

LINKS NOT BOYCOTT



Israeli tanks in the Palestinian territories — anti-boycott campaigns must actively support the Palestinians

A mixed gathering

**SACHA ISMAIL AND CHRIS MARKS REPORT
ON THE ANTI-BOYCOTT MEETING CALLED BY
'ENGAGE', 11 JULY 2007**

SOMETHING like 250 or 300 people attended the meeting on opposing boycotts of Israel called by the Engage campaign on 11 July. The main room in which the plenary sessions were held was packed — despite the £5 entrance fee.

The audience was mostly quite old, very posh and, it seemed, Jewish. This last fact is, of course, quite understandable: it is British Jews who will be the primary victims of the anti-semitism the boycott campaign is whipping up. However, it confirms the suspicion that Engage, even though many of its leading activists are not Jewish, has failed to reach out to a broader constituency.

Before the meeting began, we distributed a leaflet calling for a principled, left-wing anti-boycott campaign which actively supports the Palestinians, and sold our pamphlet "Two nations, two states". The response was very interesting. Some people were highly sympathetic, and we sold quite a few pamphlets. Equally, there were a fair number of people who as soon as they heard the word "Palestinian" assumed we were for the boycott, and in some cases were very rude indeed.

There was a small pro-boycott demonstration outside. A telling incident: one particularly irate anti-boycotter tore up one of the demonstrators' pro-boycott leaflets and threw them in her face. When we told him loudly and in no uncertain terms that this was no way to behave, the obviously very jumpy managers of Friends Meeting House got the police to threaten to remove us! And meanwhile, the pro-boycott demonstrators whom we, despite our disagreement with them, had been seeking to defend, said nothing in our defence, but simply smirked. Thanks, comrades.

The meeting itself was divided into three sections. The first was a general plenary, with speeches on the general picture in terms of pro-boycott campaigning (mainly in the unions) and resistance to it. The two speeches we managed to hear (we were let in late) were from Jon Pike and Dave Hirsh, both ex-AWL members and well-known UCU activists. Both, this or that detail aside, gave very good speeches: left-wing, labour movement-focussed and clear about the need for solidarity with the Palestinians.

The tone of contributions from the floor, however, was more mixed: quite a few participants were clearly not very left-wing at all. Among the highlights were someone who interjected that it was quite reasonable for Palestinian students to be denied an education, since they were all carrying

bombs to university, and someone who commented that since a pro-boycott demonstrator outside had been unable to spell chrysanthemum on demand, she had no right to an opinion on the Middle East conflict! (It was reminiscent of a comment made by a Union of Jewish Students organiser to an AWL member recently that the problem of UCU is that it includes not just "proper academics", but ignorant plebs who "teach hairdressing" at FE colleges...)

In the second session, the conference divided into workshops on a number of issues connected to the boycott and the Israel-Palestine conflict. We attended the one about opposing a boycott in the unions — quite a small workshop, since the great majority of the people at the conference were self-evidently not trade union activists or interested in the labour movement — another problem with Engage.

The speakers included Jon Pike and Eric Lee of LabourStart, as well as activists from the NUJ and GMB. They all made some good points, but there was a lack of emphasis on pro-Palestinian campaigning. This is a more general problem with Engage's approach to Palestinians. There are always ritual genuflections towards an internationalist position, but little attempt to actively campaign for Palestinian rights. This is presumably because that would aggravate quite a large number of Engage's often not very pro-Palestinian supporters.

Moreover, the stance taken by Jon Pike on the anti-boycott struggle within UCU seemed to align him with the right wing of the union — attacking the left as if from outside it, and dismissing the possibility of involving more members in branch, conference and other democratic structures in favour of a referendum on the boycott proposal.

The problem with this from a socialist point of view is obvious: use of referendums to over-rule democratic structures give the bureaucracy the power to manipulate an atomised, unorganised membership by setting questions calculated to overturn any decisions they don't like. Undoubtedly it is true, as Jon Pike pointed out, that some of the "revolutionary left" has a conservative, anti-democratic attitude to the membership: but the real left alternative is to organise more members in democratic processes through debate and campaigning, not abandon them of a union run by referendum.

It had been an interesting evening, however. Engage's ability to mobilise people around the boycott issue is impressive, but it remains quite far from the sort of campaign we need: broad-based, labour movement-focussed (and allied with the left of the labour movement) and active in solidarity with the Palestinians.

The greatest proletarian novel?

**STEVE COHEN'S SERIES ON GREAT
PROLETARIAN NOVELS CONTINUES WITH
"LIVING" BY HENRY GREEN**

LIVING was written in 1929. Christopher Isherwood described it as "the best proletarian novel ever written". Typically Green — honest, ironic, deprecating — is reported to have replied "the workers in my factory thought it rotten. It was my very good friend Christopher Isherwood used that phrase ... and I don't know that he ever worked in a factory."

When Green talked about the "factory" he was referring to the Birmingham engineering firm of H. Pontifex and Sons Ltd. The factory manufactured plumbing supplies and beer bottling equipment. It still exists but its base is now Leeds and can be found on the net where it is described as a "suppliers of bespoke pressure vessels, columns and storage tanks for the chemical, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, resin and food industries". It is this factory and countless others like it internationally which collectively gave birth to and sustained capitalism throughout the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. And it is this factory — its industrial processes, its workers, its managers, its bosses, which forms the fictional centre of *Living*.

Living is indeed both a very good and important novel (though not beyond criticism). Like the rest of Green's works it has been virtually lost to the public attention. One reason for this is Green himself. He did not court popularity and once said he wrote only for six people — of whom he was one. A more important reason is perhaps that bourgeois norms of book distribution can't really deal with such an imaginative and honest (if sometimes flawed) recreation of working class life and working class characters. So his later "proletarian" novel *Loving* suffered the same fate.

The essentially progressive nature of the novel is apparent throughout. It is apparent in its awareness of the oppression of women and his support for their fightback on the domestic front. As Lily Gates says of her assumed grandfather "I get black looks from him every time I come in after being out with you....But women aren't what they were, I'm not going to stay in an 'arem of his making, we're educated now". It is apparent in the novel's depiction of health and safety and the inevitable accident caused by the lack of these provisions. And it is most apparent in the descriptions of the sordid manner in which the factory through its owner, Dupret, and manager, Bridges, organise temporary or permanent lay-offs — "So it was decided all men within six months of their old age pension....all these would get their cards on Saturday. Mr Bridges had come in smiling by then and smiling he said to make it Wednesday, Wednesday was the end of every working week". What radiates from the book is Green's warm identification with the factory workers. They are not idealised or depicted as perfect — in fact nearly everyone in the book and of whatever class or strata are shown at some time or another to be conniving or self seeking. However they are shown as human actors who are able in spite of all poverty to contribute positively to the world around them. The produce of their labour, though they do not profit from it, can be things of beauty — "wild incidental beauty in these things where engineers had thought only of the use put to them". That could have been written by the socialist and arts and crafts proponent, William Morris. Again the factory itself can be momentarily transformed into a living theatre. In a very moving scene everyone hears singing throughout the day above the noise of the

machinery "Arthur sang and it might be months before he sang again. And no one else sang that day, but all listened to his singing. That night a son had been born to him".

Living can be described as a modernist novel. It hardly ever tries to internalise a character's thoughts or motives. It doesn't seek to offer explanations. It simply lets the characters be and exist to the point where the author essentially becomes invisible. It is also modernist in the sense it is cinematic. Scenes can switch between paragraphs without any warning. This contributes towards a sense of one twentieth century hallmark — namely speed. And there is another contribution to this which is Green's unique and idiosyncratic style — namely the frequent omission of "the" and "end". Again in my view this, when it works (and it doesn't always work) can lead to scenes of great human warmth — "Mr Craigan smoked pipe, already room was blurred by smoke from it and by steam from hot water in the sink. She swilled water over the plates and electric light caught in shining waves of water which rushed off plates as she held them, and then light caught on wet plates in moons. She dried these. One by one then she put them up into the rack on wall above her, and as she stretched up so her movements pulled all ways at his heart, so beautiful she seemed to him".

But yet there remains something quite ambiguous about *Living* and its author — and it is impossible to disconnect the two. When Green speaks of Christopher Isherwood and refers to "my factory" he was not alluding to himself as a worker. Rather he owned the factory — or at least was heir to it and eventually did inherit it! He was one of the sons in Pontifex and Sons. Born Henry Vincent Yorke he attended Eton and Oxford (amazingly writing his first novel, *Blindness*, at the former, whilst having it published whilst at the latter). One side of his family was in manufacturing and the city and the other came from the aristocracy. This gave him an insight into the more obnoxious aspects of these classes such as its parlour-room anti-Semitism ("Mr Dupret said Jews had brought the Continent to a ridiculous state with extravagant tipping"). So in one sense *Living* was a disavowal of two classes — feudal and capital.

Except Green/Yorke never made a complete break. Diana Mosley, the wife of the fascist leader, counted him as a personal friend. Again in *Living* the upper class Hannah Glossop has never worked in her life except "she had enjoyed enormously General Strike when she had carried plates from one hut to another". Unfortunately Green does not seem to disassociate himself from this. In his mid-life autobiography, *Pack My Bag*, he talks of his own role in the General Strike — one in which he agreed to be sent to Avonmouth to unload bananas (where he was rejected and sent home on account of looking too young). And in *Living* there sometimes appear passages which could be interpreted not just as describing the alienated life of workers but as themselves reflecting and sanctioning the snobbery of the upper classes to those beneath them — "What will they grow up to be thought in mind — they'll work, they'll marry, they'll work harder, have children and go on working, they'll die. Then he forgot all about them and thought about himself".

Henry Green and Henry Vincent Yorke appear to have never reconciled their two persona. But this does not prevent *Living* being a genuine proletarian novel in that apart from the odd lapse it is clearly taking sides. It is taking sides against the capitalist class. A class of which Green/Yorke was himself a representative! Somehow this tension has managed to generate a genuine work of art.