

# Letters:

## ROLES PARTIES PLAY

What a breath of fresh air it is to read *Marxism Today* and particularly Eric Hobsbawm's article (*MT* April). Sectarianism is a special characteristic of the British labour movement which has stamped its imprint on the Communist Party to the extent that it is very difficult for many ordinary members to understand what the role of the party should be.

Young or relatively young revolutionary socialists are *entitled* to find a party within which they can learn the business of non-sectarian political action, whose interests are in no way separate from those of the working class. If the Communist Party does not provide this then the field will be left open to the ultra left, Stalinism, or worse.

The strategy of the broad alliance does not exclude the leading role of the working class or the struggle against monopoly capitalism; on the contrary, it is an essential development in the process of forging an alliance of the majority against capital in which the industrial and urban workers play the leading, hegemonic role.

Should it really be necessary to state that all this has to be worked for; that the broad alliance will develop from a complex mix of class and non-class issues and only when it has reached a certain stage of maturity will it be ready to initiate the establishment of socialism; that it will not suddenly appear fully formed as if by some miracle and that it is very unlikely to appear at all unless we understand what we are trying to do?

*Charles V Gotten, Sutton Coldfield*

## SUSPICIONS

There is a good deal that is disturbing in Eric Hobsbawm's latest polemic (*MT* April), and which will undoubtedly provoke discussion on the Left. One of his main points is that a lot of people, even in such musty corners as the House of Lords and Oxford University, are disenchanted with Thatcherism. This is undoubtedly so, but what political consequences flow from that? As everyone knows, they now have not one but two substantial electoral alternatives to the Conservative Party. Increasingly over the past 20 years disenchanted Conservative voters have turned, not to Labour, but to the Liberal Party. Many of them are so far from being socialists, or even radicals, that they are likely to continue to do so. Others, no doubt, can be won over to the Labour Party.

One response to this situation is to favour some kind of *de facto* 'broad alliance' between Labour and the

Alliance, or perhaps just the Liberal part of it, as Neil Kinnock recently hinted. Another is to make renewed efforts to re-establish Labour as the only genuine left alternative to Thatcher. The latter course would seem to be the clear choice for socialists, as opposed to those who are merely anti-Thatcher.

Yet it is by no means clear that this is what Hobsbawm favours, since it is necessarily a 'narrower' option than that of a coalition, implicit or explicit, with the Alliance, and since he is bitterly opposed to 'the policies which led to civil war within the Labour Party' - by which he evidently means the policies, not of the dominant parliamentary Right, but of the Labour Left. If it is coalition or alliance or pact with the Alliance that he favours, and that constitutes the 'concrete strategy' of the 'broad alliance line', then he should come out clearly and say so. Then those of us who, rightly or wrongly, remain suspicious of this 'broad alliance' line, will at least know what it is we are opposing. Otherwise it must remain extremely unclear what this line does concretely imply, and therefore what its supposedly 'obvious' merits actually are.

*Anthony Arblaster, Chairperson,  
Socialist Society*

## SURVIVAL POLITICS

I found Eric Hobsbawm's piece (*Air* April) most rewarding reading, and am persuaded that he accurately identifies Thatcherism as a unique political phenomenon of capitalism. It seems to me that Thatcherism is the counter-offensive against the growing potential unity of the diverse forces in society (not only of the Left) to disunite them by populist and other methods.

I completely agree with Hobsbawm that in terms of reactionary British politics Thatcher has no parallel. But equally unparalleled is the present emergence of the new style politics of survival (in CP parlance, the broad democratic alliance). This is clearly identified in the anti-nuclear and peace movements.

Apart from CND, the ecologists and Friends of the Earth, there are dozens of other influential movements-religious, medical, cultural, scientific, feminist politics (whether at Greenham or on the picket lines). And much, much more than can be contained in a short letter, right across the social spectrum. For who does not want to survive?

*Don Wood, London*

## TRUDGING TO DEFEAT

As the capitalist world still fails to extricate itself from the latest crisis,

what are the odds against this scenario: in 1987 the leftier-than-Foot Labour Party under Neil Kinnock wins a general election. . . and after an initial spurt of reform, leads via public spending and pay and trade union controls, demoralisation and division, to a rightier-than-Thatcher government under David Owen or a new Tory hawk.

Have we not learnt the lesson that the arguments for *fundamental* change, for the replacement of capitalism by socialism, must be developed and carried on *now*, that the mass of people must be drawn into arguments and struggles that the Left - especially the communists - guide; towards *socialist* conclusions, explicitly and unapologetically?

Yet those in the Labour and Communist parties who learn this lesson and seek to apply it, however imperfectly and in many differing ways, are lumped together and dismissed by Eric Hobsbawm (*MT* April) as 'fundamentalists', 'simple-minded', 'sectarians', 'ancient monuments' etc. (and this after he promises to 'leave aside simple name-calling!')

Does Hobsbawm believe we will move towards socialism by dropping divisive talk about 'class' and 'socialism', by keeping a discreet Kinnockian distance from industrial militancy, by playing down 'fundamentalist' questions such as withdrawal from NATO? Do opinion polls count for more, in the longer term, than campaigning on principles?

This road is a well-trodden one, and has led time after time to demoralisation, defeat and reaction. That is why many members of the party which aims for socialist revolution, the Communist Party, disagree with the Hobsbawms who want the Left to trudge it yet again.

What a pity that *Marxism Today's* monolithic presentation of a single (eurocommunist) view from within the Communist Party about the way forward, has excluded so many other communists from what Hobsbawm laughably refers to as a 'discussion'.

*Robert Griffiths, Cardiff*

## OFFENSIVE SNEERS

Dorothy Friedman's letter (*MT* May) makes some interesting points about the weaknesses of Hobsbawm's article (*MT* April). It is quite disturbing, however, that she holds such a narrow view of the connection between varying disciplines.

How dare she suggest that Hobsbawm should 'stick to history'. The most important reason for studying history is to relate it to the present, and learning from past mistakes, to construct a programme of tactics for

the future. The works of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin or Trotsky amply prove this as a valid method of approach. They do not separate the past from the present, economics from politics, sociology, philosophy etc, or where they do it is only for the sake of convenience (given the mass of information available). I had hoped that such an obvious point would not need mentioning - why some comrades fail to see it I can't understand.

So while Dorothy may disagree with Hobsbawm's conclusions, she is wrong to deny him the right to participate in political debate, or to assume that history has no validity for the present. It is a shame that in accusing Hobsbawm of a sneering and smug approach she exhibits the same offensive qualities.

*Simon Phillips, Reading*

## BROODING ON BROWDER

What is there to be said of Hobsbawm's suggestion (*MT* April) that Earl Browder in 1944, when promoting the dissolution of the Communist Party of the USA, could not have done so 'without the approval, or indeed the instruction, of Moscow' - and that any idea to the contrary 'is absurd'?

The Communist International had been dissolved the previous year, precisely because its leadership judged its sections to be so mature that they were able to take their own decisions, in the light of their respective circumstances. Browder had no need to ask 'approval', much less 'instruction', from anyone in Moscow. What Hobsbawm's choice of words implies, without saying so, is merely the old anti-Communist lie that any Communist party is 'directed from Moscow'.

Not only is there not the slightest evidence that Browder was acting out of 'too much loyalty' to Moscow but, on the contrary, the 'old and experienced comrades' whose judgement Hobsbawm invokes will remember the general consternation and sense of outrage in all the older parties at the decision. While the Second World War was continuing, and so far as Britain was concerned, until the general election of July 1945, comment in this country was neither practicable nor desirable.

But by the April issue of the French Communist Party's theoretical organ, Jacques Duclos had already strongly condemned Browder's proposal, giving full publicity to the attack on it by William Z Foster, and to subsequent discussion. Moreover Duclos recorded that 'the communist parties of most countries have not approved Browder's position', and made quite plain

# :Letters:

that he was sure the French Communist Party would not do so either. Were they, too, acting on 'instructions from Moscow'?

In fact, Duclos' article met with worldwide approval among communists (except for a few in Latin America). It was reprinted in the August 1945 *Labour Monthly*. It is Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion that is 'absurd'. And it will not divert attention from the close similarity of Browder's revisions of Marxism to those commonly advanced in *Marxism Today*.

Andrew Rothstein, London

## MT's LOST MILLIONS

I was fascinated to read the May Day greetings of many trade union organisations in your May issue.

The Bakers' union sent greetings to 'all fellow trade unionists', the NGA greeted 'all in the trade union and labour movement', the NUR sent its May Day best wishes to 'workers everywhere', and the Fire Brigades Union extended 'fraternal May Day greetings to all workers involved in struggle'.

Could somebody explain that socialism is not about being in work and maybe mention that there are well over 4 million of us who are unemployed . . . and struggling bloody hard!

PS I don't think much of your contributors' gender balance... 15 men and 2 women?

Carole Harwood, Cardiff

## MAOIST TWIRL

It is a pity Megnad Desai (*MT* April) prefers to twirl his Maoist prayer wheel rather than engage in serious argument.

The statistics he produces to illustrate social and economic oppression in India tells us nothing we do not already know. In any case, I had referred to India (*MT* February) as a transitional society in which some form of barbarism was always lurking beneath the surface. What Megnad Desai should try answering is why despite the violence, exploitation and glaring inequalities in India has the Indian state proved so durable and, indeed, grown so powerful? Why has a country, once described as a mere tool of Anglo-American imperialism run by a class of comprador capitalists by BT Ranadive of the CPI, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung between 1948-50, have such close and wide ranging links with Moscow and take such a cool line with Washington today?

Mr Desai might also care to ponder how India with a low economic and cultural base came to adopt an advanced political superstructure of a type many West European nations, who had long completed their

industrial revolutions only accepted after the Second World War. Apocalyptic utterances on India coupled with ritualistic demonstrations of righteous indignation at the ills which afflict Indian society are no substitutes for a radical re-examination of orthodox Marxist tenets. Mr Desai unwittingly reminds us that conservatism comes in various shapes and guises.

Prem Addy, London

## DISREGARDING GENDER

Rate capping and abolition are important concerns for women though overall, the assumptions and strategy of the male-led opposition have provided little scope for them.

The interview with David Blunkett (*MT* March) confirms this. His strategy addresses women solely in order to broaden and generalise the problems faced by the working class. Our interests are identified with those of the whole community; their specificity is wholly disregarded.

Since the early Chartist period, women have struggled to make sure that our specific demands and activities are not eclipsed by the 'real' struggle - that of the class. How disappointing it is to find that the searching questions that socialist feminists have posed for the last ten years have had little or no effect on our great labour movement leaders.

By now Mr Blunkett should have learned that men and women are separate from each other even within the same class precisely because they experience the world differently. Whilst no-one would argue that women's interests are separable from those of the whole community they are in a fundamental sense *different*. Women are more reliant on public services both as employees and consumers. Because of the nature and structure of our oppression both in the home and society at large, our relationship to local state services is ambiguous and contradictory. An understanding of this would transform the practices and policies of local councils which often embody and institutionalise our oppression. Even more importantly it would extend the appeal of socialism, making it more meaningful to women who are after all half the population.

Loretta Loach, London

## INTELLECTUAL BRITS

Your May issue selected a 'range' of people to describe the significance of VE Day for them.

Presumably *Marxism Today* has at least a token commitment to internationalism. It is surprising that you seemed to assume that a few British intellectuals could offer a 'range' of

views. No other West European views were sought - let alone East European and Third World perspectives.

There is not much political insight to be gained from such a narrow and inconsequential piece.

Monika Bobmska, Mark Bobinski,  
Barbara Norden, London

## LOST CAUSE

As a keen supporter of the 'new look' *Marxism Today* - and its general revolt against dogma by rote - surely it does not follow from this policy that you should copy the other media, and deal selectively

I refer to the VE Day pieces (*MT* April). In the wide range of viewpoints it seems to me incredible that you left out - or failed to seek - any references to the relation of economic systems to wars, and in particular, the two holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the nature of our 'democratic' responsibility for these.

The fact that we now await the third holocaust must surely mean - for any new radical Left - that to understand the processes which are now leading us into the next war is the fundamental political issue in the world today. Why then does *Marxism Today* leave it out?

Ted Davies, London

## THE NEXT STEP

James Hinton's argument (*MT* April) for a new electoral strategy seems to boil down to this:

1. Voters in 1983 perceived the issue of nuclear disarmament as a choice between 'defence' and 'no defence'.
2. Most people believe Britain needs to be defended.
3. Therefore, electoral success requires an alternative defence proposal, credible to the electors.

There are some problems with what he proposes, it seems to me.

a) If it is true that appeals to 'high-minded self sacrifice' have achieved all they are likely to, this is neither to be welcomed, nor relegated to the margins of debate. Ultimately, un-

ilateral nuclear disarmament, in whatever circumstances, entails a willingness to be unable to respond in kind to a nuclear attack.

b) Will not the inclusion of the cancellation of Cruise and Trident attract exactly the same perceptions in the minds of the electorate as hitherto, namely the 'defencelessness' accusation? Unilateral moves would still be part and parcel of the Defence Charter.

c) There is increasing interest in non-nuclear weaponry - from none other than General Rogers, for example. The risk, therefore, is the re-escalation of the conventional

without any significant de-escalation of the nuclear systems.

d) Getting rid of nuclear weapons is not just an end in itself. It is intimately connected, for many people, with a redirecting of the creative energies of modern technology, both for national and international

In spite of these reservations, I applaud James Hinton's attempts to find the next step for the peace movement. Clearly, some such major initiative is needed. Just Defence and the Alternative Defence Commission could perhaps provide the platform for this.

Paul McGowan, Coventry

**We welcome your letters for the July issue. They should be no longer than 250 words and arrive at the office not later than June 3. The editor reserves the right to cut.**

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Natalie Hadjifotiou works for a local authority women's unit and is on the Communist Party's women's advisory committee.

Paul Fox is a journalist who specialises in the US.

Philip Bassett is labour correspondent of the *Financial Times*.

Goran Therborn is this year attached to the Department of Social Administration at Manchester University and is the author of *Why Some Peoples are More Unemployed Than Others* (forthcoming).

Simon Frith lectures in sociology at Warwick University and is the *Sunday Times* rock critic.

Petra Kelly is one of the leading figures in the West German Green party.

Rob Burns is a lecturer in German at Warwick University and member of the CP.

Andrew Gamble is the author of *Britain in Decline*.

Marge Berer works for the Women's Reproductive Rights Information Centre (for further details, contact (01)251 6332).

Graham McCann is a research student at Kings College, Cambridge.

Bob Dent is a freelance journalist and researcher specialising in Eastern Europe.

Finetime Fontayne is an actor.

Rosalind Brunt lectures in communication and women's studies at Sheffield Polytechnic.

Meghnad Desai teaches Economics at the London School of Economics.

Jude Bloomfield is researching on Gramscian Italian fascism and is a member of the CP.

John Kelly lectures in industrial relations at the London School of Economics and is a member of the CP.

David Graham is executive producer and director of the Diverse Productions Group.

Stuart Hood is an author and broadcaster.

Paddy Ashdown is a Liberal MP.