

# Lies, Damn Lies and Tony Greenstein

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TO THOSE on the left who derive sado-masochistic entertainment from the more bilious of its internal debates, Tony Greenstein will need no introduction. But for anyone who doesn't think that spending endless hours on email discussion lists and internet message boards is an appropriate and productive use of their time, it is necessary to provide a little background.

Tony Greenstein is a socialist based in Brighton who engages in a form of political masturbation that consists basically of attacking the Alliance for Workers' Liberty in the most poisonous terms known to him at every possible opportunity. Tony attacks the AWL for its small size, but he is not on very firm ground arguing numbers with a group more than 100 times the size of his own: the Tony Greenstein sect of one.

Tony's ferocious hatred of the AWL overrides all rational political thought; so, for example, when Tony stood as a candidate for the Socialist Green Unity Coalition (in which the AWL also participated) in the 2005 General Election, Tony felt it appropriate to write a letter to the CPGB newspaper *Weekly Worker* attacking the AWL in characteristic terms, even though he knew this would harm the coalition of which he himself was part. This sort of behaviour is illustrative of Tony's general approach – not rational, worked-out criticism but frenzied slander. His diatribe in *What Next?* is no different. It is embarrassing in its lack of rigour, in the way it substitutes anecdotal slander for political critique, and in its use of blatant lies, distortions and half-truths.

For Tony, the AWL are “revolutionary imperialists”. This is laughable. Tony can't even do baseless slander properly. What about the AWL is “imperialist”? Is it a nation pursuing an aggressive policy of self-aggrandisement? What countries has it occupied? What wars of conquest has it fought? Presumably Tony means “pro-imperialist,” but once again his irrepressible urge to hysterically attack the AWL has affected his ability to think and write rationally.

Tony attempts to tar the AWL with the pro-imperialism of the late-19th century Social Demo-

cratic Federation, but does not reference or quote from any documents of either the SDF or the AWL to prove his point. He simply asserts it as fact and moves on, attempting to cover up his inability to substantiate his claims with some irrelevant biographical information about SDF leader Henry Hyndman.

This method – one of baseless assertion without substantiation, quote or reference – is used in a tiresomely repetitive fashion throughout Tony's article. For example, he accuses the AWL of “criticising Sinn Féin from the right”, but fails to provide any quotes from AWL literature to back up this claim. He repeats this trick when accusing AWL member Sean Matgamna of “arguing for the repartitioning of Ireland”; again when accusing the AWL of seeing anti-Arab discrimination by the Israeli state as “a good thing in itself”; and again when accusing us of “support for the scab leadership of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.” None of these claims can possibly be justified, since none of them are true.

It is also worth mentioning some of Tony's more colourful and surreal lies. When referring to the AWL's opposition to the way the right-wing Muslim Association of Britain was promoted by the leaders of the Stop the War Coalition, Tony says that, for the AWL, “working with Zionist fundamentalist groups was fine, but working with an Islamic group was not”. Which “Zionist fundamentalist group” is he talking about? Does Tony think the AWL proposed that the MAB were replaced as co-sponsors of the Stop the War demonstrations by Israel's ruling Likud party?

In typical fashion, Tony claims that the AWL's position on the MAB was wrong because the latter was “clearly moving leftward”. But once again, Tony fails to substantiate this wild claim with any reference to MAB's propaganda or activity. In reality, even a cursory glance at the MAB's website will make it clear that its is anchored firmly in its harbour of socially conservative religious reaction. Look at Dr Azzam Tamimi, a member of the MAB executive and one of its most prominent spokespeople, who describes himself as a “sym-

pathiser and supporter of Hamas” and claimed that Arab women “ask” to be beaten by their husbands; or Anas Altikriti, a prominent MAB member and head of Respect’s Yorkshire list for the 2004 European elections, who told the *Weekly Worker* that his religious beliefs told him there would “always be rich and poor”.

Tony also says that “hostility to Muslims ... has been part of the fare at the AWL table”. Apparently he missed the fact that the AWL was the most vocal element of a tiny minority on the left who thought that opposing the genocide of the mainly-Muslim Bosnians in 1995 and mainly-Muslim Kosovars in 1999 was more important than empty anti-NATO rhetoric. He has also failed to notice that the AWL is the only organisation on the left that has done any serious solidarity work with the emerging labour movements in countries like Iran, Iraq and Indonesia whose members and militants are ... guess what? Muslims. But of course for “anti-imperialists” of Tony’s stripe, the only people that matter in mainly-Muslim world are right-wing religious fundamentalists.

This is, of course, just a limited selection – the list of instances in which Tony makes a slanderous claim against the AWL but totally fails to substantiate it is almost endless.

By contrast, it is a matter of consummate ease for any literate person to pick apart Tony’s fabrications about the AWL’s politics by simply reading anything we have ever written. Tony says we are “four-square behind the occupation [of Iraq]”. Were we perhaps lying, then, when we said “No US/UK occupation” and “End the occupation” – including on the front cover of our paper *Solidarity*? Tony accuses us of supporting the leadership of the IFTU, so maybe it was a different AWL that wrote: “The actual effect of the ... Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions intervention at the Labour Party conference was to give Blair a free hand to carry on backing Bush. Whatever sophistry may be used to evade this fact, it was de facto support to Bush’s policy – brutal, arrogant, militaristic, privatise-at-all-costs, ‘spot of trouble? Slaughter a few hundred more civilians and that’ll show them!’ – which, far from being a democratic alternative to the rise of Islamist reaction, has fuelled that rise” (see the debate at [www.workersliberty.org/node/view/3150](http://www.workersliberty.org/node/view/3150)). These examples are typical of the way Tony regularly tells lies about the AWL’s politics. It is difficult to find a more effective way of responding to him than identifying each one of his fabrications and repudiating them one by one. This, however, is an exhausting and time consuming process; the lies are numerous, life is short and there are far more important things to be doing.

The way Tony relates the AWL’s position on the AUT’s academic boycott of Israel typifies his entire approach. He starts with the “left common

sense” – in this case that a boycott of “Apartheid Israel”, whether cultural or academic, is a good thing – observes the AWL’s opposition to this and then fabricates a reason which he then doesn’t bother to substantiate. For those with a slightly more rigorous attitude than Tony, the AWL actually opposed the boycott because we have a general position against all boycotts, believing that positive acts of solidarity are more effective and that boycotts often harm most the people who are your potential allies (in this case the Israeli left and workers’ movement). The way he refers to “Apartheid Israel”, or elsewhere to the IFTU’s “strike-breaking activities” simply regurgitates the buzzwords and received wisdom of the left without any political explanation whatsoever.

Some of the other disingenuous tricks Tony employs are staggering. He attacks the AWL by attacking the politics of some of its ex-members, namely Alan Johnson and Jane Ashworth. He justifies this by saying that their current trajectories are the “logical conclusion” of the AWL’s politics. A more rational person might realise that these people left the AWL precisely because they no longer agreed with the AWL’s politics. If the views of Alan Johnson and Jane Ashworth were really the full expression of the AWL’s politics, why did the AWL waste the ink and paper to write lengthy polemics denouncing them both as “ex-Marxist Blairites”? Again, one wonders if Tony believes we were lying when we wrote those words.

(Incidentally, Tony’s “more anti-occupation than thou” attitude on Iraq is particularly amusing given his recent membership of the Alliance for Green Socialism; an organisation which positively supports the occupation of Iraq by UN troops!)

A good example of the way Tony twists reality can be found when he describes how the AWL “supported both Roger Godsiff against Respect’s Salma Yaqoob in Birmingham and Oona King in Bethnal Green [against George Galloway]”. Tony’s distortion makes it appear as if the AWL specifically backed these two Labour candidates because they were standing against prominent Respect members. In actual fact, the AWL had a consistent position of calling for Labour votes in seats where independent working-class candidates were not standing. Agree or disagree with this position by all means, but don’t pretend that our support for these two Labour candidates was somehow unique.

Tony himself admits that Respect’s candidates do not fall into the category of independent working-class politics; his only reason for backing Galloway (he himself says there was “no other” reason for doing so) was that “he was a consistently anti-war MP”. Perhaps Tony would also like to see socialists giving “critical support” to other MPs who never voted for the war; Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy, perhaps, or

maybe even the Tory Kenneth Clarke.

We can see Tony's farcical distortions at work again when he says that the AWL has "worked with the Zionist Union of Jewish Students on and off for years". We certainly do not share Tony's vitriolic hatred of UJS and actively opposed him when he campaigned to have Jewish Societies banned on campuses (a product of his irrational anti-Zionism; irrational because it far outweighs his opposition to any other form of nationalism or regional-expansionism). But there has never been a political bloc of any kind between the AWL and UJS. Tony naturally refuses to go into any sort of detail as to what the "work" between the AWL and UJS might have consisted of. Once again, he is simply lying. For example, at NUS conference 2005, it was a UJS-Federation of Student Islamic Societies-SWP-Socialist Action bloc that defeated an AWL motion opposing faith schools.

Yes – the AWL has had UJS speakers on platforms at our events and at events organised by groups in which we play a role. But we have not done so in order to promote their views on Palestine, with which we have made it clear we disagree, since we call loudly for immediate and total Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and they do not. For instance, at the recent founding conference of Education Not for Sale (a broad left group in the student movement in which AWL is involved), a UJS speaker did indeed take part in a platform discussing racism and anti-semitism – but the only speaker on Palestine was an activist from War on Want who disagrees with us to the extent of favouring an economic boycott of Israel. We have also had Tories, Greens and a whole host of other petty-bourgeois and bourgeois muddleheads on platforms at our events. This is for the same reason that we are replying to Tony's attack on us: precisely because we are not a "sect", but a democratic organisation that believes in free, open debate and political argument even with

those who maintain a poisonous hatred of our politics.

Tony refers to the Trotskyist Tendency – a 1970s forerunner of the AWL – as "a typically Trotskyist organisation with standard views in support of the Irish and other liberation movements". Here we can see clearly what seems to be the main factor in Tony's grudge against the AWL. He attacks us for breaking with positions that were "common on the far left", and says "the reality is that the AWL are now uncomfortable with all sections of the left in Britain", as if there's something inherently wrong with this. Tony obviously believes that it's wrong for an organisation to break with or challenge the "left common sense", or do anything not considered "typically Trotskyist".

In early 1900s Russia, when "left common sense" was a peasant-centred anarcho-populism, a tiny group of Marxists around George Plekhanov advocated independent working-class politics and were met with violent sectarian abuse. Presumably Tony would have berated Plekhanov's Emancipation of Labour Group for being "uncomfortable with all sections of the left" in Russia at that time.

All in all, Tony's miserably ill thought-out, unreferenced, unsubstantiated collection of randomly thrown together assertions about the AWL's politics, most of which consist of attacks on fabricated positions that the AWL has never held, is a farcical joke. At one point in this pointless piece of self-indulgent drivel, written to satisfy Tony's irrational (and, if the amount of incidental anecdotal rubbish about his various friends and enemies in AWL circles down the years is anything to go by, massively personal) grudge against the AWL, he complains that an AWL member once called him a "liar" in a Socialist Alliance meeting. Well, Tony – that AWL member was right. To rephrase Mark Twain's old adage: there are lies, damn lies – and then there's Tony Greenstein. ■

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