

LETTERS

Marxism in the Basque Country

COULD I add some points of detail to John Sullivan's generally excellent report of the latest developments in Euskadi ("Spain Bans Radical Nationalism", *What Next?* No.24)?

In the first place it is necessary to note that the position held by Izquierda Unida – effectively these days the Spanish Communist Party's electoral front organisation – was to abstain on the illegalisation of Batasuna. IU's president, Gaspar Llamazares (the PCE chief in Asturias) explained the decision in these terms: "We are abstaining because while we repudiate Batasuna's connivance with ETA, we don't think that the Parliament should involve itself in something that pertains to the judges", i.e. that illegalisation should now be a legal and not a political matter. (See *El País*, 21 August 2002.) The only currents within IU who rejected this position and called for IU to oppose illegalisation were Corriente Roja – an opposition led by Angeles Maestro that emerged within the PCE at its sixteenth congress in March of this year – and Espacio Alternativo, a formation that originated from the old Spanish State USec section. Thus, aside from this very small opposition, IU effectively lined itself up – once we allow for its own nuance of abstention – alongside the PP and PSOE in their offensive against the abertzale left. Indeed, both IU and PCE have a long history of Greater Spanish chauvinism: denunciation of ETA as "fascists" is not only routine from the leadership of PSOE and PP but is the preferred characterisation of present PCE general secretary (and former leader of IU) Francisco Frutos.

However, in Euskadi IU is a completely different kettle of fish. Although nowadays in the rest of the Spanish State IU is reduced almost in its entirety to Communist Party members (estimates put the proportion of members of IU who are also members of the PCE at somewhere in excess of eighty per cent), in Euskadi the majority of the membership of IU is independent of the Basque section of PCE, the EPK (Communist Party of Euskadi). As a consequence of this, IU in Euskadi has – much to the chagrin of IU headquarters in Madrid – come out firmly against both the new law and its implementation against Batasuna.

There is a degree of history to all this. IU in the Basque Country was a signatory to the Pact of

Lizarra in 1998 (along with the moderate nationalists of PNV and EA and of course Herri Batasuna itself), and Lizarra was immediately followed – as was understood by the concerned parties at the time – by ETA's most recent ceasefire. The stated function of Lizarra was to initiate a "peace process" along the lines of that underway in Ireland, even if it is clear in the text of the Pact itself that the Irish process was not well understood by the Pact's authors. Nevertheless, there did seem to be a move forward from violence to politics. But ETA's commitment to the ceasefire did not last: and when they returned to active military operations at the end of 1999 the Basque part of IU came under intense pressure from the rest of IU to withdraw from Lizarra (IU did not break from Lizarra when ETA ended its ceasefire but only after the first assassination). The line of the EPK – following that of PCE – had been what it called "equidistance": that it is necessary to be equally critical of all wings of the political spectrum and their principal criticism of the majority current led by Javier Madrazo was that it placed IU within the orbit of Basque nationalism – specifically, that IU-EB should not have signed Lizarra, and, after having signed it, they should have withdrawn from it sooner than they did. The differences were in fact so strong within IU that the sector critical of Madrazo refused to let themselves be considered as candidates for IU in the autonomous elections in 2001: indeed it looked at one point as if IU would split in the Basque country, something that still cannot be ruled out.

In these elections – in which Euskal Herritarrok (now effectively Herri Batasuna with a different name) did very badly – a deliberate attempt was made to form an anti-nationalist bloc composed of PP and PSOE. It was given to understand by the leadership of both parties that were their combined votes sufficient they would form a coalition government in Euskadi. As it happened, they narrowly failed: on a near record turnout, PNV and EA – who stood on a joint ticket – won sufficient votes to form a government. And – highly significantly – this government has been supported by the Basque section of IU: again to much horror at IU headquarters in Madrid (Javier Madrazo, IU leader in Euskadi, is in fact the Housing Minister in the current autonomous government).

What will happen now remains to be seen: yet

much will depend on the future orientation of the Basque section of IU (or at least that part of it separated from the PCE and EPK). For there appears to be no other force in Euskadi from which a left leadership that can support self-determination can be built: it is not so much that the rank and file of the Socialist Party in the Basque Country is bureaucratically controlled, as John puts it, but that it has been effectively depoliticised. The only issue on which the party moves is that of opposing Basque nationalism in all of its many forms. As for ETA and Batasuna, it must be remembered that Batasuna in its present form is a relaunch of the old Herri Batasuna on a new hard-line project. Its politics are built on the belief that the breakdown of both the ceasefire and the Lizarra process were positive things, and that all other politics need to be subsumed into support of ETA. And given that the only political justification that ETA and Batasuna can make for the armed struggle is the ludicrous claim that they are still living in a fascist state, the current anti-nationalist offensive coming from Madrid will only serve as more grist to their mill.

Saludos
Ed George

P.S. If anyone is interested I have a fairly lengthy analysis of the last Basque elections on my (still largely unconstructed) web page; it can be read at http://www.geocities.com/edgeorge2001es/mywritings/Elections_Euskadi.html

Marxism and Organisation

MAOISM IN the USA is not a subject I would normally have much interest in, but Louis Proyect's review of Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air (What Next? No.24)* prompted me to go and buy a copy of the book. It makes interesting reading.

Although as dyed-in-the-wool Stalinists the US followers of Chairman Mao were the Trotskyists' bitter enemies, as Louis points out the two tendencies had a lot in common, in that both were committed to Leninist vanguard party-building and therefore confronted similar problems.

Despite starting out in the early '70s on the farther shores of political lunacy, occupying themselves with the organisation of armed insurrection and the like, a decade later at least some of the Maoists seem to have come down to earth and made an effort to engage with political reality. According to Elbaum's account, the Line of March organisation with which he was involved played an important role in the movement

that emerged around Jessie Jackson in the '80s.

But the upshot of this, apparently quite effective, abandonment of crude vanguard party-building was a crisis in Line of March which led to its effective collapse by 1987. An attempt by some of its remnants to organise around the journal *CrossRoads* also came to grief. Yet a crazed sect like Bob Avakian's Revolutionary Communist Party continues to exist to this day.

Again, there is a parallel with the Trotskyists. Tendencies around Bert Cochran in the US and John Lawrence in Britain renounced sect-building in favour of work in the mass movement. But they seem to have vanished without trace, and it was the "orthodox Trotskyist" organisations led by James P. Cannon and Gerry Healy that lived on to influence a new generation of militants.

Or if you go back even further, to pre-Leninist times, you find the same thing. The tendency around Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, which Engels supported against the sectarianism of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, initially played an important role in the "new unionism" but subsequently disappeared without leaving any political heirs. The SDF, by contrast, maintained its organisational continuity over the years, won tens of thousands of adherents, and formed the basis of the CPGB at its foundation in 1920.

There does seem to be an unfortunate contradiction here. It is the sectarians who build stable organisations and influence political activists across the generations, while those who reject sectarianism, and pursue a line of activity that bears more resemblance to the methods advocated by Marx and Engels, make only a short-lived impact and are much less effective over time.

I offer no solution to this. I merely raise it as a problem that requires examination.

Dave Roberts

Frank Ridley

I AM researching into the life of the socialist and secularist F.A. Ridley, for a biographical introduction to a new edition of his classic work *Socialism and Religion*, and wondered if any of your readers could supply me with information on him, in particular relative to his early years. I am also anxious to obtain photographs of Ridley addressing meetings, indoor and out, which I could copy. I can be contacted at 43 Eugene Gardens, Nottingham NG2 3LF, or by email at r.morrell1@ntlworld.com.

Robert Morrell