



Morality, revolution, the Bolsheviks, and us

By Sean Matgamna

"Impartiality in the face of injustice is the virtue of a slave" — James Connolly, October 1915

"Problems of revolutionary morality are fused with the problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics... Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means... which unite the revolutionary proletariat, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality and its democratic echoers, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns... base means" — Leon Trotsky, 1938

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives — these are the rules of the Fourth International" — Leon Trotsky, 1938

"We live in a labour movement grown spiritually cross-eyed from the long pursuit of realpolitik and the operation of double standards, a movement ideologically sick and poisoned. In terms of moral ecology, the left and the labour movement is something of a disaster area because of the long-term use of methods and arguments which have corrupted the consciousness of the working class. The most poisonous root of that corruption was the Stalinist movement" — Socialist Organiser appeal for support against the libel case brought by Vanessa Redgrave and the WRP, 1981.

"Caesar never did wrong but with just cause" — William Shakespeare [1]

Lacking other than a distant nodding acquaintance here and there with academic philosophy I am reluctant to get involved in a discussion like the one Alan Johnson opens about Norman Geras's ideas on "The Ethics of Revolution". I might, I suppose, settle for the short answer: read Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours* again, and leave it at that. But some specific issues focused on by Alan Johnson (*Solidarity* 487 and 488, bit.ly/aj-0 bit.ly/aj-2) and Norman Geras (quoted by Johnson) deserve specific answers.

First, we need to get something out of the way.



Leon Trotsky was elected People's Commissar of Army and Navy Affairs in 1918, and was also chair of the Supreme Military Council. He created the Red Army out of nothing, the Bolsheviks having disbanded the old Russian army in February 1918

Norman Geras was a member or supporter of the Mandelstam International Marxist Group (IMG) at the time when it uncritically hailed the Stalinist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia as socialist and proletarian revolutions. At the time, also, when it supported the Provisional IRA war, and what the Provisionals did in it, uncritically. [2]

Then he moved politically, bit by bit, until in 2003 he was a supporter of the US invasion of Iraq. He was the main author of the 2006 Euston Manifesto, which might charitably be called politically fatuous. Who better qualified to draw up a code of morality for revolutionary Marxists than Norman Geras?

Alan Johnson went from the politics of Workers' Liberty to — god help us! — Tony Blair, over a decade ago. Who better fitted to be the late Geras's vicar on earth, to preach a sermon on morality to us, and to the shades of the Bolsheviks, than an old Blairite?

That much needed to be said in obedience to the dictates of my own political morality. Beyond that, I will not argue ad hominem.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

Morality is a grammar of behaviour whose elements relate to each other in shifting patterns that constantly change form and meaning.

It is always a working, conditional morality. It may be wrong to kill; in some circumstances it may be wrong and immoral not to kill.

Vladimir Lenin was fond of citing the basic — dialectical — rule that "the truth is always concrete". So is the moral truth. What is good or bad in a given situation depends on a number of exigencies. [3]

In terms of our basic morality, of course we have a common humanity and empathy, and the Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do to you.

But we live in a world divided into hostile states, nations, tribes in some areas, notional "tribes" of like-thinkers in others, and by sometimes murderous class conflict even in the most civilised nations, in Britain, for example.

We have an everyday code of strict morality which nevertheless has to be modified in our unavoidable conflicts with a ruling class with which we do not, and can not, share a comprehensive, common, all-embracing, morality, least of all during conflicts and revolutions. Our common humanity is refracted through conflict, sometimes mortal conflict.

Our morality is not something calculated and codified abstractly. It is first the morality handed down to us through the evolution of human civilisation, and most recently the evolution of the working class within capitalist society. The "golden rule" of course. The principle of standing up for yourself and for others across lines of nation, gender, skin-colour, sexuality, etc., against oppression. The liberal or libertarian principle that people should be able to do what they want to do as long as it does not do harm to others.

Labour movements have been and are the bearers and practitioners of a high moral code. A basic impulse of solidarity with other workers to oppose the exploiters, or im-

pose what the workers see as in their own collective interests, animates the labour movement. Without it there could be no labour movement. In labour movements, solidarity fuses narrow self-interest with a high collective morality.

Labour and socialist movements aspire to make their own moral code the pattern for all social relations. Labour movements cannot spontaneously arrived at Marxist consciousness — which is raised upon ideas about the economy, history, and philosophy which have to be created and acquired by study — but the working class can and does spontaneously arrive at the core moral values in which Marxist socialism culminate.

In war, semi-war, and revolution, day-to-day morality, peace-time morality, modified at certain points, would still guide us. The moral norms would still be basic humanist and socialist morality, but with some things in some situations modified or turned on their head by the conditions of insurrection or civil war. In all-out conflict, the Golden Rule, do as you would be done by, gives place to what is sometimes called “the Eleventh Commandment” — do to others what they would do to you, and do it first. You have a “Golden Rule” duty to yourself, your side (your class or nation), against the other side.

MORALITY AND WAR

War, die-or-kill relations with other people, and revolutionary war too, brings out atavistic savagery, and leads individuals and groups to extremes and excesses before it burns out.

And in that there is what might be called the Madame Defarge factor (after Dickens’s woman who sat next to the guillotine, knitting as the heads fell, obsessed with revenge on the aristocrats). The deeper the social upheaval, the more likely will be people acting out of primitive revenge against the former dominant power and its collaborators.

But even in war you don’t kill or harm people needlessly and wantonly. You don’t ill-treat or kill civilians. You don’t treat civilians and prisoners of war with needless cruelty.

But consider this true story [4]. Three soldiers are trying to make their way through the lines. One is wounded and being carried on his back by a comrade. The third is a German prisoner of war.

The soldiers, the man being carried and his rescuer, fear being turned on by the prisoner. So they shoot him dead.

How can that be assessed morally? They shot a disarmed and helpless man out of fear that the position would suddenly be reversed and that they themselves might lose their lives. Were they justified? It’s a balancing of the fear of a reversal of fortune against the life of the German soldier. Did they, the unwounded man and the wounded man being carried, have the right to kill their enemy for their own protection? It was immoral if it was unnecessary: but who can reliably judge that, especially from outside? Geras, as we will see, seems to want us to say it was wrong, but nevertheless right in the circumstances, but that doesn’t solve anything.

For socialists, the tragedy of workers shooting other workers in World War 1 is the great tragedy, the all-shaping tragedy here, and of course there is a broader morality in that large story of which this small story is part.

Separate the question from the framework of the overall character of that particular war, and they surely did have the right to protect themselves.

That doesn’t tell you whether the fear was justified or exaggerated, and the action resulting from the fear necessary or unnecessary. Those decisions can be made only by way of judgment, necessarily approximate judgment, in the flux of the situation. They can’t be made by simple basic rules like “thou shalt not kill” or even “don’t kill a disarmed enemy once he has surrendered”. The moral truth is always concrete.

MORALITY IN REVOLUTION, AND DIFFERENT REVOLUTIONS

Perhaps the nearest thing that we have to a “golden rule” in socialist revolution is what Rosa Luxemburg wrote in November 1918:

“A world must be turned upside down. But each tear that flows, when it could have been spared, is an accusation, and he commits a crime who with brutal inadvertency crushes a poor earthworm”. We must fight, and try to win, but every drop of blood we shed needlessly will cry out against us.

Norman Geras proposes a different and more absolute

“ethics of revolution”. “In order, therefore, to have the necessary force to constrain and limit what is done in a just revolutionary cause, the rights must be treated as all but absolute... They may be overridden if and only if doing so is the sole means of averting imminent and certain disaster. I repeat: the sole means; and disaster which is otherwise imminent and certain. This is a proviso of impending moral catastrophe. What it permits is to do a moral wrong in order to escape some very terrible consequence. But it is, then, precisely a wrong that is done. Justifiable in one perspective, it remains unjustifiable in another. ‘It does not become all right’” (Norman Geras, *The Ethics of Revolution*, bit.ly/ethics-g).

Rosa Luxemburg’s summary would not meet Geras’s project of stipulating absolutes. She does not set down positive detailed ethical rules for revolutionaries. The qualification, “when it could have been spared” leaves everything to be defined by circumstances.

And the ruling class accepted no common set of rules: that same Luxemburg, soon after writing the words quoted above, was denounced by her ruling-class and right-wing Social Democrat enemies as “Bloody Rosa”, had her head smashed by a rifle butt, and was then thrown in a canal.

Norman Geras was trying to translate things that are in reality always political choices, governed by the needs of political insurrection or army-against-army military conflict, into terms of morality.

Yet Geras advocates his absolute morality only as an ideal prescription. It is a morality most of whose precepts have release clauses triggered by exigency. Wrong remains wrong, but is sometimes right, says Geras. “Caesar never did wrong but with just cause”...

As I read Geras, he extrapolates his morality negatively from revolutions of three different types, and without distinguishing. Geras is talking about the Bolshevik revolution (workers’ revolutions in the past and future), but also, as test cases in the same search for general rules, the Stalinist anti-bourgeois revolutions in Eastern Europe, China, and Vietnam. He is also discussing the morality of the revolutionaries in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. [5]

These were revolutions made by different classes. Different classes, at points of sharp conflict, have different social aims and different moralities, and different attitudes to certain categories of people.

In the Stalinist anti-bourgeois revolutions the working class, like society itself, was History’s object, not its subject. In Russia, the Bolsheviks led the workers to take direct control of society. In China the working class was repressed, quelled, and regimented, as soon as the revolutionary peasant army occupied a city. The events may all have been “revolutions”, but actions in them cannot be judged — and the participants cannot judge themselves — by a common moral measurement for all.

Geras grounds his attempt at an “absolute” ethics for use in all revolutions on the medieval Catholic Church doctrine about “jus in bello” (ethical rules within war, as distinct from “jus ad bellum”, ethical rules about which wars were justified and which were not).

The medieval theorising which Geras thinks can be co-opted or used as paradigm was concerned with codes for established states or aristocrats in their conflicts with each other. The idea of rules of war fixed in advance implies combatants who recognise each other. It implies treating with equals. It implies a power to enforce the rules by the threat of sure revenge on those who break the rules. In the Middle Ages it implied a belief in God — an all-powerful and all-knowing God who would revenge breaches of the code, if not by defeat for the miscreants in the war in question, then by eternal damnation in the fires of Hell for those who broke the rules.

And it was a set of ideas about the behaviour of rival monarchs and aristocrats, who used war as a normal form of competition for territory and resources, and about how they might agree to regulate that competition.

So the short and, even if it is taken alone, sufficient answer to Norman Geras is that the medieval concords on war were agreements between people who regarded each other as equals — and fellow-Christians. No such equivalence is ordinarily true of revolutionaries and those whom they fight.

In a revolution the rebels are not considered justified by their opponents, nor is the ruling government by the rebels. Rules of conflict such as the medieval doctrines (or the

Geneva Conventions of the 20th century) fail between people who consider their opponents evil or illegitimate - between people who feel that theirs is a life-and-death struggle in which each side knows that if it loses it will be, to one degree or another, destroyed.

Social attitudes shape conduct. To recognise rules of conduct and combatant rights is to bestow a degree of legitimacy on the other side, government on rebels or rebels on government. It bestows a strength, a weapon in the conflict.

The two sides have different attitudes to specific sections of the population, but even so there is competition for the support of non-combatants, and competition to demoralise and discourage the civilian supporters of the other side. The claim to be right as against measureless wrong, to be politically and morally legitimate, either as defenders of “law and order” and the status quo, or as righteous rebels against tyranny, is central in civil war and revolution. It confers advantage on the government, or on the rebels against the government.

Between which historical, contemporary, or likely future rebels, and those whom they rebel against, is an agreed common code of right and wrong possible? When has it happened?

Moreover, *jus in bello*, if I understand correctly what it was, regulated only the aristocrats’ treatment of each other. All such wars were governed by the practice of despoiling your opponents’ territory and its inhabitants when you could, confiscating food from people who would starve without it, burning villages, robbing farms, and killing your opponent’s peasant tenants or serfs. Common soldiers were routinely butchered.

Rival nobles were, when possible, captured alive and held for ransom. Even then, not always: at the battle of Agincourt in 1415 Henry V of England decided to slaughter his aristocratic French prisoners of war for fear that, with the outcome of the battle not yet decided, they could again become active fighters. That is, in terms of morality, and in the class frame of that medieval war, the same issue as with the World War 1 soldiers, above.

Yet Norman Geras describes himself as investigating “by what normative principles socialists might be guided... when it comes to revolutionary change”. He derives his ethics for revolution from the “wealth... fullness and determinacy of *jus in bello*”; imagines those rules as extended to a uniform ideal; and proposes them as ethics for all revolutions.

“Normative” means fixed-in-advance restrictions and limits. But in a revolution, should the insurgents risk letting their side, their people, their class, the bigger “them”, be defeated, rather than breach a code devised for non-revolutionary conflicts, and one which their opponents will not be bound by? What revolutionaries would or should do that?

In a situation in which you are cognisant only of one part of a battlefield, and have to assess the practical cost of your moral code in perhaps bringing defeat upon yourself, your cause, and your people, how should you act? How could such prior limits for moral reasons operate in practice?

Our evaluation of moral limits will depend on our class allegiance and our class attitude to the forces making the revolution, not on the abstract fact that it is “a revolution” in general, and not on a set of rules designed to fit both all revolutions (socialist, Stalinist, or other) and derived from non-revolutionary conflicts between medieval aristocrats.

A common morality between, on the one side, rebels considered as illegitimate and traitors, and on the other, those thought of as tyrants, exploiters, etc. is more or less an impossibility. Except, maybe, episodically, in a particular area of conflict, nothing like that regulated competition is possible between insurgent workers — or other insurgents — and a ruling power.

Therefore any notion of established moral rules of war falls down in the case of war between insurgents and ruling-class power — and it is that which concerns us here. It falls down because they simply can not treat each other as equals.

Geras’s idea that the working class should now, and in the past should have, set itself strict rules in advance on how to fight a revolutionary war, adapting those from the medieval codes, falls down both because working-class revolution is radically different from war between medieval powers, and because even in the case where you have combatants who recognise each other as equals in some sense, and there are rules prescribed in advance, in actual war those will at best have only limited and conditional effect.

GENEVA CONVENTIONS

In general, the growth of international law in the last decades is surely good, even though it is bourgeois law.

It was good that the Nazi leaders were tried and many of them hanged after World War 2, even though some of the prosecutors and judges, and the leaders of the victorious powers, most clearly the Russians but also the others, would themselves have stood trial in any properly functioning system of international law.

After the experience of World War 1, the Geneva Protocol of 1925 outlawed the use of poison gas in war. As far as I know, poison gas was used by neither side against the other in World War 2 as it was used in World War 1. It was reserved for use against certain civilians, Jewish, gypsy, etc. (It was used in the Iran-Iraq war between different Muslim persuasions, Shia and Sunni, against Kurdish insurgents in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and recently against insurgents in Syria).

Overall, however, the Geneva Conventions did not, for either of the war camps, regulate what actually happened in World War 2. There were many atrocities on the Allied side whose perpetrators were not tried like the Nazi leaders, and which were not well known until later. For example, the terror bombing of Dresden in 1944. For another example, the systematic mass rape of hundreds of thousands of German women in Berlin, Vienna, and other places by the conquering Russian soldiers, with the tacit assent of the Russian authorities.

At the end of the war, Churchill, Truman, and Stalin agreed to the expulsion of perhaps 13 million ethnic Germans from Russian-occupied East European territories where German communities had lived for centuries. The leaders, cynically, said that those people would be expelled “humanely”. In fact, perhaps half a million of them were killed by revenge-crazed Czechs and others, or were marched or starved to death. Those who lived through the “humane” expulsion went to a Germany which had been ruined by bombs and was now starving.

There are many cases now known of Allied mistreatment of German prisoners of war. Stalin enslaved millions of German prisoners. They were not set free at the end of the war. As late as 1956, the Polish Stalinist government was still trying to negotiate the return of Poles deported and enslaved by Stalin in 1939-40.

When the USA developed a functioning atom bomb, the prospect in its war with Japan was for a prolonged battle for countless islands, against warriors who would fight to the last rusty bayonet. A lot of American soldiers would die.

The atom bomb offered an alternative. From his own point of view, US president Truman had every right to use the atom bomb to save American lives.

Did Truman therefore have the right to demonstrate the atom bomb by obliterating the population of two Japanese cities? Surely he did not. Truman could have found other ways of demonstrating the power of the bomb to convince the leaders of Japan that it was useless to continue. In any case, what he did expressed a bourgeois, nationalist, and probably to a serious extent racist morality of war.

Here the dividing line between the bourgeoisie’s morality and ours is decisive. Socialists, humanists, in Truman’s situation, faced with a very bloody, ragged, and prolonged war, would not have done what he did. As I’ve said, different classes have their own morality, even in war.

There were some useful restraints and proclamations of morality in agreements like the Geneva Conventions, but those are and will always be limited, or very limited, and cannot provide for future innovations and exigencies. They cannot

be relied on in regular wars, and still less can revolutionaries make them a guide on the premiss that our enemies will reciprocate. They won’t. They haven’t and they won’t.

THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

Revolutionary morality is governed by situations where reality and possible reality, desirable or horrifying to one side or the other, are being defined and redefined in rapid, blow-for-blow, flux.

There is a normal, tranquil-times morality. How can it, how should it, change in a kill-or-be-killed situation? In the Russian civil war it was frequently a question of all-out effort to avoid a defeat in which those on the revolutionary side, or deemed to be on the revolutionary side (and unworthy of life: Jews in Ukraine) would be massacred or degraded, as they were when the Whites triumphed in one area or another.

The Russian civil war of 1918-21 was also partly shaped by the war morality not only of the sides in the civil war, but also of the world around the Bolsheviks. A world where two multinational juggernauts had warred, for years in stalemate, and with tens of millions wounded or killed. The Bolsheviks had to fight the civil war in a death-infected world — a world where fourteen million died in wars in Russia between 1914 and 1921. They had no choice but to operate in and on that world or to give up. They fought with the knowledge that their opponents would, if they won, massacre the workers whom the Bolsheviks led.

There is the much-cited argument that “he who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself”. But suppose you have to fight dragons. Suppose you have no alternative in a world ruled by dragons?

The supposed great dilemma — you become what you fight — is far too abstract. It measures history by abstract norms that fail to grasp the reality. Alan, there have been revolutions in history in which progress was made! The great bourgeois revolutions engendered progress, even if Cromwell eventually took the title of Lord Protector and Napoleon that of Emperor.

In revolutionary war, if the insurgent side goes into battle with the idea that the war can be fought according to a pre-arranged code, then the practical consequence may be to inhibit, mystify, and confuse the revolutionaries. To go into battle with some expectation that the ruling class will treat the rebels chivalrously is self-disarming and might be self-defeating.

Take the 1916 Rising in Dublin. At his court martial James Connolly said that England had no right in Ireland, never had, and never would have. He maintained that England had no right to try him. He scorned to explain his part in the Rising and to answer charges which he said the British had no right to bring against him.

He made one exception. He would answer, he said, only to one charge — that the insurgents had deliberately ill-treated their prisoners. He explained that what they had done and not done was determined by the conditions of war. They did not deliberately ill-treat their prisoners of war.

And the British and their prisoners of war? They shot or hanged 16 of the leaders. The court-martial to which Connolly spoke about the charge of mistreating prisoners sentenced their prisoner to be shot. With a wound in his leg not healed, they took him out to the prison yard on a stretcher and propped him up in a chair before a firing squad.

Or take another example. In 1798 a small French army landed in the west of Ireland to help Irish insurgents, the United Irishmen, to win - in the words of Wolf Tone - “the rights of man in Ireland”. They roused the countryside and detonated a rebellion by the local people, a peasant rising.

They had some success, defeating an English redcoat army, which, in an event that became known as “the races of Castlebar”, fled through the streets of a town. But reinforcements did not arrive.

The French army had to surrender. They were soldiers of revolutionary (or post-revolutionary) France. Even so, they were soldiers, and were treated as prisoners of war, as the British wanted their soldiers captured by the French to be treated.

Their Irish co-belligerents the British hanged or bayoneted, every one of them that they could lay hands on, including those captured when the French invading army had surrendered. They were rebels and traitors against those who claimed to be their rightful and irremovable rulers — against their natural masters and superiors, who did not recognise

the right of those whom they saw as Irish yahoos to be free — or to live.

The Irish were excluded from the quasi-civilised rules of mutual respect and acceptance that the French and British had for each other.

MORALS OF EXPLOITED AND EXPLOITERS

So a comprehensive code of revolutionary war morality cannot make sense unless we assume, which we can’t, that both revolution and counter-revolution recognise each other’s right to fight the war.

Geras concedes that exigencies may override general considerations of right and wrong. He thereby concedes the whole case against his project of an “all but absolute” set of rules. He saves the project only by insisting on calling things that he concedes have to be done in revolutionary exigencies nevertheless “wrong”, not “right”. Caesar never does wrong except with just cause and in morally specific exigencies...

Geras insists that Trotsky made a great moral mistake by identifying the morality of revolution with the morality of war and eliminating all overriding “ethics of revolution”.

Trotsky wrote: “To apply different criteria to the actions of the exploiters and the exploited signifies, according to these pitiful mannequins, standing on the level of the ‘morals of the Kaffirs’ [East Africans and black South Africans]. First of all such a contemptuous reference to the Kaffirs is hardly proper from the pen of ‘socialists’.

“Are the morals of the Kaffirs really so bad? Here is what the Encyclopedia Britannica says upon the subject:

“In their social and political relations they display great tact and intelligence; they are remarkably brave, warlike, and hospitable, and were honest and truthful until through contact with the whites they became suspicious, revengeful and thievish, besides acquiring most European vices’.

“It is impossible not to arrive at the conclusion that white missionaries, preachers of eternal morals, participated in the corruption of the Kaffirs.

“If we should tell the toiler-Kaffir how the workers arose in a part of our planet and caught their exploiters unawares, he would be very pleased. On the other hand, he would be chagrined to discover that the oppressors had succeeded in deceiving the oppressed.

“A Kaffir who has not been demoralized by missionaries to the marrow of his bones will never apply one and the same abstract moral norms to the oppressors and the oppressed. Yet he will easily comprehend an explanation that it is the function of these abstract norms to prevent the oppressed from arising against their oppressors”.

There is a war morality. The crux of revolution is a military clash.

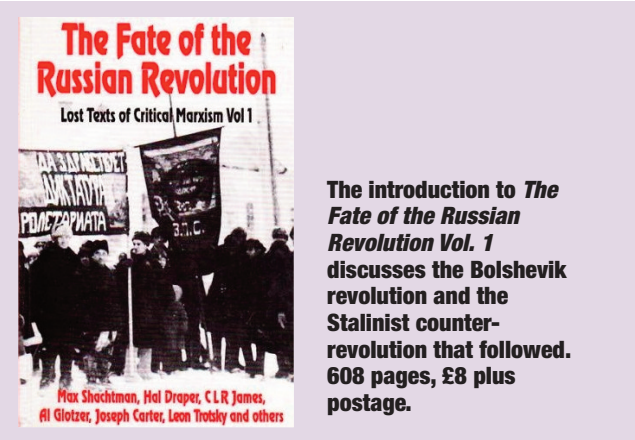
The ethical rules for revolutionaries which Geras wants can’t be defined in advance for all situations, let alone as rules covering all revolutions (working-class, nationalist, Stalinist, etc.). Who can define in advance when suffering “could have been spared”? The decisions have to be made on the hoof, and with a serious risk of mistakes, or of overdoing an action involving violence for fear that less would be not enough. If you want a picket line strong enough that the police will not be able to break it, you cannot calculate the exact minimum amount of force that will be necessary to a nicety beforehand. You are guided by the rule: prepare for the worst eventual-ity.

BRITISH MINERS’ STRIKE OF 1984-5

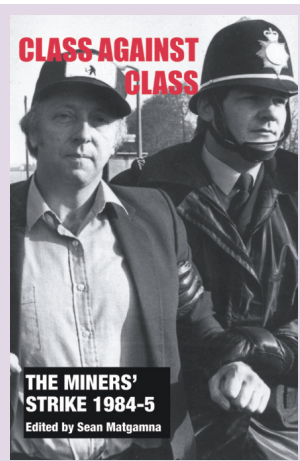
Some of the same issues come up even in cases of intense class struggle well short of revolution or civil war. Take the example of the British miners’ strike of 1984-5.

Labour movements have helped civilise advanced bourgeois societies. But it has not been in our power to civilise the ruling class in their relations with us at points of high social tension. In Britain we live in a society which was — in your political lifetime, Alan — brutally reshaped by a government which had no morality in common with the working class and whose leader Margaret Thatcher proclaimed that openly, in her own way.

When she entered Downing Street after her first election victory in 1979, her speechwriters had her quote St Francis, the pantheistic and communistic 12th century Italian monk. “Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we



The introduction to *The Fate of the Russian Revolution Vol. 1* discusses the Bolshevik revolution and the Stalinist counter-revolution that followed. 608 pages, £8 plus postage.



The second edition of *The miners' strike 1984-5: class against class* includes: A detailed week-by-week history of the strike
Photos by John Harris and newspaper front pages from the time
The story of "Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners"
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bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope". In fact she brought bitter and brutal hypocrisy-clad class war.

Years before Thatcher came to office in 1979, the ruling class and their politicians had worked out strategies to defeat the miners in a strike and to destroy trade-union power in general. The Tories used the state mercilessly. "Jacobin-fashion", as we said then. They used it against a big part of their own people, whom Thatcher called, with appropriate civil-war imagery, the enemy within. If the law, bourgeois law, can be taken to embody some moral code, social agreement, etc., then it broke down. The Tory government ignored the law when it was convenient, and the police illegally stopped movement in and out of mining villages. For us, Thatcher, the Tories, and the police were the enemy within. We had a political, and therefore a moral, right and duty to defeat them.

A devastating world economic slump came soon after the Tories took power in 1979. They used it to undermine the conditions of the working class and drive workers out of the factories.

Workers acting in solidarity with other workers is the core of trade unionism and the main tool of effective trade unionism. As has been said, it is a very high moral value. The Tories outlawed it. That is, they used the state to pinion the workers whose conditions of life they were devastating in legal fetters. The whole labour movement was faced with the choice of fighting our "enemy within", which was trying to cripple us, or surrendering. At the start of Thatcher's rule, workers were strong enough to resist, and perhaps could have won, if the labour movement had mobilised and used its strength.

The Labour leaders didn't resist, partly from fear that the ruling class would break all the established moral, political and social rules and make a military coup — that is, that sections of the state might tear up the existing rules of political life. [6]

The Tories made social war. At the time we argued — you too, Alan — that the labour movement should fight back using every position of strength it had, including its positions in local government. If the struggle escalated, the labour movement should face its responsibilities. We argued in Socialist Organiser that a system that allowed Thatcher to stay in power and do irreparable damage was not democratic. We argued for annual Parliaments. We argued for expanding and extending democracy. We repeated Trotsky's arguments in his Action Program for France (1934):

"As long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie...

"A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers' power".

We even invoked the USA's constitutionally-enshrined right to revolt against tyranny! (See our book *Democracy, Direct Action, and Socialism*).

In 1984 the miners, who had been in the Tories' sights from the beginning, began an all-out fightback. And they were subjected to every blow the government could devise. The bourgeois press howled against the miners and the left. Violence is not permitted, they shouted, not counting the extreme violence against the miners of police, and police convoys, and police garrisoning of pit villages.

The Battle of Orgreave was perhaps the turning point. Miners confronted baton-wielding and some mounted police in a pitched battle which the miners lost. At least 50 miners were seriously injured, and dozens were arrested on charges

bearing heavy sentences.

Seven years later the courts awarded payments in compensation to 35 miners for injuries they received at Orgreave. That made no difference to the outcome back in 1984 and in all the years after. The brute force of the state had crushed the workers' resistance.

Where was right and wrong in that situation? The tragedy was that the miners and the rest of the working class were not able to muster enough force to defeat the Tories and the police. That we could not deploy enough effective violence. The miners would have been justified in using more or less any means to defend themselves. Wouldn't they?

In November 1984 a taxi driver, David Wilkie, was killed by two miners dropping a concrete block onto his taxi from a bridge as he drove a scab miner to work. Wilkie did that because he had an ideological commitment to defeating the miners.

A moral question arose there. It exercised me at the time. Aside from whether attacking the taxi was advisable there and then, was it right or wrong in principle? Did the striking miners have the right to resort to lethal violence?

Suppose the desperate miners had resorted to other such lethal tactics, as had not infrequently happened in US labour history, where strikes have often become small civil wars? If that had happened, would we get out a moral calculator and do a sum to prove that such tactics were wrong, were not "British", and therefore, in our august judgement, were unjustified, and could not be used for moral reasons. We wouldn't, and, to speak of what I can be certain of, I wouldn't, even though the November 1984 incident exercised me.

"From behind their massed ranks of heavily-equipped police, the Tories have turned up the volume of their hypocritical denunciations of violence... NUM [National Union of Mineworkers] representatives at all levels have described [Wilkie's] death as a tragedy...

"But let's put David Wilkie's death into context. Five strikers have died on the picket lines. Hundreds are in hospital, many with very severe injuries. The Tories chose open class war... decided to use whatever force was necessary to get every single scab miner into the pits.

"According to his mother... Wilkie was politically committed to the scabs. He volunteered for the runs through the picket line.

"The Tories opted for full-scale class warfare. They opted for violence. They have no right to use the casualties to boost their cause. As British industry decays, the padding is being stripped off the class struggle. The Tories are shifting Britain towards... violent class battles — and at the same time trying to appeal to the abandoned traditions of relative social peace as a weapon against the miners.

"The miners, and the rest of the working class, have no choice but to fight back on the terms that the Tories have set. Margaret Thatcher has said that the Tory government will introduce 'any measures necessary' to strengthen the police... The working class must resist by any means necessary. Our resistance has to be organised, disciplined, and well-considered. But we cannot and should not be intimidated by the Tories' attempted moral blackmail". (*Socialist Organiser* 208, 5 December 1984).

CHILDREN: 1913 AND 1918

Are there then no absolute moral rules? Take the matter of children

In the morality of civilised grown-ups, any violence, bullying, guilting, lying to, punitive exactions on, or sarcastic, mocking, diminishing treatment of children and adolescents, the weakest in the family or in any collective in society, is reprehensible. It is wrong. This is, I think, one of the nearest things to an absolute moral rule. On the level of personal behaviour, I would say that it is absolute.

Socialists, where they have some control over conditions, try to help children (their own and others) grow up as reasoning, sharing, empathising, altruistic, non-vindictive, unselfish human beings. One of the glories of labour movement history in my opinion is that the newspaper of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, when the union was rousing workers ground down by terrible conditions of housing and work or not-work, and the bosses were fighting a war on labour and "Larkinism", carried an article urging the proper treatment of children: "Are You Making Slaves?"

Yet the ITGWU, the Larkinites, the Connollyites, played a part in inflicting very great suffering on the often shoeless

and generally deprived working-class children of Dublin when it took on the employers who wanted to smash the union, and fought to win the "Labour War" of 1913-14.

The ability to starve working-class children was always at that time a weapon in the hands of the employers. The union members had to watch their children hunger and starve.

Donagh MacDonagh's great Ballad of James Larkin puts it well:

"Eight months we fought and eight months we starved; we stood by Larkin through thick and thin

"But foodless homes and the crying of children, they broke our hearts, we could not win".

To fight, the workers had to inflict that, and see that inflicted, on their children.

When an attempt was made to do what had been done in some American strikes and move the children to live with sympathisers outside the war zone, a great sectarian agitation was raised by the priests, in full cry against the union, backed by the Catholic Orange Order, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, then very powerful. The workers had no choice but to fight, but the children's suffering probably did break the spirit of some of them, and no doubt sapped the spirit of all of them to some degree.

If you want to translate it into morality, it is that what they fought for was, if they could win, going to be of great benefit to the children, both as children and later as workers. Knowing that did not make the hunger and the "crying of children" easier to bear.

The Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, was a bloody tyrant, and as a human being seemingly had some dimensions missing. But he loved his children. He loved his little haemophiliac son and heir.

The Bolsheviks in July 1918 took a decision — Trotsky says Vladimir Lenin and Yakov Sverdlov decided — to kill that entire family, including the blameless children. A terrible, terrible thing.

They fell victim to the laws of dynastic succession. The Tsar is dead? Long live the little Tsar or Tsarina!

The Bolsheviks thought there was a substantial risk of the children falling into the hands of counter-revolutionaries and becoming a great strengthening for them. That would have cost the lives of unknowable numbers of workers and workers' children. [7]

Was it moral or immoral to deprive the counter-revolution of a rallying centre by killing the Tsar's children?

An answer can be made only according to calculations about the actual or likely victims of counter-revolution in the civil war. People living more or less calmly, as we do, Alan Johnson and I, would find it very difficult to make such a decision. I'm not sure I would ever have sufficient strength and sense of responsibility to make it. I think, however, that the Bolsheviks had the right to make that decision and to carry it out.

The decision the Bolsheviks took was horrible and terrible, but I would not second-guess them, because in the last reckoning I am on their side. Of course historians have a right and duty to portray accurately, analyse honestly, and arrive at a sober retrospective judgement; but I believe they were right to fight the civil war, and in their situation the Bolsheviks probably knew better than Alan Johnson or I can today.

Were such things a matter of the Bolsheviks having a morality which said that anything could go if it served? Here I think translating politics into morality produces a large area of confusion.

Anything goes? Were the Bolsheviks, fighting a war in desperate conditions, bound by moral rules which would protect the Tsar's guiltless children?

Given their assessment of the situation and the alternatives, should the Bolsheviks have let a general moral rule not to mistreat (let alone deliberately kill) guiltless young people and children outweigh the likely consequences if the Tsar's children were to fall into the hands of the counter-revolution? It was a horrible choice. But the moral choice just to let it happen — if the counter-revolution gets to use the Tsar's children as a rallying-point, then so be it — that choice, apart from being uncharacteristic of the Bolsheviks' general cast of mind, would be not moral but immoral.

I repeat: the moral truth is always concrete.

Part 2: The Bolsheviks and Lenin

I do not have space to reply to all the points which Alan Johnson claims justify Ernest Erber and tell against the Bolsheviks and Max Shachtman's defence of them.

I deal here only with the way in which, I believe, Alan Johnson misrepresents Lenin. For the rest, I would refer back to Shachtman's book, which I do not believe Alan answers adequately, and to my own introduction to *The Fate of the Russian Revolution* volume 1.

The Bolsheviks had the democratic majority, as testified by the votes in the Soviet Congress which opened on 25 October 1917 and even more by the votes at the next Congress in January 1918. The Bolsheviks were soon joined in a coalition government by the Left SRs, by then the main peasant party.

On the facts, there is no question but that democratic right lay with them. They acted in accord with the will of the people, for example by legalising land seizures.

Alan Johnson quotes a snippet from Lenin's *Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* (written in September 1917) to suggest that the Bolsheviks intended to replace the rule-by-force of 130,000 landowners by similar rule-by-force of 240,000 Bolsheviks, only with the assurance that the Bolsheviks' despotism would be in the interests of the poor.

"Russia was ruled by 130,000 landowners. They ruled by means of constant force over 150 million people ... And yet we are told that Russia will not be able to be governed by 240,000 members of the Bolshevik Party – governing in the interests of the poor and against the rich".

The slanted quote misrepresents Lenin's argument. The sentences cited are a response to the objection: "The proletariat, we are told, will not be able to set the state apparatus in motion". In other words, to the objection that, whatever the defects of the old ruling class, it knew how to administer public affairs, and no working-class alternative had that competence.

Straight after the sentences cited, Lenin argued that with the Bolsheviks' wider support "we... already have a 'state apparatus' of one million people devoted to the socialist state for the sake of high ideals and not for the sake of a fat sum received on the 20th of every month".

"In addition to that", Lenin continued, "we have a 'magic way' to enlarge our state apparatus tenfold at once, at one stroke, a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration".

"We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration". But millions could, and millions more could learn quickly. "Is there any way other than practice by which the people can learn to govern themselves and to avoid mistakes? Is there any way other than by proceeding immediately to genuine self-government by the people?"

Lenin's argument was that the 240,000 Bolsheviks could lead and inspire the creation of "genuine self-government by the people".

They made great strides towards that. Then civil war pushed them back. The Bolsheviks had to improvise an unwieldy state machine to feed and supply the Red Army and the cities during the civil war. Many of the best worker activists went to fight with the Red Army. Many died. For administration, the Bolsheviks had to call on those of the old officials who were willing to serve.

Four and half years later, in one of his last speeches before a series of strokes disabled him, Lenin ruefully but mercifully assessed the retreats forced by the civil war in terms



Injured Red Army soldiers during the civil war

reminiscent of what Alan Johnson quotes:

"Obviously, what is lacking is culture among the stratum of the Communists who perform administrative functions. If we take Moscow with its 4,700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom?"

"I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.

"Some thing analogous happened here to what we were told in our history lessons when we were children: sometimes...the vanquished version imposes its culture upon the conqueror".

FALSIFYING THE PICTURE

Alan Johnson falsifies the picture of the Bolsheviks, what they thought, what they intended, what they did.

His way of quoting radically misrepresent what Lenin wrote. He seems to have had recourse to the Golden Treasury of Patented All-Purpose Quotes and "Quotes" Against Lenin for the Busy Anti-Bolshevik Polemicist.

Alan seems to cull the quotation from *Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?* as if it proves that Lenin conceived of the active revolutionary force as the 240,000 Bolsheviks alone. He suggests that Lenin was counterposing the Bolsheviks to the Soviets, to the workers, to the unions, as the only living force. As an account of what Lenin did in the revolution, this is grossly misleading, even if the first person misled is Alan himself.

Lenin was not advocating the rule of the Bolsheviks as a party constituting itself as the state power, ruling in the same way that Russia's landowner caste had monopolised positions of command and decision. He was advocating, and he would continue to advocate, Soviet democracy, Soviet rule. Within the democracy the Bolsheviks would play a central role, educating, clarifying, leading, taking the initiative — that is, they would act as a political party.

To present the curtailed quotation as Lenin's program for Bolshevik-only rule, one that was then carried out by unrestricted terror, is not honest or serious.

Full-scale Russian civil war erupted in mid-1918. It would last for two and a half years. The civil war grew out of a variety of ruling-class and especially militarist opposition to the workers' revolution. Those who launched civil war against the Bolsheviks opportunistically seized on the Constituent

Assembly, dissolved with little stir in January 1918; yet they never won the majority of the peasants, let alone the workers.

The Reds successfully contested with the "Whites" for the allegiance of the peasants in the countryside. They built their apparatus of state in competition with a wide variety of political and military enemies, amidst economic collapse and crushing poverty, and within a culture shot through with violence and death after the years of World War. They could not have prevailed unless they had, in part by demonstrating their indomitable will to win, gained and kept the allegiance of a very large part of the peasants as well as of the workers.

In early 1919, for example, when the civil war was going badly for the Reds, Trotsky succeeded in winning over a crowd of 15,000 Red Army deserters gathered in Riazan (south-west of Moscow), tired of war, sick of conflict, wanting to go home. "I climbed on a table there in the yard, and spoke to them for about an hour and a half. It was a most responsive audience. I tried to raise them in their own eyes; concluding, I asked them to lift their hands in token of their loyalty to the revolution". And they did.

Looking back at the revolution through an opaque lens smeared with the blood and filth of the Stalinist regime, later commentators have imagined a tyrannical and bureaucratic "Stalinist" state machine inexorably working its tank-like power against the people in a drive to create a totalitarian state. Later in the century, Stalinist armies and parties calling themselves "communist" would do that, taking power as already-mighty military-bureaucratic machines, in Yugoslavia and China for example.

That is not what happened in Russia! To see the civil war that way is to read backwards into past history things that did not and could not exist then; it is to mix up the pages of two different calendars, that of the workers' revolution and that of the Stalinist counter-revolution.

The party that led the revolution was working-class, unruly, argumentative, and democratic. As late as 1918 its central administration had a staff of no more than a dozen, for a party with hundreds of thousands of members. Bolshevik party centralism did not produce the authoritarian state; it was the exigencies of civil war and invasion that made the Bolsheviks develop a strong centralised party machine in the same process that produced the authoritarian state.

In the first weeks after the decision of the Congress of Soviets in October 1917, the working-class soviets had scarcely



Lenin and Trotsky speaking in Moscow

any administrative or military machine at their disposal, and firmly controlled only the cities and the major towns. In July 1918 the Bolsheviks' erstwhile partners in government, the Left SRs, killed the German ambassador in Moscow and attempted an armed uprising. They wanted to provoke renewed war with Germany in order to avoid peace on terms dictated from strength by the Kaiser.

In September 1918 the Right SRs staged an uprising. They shot and wounded Lenin, and killed other Bolshevik leaders.

In order to create the state that existed by 1921, at the end of the civil war, the soviets and their Bolshevik leaders had to win the leadership and support of the mass of the people, the peasantry, in a fierce, free competition of ideas, leadership and arms with their bourgeois-landlord opponents. These were led by Tsarist generals like Kolchak, Denikin, and Wrangel and supported by liberals and some of the anti-Bolshevik socialists. No fewer than 14 states intervened to subvert the workers' republic. The workers and peasants chose soviet power, and fought to consolidate it against the bourgeoisie and the landlords.

If the urban soviets and the Bolshevik workers' party had not first won the competition for the minds and assent of the rural people, they would never have won the armed contest with the White armies and their foreign allies. The Bolshevik-led Soviets would have been crushed and the workers massacred, as the workers of Paris were massacred in May 1871.

LYING "CONDESCENSION OF POSTERITY"

There is here, for us, another question of morality: the morality of second-guessing the socialists who led the Russian Revolution.

They had a strict code of revolutionary morality, central to which was not giving in, not letting down the workers whom they led, and they acted in the situation they were in as they thought they had to deal with it. Is it moral to assume a moral superiority to them, as if from on high, and certainly from outside, or on the basis of a code derived from medieval Christian doctrine? In my opinion that is not moral.

With Alan Johnson's quotation from Lenin about the dictatorship of the proletariat — "the scientific term 'dictatorship' means nothing more nor less than authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force" — there are the same sort of problems as with his quotation from *Can The Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*

The quotation is given as it if it were Lenin's prospectus

for 1917. In fact it is from a 1906 pamphlet, *The Victory of the Cadets and the Tasks of the Workers' Party*, discussing the extent to which the Soviets in 1905 had been able to establish themselves as a revolutionary democratic power breaking through all the old laws and rules of the Tsarist order. Lenin quoted his own words from 1906 again in 1920, but in an article about convincing West European Communists about the slogan of "dictatorship of the proletariat", not about the civil-war regime in Russia.

Moreover, the quotation is from when Lenin's perspective for the Russian revolution was of a radical Jacobin bourgeois overturn, in which a revolutionary coalition government would — before eventually falling as the Jacobins had fallen in France — clear away all the old feudal rubbish and lay the basis for a wide bourgeois democracy.

In an 1905 article Lenin had cited Franz Mehring discussing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, edited by Marx in the revolution of 1848: "one of the reproaches levelled at this newspaper by bourgeois publications was that it had allegedly demanded 'the immediate introduction of a dictatorship as the sole means of achieving democracy'."

Marx in 1848, too, was advocating "dictatorial" measures by a Jacobin-type government to push through the broadest bourgeois democracy. Lenin further explained in the 1906 pamphlet:

"People are accustomed to see only a police authority and only a police dictatorship. The idea that there can be government without any police, or that dictatorship need not be a police dictatorship, seems strange to them.

"You say that millions need not resort to force against thousands? You are mistaken; and your mistake arises from the fact that you do not regard a phenomenon in its process of development. You forget that the new authority does not drop from the skies, but grows up, arises parallel with, and in opposition to the old authority, in struggle against it.

"Unless force is used against tyrants armed with the weapons and instruments of power, the people cannot be liberated from tyrants".

Alan operates with a "bad Lenin" version of history. Malign ideas in Lenin's head, his morality, shaped events. But does Alan mean to say that revolution in general is impossible?

Or that by misfortune the Russian revolution fell victim to this Lenin with his plans, set out in advance, to impose the rule of a small minority by unrestricted terror?

Part 3: Conclusion

The labour movement and socialism are at their best profoundly moral movements — the bearers of the higher morality which class society (the whole long pre-history of humankind, as Marx described the epochs of exploitation and oppression before socialism) is capable of generating.

In the nature of things, we do not and can not in periods of revolutionary war have an agreed common morality or rules of engagement with the ruling classes.

The medieval thinkers looked to God and to his one true, holy, and Apostolic church to be legislators and enforcers between rival aristocrats and rulers. But there is no God, and his one true, holy, and Apostolic church is now known to be and have been a fraternity of child rapists, sadists, and moral hypocrites.

We can only have a humanity-based morality. Even in class war (except perhaps in untypical limitation arrangements) and class civil war, we maintain our morality, even when it is expressed as out-and-out war against an enemy who must be overpowered.

In revolutions, especially, people have to act without knowing the full consequences of what they do, or sometimes even the general situation in which they are acting. What is right and wrong is defined by the exigencies of conflict, and by the revolutionaries' necessarily political, provisional, and approximate judgement of "what can be spared" and what can't.

For Marxists, socialism is not mainly a code for living within this system, either in peace or in war, but a militant, warlike code for fighting the class struggle at all its levels.

We must strive to win, and sometimes use "dragon" weapons against the dragons of the ruling class. To repeat, every drop of blood we shed avoidably will cry out against us.

And so will every defeat our side suffers because the socialists lack the moral backbone to fight seriously.

[1] That's not the text which has come down to us, but a story told by Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson afterwards.

[2] For the attitude of the AWL's predecessor *Socialist Organiser*, see appendix.

[3] It so happens that AWL and our predecessors have always concerned ourselves with morality, and more than once discussed it. See appendix.

[4] One of my uncles may have been involved.

[5] Geras was writing in 1988-9, before the collapse of the USSR and the East European Stalinist states. In *Socialist Organiser* (forerunner of *Solidarity* at the time), we were critical of some of the things done in South Africa by insurgents, necklacing for example.

[6] In 1980, Michael Carver, former Chief of Staff, revealed that in early 1974 "fairly senior officers" had talked about a coup. Labour Party leader Michael Foot was more or less explicit at the beginning of 1982 about what he feared: "Those self-styled revolutionaries who speak today too readily of the resort to illegal methods or to street battles... should at least train to become soldiers or policemen — to face the storm troopers".

[7] And also of unknowable numbers of Jews (the worst anti-Jewish pogroms before Hitler were done by the Whites in Ukraine during the civil war).



Appendix: the Birmingham pub bombing, 1974

The Birmingham pub bombings, on 21 November 1974, killed 21 people and injured 182 others through bombs in Birmingham city centre.

The reaction to the killings included protest strikes; some workers seen to be sympathetic to Irish Republicanism being driven out of their jobs; and drastic curbs on civil liberties through a Prevention of Terrorism Act rushed through Parliament (with no votes against — supposedly as a temporary measure, but renewed again and again over decades until its provisions were folded into more recent “anti-terrorist” legislation).

Six people were quickly arrested and convicted for the bombings, but those “Birmingham Six” were exonerated (in 1991) after a long campaign. It has been said, for example by the former Labour MP Chris Mullin, who campaigned to free the “Birmingham Six”, and without contradiction, that the actual bombers were of the Provisional IRA. The bombing was not ordered by the central IRA leadership, and David O’Connell, a chief IRA leader, made a statement on 8 December condemning the bombing.

Workers’ Fight, forerunner of *Solidarity*, condemned the bombing immediately. The debate reproduced below was sparked by a letter to *Workers’ Fight* from Lawrie White, then a leading member of the International Marxist Group, denouncing our condemnation.

It is evidence that *Workers’ Liberty*, and its predecessors, Socialist Organiser and *Workers’ Fight*, did concern itself nearly half a century ago with questions of revolutionary morality.

To clarify: when we wrote of supporting the Republicans, we meant support against the British Army, not political identification with the Provisionals or endorsement of them.

Letter: Our first duty

The front page article in *Workers’ Fight* 78 on the Birmingham bombings makes the correct point that the criticisms Trotskyists make of the IRA should be made clearly in the context of support for the struggle against British imperialism.

However, this is precisely what the very same article fails to do.

It begins by asserting that “Revolutionary socialists ... have a duty to denounce (!) and condemn this indefensible and senseless slaughter”. And indeed the whole article was littered with such emotive terms: the “carnage” was “callous”, impossible to “explain or justify”, “simply indefensible on any grounds — military, political or moral” etc., etc.

What has happened, comrades! Is it the first time in history that civilians have been killed in a war? Did *Workers’ Fight* “denounce and condemn” the Vietnamese NLF’s attacks on civilian targets in puppet-controlled areas as “indefensible and senseless”? Did *Workers’ Fight* ever spend so much space waxing horror struck over UVF pub-bombings in the Six Counties, or over the British provocateurs bombing in Dublin, for that matter?

Of course not! Because the first duty of revolutionaries is to distinguish between the violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed. The first duty of revolutionaries is to denounce and condemn the indefensible hypocrisy of the imperialist state and all its allies in the press and TV. (The deliberate indiscriminate fire-bombing of the entire city of Dresden in the last war is worthy of more than a mere aside, comrades).

But on the Birmingham bombings, the hypocrisy you choose to condemn is that of “the workers in the Midlands”. Physician heal thyself. How can you demand that the masses see through the hypocrisy of the anti-IRA hysteria whipped

up by the press when you yourselves make no attempt what soever to unmask it, but in fact merely reinforce it by repeating the same expressions of horror?

But worse. You also join in the universal attribution of responsibility for the bombings to Irish republicans. You say they were “probably the work of Irish republicans”.

Where is the evidence for this statement? Admittedly at the time of going to press, you may not have heard the news of the Provos’ denial of responsibility. But even without that what excuse can there be for your statement? You say yourselves that you cannot see any sense in the bombings. They seem “politically very stupid”. If the work of the IRA. they would “signal an entirely new departure”. Well then, where is the logic in attributing them to the IRA? Isn’t it obvious that there might be something wrong with the premiss if the conclusion doesn’t make sense? Especially when you know very well, even if the workers in the Midlands don’t, that the bombings are copy-book examples not of what the IRA is accustomed to doing, but of what the extreme unionist forces like the UVF regularly do in the north of Ireland. (And we should note that if the bombings were a right wing provocation, they were by no means “politically very stupid”).

The real lesson of the Birmingham bombings is that the British bourgeoisie have demonstrated that if someone lets off a couple of bombs, they can rapidly disorientate the workers movement and open it up to extreme right wing agitation through a press campaign blaming the IRA. And under cover of the hysteria thus whipped up, they can introduce draconian legislation planned weeks in advance.

This means that our first duty is not to “firmly (!) dissociate (ourselves) from any bombing campaign aimed at the civilian population”, but to firmly dissociate ourselves first and foremost from the anti-IRA campaign of the British ruling class And you don’t do that simply by re-stating your general position on the IRA It is the concrete situation you have to confront. It is not possible to disarm the bourgeoisie of its ideological weapons if we do not first train revolutionary cadre to recognise and to resist them.

It is this essential task that you editorial failed to carry out.

Communist greetings, Lawrie White.

Reply: facing the issues squarely

How Lawrie White concludes that we fail to place criticism of the IRA within the context of the struggle against imperialism is rather a mystery.

We have been advised by the NCCL [National Council for Civil Liberties, now called Liberty] that the editorial he criticises would be illegal now within the terms of the Jenkins police state law! The only logic to his outpouring is that condemnation of the Birmingham bombings and acceptance of the “probable responsibility of “Irish republicans” outweighed the four fifths of the article that made the basic case for the republican cause! (But we can’t please him there either, since he upbraids us for attacking the double standards of British workers in the Midlands who struck work over the bombings, but never bother about the terror by the British army in Ireland...)

When he says that we never spent as much space expressing horror at the UVF-UDA assassinations and the British army terror, it means he’s not been reading the paper or that he is indulging in shoddy and dishonest polemics.

He says that the first duty is to denounce the imperialists for their hypocrisy: we think there are other priorities, like explaining as often as necessary, what the republicans fight for, but whatever the first duty of revolutionaries in Britain may be, it is clear that Lawrie White sees denouncing hypocrisy as the only duty here and now.

At one and the same time he elevates denial of possible Republican responsibility into a principle it is treason to depart from in the “concrete situation”, and goes on to talk about the “first duty” being to ‘distinguish between the violence of the oppressors and the violence of the oppressed’. So does White think the bombings were “probably” or even “possibly” the work of “the oppressed”... some republicans, perhaps? Even if he has so far kept the dreadfully heretical thought locked in his subconscious, clearly he does think so; for at least it has escaped into his letter, if obliquely.

If there be any sense in the letter and it is other than a piece of IMG sniping or sniping by a member of the IMG not very happy with the way the line of that organisation has wobbled on the issue of solidarity with the Republicans in the last year), it can only be the belief that “the IRA” are never to be criticised, at least in ‘military matters, and if they do, or may have done, something that is indefensible, then the best policy for British revolutionaries who are in general solidarity with them is to copy the three wise monkeys and hear, see, and say nothing.

White is correct to say that revolutionaries in Britain must fight the bourgeois ideological domination of the working class specifically, the chauvinism on the Irish question. But for him, the essence of “disarming the bourgeoisie” of its ideological weapons against the working class comes down to... denial that Irish republicans might indeed have been responsible for the Birmingham bombings. That is a very limited, not to say peculiar and bizarre, conception of the nature and depth of the chauvinist disease in the British working class, of the present situation, and of the tasks of revolutionaries.

How do we disarm the bourgeoisie of its ideological weapons in this case? It is certainly not done by a *Workers Press*-type panic stricken scream of “No! — it couldn’t have been republicans, it wasn’t the IRA”. Because it might well have been republicans. It might have been elements of the republican population from northern Ireland who, in their justified bitterness and outrage at the British terror, reacted in such a politically senseless, but quite understandable, way.

Our article referred to “Irish republicans”, not any specific section of the IRA, and we would include in that term the smallest sub-grouping that takes up the fight in northern Ireland against British imperialism. The Provisionals are the main force fighting, but they have no exclusive licence to fight British imperialism (or to claim the solidarity of revolutionaries in Britain), nor are they the sole custodians of the right of the Irish people to fight British imperialism.

Isn’t it contradictory. Lawrie White asks, to say the bombings were probably the work of republicans, if they were senseless from a republican point of view? Unfortunately not. White’s talk of contradictions is abstract, purely formal logic. We are faced with the logic of the various forms of struggle employed by an oppressed people. Those forms of struggle are not, and can never be neatly cut to shape in advance. It is entirely consistent with the desperate plight of the Catholics in northern Ireland that such an outbreak could occur, the work of isolated active service units, splinter groups, or previously inactive republican sympathisers.

David O’Connell no doubt “dissociates” from the anti-IRA campaign of the British press. And he knows that any action such as the Birmingham bombings, by any section of the Catholic republican population, will be laid at the door of “the IRA”. that is, the Provisionals. Yet he condemned the bombings, disclosed that he didn’t know whether or not some sections even of the Provisional IRA were responsible, said that if it were found that they were, there would be a court of inquiry and possibly court martial — nor did he wriggle by over-stressing the no-doubt real possibility that it was an anti-republican provocation (see the last issue of *Workers’ Fight* for O’Connell’s interview).

Unlike the weekly paper of White’s own organisation, *Red Weekly*, the revolutionary nationalist leader had the guts and the seriousness to face the real possibility or probability that it was the work of republicans. He neither condoned it nor did he change sides because of it! He condemns it, which is what we did and do. And we don’t change sides either.

It is a short, though logical, step, from resting one’s sup-

posed assault on British chauvinism and anti-IRA hysteria exclusively on saying it wasn't the IRA to capitulation to that chauvinism. For it is implied in this weighty. Marxist, principled, non-hypocritical, firm, unflinching, unbending, rr...revolutionary stance, that if it were really republicans then the general reaction to the bombings, at least, and maybe the wholesale condemnation of everything the IRA stands for, and the war that it is fighting as well, are quite justified. That is neither to disarm the bourgeoisie, nor to arm the working class ideologically. It is not even to face the issues squarely, with Marxist honesty — it is to hide in a corner. And that is what the IMG did. And from this lofty moral platform, Lawrie White delivers us a lecture on revolutionary seriousness and principles. If the essence of "disarming" the bourgeoisie is to deny IRA responsibility rather than to reassert the justice of the Republican cause even if the Provisionals were entirely responsible for the bombs — what happens to your credibility with serious workers who read your paper and place confidence in it, if it transpires — say as a result of the Provisional court of inquiry — that Republicans were responsible? What about the crucial problem of educating the vanguard of the British working class to distinguish between the fundamental issues in this war and the "politics of the last atrocity" which, unfortunately, normally determine the ebbs and flows of working-class opinion on it?

There is only one way to disarm the bourgeoisie and placate the anger — the justified anger — of the British working class, and that is to confront the reality as you see it. Don't try to be "clever" and slippery. Take sides always according to the fundamental issues in the war — defend what can be defended, and if something occurs which you find indefensible denounce it. *Workers' Fight* wanted to face the issues squarely as we assessed them, and as they would appear to our readers.

We reiterated our pro-republican stand, irrespective of Birmingham.

Those, like the IMG, who nervously jumped for cover, placed in question what their whole attitude would be if it were shown to be a republican action. Far from arming their readers, they left them floundering with arguments that working-class militants not trained in double think would dismiss as contemptible evasions and which measured against the slaughter of 21 people and the maiming of over 180 were quite obscene.

Presumably Lawrie White wants to attack press hypocrisy to counter its influence, to talk, in the voice of revolutionary socialism, reasonably and honestly. The press deals wholesale in lies and distortions about Ireland, purveys anti-Irish racist double standards. They suppress and lie about the real facts of the Northern Ireland situation. Yes, but in this case, when the press raged — hypocritically — it happened that they merely articulated the feelings of the entire working class. We agreed and agree with those feelings and we said why. If one uses similar words and phrases, that simply means that the stock of language is limited. If White doesn't think the events in Birmingham cause for emotion and emotional terms, the mildest comment one can make is that he should examine the state of his emotions, not to speak of his imagination.

To let oneself be swayed by feelings of horror over civilian casualties like the woman and two children killed in the M62 explosion is to lose all political balance.

Not to feel horror at senseless slaughter unconnected with any military objective is either to be personally unbalanced or to be thrown off balance in over-reaction to the hysteria.

Not to express those feelings, while maintaining the solidarity position, is to lose the possibility of even talking to ordinary British workers.

To present at length a full socialist view of the war in Ireland and to place responsibility with the British ruling class — that was to attack press hypocrisy. *Workers' Fight* did exactly that. White grossly overestimates the influence of the press, however. There is no straight cause-and-effect relationship between mass chauvinism on Ireland and press coverage. Certainly the press buttresses chauvinism and makes the fight against it more difficult. But bourgeois ideological domination is much less shallow than simply being the effect of press bias, and certainly not simply related to this or that lie in the press at any given moment. Far more deep-rooted, chauvinism combines decades of imperialist conditioning with the most primitive "defend your home and local pub" gut responses — understandable responses.

To concentrate on condemning Government and press hypocrisy would in this case have been a mechanism for evading the reality of working-class chauvinism, in the worst IS or WRP style. We tried to hit at the substance, not the shadow. The immediate ephemeral expression in the press at that point in time was the mere shadow of the all-pervasive double standards within the working class and the labour movement. We expect hypocrisy from the press, what we attempted was to hold a mirror up to our own class.

Events like Birmingham are, as we explained, a result of British partition, interference, and its present terror campaign in Ireland. Fundamental responsibility rests with the British state, as we said and repeat. The events in Birmingham must be seen within this context. But they are events in their own right. As such they demand a response.

Simply to duck the issue, as *Red Weekly* did, with a pettifogging and evasive article by Clarissa Howard, or to take refuge behind general declarations about the general right of the Irish people to fight for independence, is petty bourgeois indecision and gutlessness. In practical politics, this leads to mimicking and toadying the republicans — something very different from principled solidarity.

With the Birmingham bombings, sycophancy towards the republicans and fear to take an independent judgment combined with the increasing tendency in *Red Weekly* to avoid sharp clashes with backward feelings in the working class, and produced a woolly and evasive response, which said nothing, did not educate, did not clarify.

It is possible, though by no means easy, rationally to explain the justice of the fight for Irish independence and all the things that flow from that, including attacks on military targets in Britain — even where some innocent victims suffer. *Workers' Fight* has done that consistently and more outspokenly than any paper on the British left. We will continue to do it in the future.

A recent incident will illustrate this. A WF militant was sacked in Birmingham during the wave of anti IRA hysteria. Ironically, his first serious stand on Irish politics had been when he attempted to hit someone 18 months ago who sold him a copy of WF containing a pro-IRA article. In patient discussion he learned the basic justice of the republican cause — because it is a just cause, one that can be rationally explained and argued.

But how do you explain, on any level, the Birmingham bombings? White would have us repeat moron-like, banalities about "civilians getting killed in a war". (Such an attitude, incidentally, parts company from the communist attitude to the habitual slaughter of non-combatant civilians in modern warfare, expressed by Leon Trotsky when he talked about the "struggle against fascist atrocities, and imperialist atrocities in general, especially the fight against the bombing of peaceful cities", and went on to describe such things as "criminal acts". That was in January 1939. It is a measure of the brutalisation that has coarsened even revolutionary socialists that we should have to recall such elementary attitudes.)

Are we being "moralistic"? But what is "moralism"? It is setting up abstract, timeless principles, and putting them above the needs of the class struggle. Since when has opposition to the useless slaughter of innocent working class civilians been a matter of abstract principles, and how is it counterposed to the class struggle? We are not pacifists, nor do we subscribe to the Ten Commandments. But there is a socialist morality. We recognise that the class struggle and national liberation struggle is a merciless battle in which we will

kill and be killed. But we do not on that account casually shrug off slaughter which serves no political or military purpose. It is for that reason that the bombings in Birmingham must be morally condemned — according to the morality of communists who do recognise that the reality of class society imposes violence upon us.

The charge of moralism implies that one shares the caricature view that Marxists are a-moral.

For English revolutionaries to fear to bend under the pressure against the IRA is healthy and politically honourable. But it is essentially infantile and unthinking if it leads to the moral nihilism of an attitude to bombing civilians which is derived from the British RAF's "Bomber Harris" and other professional imperialist butchers. In their zeal to refuse to condemn such bombing, (which they can hardly really believe *could not* be the work of certain republicans or pro-republicans) such people slander the organised republican movement, which has a better and a more honourable record precisely because it is motivated by values different from those of the imperialist butchers who casually wipe out whole cities "in order to save them".

The attitude that would say one doesn't condemn, one simply says Birmingham was "a mistake", is another contemptible evasion. We did refer to the possibility that the bombing might have been the result of a ghastly series of errors, if the Republicans were responsible. Nevertheless, if what happened in Birmingham was the result of a conscious decision, then it was not a mistake but a crime against the British and Irish working class. And it was necessary to say so.

Revolutionary cadres are not just schoolboys playing rugby, trained to resist the pressure of the other side come what may. If revolutionaries are not trained to look at reality squarely and think independently, then they will prove useless. The *Red Weekly* method of training cadres appears to be one of ducking the issue while making a fine pretence of principled politics and world-defying intransigence.

As opposed to this, the proletarian revolutionary organisation thinks maintains its political independence, and either defends or rejects action by revolutionary nationalists which whom it is in solidarity. We denounced the Birmingham atrocity. Weighing what we denounced against the fundamental issues in the war, we then went on to reiterate our continued support for the republican side, in the same article which White attacks.

We affirm the right of the IRA to fight the British ruling class and their army, in Ireland or in Britain. And we affirm our right to condemn elements within or on the fringe of that movement if they are, or appear to be, in favour of indiscriminate and senseless slaughter of innocent British workers.

We judged the situation and took our position irrespective of the attitude of the Republican movement. As it happens, we afterwards learned that Provisional leader David O'Connell expressed a similar attitude.

The guerilla leader O'Connell knows that armed actions either have a purpose or they are senseless; either they are part of a strategy, or they are random and indefensible. He says that the Birmingham bombings are senseless and indefensible. Differentiating between legitimate acts in a war of liberation and indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. (The vicarious, romantic sympathiser is of course free from such considerations, feels no responsibility and instead of trying to talk intelligently to the potential allies of the republicans among the British working class, he takes refuge in 'tough guy' quips like White's "is this the first time civilians have been killed?") We welcomed O'Connell's statement. But we would anyway have maintained our position. We remain consistent.

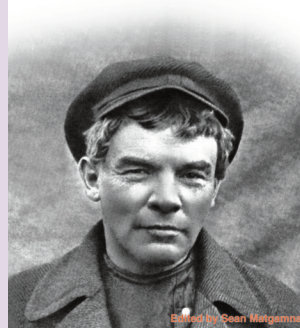
And White and the IMG? If the Provisional IRA investigation which O'Connell announces leads to a trial by the Republicans (we deny the right of the British state to try such people, who should be treated as prisoners of war), will White remain consistent and consider the defendants in such a trial as victims of British hysteria reflected within the IRA itself? (Thus intimating that even the Provos are not "hard", ruthless, or "callous" enough for their vicarious British sympathisers...)

Or will they ditch their positions of today, and come to agree with O'Connell — and Workers' Fight?

- *Workers' Fight* 81, 4 January 1975 (by Sean Matgamna)

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Appendix

The poll tax: Thatcher reaps what she sows

This article, describing the big anti-Poll-Tax demonstration on 31 March 1990, appeared in Socialist Organiser, 5 April 1990.

One of the most telling facts about the fighting between police and anti-poll tax demonstrators last Saturday 31 March, was pinpointed by the crime correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, Neil Darbyshire, in an article outlining the thinking and observation of top policemen.

"A significant number of those involved in violence had joined the march apparently spontaneously after drinking in local public houses". The source for that was David Meynell, Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

Despite all their hypocritical talk about conspiracies by anarchists and Trotskyists, the police and politicians know that much of the violence that spread through central London last Saturday was a spontaneous outburst of rebellion against the poll tax and other aspects of Thatcher's Britain.

They know, too, that it was the police who started the violence when they charged down Whitehall into some hundreds of demonstrators who had sat down in peaceful protest opposite Downing Street.

Of course there are organisations of anarchists who believe that the only way and the best way to register their opposition to the poll tax, and maybe destroy it, is by violent demonstrations as near to outright insurrection as possible. But those anarchists cannot organise such things at will.

On Saturday it was the combination of outrage over the poll tax and the mounted police charge against the would-be sitdowners in Whitehall which ignited the demonstrators — not the anarchists.

The wonder of it is that such outbreaks have not happened before in a capital city where upwards of 75,000 people are homeless, and many of them sheltering in squats, hostels, or bed and breakfast places must now find the money to pay poll tax for the privilege of breathing London air.

Much of the violence by demonstrators on Saturday was blind, destructive and counter-productive — people climbing scaffolding then throwing rivets into the crowd of demonstrators, looting, destruction of cars in the streets, and so on. In so far as the anarchists had anything to do with such events, they proved once more that with such people it is not so much the rocks in their hands as the rocks in their heads that make them dangerous.

But — to repeat — the point about what happened on Saturday was not the anarchists, but the large "spontaneous" element in it. Most of those who went

on the rampage through part of Mrs Thatcher's capital given over to conspicuous consumption were people driven to revolt by intolerable pressure. The pressure of the poll tax was merely the detonator. The police charge against the peaceful sit-down in Whitehall was the spark that set off the explosion.

Not to distinguish between foolish anarchists and people driven to spontaneous revolt is not to be able to understand what happened and why.

The main responsibility for what happened on Saturday lies with the leaders of the labour movement. No wonder people feel desperate and hopeless enough to lash out blindly when the leaders of the Labour Party and the TUC confine themselves to verbal fireworks and fencing displays with Mrs Thatcher and her ministers in the House of Commons.

As Tony Benn has said, had the Labour Party and the TUC backed Saturday's demonstration, then it could have been a million or more strong. Proper stewarding could have controlled the unruly.

Even the police would perhaps have had to behave themselves better at a demonstration with Neil Kinnock and Norman Willis marching at its head.

Instead the leaders of the Labour Party and the TUC have eagerly joined in the Tory-conducted chorus against "violence". It is a long time since anything quite so odiously hypocritical has been seen in Britain.

People sitting in their homes saw on their TV screens a troop of perhaps 20 mounted police ride down a lone woman in the centre of the road, ride over her without faltering, and go on their way, leaving her on the ground where the horses' hooves had trampled her.

They saw a mounted policeman with a long baton leaning down to club a man who had fallen on the ground beating him repeatedly on his head. They saw policemen — sometimes mounted — charge wildly into crowds of bystanders, swinging batons indiscriminately.

They saw peaceful bystanders with their heads streaming blood as a result of such tactics by the police.

And the politicians — Labour and Tory alike — go one and one about violence, meaning violence by the poll tax demonstrators!

Labour leaders Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley vie with the Tories to demand exemplary punishment of those arrested, and call for police investigations into the "conspirators" behind it all. Roy Hattersley blames the Socialist Workers Party — though even the police have stated that known SWPers were seen trying to calm things down! So does George Galloway the well-off "left" MP (quoted in the Guardian 2 April).

It has hard to imagine anything more disgusting, or more scandalous, than the Labour leaders... appealing to the Tories not to blame them but instead to form a common front against "the enemies of democracy". To unite with Thatcher against the enemies of democracy is to unite with the Devil to fight sin!

The ramming through of the poll tax by Thatcher's minority-elected government against the manifest opposition of a big majority of the electorate — and maybe even of a majority of Tory voters — is the very opposite of democracy. If Thatcher's attempt to brand Labour with responsibility for last Saturday's semi-uprising has failed, that is not because Labour's leaders have played little sir echo to Mrs Thatcher but because people in Britain know where the violence comes from.

Vast numbers of desperate people in Britain probably sympathise, half-sympathise, or can anyway understand those who ran amok last Saturday.

If Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley are interested in democracy then they should cut the cackle and the cant about the democratic nature of Mrs Thatcher's tyranny and fight for the democratic rights of the British people now but campaigning for an immediate general election.

It is still not too late for the leaders of the labour movement to take their proper place at the head of a powerful labour-movement based movement against the poll tax and Mrs Thatcher. If they believe their own talk about democracy, that is what they will do. Probably they won't.

The months ahead may well see other explosions of anger like last Saturday's, essentially spontaneous. If the leaders of the labour movement won't lead an organised fight back, then the rank and file must.

Not only Labour MPs like Hattersley and Galloway have gone in for "fingering" sections of the left and acting, or promising to act, as "felon-setters" for the police by trying to identify left-wingers as being responsible.

The officers of the All-Britain Anti-Poll-Tax Federation — [Militant members] Steve Nally and Tommy Sheridan — have promised to hold their own "investigation" and then "go public naming names" (Nally). To whom?

To the police? To go public is to go to the police.

The left has a right to defend itself against anarchist disorganisers and against outbreaks of wild hooliganism, including the right to throw disrupters off marches. Nally and Sheridan had a right to dissociate themselves from the violence last Saturday.

But nobody on the left has the right to felon-set people on our side who act against Thatcher and her poll tax according to their best lights.

Nally and Sheridan are Militant people, and the All-Britain Anti-Poll-Tax Federation is completely (and very bureaucratically) controlled by Militant. Those who run Militant should call them to order at once; if they don't, the activists in the anti-poll-tax movement should.

The Militant-controlled All-Britain Anti-Poll-Tax Federation also bears responsibility for the chaos which engulfed the demonstration last Saturday, a responsibility second only to that of the leaders of the labour and trade union movement.

They have a one-sided, exclusively "direct action" strategy for beating the poll tax — don't pay.

They talk for the record about not collecting, and call for a general election now to "bring down the Government", but in practice they pay no attention at all to the fight to line up Labour councils to refuse to implement the poll tax, or trade unions to refuse to cooperate.

This is surprising, but true. Militant burned its fingers too much in Liverpool.

And Militant is in considerable disarray politically. People in Scotland like Tommy Sheridan looked set early this year to stand as candidates against Labour in the local government elections. They seem to have been dissuaded.

It is right to advocate non-payment, and Socialist Organiser does advocate it. But Militant makes it into a one-sided panacea and foolishly ignores its limitations and difficulties while at the same time channeling the anti-poll-tax movement away from concern with the trade unions or with local government, which is the interface between the Tories, the labour movement, and the working class.

These politics — or lack of politics — help push young people new to politics and not part of the labour movement into anarchist attitudes.

More than that. Militant was in charge last Saturday. The Anti-Poll-Tax Federation is tightly controlled by them and patrolled in their usual ultra-sectarian spirit. Most of the stewards on Saturday were Militant (many of them full-time) or controlled and selected by Militant, and Militant had an airtight grip on the overall organisation.

There can be no certainty that better stewarding would have made a decisive difference, but it is a matter of fact that the stewarding failed completely at the end. Since Militant has a jealously-guarded near monopoly on the Anti-Poll-Tax Federation, the responsibility is Militant's when things go wrong.

To cap this inept performance with a public promise to investigate and publish a list of names of allegedly violent people there on Saturday — that is, in effect, to hand them over to the police — is to reduce things to a nasty and unpleasant farce.