

Discussion

Falklands Fallout

Gerry Pocock

Eric Hobsbawm's article on the Falklands was most interesting, particularly in discussing Thatcher's manipulation of national feeling. There is a lot for the left to learn from this. But there are some additional aspects that require some attention.

But first I'd say something on the opposition to the war. This was considerable, and grew in strength and, even more significantly, self-confidence as the campaign — and the war — progressed. And here I'm not quite in agreement with Eric. He is too dismissive of the opposition to the war and therefore I feel exaggerates the hold of Thatcherite jingoism. His reference to the 'very feebleness of the demonstrations' is both unsympathetic and misleading. He exaggerates the 'general sense of outrage and humiliation'.

The failure of the Parliamentary Labour Party in the first debate had, as one crucial result, the effect of leaving unrepresented in Parliament a very big segment of opinion in the country which was looking for an alternative to the Thatcher response. The setting up of the ad hoc committees in different parts of the country and the breadth of support they gathered showed this. Eventually on May 4, over 70 MPs supported the early day motion calling for an immediate truce and genuine negotiations.

A number of trade unions called for a change of policy; CND from the outset raised the question of the possible nuclear danger in the conflict. We could also cite the very low level of overtly jingoistic demonstrative support for the war. The initial PLP failure made the expression of opposition much more difficult and once the task force

had sailed there was a 'rallying round', a feeling that it was disloyal to criticise when young soldiers, sailors and airmen were risking their lives.

There has since been the exposure of the way much of the media, including all of TV, ignored or played down the opposition to the war, was very biased in its reporting and just refused to ask probing questions, or to challenge government versions of events. It is of value to consider 'what might have been' if Labour had adopted a different approach and if the media had not in the main kowtowed to the government. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that in early June when the Falklands war was still a live issue, we had the massive peace demonstration involving a top estimate of 250,000 people. Not on the Falklands, true, but hardly an action that fits easily into the notion of a people carried away by jingoism and war fever.

The anti-war movement

A decisive element in developing the anti-war movement was the Communist Party, whose immediate action had been to oppose the decision to send the task force and to call for its recall. The statement issued on April 7 demanded that the task force be recalled, condemned the Argentine military takeover, and supported the UN call for withdrawal of Argentine forces and for a negotiated settlement through the UN. And for such a settlement to be based on ending Britain's claim to sovereignty. The Communist Party also said that in negotiations the rights and interests of the inhabitants of the Islands should be protected, and that they

should all have the right to hold British citizenship. The validity of this approach here stood the test of time.

These were the themes argued day in, day out, by the Morning Star and this played a significant part in the steady *strengthening* of the anti-war movement. I stress this because I feel that Eric underestimates both the strength of the anti-war movement and the fact that it grew. Thus he refers to the significance of the fact that the opposition was not 'weakened', largely, I feel, because he sees this opposition simply as a passive, already existing, pacifist tendency with little or nothing to offer in terms of an alternative solution.

The second point I would make is on the alternatives. Very few argued a simple do-nothing — 'Let the Argentinians take it' policy, and I agree with Eric that any British government would have had to do something, though his dismissive reference to 'passing the buck to the United Nations, which would have adopted empty resolutions' is misleading. Eric himself gives no alternative. The question to be asked is, why must a reliance on the UN be refused? After all, even Thatcher made some use of the UN, claiming to be operating within its resolutions and Charter. Six weeks spent searching for a UN solution would have been preferable to the war and killing. Nothing of this was tried, and with good reason. The Falklands/Malvinas were already the subject of a UN decolonisation decision on which successive British governments had dragged their feet. And the UN resolution, while condemning the Argentinian action, called on all parties to the dispute to refrain from the use of force. What is involved is also the vital and topical question of the use of force in international relations. If a powerful country like Britain, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, can't set a better example, and on such a question, who can?



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