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The prolonged countdown to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has thrown the Conservative government into a profound crisis. CIARAN MULHOLLAND explains that the chaos is such that an anonymous European source has compared the UK to a "failed state", and that the EU was able to impose its own terms when May came cap in hand seeking an extension of the original withdrawal date of 29 March.

At the time of writing Theresa May has tried three times to win a parliamentary majority for her draft withdrawal agreement, and has three times failed. The withdrawal agreement has been rejected on each occasion by a wide margin. The third defeat plunged the government into a mood of despair, and May even hinted at a general election if no way forward can be found. As things stand the UK will leave the EU without a deal on 12 April unless the draft withdrawal agreement is accepted by Parliament in the coming days, a long extension of months or even years is granted, or Article 50 is revoked and Brexit is "cancelled". If the withdrawal agreement is passed 22 May will be the new withdrawal date.

A state of chaos

The indications are that May is hoping that one final vote, coming at the eleventh hour, will put immense pressure on MPs and sufficient numbers will switch sides rather than risk a "no-deal" exit. Some Tory MPs have indicated that they will indeed switch in such a scenario, and behind the scenes talks with the DUP are continuing in an attempt to win its 10 MPs over, but it is still most likely that May will lose again.

In normal circumstances, a government defeat on its key policy would bring it crashing down, or the Prime Minister would resign, but these are not normal times. What happens after another failed vote (or if there is no vote) is a matter of intense speculation. May has set her face against revoking Brexit. A long extension would mean that European elections would be necessary in the UK and this is regarded as a toxic option by the Tories. A second referendum is also anathema, not just for most Tory MPs but also for many Labour MPs from leave-voting areas.

The Conservative Party is in a state of chaos. May has signalled her intention to step down if her deal is agreed and her opponents within the Conservative Party are jockeying for position in the hope of succeeding her. A desperate May might consider appealing to the public above the heads of MPs by calling a general election, but Tory MPs are very unlikely to agree this as they fear that this would result in the election of a Labour government led by Jeremy

Corbyn. Predicting exactly what will happen next is incredibly difficult. There is a real danger of a no-deal Brexit, with all the chaos this would produce, unfolding in mid-April, but it is more likely that a long delay will be agreed at an EU summit on 10 April.

Brexit and the Border

May cannot obtain a parliamentary majority for a number of interlocked reasons but the crunch issue is the “backstop”. This is the proposed arrangement, which is claimed to be necessary to avoid the return of a hard border on the island of Ireland, an eventuality that would “put the peace process at risk”. The EU is insisting that if the UK leaves the customs union and single market then there must be new border checks somewhere in order to protect its trade interests. If the Irish border is to remain open, then there must be new checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea instead. In other words the EU is presenting a rigid binary choice: either a hardened North-South border or an East-West border.

This all must have seemed “obvious” and a matter for calm discussion when the politicians and senior officials of the EU and the UK sat down across the negotiation table two years ago. They were in for a rude awakening as the reality of a sharp divergence of views between the two communities in Northern Ireland became apparent. The majority of Protestants are opposed to new checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea. An East-West border, no matter how soft, has come to represent a threat to the union between Northern Ireland and Britain.

Simultaneously, any hardening of the North-South border, no matter how minor, is seen as a threat to the national aspirations of Catholics, and any imposition of new border checks will be met with fierce resistance, including the physical tearing down of any infrastructure. In any circumstance the different positions of the Protestant and Catholic communities would have been problematic, but the accidental fact that the DUP hold the balance of power at Westminster has precipitated a full-blown crisis and has in effect blocked the UK’s planned departure.

A deal for the bosses

This is the context in which the Socialist Party has considered the draft withdrawal agreement. The key to determining the position of socialists is always to consider what is in the interests of the working class. The Socialist Party is opposed to the EU, an institution created in the interests of the various capitalist classes of Europe. We oppose the Tory government that unashamedly represents the interests of British capitalism. Any deal that is negotiated between these two players is bound to undermine the rights and conditions of the working class.

The referendum vote for European withdrawal in 2016 was a manifestation of a profound sense of alienation from the neoliberal “political centre”, and the majority of those who voted for Brexit did so to

express their anger at the years of austerity and de-industrialisation.

The Socialist Party opposes the draft agreement because it acts against the economic and social interests of the working class. As Socialist Party member and Solidarity TD Mick Barry pointed out in November when speaking about the deal:

“...the politics of neoliberalism runs through this document like the stitching on a jacket.”

And that under a potential Corbyn government:

“None of [Corbyn’s policies of state aid and nationalisation] will be permitted. If this is a deal for Brexit, it is clearly a deal for a Tory Brexit. It is pro-market, pro-privatisation and pro-rich. It is against nationalisation, public services and the interests of the working class.”

Danger of sectarianism

It is essential that the workers’ movement also considers the potential impact of the withdrawal agreement on sectarian divisions in the North. The draft agreement outlines a scenario in which there will be a developing East-West border. This will increase sectarian tension and weaken workers’ unity, and we are opposed to the agreement on this basis. The trade union movement should reverse its current position and come out against the draft agreement.

We have been warned that if the agreement is not voted through the UK will crash out of the EU, and a hardening of the North-South border will then be “inevitable”. If this were to happen it will increase sectarian tension and weaken workers’ unity. We are resolutely opposed to this scenario too. We do not accept that border checks or controls on the North-South border are in fact inevitable. The trade union movement must oppose, and refuse to implement when possible, such measures.



Opposition must be clearly expressed on the basis of the interests of all working class people, Protestant and Catholic, North and South. This is not possible if the trade union movement backs the withdrawal agreement, which explicitly points in the direction of a hardened East-West border. The trade union movement unites working-class Catholics and Protestants in a shared struggle for a better life. This unity has to be fought for, and is put at risk by support for the withdrawal agreement.

Workers' Movement Must Act Now

The only way in which the rights of both communities can be respected is to keep both borders open. The logic of capitalism dictates that this is not possible but we reject this logic. Ultimately, increased border checks can be avoided by the EU and the UK governments taking the political decisions necessary to keep the North-South border open and to not allow an East-West border to develop, whatever the supposed impact on trade.

As such an approach will hit big business profits we have no faith that they will do so, unless under immense pressure from below. In order to protect the wider interests of the working class it is vitally important that the workers' movement intervenes at this time with an independent, socialist programme on Brexit. The workers' movement should draw its own "red lines" on the key issues.

Trade unionists in Ireland, North and South, are united in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and have strong links with their fellow trade unionists across England, Scotland and Wales. If the trade unions were to bring their combined weight behind a movement for a new Europe, organised in the interests of the 99%, then millions could be mobilised across these islands and across Europe in opposition to any form of Brexit which favours the capitalist class. The trade unions must mobilise to defend the wider interests of working-class people and preparations should be made for industrial action to defend workers' jobs, wages, conditions, and rights. Preparations must also be made in the North to counter any increase in sectarian tension and conflict, including preparations for protests, demonstrations, and if necessary, industrial action.

Workers' struggle & socialism

An emergency conference, with the widest participation of workers' representatives from workplaces across Ireland, North and South, must be convened, in order to allow a full democratic discussion on how to best oppose both the EU and the



Socialists oppose any hardening of borders, North and South or East and West

“The trade unions must mobilise to defend the wider interest of working-class people and preparations should be made for industrial action to defend workers' jobs, wages, conditions, and rights”

attacks of the Fine Gael and Tory governments. Trade unionists in England, Scotland and Wales should be asked to send representatives to this conference and links should be forged with trade unionists across Europe who are also facing attacks originating from the EU. From this conference a clear action

programme of strikes, protests and occupations could be brought forward in the event of cutbacks, job losses and attempts to undermine workers' rights.

Socialists in Ireland would welcome the return of a Corbyn-led government in Britain. If such a government were to adopt a position of socialist opposition to the EU this would transform the situation. It should seek to re-open negotiations and demand an entirely different relationship with the EU, including new trade and customs arrangements, based on the interests of working-class people, not those of the bosses and the bankers in the city of London. It would make an appeal to the working class across Europe, over the heads of their capitalist rulers, to join workers in Britain in a struggle against a

common enemy; the EU and the capitalist system it represents.

Socialists are in favour of a genuinely united Europe. This will only be possible when the socialist transformation of society allows the voluntary coming together of all the people of Europe in a democratic, Europe-wide confederation. We fight for a socialist Ireland, with full democratic rights for all communities. We favour a voluntary socialist federation of Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, as part of a socialist Europe, and will raise these demands throughout the workers' movement in the months ahead. ■



Islamophobia, Racism & the Terror Attack in New Zealand

The horrific murder of 50 Muslims in two mosques in New Zealand in March once again shone a spotlight on the poisonous ideas of the far right. CONOR PAYNE looks at the wider context surrounding this atrocity and how the forces of fascism and the far right can be defeated.

On Friday March 15, 50 people were killed and 50 more injured in a racist terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The dead ranged in age from 2 to 71. This was the deadliest mass shooting in modern New Zealand history. Horrendously, the shooting was live streamed by the perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant. Tarrant, who is a 28 years old and born in Australia, is clearly steeped in the ideology of the far right and of fascism.

He published a deranged “manifesto”, declaring himself a “fascist” and titled the “Great Replacement” referring to the racist conspiracy about immigrants being used to “replace” the population of white-majority countries. He referred to Trump as “a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”. He was known to have frequented far right online communities and his document constantly uses the ideas, language and memes of the online alt-right.

This is no isolated incident – these fascist ideas are intrinsically linked with violence against immigrants, Muslims, minorities, LGBTQ+ people, women, the trade union movement and the Left. From 2009 to 2018 in the US, 73% of “domestic terrorist” killings were carried out by right-wing extremists, compared to 23% committed by Islamists and just 3% by those classified as “left wing”. Despite this, terror attacks by Muslims in the US receive 357% more press attention.

Far right emboldened

This rise of far right violence is not taking place in a vacuum. It is completely linked to the climate of racism and Islamophobia which has been fostered for years now, including by very wide parts of the capitalist establishment, politicians and media. This has been capitalised and built on by right populist forces in many countries – most obviously Donald Trump – who have majored on stoking up fears about immigrants, and Muslim immigrants in particular. All of this has played a role in creating the atmosphere in which attacks like the one in Christchurch take place.

This was underlined even in the aftermath of the attack itself. There were many crocodile tears from far right figures who trade on stoking racism every other day of the week. Some didn’t even bother with this. An incredible statement from far right Australian Senator Fraser Anning openly blamed the victims for the



The aftermath of the massacre in Christchurch saw a surge of solidarity against racism and Islamophobia

attacks: “those who follow a violent religion that calls on them to murder us, cannot be too surprised when someone takes them at their word and responds in kind.”

But racist bias was reflected also in the mainstream press. *The Daily Mirror* (16 March) in Britain ran with the frontpage headline “Angelic boy who grew into an evil far-right mass killer” and a picture of the murderer as a child. As was widely pointed out, it is impossible to imagine any tabloid running such a headline about an Islamist mass murderer!

Capitalism, racism and Islamophobia

Racist attitudes towards immigrants and refugees are linked to the current crisis in the capitalist system, to austerity and the scapegoating of migrants for low wages, housing crises, cuts to public services etc.

However, the issues are clearly much broader. Islamophobic racism bases itself primarily on depictions of Muslims and those from Muslim-majority countries as violent, barbaric, backward, prone to terrorism etc. This has been ramped up ever since the beginning of the “War on Terror” in 2001, when many in the “mainstream” capitalist establishment adopted (pre-existing) racist narratives of a “clash of civilisations”. State racism has often meant a sweeping use of repression and surveillance against Muslim communities.

Islamophobia has played a big role in the propaganda for wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East and for Western support

for the Israeli occupation of Palestine. It is used to justify anti-immigrant measures and attacks on civil liberties at home. As with other racist ideas, Islamophobia has deeper roots in historic colonialism and imperialism which has always accused its victims of being “uncivilized” to justify carrying out violence, occupation and plunder.

Even the ‘Liberal’ sections of capitalism are guilty of feeding racism. Many have understandably praised the response of New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern of the Labour Party. She has spoken clearly against racism and in solidarity with the Muslim community and correctly described the attack as an act of terrorism. However, she is currently leading a coalition government which the right populist ‘New Zealand First’ party with routinely employs anti-immigrant rhetoric. Her own party ran in the 2017 election on a platform of reducing migration by 20-30,000.

Mood of solidarity

In spite of all this, the overwhelming response of working people in New Zealand, as well as around the world, has been a genuine outpouring of solidarity. Solidarity events and vigils have been organised around the country. Many have been touched by videos of mainly Maori people performing the haka to honour the victims. There is absolutely a basis for a broad movement against racism and racist violence.

On the same day as the massacre in Christchurch, we saw over a million school students go on strike to

demand action on climate change. This is far more reflective of the attitudes of this generation of young people than the minority of mostly young men who have turned to the ideas of the far right. We see a widespread rejection of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia combined with a growing opposition to a world of economic inequality and environmental destruction and openness to anti-capitalist and socialist ideas.

Whatever their “anti-establishment” pretensions, the far right is the enemy not only of immigrants, LGBTQ+ people and minorities but of all those seeking to challenge this system. This includes the workers movement, as was shown recently in Manchester when far right activists attacked a picket line of striking rail workers organised in the union the RMT.

At the same time, far right and right populist forces can continue to pick up wider support, including electoral support, in the context of a capitalist system in crisis, with major discontent, and the absence of a clear left wing alternative that challenges this system. In many countries, there has been a relative lack of mass working class struggle in response to austerity and the crisis, due to the weakness of the workers’ movement and the role of leaderships which have accepted or failed to seriously fight the attacks on workers.

The old former parties of social democracy, such as the Socialist Party in France or Labour in Ireland, in most countries have embraced and implemented austerity. In some places, even new left initiatives such as Syriza in Greece have come to be seen (correctly) as part of the system. This has all fed a certain level of political confusion about the real causes of the crisis and the real nature of the divide in society. This has opened the door among some sections of the working

“On the same day as the massacre in Christchurch, we saw over a million school students go on strike to demand action on climate change. This is far more reflective of the attitudes of this generation of young people than the minority of mostly young men who have turned to the ideas of the far right”

class for arguments which scapegoat immigrants and has allowed the right to pose as ‘populist’, ‘anti-system’ etc.

The role of the workers’ movement

All this poses urgent tasks for anti-racists, the workers’ movement and the socialist left. Clearly we need re-developed anti-racist and anti-fascist movements which organise and mobilise against the far right. This can include organising to confront and deny platforms to fascist groups. However, the most effective way to do this is via mass mobilisations which fully bring to bear the mass opposition which exists to these forces. We also need movements which challenge state racism, including the horrific treatment of refugees by the EU and European governments.

Linked to this is the task of re-building a fighting workers movement and a mass socialist left with a clear anti-racist and anti-capitalist programme. To effectively combat racist ideas, socialists must be able to deal thoroughly with all the issues. This means exposing the lies of the far right and educating the broadest sections

of workers about the dismal situation faced by refugees and many other immigrants. It means opposing imperialism and repression, organising and supporting struggles which unite workers to fight for jobs, housing and services for all and crucially putting the blame for the problems workers face on the real culprits – the capitalists and their system. A socialist alternative, with democratic public ownership of the vast wealth and resources currently controlled by the capitalist class, could lay the basis for a society based on solidarity and free from racism and division. ■



Tens of thousands of Muslims and non-Muslims attended Friday prayers in the week following the attack



“Sea levels are rising & so are we”

School Climate Strikes: A new generation takes on the system

In recent months a new movement of school student strikes and protests has emerged globally demanding “system change, not climate change”. HARPER CLEVES looks at the significance of this movement and why the fight against climate change is bound up with ending the rule of capitalism.

“Be moderate,” the trimmers cry,
Who dread the tyrants’ thunder.
“You ask too much and people fly
From you aghast in wonder.”
’Tis passing strange, for I declare
Such statements give me mirth,
For our demands most moderate are,
We only want the earth.”
– James Connolly

It is, or rather should be, a universally accepted truth that the planet has been irrevocably impacted by humans, and for the worse. Even the name assigned to the current geologic period by scientists reflects this simple fact: the Anthropocene, which literally means ‘the epoch of humans.’¹

In the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) convened by the United Nations (UN), scientists predicted that we have twelve years before the average temperature of the Earth rises by 1.5 degrees Celsius. After this, any boost in global temperature will drastically increase the risk of natural phenomena such as drought, floods, extreme heat as well as the eradication of coral reefs.

How much can the average human be blamed for climate change? In order to answer this question, it is important to note that in some interpretations of the period, the Anthropocene covers the entire stretch of human/ hominid presence on the planet. The earliest hominid is thought to have existed between 5-8 million years ago; the earliest modern human is dated back to

200,000 years ago. And yet, when scientists write about climate change, they typically don't cover the entire breadth of human existence on Earth. The scientists on the IPCC began their analysis of the negative turn of the Anthropocene in 1880.² This time period also coincides with an uptick in industrial development and capital accumulation. This suggests that the rapid destruction of the environment is not caused simply by 'human nature,' but rather, the rapid advent of the economic system known as capitalism.

This link between the inequality fostered under capitalism and climate change is even made explicit in the IPCC report. The authors point to the fact that, while there has been an increase in wealth globally, as well as an increase in life expectancy in huge swaths of the world, this development is unequal. The report highlights the fact that inequality in access to health and resources has led to a situation in which many regions of the world are not only disproportionately affected by pollution and environmental degradation, but that poverty and severe inequality increase the vulnerability of these populations to the impact of climate change.³

Politicians and the capitalist establishment

The current political establishment offers no solutions to this critical issue, and in fact, stands to accelerate the process. Right-wing and far-right populist political figures like Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil represent particularly dangerous responses to the impending climate change disaster. Both men have publicly denied the threat of climate change. Jair Bolsonaro, the newly elected president of Brazil, has consistently (and actually, correctly) counterposed the issues of environmental protection and corporate development.

Early in his presidency, he threatened to leave the Paris Climate Agreement, although he capitulated after international outcry. He has, however, indicated

that he will roll back protections on the Amazon Rainforest, including eliminating some indigenous reserves. This is particularly significant in the case of the Amazon, as it was previously thought to represent an important buffer to the effects of climate change.

Donald Trump is similarly dismissive about climate change. He consistently tweets about the 'global warming hoax,' most recently pointing to the presence of snow in February in Minnesota as definitive proof that the average temperature of the Earth is not increasing.⁴ While these sorts of blatantly unscientific claims are largely condemned by working-class people generally, they are unfortunately taken as fact by some of his less politically conscious constituents.

More significant of course, was Donald Trump's 2017 withdrawal from the voluntary Paris Climate Agreement, which represented a modest dedication by 195 UN countries to curb greenhouse gas emissions. While the deal itself only represented moderate reform under capitalism, leaving the agreement poses a significant danger.

Individual "solutions"

However, it is not only those political leaders on the far right that represent a climate change risk. Mainstream politicians who acknowledge the reality of climate change also pose a risk because, like Trump and Bolsonaro, they represent the interest of capitalism. Leaders of the likes of Justin Trudeau, Theresa May, Emmanuel Macron, Barack Obama, Leo Varadkar and many more speak about addressing climate change not by tackling systemic issues related to corporate overproduction, but by calling on the individual, or in many cases, neo-colonial states, to curb their waste.

For example, in Theresa May's much anticipated 25-year plan for the environment in Britain, one of her pre-eminent proposals is taxing plastic bags, using market solutions to shift the responsibility of plastic waste to consumers rather than the companies that produce it. There is also the infamous fuel tax imposed by Macron, which sparked the mass 'gilets jaunes' (yellow vest) movement across France. Here in Ireland, Leo Varadkar has claimed he wants to make Ireland a leader in combating climate change, and yet the solutions he offers are moderate and regressive carbon taxes and calling on 'citizen engagement,' asking people living in the Republic of Ireland to support the policy through their 'individual purchasing decisions.'

Perhaps the most egregious of these examples is reflected in the statement of Prince William in 2017, who called on people to engage in 'voluntary family limitation,' a request that not only ignores the reproduction patterns of the British Royal Family, but also disproportionately targets working-class people from neocolonial states as the root cause of climate change.⁵ This statement



shifts the responsibility for environmental degradation onto marginalised communities, and as such represents a blatantly anti-working class and implicitly racist ethos.

All of these solutions fail to address the issue at hand; that only 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions.⁶ No amount of 'individual purchasing decisions' will solve the problem without tackling the root cause that capitalism poses.

Speaking truth to power

If there is something to be optimistic about in regards to the increasing risk of climate change, it is the sense of urgency and militancy among young people. This is particularly reflected in the person of Greta Thunberg. This Swedish school student, then aged 15, began her solo protests in August following Sweden's hottest summer, sitting outside of the Parliament building for two weeks handing out leaflets explaining that the adults were 'shitting on her future' by not taking climate change seriously.⁷

The international attention Thunberg garnered from this action earned her the ability to address the UN Climate COP24 conference in December 2018. At this conference, her message to world leaders was direct. While she never references capitalism explicitly, she points to the profiteering of a few as the true cause of climate injustice. She states that "our civilisation is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making an enormous amount of money" she goes on to say that "it is the suffering of the many which pays for the luxuries of a few."

Thunberg did not ask the world leaders for policy change, because she correctly states that "you have ignored us in the past. And you will ignore us again." Instead, Thunberg calls on the 'true power' of the masses. In perhaps her most widely quoted statement, she says, "If solutions within this system are so impossible to find, then maybe we need a new system."⁸

Thunberg has recently been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. While this recognition from a supposedly reputable institution of the establishment may represent an effort to undermine or neuter her politically, Greta Thunberg has nevertheless already made a mark on society. Her bold and solitary action and her frankness with political leaders earned her international popularity and served to raise the issue of the 'strike' tactic among students globally.

School student strikes

Thunberg's austere bravery in the face of global powers, and her call for systemic change reverberated around the world, striking a nerve with primary and secondary students who see their futures being stolen from them by the powers that be. In the weeks and months following her original actions and this speech, students became increasingly militant. In November protests, thousands took to the streets in Australia.

They were told by the prime minister, Scott Morrison, to "go to school" while the education minister Rob Stokes, dismissed the action, telling students "you can't strike if you don't have a job." Most offensively, the resources minister Matt Canavan claimed that by walking out of school, students were 'learning to join the dole queue.'⁹

In late February in the United States, a group of students waited outside of California Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein's office, calling on her to support Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez' Green New Deal, a proposed list of economic demands aimed at addressing climate change and economic inequality. These students were met with ridicule from Feinstein, who claimed that the United States government could not pay for such plans, that it was not politically expedient, and that these students, as children too young to vote, simply did not understand politics.

The ridicule and dismissiveness with which students have been met globally seemed only to fuel their sense of militancy. On 15 March 2019, a global student strike was called; mimicking Greta Thunberg's original solo action. On this day, in countries ranging from South Africa to Argentina, students held signs and led chants referencing 'system change' and demanding radical action. In the end, an estimated 1.5 million school students participated globally, with numbers exceeding 10,000 on the march in Dublin – making it one of the largest responses to climate justice to date.¹⁰ All of this was planned and executed by school students, 18 years of age and younger, in a state where there is not a strong tradition of school student movements, much less school student strikes.

Many students instinctively made the connection between climate change and capitalism – a link that was implicit in Thunberg's criticism directed at world leaders. A number of students in Ireland and Britain





Greta Thunberg's call for school student strikes and action has sparked a global youth movement for climate justice

marched with posters pointing to capitalism as the root source of the problem. In the Spanish State, the School Student Union (led by Revolutionary Left, our sister organization in the Spanish State) marched with a banner that said 'El capitalismo mata el planeta' or 'Capitalism kills the planet' and similar slogans in cities across the country. These slogans were echoed globally. A significant portion of students see the destruction of the planet as an inevitable and continuous byproduct of capitalism.

Drawing wider conclusions

Of course, to say all school students are making this connection would be an overstatement. Certainly not all students chanting 'system change, not climate change' explicitly understand what capitalism is and therefore would likely not naturally see socialism as the solution to environmental degradation at this stage. However, the growing frustration at the immobility, inaction, and patronising of the political establishment has the potential to generate further action and further openness to anti-capitalist and socialist ideas.

Convincing this section of radical young people of the necessity of anti-capitalist and socialist change would position the socialist movement for growth in the years ahead. Working-class students who have been politically activated by this movement, and who have now been exposed to the idea of strikes and walkouts, will go on to be workers in their adulthood. Now is the chance to connect this potential for militancy with the need for continued workplace

struggle and a long-term fight for socialist change.

The use of strikes and walkouts as a tactic is noteworthy, not only because it demonstrates the militancy of young people, but also because it has the potential to inspire strike movements of the working class. If school children, many of them working class, effectively garner attention by taking part in a strike, this could potentially signal to workers that they too have the ability to use industrial action to demand changes to improve their lot immediately, but also use this power to challenge the rule of capitalism.

A new generation radicalised

It is also important to situate the student climate strikes in the context of movements globally. The use of strikes and walkouts to call for changes both in and out of workplaces has gained traction in recent years. In 2017, in anticipation of the referendum to repeal the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution, thousands walked out on International Women's Day as part of the Strike4Repeal campaign in order to call for abortion rights and bodily autonomy for women and pregnant people. This brought the issue of the political strike to the general population, and brought thousands of people onto the streets, effectively shutting down Dublin City centre for the remainder of the day.

In the first half of 2018, students across the country in the United States walked out of class to call attention to the need for serious gun reform in the wake of the High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. Later that same year in the United States and globally, non-unionised workers walked out of their workplaces

at McDonalds and then later, Google in order to highlight workplace sexual harassment and place pressure on employers to address this issue. In 2018, in South Korea, India, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Nepal, Britain, Ireland and Turkey similar protests took place in spontaneous reaction to violence against women, injustice in rape trials, abortion rights and the objectification of women and queer peoples' bodies.

This year in the Spanish state, a general strike was called for International Women's Day in order to highlight gender-based violence and macho culture and the need for radical action to combat these societal ills, which in turn placed pressure on many unions to officially support these strike actions. In February, there was also a general strike called to draw attention to the political and democratic repression in Catalonia. Issues such as racism, gender-based discrimination, trans rights, homophobia, housing, health care, and equitable pay have all been flash points of political activism and social movements in the past years, with growing levels of militancy and frustration. The student climate strikes cannot be separated from this. The deterioration of rights, safety and quality of life under capitalism today is leading to growing unrest among the general population and particularly amongst working-class people, especially working-class women and young people. There is growing realisation that these issues are systemic, and cannot be addressed merely through policy reform.

Socialist demands

One fundamental truth must be stated here: there is no solution to climate change under capitalism. Even parties that purport to prioritise climate justice bolster inequality in society as a whole. From 2007 to 2011 when the Green Party was in government in Ireland, there were massive cuts in public transport, and Eamon Ryan, as Minister for Energy, supported the licensing of oil and gas exploration off the west coast of Ireland. Ultimately, the pressures and brutal reality of capitalism impede on the desire for more sustainable options.

What demands should we make as part of a movement for climate justice and socialist change? There should first of all be massive investment in public transport. It is not enough to simply expect people not to drive their cars by implementing a fuel tax, in true Macron-ian form. For people to stop using their cars, they need to have access to reliable, far reaching, affordable public transportation. Thus, there should be a reversal of the privatisation of bus services in Ireland. The expansion of accessible and sustainable

“Issues such as racism, gender-based discrimination, trans rights, homophobia, housing, health care, & equitable pay have all been flash points of political activism and social movements in the past years, with growing levels of militancy and frustration. The student climate strikes cannot be separated from this”

forms of transport cannot happen under a system whose primary motive is to generate profit.

Further demands must include a dramatic shift away from fossil fuel dependency. This would begin with the nationalisation and democratic operation of energy companies by the workers in the sector and working people who make use of that energy. The resources of these companies could be used to phase out the use of fossil fuels, with the growth of green energy jobs and a shift towards renewable energy. Additionally, nationalising the construction industry would allow workers to build more sustainable homes on public land, thereby addressing the dual crises of housing shortages and environmental degradation. Taking the agri-business sector out of private hands and into democratic public ownership could allow food

production to take place on an environmentally sustainable basis. All of these demands will be resisted by the capitalist class, as they directly challenge their profits, power and the logic of their system.

We absolutely do need “system change not climate change”; time is running out for humanity and our planet. The system we need to get rid of is a capitalist system based on the ruthless drive for profit and the private ownership of the world's wealth and resources by a small minority. Democratic socialist planning of the economy can mean that we can meet our needs in an environmentally sustainable way. This is the programme that the Socialist Party and the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) will be energetically promoting as we fight alongside a new generation who “only want the earth”. ■

Notes

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The Revolutionary Ideas of ...

Rosa Luxemburg



January marked the 100th anniversary of the murder of the outstanding revolutionary socialist leader, Rosa Luxemburg. In this article, ELEANOR CROSSEY-MALONE looks at her defence of both the fundamental ideas of Marxism and the necessity of revolutionary change against an increasingly opportunistic and reformist SPD leadership.

Remembering Rosa Luxemburg after her death, the Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky wrote of seeing her speak at a congress in Germany: “she mounted the platform of the congress as the personification of the proletarian revolution. By the force of her logic and the power of her sarcasm she silenced her most avowed opponents.”¹ Luxemburg stands out for the formidable challenge she posed to reformist ideas, and as a class fighter who maintained a Marxist and revolutionary outlook, as well as an unflinching optimism in the ability of workers to struggle and win, in the face of historic betrayals by the leaders of the international socialist movement at the outbreak of World War One.

Luxemburg was born in Poland in 1871 to a family of Jewish descent. From the age of 15, she was active in socialist politics and organising strikes. She produced a doctoral thesis on the industrial development of Poland and was one of very few women in her time to

be awarded a doctorate. In Germany, she joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The German SPD was established in 1875 as one of the world’s first Marxist parties with a mass base in society. On her arrival in Berlin she worked as a journalist and taught Marxist economics at a training centre run by the party.

Divisions in the socialist movement

During Luxemburg’s lifetime, much of the socialist movement in Europe, including the Second International – a grouping of socialist parties within different countries then known as the ‘social democracy’ – claimed a connection to the ideas of Marxism. Even those whose politics revised or altogether abandoned Marxist analyses often felt the need to legitimise their ideas by paying lip service to Marxism. But the national parties and the international were forums containing markedly different outlooks and methods. These differences ultimately manifested in the form of two distinct camps within the international organisation, and it was within the Russian and German parties in particular that these differences came into sharp focus.

On one side of this dispute were the revolutionary socialists, most significantly the Bolsheviks in Russia, who intervened in the daily struggles of workers and the oppressed in the knowledge that it would ultimately be necessary to break with the capitalist system, and for the working class to take economic and political power from the capitalist class. Capitalism as an inherently crisis-prone system would

repeatedly create the conditions for new revolts of workers, but Lenin in particular theorised that, in order to ensure their victory, it was necessary to be prepared – to organise inside a revolutionary party and maintain the party as a tool for independently fighting in the interests of workers. The Bolsheviks saw workers revolution as a living perspective and sought to consistently raise the consciousness of working-class people to the need for revolutionary socialist change.

Reform or Revolution?

On the other side of the dispute within the Second International were the proponents of an anti-revolutionary outlook that crystallised into the ideology of reformism. Eduard Bernstein, also a member of the German SPD, became the first to give this tendency a theoretical expression. In his book, *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899), he challenged Marx's most profound observations about the capitalist system. Bernstein claimed that rather than being an inherently crisis-prone system, capitalism was capable of stabilising itself – it had “means of adaptation” that would allow it to overcome its contradictions, and could therefore circumvent the need for revolutionary and systemic change. He claimed that the working class was not the engine of socialist change, but instead through organising in trade unions and fighting for reforms, it helped the capitalist system to adapt and to avoid crisis.

Reforms to the capitalist system alone, according to Bernstein, would over time lead to socialism. The pursuit of political power by the social democrats became no longer a means to an end, not a platform from which to spur on the independent movement of workers, but an end in itself. It is important to note that Luxemburg did not oppose reforms within capitalism, she fully favoured a struggle by working class to improve their rights and conditions. However, she did not see this struggle as an end in itself and rejected the idea that capitalism as a system could be reformed.

Rosa Luxemburg saw in Bernstein's book a dramatic break with Marxism that had far-reaching and dangerous implications, which could threaten the entire workers' movement and subvert the upheavals occurring throughout Europe. She wrote *Reform or Revolution*, a polemic in which she deconstructed Bernstein's arguments and exposed their weaknesses. She disproved mistaken ideas about how the credit system would in future allow the system to avoid going into crisis. The 2007-2008 crash, also known as the “credit crunch”, proved Luxemburg correct when she argued that the system of credit, in which businesses are allowed to rack up enormous debts before collapsing, actually makes crises deeper and more destructive when they do occur.

In the midst of the argument Bernstein claimed that, whatever path each group envisaged, they ultimately shared the goal of socialism. But, Luxemburg pointed out, if workers' struggles lead to

reforms which enrich workers at the same time as strengthening the capitalist system, then why should socialism ever become necessary? How could the working class and its organisations be at once the seed of a socialist society and a pillar of support for capitalism? As she aptly pointed out:

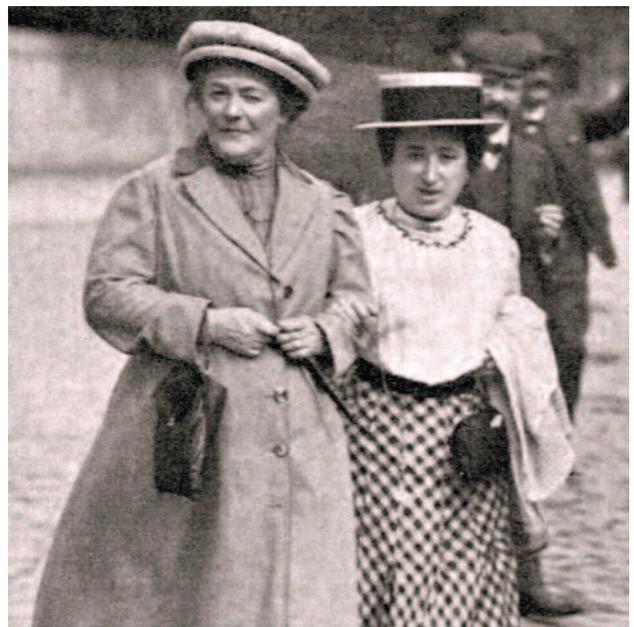
“...people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform in place and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society.”²

The roots of reformism

Luxemburg noted that these ideas came from an academic stratum in the leadership of the party that guarded its knowledge of Marxist theory and hoped to keep Marxism – the sharpest weapon in the struggle for socialism – out of the hands of the mass of workers within the party, not least due to fear that the reformist leadership would be exposed as inadequate.

Bernstein's theories reflected not the perspective of the working class, but the intrusion of middle-class ideas into the party. Because of the intermediate social position of the middle classes, their loyalties could be divided between support for capitalism on the one hand and hostility to the big bourgeoisie on the other.

Bernstein's ideas ultimately expressed the doomed hopes of the middle classes that the fatal contradictions of capitalism could simply resolve themselves without any real confrontation between the elites (who privately owned the means production and pocketed the profits from workers' labour) and the working class (who were robbed of the enormous wealth they produced through the system of wage



Luxemburg alongside her comrade Clara Zetkin



Red Rosa was a powerful orator who impacted enormously on workers who flocked to hear speak

labour, and who operated but did not own the means of production). These ideas also gained traction, if perhaps less consciously, amongst the SPD's growing and increasingly bureaucratized apparatus.

Later on Luxemburg was also to come into conflict with those who nominally claimed to support her political position outlined in *Reform or Revolution*, most notably the SPD's leading theoretician, Karl Kautsky, the so-called "pope of Marxism". In 1910 she wrote an article on the question of the 'mass strike' as a means of struggle to win electoral reform in opposition to Germany's dominant ruling class, the Junkers – big landowners based in Prussia.³ For Luxemburg such a strike movement was a "a partial manifestation of our general socialist class struggle".

Kautsky opposed this position, reflecting a conservative desire not to alienate the increasingly bureaucratized and reformist trade union leaders. His strategy to challenge the rule of capitalism was for a gradual "accumulation of forces" on the part of the SPD in a "war of attrition". Ultimately, this reflected his own lack of confidence in a mass struggle of the working class and the fact that a large section of SPD were shifting away from the necessity of a revolutionary struggle against capitalism. All of these political differences were to sharply come to the fore with the outbreak of the First World War.

Capitalism and war

Marxism explains how the capitalist system inherently generates war between nations, rooted in the tensions between the capitalist classes of different countries. In 1914, along with this revolutionary outlook came a systemic analysis of World War One: the war represented the struggle of the competing capitalist classes, notably Germany, Britain, France, the US, Russia and Japan to gain conquest and exploit the world market for profit. The ruling classes were willing to send millions of working-class people to be slaughtered in the service of this goal. If the labour

leaders were to support the war, it would mean the subordination of workers' organisations to the defence of the national capitalist classes and their system. Luxemburg, like the Bolsheviks, maintained a steadfast opposition to the war and called for socialist revolution internationally to end all wars.

A serious clash of ideas took place between the revolutionary socialists and the reformists. Nationalist propaganda in all of the warring countries spread the idea that the war was necessary to defend the 'fatherland' in the interests of people of all classes. There was tremendous pressure on all left-wing forces to capitulate to

this idea. But while there was formally an agreement among the parties of the Second International to oppose the war, in reality Kautsky and the reformists within the SPD reasoned that there could be no struggle for socialism until the war was fought to a conclusion, and in effect did not oppose the war effort.

Luxemburg was clear that to lay down class struggle was to lay down the only tool that could have ended, not only World War One – which the 1917 October Revolution eventually did – but all wars thereafter. This was what finally pushed Luxemburg and Liebknecht to break away from the SPD and organise independently within the Spartacus League – named after Spartacus, the famous leader of a slave rebellion in ancient Rome.

Making a revolution

In 1917, mass strikes broke out in Russia bringing down the Tsarist autocracy and developing into the revolutionary overthrow of the reformist provisional government. The Russian Revolution was successful due to the political leadership of the Bolsheviks. Unlike the SPD, they were not a party that simply claimed adherence to Marxism while at the same time accommodating to the system and increasingly embracing reformist ideas and methods. Since their inception they were an organisation preparing for revolution and building a mass base amongst the working class for their ideas. Its leadership and cadres were known and tested fighters that had collectively developed invaluable experience in the struggle against Tsarism and capitalism in Russia in the early 20th century.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Rosa Luxemburg's life was that she did not build such an organisation in Germany, or indeed in Poland where she was also politically influential. She was unquestionably a courageous fighter and an articulate voice in combating the reformist degeneration of the SPD in the period before the war. However her ideas did not have an organisational expression, in the form of a



The monument in Berlin marking the point where Luxemburg was murdered

genuinely Marxist tendency that could have built an important base amongst the advanced sections of the German working class. It was only during the war itself, and later with the founding of the German Communist Party (KPD) in December 1918, that she attempted to rectify this. Notwithstanding the fact that it attracted outstanding revolutionary class fighters, the KPD was too inexperienced and lacked sufficient support amongst the German working-class to play a decisive leadership role.

Of course the above criticism of Luxemburg needs to be put in its historical context. The essential role of a distinct revolutionary socialist party in the struggle for socialism was not demonstrated in practice until the 1917 Russian Revolution. Prior to this it appeared to most Marxists that the German SPD was the model organisation for workers to challenge capitalism.

Lessons for today

Today the contradiction between the need for socialist change and the low level of consciousness and organisation among workers has only become starker. The economic crisis of 2007-2008 plunged global capitalism into a long recession and marked new assaults on the wages and conditions of workers, but at the same time it precipitated a rise in workers taking industrial action to defend jobs, pay and conditions. Increasingly, workers and young people are searching for solutions and drawing connections between immediate problems, such as cuts to public services, inadequate housing, and rising costs of living, and the system itself. This wave of radicalisation has also found political expressions in new left formations around the world and huge support for Jeremy Corbyn in the Britain, Bernie Sanders in the USA, Melenchon in France. The problem of how a workers' party should be structured, and how best we should organise to fight for socialist change, is one that pervades the experience of the years since the crash.

Hand-in-hand with austerity and attacks on workers has been a drive to chip away at the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, migrants and ethnic groups, with figureheads like Donald Trump falsely directing blame

for the erosion of living standards and wages away from the system and towards oppressed groups. An important task of a revolutionary socialist party today is to act as the memory of the class struggle, and to refocus struggle towards its rightful target. The approach of revolutionary socialists is to trace the roots of all

attacks on workers, as well as all oppression, to the capitalist system and its representatives, and in doing so to build solidarity and a united movement for the socialist transformation of society.

The lessons that must be learned from the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, and also from the events that defined her life and death, are many. The pressures to capitulate to conservative and nationalistic ideas, and to uncritically take the approach of lesser-evilism, limiting our aspirations to a kinder version of capitalism, are still very real for socialists, and are fresh as a new generation of workers navigates these ideas today. The pressure to lose sight of workers' ability to break free of the constraints and treacherous leaderships of the past, particularly among its new generations, can lead to the abandonment of Marxism and revolutionary ideas. Luxemburg's death and the failure of the German Revolution raise the question of how history might have panned out had there been a strong revolutionary leadership with roots throughout the working class, cohering in a vibrant and steeled democratic centralist organisation. The absolute imperative of the such a party and International are made clear by the tragedy of 1918/19.

In her last piece of writing, Rosa Luxemburg issued a warning to the ruling class and to the labour leaders who cooperate with them to undermine the revolutionary activity of the working class. Her immortal words sound with renewed force:

“You foolish lackeys! Your “order” is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will “rise up again, clashing its weapons,” and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I shall be!”⁴■

Notes

1 Leon Trotsky, 1919, “Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg”, www.marxists.org ● 2 Rosa Luxemburg, 1900, *Reform or Revolution*, www.marxists.org ● 3 Rosa Luxemburg, 1910, “The Next Step”, www.marxists.org ● 4 Rosa Luxemburg, 1919, “Order Prevails in Berlin”, www.marxists.org

GERMANY 1918-1919



WORKERS' REVOLUTION ERUPTS

The horrors of the First World War, deteriorating living standards and the inspiring example of the Russian Revolution lit the fuse for revolutionary upheaval in Germany in November 1918. Workers' power and socialist revolution were the order of the day. MATT WAINE looks at the lessons of these events and their historic significance.

On the second weekend of January 2019, over 40,000 people made their way to the Zentralfriedhof Friedrichsfelde cemetery in east Berlin to pay their respects at the graves of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. These two socialist leaders were murdered 100 years ago by the Freikorps, the proto-fascist militia, on the orders of their former comrades in the leadership of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The simple obelisk in the grave bears the ominous epitaph, "Die Toten mahnen uns" – "the dead remind us".

The Tiergarten park in the centre of Berlin was the scene of these grisly murders. There, at the Lichtenstein bridge, the body of one of the greatest socialist revolutionaries, Rosa Luxemburg, was dumped into the freezing Landwehrkanal. At around

the same time, in another part of the park, her comrade and collaborator, Karl Liebknecht, was murdered, with his body disposed of anonymously in one of the city's mortuaries. Their deaths brought to an end two months of revolutionary fervour and upheaval which saw the declaration of a workers' republic, with Luxemburg and Liebknecht the leaders.

The centenary of these events has provoked much comment in Germany as political instability, economic uncertainty and the growth of the far right haunt the political establishment, none more so than the SPD who, 100 years later, cannot seem to excise the ghosts of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Writing of the events of 1919 in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, former vice-chair of the SPD, Wolfgang Thierse, said: "But what choice did the Social Democrat-led government have?...but one can know that the path that was taken was the better one."¹

War and revolution

"War is the mother of revolution," wrote Leon Trotsky. And so it was in Germany. On 9 November 1918, the 400-year rule of the Hohenzollern monarchy collapsed and Germany sued for peace – in terms understood to be a complete surrender – thereby bringing the First World War to an end. Four days earlier, the sailors of the German High Fleet mutinied at the Baltic seaport of Kiel. They elected a sailors' and workers' council and raised the red flag of socialist revolution over the vessels.

In Berlin, earlier that day, Phillip Scheidemann, chairman of the SPD, had hurriedly declared the formation of the German republic from the balcony of the Reichstag to tumultuous applause from an enormous throng of people below. All across Germany, workers' councils were being established and red flags were flown from barracks to state buildings. The impressive, impervious and world-renowned efficiency of Prussian autocracy and militarism had melted away. Power now rested in the hands of the SPD.

Four years earlier, on 4 August 1914, the SPD deputies went into the Reichstag and voted for the War Credits – a special budget for financing the war. It was a bombshell to the world socialist movement; so much so that Vladimir Lenin, who would lead the Russian Revolution in 1917, refused to believe it, even dismissing the issue of Vorwärts (the SPD daily paper) as a forgery of the German High Command.

Historic betrayal

The SPD had been the model of European Socialism. Its official doctrine was Marxism and its main theoreticians and leaders were supporters and students of Marx and Engels. The unification of Germany in the 1860s had unleashed massive productive forces and the expansion of the German industrial economy, which in turn created the largest working class in Europe. Through patient and persistent work, toiling through repression in its early years, the SPD had by 1914 a membership of 1,100,000, 3,000 manual and clerical workers, 90 daily newspapers employing 267 fulltime journalists, 2,886 local elected councillors and 110 members of the Imperial Reichstag – making it the largest parliamentary fraction.²

As Ruth Fischer explained,

“The German social democrats were able to realize a type of organization that was more than a loosely knit association of individuals coming together temporarily for temporary aims, more than a party for the defence of labour interests. The German Social Democratic Party became a way of life. It was much more than a political machine; it gave the German worker dignity and status in a world of his own. The individual worker lived in his party, the party penetrated into the workers' everyday habits. His ideas, his reactions, his attitudes, were formed out of this integration of his person with his collective.”³

So how then did this magnificent machine of working class political organisation find itself on the same side of the Kaiser in 1914? The long upswing of European capitalism in the last quarter of the 19th century provided a new objective reality for the emergence of a reformist current within the SPD personified by Eduard Bernstein. He argued that capitalism had appeared to overcome its chaotic boom-bust cycle which allowed for the possibility of a gradual and peaceful evolution of society towards socialism

The steady growth in support for the SPD and the reforms won from the German state seemed to endorse Bernstein's contentions. Rather than the growing impoverishment of the working class, as predicted by Marx, capitalism was being forced to share out the fruits of its growth. Marxism, contended Bernstein, needed to be revised, brought up to date.

In this battle, Bernstein won the support of the growing bureaucracy of functionaries in the party and the trade union leaders, who saw this perspective offering an easier path for their careers. It fell to the party's main theoretician, Karl Kautsky, but especially the brilliant Rosa Luxemburg, to challenge and refute Bernstein's revisionism. Luxemburg's seminal pamphlet, *Reform or Revolution*, even today, is a fantastic refutation of opportunism and reformism. While Bernstein's revisionism was rejected at the party congress in Dresden 1903, the process of moving the party away from its Marxist principles and adopting a reformist method continued.

The test of war

The declaration of war in August 1914 was not unforeseen. Indeed, what to do in the event of the outbreak of a world war was something that occupied the minds of all socialists. The Second International had committed itself to opposition to imperialist wars, with aims of encouraging the European working class to rise up and stop the war with a general strike. However, when war eventually came to the door of the SPD, the majority of its deputies supported the defence of the Fatherland and voted for the war credits in the Reichstag.

Whilst this eventuality was not widely anticipated in advance of the war it was in fact the culmination in practice of the perspective argued for by Bernstein. If socialism was to be achieved by a peaceful, gradual evolution of German capitalism, then it followed that the German capitalist class must be defended in the war. Bringing the war to a speedy conclusion would then allow things to return to normal. Through the practice of effectively reconciling itself with the system of capitalism, the SPD supported its most important institution; war.

Of course the war was not a short affair. The colossal clash of imperialism saw millions of workers mobilised and the most modern military technology matched with the most primitive barbarism, resulting in the massacre of nine million working-class combatants and seven million civilians. It was horror on a scale never before imagined. At home, the SPD agreed to the policy of Burgfrieden, a suspension of class struggle to allow for the uninterrupted exploitation of the working class in the name of the war effort. Everyone available was drafted to the front, or to the war industries. The weekly rations were eroded month after month, with starvation, influenza and other diseases claiming hundreds of lives in the capital on a daily basis. Inflation reduced workers' meagre wages even further and banks began to



Armed revolutionary soldiers, sailors, and workers at Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, on 9 November 1918

collapse. Anger at these inflictions encouraged a steady increase in strikes and protests and a growing anti-war sentiment.

By 1916, after five more votes for increased war credits, the mood had begun to change. The left inside the SPD had begun to find its voice and an echo, and in January of that year, a split occurred resulting in the creation of the “Independent SPD” (USPD).

Outbreak of revolution

By October 1918, Germany was on the verge, not only of military defeat, but also of socialist revolution. The SPD leaders finally became aware of the growing support for revolutionary ideas.

“With a chill, the Majority Socialists (SPD) began to realise how much ground they had lost to the Independent Socialists and especially the extreme-left-wing factions...Only a few weeks before, the Majority Socialists had been absolutely confident of their authority within the working class... Philip Scheidemann, who had advocated Liebknecht’s release on the grounds that he was much less dangerous outside prison, was frankly dumbfounded – ‘Liebknecht has been carried shoulder high by soldiers who have been decorated with the Iron Cross. Who could have dreamt of such a thing happening three weeks ago!’”⁴

In the maelstrom of the developing German Revolution, the masses had begun to look for a way out of the chaos. The propaganda and agitation of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, calling for a workers’ government on Soviet lines, was embraced by wide and growing sections of the working class. As the old regime began to crumble, Germany was entering a

period of ‘Dual Power’ with workers’ councils and the capitalist state vying for control.

Almost to the eleventh hour, the policy of the SPD was to save some sort of ‘constitutional monarchy’, until it was clear that the risen masses had moved beyond the idea of even a ‘constitutional democracy’ and had begun to establish democratic workers’ councils. Now the policy of the SPD was to save capitalism from the threat of a Soviet state being established in Germany.

The SPD, with its multi-layered bureaucracy and experienced professional organisers, had learned some of the lessons of the Russian Revolution. Instead of opposing the occupations and establishment of workers’ councils, they sought to acquiesce to them. In some areas, it was SPD functionaries who even set them up.

Sailors revolt in Kiel

In Kiel, Gustav Noske was despatched to dampen down the revolutionary energy of the workers and sailors who had seized power. He immediately acceded to many of the sailors’ demands – arranging for payment of wages, releasing imprisoned mutineers, allowing the red flag fly over vessels. But he also insisted on ‘Ruhe und Ordnung’ – peace and order. The sailors were convinced to hand over their weapons to the Supreme Council, which had been hand selected by Noske himself.

But what had happened in Kiel had sparked off movements across the country. “Reports were reaching Berlin that in almost every army regiment, men were electing ‘barracks councils’ which in turn combined with other regiments in the same city to elect a ‘garrison council.’”⁵ These developments had an ominous familiarity with events in Soviet Russia. The SPD leadership had to act quickly to stem the tide.



The issue of Die Rote Fahne, newspaper of the Spartacusbund, from 9 November 1918

that was taking shape, their aim was to crush it.

The German Revolution was throwing up many of the challenges, obstacles and similar political forces as had the revolution in Russia in 1917. Critically, what was missing was a distinct revolutionary party, something Lenin and the Bolsheviks had consciously and patiently built in Russia. There was no shortage or revolutionary initiative and groups with a willingness to sacrifice. For example, the Obleute, Revolutionary Shop Stewards Group in Berlin, were small in number but had massive influence among the working class, particularly the industrial working class. Hundreds of thousands of revolutionary-inclined workers had joined the USPD, but none of these

Freidrich Ebert, leader of the SPD, insisted on the abdication of the Kaiser. Reichskanzler Prince Max von Baden, before he sought the Kaiser's abdication, called Ebert and asked him directly, "If I should succeed in persuading the Kaiser, do I have you on my side in the struggle against the social revolution? Without hesitation, Ebert replied, "If the Kaiser does not abdicate, the social revolution is inevitable. I do not want it – in fact, I hate it like sin."⁶

In Bavaria, Ludwig III had been deposed and a workers' government declared. It was similar in Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Leipzig, and many other cities. The general strike, called by the USPD and the Spartacists for 9 November, was enormous.

Faced with an imminent revolution, the SPD had no choice but to support the general strike, try to put themselves at the head of the movement in order to divert it down a non-revolutionary road. For the next two months, it was a battle not only for the leadership of the German working class, ultimately the fate of world history was in the balance.

The USPD and the KPD

The day after Scheidemann declared the German Republic from the Reichstag balcony, the SPD proposed the establishment of a 'Council of People's Commissars' – adopting the same name as the government declared by Lenin in Russia just a year previously. Alongside the three SPD members, three seats were offered to the USPD. They even hinted that Karl Liebknecht would be welcome to join!

The USPD was a 'centrist' political force, meaning that it vacillated between revolution and reformism, but always came down on the side of the latter. They insisted that their participation in this government was necessary in order to defend the gains of the socialist revolution. From the point of view of the revolution this was in fact a critical mistake. The SPD leaders had no intention of consolidating the socialist revolution

groups had the cohesion, the steeled and tempered political leadership that the Bolshevik Party had. Lenin had determined that such a party was necessary to lead the working class through to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' state. His concept of the party was confirmed by the victorious October Revolution.

Unfortunately, neither Luxemburg nor Liebknecht grasped the need for such a party fully, until it was too late. The Spartacist group had enormous support, but it wasn't organised as a cohesive revolutionary party with a tested and experienced cadre. As Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian revolution said, "Without a guiding organization, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam."⁷ In that sense, there was plenty of steam in Germany in 1918, but there was no piston-box. It was not until 30 December that the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was founded.

SPD manoeuvring

Immediately after the establishment of the Council of Peoples' Commissars government, the SPD set about trying to rein in the disparate and chaotic workers' and soldiers' councils that had sprung up around the country. Ebert called for a national congress of all the various councils for December. It was a nod in the direction of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets that became the new state power in revolutionary Russia. However, without a Bolshevik-type party to contend with, and using the enormous apparatus of the SPD and its connections with the trade unions, the delegates were packed with SPD Yes-men. Indeed, of the 489 delegates, only 187 were waged or salaried workers, the rest being trade union or SPD officers.⁸ At the National Congress, the crushing majority enjoyed by SPD was used to reject the call for the socialist transformation of society.

Revolution is nothing other than the conscious interference of the masses into political life. Trade union membership rose from 2.8 million in 1918 to 7.3 million the following year. The SPD say its membership climb from 250,000 to 500,000 in a year, with the USPD jumping from 100,000 to 300,000 in four months!

However, this also served to dilute the experienced and more revolutionary-minded workers. This had happened to the Bolsheviks who were a small minority in the soviets as hundreds of thousands of workers took their first tentative steps into political activity. But the political perspectives of the Bolsheviks, in understanding the stages of the revolution, patiently explaining its ideas to workers over the course of a number of months and allowing them to go through the experience of the actions of the reformists in whom they had initial illusions, won a majority of the working class to its programme by October.

The SPD manoeuvre at the national congress of the workers' and soldiers' councils did not stem the revolutionary tide. There were violent protests and skirmishes between frustrated workers and state forces, including an attempt to arrest Karl Liebknecht in early December, whereupon 150,000 demonstrated in Berlin. The supreme command-inspired 'National Congress of Soldiers' Councils' was an attempt to nullify the soldiers councils, but provoked a backlash from the troops who were moving increasingly in a revolutionary direction. More and more the SPD were forced to resort to state repression, including the newly formed proto-fascist Freikorps forces, to stem the tide. This led to the events of 'Bloody Christmas', where the police force (under the orders of the SPD) violently attacked the revolutionary 'People's Naval Division'.



As tireless as he was brave, Karl Liebknecht never grasped the need for a revolutionary party as advocated by Lenin – a weakness which would prove fatal

The attack was too much for even the USPD to accept and their three representatives in the Council of Peoples' Commissars resigned, replaced by three more representatives from the SPD, including Gustav Noske. On accepting the portfolio of Minister for Defence – a position which would put him personally in charge of suppressing revolutionary workers, he was reported as saying, "someone must be the bloodhound. I won't shirk the responsibility"⁹

The remnants of the old state could not tolerate the lack of order. They had placed their faith in the SPD to rescue Germany from Bolshevism. They wanted the Ebert Government to move more decisively against the growing revolutionary unrest.

Premature action

The art of revolution is about being able to read the tempo and development of consciousness of the masses, understanding that consciousness among different sections develops in different stages. Whilst the more revolutionary-minded and experienced workers grew impatient at the SPD government and were suspicious of their real motives, the newly active elements had to go through certain experiences themselves before they could really draw the necessary conclusions. This was the case in July 1917 in Russia. The Petrograd working class was armed and ready to overthrow the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky, but Lenin understood that the the working class, soldiers and peasantry in the rest of Russia were not ready for that and a premature uprising in the city might actually derail the revolution.

The SPD cynically recognised this impatience, and while still paying lip-service to the ideas of socialism, tried to provoke a response from the working class. The events around Bloody Christmas were a big blow to Ebert. He had overstepped the mark by calling in the army to shoot on revolutionary sailors and had pinned his colours to the mast. There was nothing to do but continue on attacking the left. At the end of December, the SPD Government demanded the removal of the police chief of Berlin, Emil Eichhorn, who was a member of the USPD. In response, the USPD, the Obleute and the newly formed KPD called a mass demonstration for 5 January. The stage was then set for a direct conflict between the state forces and the advanced sections of the Berlin working class.

An enormous throng of hundreds of thousands of people, many bearing arms, took to the streets, fearing that the SPD were moving to crush the incomplete revolution. The size of the protest surprised even the organisers. Whilst the USPD, the KPD and the revolutionary shop stewards had been in full agreement that it was not possible to overthrow the Ebert government at this stage,

the sheer volume of protesters and their determination introduced the element of doubt – maybe it was time? The leaders met for two days to discuss what should follow, while the masses returned to the streets on the second day.

Finally, a large majority of the leaders agreed that it was time to overthrow the government, announcing the formation of a Revolutionary Committee of 52 to lead an insurrection. By that stage, the impatience of a section of workers led to the occupation of the SPD's Vorwärts office and other enterprises. The leaders of the Revolutionary Committee had banked on the support of soldiers and sailors, which turned out to be a miscalculation. But they had also over-estimated the mood of the protesters. As historian, Richard M. Watt, noted: "Despite the hundreds of thousands of strikers, there were altogether less than 10,000 men determined to fight... The mass of the Berlin workers were ready to strike and demonstrate, but not to engage in armed struggle."¹⁰

The counter-revolution

By the evening of 6 January, it was clear the situation had begun to slip. The National Committee of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils endorsed the call for Eichhorn's dismissal. Noske moved into the Freikorps headquarters and prepared for a counter attack. The SPD leadership were able to paint the occupations of Vorwärts and the armed demonstrations as a dictatorial attempt by Bolsheviks to overthrow the newly established democracy. Negotiations between both sides broke down and as the USPD began to waver. Liebknecht called for an armed uprising, while the Berlin working class looked on in shock – two armed groups, both calling themselves socialists, preparing for civil war. Meetings in the factories called for an end to the conflict.

Ebert's government used the confusion and aspirations for unity among the wide working class to move decisively against the insurgents and after a number of days, all the main districts of the city were under government control.

With all the revolutionary leaders either killed, arrested or forced into hiding, the opening chapter of the German Revolution came to an end. But for the SPD, whose former Marxist education told them that the revolution itself was not ended, moved to decapitate a future, more-prepared and ultimately successful revolution. The 'Bloodhound' Noske set as his target the annihilation of Luxemburg, Liebknecht and the KPD leadership, setting his crazed Freikorps dogs onto their trail. On 15 January, the two were



"The Dead Remind Us" – 100 years on, the German Revolution is rich in lessons

discovered in the Wilmersdorf area of Berlin, arrested, brutalised and murdered that night.

A tragic end

1918-19 saw the opening up of a period of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary turmoil in Germany, with ebbs and flows, that lasted until 1923. For Marxists, these are not chaotic affairs, but flowed from the war and the historic crisis of capitalism that this came from. This in turn resulted in the mass of working people looking for a way out of the crisis and following the path of revolution. What Luxemburg and Liebknecht lacked was not an understanding of this, or revolutionary determination and courage – but a revolutionary party. The valiant attempts to weld such a party into existence in the middle of the unfolding revolution between November and January was too late, its reach too little and its experience too short.

Four days before her death, on 11 January, Luxemburg tragically drew the lessons of the defeat:

"The absence of leadership, the non-existence of a centre to organise the Berlin working class, cannot continue. If the cause of the Revolution is to advance, if victory of the proletariat, of socialism, is to be anything but a dream, the revolutionary workers must set up leading organisations able to guide and to utilise the combative energy of the masses."¹¹ ■

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Venezuela: once again in the crosshairs of imperialism

On 23 January 2019, Juan Guaidó declared himself interim president of Venezuela. Shortly afterwards, he was recognised as such by the USA and Canada. A few days later, Britain, France, Germany and many others followed suit. Ann Orr looks at the ongoing attempts by imperialist forces to crush the government of Nicolás Maduro and argues that Venezuela does not represent a failure of socialism, but a stark warning about why a fundamental break with capitalism and real socialist transformation of society is required.

“This Troika of Tyranny, this triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua, is the cause of immense human suffering, the impetus of enormous regional instability, and the genesis of a sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere [...] The United States looks forward to watching each corner of the triangle fall. [...] The Troika will crumble.”¹

These were the words used to describe Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela by John Bolton, national security advisor to Donald Trump, in a speech last November. Together with the other two countries Venezuela is therefore once again in the sights of the White House. As indicated by this quote, but in particular his past record, the threat to these countries is serious. Bolton was US foreign secretary to the UN in 2005 during the war in Iraq. He also worked in the Bush senior and Reagan administrations. His actions included attempts to halt stronger international controls on biological weapons. More recently he has also advocated the bombing of Iran and North Korea.² That he attempts to paint himself as standing against human suffering is absurd.

The speed at which not only Trump but also Brazil's recently elected president Bolsonaro recognised Guaidó is also indicative of an internationally coordinated campaign. And Trump's government continues to push for change in Venezuela, repeatedly refusing to rule out military intervention. Trump also made his intention clear when he appointed Elliot Abrams as special envoy to Venezuela. Abrams was involved in organising finances to arm paramilitary forces known as the 'Contras' in Nicaragua in the 1980s and was working with George Bush during the 2002 attempted coup in Venezuela. In Bolton's words, Abrams's actions represent a clear “cause of immense human suffering” and “impetus of enormous regional instability” although neither are likely to recognise it as such.



John Bolton, national security adviser to Trump: a particularly dangerous figure

Chavez in power

The attack on Venezuela is far from new. Since Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998 he was not only a symbol of hope for the poor and working masses of Latin America and beyond, but also a thorn in the side of international capitalism. Initially Chávez spoke of a “Bolivarian revolution” which involved an end to corruption and opposition to neo-liberalism. His model was based on capitalist development of Venezuela with a focus on redistribution of wealth in favour of the poor while the key sectors of the economy remained under the private ownership of the capitalist class. Wealth from Venezuela’s oil reserves, which still accounts for over 90% of the government’s revenue,³ was used to implement reforms to improve access to health and education and increase the minimum wage. Significant improvements in literacy resulted and many escaped poverty. He also introduced basic healthcare which was free. All of these measures led to his biggest electoral victory with over 62% supporting him in the 2006 presidential election. In this period, he also began speaking about the need for “Socialism for the 21st century,” while at the same time referencing socialist revolutionaries including Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky.

His more radical rhetoric and policies followed a failed coup in 2002 which was backed by the USA as well as a lock-out of workers by bosses and an unsuccessful attempt to recall him from office in 2004. These events also impacted Chávez’ international policy as he attempted to build counterweights to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the USA through cooperation with neighbouring countries. These included initiatives for the selling of oil at cheaper rates and the formation of blocks such as the Union of South American countries .

Although Venezuela’s traditional capitalist class remains, over the past decade a bureaucracy based on the Chavista movement has also developed that has materially benefited from social inequality. Sometime referred to as the “Boliburguesía” (Bolivarian bour-

geoisie), this stratum, along with the existence of capitalism, constitutes an important obstacle to socialist change and must be got rid of. A *Financial Times* article from February 2019 paints a picture of the inequalities between this group and working-class Venezuelans when they speak of luxurious dishes being consumed by those sitting in designer clothes on leafy terraces while “Just metres from the restaurant, [people] rummage through refuse skips looking for food”.⁴ The same description could of course apply to countries around the world. Now, the significant poverty, discontent and despair that exists is being used in an attempt to complete a right-wing coup.

Collapse of Venezuelan economy

To say Venezuela is struggling economically is an understatement. Due to its high reliance on oil revenue, the international crisis of 2007/2008 hit Venezuela particularly hard and Chávez’ government reacted by reducing spending on social reforms.⁵ Since 2013, it’s economy is said to have contracted by 50%.⁶ Economic sanctions have been employed against Venezuela by the US for over a decade. When former president Barack Obama declared Venezuela as a “national security threat” in 2015 this enabled further and harsher sanctions to be levelled. The recently announced further sanctions by the USA aimed at Venezuela’s state oil company (PdVSA) represent a serious escalation.

The sanctions include prohibiting individuals from trading with PdVSA and required the winding-down of operations of two USA-based subsidiaries of PdVSA. In addition, during the wind-down period, all payments must be placed in a blocked account in the USA. They are estimated to result in a further reduction of Venezuela’s oil exports by two-thirds which would amount to a further shrinkage of 26% of the economy.⁷ Economic activity is further impeded by Venezuela being effectively cut-off from international financial markets due to the prevalence of the USA dollar and its banking system, from which sanctions have excluded Venezuela.⁸

The impact of Venezuela’s economic crisis on ordinary people has been immense. The UNHCR estimated that over 3 million people have left Venezuela, many of whom are applying for asylum in countries across Latin America. In other words: 1 in every 10 people have left the country . For comparison, the UN states that in 2015, when the high-point of the so called European migrant crisis was reached, just over 1 million refugees arrived in Europe . The migration wave from Venezuela is therefore also a significant one on an international scale.

Another indicator of the severe crisis is the hyper-inflation rate. At the end of last year, Venezuela’s annual inflation rate was the highest in the world and reached an incomprehensible 80,000%. Although recent inflation rates have significantly decreased, they are still in the category of hyperinflation, remaining at over 50%

a month. A key problem of hyperinflation is that it encourages the hoarding of goods by capitalist profiteers as a delay in sales is likely to benefit from even higher prices. For working class people it means an incredible challenge to buy even essential items. Extraordinary price hikes have also affected goods and services sold by the government including electricity. The electricity system's collapse for over a week in March further heightened the crisis by also affecting the water supply as clean water could not be pumped through the system. Explanations for the blackout range from sabotage, US-backed cyber attack to effects of a wildfire on an underfunded and backward electricity system. In any case, the event resulted in additional burden on the working-class and poor already struggling to survive.

Food production for profit

Food of course is also part of these essentials affected by hyperinflation and here Venezuela is very vulnerable. Even at the height of Chávez reforms, the country relied on imports for 70% of its food. Decreased revenue from oil also reduced the country's ability to import these items. One line of argument often used in an attempt to show that Chávez's "socialist" policies failed goes as follows: Price controls implemented by Chávez in an attempt to control increasing food prices thus making basic items more affordable was flawed as it led to Venezuelan companies no longer producing these items as they were not profitable anymore. While price controls may be a useful measure which socialists support and call for, on its own this is insufficient. To deal with this issue, socialist measures are absolutely necessary. This should include the nationalisation of the food production industry to ensure it is run in the interest of working class people in Venezuela.

The primary consideration would therefore have been the needs of the population, not the profit margin of privately owned companies of the bosses. These factories could then have been run democratically by the workers and representatives of the working-class and government. This would have constituted a socialist policy and would, if linked with the the nationalisation of the main sectors of the economy and democratically placed under the control of the Venezuelan working class, amount to a socialist challenge to capitalism in Venezuela. Of course, Chávez would not have been able to do this on his own. Crucial to the success of such a move would have seen the active struggle and independence of workers in those industries and the working class as a whole.

Around 2007, there were examples of nationalisations and also workers' co-management. These were driven by workers themselves and occurred for example in paper and aluminium factories. In such cases workers continued to produce goods after employers abandoned facto-

ries and companies. These individual seizures, while receiving retrospective ratification by the Chavez administration, were not part of a co-ordinated plan. Similarly, even though the over-reliance on oil revenues was recognised officially, there was no central programme to diversify the economy to be able to tackle this over-reliance.

This again illustrates that while positive reforms were implemented, Chávez fell well far short of implementing socialist policies that would have challenged capitalism and could, with the active support and participation of the working class, have overthrown it. In contrast to the top-down, bureaucratic approach used by the Chávez regime, a system of genuine workers control and democracy was needed to be able to successfully challenge the corruption and repression that increasingly became features of the Chavista regime.

Revolution & the role of the working class

Far from being a failure of socialism, Venezuela therefore demonstrates that it is not possible to gradually reform capitalism into socialism; It is not possible to find a middle ground because a challenge to the capitalist system requires a challenge to the private ownership and control of wealth - of factories, of resources, of the banking sector. Chávez implemented significant reforms including nationalising some sectors such as the oil industry. However, he fell short of challenging capitalist rule. Even the reforms implemented in Venezuela were too much for the capitalist class who in 2002 demonstrated that they would not hesitate to use military force against Chávez.

While Chávez implemented more radical measures after the attempted coup, he again fell short off challenging the rule of the capitalists. This allowed the global elite and right-wing forces in Venezuela to regroup and go back on the offensive. Through various



Juan Guaidó is backed by imperialism in his attempt to oust President Maduro



Maduro retains the support of the armed forces, for now...

tactics, including economic sanctions, pressure was applied to Venezuela. Largely on their own, and with a global slump in oil prices linked to the economic crisis, Venezuela had little chance of holding out against the might of USA's economic power. In the current crisis, Trump and his allies are again demonstrating they are prepared to use military intervention, with Guaidó even publicly calling for foreign military intervention. In 2002, the military split with some continuing to support Chávez. In the situation now Guaidó has not been able to win any significant sections of the Venezuelan military which so far has prevented a successful coup.

A cursory glance at recent history in Venezuela could lead to the erroneous conclusion that any opposition to neo-liberalism and capitalism is bound to fail, at best only bringing limited and temporary gains for the majority of ordinary people. However, a more fundamental analysis shows that the potential existed for more far-reaching and fundamental change. Opportunities existed in Venezuela following the failed coup in 2002 and in other countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador for the working class to not only challenge capitalist rule but take power themselves. The coup attempt in 2002 was defeated by the movement of working-class people who spontaneously organised to defend Chávez.

They were further tested by the lock-out which followed the coup attempt and which lasted 12 months. This demonstrates not only the determined fighting spirit but also the strength of the working-class. A reflection of this is also evident in the situation now with one commentator showing his bewilderment that "Not even the countrywide blackouts that have recently struck Venezuela have undermined Maduro".⁹ The working class in Venezuela has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to fight and struggle for a better future. What has been lacking is a clear alternative to capitalist rule and a lead to how to achieve this.

Defeat imperialism and capitalism

Socialists must deal with the reality at hand. In Venezuela this is marked by deep divisions and the danger of civil war particularly if sections of the military are won to support Guaidó; harsh economic circumstances; well-resourced and USA-backed opposition; lack of leadership for the working class and significant threats to the gains for workers and the poor achieved under Chávez. With an estimated 90% of Venezuelans living in poverty it is understandable how many who hoped Maduro would change things for the better have joined protests for Guaidó. However, while mass protests occurred in support of Guaidó in January, significant demonstrations of government supporters who gathered were called upon by Diosdado Cabello, leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), to go to the Miraflores

Palace in order to keep a vigil in defence of Maduro against possible assault. This is how working-class people defended Chávez in 2002.

Critique of Maduro is necessary and at the same time so is support for the working class in Venezuela to defend themselves against imperialism. It is evident that if Guaidó is victorious, waves of privatisation, austerity and repression of workers will follow. Therefore, socialists must call for the mass mobilisation of the Venezuelan working class for a revolutionary front of rank and file workers in the the Chávista movement and trade union activists. These should be organised in committees of action and defence to organise measures including the occupation of factories.

However, the movement must also go further and be prepared to break with capitalism. This means challenging the "Boliburguesía" as well as imperialist intervention. To do this, the working class must take over the running of key sectors of the economy which will involve further and complete nationalisations as outlined above. Internationally, we must learn the lessons of the developments in Venezuela and oppose any attempted coup by imperialist intervention or right-wing forces. ■

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Milkman

By Anna Burns
Published by Faber, 2018

Reviewed by Cerys Falvey

Whilst a somewhat difficult read *Milkman* is entirely deserving of its recent praise, including winning the prestigious Man Booker Prize. The protagonist, an 18-year-old book worm, tells her story from an unnamed town, though to anyone familiar with the geography of North Belfast (from where Burns is from), it is clear the story is based in 1970s Ardoyne at the height of the troubles.

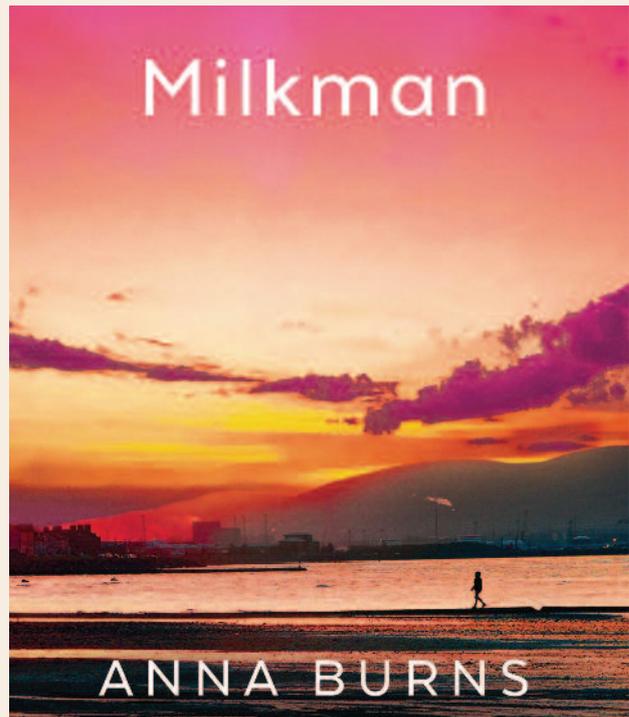
Despite its historical context, *Milkman* is also a novel for the modern day. With gripping descriptions of sectarian violence, paramilitary macho culture, gas-lighting (emotional abuse where a person is tricked into question their thoughts, memories ect) and sectarian polarisation, the book holds relevance and lessons for today in the #MeToo era, and with northern Irish society still in a sectarian headlock.

Burns' description of how a sectarian society operates is exceptionally accurate. Her description of how normal everyday things – newspapers, bars and even cars – are considered as 'us' or 'them' with dangerous consequences if you dare to engage with something from 'over the water', or even more dangerous, from 'over the road', holds relevance today with certain sports, bars and areas unwelcome to those from the 'wrong community'.

The plot is given away in the book's first sentence: "The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died." Yet it takes the entire book to understand what is laid out in this introduction.

Burns perfectly encapsulates the life of a slightly-odd, tragic and comic "middle-sister" growing up during the Troubles with an obsession with 19th Century novels. In her words, "I did not like twentieth-century books, because I did not like the twentieth century", which is understandable given the traumatic world in which she's grown up and been shaped. This is a young woman who's father died after a long fight with depression, revealing on his death bed his rape by his elder brother, and whose mother has had to raise an untold number of children (although seemingly a lot of them), causing her to become hardened and obsessed with the marrying off of her now 18-year-old daughter.

This alone would be enough to push one to insanity, but considering its coupling with growing up in a flashpoint of a civil war in which she lost two brothers, it isn't surprising that she becomes obsessed with novels from a 'simpler time', and running. Thus, when Milkman, an established paramilitary, walks into her life



and disturbs these methods of escapism, life becomes particularly grim for middle-sister.

The novel begins by the stalking and harassment of middle-sister by said Milkman, who appears unannounced, knowing untold information about her family, her evening French classes, and even her (up to this point) well hidden "maybe-boyfriend". She makes it instantly clear to the reader that this is not a welcome encounter, but more importantly – that she does not possess the articulation with which to deal with him: "At the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were – if not physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there?"

This is a young woman growing up in the context of paramilitarism, where violence and so-called 'machoism' were encouraged and celebrated, where she is being educated by the church and a culture of shame. Her lack of sex education and her extreme sexual repression become obvious when she can't even bring herself to say the word 'vagina', preferring to use the phrase 'monosyllable' and talk of sex with maybe-boyfriend is clouded by vagueness and awkwardness.

Thus, middle-sister is extremely unequipped to deal with a potential sexual predator. Significant as well is the judgement of the community around her for her involvement with a married paramilitary. All, including her mother, assume she has wilfully become his mistress, which mother points out is even stupider than marrying a paramilitary – still hoping to hear wedding bells for her middle daughter. Her community gas light her into questions of her tempting of Milkman, and what personal responsibility she holds for his stalking

of her. The toxic sexism in this society is powerfully mapped out and adroitly explained, with many Northern Irish readers I'm sure reminded of the macho culture in which they were raised.

Even through what can only be considered as the darkest of times, middle-sister never fails to exercise her wit and observing and critical eye for the society around her. Even whilst being stalked by a professional

(Milkman) and an amateur (Somebody McSomebody) she finds time to comment on the hilarity of the society around her. She is typical of a child raised during the troubles – hardened, vulnerable and controlled, yet containing a remarkable sense of humour. It is a perfect example of the 'laugh or you'll cry' mentality. The book brings out the reality of paramilitarism and sexism in our society. ■

If Beale Street Could Talk

Directed by Barry Jenkins

Plan B Entertainment, Pastel Productions, 2018

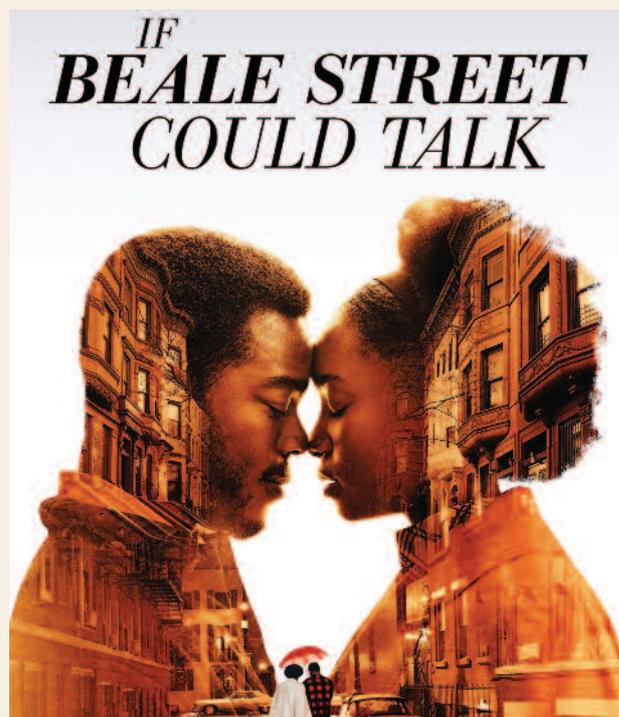
Reviewed by Emily Belton

If Beale Street Could Talk is based on James Baldwin's 1974 novel of the same name. The film is set in New York City in the early 1970s and centres around 19-year-old Tish Rivers and 22-year-old Fonny Hunt. The two have been friends since they were children and their friendship evolves into a romantic relationship as they become older. The 1970s saw the start of the post-civil rights movement and signified the beginning of a new era for African-Americans. However, in the midst of a decade that saw important gains being made through the active struggle of this movement, the discrimination faced by African-Americans was still very much alive.

Tish and Fonny struggle to find somewhere to live in New York as landlords constantly turn down their offers. During this time, it was common for landlords to refuse to rent their apartments to black people. After a long struggle, the couple come across a derelict warehouse that is set to be converted into loft apartments. Despite their race, a Jewish landlord who admires couples in love decides to rent it to them.

At the beginning of the film, we become aware that Fonny was arrested and awaits trial for a rape he did not commit. Tish, who is pregnant with Fonny's child, focuses on trying to prove that he is innocent. On the night of the incident, a police officer claims to distinctly remember seeing Fonny taking off from the scene. The officer's testimony underpins the whole case against Fonny despite his credible alibi. The theme of love is the main focus, which is present right from the beginning. The film portrays an entangled web of love and injustice. Love is depicted as something both fragile and powerful. Throughout the film, the mood veers from happy to sad, and sad to happy. The storytelling is intriguing, with its non-linear structure.

There are noticeably strong female characters in this film, particularly Tish's mother and sister who will stop at nothing to defend and protect her. When a nervous Tish reveals that she is pregnant, her family respond with love and celebration. Tish, who appears apologetic and



ashamed, is told "Unbow your head" by her older sister.

Later, when Tish and her family invite Fonny's parents and sisters over to announce Tish's pregnancy, the mood grows increasingly chaotic. Fonny's mother, who is a religious fanatic, strongly disapproves of the pregnancy and relationship. Tensions rise as arguments become fuelled by bitterness and anger.

The couple's emotional hardship is particularly felt when Tish visits Fonny in prison. Their once youthful energy has become exhausted by the injustice of the criminal justice system. The time spent in each other's company once had a strangely transfixing, sunny disposition. Now, it has lost its breezy, love-struck quality as their struggles are laid bare.

The cinematography is highly polished and stylised, with blissful sunset vibes of the young couple gleefully strolling on the streets after finding a place to live. There are also historical and factual inserts in black and white, which provide stark contrast to the warm, honeycomb filter of the film. The languid production and slow-moving scenes of Fonny, an aspiring abstract sculptor, working on his art are a joy to behold. The pristine production goes perfectly with the expansive film score composed by Nicholas Britell which is an engrossing

collection of multi-layered textures and slow-burning sounds. The recurring musical theme introduced at the beginning of the film has uplifting powers and a hazy, jazzy resonance. The textured arrangements create a soundscape that is immediate and arresting.

The scope of Tish's family's efforts to prove Fonny's innocence is staggering. Tish's and Fonny's fathers work together to steal and sell goods to pay for legal expenses, while Tish's mother Sharon tries to track down Victoria, the victim of the rape. After learning that Victoria returned home, Sharon travels to Puerto Rico to desperately convince her to change her testimony.

In a flashback scene leading up to the rape, Tish is harassed by a white man in a grocery store. When Fonny forcibly pushes the man out of the store, a policeman tries to arrest him. The atmosphere becomes heightened when Tish tries to stand up for Fonny. The policeman's racist tone starts to seep in and quickly creeps under

your skin. A sense of menace and unease looms as the officer, already feeling provoked, is insistently told by the shopkeeper that the two are innocent. This sinister encounter with the law highlights the racial discord that was rampant in America and still exists today.

In exploring racial anxieties and discrimination, this film highlights issues that continue to exist in capitalist America. Watching this film, you cannot help but expect that the couple will be subject to discrimination and experience hostility. Tish, who narrates the film, expresses her discontent with the system: "The game has been rigged and the courts see it through". James Baldwin, who was a civil rights activist, was especially interested in socialism and hoped that it would one day take shape. While the narrative is not overtly political, the film shows again and again the resilience of love against the backdrop of oppression. It is a warm accomplishment and gives the viewer much to chew on. ■

Life & Fate

By Vasily Grossman

Published by Vintage Publishing, 2017

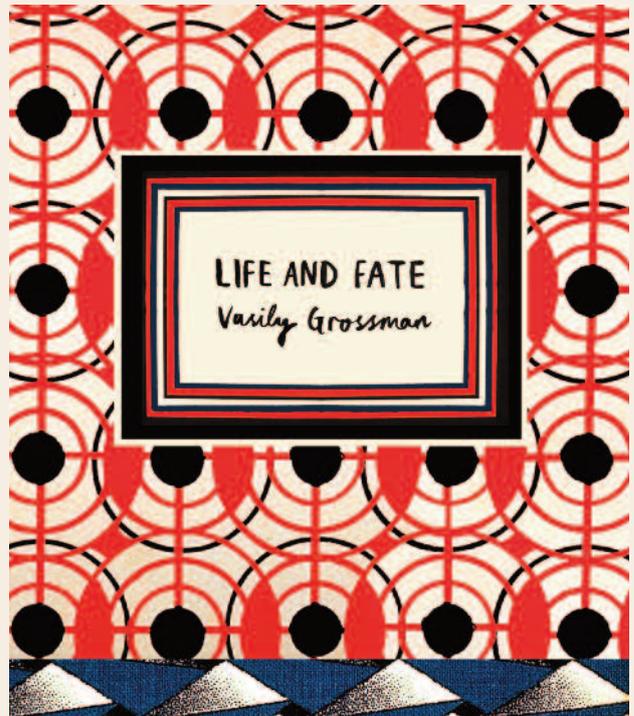
Reviewed by Manus Lenihan

Life and Fate by Vasily Grossman is an epic novel centered on the Battle of Stalingrad. In the midst of this vast and terrible conflict, it is human drama, connected to history and politics, that drives the story forward. The scale and ambition of the novel are incredible; at the back of the book there is a list of characters nine pages long. The cast includes prisoners, fascist war criminals, apparatchiks, victims, grieving mothers, soldiers, and even (briefly) Hitler and Stalin.

Grossman was a journalist with the Red Army, one of the first writers to document the Holocaust. In the novel he describes every aspect of it through of a diverse range of characters, almost like a prosecutor building up a case. Grossman's own mother was among the millions killed; this too seems to come across in his warm depiction of the victims as humans, not statistics: one Jewish woman writes of her neighbours in the ghetto: "what wonderful, impractical, dear, sad, good people they all are!" This builds up to a powerful message against fascism and anti-Semitism.

In spite of the horrors it depicts, the novel is full of humour, life and optimism. In contrast to a book like *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which depicts humanity annihilated by a fictional dictatorship, pessimism and misanthropy are alien to *Life and Fate*; again and again it depicts the human spirit as fundamentally opposed to the forces of oppression.

When Grossman tried to get the novel published in the 1960s, Nikita Khrushchev himself played a role in



banning it. This is because it shows the many ugly faces of the USSR under Stalin: hunger, mass killing, dogmatism, paranoia. Even though it disguised itself in "revolutionary" trappings, Stalinism represented a counter-revolution, a point that comes across very explicitly in *Life and Fate*. The theme of Stalinism running through the novel deserves the attention of the growing numbers of people turning to socialist ideas and eager to explore this rich, complex and tragic history.

The novel depicts the Soviet war against Nazi invasion with fierce sympathy. Stalingrad is presented as a crucial moment in human history, and the crux of Stalingrad is the heroic resistance of Soviet soldiers with "hearts of steel" fighting with their backs to the Volga. This heroism

was rooted in a will to defend the workers' state which, in spite of the rotten regime in charge, still upheld many of the gains of the October Revolution.

Some pro-capitalist critics have done a spectacular job of misunderstanding *Life and Fate*. Tone-deaf to nuance, and even to some things that are not all that nuanced, they attribute to Grossman the belief that "Communism and National Socialism were mirror images of each other." These critics are also under the impression that *Life and Fate* represents some kind of hymn of praise to capitalism.

In fact only one character says that the Nazis and the Stalinists are "mirror images of each other": the Nazi officer Liss. It's clear (or at least it should be clear) that he's being deceitful in an attempt to demoralise a prisoner. He fails. The novel itself, while drawing specific and limited parallels, never suggests anything close to equivalence between Stalinism and fascism. In spite of the horrors of forced collectivisation and the Great Terror (which are detailed in *Life and Fate* in a harrowing fashion) neither does any fair study of history.

When the novel mentions the West, its attitude is cynical: "The bourgeoisie don't allow down-and-outs into the Senate, that's for sure." The novel's critique of Stalinism, too, comes from this socialist and class perspective. "That's what I see as the root of bureaucracy," complains a soldier: "A worker suffering in his own State." His comrade agrees: "We don't trust members of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy with positions of responsibility – and that's fair enough. But it's another matter altogether to stamp the mark of Cain on the forehead of an honest worker simply because his mother and father were kulaks or priests.

That's not what I call a class viewpoint." At a crucial moment Viktor, a character very similar to the author, says: "Yes, we spoke too soon about Socialism – it's not just a matter of heavy industry. Socialism, first of all, is the right to a conscience."

While the diverse characters include a liberal humanist and a religious obscurantist, *Life and Fate* frames its critique of Stalinism in socialist terms. There's nothing unusual about this: it was the Left Opposition, who called for workers' democracy and internationalism in the Soviet Union, who had the most coherent analysis of Stalinism. It's significant that the spectre of Trotsky haunts *Life and Fate*. A key leader of the Russian Revolution and of the Left Opposition, he was murdered by Stalin two years before the events of the novel. He occurs regularly to the minds of various characters – including, at one stage, Stalin himself – especially Krymov, a commissar in battle. It is not one individual that they are remembering, but an entire political tradition running from 1917 to the Left Opposition.

However, *Life and Fate* does not fit neatly into this political tradition. At one stage the author suggests that Stalinism was in some sense the "logical result" of the October Revolution – a point that Trotsky would strongly contest. It makes more sense to place *Life and Fate* alongside the writings of figures such as Leopold Trepper and Sandor Kopacsi: socialists who did not advance a rounded-out Marxist analysis of Stalinism, but who were brave and eloquent witnesses to it. None of this detracts from the value of the novel as a mature and optimistic meditation on Soviet history, an important anti-fascist work in its own right and a powerful depiction of a pivotal event in human history. ■

Feminism For The 99%

By Arruzza, Fraser and Bhattacharya

Published by Verso, 2019

Reviewed by Laura Fitzgerald

Less than 100 pages long, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* will be an attractive read for a new generation politicised by their experiences of oppression and exploitation under capitalism today, and of engaging in struggle. The text ridicules what it dubs "equal opportunity domination" – feminism that is propounded by women in the political and business establishment that remains firmly within the confines of the capitalist system. The text also places emphasis on the women's struggles emerging around the globe, most particularly the idea of the "huelga feminista" or "feminist strike" as it's so inspiringly emerged in the Spanish state, Italy, Poland and Latin America.

Feminism for the 99% is a clarion call against liberal or

bourgeois feminism, the 'lean in' mantra of billionaire Facebook Executive, Sheryl Sandberg. The authors lacerate the shallow mendacity of establishment Identity Politics: "Dedicated to enabling a smattering of privileged women to climb the corporate ladder and the ranks of the military, it propounds a market-centered view of equality that dovetails perfectly with the prevailing corporate enthusiasm for 'diversity'... Its real aim is not equality but meritocracy." They also advocate for a splitting of the feminist movement along class lines in order to break with the pro-capitalist feminism that ultimately means the perpetuating of oppression and exploitation: "...we aim to separate the mass of working-class women, immigrants and people of color from the lean-in feminists."

A central thesis of the authors is that sites of reproduction of a new workforce for capitalism – homes, schools, hospitals etc. – where women tend to predominate doing paid and unpaid labour – will be a vital site of struggle in the years ahead. It's absolutely true that because of capitalism's decades-long neoliberal and austerity offensive, which has included an all-out

assault on the public sector – including a profit-driven commodification of aspects of the latter – we are seeing inspiring workers' struggle led by women workers in many of these sectors, from the mass teachers' strikes in the US, to the nurses and midwives strikes in Ireland.

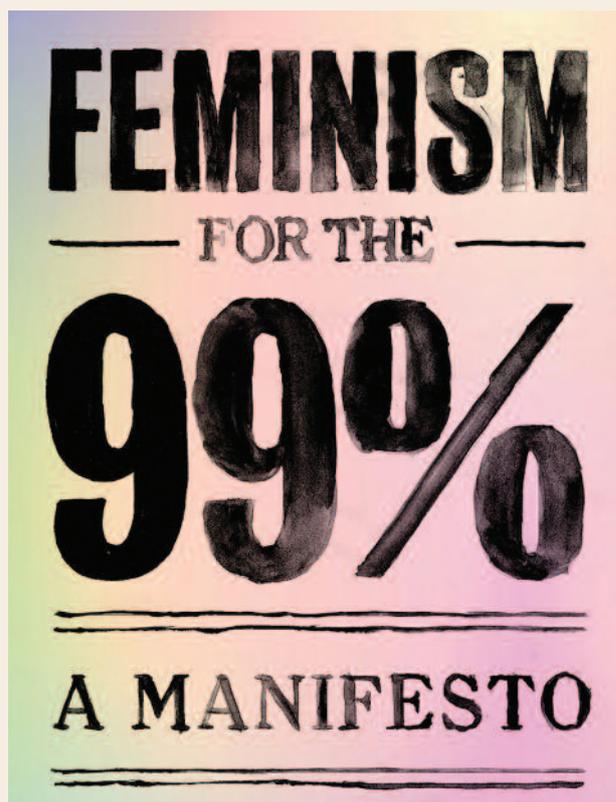
The authors' focus on the aforementioned "feminist strike" (which now includes an incredible estimated six million strong general strike across the Spanish state on 8 March 2019) is completely justified. The fact that this phenomenon has emerged is testament to the fact that the most combative, radical sections of the emerging global feminist wave – especially amongst the working class and youth – are instinctively looking towards the traditional methods of working-class struggle in their fightback, particularly its most potent and powerful weapon: the strike.

The authors make the point that this movement has been "democratizing strikes and expanding their scope" and that "Far from focusing only on wages and hours, they are also targeting sexual harassment and assault, barriers to reproductive justice and curbs on the right to strike." When a highly bureaucratized trade union apparatus has been suppressing workers' interests, agency and struggle, the emergence of any challenge to that is a necessary lifeblood in the working-class struggle. As a living example of this, in the Spanish state, there was huge pressure exerted from below on the official trade union movement to row in behind the 8 March International Women's Day general strike.

Similarly, the emergence of the cross-border school student strike for action on climate change will give confidence to workers to push their own unions to take effective action, including strike action. It is a weakness that the authors do not comment on the need to rebuild and revitalize the trade union movement, or on the failure of some trade union leaders to effectively fight on either economic questions or broader issues of oppression and inequality. But the positive reference point of the use of the workers' movement weapon of the strike is an important point, as well as the inspirational strike action of a political character that has taken place.

At one point the authors briefly reference male workers taking solidarity strike action as part of this. It is a pity that this was not more clearly advocated for. In fact, the idea that only women should strike has been a common theme of debate within such movements, with many liberal feminists only wanting a symbolic strike to illustrate women's role in society, rather than a more concerted confronting of the political and business establishment. In the Spanish state, male workers striking in solidarity as part of the International Women's Day general strike meant much more of the economy was shut down, massively increasing the impact of the movement.

The above is connected with another weakness, or imbalance, in the *Manifesto*. The authors make an important point that the system of capitalism inherently undervalues the work that women disproportionately do – particularly care work, both



paid and unpaid. As a means to strike back against this, the authors emphasise the idea of "women's power: the power of those whose paid and unpaid work sustains the world" and the idea of "withdrawing housework, sex and smiles". While of course working-class women who are not in paid employment should come onto the streets and organise in their community – and in fact this has always been a vibrant feature of working-class struggle and revolutionary history – the act of striking from unpaid "reproductive" work, not only is impossible for most working-class women (e.g. picking the children up from school, feeding the baby, ensuring elderly relatives can get out of bed), but simply does not provide anywhere near the same potential power as striking from waged work.

This power is broadly derived from the fact that workers are key to creating profit for capitalism. Furthermore, there is something especially powerful and strategic about the solidarity and organisation that can be built at workplace level. The impact and disruption to the system of striking together in solidarity with workmates, including from waged "reproductive" work (reproducing the labour force for capitalism) – like the recent nurses and midwives strike did with 40,000 workers together in huge workplaces – is crucial.

Rather than telling us to "lean in", it's welcome that this pithy read inspires us to lean out in struggle and solidarity against the capitalist system of exploitation, oppression and environmental destruction. Although it falls short of explicitly agitating for and explaining the socialist alternative to the latter, *Feminism for the 99%* will inspire many of its readers to explore socialist feminism. ■