

Revolutionaries

We're as Rare as Hens' Teeth

By Don Milligan



Rare as hen's teeth. Gathered in tiny groupuscules or scattered as individuals throughout campaigning groups of all kinds, revolutionaries are an endangered species. No doubt the stalwart comrades of the Socialist Workers Party, of Fight Racism Fight Imperialism (RCGI, for short), will hotly dispute my assertion that they've vanished from the 'field of history'. Yet, it is indisputably the case that even in our hey days, during the nineteen seventies, we didn't amount to much. Yes, we headed mass

single-issue campaigns fighting racism, fighting fascism, supporting strikers, “Hands Off This, That, and the Other”, but our revolutionary ambitions, surreptitious at best, were as well-hidden as they were unrewarded.

Our groups perpetually responded to our unpopularity with front organisations, and alliances, of one sort or another, whether it was fighting for Irish freedom, warring against racism, or reaching beyond the fragments, it was always the same thought, the same tactic that in truth was more of a strategy, a threadbare one to be sure, but a strategy nonetheless. It was always hoped that our occasional, monthly, weekly, or even daily papers, sold at pickets, demos, university campuses, factory gates, and on the streets, would get across our message and convey the truly heroic scale of our ambition.

Throughout the eighties the Revolutionary Communist Party, was “Preparing for Power”. After twelve months of incessant activity, annually, those of us in the RCP could muster about one thousand people at our annual public gathering. The Socialist Workers Party’s, “Marxism”, was always more successful (perhaps, two or three times as good as those of us selling *the next step*). With a few keynote speakers inveigled in from wider society, to an annual event celebrated with giddy enthusiasm, the SWP remains, to this day, irretrievably irrelevant.

Our inflated claims were, and are, often accompanied by an engaging modesty. For example, the Communist Party of Great Britain’s leadership styles itself “The Provisional Central Committee”. Quite what is “provisional” or “central” about it is never explained. The smaller groups that dare not style themselves, “party”, opt for ‘group’ or ‘tendency’, as if dawdling in chrysalis, until metamorphosis, or the class struggle, transforms larva from pupae into fully grown-up parties. Despite the desire not to overstate their case some enlarge themselves by affiliations to the grandest of the various secretariats, of the various ‘fourth internationals’.

This is because we socialist revolutionaries are always ‘internationalist’ and we have always sought to

widen our claims to relevance with talk of the importance of faraway places of which most people know little, and we know a lot. Whether in Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Africa, the Balkans, or the Middle East, the wretched of the earth are always struggling to be free, and can always count on our help, with resolutions passed at poorly attended trade union meetings, demos on Saturdays, and pickets on the first Sunday of every month.

Some readers might detect a cynical tone here, but they'd be wrong. I am describing the world in which I lived for many years. In some ways I lament its passing, but passed out of existence it certainly has. The far left continues to announce its existence, and assert its relevance, with a few hundred here, a thousand there, waving Kurdish or Palestinian flags, or listening enraptured while Tariq Ali welcomes the fall of Kabul to the Taliban (though not, "of course", Islamist 'social policies'). The *New Left Review* is still regularly published in print and the Internet is alive with websites and on-line journals that make the smallest groups look keen, keen as mustard.

At the same time, YouTubers and new media organisations have amplified radical and revolutionary ideas online, giving them a presence, which find little or no expression in the social movements of the day. This is because such ideas, in the absence of a coherent revolutionary movement, are spontaneously dissolved into a vast reservoir of sentiments about equality and injustice. Such sentiments are not in themselves destructive of revolutionary ideas, but without a coherent anti-capitalism, they are ebbed away into struggles for reforms which have little impact on challenging the viability of the capitalist system.

Stop The War is still marshalling its forces against NATO and Western imperialism, while the Alliance of Workers' Liberty does its best to rectify the wrongs of the rotten elements. All this is happening, has happened, while the relevance of what we have in common, slithers away into an unforgiving future.

Revolutionary socialists, Class War-riors, resolute and proper Anarchists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, Situationists, Communists, a confused and confusing crew are, like the Anabaptists of old, entirely remote from the lives and struggles of the mass of working people. Nobody is listening while we wrangle with each other and tell our truths and spell-out out our programmes.

We are émigrés in our own land.

Our preferred country is far away and we speak as refugees do about our imagined and imaginary homeland in which we were discontented and terrorised, but above all else, understood, relevant, worth oppressing.

Here, in the here and now, in the ruthless present, nobody is interested in us. We are not worth oppressing and it is a matter of some doubt whether the state's security services bother to keep files on us any longer, or monitor our comings and goings. That credit now goes to Islamists and bombers, not to revolutionaries who as a matter of principle oppose assassinations and individual acts of terror. So, the state, like the working class, is not interested in anything we do or say.

This probably accounts for the amnesia which has allowed us to proceed without acknowledging that the world which formed our ambition, and shaped our rhetoric, has passed out of existence. Most of us hoped that the end of the Soviet Union would in some way free us from the weight of Stalinism. It didn't.

We should interrogate our failure, but oddly this hasn't happened. In 2008 I published the article, 'Radical Amnesia and the Revolutionary Communist Party'. I was not joining George Mobiot's scurrilous attacks or depicting Frank Furedi as a wicked *Svengali* that had destroyed our peace of mind. No, I was simply noting that the former members of our party, prominent in celebrating the age of reason and the need for free speech, had not had much to say about our failure – the mantra was, look to the future, not to the past.

Yet, we can have no future without understanding our history. There were serious problems, confusions, and

infelicities, with our stances on South Africa, on Ireland, on the Soviet Union, on Yugoslavia and Serbia. Above all, our understanding of the changes which capitalism was undergoing, together with the transformation of the working class, was threadbare to say the least. This is not a belated attack on the RCP, but a criticism of the revolutionary left in general. The far-left milieu seems to be entirely insensible to an honest and thorough-going reflection upon our history. We appear to be incapable of any serious self-criticism.

We will not hear of Bolshevik tyranny or Lenin's foundation of the Cheka in December 1917 – the abrogation of all civil rights, of torture, of arbitrary imprisonment, and mass killings. "That was all Stalin! Lenin and Trotsky were innocent!" We will not hear of the crimes of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Pham Van Dong, or Vo Nguyen Giap. Even Pol Pot, leader of the criminal gang, Khmer Rouge, has disappeared from view, along with Mengistu Haile Mariam, and all the hereditary rulers in Pyongyang. "Nothing to do with us governor!"

The wars, crimes, famines, and massacres, were all the result of untoward events, they were always contingent on the desperate situation of the "progressive forces"; there was nothing intrinsically wrong with socialist dictatorships or one-party states. Indeed, that's why socialist tyrannies were always called democracies – people's democracies, no less.

This socialist self-deception fooled nobody. While we talked of the emancipation of 'mankind', everywhere people like us, people who apparently believed the same sorts of things as us, were engaged in enslaving millions. We blamed Stalin for this, though we were always a bit hesitant about Mao Zedong's culpability, we knew he had a particularly tough row to hoe. Although it's worth remembering that Ho Chi Min, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro, all achieved something close to sainthood, unblemished by their dictatorships and murderous crimes. Stalin, most of us agreed was a bad lot, redeemed, if at all by the fall of Hitler's Reichstag to the Red Army.

We have engaged in a tradition of elaborate apologetics for tyranny, massacres, and famines. While being particularly hard on the democracies of the West. Cast as “imperialists” seeking to dominate the world with an explosive cocktail of investment and violence, bankers and money-men have bestrode the world crushing the hopes and dreams of millions. In contrast, the crimes of socialists have always been the product of desperate contingencies – they are not in our nature. Whereas the crimes of the imperialists are integral to their make-up. We falter and make mistakes, while they deliberately put profits before people. We love peace and community, while they celebrate selfish individualism and war.

There is just enough in this caricature of the West and the imperialists to convince *us* of its truth. However, the mass of the working class has never been convinced by it. They view authoritarianism and dictatorship for what it is – a fear of freedom. A fear so all embracing, that people during years of *actually existing socialism*, the years 1917-1989, could be imprisoned, worked to death, or even shot, for telling jokes at the expense of the dictator, or of the leaderships of ruling communist parties throughout the people’s democracies.

The cardinal error made by revolutionaries everywhere was always to be found in their opposition to bourgeois democracy. It is certainly true that democratic arrangements in Western Europe, North America, Australasia, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, leave much to be criticised, lamented, and even hated. However, they represent a far more plausible and sustainable form of rule than revolutionary socialists have ever sponsored. The majority of working people have demonstrated their commitment to this truth, time and time again, for a century or more.

Yet, revolutionaries of all sorts have always quibbled, cavilled, qualified, and finally rejected the defence of bourgeois democracy on grounds of its manifest defects, while giving a free pass to the authoritarian rulers and dictatorships opposed to the West.

Of course, revolutionaries will tirelessly point to the Gulf, states where tyranny reigns supreme. Surprisingly, these bourgeois hypocrisies, often associated with repression, cruelty, renditions, murders and disappearances, do not result in support for the revolutionary left. This is because at the core of bourgeois democracy is the belief that government by consent is the safest and surest way to guarantee the safety and security of capitalism. Any truck they have with dictatorships is always contingent on the defence of capitalism, and eventually in the defence of bourgeois democracy. Witness the transitions of Spain, Portugal, South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, and many others, from authoritarian rule to government by consent.

This is the nub of the issue. Bourgeois democracy is the form of rule preferred by the capitalist class. It is predicated on the defence of private property and the right of owners and investors to make profits. It goes without saying, revolutionaries cannot endorse either private property or private profits. They are resolutely anti-capitalist, consequently many on the far-left feel that they cannot wholeheartedly embrace the form of democracy spawned and developed in the long struggle waged in defence of private property and profitable commerce by the bourgeoisie.

Now the working class has in most places supported the idea of the free society, of government by consent, and the rule of law. They have been stalwarts in opposition to the arbitrary rule of the rich and powerful, and have fought tooth and nail for the right to form trade unions, for the right to vote, and for freedom of speech. They have fought to become citizens with the right to enjoy and exercise these freedoms. Working men and woman have never made the abolition of private property (or of capitalism) a condition for their participation in the governance of society.

In complete contrast we revolutionaries have made no secret of our desire to tear down the capitalist class, and destroy the reign of profit and private property. It is at this point that the tension between revolutionaries and the great mass of working people begins to break into open hostility.

This is because the revolutionaries have not, and don't appear to be able, to offer a plausible alternative to capitalism or commercial society.

Of course, we have always provided vague assurances, and sketchy out-of-focus pictures of what we would replace capitalism with. Unfortunately, these have never been substantial, distinct, or sufficiently appealing to the wider population. People might be prepared to surrender the defence of bourgeois democracy, but not without some reliable assurances that they'll get more in the socialist future than they have in the capitalist present. In the absence of such assurances, they've always opted for the devil they know.

This reluctance to overthrow capitalism has always been undergirded by the historical reality that all attempts by revolutionaries to do just that, have resulted in poverty, stagnation, and/or tyranny. Against the capitalists, socialists have, as a matter of course, always opted for the continuation of various forms of autocratic or authoritarian rule. Nowhere have revolutionaries ever installed rule by consent, never have socialist revolutionaries established freedom of organisation, assembly, or speech. They have never expanded or added to the freedoms that the bourgeoisie has to offer.

No doubt some will suggest the experience of Rojava, and others that of Venezuela, in an effort to contradict what I am arguing, but these radically different exceptions, such as they are, are the exceptions that prove the rule.

This wretched tradition of dictatorship (for it has become a socialist tradition), is underlined and reinforced every day by the preparedness of the socialist left to line-up with tyrants and dictators against the West whenever sharp conflicts emerge between bourgeois democracies and authoritarian rulers. Under the rubric of "fighting imperialism" most of the radical and revolutionary left is, almost as a matter of routine, prepared to give anti-Western tyrants the benefit of the doubt.

Most recently, this has been the case in defence of the Russian Federation against the hostility of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and their allies around the world. Despite the presence of Hungary and Turkey in NATO, the alliance is largely composed of bourgeois democracies committed to defending the sovereignty of Ukraine, against Russia's invasion and annexations.

The revolutionaries and much of the far-left have opted to face both ways – opposing Russia's invasion, but simultaneously calling for the resolution of the Russian Federation's "legitimate security concerns". They have decided to be even-handed, and to call upon Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to negotiate a settlement with Vladimir Putin, on the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas.

They do not see the Russian Federation as the unprovoked aggressor, but as a state with legitimate fears concerning the governance and alliances of the Ukrainian state. Consequently, much of the far-left accepts Moscow's demands for some measure of control over the conduct of affairs in Kyiv. Yes, Ukraine may be independent, but only on Moscow's terms.

They adopt this position because Ukraine is being armed and supported by NATO and her allies. This has led most far-left socialists and revolutionaries to conclude that Ukraine is not fighting a war against an invader which is attempting to occupy its territory and destroy its state and sovereignty. On the contrary, the anti-imperialists argue, Ukraine is fighting a 'proxy war' on behalf of the West against the Russian Federation. Because, this is a 'proxy war' between the imperialist powers and the Russian Federation it is imperative that Ukraine accepts Russia's theft of around twenty percent of its territory in return for peace.

The "anti-imperialism" of the far-left makes it impossible to unequivocally defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. This makes it clear for all to see that most revolutionary socialists support the invasion of

a sovereign bourgeois democracy by a dictatorial power. Once again, most of the far-left has proved themselves to be enemies of democracy. Once again, the far-left is taking sides with a tyrant rather than with the rule of law and government by consent.

Until we socialist revolutionaries break with our anti-democratic tradition, we can have no hope for relevance or influence with the great majority of working men and women. We are almost certain to shrink away, almost to nothing, in the coming years. The only plausible route for our survival is to work to present a programme of *militant democracy* in which we endorse bourgeois democracy and advocate the progressive extension of democratic rights to the management of the economy as a whole. We must work towards the widest participation of working people in the administration of the workplace, of investment, and planning.

Such a signal change of direction would inevitably involve developing a more convincing and complete conception of the socialist future that just might persuade enough working people to side with us against the capitalists and the investing public. If this route is not taken, we are without doubt headed for oblivion.

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