The Transitional Programme, its relevance and application for today

By John Barry 2014

Afghanistan: Marxist Method vs. Bureaucratic Method
By Gerry Downing 1997

Trotsky’s Transitional Programme is the method which was employed by the pioneers of scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, in the Communist Manifesto and was used successfully by the Bolsheviks to become the method of the first four congresses of the Third International. But its Stalinist degeneration saw it regressing to the old minimum (day to day achievable reforms) and maximum (some vision of organization in an unspecified socialist future) demands of the Second International expressed in reformism and sectarianism, just as social democracy had done decades previously.
Where We Stand

1. WE STAND WITH KARL MARX: ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves. The struggle for the emancipation of the working class means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies but for equal rights and duties and the abolition of all class rule’ (The International Workingmen’s Association 1864, General Rules).

2. The capitalist state consists, in the last analysis, of ruling-class laws within a judicial system and detention centres overseen by the armed bodies of police/army who are under the direction and are controlled in acts of defence of capitalist property rights against the interests of the majority of civil society. The working class must overthrow the capitalist state and replace it with a workers’ state based on democratic soviets/workers’ councils to suppress the inevitable counter-revolution of private capitalist profit against planned production for the satisfaction of socialised human need.

3. We recognise the necessity for revolutionaries to carry out serious ideological and political struggle as direct participants in the trade unions (always) and in the mass reformist social democratic bourgeois workers’ parties despite their pro-capitalist leaderships when conditions are favourable. Because we see the trade union bureaucracy and their allies in the Labour party leadership as the most fundamental obstacle to the struggle for power of the working class, outside of the state forces and their direct agencies themselves, we must fight and defeat and replace them with a revolutionary leadership by mobilising the base against the pro-capitalist bureaucratic misleaders to open the way forward for the struggle for workers’ power.

4. We are fully in support of all mass mobilisations against the onslaught of this reactionary Con-Lib Dem coalition. However, whilst participating in this struggle we will oppose all policies which subordinate the working class to the political agenda of the petty-bourgeois reformist leaders of the Labour party and trade unions.

5. We oppose all immigration controls. International finance capital roams the planet in search of profit and imperialist governments disrupts the lives of workers and cause the collapse of whole nations with their direct intervention in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan and their proxy wars in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc. Workers have the right to sell their labour internationally wherever they get the best price. Only union membership and pay rates can counter employers who seek to exploit immigrant workers as cheap labour to undermine the gains of past struggles.

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Introduction

The transitional programme is the method which was employed by the pioneers of scientific socialism Marx and Engels in the ‘Communist Manifesto’ and was used successfully by the Bolsheviks to become the method of the first four congresses of the Third International (AKA the Communist International). After the Third International suffered bureaucratic degeneration it abandoned the transitional program and regressed to the old minimum (day to day achievable reforms) and maximum (some vision of organization in an unspecified socialist future) demands of the Second International (AKA the Socialist International) expressed in reformism and sectarianism, just as social democracy had done decades previously.

The responsibility of building the revolutionary socialist consciousness rested upon the shoulders of the Left Opposition of the communist movement after this degeneration, and then later the Fourth International founded in 1938 when it was clear the Third was beyond salvation.

The transitional programme is the only method which can build a socialist consciousness in the working class and create a bridge, as Trotsky described it between the current consciousness of the majority of workers and the final conclusion of the class struggle, that a socialist revolution is necessary to save humanity from capitalism. It is of paramount importance for a revolutionary party to have a correct method to build a revolutionary socialist consciousness in the working class, otherwise there will be no overthrow of capitalism and the transformation to socialism.

Crisis does not result automatically to revolution. Imperialism (highest form of monopolistic capital) reached a most destructive phase in the 1930s and developed into the most murderous and bloody world slaughter which ended in the industrial extermination of an entire people and mass murder through the use of atomic weapons. Yet despite the huge desire among the masses in Europe and Asia for socialism, their misleaders helped prop up imperialism and throw consciousness backwards with a massive anti-communist propaganda onslaught.

Trotsky was clear that if capitalism survived the Second World War it would see a new lease of life for world imperialism and would eventually lead to the Third World War.[1] Today US imperialism dominates the planet, it has no equal and is entering its most predatory and destructive phase, as happened with German imperialism in the 1930s. The US has in its sights the semi-oppressed nations of Russia, China, Iran, Syria and North Korea.

The next world war could quickly escalate into a thermo-nuclear conflict and destroy humanity. Therefore the need for socialist revolution is paramount. The importance of developing transitional demands is precisely because the working class as a product of bourgeois society has a false consciousness when compared with the objective situation. Kautsky when he was the main theoretician
of Marxism in the second international and Lenin following him explained that a socialist consciousness comes to workers from without, that is to say it is introduced and taught to workers from the intelligentsia, bourgeois intellectuals from outside the working class.

These intellectuals such as Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky develop theory. The vanguard workers then learn, and develop as worker intellectuals and train other vanguard workers. Trotsky explained how revolutionaries are distinct to others in the workers movement.

In the final analysis, revolutionaries are made of the same social stuff as other people. But they must have had certain very different personal qualities to enable the historical process to separate them from the rest into a distinct group. Association with one another, theoretical work, the struggle under a definite banner, collective discipline, the hardening under the fire of danger, these things gradually shape the revolutionary type.

Whole sections of the class however lag in consciousness in comparison to the objective conditions and hence the necessity for a transitional programme. We must however be patient explaining and helping to develop the consciousness of the workers to connect with the objective conditions. In no way should this mean however that we should appeal to the lowest common denominator of workers consciousness, tail ending populist petty bourgeois public opinion and jumping on the latest political bandwagon. Trotsky explained:

“The mentality in general is backward or delayed, in relation to the economic development….This delay can be short or long. In normal times when the development is slow, in a long line, this delay cannot produce catastrophic results. To a great extent this delay signifies that the workers are not equal to the tasks put before them by objective conditions; but in times of crisis this delay may be catastrophic.”

There is common misconception of the transitional programme by left sects which operate in an opportunist fashion. Typically left organisations with no link to the labour movement move toward opportunism to increase their membership and influence, such as the Socialist Party of England and Wales (SPEW). In their hands the Transitional Programme is presented as a list of left reformist policies (relatively unchanged for the past 50 years originating when they were the Militant Tendency) which is also the program of the latest electoral reformist vehicle they are using to gain influence, such as No2EU or TUSC, creating illusions in new reformist fronts rather than challenging and breaking workers from the reformists they look toward for leadership. Then after the reformist demands they present description of how the world should be run under socialism, in other words a maximum programme. So the SPEW is back to the Second Internationals Minimum-Maximum programme! Let us look for example at their statement of ‘What we stand for’.

The introductory paragraph is very vague for a self-professed revolutionary organization:

The Socialist Party fights for socialism – a democratic society run for the needs of all and not the profits of a few. We also oppose every cut, fighting in our day-to-day campaigning for every possible improvement for working class people.

The brief description does not say who the democracy in this ‘democratic society’ is in the
interests of, a workers democracy or bourgeois democracy? The statement goes on to say:

The organised working class has the potential power to stop the cuts and transform society.[6]

This gives no indication of what sort of organization the working class requires (a revolutionary Leninist party, directed by Marxism of which Trotskyism is the continuation) or what type of organisations already exist and the working class are led by (trade unions, social democratic parties, Stalinist parties) or rather misled by. The cuts, and apparently this is all the working class has to fight under capitalism, have only the potential to be stopped! Then transform society (to what? How?). The working class if it is led by a revolutionary party can overthrow capitalism, never mind just stopping the current public sector cuts. We then come to what the SPEW would call transitional demands, a list composed by their leadership in advance we assume, aimed at no one it appears and not giving any direction or inspiration for the working class to organize to take over society and begin the transformation to socialism. Here is one of their demands: “No to privatisation and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Renationalise all privatised utilities and services, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need. [7]”

They are a bit late off the mark as privatization has taken place on a large scale for 30 years, and besides it transferred capitalist state direction over to stock ownership and direction, most of the economy was and banking was private capitalist ownership, they should not try to confuse state ownership in the past with socialism. Then the reformist call for renationalization, back to the ownership of the capitalist state? Just so as not to upset the bosses and big stock portfolio holders they are even going to compensate you by some means test! There are some demands which could be useful in campaigns but due to the poor reformist start of their ‘What we stand for’ would be taken for improvements of the current society and nothing more. It goes on:

- Tax the super-rich! For a socialist government to take into public ownership the top 150 companies and banks that dominate the British economy, and run them under democratic working-class control and management. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of proven need.

- A democratic socialist plan of production based on the interests of the overwhelming majority of people, and in a way that safeguards the environment [8]

So the same old call from Militant 50 years ago for taking over the top companies (only now its 150 not 200), running them under workers’ control and management, but they don’t indicate how, as if the ruling class will nationalise these companies anyway and grant workers the management of them. Even then it will be under capitalist state direction if it is just ‘renationalised’. The actual class nature of the state is never challenged in the statement. There will apparently be a ‘socialist government’ to do this.

Then thrown in at the end the ‘democratic socialist plan of production’ and all the other examples of a socialist system which is again vague, and an example of a finished maximum program without any bridge to it. They do not formulate demands to raise workers consciousness in stages of struggle. As the SPEW have abandoned work in the Labour Party and thus distanced itself from the working class with the exception of those in public sector unions, its demands are aimed at no one in particular. This obviously bore no results so now they aim their demands or rather tailor them to the demands of trade union bureaucrats, particularly in the public sector and even the repressive bodies of the state (Prison Officers Association, POA), but if, as in SPEW’s case, you’re not fighting to overthrow the cap-
italist state then why not support the employees who staff its repressive apparatus against the working class?

The Socialist Appeal group fares much better and does proclaim revolutionary intentions, they are also light years ahead in theory compared to SPEW. While this group professes to carry out entry work in the Labour Party they are actually standing on the side lines and refusing to get involved, their fingers still sore after being burnt in Kinnock’s witch hunt against the left in the 80s. They present a clear challenge to capitalism and for its replacement with socialism through class struggle, they also present demands which to start with are useful for raising class consciousness and explaining the action which workers should take to destroy the foundations of capitalist society. Unfortunately they then let themselves down by jumping straight into a Maximum style program of:

“A Socialist government to take over the “commanding heights” of the economy, the top 150 monopolies, banks and finance houses, which dominate our lives, without compensation and placed under democratic workers’ control and management. Establish broad committees of workers, students, pensioners, technicians and others to oversee the drawing up of a democratic socialist plan of production to answer the needs of society and protect our environment. We shall harness the wonders of modern science and technique, not to act as a burden as under capitalism, but instead to raise our living standards and oversee the abolition of class divisions.” [9]

Like the SPEW demands it places the emphasis on a ‘Socialist government’; does not France have a ‘Socialist government’? We assume, given Socialist Appeal’s focus on the Labour Party, that the Parliament with a Labour majority can form a Socialist government, not the working class. Similarly to the SPEW they say this government should ‘take over’ the top 150 monopolies and nothing else apparently. Then they usher in everything else which is included in a socialist society. Socialist Appeal have still not managed to throw off their reformist right centrist heritage, although they have done more so then SPEW. [10]

How should transitional demands be formulated?

The Transitional Programme is not therefore a list of reforms all at once aimed at nothing thought up by a small group running a sect, and is not policies handed down from an enlightened ‘Socialist’ government in response to left demands. It must be a fighting program, hitting the base and structure of capitalist society, directing workers to take control of the material world and destroy the capitalist state, they would then need a new program to guide them using the material they control and can then build socialism through the workers’ state, the transitional program ‘brings the reader only to the doorstep’ of socialism. [11] Hence the original ‘Transitional Programme’ was a draft for the period it was written in and not to be used as a Gospel as some sects do.

Class consciousness is not static and is not homogeneous in all sections of the working class at the same time. Only a minority will of course have a developed class consciousness of the Marxist understanding of human social relations. The majority of the working class
will develop a common set of interests to fight for and overcome, they will not develop a socialist consciousness or a higher class consciousness as the vanguard of the class does which is expressed in the revolutionary party. It is therefore necessary to develop a set of demands they can fight around and which present to them a resolution of the problems faced under capitalism. So despite the diversity in consciousness and the many other differences between workers which are fostered by capitalist ideologues, the demands if they resonate with a desire and confidence of the class to fight for them can help to unite the working class. Trotsky in a polemic against a French leftist intellectual illustrated how the moods of the masses are varied and can change and only revolutionary strategy can develop their struggle:

“Victory is not at all the ripe fruit of the proletariat’s “maturity”. Victory is a strategical task. It is necessary to utilize in order to mobilise the masses; taking as a starting point the given level of their “maturity” it is necessary to propel them forward, teach them to understand that the enemy is by no means omnipotent, that it is torn asunder with contradictions,”[12] The demands tackle the solutions to the objective circumstances with an embryo of socialist organization of society. The demands themselves while addressed as the solutions to the crisis of capitalism cannot be fully implemented through the capitalist state and therefore even if attempted partially can only finally be achieved through conquest of power by the working class. It encourages the working class to go further, even if the capitalists and the state are forced to give partial reform then further demands must be made especially as it becomes apparent that the capitalist state and the trade union and reformist labour leaders will not go further attacking the base of capitalism, a wall will be met.

That is how the bridge from today’s understanding by the working class and the revolutionary consciousness of tomorrow is built. As Trotsky described the program as ‘an instrument to vanquish and overcome the backwardness’. [13] Knowing when and which demands to use at a particular time is important for revolutionaries. We do not present a whole list of demands all at once and always the same for years on end (as the SPEW does), the demands can change depending on circumstance, the symptoms of capitalist crisis at a given time and level of struggle by the working class. However the demands must always be addressed as a solution to the objective conditions under capitalism, after all the understanding of the working class can alter quickly ‘under the blows of objective crisis’. [14]

One way is to put the demands into easily memorable and understood slogans, which Trotsky described as ‘the program of socialism but in a very popular and simple form’. [15] As we have said we must build on the demands the more success and penetration of the demands among the masses is achieved and their implementation until the point is reached where the working class understands and follows the revolutionary leadership to overthrow the capitalist state.

Slogans and Demands
When the original draft program was written in 1938 the situation in terms of symptomatic expressions of the capitalist crisis differ to that of today, some of course remain the same such as the threat of world war. We cannot therefore use the same slogans as were used then. Trotsky drew up a ‘Program of Action for France’ when he resided there. This is one of the best examples of transitional demands and included the following:

Forty-hour week, wage increases. Workers’ control will demonstrate that the level of productive forces permits the reduction of the working day. Wage increases at the expense of the magnates
of the Comite des Forges, of the Comite des Houilleres, of the Finalys, the Schneiders and the Staviskys, and to the material and moral advantage of the labouring people.

Real social security and, first of all, unemployment insurance. Annual vacation of at least one month. Retirement pensions permitting one to live after fifty years of age.

Equal wages for equal work. Abolition of the super exploitation imposed on women, young people, aliens and colonials.

For working women, the same wages and same rights as for working men. Maternity protection with supplementary leaves of absence.

For young people, wages equal to adults. Extension of study and apprenticeship at the collective expense. Special hygienic measures.

Repeal of all special legislation applying to foreign and colonial workers. [16]

France was in the grips of the capitalist crisis at this time and sections of the capitalist ruling class had attempted a fascist coup, only social revolution could have bought these demands then. Instead there was world war and then the capitalist upturn as there had been in the late 19th century which meant social reforms could be introduced, but today we are in crisis once again and the gains are gone or being eroded in the imperialist countries.

Some of the basic demands are the same though. Observing current struggles is important to develop demands and slogans, as they must resonate with the masses. For example there are currently various movements based on occupations including among poorer sections of the working class such as the E15 Mothers which have taken on the problems created by capitalism which have impoverished them. Occupations have always been an important part of class struggle for workers under capitalism and is also in the original Transitional Programme concerning factory occupations.

Today we could raise the demand for the occupation of empty properties to be given to families who need them and become cooperatives with public funding, or something similar, the final demands must be reached through discussion. In the labour movement demands could find wide appeal on the left and be aimed at Labour leaders and especially Labour governments. This was the tactic of support for a Labour government which the Communist Party of Great Britain adopted during the early years of the third International before its degeneration. The CPGB placed the following demands on the Labour government:

- Full maintenance for unemployed workers at trade union rates.
- Nationalization of mines and railways with workers’ control over production.
- Full freedom for Ireland, India and Egypt.
- Revocation of the policy of armaments. Credit for Soviet Russia. Scrapping of the shameful treaty of Versailles.
- Workers of Great Britain, no government, even with the best intentions, will be able to better your positions, to break your chains, if you yourselves do not bring pressure to bear on the bourgeoisie and compel it to realize your growing power. [17]

In the present time demands for a return to union rights which have been eroded by Tory employment acts and taxing the rich to pay for public services would find wide support, and if the rich threaten to move their wealth abroad we should demand trade exchange controls and leading from that the demand for open and transparent accounting of all finance in the country and global trade and their wealth prevented from moving. The Labour leaders can no longer even promise to nationalize utilities, so even demanding this would run up against the capitalist state, however capitalist nationalization is not the answer, the demand should be the nationalization under committees of workers and con-
sumers control and management without capitalists.

If a demand such as this were to take on mass support in the labour movement and it became clear the leaders would betray it, which even under a left wing leadership would be the case for the reformists, and then the call for occupation of the utilities could be made. The same would be made for the banks, the demand could be made for the total appropriation of the banks and finance institutions by the state under workers’ control, in contrast to Brown’s buying of the banks with tax payers money like he did with RBS and Northern Rock to bailout the capitalists in 2008.

There is a wide desire for decent public services even among more backward workers, but also distrust of government and big business of which public services are also seen as part of or under the influence of. Therefore demands for public services without unrepresentative governments and big capitalists, would find a hearing among workers and this could develop into the understanding that we could run public services if we occupy them and make them ours. This is transcending the capitalist state and property relations.

When a revolutionary situation does develop and dual power becomes a prospect we must call on the working class and their organisations to take power from the capitalist state, as the Bolsheviks did in 1917, which exposed the political cowardice and impotence of the other parties who claimed to lead the working class such a the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. We would also expose the cowardice of the official labour and trade union leaders.

We must challenge the illusions in the capitalist state and the faith in bourgeois democracy especially by reformist workers, we must explain and expose how undemocratic it has become, which most workers know to a degree already. We could appeal to the memory of the Chartists and call for reforms that capitalism could never concede. Trotsky did this in the ‘Programme of Action for France’, in which he appealed to reformist socialists to be faithful to ‘the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic but of the Convention of 1793’[18] and called for ‘A single assembly’ to ‘combine the legislative and executive powers.’ [19]

A similar demand could be made for Britain today, with abolition of the Lords and Monarchy and election of Prime Minister and cabinet by the chamber. We could add that MPs earn the average of their constituents, how many right wing Labour MPs would there be then? Also the defence of Human Rights which are currently being eroded will find wide understanding. The improvement and protection of unemployment, housing and disability benefits is also an important demand and links to the question of who controls the wealth, and how it should be spent to pick up the devastating effects of capitalism.

**Internationalism: Challenging the social chauvinists**

Socialism cannot be created in one country, it must be international; the struggle of workers against capitalism is worldwide. The defeat of world imperialism of the USA and the NATO block is of major importance. Therefore we must always agitate for solidarity with workers in struggle in other nations and national liberation struggles.

As we are close again to world war we must warn the masses of the danger and demand the dismantling of NATO and the other military alliances protecting the interests of the US dollar. In Britain the call for nuclear disarmament can also be linked to how public money is spent and how it can be put to socially useful projects if workers could have control of public finance. As can a call to
withdraw all troops from foreign occupation, including Ireland and linked to this the freeing of all Irish political prisoners and prisoners. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq met with mass opposition. If such a situation were to develop into a revolutionary crisis then we would begin calling for trade union rights for the ranks of the army we could raise the demand for the election of officers but only when the soldiers are mutinous during a revolutionary crisis, not in peacetime.

Conclusion
The transitional programme is not and cannot be set in stone and used as a Gospel of some kind. It must be developed through as wide a discussion as possible, taking into account the struggles of the day and consider and the objective situation and how it develops. Demands stemming from these struggles can gain an immediate understanding among workers. They must be developed in the course of struggle, building from one to another. The demands must however be a solution to capitalist crisis which must in the final analysis pose to the working class that it can only be solved by the action of the class taking power and transcending capitalist property relations. The programme can then be a bridge from the struggle today to the socialist revolution of tomorrow.

Notes
[5] This introduction to ‘What we stand for’ appears on the back of every edition of ‘The Socialist’, newspaper of the SPEW.
[6] ibid
[7] ibid
[8] ibid
[10] For more about the history of SPEW and Socialist Appeal see In Defence of Trotskyism No. 8, The CWI and IMT: Right Centrist Heirs of Ted Grant, published by Socialist Fight Group 2014
[14] Ibid, p44
[19] Ibid.
We have reposted this piece to shown that there is a Marxist revolutionary approach to religion and women’s oppression and that the early Soviet government of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks attempted this in a serious way. This stands in contrast to the Menshevik methods when they were in power in southern republics like Georgia during the Civil War and in stark contrast to the brutally ignorant policies of Stalin and the bureaucracy after they triumphed in 1924. This is the method of Lenin as recounted by Dale Ross (D. L. Reissner), the first editor of the Spartacist League’s ‘Women and Revolution’:

‘The Bolsheviks viewed the extreme oppression of women as an indicator of the primitive level of the whole society, but their approach was based on materialism, not moralism. They understood that the fact that women were veiled and caged, bought and sold, was but the surface of the problem. Kalym was not some sinister plot against woman-kind, but the institution which was central to the organisation of production, integrally connected to land and water rights. Payment of Kalym, often by the whole clan over a long period of time, committed those involved to an elaborate system of debt, duties and loyalties which ultimately led to participation in the private armies of the local beys (landowners and wholesale merchants). All commitments were thus backed up with the threat of feuds and blood vengeance.

‘… Lenin warned against prematurely confronting respected native institutions, even when these clearly violated communist principles and Soviet law. Instead he proposed to use the Soviet state power to systematically undermine them while simultaneously demonstrating the superiority of Soviet institutions, a policy which had worked well against the powerful Russian Orthodox Church.

SF April 2015
ing coup, the ‘Glorious Saur (April) Revolution. The PDPA was divided between the Khalq and the Parcham factions. In sociological terms the Khalq faction of Noor Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin was differentiated from the Parcham faction of Babrak Karmal and Najibullah by background (urban and rural) and by class origin (lower middle/work class and upper middle) and by tribal origin Pushtun vs. others (Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, etc.) However the role of racism in containing the working class meant that the most oppressed worker from the Hazara tribe were more opposed to the Khalq than to the Parcham, as described below. The Khalq was itself divided between the followers of Taraki and Amin. Amin had his power base in the Soviet influenced army and played the major part in the coup of April 1978. The Khalq represented the aspirations of the urban state employees and lower middle classes around Kabul and Kandahar, swollen since 1954 by Soviet aid. They therefore had a working class base, but one which was dependant on the state for its wages. The Kremlin, of course, favoured the upper middle class who were the most conservative, the most compromising and bureaucratic. They had the least to gain and the most to lose if modernisation should really proceed to revolution. On the other hand the Khalq had much to gain in social advancement from modernisation and were therefore more radical though they also were totally opposed to revolutionary methods and sought only the same bureaucratic ‘revolution’ from above and without.

Karmal had made his name by demagogic parliamentary speeches supporting the previous monarchical and then pseudo-republican regimes. The Saur coup and the Russian invasion enabled him to pass himself off as some type of a genuine communist for a period. Many left groups believed PDPA propaganda about the participation of the masses in the ‘revolution’ after the coup. It was the revolution ‘most conspicuously from above’ of any of the so-called revolutions in the third world. 1 The ‘revolution’ was basically the endeavours of the petit-bourgeois Khalq faction to continue to modernise the Afghanistan state. They stood in the long tradition of modernisers, dating back to Shah Zambian in the 18th century, Lenin’s contemporary King Amanullah Khan, with whom he signed the first Soviet/Afghanistan friendship treaty in the early 1920s, and Sardar Daud Khan, who fell to the 1978 coup.

Daud feared modernisation was going too far and wanted to halt the process. He had begun to court reaction and was looking to the US allies in Iran and Pakistan. The immediate impulse for the coup was the clear indications that he was about to liquidate the representatives of the urban petit-bourgeoisie, the

Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai, in her younger days she understood and fought against the oppression of women better than Lenin and Trotsky
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PDPA, in April 1978. Two of its central leaders were in prison, the rest were waiting to be picked up and executions could not have been far away.

It was, in fact, a coup by a section of the armed forces that were influenced by the petit bourgeois radicals of the PDPA. The character of the PDPA was determined by the large amount of Soviet aid and personnel training, advisors, etc. At last the modernising, radical petit bourgeoisie had the social base provided by Soviet aid to carry out one of the regular coups that marked the governance of Afghanistan. Of course we should have critically supported it as a movement against semi-feudal reaction which was backed by imperialism.

Both sections of the PDPA supported the same programme, a not-quite standard Stalinist text that distinguished itself by developing a three-stage rather than the standard two-stage theory of revolution.

In analysing the nature of the April 1978 military coup the ICL are broadly correct against the CPGB. If we are to call it a revolution then we are stretching the concept to cover a revolution without popular participation. The 15,000 strong demonstration following the state assassination of Parcham leader Mir Akbar Khyber does not constitute a revolution, though it did indicate a strong base of support for the PDPA.

The international situation

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on 27 December 1979 was the defensive reflex of a Soviet bureaucracy that was entering a crucial phase of its decline. In order to appreciate the context it is necessary to set the 1978 coup by the PDPA in its international context. The following quote from Afghanistan Politics, Economics and Society by Bhabani Sen Gupta does this:

“The political ambience of 1978 was very different from that of the late sixties or early seventies. Nasserism had died with Nasser. The emergence of oil power radically altered power alignments in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. The Soviet Union had suffered a severe setback in Egypt. Sadat had signed a peace treaty with Israel. The conservative forces – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran – backed by the United States, dominated the politics of the Middle East and the Gulf region. The Shah of Iran was using oil money and newly acquired military power to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in the Gulf area, as well as South Asia.

The Shah wanted the two regions to be less polarised between the United States and the Soviet Union, and Afghanistan, with its surplus of Soviet influence, was one of the targets of his foreign policy. ‘The political influence of the Soviet Union had diminished in the Gulf and the Middle East – and even in India to some extent, following the installation of the Janata party government in Delhi, with its declared commitment to ‘genuine non-alignment’. At the same time the Soviet Union had emerged unmistakable as a global military power capable of intervening, and willing to intervene, in national liberation struggles on behalf of its friends and allies.

Soviet military help had proved a decisive factor in the Vietnam War … Cuban troops, airlifted in Soviet transport planes with heavy war equipment, determined the fate of the revolutions in Angola and Mozambique… Whatever the state of Soviet political fortunes in specific third world regions at specific periods of time, the fact that the Soviet Union was capable of intervening with arms on behalf of revolutionary movements and had the will to intervene, given a decisively favourable balance of forces, undoubtedly made a vital difference to Third World conflicts after 1975. From the 1970s onwards, most successful Marxist-led national libera-
tion movements owed their victories to Soviet military assistance. ‘2

The working class in Afghanistan

The size of the working class in Afghanistan is disputed. The industrial workers numbered just some 20,000 in 1965 and had risen to just 40,000 out of a population of 15 – 17 million by 1978 according to figures from Afghanistan Politics, Economics and Society’ by Bhani Sen Gupta. These figures seem to be underestimating its size by a factor of ten. This would make political sense as Bhani Sen Gupta writes his account from a Stalinist perspective and would therefore wish to prove that no appreciable working class existed. This would then implicitly justify the Soviet invasion as socialist revolution was supposedly impossible and only the ‘Red Army’ could provide the forces to defeat reaction. His figures are contradicted by the US SWP, who give a figure of 300,000 out of a population of 20,000,000 in their 1980 pamphlet, The Truth About Afghanistan by Doug Jenness. But Jenness seems to be taking a narrow definition of working class as simply industrial workers. The total working class had to be much bigger than this because of the relatively large state sector arising from Soviet aid programmes.

Valentine M. Moghadam quotes statistics which give a figure of 593,970 in industry by 1975. 3 He quotes the International Labour Organisation Yearbook of Labour Statistics which gives a total workforce of 1,576,110 (calculated from statistics supplied) for commercial activities outside Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing for 1979. 4 Clearly then the total working class was in the region of two million by the late 1970s and certainly a major social constituent of the population. The industrial and poorer workers are mainly Hazaras, ethnic Mongols who are descendants of Genghis Khan’s army. Their home-
manner and offered no alternative to the PDPA.
Of several Maoist workers’ groups set up in the late 60s, only one, the Groh-i-Karagar, led by Ghulam Dastgir Panjsheri, joined the PDPA. Clearly that was quite a right-wing group. The main pro-Chinese communist party was the SAMA, founded by Dr Rahim Mahmoodi in 1946 and co-led by his brother Hadi and his nephew Rahman. The following quote gives a picture of the political influences on the class:

“The Mahmoodi brothers tried to organise them (the Hazaras) on a tribal and religious basis instead of raising their class consciousness. The Hazaras are still considered the main recruiting ground by pro-Peking communists who, after 1980, launched an armed struggle against Karmal in the Hazarajat region. Consequently there is much weight in the claim that it was the pro-Peking communists who were responsible for most of the industrial strikes in Kabul back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is borne out by the fact that Dr Rahim Mahmoodi and Dr Hadi Mahmoodi were arrested in 1969 for their role in a strike that hit the largest state factory in Janglak.”

Babrak Karmal was very much part of the elite reformist establishment before the Saur Revolution. As Anwar points out:

‘… only three PDPA leaders were in jail for varying terms during Zahir Shah’s rule. In Daud’s second term Taraki and Karmal were in jail for only two days and Amin for one.’

However the pro-Chinese communists, because they led the working class and some very important strikes were treated far differently:

‘In Daud’s second term (1973-1978) Shala-e-Jared j (the newspaper of the SAMA) supporters were singled out for punishment. He hanged Dr Rahim Mahmoodi and a number of his pro-Peking followers. A pro-Chinese communist Majid Kalkani… initiated an armed struggle against Daud’s regime, which continued during the years in power of Taraki, Amin and Karmal. In 1980 he was arrested and executed by firing squad along with some pro-Amin Khalqis, the men whom he fought for nearly two years. Both the Tajik Maoists and pro-Peking communists, it is said, shouted ‘Long live Marxism-Leninism’ before being put against the wall and shot.’

It is clear from this quote that Majid Kalkani was driven by oppression and political confusion to abandon the working class and launch a peasant guerrilla war in the Maoist tradition. However some pro-Chinese communists remained with the working class at least until the savage repression of the Hazaras on 23 June 1979. It was therefore the working class, and its political potential, that Zahir Shah and Daud feared the most. Both wings of the PDPA maintained this class hostility, though they masked it in their propaganda for international audiences by left-sounding demagogy.

The Hazaras are still persecuted in Afghanistan and Pakistan, they are regarded as traitors, their Chinese features tell their origins in the remnants of Ghengis Khan’s armies and they are the poorest of workers so often embrace Maoism as a liberating ideology.

Hostile to the working class

The ‘Glorious Saur Revolution’ was indeed hostile to the working class:

‘The revolution had changed nothing in the relationship of employer and employee, either in the public or the private sector. That this relationship was unequal seemed almost a law of nature, an indisputable fact of life to so many working people in Kabul, happy to have a job at all, regardless of wage or working condition. Arbitrary and instant dismissals without back wages were common enough for lowly employees in either sector,
as I found out from groups of Hazaras working in the capital. Since Hazaras perform the lowest, most menial tasks – being doubly disadvantaged as Shi’a Muslims and a Mongol race – I fully expected workers of this discriminated group to favour the Taraki regime, with its reforms and its stated rights for national minorities. Yet Hazaras scoffed at the idea that benefits would flow to them from reforms.

‘Whether working in hotels or state offices (in private or state jobs) their relationship with Tajiks and Pushtuns had not altered at all since the Saur revolution …. ‘Young Hazaras in school even in the capital still faced prejudice if they tried to continue beyond elementary school. It is hardly surprising, given this background, that many Hazaras who were literate and had a modicum of education rejected the Khalqi state and all it seemed to offer the underprivileged classes.

‘Instead, many were attracted by the ideas behind the Islamic revolution in Iran, reading many Iranian books and tracts by Dr Ali Shariati, the eminent Iranian philosopher, who provided a reconstruction of Shi’a Islam revitalised by Marxism and existentialism, before dying in 1975 an exile in London. 8 The confusion in Iran that was so apparent to all serious Trotskyists who sought to find the road to the masses via the transitional method existed also in Afghanistan. In Iran all was still to play for while revolutionary Marxist ideas, and literature, met a huge response and conflicted with Islamic reactionary ideas. It was the task of revolutionaries to distinguish between, and separate, the religion of the oppressor from the religion of the oppressed by proving the worth of revolutionary Marxist leadership in practice. Only a small group of Trotskyists within the USFI, the HKS, who broke from the official USFI section, the HKE, seriously attempted this.

Of course the ICL’s line of ‘Down with the Shah, down with the Mullahs’ could not make the vital connection with the masses to begin the task of differentiation between revolution and reaction.

The Red Mullahs

In Iran there were many Dr Ali Shariatis. They were the political descendants of the ‘Red Mullahs’ of the 1920s, who sought to prove that socialism and Islam were essentially the same. They reflected the class struggles fought out within the working class in the Iranian Shoras in particular between early 1979 and the early 80s. They were the conduits who corrupted and distorted Marxism, particularly on the issue of women’s oppression, with the able assistance of the Tudeh Party and some of the fake Trotskyists. But the fact that they felt obliged to adopt this role spoke of the potential of revolutionary Marxism in the midst of what was perhaps the greatest mass movement of the working class and oppressed the world has ever seen. But the PDPA hated and despised the Hazara working class and only wanted ‘revolution from above and without,’ i.e. for themselves, the middle classes. Even towards some of the poor and middle ranking workers who were from the Pushtun and Tajik tribes, there was no attempt at any socialist measure or even simply making capitalism a little more just: ‘Another existing grievance in the lower and middle ranks of the administration was the failure of the Khalqi state to redeem the promises made soon after the Saur revolution. to level out the sharp differences in salaries between the various grades of civil servants. There was still a difference of 43 times between the highest and lowest salaries, which descended in nine grades from 70,000 to 1,600 afs per month.’ 9 Nepotism was powerful within the Khalqi regime. Taraki and Amin handed out lucra-
tive posts to many close relatives who were totally unqualified for these. Schoolteachers, the main professional group to support the PDPA, found themselves at the head of all types of state enterprises when the adherents of the old regime were purged. They generally had little idea on how to fulfil the roles allocated to them by Taraki and Amin: ‘Hafizullah Amin relied greatly on his family, making his elder brother and a nephew two of the most powerful people in the country. His brother Abdul Amin was appointed president of the biggest textile group, the Afghanistan Textile Society; soon, as secret police director of Kabul, Samangan, Baghlan and Takhar, Abdul Amin became virtual viceroy of the four north-eastern provinces. Amin’s nephew, Asadullah Amin, reached even dizzier heights, from an early post as secretary of state in the Ministry of Health and President of the Afghanistan-Soviet Friendship Society, Asadullah replaced his uncle as Foreign Minister, in September taking over as secret police chief one of the key posts in Amin’s regime”.

10 Bureaucratic imposition was not an ‘error’ in Afghanistan but the basic Stalinist mode of existence since the 1930s. Excuses by the ICL and the US SWP about the backward nature of the country and the lack of a working class are simply cover-ups for this repression. Ironically both groups’ positions on Afghanistan were almost identical in their capitulation to Moscow. ICL leader James Robertson had split his followers from the SWP in the early 1960s on this very issue of abandoning the working class and capitulating to Stalinism (in Cuba).

The national question in Afghanistan

The coup only initially affected the urban centres and had little or no resonance in rural areas. These operated with a large degree of autonomy, controlled by local chiefs and Mullahs. The Mullahs had welded tribal customs to the needs of feudalism and were now adapting them to the needs of modern capitalist trading relations. The Mullahs ensured that everything reactionary from the past was maintained and that customs like tribal egalitarianism were marginalised. Over 80% of the population lived in these rural, oppressive conditions. Afghanistan is not a nation in any accepted sense of the word. It is a state with various tribes and nationalities ranging from Pushhtuns in the South to Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkomans, Hiratis, Aimaqs and Nooristanis in the North. The Pushhtuns constitute almost half the population, seven to eight million. Only the Pushhtuns describe themselves as Afghans. It is impossible to understand the politics of the PDPA, or the Taliban, who are based in the Pushhtuns, without understanding this.

However this does not mean that certain nation sentiments – e.g., opposition to a foreign invader, be it British from the last century or Russian from 1979, cannot emerge.
from time to time. The reactionary nationalism of the Mullahs swept the country after the 1979 invasion and collapsed into tribal warfare with the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the onslaught of the Taliban. The Pushtuns do constitute a nation that is divided by the Durand line, imposed by the British Empire, from the rest of the nation in the North West Frontier province of Pakistan. Independent Pushtunistan emerged as a political slogan at the time of Pakistani independence in 1947 but there was no real movement to achieve it. Ironically it may emerge again as a real possibility if the Taliban, funded mainly by Pakistan now, fail to re-unite the country. In that case they would be tempted to turn against their Pakistani allies in order to carve out a viable territory for themselves. The forging of a multi-nation state able to develop economically remains the task of the working class and the future socialist revolution.

Reaction begins to consolidate
Less than a year after the coup, in March 1979, there was an uprising against the regime in the western city of Herat, near the Iranian border. Of particular importance here is the class character of the uprising. Whilst it must have been led by the Islamic fundamentalists, the quote from Soviet Politburo member Kirilenko below points out that: ‘The insurrectionists have been joined by a large number of religious persons, Muslims and among them a large number of the common people.’ And he correctly warns that if Soviet troops go in: ‘In this way we will be forced to a considerable degree to wage war against the people.’ It was put down with great ferocity by Amin, with Russian pilots and tank drivers leading the massive bombardment of the city. About 5,000 lives were lost. Significantly all Russian technical advisers in the city were lynched in the uprising while other foreign nationals, including east European communists, were spared. This crucial incident greatly consolidated reaction. Already by this stage the imposition of ‘revolution from above and without’ was having disastrous consequences. There were big disagreements on Afghanistan within the Politburo. As shown by the quotes below, Kirilenko, Gromyko and Andropov (whom the SL honoured by naming a party ‘brigade’ after him), had a greater understanding of how to deal with reaction that their gung-ho mentors in the SL. Brezhnev was ailing and the operational decisions seem to have been taken in the main by Defence Minister Ustinov. It was on the basis of his apparent freedom to manoeuvre in this period that he was mentioned in the western press as the most likely successor to Brezhnev. This extract was supplied on the internet by Rolf Martens, a Swedish Marxist-Leninist, in response to my request. The italicised commentaries came with the quotes, the rest are my own. It has been slightly edited to improve the English. After the breaking up of the Soviet Union in 1991, many earlier confidential Soviet documents were made public, The source for that quoted below is the issue No 4 /1994 of the Swedish language magazine Afghanistan-Nytt organ of the Swedish Afghanistan Committee.

The minutes of the Politburo discussed the Herat uprising of March 1979, just a month after the Iranian Revolution. At the time, almost nine months before the Soviet invasion, considerable disturbances took place in this third-largest city of Afghanistan. On 17 March, the Soviet Politburo convened for a three day meeting. During the first two days, Brezhnev was not present. Gromyko: ‘The situation in Afghanistan has seriously deteriorated. The centre of disturb-
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ances is now the city of Herat… As is known from earlier telegrams, the 17th Afghan division is stationed there. It restored order but now seems in practice to have disintegrated. The artillery regiment and one infantry regiment that were part of that division have gone over to the side of the insurrectionists. According to Gromyko, the uprising was caused by thousands of agitators from Pakistan and Iran who, with US help, had caused chaos in Herat. Over 1,000 people had died in Herat, he reported. The situation had not been adequately met by the Afghan government, Gromyko held and he continued:

‘Typical of the situation is that at 11 o’clock this morning I had a conversation with Amin, who is foreign minister and the deputy of Taraki, and he expressed no anxiety whatsoever concerning the situation in Afghanistan but spoke with Olympic calm about the situation not being all that complicated (…) Amin even said that the situation in Afghanistan is normal. He said that not one single case of insubordination on the part of the Governors had been registered. (…) ‘Within about half an hour we got another message, which said that our comrades, the military Chief Adviser comrade Gorelov and the Charge d’Affaires comrade Alekseyev had invited comrade Taraki to visit them (…) As far as military assistance was I concerned, Taraki said in passing that perhaps help will be needed both on the ground and in the air. This must be understood to mean that we are requested to send ground forces as well as aircraft. I hold that we must proceed from this most important consideration when helping Afghanistan; under no circumstances must we lose that country.’

Several other speakers expressed their distrust of the Afghan government and its heavy-handed purges of rival Communist factions. Even at that time various proposals for armed intervention and even for a complete invasion were put forward within the Politburo. Defence minister Ustinov briefly reported:

‘Tomorrow, 18 March, operative groups will be sent to Herat’s airfield.’ He thus indicated that he was taking the operational decisions whatever the Politburo decided. He at the same time presented two possible lines of action. In the one case, smaller forces would be sent. In the other, the Soviet Union would dispatch two divisions, or about 36,000 men. The proposals were met with some objections.

Kirilenko: ‘The question arises, against whom will our Army wage war if we send them there? Against the insurrectionists, but the insurrectionists have been joined by a large number of religious persons, Muslims and among them a large number of the common people. In this way we will be forced to a considerable degree to wage war against the people.’ The following day, Kosygin reported on his telephone conversation with Taraki. The anti-aircraft battalion in Herat had also gone over to the enemy. ‘If the Soviet Union does not help us now,’ Taraki had said ‘we will not be able to stay in power.’ This was understood by both Kosygin and Ustinov as a request for direct military assistance. But
still individual Politburo members raised serious objections to an invasion.

**We know Lenin’s teachings**

Andropov: ‘We know Lenin’s teachings about the revolutionary situation. Might there be one in Afghanistan now? Obviously not. We can only help the revolution in Afghanistan by means of our bayonets, and this is absolutely impermissible for us. We cannot take such a risk?

Gromyko: ‘I wholly support comrade Andropov on our having to exclude such a measure as sending troops into Afghanistan. The Army is not reliable there. In this case our Army, if we send it into Afghanistan, will be an aggressor. (…) We must consider the fact that neither can we justify juridical the sending in of troops. (…) Afghanistan is not subjected to any (outside) aggression. (…) Furthermore it must be pointed out that the Afghans themselves have not officially made a request to us concerning the sending of troops’

The discussions went back and forth and a decision seems to have been reached only on the third day of the Politburo session, when Brezhnev was present and unequivocally made clear that sending in Soviet troops could not be the right thing to do at this moment. The session was ended by a decision immediately to call Taraki to Moscow. This meeting did take place on the following day, 20 March. In a rather patriarchal tone, Brezhnev educated his colleague and warned him on his purges. ‘Repression’ Brezhnev said ‘is a sharp weapon which must be used very, very sparing’.

As the same time, Brezhnev repudiated the idea of dispatching Soviet troops: ‘I am saying it quite plainly: This is not necessary. It would only play into the enemy’s hand.’

However it is clear from the account in the next commentary and from Antony Hyman’s book, Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, that Soviet air force pilots and tank crews, directed by Ustinov, were very much in action in Herat, whatever Brezhnev had decreed.

During Taraki’s continued consultations with Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov and Ponomarev, Ustinov was able to promise Soviet shipment of 12 Mi-24-type helicopters. Citing the unreliability of those Afghan helicopter pilots who had been trained in the Soviet Union ('Muslim brothers' or pro-Chinese Q, Taraki asked for the assistance of pilots and also tank crews from Cuba, Vietnam or other socialist countries. This proposal was bluntly turned down by Kosygin: ‘I cannot understand why this question arises…The question of sending people who would climb into your tanks and shoot on your people. This is a very serious political question.’

After their meeting with Taraki, Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov and Ponomarev worked out a proposal for a decision by the Politburo, in which the Afghan leadership were criticised for their suggestion of introducing Soviet troops into the country. This line was an expression of 'lack of experience' and ‘…it has to be held back also in the case of new anti-government actions in Afghanistan.’

**The unfortunate area of Joda-I-Maiwand (see page 40 for more on this)**

The Hazaras were Shi’a co-religionists with the Heratis. In Kabul, on 23 June 1979, they began a procession of about 100 with green Islamic flags and followed by two buses full of armed fighters. The procession grew to several thousand before the army opened fire. The firing went on for four hours before they managed to disperse the crowd. The wounded were refused treatment in the Kabul Hospital and then the mass purges of the Hazaras began: ‘All this month, a massive round-up took place of suspected opponents.
of the Taraki regime. In the unfortunate area of Joda-I-Maiwand, troops filled lines of waiting trucks with the ‘flat noses’ i.e. the Mongol-race Hazaras, and sober observers among Kabul’s citizens speak of 3,000 at least of the Hazaras, picked casually off the street in the main, who disappeared into the mass graves of the regime … Among those killed in the purges of the intelligentsia were many socialists and personal friends of both Taraki and Amin and other prominent Khalqis – left wingers of undoubted progressive views… (Surely the pro-Chinese communists – GD)’

This massacre and the subsequent purges was the major counter-revolution against the working class. As in the Barcelona May Days of 1937 the Stalinists smashed the organisations of the working class and thus practically guaranteed the victory of reaction. The backward capitulation to nationalism and tribalism of the pro-Peking communists (though the racism of the PDPA explains why they won support in the working class) prevented any powerful impact by consistent Marxist ideas, and when the class arose in confused outrage at the promises of the Saur ‘revolution’ betrayed, they were cut to pieces by Amin’s troops.

The class, therefore, did and does exist and that strike wave of the late 1960s indicated the potential power of even a small working class in modern imperialist conditions. And it is the ideology of Marxism, based on the potential power and leading role of the class in revolution, which must guide a revolutionary leadership. No revolution has historically superseded the model of Russia 1917 despite all the attempts to substitute ‘red armies’ whether composed of peasant guerrillas or the direct armed forces of a Stalinist bureaucracy for it.

As the period since the Russian Revolution stretched into three generations the disparity between the lives of the workers in the Soviet Bloc and the West (and between East and West Germany in particular) became more apparent. Their class consciousness was driven to a historically low point by the late 1980s. The Soviet armed forces themselves became increasingly disaffected as the futility of the war in Afghanistan became clear to them.

The final turn of the screw

The heavy industries, another powerful pillar of the bureaucracy, were increasingly undercapitalised as Afghanistan and Regan’s Star Wars offensive obliged the bureaucracy to divert ever greater resources towards military expenditure. This whole crisis of undercapitalisation, a bludgeoning military budget and frustrated expectations of the toiling masses meant that the bureaucratic methods of defending nationalised property relations eventually ran out of steam. Afghanistan was the excuse that enabled US imperialism in particular to apply the final turn of the screw, but it merely hastened the inevitable end.

The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 altered the balance of forces in the area against imperialism (before the new rulers managed to stabilise and defeat the revolutionary strivings of the masses). If social revolution triumphed in Iran (and this aspiration in the masses was not dealt its decisive blow until the counter-revolution of the so-called ‘Revolutionary Guards’ in September 1980 at the start of the Iran-Iraq war) then political revolution threatened in the USSR. If Islamic fundamentalism triumphed then the Soviet Central Asian Republics, which had a majority of Muslims, could succumb to Islamic counter-revolution. In either case disaster threatened the bureaucrats. Therefore the invasion was prompted by a number of considerations:

1. The desire of the bureaucracy to have another front to attack the Iranian Revolution if it should develop into a social revolution,
thereby threatening political revolution in the USSR – counter-revolutionary motive.
2. Fear that Imperialism itself would supply sufficient arms and other support to the mujadiheen to overthrow the PDPA government and consolidate a pro-western regime.
3. Fear that if Islamic counter-revolution consolidated itself in Iran and spread into Afghanistan it would precipitate counter-revolution in the Soviet Central Asian Republics – defence of nationalised property relations as the source of their own privileges.
4. The ascendancy of the Red Army bureaucracy in the Kremlin due to the increased military spending in response to the US ‘Star Wars’ military build-up led to increased belief in military solutions to all problems.
5. Desperation at the increasingly critical internal economic problems in the USSR and hope that a military victory in Afghanistan would divert the attention of the masses.

To support or oppose the actual invasion?
To assist us in deciding whether to support or oppose the actual invasion we have to first establish the facts. Hafizullah Amin was the new president and plenipotentiary after September 1979, when he overthrew and murdered his rival, Noor Mohammed Takari and as many of his supporters as he could get his hands on. Takari was just about to do the same to him. He had invited in Soviet troops in large numbers to save the regime against the mujadiheen counter-revolution. Obviously under instructions from the Kremlin the troops took advantage of the invitation and proceeded to murder their host and practically his entire government. They then installed Babrak Karmal in power, a former leader of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, which faction Taraki and Amin had attempted and almost succeeded in liquidating in August and September 1978.12
Karmal had been sent into exile as ambassador to Czechoslovakia a few months before Amin discovered the Parcham plot against Taraki and his Khalq faction. It is likely that the plot was an attempt to prevent the liquidation of the Parcham faction by Taraki. Karmal was then deposed as ambassador and lived secretly under Moscow’s patronage until the day came for his reinstatement on the back of a Soviet tank. There were already many thousands of Soviet advisors in the country. Amin had invited in the ‘Red Army’ because of the increasing strength of the mujadiheen attacks, now well armed by US imperialism and its allies, which now clearly included China. Considerable numbers of Soviet troops were already in place and more were expected with government knowledge. None of this constituted an invasion and even the CIA did not claim it as such.
The invasion consisted of the secret dispatch of huge numbers of extra ‘Red Army’ troops (100,000 is the figure now accepted). The advance troops surrounded the barracks of the Afghan army and air force units who had led the 1978 military coup. They then captured Amin’s residence. Food doping by Russian cooks had not worked well enough as Amin ate little because he was ill. This necessitated the very bloody public massacre. Having disposed of Amin and his immediate family they occupied all the government buildings, murdered 97 government officials and installed their own chosen puppet, Karmal.
That is an invasion. The Soviet reason for installing Karmal was their perception that only he could re-unite the PDPA and appeal to the more conservative section of Afghan society, in particular the upper middle class and the bourgeoisie and ‘unite the nation’ against the mujadiheen. Its aim was to sup-
plement military force with a new, more right-wing popular-frontism as against the more radical popular frontism of Amin.

It is totally incorrect, therefore, to assert that the invasion was because Amin had become a CIA agent and it was necessary to prevent the US Army landing in Kabul. He would scarcely have invited in both the US and USSR to fight it out at Kabul Airport! However clearly he was making overtures directly to the US and indirectly via Pakistan because he must have had wind of the impending coup.

Whilst things were bad in the rural areas by 27 December 1979 the counter-revolution was not able to gather any significant support to launch an all-out attack on the government nor did it have any type of unifying ideology of even tactical consideration to prevent the continual outbreaks of inter-tribal warfare. The invasion of the ‘Red Army’ and the old rallying cries against a foreign invader were utilised by the reactionaries and this did indeed seal the loss of the modernising attempt and welded together a counter-revolutionary alliance which did operate non-aggression pacts with some success until the present phrase, after the fall of the PDPA. Karmal’s Soviet advisors attempted no better tactics than Taraki or Amin. The invasion also succeeded in alienating the base of the PDPA support in the urban areas. There were demonstrations by the girls’ colleges soon after that were brutally put down. Two girl students were murdered by the regime. More ominously a national Islamic movement called Allah-au-Akbar started against Karmal. There were several daytime demonstrations and at night the entire population began to chant the azan, the Muslim call to prayer, from the rooftops. Reaction was consolidated even in Kabul. Not only the poor and most oppressed were alienated by the invasion but now there was an end of any pretence at rallying the urban petit bourgeois behind the regime. Henceforth Karmal was a hated and isolated figure, hiding from all classes of his own people behind the Russian tanks.

**The Kremlin’s foreign policy**

We should also bear in mind the direction of the Kremlin’s foreign policy, according to Trotsky: “The entire foreign policy of the Kremlin in general is based upon a scoundrelly embellishment of the ‘friendly’ imperialism and thus leads to the sacrifice of the fundamental interests.

of the world workers’ movement for secondary and unstable advantages. 13

The fact that in order to defend their own privileged positions at the head of the bureaucracy the Kremlin leadership often took measures that safeguarded nationalised property does not oblige us to give them a blank cheque on this or any other occasion. The point, which Trotsky always emphasised, was that the bureaucracy defended these relationships by their own, bureaucratic, counter-revolutionary, methods. This type of bureaucratic ‘defence’ was continually weakening and undermining the only real and ultimate way that they could be defended: the class conscious actions of the working class defending the nationalised property relations as economic basis of socialism, despite and against the bureaucracy.

This is how Trotsky explained the matter in relation to eastern Poland in 1939:
‘Foreign policy is the continuation of the internal. We have never promised to support all the actions of the Red Army, which is an instrument in the hands of the Bonapartist bureaucracy. We have promised to defend only the USSR as a workers’ state and solely those things within it which belong to a workers’ state. ‘…In every case the Fourth International will know how to distinguish when and where the Red Army is acting solely as an instrument of the Bonapartist reaction and where it defends the social base of the USSR’ 14

No doubt with the experience of the disastrous invasion of Poland in 1920 in mind Trotsky was opposed to exporting revolution even by a healthy workers’ state except in very favourable circumstances: ‘…But such an intervention, as part of a revolutionary international policy, must be understood by the international proletariat, must correspond to the desires of the toiling masses of the country on whose territory the revolutionary troops enter.” 15

Not even the ICL could claim that these conditions were satisfied in the invasion of Afghanistan. As Trotsky said of the joint invasion of Poland in 1939 by Stalin and Hitler: ‘On the contrary, it (the Kremlin) boasts cynically of its combination, which affronts, rightfully, the most elementary democratic feelings of the oppressed classes and peoples throughout the world and thus weakens extremely the international situation of the Soviet Union. The economic transformation in the occupied territories do not compensate for this by even a tenth part. 16

**CPGB and ICL support invasion**

It is ludicrous to claim, as Eddie Ford does in *Weekly Worker* No. 163, that it is correct to support the invasion and then to acknowledge;
‘… the paradoxical nature of the Soviet intervention in 1979 – which was to extinguish the flame of the revolution while defending the husk that remained. The Soviet bureaucracy feared social revolution, especially one on its own doorstep, far more than it welcomed one – yet it feared imperialist intervention and Islamic-inspired counter-revolution even more.” 17

But is not ‘extinguishing the flame’ of a revolution called counter-revolution? However comrade Ford here correctly attacks the ICL from the left, at least pointing out that the manner of the intervention was reactionary, whilst tying himself in knots by supporting that same intervention. Seemingly uneasy about his paradox comrade Ford tries again a little later in his piece:
‘It was better to have the Red Army defending the dried out remnants (ashes from the flame extinguished by the ‘Red Army’ according to The Leninist – GD) of the 1978 Revolution, rather than not at all.” 18

Why is this better? If we accept his assumptions; that 1978 was a revolution, that popu-
lar enthusiasm (flame) for the event still survived by 27 December 1979 – as distinct from preferring it to Islamic counter-revolution – then it was surely the duty of all revolutionaries to defend and nurture those flames that then might sweep and liberate the country and continent in time? Since clearly neither Comrade Ford, nor The Leninist back then, seriously believed this then it is best to say why they supported the invasion, even if it was paradoxically reactionary and develop the argument to a higher plane than one of the pro and anti-Soviet ‘camps’. They should seek to establish what revolutionaries in the region should have done in those circumstances. Were Comrade Ford to do this he might not find so ridiculous and inconsistent Ernest Mandel’s position, (which in our view was broadly correct) that it was necessary to oppose the invasion in the first place but once the deed was done, and reaction was enormously strengthened because of it, it was now incumbent on all serious revolutionaries to demand that Soviet Army stay and fight that reaction. For a similar reason we would oppose a foolish and ill-prepared strike called by a trade union bureaucracy, but once it was called we would demand that the bureaucracy go all out to win that strike – because the battle was now joined! This is essential united front tactics – strategically with the masses struggling against oppression, tactically with their leaders in order to expose them in struggle and so build a leadership capable of winning and willing to do so. This was exactly Trotsky’s position on the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland just before the war. Stalin had signed the secret protocols with Hitler over that and the invasion of the Baltic lands, etc. but nevertheless: ‘The occupation of eastern Poland by the Red Army is to be sure a ‘lesser evil’ compared to the occupation of the same territory by Nazi troops. But this lesser evil was obtained because Hitler was assured of obtaining a greater evil. If somebody sets, or helps to set, a house on fire and afterwards saves five out of the ten occupants in order to convert them into his own semi-slaves, that is to be sure a lesser evil than to have burned the...
entire ten. But it is dubious that this firebug merits a medal for the rescue. If nonetheless a medal were given to him he should be shot immediately after as in the case of the hero in one of Victor Hugo’s novels.

And:

‘…A trade union led by reactionary fakers organises a strike against the admission of Black workers into a certain branch of industry. Shall we support such a shameful strike?’

Of course not. But let us imagine that the bosses, utilising the given strike, make an attempt to crush the trade unions and to make it impossible in general to organised self defence of the workers. In this case we will defend the trade union as a matter of course in spite of its reactionary leadership. Why is not this same policy applicable to the USSR?’ 19

Also comrade Ford is wrong to assert that:

‘The Soviet bureaucracy feared social revolution, especially one on its own doorstep, far more than it welcomed one – yet it feared imperialist intervention and Islamic-inspired counter-revolution even more’ 20

The Soviet bureaucracy feared social revolution more than anything else on the planet because it would threaten political revolution in the USSR. Islamic reaction would be positively welcomed by the Kremlin in the face of this ‘horrendous’ prospect, and that has been their increasing paranoia, displayed in every action, internal and in foreign policy, since 1933 at least.

‘The only decisive standpoint’

The ‘flame’ that the CPGB thought was extinguished by the invasion was only then flickering into life, according to the ICL. In defiance of the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution the ICL (adopting
Amin’s line) believed the socialist revolution was not possible in Afghanistan because it had no working class (uniquely in the entire planet, according to some members).

Ludicrously, in attempting to cover for their capitulation to Stalinism, the ICL demanded the formations of soviets – led by whom? The working class that they had already written off or its adequate substitute, the ‘Red Army’? The possibility of ‘revolution from without’ is referred to several times in the article and it is clearly their main rational for supporting the invasion, e.g., in attacking the IMG and the UK SWP (IS as was) they say: ‘For these dregs of the pro-nationalist New Left and the wretched ‘Third Camp’ social democrats, counter-revolution from within is preferable to revolution from without.’

In the Winter of 1979/80 they held that: ‘Even if the country is incorporated into the Soviet bloc – a tremendous step forward compared to present conditions – this can only today be as a bureaucratically deformed workers’ state.’

Then they follow with a call for political revolution in the USSR and social revolution in Iran – no question of calling for one in Afghanistan. But by the summer 1980 issue such caution was flung to the winds:

‘Moreover, the Soviet military occupation raises the possibility of a social revolution in this wretched, backward country, a possibility that did not exist before.’

The ‘Red Army’ was now apparently going to lead, or at least assist, a social revolution from within and not simply bureaucratically overthrow capitalist property relations. Quite why this possibility was not realised, or never even raised its head, is never explained. The illusions of the ICL in the ‘revolutionary’ nature of the Kremlin bureaucrats were never clearer than in re-reading their 1980 positions.

This was, in fact, a variant of the PDPA theory on why they had to use the army and not organise the working class and poor peasants. They also feared and opposed a revolution from below and would only tolerate a ‘revolution from without’ for this reason.

We can only react with huge amusement at the Stalinophilia of the ICL – Brezhnev – a revolutionary to the end! Despite all the hysterical condemnation of ‘Pabloism’ Pablo never sunk to the level of supporting the brutal invasion of the ‘Red Army’ to install a conservative reactionary Stalinist politician and say this raised the possibility of social revolution. All that ICL stuff about calling for soviets, etc., while ignoring the real Afghan working class and even denying their existence, is so much eye wash.

Indeed the ICL held the working class and poor peasants in such contempt that they imagined that it was possible to produce the baby first (the revolution) and then invent the mother (the working class)! Of course it turned out that it was not a real baby at all but a shoddy painted Russian doll that fell to pieces at the first rattle. We can reasonably assume that the PDPA and the Kremlin operated purely cynically with no such illusions. The quotes from the Politburo members above are an example of this, revolutionary phrases masking bureaucratic realism. But Trotskyists should have different politics:

‘Our defence of the USSR is carried out under the slogan: For Socialism! For the world revolution! Against Stalin!’

Even where the Kremlin had bureaucratically transformed property relations after the Polish invasion i Trotsky warned that: ‘This measure, revolutionary in character – ‘the expropriation of the expropriators’ – is in this case achieved in a military bureaucratic fashion. The appeal to independent activity on the part of the masses in the new territories – and without such an appeal, even if worded with extreme caution, it is impossible
to constitute a new regime – will on the morrow undoubtedly be suppressed by ruthless police measures, in order to ensure the preponderance of the bureaucracy over the awakened revolutionary masses.

That is one side of the matter. But there is another. In order to gain the possibility of occupying Poland through a military alliance with Hitler, the Kremlin deceived and continues to deceive the masses in the USSR and in the whole world. The primary political consideration for us is not the transformation of property relations in this or another area, however important they may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organisation of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones. From this one, the only decisive standpoint, the politics of Moscow, taken as a whole, completely retains its reactionary character and remains the chief obstacle in the road to the world revolution. 25

This latter position of Trotsky’s was abandoned by the ICL in Afghanistan, Poland and everywhere else.

**Marxist method vs. bureaucratic method**

It took fifteen years of warfare to subdue the uprisings in the Soviet Central Asian republics caused in the main by Menshevik and Stalinist bureaucratic methods. Some conflict was and is inevitable if the power of the Mullahs, Khans and fundamentalists is again to be broken in the countries of Soviet Central Asia and in Afghanistan, Iran through to Algeria. What a terrible price humanity must pay for the marginalisation of the transitional method of the Bolsheviks and the triumph of the counter-revolutionary bureaucratic methods of fighting reaction of Stalinism and petty-bourgeois nationalism in these states.

Given imperialism’s support for the mujadiheen and the nature of the terrain victory was only possible if the PDPA or the ‘Red Army’ combined warfare with the transitional method. A reactionary ideology, such as fundamentalism, can only be broken by total military defeat or by a dialectical combination of warfare and the transitional method. Marxists must use great tactical sensitivity to fight against the oppression of women and for the material, economic and social advancement of the working class and the poor. Neither the PDPA nor the ‘Red Army’ were prepared to fight in this way.

In a front pager article of Workers Hammer (April/May 1995), paper of British SL, we are told the ‘Soviet Red Army liberated Auschwitz’ but nowhere that the war against the Nazis was fought as a ‘great patriotic war’ and was specifically anti-German and anti-working class. The ‘Red Army’ either allowed the Nazis to crush workers’ uprisings or crushed them themselves to defeat attempts at socialist revolution in Eastern Europe. Following the same policy the communist parties in the west betrayed post-War revolutionary situations in Italy and Greece and pre-revolutionary situations in France and elsewhere.

Therefore to ignore the method of the liberation of Auschwitz, not to counterpose the method of the real Red Army of the 1920s against the method of the armed forces of the bureaucracy, in Berlin 1945 or in Afghanistan in 1980s, is to perpetrate an historical lie on the working class. 26 Trotsky always combined revolutionary propaganda, guerrilla warfare and uprisings behind enemy lines with socialist measures in liberated territory to win over the workers and oppressed masses. The bureaucracy could not have possibly contemplated such revolutionary methods, lest a successful revolution would ensue which would see the bureaucracy expropriated as a parasitic social cast.

It was possible to drive a wedge between the feudalists and progressives, between the Mul-
lahs and the poor and landless peasants – if a Marxist regime had existed in either Kabul or Moscow that desired this end and fought for it. However the PDPA were so busy scheming and plotting against each other and murdering their former comrades wholesale in the most bloodthirsty fashion at the first opportunity that there was little time, or inclination, to consider how to propagate their revolution among the workers (who never got a look in at all from any of the ‘revolutionaries’) or the poor and landless peasant masses, who were supposed to be the real beneficiaries of the entire revolution.

Moreover they attempted to impose the ‘revolution’ from above in such a bureaucratic, heavy handed fashions that it stood no chance. They rode rough-shod over tribal customs and religious sensitivities and prejudices alike. For examples they granted land to the landless peasants without the provision of bank credit to fertilise it or buy seed. In consequence the peasants were forced back to the very landlords who had been expropriated when it was presented to the peasants by the ‘revolution’ in the first place. In many cases they had to accept the most humiliating terms and punishments from these reactionaries, including self-mutilations, for their ‘anti-Islamic actions’.

The PDPA failed to conduct any preparatory campaign against all the other reactionary customs like women’s oppression, e.g., the selling of daughters in forced marriages – the Kalym (bride price) -, etc. They issued ‘binding’ decrees but did not provide any viable alternative. They naturally did not expropriate the landowners by mobilising the peasants.

There were local Jirgah – tribal councils whose job it was to ensure tribal laws were carried our including those stipulating equality between all tribal members – which still theoretically, and practically in some minor issues, existed. These could have been pressed into service by careful preparation and could have revived local pre-feudal, progressive tribal customs of equality in land tenure that would have made the first steps in breaking the hold of the landlords and Mullahs.

The very strength of the authority of the Jirgah lay in this notion of universal equality – which made the system of land holding seem ‘democratic’ as distinct from the system in the Indian sub-continent where the landowner operated a cast system and flaunted his privileged birth over his ground-down subjects.

The custom of paying for a bride, known as “kalym”, has seen a significant revival in Turkmenistan in the years since the Soviet period, when it was officially banned. Nine of ten Turkmen marriages contracted in 2011 involved a transaction of this kind. A kalym payment can reach up to 10,000 US dollars. A local Muslim cleric said the highest prices were paid for marriage to a woman with a university education, in a public sector job, or skilled in a traditional craft.
Therefore the very strength of the Jirgah was also its weakest point, and any patient attempt to penetrate the surface appearance of unity and relate to the political necessity of today’s revolution with yesterday’s progressive customs would have begun to turn the masses outward from the valleys and forward from the past. But a full frontal attack, such as the PDPA launched, and which was enormously intensified by the Soviet invasion, could only unify the oppressed with the oppressor in the countryside in an undifferentiated mass of reaction against their perceived common enemy.

The material basis of women’s oppression in Afghanistan
The SL obviously still understood the material basis for the rural customs that all hinged around the terrible oppression of women but they drew no practical conclusions from this. This was an integral part of the production process in those terrible conditions of poverty. Tribal blood feuds, polygamy, etc. are part of the local customs and institutions that enabled that primitive system of production to continue.

The short skirted teachers from Kabul who were to educate the illiterate womenfolk often used army units to force attendance at class – which quickly provoked tribal uprisings at the ‘godless’ attempts to corrupt ‘their’ women and deprive them of an essential part of the peasant household economy. A real material improvement in living standards in selected pilot areas would have begun to turn the tide against the local oppressors.

It was this type of sensitive approach, taking full cognisance of local customs and practices to advance the progressive and defeat the reactionary that succeeded in Soviet Muslim lands just across the border in Soviet Central Asia in no less difficult circumstances. This was the method of operation of the Zhenotdel – the Department of working women and peasant women – in the years between the end of the civil war the beginnings of its Stalinisation after 1924.

Dale Ross (D. L. Reissner), the first editor of the SL’s ‘Women and Revolution’, explained that method and history well in her article ‘Early Bolshevik Work among Women of the Soviet East’ (Issue No. 12 Summer 1976). She goes into great detail to explain the difference between the Bolshevik method of approaching this work and both the Menshevik and Stalinist method. There is no need to ask which method the PDPA and the ‘Red Army’ operated in Afghanistan. Or which method the ICL supported so uncritically after 1979. http://regroupment.org/main/page_ussr_east_women.html

The following quotes from that article stand in total repudiation to the ICL’s posturing Stalinophilia in Afghanistan. Note in particular the great detail given of the sensitivity of approach of the revolutionary Bolsheviks to local custom and law, in total contrast to the Menshevik and Stalinist methods. The revolutionary women of the Zhenotdel faced horrible death in the early 1920s by donning the paranja (a garment that totally covered women’s faces without even openings for eyes and mouth) to get the ear of the oppressed women. The ‘Red Army’ rained na-
palm on them in the 1980s. This account highlights, better than any other analytic article I have seen, the practical application of the transitional method in such circumstances:

‘The Bolsheviks viewed the extreme oppression of women as an indicator of the primitive level of the whole society, but their approach was based on materialism, not moralism. They understood that the fact that women were veiled and caged, bought and sold, was but the surface of the problem. Kalym was not some sinister plot against woman-kind, but the institution which was central to the organisation of production, integrally connected to land and water rights. Payment of Kalym, often by the whole clan over a long period of time, committed those involved to an elaborate system of debt, duties and loyalties which ultimately led to participation in the private armies of the local beys (landowners and wholesale merchants). All commitments were thus backed up with the threat of feuds and blood vengeance.

‘… Lenin warned against prematurely confronting respected native institutions, even when these clearly violated communist principles and Soviet law. Instead he proposed to use the Soviet state power to systematically undermine them while simultaneously demonstrating the superiority of Soviet institutions, a policy which had worked well against the powerful Russian Orthodox Church.

‘Extending this practice to Central Asia, the Soviet government waged a campaign to build the authority of the Soviet legal system and civil courts as an alternative to the traditional Muslim kadi courts and legal codes. Although the kadi courts were permitted to function, their powers were circumscribed in that they were forbidden to handle political cases or any cases in which both parties to the dispute had not agreed to use the kadi court rather than the parallel Soviet court system. As the Soviet courts became more accepted, criminal cases were eliminated from the kadis’ sphere.

Next the government invited dissatisfied parties to appeal the kadis’ decisions to a Soviet court. In this manner the Soviets earned the reputation of being partisans of the oppressed, while the kadis were exposed as defenders of the status quo. Eventually the kadis were forbidden to enforce any Muslim laws which contradicted Soviet laws. Two soviet representatives, including one member of Zhenotdel were assigned to witness all kadi proceedings and to approve their decisions. Finally when the wafks (endowment properties), which had supported the kadis, were expropriated and redistributed among the peasantry, the kadi disappeared completely.

‘This non-confrontationalist policy in no way implied capitulation to backward, repressive institutions. It was made clear that there could be no reconciliation between communism and the Koran. Although ‘Red Mullahs’ attracted by the Bolshevik programme of self-determination and land to the tillers, suggested to their followers that Islam was socialism and vice versa, the Bolsheviks insisted that Soviet and Muslim law could never be reconciled precisely on the grounds that the most basic rights of women would be sacrificed.

‘The bloody civil war that pitted the Bolshevik state against imperialist-supported counter-revolutionary forces devastated the young workers state and threatened its very survival. During this period when Bolshevik capacity to intervene in Central Asia was crippled, the crude tactics employed by their ostensibly socialist opponents fuelled anti-Soviet sentiments. In Tashkent, the railway centre of Central Asia, the governing Soviet was made up of Russian émigrés, many of them railway
workers, led by Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks.

In an orgy of Russian chauvinism and self indulgence foreshadowing to policies of Stalinism to come, they expropriated the holdings of the most respected Islamic institutions and stood the slogan ‘self- determination of the toiling masses’ on its head to justify the exclusion of native intellectuals and sympathetic Mullahs, whom they labelled ‘non- proletarian elements’. At the same time they collaborated with former white army officers. When the Tashkent soviet began arbitrarily requisitioning food from the peasants during the worst grain shortages of the civil war, Lenin intervened to stop this. But the seeds of anti-Soviet rebellion had been sown.

‘…The end of the war signalled the initiation of systematic Bolshevik work among Muslim women. In the absence of native activists, it was the most dedicated and courageous members of Zhenotdel who donned the paranja in order to meet with Muslim women and explain the new Soviet laws and programme which were to change their lives. This was an extremely dangerous assignment, as any violation of a local taboo enraged husbands, fathers and brothers to murder.

‘…Had a balanced approach of training and education complemented this liberalising agitation, these new divorcees could have become enthusiastic pioneers of agricultural collectives and proletarian reinforcements for industrialisation. But at the January 1924 Party conference, which preceded the 13th Party congress, the leadership, programme and methods of the party changed decisively. ‘In an ominous prelude to the policies of the ‘third period’ such as the forced collectivisation of agriculture, the legal offensive against traditional practices in Central Asia was stepped up until the divorce rate assumed epidemic proportions.

‘…Then on 8 March 1927, in celebration of International Woman’s Day, mass meetings were held at which thousands of frenzied participants, chanting ‘down with the paranja’ tore off their veils which were drenched in paraffin and burned. Poems were recited and plays with names such as ‘Away with the Veil’ and ‘Never again Kalym’ were performed. Zhenotdel agitators led marches of unveiled women through the streets, instigating the forced desegregation of public quarters and sanctified religious sites’

The consequences of these brutal Stalinist methods were the same in 1927, 28 and 29 as they were in Afghanistan sixty years later: ‘Women suing for divorce became the targets of murderous vigilante squads, and lynchings of party cadres annihilated the ranks of the Zhenotdel. The Party was forced to mobilise the militia, then the Komsomolsk and finally the general party membership and the Red Army to protect the women, but it refused to alter its suicidal policies. The debacle of International Woman’s Day was repeated in 1928 and 1929 with the same disastrous consequences, exacting an extremely high toll on party cadre.’

The best results against fundamentalism were achieved by women revolutionaries of the Zhenotdel using the transitional method of Bolshevism, as Dale Ross describes. The Afghan coupists were no revolutionaries, had no knowledge of and did not want to know about the methods of Marxist revolutionaries. They feared the consequences of utilising such tactics and were utterly opposed to them. They preferred their own bureaucratic ‘suicidal policies’, as Dale Ross says above. Armed with this understanding in must have been with either the utmost reluctance or greatest confusion that Dale Ross embarked on what ‘Women and Revolution Issue No. 44 Winter 1994 – Spring 1995, in her obituary, described as a ‘tour under our banner
‘Hail Red Army in Afghanistan’ on International Women’s Day in 1980.’ After describing the disastrous consequences of International Women’s Day demonstrations of a like political character in 1927, 28 and 29 in Central Asia this must have been a severe blow to her self-esteem.

To say ‘In Afghanistan today the Red Army alone stands between women and the perpetration of feudal and pre-feudal reaction’ on this tour after describing in such vivid detail the consequences of the Stalinist degeneration by 1927 in outrageously provoking such reaction must have been too much to bear.

To abandon theoretically all hope in the revolutionary potential of the Afghan working class (and then the Polish and the working class and oppressed in general after totally failing to relate to the Iranian working class) and be obliged to put her faith in counter-revolutionary Stalinism must have been the last straw. She left the SL in January 1983. Having left the SL, she discovered the future leaders of the Bolshevik Tendency, but they too had abandoned the Transitional method and were not seeking the road to the working class and masses. This proved to be the political end for Dale Ross.

The left and the mujadiheen
The crisis of Trotskyism and those who regard themselves as revolutionary socialists is evident here. Of the groups mentioned in this article who at least took the correct class lines against imperialism, one, the US SWP, has renounced Trotskyism. Another, the CPGB, is a left Stalinist grouping (though quite an atypical one) and a third, Workers Power, had a substantial minority which was pro-imperialist on Afghanistan. This minority became a majority at the recent international congress in Austria of their international grouping, the League for a Revolutionary Communist International, on closely related issues pertaining to Stalinism. The ICL has abandoned all attempts to apply the transitional method and pride themselves in posturing ultra-leftism. They clearly show their US chauvinism and pro-imperialist bias by their lack of sympathy for, let alone orientation towards, the working class and oppressed in non-imperialist countries.

However ultra-left the CPGB and the ICL were, however supine the capitulation to Stalinism the politics of the US SWP and the ICL were in 1980, nothing excuses the direct assistance rendered to imperialism by the leftist pro-mujadiheen groups. The former at least stood on the correct side of the class line in many confused ways but the latter were cynical capitulators to bourgeois public opinion.

The Communist Workers Group of New Zealand (CWG NZ), who supported the invasion, correctly commented in an article written in November 1996:
‘Those, like the state capitalists, who claimed that the USSR was ‘social imperialist’ flatly opposed the Soviet presence and drew graphic pictures of the death and destruction of Soviet ‘gunships’ etc. The even more right-wing tendencies painted the mujadiheen as a national liberation army. The right opposition

In October 1996, the Taliban took Kabul and Najibullah and his brother met their grim fate.
inside Workers Power under Keith Harvey took this position, but was defeated by a majority which took a more correct line. … If revolutionaries could not see which class forces were aligned against each another in this civil war, then they cannot get to ‘square one’ in the class struggle.’

Though the British SWP, the French Lambertists and the Latin American Morenoites supported the mujadiheen, this does not mean that these are now totally counter-revolutionary groupings. They were acting in typical centrist fashion when faced with hostile public opinion over the Soviet invasion. They saw little point in taking a principled stand, which would cost them members, when it did not seem to matter overmuch to their own class struggle what happened in far-off Afghanistan. Nothing fundamentally new here, this has been their practice since the 1950s, though certainly a new level of cynicism was reached by the British SWP. Not only did they support the mujadiheen from the beginning as ‘freedom fighters’ on 5 October 1996 they welcomed the victory of the Taliban, though with some reservations (!):

‘But Taliban’s success comes from popular disenchantment with the leaders who oppose it – the forces guarding Kabul melted away last week. Tragically, (!) the Taliban has no answer to the crisis of the country either. As the SL pointed out in quoting this piece, the Taliban did indeed have answers – brutal repression of women was just one.

Where to now?

Najibullah took over from Karmal in 1986 and was formally elected President of the Republic of Afghanistan in 1987 at a national Loya Jirgah. This was an attempt to give democratic credibility to the regime. The Loya Jirgah was supposedly the traditional way that national emergencies were solved in Afghanistan going back to time immemorial. In fact these were convocations of tribal leaders to take some common action, usually to confront an invader.

That was certainly how the rural population in particular understood them. The attempt to portray them as a type of modem parliament, or a traditional body which could be taken and transformed into a parliament could not work. It was merely a rubber stamp for the Najibullah, completely controlled by the PDPA who were desperately manoeuvring to stave off the assaults of the imperialist-backed mujadiheen.

It adopted a new constitution based on democratic capitalist principles coupled various aspects of reactionary feudalism. For instance we are told by a government publication that: ‘The Constitution is popular because every article is in conformity with the sacred principles of Islam, the time-honoured tradition of Afghan society.’

This attempt to conciliate reaction was the direct opposite of the policy of the early Comintern, which always combined the utmost sensitivity to religious sentiments with uncompromising opposition to religion itself. Najibullah’s efforts were, in any case, too late. Reaction had been consolidated and the withdrawal of Soviet troops sealed the fate of his regime.

The CWG NZ concluded their November 1996 article: ‘In 1986 Najibullah, another Parcham leader, became President when Karmal stepped down. The US backed mujadiheen revolt had been contained by Soviet troops, but under pressure from the US Gorbachev withdrew the Soviet forces in 1989.

‘Najibullah’s government lasted for another three years. But internal fighting weakened the government. In 1992 mujadiheen forces overran Kabul. Najibullah took refuge in the UN compound. The victory of the muja-
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dhien did not end the tribal conflicts. Taliban, a more fundamentalist Islamic students’ movement backed by Pakistan, became the dominant military force driving back the Rabbani government. Then in early October 1996, the Taliban took Kabul and Najibullah and his brother met their grim fate.

‘When the Soviets pulled out in 1989 Trotskyists were correct to condemn the action as a retreat in the face of imperialism. We recognise this for what it was, an attempt by Gorbachev to placate imperialism, to buy time, in the face of the collapsing USSR economy, in the hope of introducing ‘market socialism’ and stave off a total counterrevolutionary return to capitalism. But the price was the eventual victory of counterrevolution in Afghanistan, as it was counterrevolution in many of the other former Soviet republics.

‘The Taliban victory is a victory for reaction. We do not recognise let alone defend the national rights of the mujadiheen or the Mullahs. They represent a feudal ruling class determined to destroy every last PDPA democratic reform. Their fight is not a popular fight for national self-determination. Any rights the feudal leaders may have are cancelled by the rights they deny to everyone else. The belief that reactionary leaders can represent national rights only applies in circumstances where they are leading a popular national movement against imperialism.

‘When Lenin says:

‘The struggle that the Emir of Afghanistan is waging for the independence of Afghanistan is objectively a ‘revolutionary’ struggle, despite the monarchist views of the Emir and his associates, for it weakens, disintegrates and undermines imperialism.] is true only under such conditions. Today, the ‘Emirs’ are on the side of imperialism against the only forces capable of winning a national democratic permanent revolution, the impoverished masses. Already the summary executions of Najibullah and others and the return of the veil and appalling oppression of women show what is in store. A return to feudal patriarchal relations is underway.

‘The rights won by women to equality, to jobs, education, free health, etc. will now be subordinated again to their status as the property of men. All those who had anything to do with the ‘communists’ democratic reforms will be hunted down and killed. In this situation there is no question as to what must be done. We are for the formation of workers’ and peasants’ soviets backed up by armed militia, and for the smashing of the reactionary clerical, theocratic dictatorship of the mujadiheen!”

Notes


5 The Tragedy of Afghanistan, A First-hand Account, Raja Anwar Verso, 1988 Page 58. The majority of the empirical details in the article are taken from this account by a former minister of the Pakistan People’s Party in Ali Bhutto’s government. He learned much of the details from speaking to the passing population of Kabul’s Pulcharkhi Prison (as an inmate himself) as different factions of the PDPA fell from favour.

6 The Tragedy of Afghanistan, Page 58.

7 The Tragedy of Afghanistan Page 60.

8 Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, Page 115-116, Antony Hyman, Macmillan Press 1982. This book supplements the other two used as background material. The author’s political views are liberal-democratic and therefore pro-imperialist, but he supplies greater detail on some issues.

9 Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, Page 118.
Another account of Amin’s massacre of the Hazaras workers in Kabul from page 20:

Flashback to 1979: A massacre of unarmed civilians in an uprising

"The uprising started at 9am," he says. "By 5pm the streets were strewn with the dead - poor people, daily wage workers, coolies (porters), and innocent people who were only passing by." By Fazal Hadi Hamidi

The Taraki government's brutal attempt to ram through a revolution from the top with a radical reform programme provoked widespread, largely spontaneous rebellion like the uprising in Chendawol in Kabul on 2nd Sartan (1358/23 June 1979).

Jafari remembers the exact time of the rebellion. "The uprising started at 9am," he says. "By 5pm the streets were strewn with the dead - poor people, daily wage workers, coolies (porters), and innocent people who were only passing by. The protestors were under siege."

He insists the uprising was of common people. The communist regime ruthlessly beat back protestors who launched the uprising with just loud cries of Allahu Akbar (God is great).

"Only dead bodies could be seen in Sar e Chawk and Jade Maiwand (areas next to Chendawol). The voices raised in spontaneous protest changed into cries (of pain). The butchery went on all day," he says.

Jafari remembers the government used tanks and other heavy weapons while the protestors were armed with nothing more than shovels and sticks. "It was impossible (for people) to defend (themselves)," he says.

"Finally protestors attacked Chendawol police station. They occupied the police station and raided the armoury. But the oppressed people could not have won. There were airplanes (of the communist government) circling overhead. Security forces had besieged the police station. They could target anyone," he recalls.

Forcibly disappeared

Worse was to follow on the night of 3rd Sartan. While the people were still gathering their dead, reserve units of the police entered Chendawol. They broke into houses and dragged away "elders, academics and professionals". The terror went on through the night.

Read more: http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2013/10/13/flashback-to-1979-a-massacre-of-unarmed-civilians-in-an-uprising.html#ixzz3WAsoFxVh