



Russia's war in Afghanistan: not imperialist?

# A letter to a confused "anti-imperialist"

Dear Mark Fisher,

I'D written the friendly letter that follows this note before we received the CPGB's refusal to debate the question of Iraq and the slogan "troops out now" with us at your summer school.

Mark, plainly you don't believe in making life easy for those of us in the AWL who are your friends, admirers and advocates! One minute you are publishing blustery little articles in your paper that suggest you are spoiling for a fight, and which accuses us of

being "afraid" to debate with you. And what happens when, after a lot of lobbying and arguing, I manage to persuade our office to take you up on it? You back out!

I tried, honestly I did, to persuade them to agree to your very reasonable proposal that we send a young comrade to debate with you. (See Davis Broder's article, on page 14.)

The AWL view of your request was summed up by one member: "Do they want jam on it too?" Your too-frank statement that

your objection to me, that I am for the occupation of Iraq, that I disagree with you, did not help either. Someone said: "They have an unreconstructed Stalinist notion of what a debate is."

(The fact that I do not, in fact, support the occupation of Iraq didn't do much for your credibility either.) The best I could get out of the comrades was: "If you are so keen on debating with them, go yourself!"

And now, after all my efforts for you, you back out! Don't you know what impression that will make?

I argued that your explanation, that you had scheduled the debate as the school's opening session, and didn't want to start the weekend with a "bloodfest" was perfectly reasonable. Mark Osborn — the most backward, economistic and anti-communist person in the AWL, apart from Martin Thomas, David Broder and Sacha Ismail (who has not forgiven you for ceasing to address him as "lovely boy" when he refused to be flattered into agreeing with you politically) said: "and of course they couldn't re-jig the agenda!" Another comrade added, "and the pompous, oily little twerp forgot to say whose political blood he is afraid will be shed".

The comrades also didn't buy your comment on my "Zionism". Someone unhelpfully recalled that I had exactly the same politics on the Middle East when the leaders of your organisation let me convince them to embrace a two-state solution on Israel-Palestine.

Mark, I fear that this has set your cause in the AWL back a long way. Already someone has suggested on our internal e-list that we should stop referring to your leaders, or the Great Leader and his No.1 acolyte (yourself) as Jack Theory and Mark Practice. She has also started an online competition to rename you. So far the most popular suggestions are "Yellow Streak Mark" and "Yellowstones Fischer". I'll keep you informed of developments.

Sean Matgamna

Dear Mark,

IT will surprise you to learn that I am one of the growing number of people in the AWL who are campaigning within our organisation for closer links with the CPGB. Many AWL people unfortunately refer to you as "the *Weekly Worker* group", and others as "that ridiculous little gossip-mongering cult with the preposterously inflated name; that political equivalent of a four-year old boy wearing his mother's high heels, his father's bowler hat and his big sister's make up smeared all over his face in inappropriate places".

Most of them now go on foolishly to

denounce you for having produced six issues of your paper without a word on the Royal Mail strikes. I try to explain to them that you don't think it important enough to notice and they ask me what inner world I have migrated to. I tell them that they are

## What do you now think of your decade (1979-89) of support for the Russian war of conquest in Afghanistan?

just a bunch of benighted economists and anti-Leninists, that you probably need your valuable pages for articles on the Campaign for a Marxist Party. Their responses to that are entirely apolitical, and, unfortunately, not something I'd dare repeat in print.

It was I now think a sectarian mistake on my part, a few years back, to sour relations between the AWL and you by asking you what you now think about your decade (1979-89) of support for the Russian Stalinist war of conquest in Afghanistan. I tell the AWL that you, apart from the leaders of the SWP and myself, are the only people in Britain who really understand Tony Cliff's profound dictum: "tactics contradict principles". I write now in the hope that with your advice (and that of Jack Conrad, who, I agree, has, as you like to say, "a very beautiful mind") I can win an AWL majority to a policy of alliance and eventual amalgamation with your organisation.

What can you do to help? Explain to me how you yourselves answer awkward questions which people jealous of your size and influence raise about your organisation and its politics. I confess that, though I grasp and cherish your guiding principle, that politics should never be allowed to get in the way of organisational manoeuvrings, even I can't always see how your various facets, political and organisation, fit together.

TELL me, Mark, what is it in the history and traditions of the CPGB that gets a group originally called *The Leninist* to adopt its name? You grew sick of the dishonesty of calling yourselves, unashamed ultra-Stalinists as you were until well after the collapse of the USSR, "Leninist", as I would like to think?

But he Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) is the name of a party with a long and indelibly shameful record. What is it you endorse about it?

• Its history of mindlessly supporting the USSR in everything it did for half a

## Gossip, or real debate?

BY DAVID BRODER

THE minority group of opinion in the AWL which thinks we should call for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq has been courted in recent months by the Communist Party of Great Britain, who, while displaying no interest in building working-class politics in the Middle East, have noticed a superficial similarity between their own slogans and those of our minority.

The CPGB, whose *Weekly Worker* organ finds nothing more riveting than gossip about other far left organisations (in contrast, for instance, to its complete indifference towards the postal strike, which it has not mentioned in its hallowed pages), is keen to aggravate the supposed tensions within the AWL on the Iraq question, and are plainly angling for a split. But, despite conference debates, arguments on the Workers' Liberty website and a flurry of articles, documents and letters in *Solidarity*, CPGB lothario Mark Fischer has become impatient at the minority's "flaccid" resistance to the majority line. The *Weekly Worker* has run numerous long articles making a fuss about this.

Furthermore, attacking the "so-called AWL 'opposition'", (because clearly that's what we refer to ourselves as!) in an email to myself, Fischer suggested that the tactic of a "real" opposition would be to "raise the demand to clear out the leadership committees of all those with the scab pro-imperialist line". I do not at all accept the terms of this argument — the majority is not pro-imperialist or pro-occupation, and does not have a "scab line", but makes a

purely tactical error. We do not have to be for "troops out now" out of some abstract God-given (Lenin-given?) principle of shrill anti-imperialism; but I think that the Iraqi labour movement must fight for national liberation as a key democratic demand which will help it cohere Iraqis around itself across sectarian divides.

However, I am not of the opinion that "troops out now" and self-determination are the same thing. The point is that self-determination could become realisable if the working class fought for it across sectarian divides, not that Islamist militias defeating the US-UK would give Iraqis self-determination.

In that my main perspective is that of how the working class movement can become a strong and independent social force, I have much in common with the majority position, more so than with the CPGB's classless anti-imperialist sloganeering. Of course, I cannot speak for anyone other than myself on that score — I am not a "leader" of the minority, which itself is heterogenous and has only some common slogans and ideas, but happen to have written a fair bit about what I think.

In any case, to suggest that the National Committee democratically elected at conference should be overturned because of differences in the Iraq debate — on which we can have free and frank discussion within the AWL — could be nothing but a prelude to leaving, or some sort of attempt to break up the organisation. Of course, if we succeeded in making the NC "minority only", I might be spending some rather dull meetings with only a couple of people for company...

century? The first time it criticised the USSR on anything was in 1968, when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia! (Ten years later Jack-with-the-Beautiful-Mind, not yet the greatest Marxist in the CPGB, but a mere National Organiser of an ultra-Stalinist splinter of the real CPGB, the “New Communist Party”, organised a demonstration outside the Czech Embassy in London to celebrate the tenth anniversary of that invasion.)

- And, even more oddly, you took the name of an organisation, the real CPGB, which by 1980 was sensible enough to denounce the Russian invasion of Afghanistan while “The Leninist” made it its point of honour all through the 1980s to loudly back the Russians and their Afghan puppets.

- Or were you attracted by the old CPGB’s decades of propaganda for the strange idea that the working class can make a proletarian socialist revolution in Britain and everywhere else by way of a parliamentary vote (which “The Leninist” rejected, of course)?

- By its policy in industry since the mid-thirties of backing and, where it could, joining the trade union bureaucracy?

- By its support in the late seventies and eighties for the Kinnockite soft left of the Labour Party in its drive to the right, when the CPGB and its journal Marxism Today acted as powder monkeys for the Labour right (Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock publicly praised one of them, Eric Hobsbawm as “the most sagacious living Marxist”. He’d know of course!)

- Or the CPGB backing for the craven local government “left”. I know *The Leninist* opposed the CPGB then. All the stranger that you should want to clothe yourselves in the flea-bitten empty skin of that party’s name. But, Mark, you see my difficulty in explaining you to AWL comrades.

- Or is it the CPGB of the 22 month period between the Stalin-Hitler pact of August 1939 and the German invasion of Russia in June 1941, during which the CPGB “opposed the war” by making pro-Hitler propaganda (Hitler was the victim of aggression; he really wanted peace). The CPGB of that time, which retained its links to parties which did the same pro-Nazi work in Nazi-occupied Europe, and which in Mexico engaged in Nazi-mimicking agitation against “the Jewish Trotskyists”?

- Or is it the CPGB’s support for the Moscow trials of 1936-38, in which almost all of the surviving leaders of the October Revolution were condemned to death as agents of foreign powers even while they were leading the revolution (as Menshevik and bourgeois propaganda had said in 1917 when they were doing so).

- Or the systematic falsification of history — its own and that of Russia — that was done by the CPGB from the late twenties?

- Or is it that party’s support for the systematic violence against the working class by the “Communist Party of the Soviet Union” in the USSR, that “party” — the Russian bureaucratic ruling class — you still openly addressed as “comrades” in 1991 when, though you were not yet the CPGB, you backed the attempted Stalinist coup they organised (with caveats and criticisms, true, but which, nonetheless, you supported)?

- Or the CPGB’s support for the suppression of the working class revolution in Spain (1936-7) and the slaughter of its best militants by the Russian and Spanish Stalinist political police?

- Or is it the earlier CPGB? But between the early nineteen twenties and today there falls the giant, all-distorting shadow of Stalinism. Even in its earliest period the CPGB was warped by its Russian connections. During the General Strike of 1926, under Stalin’s orders, it raised the cry “all power to the General Council of the TUC”, the GC that was busy selling out the General Strike?

- Or is it the ultra-left craziness of the CPGB’s “Third Period” you support, when it called every working-class opponent “fascist”, broke up meetings of the “social fascist” Labour Party and tried to split the unions. When the real CPGB supported the similar policy of the German CP, which sided with the Nazis against Social Democrats?

- Or the CPGB’s support and endorsement of the German Stalinist party’s peaceful surrender to the Nazis, making no resistance

to Hitler — not even calling for a general strike for instance — which the powerful German party was then capable of organising, but under Russian orders did not even try?

- Or is it that there is some “essence” of “Communism” which inheres in the name “CPGB”?

You see my problem in defending you, Mark, when I simply haven’t the wit or the Jesuitical subtlety to understand you myself? If I could understand how you square all these circles and “triangulate” between those positions and traditions which you embrace with the name “CPGB” and your verbal commitment to socialism and communist and socialist sense (the politics which the Trotskyists — sorry, I forgot that you prefer the old Stalinist term “Trotskyite” — counterposed at every turn to Stalinism) then I might be better able to defend you.

TAKE, for instance, the general response I get in discussions on your criticism of us about Iraq: “What would those a-moral, fantasy-addled idiots who backed the Russian colonial war of conquest in Afghanistan for nine years, publicly relishing and endorsing their brutalities against the Afghan peoples, know about ‘anti-imperialism’”? I say: “that was a long time ago”. But they always trump me: “They have never even admitted they got anything at all wrong about Afghanistan then”.

Imperialism, of course, is the biggest boulder blocking the road to the CPGB for most AWL people. I admit, I’m not as clear on your ideas here as I’d like to be. It is, you argue, a principle to demand troops out of Iraq — now, immediately, yesterday! Anything less is a “scab” position.

It is, I tell them, following your line, not enough for the AWL to have opposed the invasion and to be for self-determination. No. Having opposed the invasion, we must now concentrate all our efforts on demanding that those who control the occupying forces, act in such a way as to maximise the chaos and bloodshed and increase the likelihood of new — Iranian, Syrian — foreign intervention, by scuttling immediately and letting Iraq dissolve, most likely, into far worse chaos and carnage than anything known now.

It would help if you would give me a clear answer to pass on to other comrades on the following questions. Were you right to back the Russian colonising imperialist army and their Afghan puppets from 1979-89 in their attempt at subjugation, and their all too real massacres of the peoples? If you now think you were wrong, why are you so reluctant to say so (you will recall, Mark, that when I met you at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign demonstration you refused to admit that anything you’d said had been)?

If you still believe that you were right to back the Russians in the most savage, old-style imperialist war of conquest of the second half of the 20th century - the French war to hold onto Algeria 1954-62 is the nearest parallel to it that I am aware of — then an explanation of why would be useful.

I know, of course, that you backed Russian imperialism in Afghanistan because you thought that it was “working-class imperialism” — that this was a case, so to speak, of socialist “working class butchery”. But you don’t think that now — or do you? At least one of your small inner group thinks that the Russian Stalinist bureaucratic collectivist system was a form of “state slavery”. If the group thinks that, then it follows that you were led by your mistaken assessment of the USSR to gloat over, and publicly glory in Russia’s Nazi-style war on the men, women and children of Afghanistan.

It also follows that for at least a decade you were guilty of a criminally wrong-headed policy, and backed people in Russia who, in a better world, would long ago have been hanged as war criminals. If you think you were right, shouldn’t you say so?

The implication of your coy reluctance to say you were wrong is that you do think you were right, and regret the defeat of the USSR in Afghanistan, and its collapse in 1991 — the final collapse triggered by the Stalinists’ attempted coup, which your paper backed.

But then what moral or political right have you to turn yourselves into an ultra-self-righteous “anti-imperialist” part of the kitsch

left-Islamic clerical fascist bloc to denounce the AWL?

Your policy now means that you throw what weight you have decisively *against* those who stand in Iraq for some degree of civil liberty, and *with* their clerical fascist enemies. It is to blindly follow the logic of a thoughtless “anti imperialism”, even into the camp of reaction in Iraq and the Middle East! You turn yourselves into advocates of an abstract, a-historical absolute “anti-imperialism” which works out in practice as a siding with dark reaction against modern bourgeois society in Iraq and most of the conquests of human civilisation since the Renaissance. It is to make a fetish of what in practice is a reactionary anti-imperialism.

One of the staples of your propaganda in favour of Russia’s colonial-imperialist war in Afghanistan was the backwardness of the Muslim tribes there. Yes, indeed. And al-Qa’eda, which is an active force in the Iraqi resistance, is better? The Ba’athists are better? The murderous sectarians who wreak a deadly daily slaughter in Iraq are better? All these who will, as a matter of principle, wipe out the newly-reborn Iraqi labour movement, are better?

Most AWL people insist that in a war of colonial conquest, aiming for subjugation, annexation and colonial exploitation, we would, following the principles laid down by the Communist International in 1920, back even Islamic reactionaries against their enslavers. Not politically, of course, but only against their would-be colonial conquerors. You ruled that out in the eighties in Afghanistan: you invoke a parody of it now for Iraq. Again, you see, my difficulty in explaining the ways of Jack and yourself to ordinary mortals in the AWL?

There is even one stream of AWL thinking, I’m afraid, which says that your record on Afghanistan and many other things is that of a classic paranoid cult. You operated in the 1980s and much of the nineties with a preposterously false, delusional vision of the world in which the Stalinist Communist Parties were genuine working-class parties, Stalinist elites, where they held power, were the working class in power. The seizure of power by the peculiar middle-class and army officer Afghan Stalinist organisation was the working class seizing power. These views that were lunatic in their divergence from reality. Views that any person who was not hopelessly ignorant - and you were not *hopelessly* ignorant - could not seriously sustain. Yet you sustained it. If I understand you, you still sustain it.

You related to the world by way of making deductions from absurdities, fantastic delusions like your characterisation of the Afghan middle class-army officer Stalinist formation as working class. At every shift, as events ripped holes in the fabric of your fantasies, you moved to repair the picture. (The record is in “In Defence of October”).

That is perhaps why you have such difficulty now in bringing your current politics, your lately discovered “absolute anti-imperialism”, into line with your past. Why you can’t admit — or so it seems — that you were certainly wrong in relation to Afghanistan even though if you are right now, you were wrong then. If you were right then to back the colonial conquest of Afghanistan and the attempt to erect a Stalinist “slave state” there, then your “principled Anti-Imperialist” position now is very strange indeed.

What would really help the AWL would be for “Jack-of-the-Beautiful-Mind”, or, at a pinch, even you, Mark, to write a reply to my pamphlet. Jack-of-the-Beautiful-Mind, you will remember, wrote a many-part polemic against Martin Thomas and myself but, strangely, he never got round to replying to my pamphlet.

One of my biggest problems in convincing people that you are worth talking to is the attitude of those AWL comrades who in the past have taken you for a serious political tendency, for a political “political tendency”. We succeeded in breaking you from the “Israel must be wiped out” kitsch left consensus to a two-state solution; and to recognise that in Ireland the situation is not one defined by British occupation but by a conflict between two distinct sorts of Irish people. We succeeded in getting you to understand some of these problems at a general level, but, as those in the AWL who

think you a waste of good space remind us, it had no political effect on you. You drew no political conclusions. All we succeeded in doing was in making you even more profoundly incoherent.

On Israel-Palestine you still splash about in the septic ditch of anti-Semitic “anti-Zionism” which, as you know, originates with your still pined-for Stalinist movement (though these days it is mainly the proud possession of politically deracinated kitsch-Trotskyists).

In theory you accept that Israel has a right to exist and defend itself. In practice? You run with the hounds of “anti-Zionism”, baying even more hysterically than your running-mates. You throw what weight you have behind the demonisation of Zionism - that is, since the end of the thirties, of most Jews alive - which poisons the left against rational politics on the Middle East.

Someone in the AWL called you the “oxymorons ‘r’ us, multiple personality, Stalinist ‘ex-Stalinists’”. I find that hard to refuse. I find it especially hard to explain how you can in theory think that the British Irish north-east Ulster Protestants have rights in practice glorify and endorse the Catholic chauvinist IRA’s campaign (and even that of groups like INLA, which combine left phrases with unashamed Catholic sectarianism).

The problem here is that even some of those in the AWL who are loath to dismiss you, can’t help but see you as people for whom political principles are far less important than manoeuvrings to stay in with the kitsch left.

But the strange saga of your position on imperialism, is, as I have said, the big issue. You are people who backed the Russian butchery in Afghanistan all through the eighties, when one in three of the estimated then population of 18 million were driven over the border as refugees (the Taliban arose amongst them), and one and a half million were killed with napalm and other socialist, Russian technologies of war.

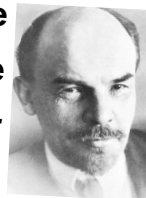
You don’t have the right to prattle as you do about imperialism and anti-imperialism.

Let me close, Mark, with an appeal for your help in convincing the rest of the AWL that you are not a hopeless hodge-podge organisation blighted by an inability to choose between being a principled propaganda group — people capable of holding their course no matter what hostility they encounter — and manoeuvrers and organisational fixers. Answer my questions.

*Yours in comradeship, Sean Matgamna*

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of the  
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