

Why Militant is in disarray

***Open Letter to a
supporter of
Militant***

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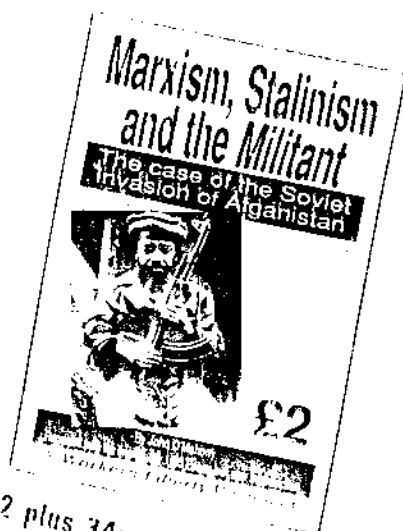
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What we are and what we must become

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and Sean Matgamna

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WHAT WE
ARE AND
WHAT WE
MUST BECOME

An Open Letter to a Militant Supporter

Dear Dave,

MILITANT IS NOW in the middle of a profound crisis. It is not only a crisis about your relationship to the Labour Party, though that is one part of it, and immediately the focus of it.

It goes deeper and wider. The collapse of Stalinism has brought sharply into question — I would say shattered and destroyed — the entire world outlook on which *Militant* has stood for the past 44 years. Every key idea specific to the *Militant* as a political formation lies in ruins, the last of them, your ideas about the Labour Party, shattered by your “open party” faction. All *Militant's* theories about the ever-expanding socialist “colonial revolution”, all your illusions about the progressive role of Stalinism in developing the economies of underdeveloped countries have now been reduced to the same degree of credibility as the theory that the earth is flat and was created in six days by a benign God four-and-a-half thousand years ago! I will return to this fundamental aspect of *Militant's* difficulties.

I want to discuss *Militant's* crisis with you, Dave. It has been a long time since we talked. As you know, it is one of the things I hold against *Militant* most, the Stalinist spirit of dogmatic intolerance and hatred of others on the left in which it systematically trains its members, inculcating contempt for the ideas of everyone outside your Church of the Lord.

Given the way you are organised, and the schoolroom sort of internal life you have, this means in reality contempt for the ideas of everyone but a tiny group of your own leaders, who give “the line”.

You call this “Bolshevik discipline”. But the Bolsheviks were never like that. They had more confidence in their own ideas: their leaders were ideologically braver.

The crisis now is caused by *Militant's* turn to electoralism, by the adoption by most of *Militant's* leaders, of a perspective of “one, two, many Waltons”.

The turn to electoralism against Labour is undoubtedly the turn to “building the open revolutionary party”, a turn to Gerry Healy's old politics of “building the revolutionary party”. You don't think so? What is it then? It is not possible to stop halfway down that road, Dave! Already, *Militant's* Walton candidacy has led to this turn. That logic is irreversible, and the youth who now press for “independence” will make sure it is.

You are now en route to the “independent open revolutionary party”, Dave! **THE IRONY OF** all this is pretty staggering, though, isn't it Dave? In 1984, when the miners were making the biggest attempt the labour movement ever made to break Thatcher, *Militant* had the leadership of the Merseyside labour move-

ment. Instead of standing up to the Tory government, fighting side by side with the miners, *Militant* left the miners in the lurch and did a deal with the Tories — which lasted just a year, and then, the miners beaten, they came for *Militant*. You also played into the hands of Kinnock.

In 1984 *Militant*'s leaders should have been willing to stand up to the Tory government, letting the logic of the class struggle decide, and if necessary breaking with the Labour leaders.

Large numbers of labour movement activists could then see plainly that Kinnock was playing the role of outright scab against both the striking miners and the Liverpool council. Today, those of them still active are prepared to put up with almost anything from Kinnock because they can now see no way of beating the Tories except a Kinnock General Election victory.

If necessary, if the logic of the class struggle dictated it, then *Militant* should then have broken the Liverpool District Labour Party away from the control of Kinnock and his friends — and appealed for support from class struggle Labour people throughout the country.

That would have been the opposite of the little sectarian, electoralist stunt in Walton which has now become the occasion for your break with the Labour Party — at a time when the class struggle is at the lowest ebb in 50 years, and the Labour left is weaker than at any time in 30 years!

Both the class struggle and the left in the labour movement are now at such a low ebb because we suffered defeat in the miners' strike, and the defeat, or surrender, everywhere, of those who, in the early '80s, posed as a local government left.

If *Militant* had pursued different policies in the mid-'80s, it might have made a radical difference: *we might have won*.

You say *Militant* was too small, with only a few thousand members? It was small, but it held a commanding position in Merseyside. Merseyside could have been brought in to struggle against the Tories together with the striking miners. The potential leaders of other local government struggles could then — perhaps — have followed Liverpool's lead.

Yet other workers could have been drawn in to a burgeoning and coalescing wave of class struggle — the dockers, for example.

You will recall that on two occasions during the miners' strike the dockers were on the edge of a national strike.

That strike alone might have tipped the balance in favour of the miners and against the Tories. Not the miners but the Tories would have gone down to defeat.

And the dockers would not later have been defeated and the National Dock Labour Board destroyed, as it was two years ago.

I put it to you that such a scenario is not mere fantasy. All the elements were there in the labour movement at that time. All those possibilities were there in the real situation. They only needed a catalyst.

Defiance of the Tory government by Liverpool council might have been that catalyst.

right he went to weddings and cried, and to funerals where he giggled ...

BUT THE LABOUR Party is only a part of your crisis, and politically not the most important one. Your entire "optimistic" world outlook has now been destroyed. It was based — since 1947 — on the idea that the expansion of Russian Stalinism in Eastern Europe and the victory of Stalinism in China and elsewhere was the *world socialist revolution*.

Of course you denounced Stalinism and advocated a "political revolution". But you were grotesquely enthusiastic for the expansion of Stalinism.

It must be one of the most shameful episodes in the history of any of the groups calling themselves Trotskyist that from January 1980 to the withdrawal of Russian troops in 1988 *Militant* supported and, indeed, glorified, Russia's "Vietnam war" in Afghanistan.

It was a war in which the Russians napalm-bombed villages and destroyed crops, using the tactics the US used in Vietnam, and the French in Algeria and Vietnam. A quarter of the people in Afghanistan — about five million people! — were driven over the border as refugees.

And you supported Russian imperialism's bloody war! Your preposterous dogmas led you to define it as the expansion of the "world socialist revolution".

You wound up accepting, advocating, defending and glorifying the inextinguishability of Stalinism in most of the less developed countries as a permanent stage in the movement of the world toward socialism. As late as 1979 — yes, 1979! — Ted Grant looked forward to a Stalinist officers' coup in Portugal! (This is the period in the Summer 1978 edition of your magazine.)

You don't want to accept that this was the implication of what you said and wrote? I don't blame you, Dave! But you will find that it is the unavoidable conclusion from what your organisation wrote. I analysed all this in a pamphlet some years ago, and there you will find all the relevant quotations from your organisation's articles and pamphlets.

But it was worse than that. The Mandelites and those who have had — again and again — ridiculous illusions in Tito and Mao or Castro usually need to tell themselves lies about it. They needed pretences and fantasies about what went on in these Stalinist states. You told yourselves a large part of the truth about them. You knew and said that they were totalitarian societies where the working class was ruthlessly oppressed. *And still* you supported them, still you crowed in triumph for every advance by Stalinism (in Afghanistan, for example).

The "autonomous movement of the productive forces" was at work in the world, you said, like Adam Smith's hidden hand, inevitably creating Stalinist capitalism, like the invisible hand of bourgeois capitalism. But the bourgeoisie in China, the USSR, Cuba, etc. kept the means of production in the hands of the state.

And now "The 'autonomous movement of the productive forces' — once the Stalinist political centres of command and terror have broken down — prove to be capitalist in direction!"

Which — I have carefully scrutinised of the last 100 pages of your magazine — has come only under the most favourable conditions, and proves that you are — not only —

movement of the "productive forces".

Your picture of a world in which capitalism is dying and a form of workers' power exists in large parts of the globe is shown to have been delirium, fantasy, political fool's gold.

What is left of *Militant's* "world outlook" now? What can be left of the political authority of leaders who have peddled such self-evident gibberish — reactionary gibberish! — for nearly half a century? Ted Grant's political authority is in crisis — to use the term Lyn Woods used when he talked to the *Guardian* reporter — not only, and not fundamentally, where the Labour Party is concerned. But what about the authority of people such as Tait and Walsh who have run the organisation for a quarter of a century?

Now, your "world outlook" — spun out of ridiculous pseudo-Trotskyist pieties — glosses on Stalinism — was never either coherent or intellectually worthy of respect. At one and the same time a *Militant* supporter could give the prizes of expanding — Stalinist — "world revolution", and paradoxically cite the "democracies" of nationalised property as socialist successes and denounce "Stalinist totalitarianism".

You called your theory "workers' statism", but the terms of your social theory were the opposite of the theory Trotsky had propounded for the USSR in 1910 using the same name tag. You described Stalinist societies in which the nationalised economies were not in antagonism with the bureaucracy but were *its own social property*, created by itself, for a long transitional stage of history. In fact you described Stalinist societies — with the exception, perhaps, of the USSR — where, you said, conditions were now objectively ripe for a working class "political revolution" — in which the bureaucracy had a necessary and progressive function in the economy and was not at all the "cancerous growth" Stalin's bureaucracy was for L.D. Trotsky's "degenerated workers' state" theory in 1940.

Under the workers' state name tag you actually described a new form of class society in which the bureaucracy had the role of a progressive ruling class. You described the sort of society Shachtman described (and I believe accurately described) except that you believed it was progressive. The "workers' state" name tag was merely your way of saying it was "post-capitalist" and progressive.

In fact, for Stalinism, you had exactly the politics of Bruno Rizzi against Leon Trotsky polemicalises in *In Defence of Marxism*. Rizzi considered both fascism and Stalinism to be "bureaucratic collectivist" societies, and that they were progressive — moving towards socialism.

It is, say, that fact alone sums up *Militant's* political and theoretical level: here is the theory which in its historical exhibitions, political conclusions and terms of reference is now almost identical to Rizzi for Stalin's "Progress and third international" — the theory of the "progressive" — the USSR in 1940.

But the question arises — what has happened since? Perhaps the "workers' statism" you went on to incorporate what you called "Bourgeoisist workers' states" into your programme as an inevitable stage of the development of the world — and the theory of the "Bourgeoisist workers' state" had to be dropped.

A Liverpool general strike alone — and an opinion poll in 1983 showed that a majority of Liverpool workers would have backed a general strike in support of Liverpool council if it had confronted the Tories, as its leaders promised the great mass demonstration they led through the centre of Liverpool that they intended to — would have decisively ended the isolation of the miners.

Everything in the last seven years might have been different. Dave, Thatcher was not as strong as she seemed, nor were the Tories: they seemed so strong, and looked so invulnerable only *after* they had beat the miners.

The way in which the panicky Tory MPs ditched Thatcher last year showed decisively that Thatcher was never as strong as she seemed.

And even if the miners, dockers and left-led local government had combined and coalesced their interests in 1984, and had nevertheless still suffered defeat, even then, things would be better than now. The labour movement would have been beaten in a fight, not suffered the demoralising horrors of a major defeat without a fight.

In fact, of course, only the miners fought, while the rest of the labour movement, from the TUC leaders to *Militant* — where *Militant* was in a position to lead a fight, and a crucial one — slunk away instead of fighting.

That is the shameful reality behind *Militant's* big talk about "Liverpool, the city that dared to fight". Liverpool dared to fight; *Militant* did not!

This may seem a very harsh judgement, Dave. It is harsh. But it is a fair judgement, and true to reality.

Militant chose to do a deal with the Tories, left the miners in the lurch, and allowed the mass support in Liverpool for a fight to bleed away slowly. Why people who call themselves Trotskyists did this is a mystery to me. But many things that happened in Liverpool then are beyond my comprehension, especially the bizarre doings of Derek Hatton, your leader there — and that, Dave, is what he was, whatever place he had in your hidden inner hierarchy.

That was the time to break with Kinnoek! If you wanted to make this turn out of the Labour Party, if such an attempt was to be anything other than a politically suicidal desertion of the political labour movement, there was your chance.

It would have been the Liverpool Labour Party backed by much of the working class in the area. After it, others areas might have followed, in an atmosphere of solidarity strikes with the miners. Not only could the Tories have been brought down, but the "Kinnoekite Tendency" in the Labour Party could have been stopped in its tracks by the working class movement. *Militant* might have understood, had its leaders had the stomach for it.

Maybe you, Dave — forgetting for the moment about the "disappointment of the Liverpool Labour Party" and about how and why the "disappointment of our Liverpool Labour Party" — you would have had a vastly greater number of people around you to build your organisation from, many of them tempered class struggle fighters too.

The truth is that the leaders of *Militant* did "forget" all about the "disappointment of the Liverpool Labour Party". They being "workers' party" in Liverpool, in 1984, was not the other Labour Party's concern. Left to fighting for the support of the "workers' party" in

Coherent, properly worked out, or intellectually respect-worthy this stuff surely never was, Dave. But it was quite powerful as a political artefact. If you didn't think about it, it would explain the world to you and your own place in it as a Trotskyist. And now, it is gone where the Berlin Wall went!

WHAT IS LEFT of your world outlook now? It is in tatters. And it is in this condition you set out on Healy's road to "build the revolutionary party"! Physic, heal thyself! Before you appeal to working class people to join this party, tell them first what you now stand for. Tell yourselves what you stand for.

Demand that your leaders — on both sides of the present dispute — tell you how they could have been so wrong on everything for so long!

Your tendency was built through routine propaganda activities within the protected environs of Labour's youth movement: and it is now quite plain that it was built on myths — the myths about "Labour's mass left wing" and your predestined place within it, and *Militant's* peculiar myth about "the world revolution" ever-expanding by way of a "colonial revolution" that would inevitably — even in Portugal at the end of the '70s — produce progressive Stalinist "deformed workers' states".

Probably it was inevitable that people with such a political record on the big questions would bungle things as badly as they did in Liverpool in the mid-'80s — and in Walton recently, where their stupid adventurism gave the Kinnockites the excuse for a new purge, and may well cost Dave Nellist and Terry Fields their seats in parliament. Some strategists!

This letter is overlong, and I must finish. Dave, for decades *Militant* has lived cut off from dialogue with the left. You poisoned the youth with bile and hatred against all the rest of the left. You affected disdain, and indifference, while your internal bulletin published vicious political misrepresentations, and often libels, of other left wingers — which their victims were not even supposed to know about, let alone have the chance to reply to.

You should break with the hermit habits of the "Exclusive Bretheren", Dave, and develop contact and dialogue with others of us on the left. In *Socialist Organiser* and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty we have long been grappling with the questions now placed brutally on *Militant's* agenda by the collapse of Stalinism in the USSR.

You have built an organisation akin to a religious cult, not a healthy political party. Now some of those who built it find it turned on them. The organisation is starting out on a Healyite adventure, its ideas in shreds and tatters.

God knows what this organisation will now mutate into. But it won't — it can't — evolve into a serious revolutionary force in the British working class movement. For there to be any hope of that, you must first settle accounts with your history and draw up an honest political balance sheet of what you are, now that all your old ideas have collapsed, like your "perspectives" for the Labour Party.

Sean Matgamna

What happened in Liverpool

- 29 Mar '84 Budget day for the council. Despite a one-day strike by council workers and a big demonstration at the Town Hall, Labour's 'unbalanced' no-cuts budget is defeated by 3 Labour right-wingers voting with the Liberals and Tories. All other budgets are defeated too.
- May '84 New council elections. Labour wins solid majority. An opinion poll shows that 55% of Labour voters would back a local general strike if the Tories intervened against the Council. But the *Militant*-led Labour Council does not vote through the unbalanced budget. The mass campaign is wound down in favour of negotiations with the Tory government. This is the decisive turning-point when confrontation with the government could have linked up with the miners's strike and given a lead to all other councils.
- July '84 The council leaders announce a deal with the government. Some of the financial problems are postponed to the next year, and the Council can get through with a 17% rate rise. *Militant* call it "a 95% victory", but the Tories are quietly satisfied: they have evaded the danger of a fight on two fronts, with the miners and local government at once.
- Oct '84 The Council appoints Sampson Bond, a *Militant* supporter, as its race relations officer, against the strong wishes of the City's Black Caucus. The ensuing row wrecks the Council Unions' Joint Shop Stewards' Committee and alienates Liverpool's black community. Throughout the country — in LPYS branches for example — *Militant* wages a savage campaign of racist stereotyping against the leaders of the Black Caucus, denouncing them as "Pimps and Gangsters".
- Mar '85 The miners, defeated, are forced back to work after 13 months. Liverpool Labour Council has not yet said anything definite about plans for a confrontation with the government over the budget for the financial year starting April 1985. Instead, it delays setting a budget — a policy also followed by a few other Labour councils.
- June '85 Councillors propose a budget with a 20% rate rise and some financial juggling to see them through the year without a showdown. The council workers' unions say no. The Council sets an 'unbalanced' budget — yet starts no clear campaign for action.

- Sept '85 The Council announces that it is about to run out of cash and will issue 90 day redundancy notices to all employees "as a legal device". The council unions protest. The council leaders withdraw the notices. The council shop stewards call a ballot for an all-out strike. The vote goes against the strike, 47% to 53%. The council leaders send out the redundancy notices again — some by taxi to bypass a teachers' picket line. NALGO members strike in protest.
- 11 Oct '85 The Council is forced to withdraw the redundancy notices by legal action brought by the NUT. It proposes another 'legal device' — laying off the whole council workforce from 1-28 January!
- 29 Nov '85 Labour's National Executive sets up a kangaroo court 'inquiry' into Liverpool District Labour Party. This is simply the Kinnock faction seizing its chance.
- 22 Nov '85 The Council announces a deal. It gets a loan from Swiss banks on condition that it makes cuts and stays legal in future. It reveals that the required cuts have already, quietly, been made! And it soon comes out that the loan had been negotiated back in August! The entire saga of redundancy notices, taxis, clashes with the workforce etc. is rendered inexplicable. To this day *Militant* has offered no credible account of what it thought it was doing. *Liverpool, the City that Dared to Fight* by Peter Taaffe and Tony Mulhearn relies on lies and bombast.
- Mar '86 A court declares that the Liverpool Labour councillors must be surcharged and disqualified because of their delay in setting a budget.

“The government were fighting Arthur Scargill on one front. They didn’t want a second front with Derek Hatton, Militant and all that entailed. Jenkin was under pressure to find a solution...

‘You do realise,’ [Teddy Taylor MP] said, ‘that we had to tell Patrick [Jenkin] to give you the money. At this stage we want Scargill. He’s our priority. But we’ll come for you later’.

To the best of my recollection, these were the words he used, and how true they turned out to be.”

Derek Hatton, recalling the events of July 1984, before Militant-led Liverpool City Council did a deal with the Tories (from “Inside Left”)

“These tribesmen are ‘dark masses’, sunk in the gloom of barbarism, whose conditions of life and psychology have not changed fundamentally in 2,000 years...the task of dragging the Afghan countryside out of the slough of primeval backwardness and into the 20th century [falls to] the Russian bureaucracy and their Afghan supporters [who] are in effect carrying through the task of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Afghanistan.”

Alan Woods, Militant Journal, 1980, in support of the Russian troops in Afghanistan