

Alliance for Workers Liberty: apologists for imperialism

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The leaders of the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) argue that socialists should not fight for the withdrawal of US and British troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. They claim that, were the occupation to end immediately, reactionary Islamic forces would annihilate the Iraqi labour movement. Some comrades in the organisation are challenging this shameful position. To assuage their fears, Martin Thomas published a "questions and answer" in the run up to their conference. **Simon Hardy** and **Luke Cooper** unpick his arguments and find - unsurprisingly - that Thomas is an apologist for imperialism

The AWL is divided three ways on the Iraq occupation. Two tendencies within the organisation are questioning the leadership's line. One argues for "troops out", while the more principled tendency proposes the clear and unequivocal slogan, "Troops out now". Martin Thomas' argument has a Marxist veneer only insofar as he expresses a concern for the Iraqi working class, and suggests that this is the basis for the AWL's refusal to call for troops out. Notwithstanding this, Martin Thomas offers little in the way of serious Marxist analysis or strategy, choosing instead to appeal to "common sense" arguments that would not be out of place in *The Guardian*.

From the "third camp" to the imperialist camp

Thomas' argument is hinged on the view that there are two forces engaged in fighting in Iraq: on the one hand, the imperialist occupying troops and, on the other, the "reactionary anti-imperialists" in the form of the "sectarian clerical-fascist militias". If asked to choose, Thomas is quite clear that he thinks the latter are worse. He argues:

"The US/UK occupation is bad. The immediately available alternative to it is throwing Iraq into the hands of sectarian clerical-fascist militias, who will fight it out among themselves. That is also bad, in fact worse."

Thomas continues by claiming to spurn both sides in this reactionary conflict, arguing that the AWL's role is to support the "third camp" of the working class. He writes, it is not the job of the AWL to counsel "the working class on which among the bourgeois alternatives immediately available is the lesser evil and therefore should be supported. We are for the working class creating its own alternatives - the Third Camp."

Observant readers will already spot a sleight of hand. On the one hand, Thomas does not want to take sides in the conflict between the imperialist occupiers and the Iraqi resistance. But just a few sentences earlier, it was Thomas who tacitly took sides in the conflict, arguing that the triumph of the "sectarian clerical-fascist militias" was "also bad, in fact worse" than the occupation.

What else could this mean, other than that Thomas sees the occupation as providing some kind of security for the working class against the "clerical-fascist" resistance? This is not a mysterious "third camp" but grossly misplaced reliance on the occupation as defenders of the Iraqi labour movement.

His comrade, Mark Osborne has recently claimed at an AWL school, that Moqtada al-Sadr has a policy of "killing trade unionists". In a recent letter to Workers Power, Sami Ramadani summarised nicely what the AWL's attitude amounts to:

"It is despicable of the Alliance for Workers Liberty to absolve the occupation and accuse the Sadr movement of assassinating trade unionists. It is the occupation tanks, jets and police-state tactics, which are trying to crush the struggle of Iraq's working class and its trade unions. Like you, I don't have any illusions about Sadr, but one has to base one's analysis of Iraq on the facts and not on a pack of lies."
Sami Ramadani on Iraqi trade unions and the resistance

The "clerical-fascist" bogeymen

Thomas uses the resistance as a bogeyman. By labelling all those who resist imperialism as "clerical-fascist", he wants to absolve the AWL of the need to support the democratic rights of the Iraqis to decide their own future - something that is naturally impossible while the country remains under occupation. For any consistent democrat - let alone socialist - it is elementary that you have to support the basic democratic rights of Iraqis to organise militarily to repel the occupying army.

The use of the term "fascist" to describe these forces is intended to rouse the emotion of AWL members - after all, how could socialists ever support the actions of fascists? In fact, Martin Thomas uses the term without much care to its actual meaning.

For Marxists, "fascist" is the term assigned to the shock troops of the enraged middle class, whose aim is to smash up of the organised working class, in the service of the big bourgeoisie. We should not extend the term fascist to simply include any political force, which has recourse to violence or appeals to reactionary ideology. The instability of bourgeois politics in most of the world oppressed by imperialism means that even ordinary capitalist parties employ violence regularly against political opponents or journalists, who criticise them - Bangladesh springs to mind. But to label them fascists would run the risk of failing to alert the working class to a real fascist threat, when it does emerge.

However, let us assume for the sake of argument that Moqtada al-Sadr and his supporters are fascists - in the classical Marxist sense of the word. What should our attitude be to them and any other "fascist" (again, for the sake of argument) forces that are thrown into conflict with the occupation?

Trotsky confronted this question directly in the 1930s. He speculated hypothetically that the semi-fascist regime in Brazil would enter into conflict with Britain. On whose side should the working class be? Trotsky was unequivocal:

"I will be on the side of 'fascist' Brazil against "democratic" Great Britain. Why? Because, in the conflict between them, it will not be a question of democracy or fascism. If England should be victorious, she will put another fascist in Rio de Janeiro and will place double chains on Brazil."

Trotsky drew this conclusion because a) he knew that a defeat for imperialism would be a victory for all those oppressed by it across the world, and b) he wanted the working class to come to the head of the anti-imperialist struggle in the event of any war.

Take the example of Iran as a closer analogy. Here you have a reactionary theocratic regime, which may be attacked by Israel or the United States. In the event of this attack, what would the message of Marxists be to the Iranian working class? We would certainly seek to use the crisis to bring down the Iranian regime. But we would not for a moment call for an end to the war, or oppose the actions of the Iranian state, aimed at repelling the imperialist invader.

Our message would be "Victory to Iran!" But we would link this to the fight for workers' control in the armaments factories, democratic councils in the army, full political rights for women, and so on. In short we would wage a political struggle against the theocracy, while also giving unconditional support to the military struggle to defeat the attack of the United States or Israel.

The occupation of Iraq is different only in the following sense. Here, you have a country under occupation by an imperialist power. The US is already in power, rather than fighting for power in a war. But there is armed resistance, mainly led by reactionary forces. Like the Iranian regime, these forces are also enemies of the working class - they want to oppress the rights of women, the working class and so on. However, the question remains: how do we effectively fight their influence on the masses?

The answer is: by fighting for a united front with these forces. "But hang on" the AWL leadership would say, "how can you have a united front with reactionaries?"

This response belies a misunderstanding about the united front policy in general. The united front always involves a political struggle. In Germany in the 1930s, Trotsky proposed a united front of the communists and social democrats - and these were the very social democrats, who assassinated Rosa Luxemburg. But for Trotsky this moral question was irrelevant. The point was a united front of the mass organisations - organised in councils of action from below - was the best means to expose in practice the treachery of the social democrats, defend the class from the Nazis, and prepare the way for the working class seizing power, based on the anti-fascist committees.

By placing demands on the leaders of the resistance to have a united front with the working class, we can break their influence, and expose their treachery in struggle. After all, look at the series of ceasefires Sadr has called, and how his ministers once participated in the puppet government. These facts can be used against Sadr - as can be any reactionary attacks he carries through on workers or women - but they will only be effective, if the working class demands that all forces in Iraq (including Sadr's Mahdi army) unite in struggle to break the hold of the imperialist occupation.

In this case it is totally possible and permissible to organise democratic forums of resistance (similar, for example, to the popular committees of the first intifada in Palestine) to coordinate the struggle against the common enemy: in short, to fight for a united front "from above" and "below", as the Trotskyists did in Germany during the 1930s.

In this way the Iraqi masses will see that the revolutionary socialists are not afraid to fight, but, on the contrary, want to lead the resistance movement, and have a more progressive programme for the movement (e.g. for the nationalisation under working class control of the oil industry) than their current reactionary leaders. When whole regions or towns (Fallujah, Mosul, Sadr City, etc.) have risen up in revolt, it is clear that this movement is not simply limited to small bands of Islamic fighters, but at key moments has involved whole layers of Iraqi society.

To return to the question of "clerical-fascism", it is clearly necessary to expose the lie that, simply because a resistance movement is led by Islamists, it is automatically "fascist". The experience of the Lebanese Communist Party militias in Lebanon, fighting alongside Hezbollah against Israel, and of the joint work between the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Hamas in Gaza both demonstrate that the AWL leadership's single-minded obsession with "Islamofascism" (one they share with such pro-war writers as Nick Cohen of The Observer) is totally at odds with the reality on the ground. On the contrary, under the pressure of the masses' desire for unity, workers' organisations and Islamists have taken common actions against occupying forces.

The inevitable destruction of the labour movement?

Thomas quotes the AWL's historic leader Sean Matgamna approvingly:

"The immediate or, in Barry Finger's expression, 'precipitous' withdrawal of the occupying troops would, most likely, lead to three-way sectarian (Sunni, Shia) and national (Kurdish) civil war... In those conditions, the nascent Iraqi labour movement - which is our central concern - would probably be destroyed."

Would it? No, not necessarily, not if the working class was armed and had drawn mass support by declaring loudly and clearly that it was a consistent defender of the Iraqi people, and that its cadres had fought against the hated occupation. Let us remember how Islamist resistance movements became so popular in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq? Because the secular (usually Stalinist led) forces capitulated, and ceased fighting the imperialists or Zionists. The Islamists filled the gap, and rallied the majority behind them.

But let us think more carefully about what it means to say that in conditions of a "precipitous withdrawal" the labour movement "would probably be destroyed". Well, the question is what exactly is the alternative to a precipitous withdrawal - a steady, phased withdrawal? Under what conditions would the Americans do this - given we are now five years into the occupation?

The answer, of course, is: once they have won, and secured a stable pro-US regime in Baghdad, or managed the break up of the country into a series of client states. How exactly would the working class - in an Iraq, which was enslaved to imperialism in this manner - be in a stronger position?

The US occupations of Italy and Japan after the World War II provide excellent examples of how imperialism treats the working class in such situations - with formal democratic rights, but alongside the most repressive extra-parliamentary repression that you care to imagine.

Confronted with a general strike in Japan in 1947, US General Douglas MacArthur had the leaders of the trade unions brought to his office at gunpoint, and demanded they call off the strike. Or look at the creation of the secretive Gladio network in Italy, whose aim was to launch a military coup if the communists ever came close to taking power. These clear examples should dispel the illusion of any honest observer that imperialism would provide a breathing space for the working class.

Of course, the imperialists are not against promoting certain leaders of the workers' movement, so long as it is in their interests - for instance the Iraqi Communist Party, which joined the government at the start of the occupation. The imperialists helped them to build their "free trade unions" as a bulwark against the more independent and radical trade unions, and to tie working class politically and organisationally to a pro-imperialist party in a quisling government. Imperialism will only allow the creation of a workers' movement that is totally subordinated to the interests of the imperialists.

Principally, this means the economic plundering of the country, through extraction of its raw materials and the theft of industry, in the form of privatisation to foreign multinationals. Any serious strikes against this project will be met with, first, the Iraqi police, then, the Iraqi army and, finally, the imperialist troops - sent in to "keep order" and "protect democracy". The protection offered the working class by the occupation is illusory and those, who spread this illusion, are doing the work of public relations hacks for the Washington/London war machine.

Furthermore, what exactly makes the destruction of the labour movement in a precipitous withdrawal inevitable? This is a frank admission that the AWL - despite its nominally proletarian orientation - has no faith in the working class' ability to come to the head of the national liberation struggle. The force that leads the resistance will be in the best position to take power, when the troops leave. In short, to abstain from the

fight to rid the country of imperialist troops is to abstain from the struggle for power.

Forget the AWL's bourgeois "common sense" logic and learn from the Communist Movement

The Communist International summed up a clear analysis of what must be said in 1922:

"The Communist International, though well aware that in different historical circumstances fighters for national political independence can be very different kinds of people, gives its support to any national revolutionary movement against imperialism. However, it still remains convinced that the oppressed masses can only be led to victory by a consistent revolutionary line that is designed to draw the broadest masses into active struggle and that constitutes a complete break with all who support conciliation with imperialism in the interests of their own class rule."

The communist movement thus established critical but unconditional support for all anti-imperialist struggles as a principle. But they recognised that this is just one component of a communist programme for the liberation of the oppressed. This must include class struggle demands, like the formation of militant unions, strikes in the workplaces for economic and political demands, women's rights, and, above all, the arming of the working class - not only to defend itself from attack by imperialists or reactionaries, but also to go on the offensive against the imperialist occupation. The point then - as it remains today - is that, when revolutionaries refuse to raise clear slogans of class independence, coupled with consistent anti-imperialist positions, they will be outflanked and eventually defeated by the bourgeois nationalists, as happened tragically in Iran, 1979.

The Comintern continued:

"The refusal of Communists in the colonies to take part in the fight against imperialist tyranny, on the pretext of their supposed 'defence' of independent class interests, is the worst kind of opportunism and can only discredit the proletarian revolution in the East. No less harmful, it must also be recognised, is the attempt to remain aloof from the struggle for the immediate everyday demands of the working class in the interests of 'national unity' or 'civil peace' with the bourgeois democrats. A dual task faces the Communist and workers' parties of the colonial and semi-colonial countries: on the one hand, they are fighting for a more radical answer to the demands of the bourgeois democratic revolution, directed towards the winning of national political independence; on the other hand, they are organising the masses of workers and peasants to fight for their own class interests, making good use of all the contradictions in the nationalist bourgeois democratic camp. By putting forward social demands, Communists will stimulate and release revolutionary energy, which can find no outlet in liberal bourgeois demands. The working class of the colonies and semi-colonies must be firmly convinced that it is only the overall intensification of the struggle against Great Power imperialist oppression that can promote it to revolutionary leadership. On the other hand, it is only the political and economic organisation and the political education of the working class and the semi-proletarian layers that can increase the revolutionary scope of the anti-imperialist struggle."

The "worst kind of opportunism", comrades. AWL leaders will no doubt protest that we are no longer in the epoch where these policies applied. This is a question for another article, and another time. But when US and British forces are engaged in brutal and reactionary occupations, systematically denying the democratic and national rights of the Iraqi and Afghan people, we see no need to dump the Communist International's programme. Our message to AWL members remains the following: start a fundamental consideration of the politics and method of the AWL.