

# The Alliance for Workers' Liberty: Britain's Revolutionary Imperialists

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IT MAY seem to be a contradiction, a revolutionary imperialist, and of course it is, but that is in essence the contradiction that lies at the heart of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Not of course that the AWL is alone in wrestling with this dilemma. On the contrary, the AWL stands in the finest traditions of labour imperialism. It was Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation that pioneered the belief that socialism and imperialism could be reconciled. Coming from a rich Ulster family, Hyndman was antagonistic to the struggles of the Irish, supported the Boers and eventually the British in world war one. Another prominent British socialist of the period, *Clarion* editor Robert Blatchford, later to join the Tory Party, was equally a supporter of British imperialism and its foreign ventures.

Marxism is to be distinguished from Fabianism and the different varieties of reformism in that it is wedded to a class analysis of society and in its historical materialist approach. New Labour is forever talking about its values (even if they end up in imprisonment without trial at Belmarsh) but socialists deal with concrete actualities. What is it that has led generations of socialists and their organisations into supporting the wars and adventures of the ruling class? What material base do these politics have? Although it is fashionable to deride the thesis of Lenin, it is unarguable that his thesis, that the conservatism of the British working class was due to their being the recipients of the crumbs from the fruits of imperialism, explains both the racism and the lack of revolutionary fervour of this class.

British racism, at its heart, has material foundations. It does not exist solely in the realm of ideas. The relative privileges of the British working class, compared with their Argentinian or South African counterparts, lies in the operation of British capital abroad, the returns from their investments in the form of a social wage – the NHS, Social Security etc. Repression abroad paid for reformism at home. The greatest reforming Labour Government, under Attlee, was also the government which most intensified the robbery

of the African and Malaysian colonies, in order to fund the dollar deficit.

I first came across the AWL when I was a young member, about 18 at the time, of the International Socialists (now the SWP). I was in the Liverpool branch when a proposal came from the leadership that the organisation should expel the Trotskyist Tendency as they were called. A speaker was invited from this group and Andrew Hornung, their most effective speaker and someone with whom I worked closely over Palestine in future years, spoke to the branch. Nonetheless the branch split 2-1 in favour of the expulsion and delegates were elected proportionately.

One member of the Liverpool branch who came to play a prominent part in Socialist Organiser/AWL was John Bloxham, then a young teacher. When I was expelled a few months later, for publicly disagreeing with and voting against the decision of IS to close down the Anti-Internment League, Bloxham repaid my support by abstaining. He explained that it was all a question of democratic centralism!

By way of an aside, I should mention that the Liverpool branch was somewhat reluctant to expel me. It was felt necessary to bring up to Liverpool their Industrial Organiser, Roger Rosewell. Rosewell managed to complete his task admirably. It was no doubt a good preparation for his future career, which included sitting on the SDP's Industrial Committee, working for the free-market Aims of Industry and being a leader-writer on the *Daily Mail*. Currently he is bag-carrier-in-chief for Lady Shirley Porter!

I digress however. The Trotskyist Tendency was expelled at an Extraordinary Conference of IS and soon became Workers' Fight. It was a typically Trotskyist organisation with standard views in support of the Irish and other liberation movements.

I first caught up with what was by now Socialist Organiser when I went, after the invasion of Lebanon, to a Bradford Labour Movement Conference on Palestine in or around 1982. There I met up with Andrew Hornung, with whom I

was to work for the next four or so years on Palestine. The Labour Party had traditionally been a bastion of support for the Zionists. Indeed the only support the Palestinians had ever received came from the right of the Party – people like Andrew Faulds MP and David Watkins MP. Ian Mikardo, Jo Richardson, Tony Benn, Eric Heffer – all were stalwarts of the Labour Friends of Israel, though the latter two left shortly after the invasion of Lebanon.

Andrew and myself set up, at a meeting in the GLC's County Hall, the Labour Committee on Palestine, which led directly to the passing of an emergency motion at the 1982 Conference supporting a democratic, secular State of Palestine. At this time SO had a policy, common on the far left, of support for a democratic, secular state in Palestine.

However SO had already begun moving in the direction of imperialism, when it began to criticise Sinn Féin from the right. It began to warm to the Ulster Loyalists, arguing that they were merely articulating the sub-national feelings of the Protestants, rather than seeing them as a political representatives of a form of settler colonialism and an appendage and extension of British imperialism. This resulted in SO supporting some sort of federation in Ireland to accommodate Loyalist desires and for their guru, Sean Matgamna/John O'Mahoney to argue for the repartitioning of Ireland so as to excise from the current Northern Ireland statelet the Catholic counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone!

The LCP became transformed into the Labour Movement Campaign on Palestine after the Workers Revolutionary Party, at the instigation of Ted Knight, then leader of Lambeth Council, took over the organisation. SO were traditional enemies of the WRP, having been taken to court by the latter for libel. So at this time the main battle was with the WRP's LCP, but within a couple of years Matgamna was becoming restless as he sought to take his organisation down what is known, in the Trotskyist jargon, as the road of the "Third Camp".

AWL has now become a full "Third Campist" organisation. This term was used to describe the position of Max Shachtman, one of the leaders of American Trotskyism, which was in essence a forerunner of the SWP's "Neither Moscow nor Washington". Shachtman himself ended up as a cold war warrior, supporting the CIA invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Matgamna has now succeeded in taking AWL down exactly the same road.

AWL have since the mid-1980s adopted a "Two States" position on Palestine. Both "nations" according to them are entitled to their own state. Leaving aside the question of whether or not the Israeli Jews are a nation, what the AWL position ignores is the fundamental difference between Israeli Jews and Palestinians – one is the oppressor and the other is the oppressed. When AWL first

adopted this position I argued with them, in debates and articles, that what they are doing is supporting an imperialist solution to the problem – a Palestinian Bantustan which would merely replace the face of the Israeli soldier with that of the Palestinian.

However AWL's position is actually far worse than this.

There are many good supporters of the Palestinians and genuine anti-Zionists who support a Two States position, not because they wouldn't wish to see one, unitary, democratic and secular state but because they don't think it's practical politics or feasible. People such as Noam Chomsky and the late Israel Shahak. No one could doubt that these people are genuine and sincere opponents of Zionism and the racism of the Israeli State. It's just that they don't see an alternative to Two States. Now I would argue they are wrong in thinking that a stable and organic Palestinian State, with its own sovereignty and free from Israeli domination, is possible. Today the presence of some 400,000 settlers and the cantonisation of the West Bank would, I suggest, make this impossible. However this is a debate within the Palestine solidarity movement.

AWL's position is however entirely different. They don't support a Two States position because it is the only thing that is attainable. They see the existence of the Israeli State, a State of its Jewish citizens, for whom its Arab citizens are at best a tolerated minority, as a *good thing in its own right*. AWL, beyond the occasional reference to Israeli racism, have absolutely nothing to say about the inherent racism in the Zionist State. Nothing about the fact that 93% of the land is reserved for Jews, or that welfare benefits are higher for Jews than Palestinians in order to encourage a higher birthrate. AWL even support the Israeli Law of Return which allows people like myself to go and live in Israel and become citizens but denies the same right to Palestinians who have been born and brought up there.

It is little wonder then that both Sean Matgamna and his faithful lapdog, Martin Thomas, both describe themselves in Thomas's words as "a little bit Zionist". This is the ideology that the founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, described as "an antidote to socialism". The nationalism of Zionism was seen as the only way to wean the Jews off socialist politics. It was no accident that the Balfour Declaration was issued five days before the Bolshevik Revolution in a forlorn attempt to win the allegiance of Russia's Jews. Balfour himself, as the author of the Aliens Act 1905, was a dyed-in-the-wool anti-Semite who seriously believed that the Russian revolution was a Jewish affair! It was also the reason why the Zionist movement was the only legal political movement in Czarist Russia. Zionism was vehemently opposed to Jewish revolutionary activities.

Emigration to Palestine, escape from the anti-Semites, this was the only “good” Zionist activity.

It was no surprise therefore that when the Association of University Teachers passed a motion supporting the boycott of Israeli universities, Haifa and Bar Ilan, both hotbeds of anti-Arab racism, the AWL moved into action *in support of these racist universities*.

Haifa, on 17 May, hosted a conference, organised by its own Professor Arnon Sofer, into the “demographic problem and Israeli policies”. The “problem” being too many Arabs in the Jewish State. Sofer’s preferred solution being “transfer” i.e. expulsion. Nor is Sofer just an academic crank. He heads the Department of Geo-Strategy and is deputy-chair of its Institute of Security Studies. The guest of honour at the conference, from which Arabs were excluded, was the Rector of Haifa University, Professor Yossi Artzi. Haifa bans the Arabic language from being used on signposts on campus, its website is in Hebrew and English (despite Arabic being an official language in Israel) and despite there being 20% Arab students at Haifa – the highest of any Israeli university. Bar Ilan University is a hotbed of the religious right. It validates the degrees at the College of Judea & Samaria in the Ariel settlement on the West Bank. Bar Ilan used to bar Arab students from even living on campus. Israeli academics are complicit in all aspects of Israeli military life and have never spoken up, except for a minority like Haifa’s Professor Ilan Pappé (whom the Rector has tried to get expelled from the university), for the Palestinians and against the racism that their universities tolerate.

AWL has nothing to say about any of the above. Racism against Arabs is not its concern. It doesn’t exist. You will not find in the reams of articles they have produced even a single one attacking or even analysing racism in the Jewish State and how it has come about. AWL have no analysis of Zionism, with its aim of creating an ethnically pure Jewish State. Like all good colonialists and imperialists, for AWL, the natives are invisible. They simply don’t exist other than as supporting actors in a play. And anyone who criticises Zionism is labelled an anti-Semite or a “left anti-Semite”. AWL therefore had no difficulty in taking part, with Jon Pike and other Zionists, in the Engage site, which libelled Sue Blackwell and other lecturers who had supported the Boycott of Apartheid Israel. AWL is at home with these reactionaries, many of whom argue that it is no business of trade unions to meddle in the politics of other countries. Bread and butter issues are their sole concern.

The AWL position on the Academic Boycott is a good example of their hypocrisy. If they were sincere in their Two States position, they would of course understand that Israel is a military giant compared with the Palestinians. That the only

way, given the power and support of the settlers and far-right in Israel, to obtain a Palestinian State was precisely to put as much pressure on the Israeli State as possible. This indeed was the position of one of the main speakers for the original AUT motion supporting the boycott. But AWL are *opposed to any* pressure on the Israeli State and certainly any *effective* pressure on them. The real reason is that AWL’s Two States position is really a totem. In practice they support the Zionist State and nothing else. In the event that the Zionist State “solves” its demographic problems by expelling the Palestinians into Jordan, which must remain a distinct possibility, you can be sure that as time goes on, AWL will label all those seeking the return of the Palestinians as “anti-Semitic”.

It is no accident therefore that AWL have become the main left group in support of the war in Iraq. For sure they didn’t support the original invasion, but today they are full square behind the occupation. Matgamna even muses on AWL’s website that it might lead to the establishment of a bourgeois democracy with the elections in January (if only one forgets about the tiresome bombing!).

There was a full debate over the AWL’s position on the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform’s e-mail list earlier this year. Pete Radcliff’s “defence” of their position was to call their opponents, primarily myself, “liars”. However this defence didn’t go down particularly well, and when I subsequently moved a motion at the January SADP calling for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of imperialist troops from Iraq, AWL first tried to amend it, arguing that “calls for troops out should be consequential to an overall orientation towards working-class solidarity”. When this was defeated, AWL opposed the main motion. AWL’s other main difference over Iraq was its support for the scab leadership of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, whose Iraqi Communist Party leadership were also part of the US puppet government under Allawi. The IFTU have operated with the blessing of the US occupation authorities, utilising the same decrees (Order 31) that Saddam Hussein issued, effectively banning any other trade union organisation such as the Federation of Workers Councils or the Iraqi Union of Unemployed. Despite this AWL continues to support the IFTU and their strike-breaking activities.

Despite having joined with other comrades in forming the SADP, after the SWP had effectively closed the Socialist Alliance down, AWL found that they could no longer co-exist within the same organisation with those who were genuine anti-imperialists. AWL members have now stopped posting to all left e-mail lists such as UK Left Network. Instead members such as the rabid Zionist Jim Denham post to the pro-war Harry’s Place, where they are in congenial company with

even more ardent Zionists than themselves. The reality is that AWL are now uncomfortable with all sections of the left in Britain.

Why is AWL pro-war? Because if you refuse to call for the withdrawal of troops, you must, by necessity, be in favour of the troops remaining, i.e. the occupation. It is little wonder that satellite members of AWL, such as Kate Ahrens (recently defeated in the UNISON elections), have signed joint letters with the openly pro-imperialist Labour Friends of Iraq, attacking comrades on the left. LFI, incidentally, has been formed by ex-AWLers like Jane Ashworth, Simon Pottinger and Alan Johnson who have taken AWL's politics to their logical conclusion and openly abandoned any pretence that they oppose imperialism. Johnson himself has written in *Red Star* defending the US war crimes in Falluja.

Even when AWL was a formal part of the anti-war movement, it spent most of its time attacking the fact that the Muslim Association of Britain was part of the anti-war coalition. Working with Zionist fundamentalist groups was fine, but working with an Islamic group was not. The fact that MAB has, under the pressure of events, been moving leftwards for some time, was irrelevant. A hostility to Muslims because of their perceived Middle East connections and anti-Zionism has been a part of the fare at the AWL table.

Concomitant with this has been an obsession with the figure of George Galloway and Respect. Now I am not a supporter of Respect. I am opposed to communalist politics and seeking to win over a small minority (5%) of the working class on the

basis of their religious affiliation. In particular when the appeal is a cross-class appeal. However I would venture to suggest that most socialists, even some inside the Labour Party, welcomed the defeat of the warmonger Oona King in the General Election. We were even more thrilled by Galloway's brilliant performance at the Senate hearings when he tore into the hapless Senator Coleman. Not so AWL. AWL supported both Roger Godsiff against Respect's Salma Yaqoob in Birmingham and Oona King in Bethnal Green. It beggars belief that a so-called socialist organisation, which itself supported the Socialist Green Unity Coalition standing candidates against New Labour, nonetheless opposed Galloway's successful challenge to King.

Yes Galloway became very close to elements of the Ba'athist regime. But this has always been the case with Labour MPs, not least Tony Benn. Yes he was an Arabist (and also a supporter of Two States!). But he was a consistently anti-war MP and deserved on that account, if no other, to receive the critical support of socialists.

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty, which stood just one candidate in the General Election (Pete Radcliff in Nottingham), is a tiny ex-Trotskyist sect, numbering maybe 100 people. Its main strength is still in the National Union of Students where it has worked with the Zionist Union of Jewish Students on and off for years. The AWL is fast moving to the right as it abandons any pretence at internationalism and support for the oppressed of the world. As Karl Marx wrote, a nation that oppresses another will not itself be free. It's a lesson that the AWL has forgotten. ■

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