

The arrogance of the long-distance Zionist*

By Jim Higgins

THIS will be the third time that I have ventured to disagree with Sean Matgamna on the vexed question of Zionism. I do so with some trepidation because, or so it seems, even when I am right I am in reality exposing myself as fundamentally wrong and mischievously so. In my first article I attempted to lighten the subject with a few mildly humorous quips. I was sternly rebuked for this failure of seriousness. Chastened, in part two I adopted a serious tone. Sean responded by regretting my humour had been replaced by "choler, rodomontade, unleavened abuse, some of it purely personal..." Did I really do all of that? I feel particularly cheered to hear that I was guilty of choler and rodomontade, rather like the man who discovered at an advanced age that he had been speaking prose all his life. Normally, of course, I only use unleavened abuse during Passover. Sorry about that.

Having reviewed Sean's articles I can see that they fit quite nicely into the Matgamna mode of polemic. First and foremost, his views are lumped together in such a way that they will sharply divide him from other socialists. This is what Al Richardson calls "consumer socialism" and Marx calls "sectarianism." In practice, this means that since Bernard Dix died, there have been no adherents of the Shachtmanite school of bureaucratic collectivism on these shores and if Sean were to occupy this vacant franchise he would acquire a whole slew of policies to differentiate himself from everybody else. All you need is a file of the *New International* (published monthly between 1936 and 1958) and you can start to kid yourself you are writing with all the style and eloquence of Max Shachtman. Along with all the clever nonsense about Russia you will also inherit the Workers' Party-International Socialist League line on Israel.

A comparison of Sean's article with a sampling of the WP-ISL texts shows that whatever Sean lacks in originality he has made up for in the diligence of his researches into the *New International*. In the September issue of *Workers' Liberty* we have Sean as follows: "Cliff's 1946 pamphlet does not deal at all with the political questions in the Middle East, having more to say about the price of oil than about the rights of national minorities. Where politics should have been there is a vacuum..." Now here is Al Gates in the *New International* in September 1947: "T Cliff's competent analytical work on Palestine, and here too we observed a fine study of the economic growth and problems of the Middle East and the place of Palestine in that situation. Yet the whole work was outstanding for its studied evasion of the political questions of the class and national struggle taking place there."

* Jim Higgins' suggested title for this piece was "Sean Maxshachtmana".

Gates is more polite than Sean, but that will probably surprise nobody.

Another standard feature of Sean's method is the one where he complains bitterly that he is being abused unfairly as a prelude to unleashing a little of his own venom into the argument. For example, I raised the case of Deir Yassin because it took place in April 1948 and set in motion the Arab refugees, countering Sean who had said that they only fled in May 1948 when the Arab armies started their offensive. In so doing I neglected to mention the killing of 60 Jews by Arabs in the bloody attacks of 1929. For this I was accused of hypocrisy. Perhaps now I should go on to apologise for failing to condemn the similar Arab outrages of 1920, 1921, 1929, 1936 and 1938. In the interests of balance perhaps I should also throw in the massacres of Sabra and Chatila, because I condemn them as well. In the same vein, Sean insists that he does not believe that I, or the SWP, are racist, but in virtually the same breath he repeats his accusation that we are anti-semitic. This does not come from the WP-ISL, I have nowhere in the pro-Israel polemics of Al Gates and the rest seen them accuse their socialist opponents of anti-semitism. For that we must look to official Zionist spokesmen and Sean Matgamna. It is, I suppose, always nice to have two sources of inspiration.

"Self-determination for the Zionists had nothing to do with democracy, because any democratic solution while the Jews remained a minority would have to come to terms with the Arab majority."

Let us now turn to Sean's predilection for discovering sinister and malign purposes in the work of others and constructing a sort of retrospective amalgam. About a quarter of his piece is devoted to a partial and not very informative trawl through Cliff's works on the Middle East. On the strength of his 1946 pamphlet *Middle East at the Crossroads*, this apparently made Cliff, along with Abram Leon, one of the Fourth International's two experts on the Jewish question. Unfortunately, Leon was killed by the Nazis, so after 1946 Cliff must have stood pre-eminent, although Sean assigns a subordinate role to Ernest Mandel. Thus we have the sinister Cliff leading the FI along the road of "anti-semitic anti-Zionism." Unfortunately, by the time Sean got round to this particular fan-

tasy he had forgotten what he had written on the previous page: "In 1967, after the Six Day War, Cliff wrote a pamphlet which is closer in its political conclusions and implied conclusions to what *Workers' Liberty* says than to what the SWP or Jim Higgins say now. The decisive shift came after 1967 and was brought to the present level of nonsense after the Yom Kippur war of 1973. The 'honour' of having established the post 1973 IS/SWP line belongs, I think, to none other than Jim Higgins (in an article in *IS Journal*)." There you have it, comrade readers, Cliff set the style for the FI and especially the American SWP, except that until 1973 his views were not much different from those of *Workers' Liberty*, which I assume are the same as Sean's. Far from Cliff being the *deus ex machina* of anti-Zionist anti-semitism, I am. In *International Socialism* No.64 in 1973, I wrote this seminal offending piece, "Background to the Middle East Crisis." At the same time, the ground-breaking significance of the article passed without a murmur. Nobody, including the author, was aware that it was any more than a very short explanation of the IS Group's attitude to the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, which I had reported for *Socialist Worker*. In the 23 years since it was written probably only Sean Matgamna has read it. Now that Sean, with Holmes-like skill, has unmasked me as the *eminence grise* of "non-racist anti-Semitic anti-Zionism" I too have read it, and regret that it has no claims, subliminal or otherwise, to trend-setting originality.

Delving further into the Matgamna polemical method we encounter that special form of arrogance that insists on setting all the terms of any debate and finding significance in a failure to follow him up any logical blind alley he may choose. Let us then consider his "serious and not entirely rhetorical question, why the Jewish minority, a third of the population in the 1940s, did not have national rights there." Let us leave aside the fact that rhetorical questions are precisely the ones that are not looking for answers, and think about this one. First, in those terms of realpolitik to which Sean is so addicted, who was to afford them national determination in the 1930s and 1940s? Was it the Arab majority? Not a bit of it, the very notion of any kind of accommodation with the Arab majority was totally anathema to the Zionist leadership. Should they have addressed themselves to the British? Actually they did and were turned down. The fact is that there were no rights for self-determination for anyone in Palestine. British policy had been to utilise Zionism as a force to divide and discipline the Arab masses. That is how the Jewish population rose from fewer than 100,000 in 1917 to over 400,000 in 1939 (a third of the total population). The plan was eventually for a Jewish homeland under strict British tutelage. The turning off of Jewish immigration in



Jewish cavalry ride through a village destroyed in the 1948 conflict

1939 was because the British were concerned to pacify the Arab majority to safeguard Palestine as a British controlled Middle Eastern hub, especially the oil pipeline, in the war.

The question of self-determination for the Zionists had nothing to do with democracy, because any solution, while the Jewish population remained a minority, would under democratic norms have to be cast in such a way that came to terms with the Arab majority. It is for this reason that the Zionist leadership fought so hard for unrestricted immigration and why the Arabs were against it. It is for the same reason that the Zionists while demanding Jewish immigration were opposed to Arab immigration. It is the same reason why Zionist policy was bitterly opposed to the idea of a constituent assembly. This vexed question of population arithmetic is what distorted the political agenda of Palestine.

With two thirds of the population the Arabs would seem to have a fairly safe majority. In fact, they had a plurality of only 400,000. For the Zionist leadership this was the magic number and to overhaul it took precedence over all other considerations. Such a number might just, with massive difficulty and at the expense mainly of the Arabs, be accommodated. This was the emphasis of Zionist propaganda, despite the fact that Palestine, assuming a complete disregard for the Arabs, could take only a small proportion of the Jews threatened and eventually murdered

by Hitler. The massive propaganda effort was expended on altering Palestine's population statistics, instead of demanding asylum from the US and Britain (who were infinitely better able to provide it) for these and many, many more Jews who were to be lost in Himmler's ovens. This was not a matter of emphasis, shouting louder about Jerusalem than New York, it was a positive opposition to Jews going anywhere other than Palestine. If the intention had been to save Jewish lives at all costs, the argument should have been: "If you will not let Jews into British-mandated Palestine, then you have an urgent and absolute moral responsibility to give them asylum elsewhere." No such campaign was mounted.

Nevertheless, comrades might ask, is not the hallmark of socialist internationalism the free, unfettered flow of all people throughout the world? Why should Palestine be different? The short answer is that immigration as part of a concerted plan that will take over the country, expropriating, expelling and exploiting the native masses, is less immigration and more a long drawn out and aggressive invasion. For socialists, the reactionary character of Zionism is defined by its racist ideology, imbued with the spirit of separation and exclusion, the very reverse of socialist solidarity. It was prepared to ally itself with every reactionary force that might help its purposes. It lobbied such figures as the Kaiser, the Sultan of Turkey, for twenty years it cosied up to British imperialism, finally snuggling into the

embrace of the biggest imperial power of all, the United States. In the process, it has treated the Arab population as a species of *untermenschen* and has effectively driven a large portion of the Arab masses into the hands of Islamic obscurantists and bigots. It stands in the way of any socialist advance in the Arab world, operating as imperialism's gendarme in the region, a far more effective force for imperialism than, for example, the feeble Saudi royal family or the Hashemites. If Zionism has had one redeeming feature over the years, it is that it never bothered to conceal its intentions, but it is difficult to commend a man for his honesty in telling you that he is going to beat your brains out, especially if he then delivers the mortal blow.

As Sean indicates, the development of ideas on Zionism in the Trotskyist movement is quite interesting. As Sean says, Cliff, in his *New Internationalist* article of June 1939, was for Jewish immigration into Palestine and for the sale of Arab land to the Jewish population, both points vigorously opposed by the Palestine CP. His argument for this, and it is a thin one, is: "Yet from the negation of Zionism does not yet follow the negation of the right to existence and extension of the Jewish population in Palestine. This would only be justified if an objectively necessary identity existed between the population and Zionism, and if the Jewish population were necessarily an outpost of British imperialism and nothing more." Like a lot of Cliff, this takes a bit of time to get your head around. With perseverance one is, however, struck by how abstract it is as a serious formulation. Whether this is a reaction against the Arab chauvinism of the CPP I cannot say, but it clearly suggests that unless Zionism is 100 per cent in the pocket of British imperialism it is OK to augment its forces. But as we well know, nationalist movements are not wedded to any particular sponsor, and their interests are never seen as identical and often antithetical. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem could make overtures to Hitler, Jabotinsky, the founder of revisionist Zionism, was a great admirer of Mussolini, and, during the war, Chandra Bhowse, the leftist Indian nationalist, worked with the Japanese, building an Indian national army. In the same way, the Jewish population were not 100 per cent identified with Zionism, Cliff and the handful of Jewish Trotskyists were not and neither was the CPP, but in the absence of anything of consequence, Zionism certainly had at least the tacit support of an overwhelming majority of the Jews. After the war and the holocaust, that support became far more active.

I have a suspicion that it is from this 1939 article that Sean acquired his idea that the Comintern were not opposed to Jewish immigration to Palestine in the 1920s. In truth Cliff, as is his wont, is being a bit economical with the *actualité* here. He says: "The members of the Comintern in Palestine... while absolutely opposed to Zionism (against the national boycott [of Arab goods and Arab labour — JH], against slogans like the Jewish majority and the Jewish state and the alliance with England, etc.), declared at the same time that the Jewish population is not to be identified with Zionism

and hence demanded the maximum freedom of movement for Jewish immigration into Palestine..." You will notice the odd usage of the "members of the Comintern in Palestine". He is trying not to refer to the CPP, which he excoriated earlier in his piece, and also neglects to say that the CPP was formed of resignees from the semi-Zionist Poale Zion in 1922. Whatever the CPP's policy may have been, up to 1926-7, it was not the Comintern's.

Cliff's article concludes by proclaiming that the only solution is socialism, but in the meanwhile calls for a secular, unitary state in a parliamentary democracy. The suggested programme included: compulsory education for all, a health service, pensions, minimum wage and all the other appurtenances of the welfare state. All of this seemed to have a familiar ring about it, especially when taken with the call for Jewish immigration. Then it struck me, Cliff's 1939 policy was the same as that of the WP-ISL, as set out in various resolutions of that party. Shachtman never acknowledged this fact, but then he always denied that the theory of bureaucratic collectivism came from Bruno Rizzi. We are now left with a terrible problem. We have it on no less an authority than Sean Matgamna that Cliff, in 1946, had set the political line of Palestine for the Fourth International, especially of the Cannonite SWP. Now I find that such is the dastardly cunning of T Cliff, he had previously masterminded the opposing Shachtmanite WP-ISL policy. With the brain reeling, one realises the full horror of it all. The Cliff-inspired Shachtman variant has now been taken up by Sean Matgamna. When one recalls that for some years there was no greater fan of the US-SWP and James P Cannon than Sean Matgamna (he endorsed their defencism, violent anti-Shachtmanism as well as their anti-Zionism), we might describe this phenomenon as "deviated apostolic succession."

In all this chopping and exchanging of opinions, we can confidently affirm that Sean's "two states for two peoples" formulation did

not come from Lenin, Trotsky, Cliff (pre- or post-1946), Shachtman, Cannon or any other international socialist source. In Sean's thesis it seems that if most Jews support a Zionist state, although the overwhelming majority of them do not and would not live there, then socialists must support them regardless of the democracy of numbers or the rights of others. By the same token, presumably, the rural Afrikaaners who want their own state must have it because they represent a significant minority.

"So long as Israel exists as a Zionist state, then Jews and Arabs will continue to die needlessly and to no good purpose, as they are dying while we conduct this argument."

It is possible to argue that after the war the people who suffered the ultimate barbarism of the holocaust deserved special treatment from the world that bore no little responsibility for that horror. It is a persuasive argument and one that struck the heartstrings of many in the aftermath of 1945. It was that public sympathy at the condition of Jews, who had endured so much, languishing in displaced persons camps, that put pressure on the Allied governments to solve this humanitarian problem. What none of them were going to do was open their own doors to a flood of immigrants. Not least of their calculations concerned the fact that there were also hundreds of thousands of displaced people and prisoners of war who might have claimed similar privileges. Their attitude was rather like that of Kaiser Wilhelm II who thought of a Jewish homeland

as "at least somewhere to get rid of our Yids." The people's conscience about the Jews was salved at little cost to the world but at the expense of the Palestinians. Many of the other refugees were herded callously to their deaths behind the Iron Curtain. In both instances, a cheap and easy solution for the Allies, but not one that readily commends itself to international socialists. It is ironic that the displaced persons camps in Europe emptied as the displaced persons camps in the Middle East were filling with Arabs. Why should the world's debts be paid by the poorest people?

Of a piece with this affection for the accomplished fact and his perverse inability to see the need for change and to fight for it, is his sneering response to the suggestion that the answer is revolutionary socialism. For Sean, the fight must be for the maintenance of Israel. The socialist Matgamna is the eager partisan of this robustly capitalist state, this proud possessor of an arsenal of atom bombs, this outpost of imperialism that enshrines the expropriation and exploitation of its Arab citizens and finds its justification in the notion of the exclusive and superior character of its Jewish people. Sean might condemn (but not too loud) the denial of human and democratic rights, the legal theft of property and land, the arbitrary arrests, the rigorous application of collective guilt, the deportations and curfews, but he draws no political conclusions other than to excuse this on the grounds of the right of Israel to be secure. For my part, I believe that so long as Israel exists as a Zionist state, then Jews and Arabs will continue to die needlessly and to no good purpose, as they are dying while we conduct this argument. There will be no peace. I further believe that only under socialism can the national question be solved for both peoples, because only then can there be any chance of fairness and equity. The history of the last 50 years is the negative affirmation of that fact.

Scattered throughout Sean's text are four footnotes. Footnote 3 is quite charming, because it bangs on at length abusing the leadership of IS, during Sean's recruiting raid within its ranks from 1968 to 1971. As part of the leadership during that time I was overjoyed to discover that, along with Cliff, Duncan Hallas, Chris Harman and Nigel Harris, I had displayed "Malvolio-like snobbery, self-satisfaction, and brain-pickling conceit, built on small achievement..." As Malvolio said: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them." I have to say that, since he transferred his loyalty from Cannon to Shachtman, Sean has acquired an entirely better class of vituperation, although he still has some way to go before he is in the same street as Max Shachtman for his high-grade abuse. Probably better to get the politics right, Sean, especially the WP-ISL's opposition to Zionism and two nations theory.

The disconnected footnote 4 concerns an anecdote told to Sean by James D Young, concerning a discussion about Israel, in the late 1950s, between Cliff and Hal Draper, witnessed by James. According to Sean: "Suddenly Draper turns on Cliff in irritation and repudiation, and accuses him: 'You want to destroy

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Israeli Jews! I don't!" Leaving aside the "irritation" and "repudiation" — this is just Sean spicing up the story — this little anecdote is actually more revealing of Sean's method than of Cliff's. We hear what Hal Draper said, as recalled by James, forty years after the event. But what did Cliff respond to this accusation of his wanting a pogrom of holocaust proportions? Did Sean ask James for this information and he could not remember? Or is that Sean, having acquired the evidence for the prosecution, did not want to confuse matters with any defence? Or did Cliff have no explanation and confess that he, along with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, wanted to drive all the Israeli Jews into the sea? If the answer to this last question is "yes", then he should have been scandalised out of the movement. Or is this just something that Sean has failed to check properly with James D Young? What we do know, however, is that Draper was against the Zionist state and wanted to replace it with an Arab-Jewish socialist state. And so say all of us, including Cliff, I think.

Throughout Sean's reply there runs an accusatory thread that I am conducting this argument as some way of making my apologies to Cliff. If I defend his line on Palestine in *Workers' Liberty* it is to cover my "social embarrassment before [my] SWP friends and former comrades." Which ones are those, pray? Paul Foot, Chris Harman, Jim Nichol? I think not. I do not defend Cliff's line on the permanent arms economy, because I no longer agree with it. I no longer defend his line on Russia, because I no longer agree with it. I defend his line on Zionism, because I agree with it. I defend the IS line on the Minority Movement that both of us held and he abandoned. It may come as a surprise to Sean but there are those of us who can disagree on fundamentals with Cliff without consigning everything he has said or done to the dustbin of history. At the same time, I do feel a degree of bitterness that what I saw as the best hope for the revolutionary movement in Britain since the 1920s, that I spent some time in helping to build, should have been diverted down various blind alleys at the behest of Cliff's impressionism and caprice. Most of all, my real complaint is not that Cliff has maintained his position on various matters, it is that he is capable of jettisoning almost any of those positions for at worst imaginary and at best transitory benefit. All of this and a great deal more, I have set out in a recently completed book on the IS Group². At the end of it I do not think anybody, including Cliff, will think that I am apologising, or wonder why I, and many others, are a touch bitter.

Finally, I would like to apologise to those *Workers' Liberty* readers who have got this far, for taking up so much of their time, but they really should blame Sean. He started it.

1. Current medical research suggests that Alzheimer's may be caused through eating from aluminium cooking utensils. If Sean still has such pots in his kitchen, I suggest he replaces them without delay.
2. *More Years for the Locust* by Jim Higgins, to be published by the International Socialist Group.