses. Those they attacked would normally know nothing about it, and thus young people in Militant or SP; or "close to" them, would not be confused by rebuttals and counter-attacks. And Militants! SP leaders could boast that they ignored what they couldn't see. Nor the traipsing trains that burdens Taaffe and his close associates to those who know them.

In replying to Taaffe I have a number of problems. The first and politically most important is that it's difficult, and in places righ impossibly, to know exactly what Taaffe is trying to say.

He jumps back and forth from logical to emotional rhetoric, from specifics to sweeping generalisations. He goes from a semblance of reasoned exposition to moralistic denunciation, abuse, and intellectual hooliganism. For responding to what we actually say, he substitutes a response to what he says we say, or we really say.

Sometimes he displays a degree of ignorance astonishing in one who has been in politics fifty years. He defines the American revolution as: "If the bishops in America were Robert Shachtman as holding the position that the USSR was "state capitalist" — "they [AWL] have now adopted Shachtman's position, characterising the Bourgeoisie as the "state capitalist". In fact, Shachtman held the radically different position that it was "bourgeoisie collective" — a new and unprecedented form of exploitative class society.

He whinges about being misrepresented and "lied" about, while all through his own texts he writes about our "supposed" misrepresentation of Shachtman's position. That the states intervening from the air against Qaddafi are "imperialist", are "imperialist", are "imperialist".

And then that only two attitudes to the intervention are possible. Either "absolute opposition". Or full support. Between those two positions there is no political space at all. In the old Stalinist formula, those who aren't with us are against us. In Taaffe's scheme, those who do not "absolutely oppose" are "attorneys and apologists for America and Britain". If you don't faithfully invert the policies of the bourgeoisie, and produce an exact negative image of what in them in positive, then you are their "apologist".

Taaffe says or implies, again and again, that not to condemn the bombs against Qaddafi is tantamount to supporting not just the bombs but also full-scale invasion, including military occupation.

But he is supposedly analysing AWL's position, which is that there is political space between denouncing the intervention and supporting it; and, specifically, political space within a general anti-imperialist for not denouncing a specific limited action whose immediate consequences have been to stop imminent massacres of the anti-Qaddafi civilian forces in Benghazi and Misrata. He never discusses what we actually say. Instead he discusses what he asserts we are really saying.

THE NICARAGUAN CONTRAS?

Taaffe's manner and style are those of someone used to speaking from the episcopal, or papal, chair; to laying down the law, to playing the oracle. In Taaffe-land what Bishop Taaffe says is interpreted by the bishop too. "Protestants" who use their own understanding of logic, reality, and nor mandish (in English) are "forced every bourgeois" sitting against the bishop and his prerequisites.

ANYTHING OTHER THAN "ABSOLUTE OPPOSITION" MEANS SUPPORT?

The one thing clear in Taaffe's texts is that he is against no-fly zone. He presents this, for all practical purposes, as something axiomatic, as a matter of principle, as a reflex of being against imperialism.

Why is it an axiom, where he is coming from politically, is not clear. So far as there is an explanation in Taaffe's texts, it is twofold.

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WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT IN THE SITUATION THAN STOPPING MASSACRE?

Or was there something else in the situation loomed larger in the calculation, on the negative side? If so, what is that here, concretely?

In large part our position depends on the fact that we don't see any such overriding other factor here. It might be that intervention against Qaddafi becomes a pretext for occupying Libya and holding it down. But the difference between a certain type of amoralist and sane person has been neatly summed up as the lunatic not seeing the distinction between what it possible and what is probable or likely. A striking thing in Peter Taaffe's sneers is that he seems unable to tell the difference between what might be possibilities in Libya and what are real possible and probable developments. (Am I calling Bishop Taaffe a lunatic? No, I am saying he lacks the capacity to think with a sufficient grasp of reality and its likely developments.)

Generalities about "imperialism" here are useless, indeed pernicious. There have been clear cases of moralism, and different phases in a given imperialism. It is not at all likely that one can predict how the NATO powers wants to occupy Libya now. Everything in the political situation speaks against it.

It is not from his first text one can form an idea of what was going on in Peter Taaffe's mind. It is plain, I think, that Taaffe saw the letter on Libya by Obama, Cameron, and Sarkozy on 15 April as an announcement of a major shift — which, in going for "regime change", it was — and extrapolated two freely from there.

There is nothing necessarily wrong in extrapolating. The problem is that two months later Taaffe is unable to make a balanced judgement.
I can make sense of what Taaffe is saying about Libya only in terms of his having some notion, or unfrAGMENTED picture of the world in the era of the old colonial empires, or going back to it.

Leave aside for now a precise definition of “imperialism” and the issue of when, if ever, it is going to end. It seems, at least that the big powers throw their weight about, and that we should and will oppose that.

Taaffe speaks of “neo-colonialism” as a reactionary, not as a new, yet practical, process. It might be a way of saying that the old colonial imperialism is no more, and that a new kind of it is just around the corner. Yet for practical purposes he operates with something like the picture of the old world of colonial empires.

In the drive to make Libya an occupied colony, for the sake of its oil or possible strategic position, then that drive meant not just a sphere of influence, but a new phase in the world since World War Two, which has seen the liquidation of the once-great British, French, Belgian, and Portuguese empires.

Such changes in direction are of course possible. The free-trade and world market doctrine, in the mid-19th century, was inclined to see India as a liability to Britain, or an asset whose shedding might be seriously considered. Then came a new surge of British colony-grabbing and a competitive drive by the great powers to carve up the world.

Such shifts in direction are possible again. But to think seriously that it is what is happening today, you would have to have enough observations to justify your conclusion. In Iraq, the drive of the great powers is not is turning it into a colony but to get out. Libya, according to all the evidence, is not a desired colony of any sort, before or now.

Most likely, the scope of the mass revolt against Qaddafi and the alliance with Islamic fundamentalists, in France and the others that they could easily kick him into hell. Of course wanted to influence the new government and gain... anyway by some Black politicians in the USA.

I wrote in Solidarity 3/198: “Of course the no-fly zone on Qaddafi might be a move towards developing into invasion and occupation. Wars escalate, combatants respond to situations they did not foresee”. But that has not happened and, the Libyan government is still in power, and the bombing is still going on.

It is only if some sort of re-colonisation is going on that Taaffe’s position on the limited NATO intervention, a international police act, would make any sense. Then, the intervention would be an instrument connected to and followed by the greater disadvantages of con-quartered empires. Socialists and anticolonialists would let that fact shape its attitude.

It is not that all anti-imperialists would be for the NATO intervention as we would properly react if it were likely to lead to renewed colonial conquest. If the situation gets to be taken seriously, and not as the political and cultural equivalent of the paranormal who cannot distinguish between what is theoretically possible and what is realistically probable, he must justify the suspicions and fears he expresses about occupation and colonial conquest in terms of a coherent picture of the world now. And in this respect, not the unpug... anything.

WHAT IS THE “ANTI-IMPERIALIST” PROGRAMME IN TODAY’S WORLD?

One of the worst things about the War-Two Trotskyist is that we responded to the freeing of colonies — their gaining independence and the sense of power that went with them — by saying: “But this isn’t really independent.”

As a description of the limited economic weight of most of the ex-colonies in a world dominated by the big powers, “not real independence” was all right as far as it went. But the description was very much, mostly even, used as a prety for denying that imperialism had ceased to be colonial imperialism. It was used to pretend that nothing had really changed.

In practice, the “not real independence” line led most Trotskyists, in one degree or another, to embrace and support national movements that they should have Bildet against without them — by saying: “But this isn’t really independent.”

Against colonial imperialism, the democratic and social programme of the movement was not only determined by independence and independence. Drive out by force the colonial power, independent on political control and on armed. But it was this whole process, politically independent, while still economically a very great deal less independent, the “semi-colonial” Still less than economic equal of the big powers? The programme of driving out the colonial power becomes meaningless in the old sense.

Is there a new sense? There can be: economic nationalism, the drive to economic self-sufficiency, as possible. In the 1930s and afterwards that “anti-imperialist” programme and the movements. It shaped the economic policies of governments in, for example, Argentina, and the 26 Counties Irish state.

There can be progressive manifestations of “nationalism” in certain economic areas. The nationalisation of industries like oil may be a large move towards economic self-sufficiency. But just as it undermines the economic autarky would the world trade; and in the case of the 1930s, the goal was to prevent a new world war.

In his denunciations of fascism and in his analysis of Stalinism, Trotsky saw that nationalism was an economic self-sufficiency, for cutting away as much as possible from the world market, as thoroughly reactionary. The same idea was there in his case for occupation and the development of his own idea that the UN Secretariat — for instance, in Towards Socialism or Capitalism? (1925) — and in his idea that the developing movements in the advanced countries should advocate economic development linked to trade with the US.

There can be backwash-looking as well as forward-looking “anti-imperialisms”, as Lenin showed in his critique, in his analysis, of what Trotsky denounced (in its fascist form) as “counter-revolutionary nationalism”.

Confusion on this is at the root of much of the debate about what is the “correct” programme for Iraq and Iran in their decade of very bloody war (1980-8), or conflicts between the great powers and former colonies or semi-colonies.

FROM SEMI-COLONY TO REGIONAL POWER

Some former colonies or semi-colonies are now regional or even world powers. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was a regional imperialist power at the time of the 1980s.

To approach its conflict with the USA and its allies as if it were conflict between a colonial or semi-colonial people and an imperialist power is not, normally, the socialist, let alone an anti-imperialist, position. It is simply making no sense to react to the actual NATO intervention against Qaddafi’s Libya to... that it return to the old conditions. It is not that we are advocating a “United States of Europe” as a private prayer to the gods of internationalism.

The reason for this is that some of the most unbridgeable oppo... other conditions... people, initially the anti-imperialist movement turned away from the US to the capital of Russian foreign-policy interest in not having a united Western Europe. The reasons are many. The Trotskyists left initially, decades ago, refusing to follow the arguments of the leaders and other “anti-imperialists” of the period.

What follows from this in politics is that we examine each situation concretely and in terms of its specific, and that we approach the question of anti-imperialism today in the light of what is going on here and the programme that we properly work with it can be applied automatically.

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Peter Taaffe's response to Martin Thomas's observation that the SWP/Militant have not explicitly polemised with us since the mid-1960s. He argues that the 1970s were a time of mass struggle and that the Militant/ RSL had to be more cautious in their criticism. Taaffe believes that the Militant and the Socialist Party have not explicitly polemised with us, which he sees as a mistake. He argues that the Militant's approach was wrong in principle. Our role should never be to preach complacency to the working class. The Labour movement must be able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, and that means being able to criticise those in power who fail to meet those challenges.

WHAT IS A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE?

Rachel and I had come up against a cluster of basic Marxist political and attitudes. That forced me to think about the attitude to the working class. That attitude which pervaded everything and in all important things defined 

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The Labour movement was too strong to be defeated. The widespread trade-union commitment to “nationalisation” was a serious socialist consciousness. The Labour movement would evolve by way of the creation of a mass Labour/ trade union movement, and that would become a Marxist current organised around themselves.

The fact of the matter was that the AWL, before it was called this, through the Socialist Labour Party, everything that had happened since the 1960s is surprising that Taaffe can write as he does, even given his mindset as incum bent high politician. And we believed in the Socialist Labour Party. I went to the office and there was no chance to reply and the youth in Militant had no chance to hear other accounts— but thus:

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At the same time, they could be refreshingly brutal about the realities of Stalinism, in sharp contrast to, for example, the Mandelites. Stalinism was “totalitarian”, but so, too, was pro-peaceful-revolution working-class “partisan-ism”.

This was utterly inchoate, but, if you didn’t see that, satisfying. You could call the horrors of Stalinism “totalitarian”. At the same time you could see the spread of “proletarian” peace, which steadily progressed the “world revolution”, and everywhere to be approved of. Nothing was required of the Party: they had nothing contradictory in the Labour Party and organisations like it, which they dismiss as having no sliver at all of a working-class dimension, so then also the government (Prime minister Harold Wilson accused it of being engineered by a “tightly knit group of politically motivated men”), and threatened by statutory incomes policies.

Militant’s politics were for practical purposes more a resolution of Leninist centralism. It was for stock-building they were ideal — so long as the organisation could thread itself through the trellis-work of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

**PEACEFUL REVOLUTION**

Around the mid-1960s, the Militant leaders spun a whole skein of related positions. For example, they argued for a peaceful, parliamentary, road to socialism in Britain.

I learned that they had the position in the following way: I organised the Militant’s first meeting in Manchester. Taaffe would travel around with Grant and chair a meeting, generally praising the alter-ego to Father Ted, so speak — being built up and fitted with a set of political Cuban-heeled boots. Grant came out with a sort of prepared speech which displayed so many responses from a number of people there, but he stuck to his guns.

In 1966 Rachel and I forced that to discuss on the “Secretariat” (which was effectively both Political Committee and National Committee) of the five members, the three “senior” comrades — Ted Grant, the trade-union official Arthur Deane, and Ellis Hillman — said yes, they held that Britain could, or would, have a peaceful revolution. Of the two apprentices, Keith Dickinson said he wasn’t sure, and Peter Taaffe said he didn’t believe in the peaceful revolution. Such independence by Taaffe was very rare; otherwise he was always conformist.

Militant also had a general all-purpose excuse for saying what they thought they would be organisationally advantageous to them. “The workers wouldn’t understand that, comrades!”. For example, in the early 1960s, all this took some untangling. As a response to their alarming quietism over statutory incomes policies, they put out a short piece on exactly what a Marxist per- spectve was, as distinct from their railway-station waiting-room notions of a perspective. Then I got lost in “reading aloud” the section, which I found to be confused nonsense, or political confidence, or the urgent necessity of setting themselves a criteria. Then I gave it up.

The seafarers’ strike of May-June 1966 had started. Militant responded to a strike being witch-hunted by the Labour government. Prime minister Harold Wilson accused it of being engineered by a “tightly knit group of politically motivated men”, and threatened by statutory incomes policy, with routine articles in support of the strikers’ trade-union demands. This was “forbidden”.

When Rachel and I left, we were told not to get too excited. The self-excited and habitually profound Peter Taaffe dismissed the strike as only something “ephemeral”. “You couldn’t fool little Peter: he knew that a strike didn’t go on at the “Extended National Committees”. An anyway, the political Cuban heels they had been putting under Ted Grant’s acolyte Peter. It was meant to.

**WE CAN’T DISCUSS WHAT GRANT AND TAAFFE CAN’T REFUSE TO TALK ABOUT**

From the point of view that they presented it, we were given the message, “You’ve got a month to go on”. We then eventually produced 100 hard copies, they refused to let us circulated it.

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I was a “pre-photocopier days” informer — the confere- ence was about three months away — so surely we had a right to circulate a piece based on facts? “The leader- ship” would not have to reply! So, our democratic rights as members could be removed because they could not reply within that time.

In the conference, however, the precedents were so recent, so real, that it was impossible to say that they could not reply within that time. They wanted a “discussion” in which most of those involved could read it, any discussion would be dominated by claims that what we said was “all about the war on Peter Taaffe’s face”. They wanted a “discussion” in which most of those taking part would be deprived of the right to read the document.

Finally, I remember the point at the October 1966 extended Na- tional Committee at which I decided I wasn’t going to remain a member of Militant. It was the justification that the members accepted from Peter Taaffe — for some of his unidinous bureaucratic blocking by the centre. “This is ex- actly how it is done in the broad labour movement. It is per- fectly democratic.”

In the bureaucratised, ritualised, ideas-unfriendly “broad labour movement”, it is quite something else to acquire it being better. On the second day of the Extended National Committee, I made a formal statement, and we left.

**PRETENSION**

Militant’s two pieces which Martin Thomas and I have analysed highlight a prime source of the bureaucratisa- tion in so many of the would-be Trotskyist organisations. The mixture of demagogic attempts at shouting down and moralistic bullying which Taaffe has publicly dis- played.

If Taaffe, self-satisfied in his political clomnusness, political belligerence, and plan of militancy, existed in an organisation where people had the habit of thinking for themselves, and could exercise the right of taking what he says not as the oracle from “above” (however much one admires the voice of an ordinary mortal, a comrade among comrades, there would quite quickly be a change). If they could mock his pretences without calling on their heads a chorus of full-timers and loyal louts in the vein of “This is your last chance, Mr. Smith, before we blackball you.”

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It surprises me that Taaffe is so self-unawares as publicly to repeat some of their arguments from that time. When Rachel and I again objected, we were told not to get too excited. The self-excited and habitually profound Peter Taaffe dismissed the strike as only something “ephemeral”. “You couldn’t fool little Peter: he knew that a strike didn’t go on. We had to insist that we had a right to get it out. It surprised me that Taaffe is so self-unawares as publicly to repeat some of their arguments from that time. When Rachel and I again objected, we were told not to get too excited. The self-excited and habitually profound Peter Taaffe dismissed the strike as only something “ephemeral”. “You couldn’t fool little Peter: he knew that a strike didn’t go on.

We started to campaign in the organisation for our right to raise our criticisms of the leaders’ politics. We found — in London, for example — solid and seemingly unquestioning acceptance by Taaffe of the idea was “new stuff to him."

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