

# Hands off the People of Iran: campaign for action or propaganda bloc?

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Hands off the People of Iran (Hopi) describes itself as a campaign against an attack on Iran by the United States and in support of the struggles of Iranian workers, youth and women against Iran's repressive theocratic regime. It was initiated by Iranian activists, who had criticisms of the policies of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) leadership in general and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in particular. They accused the StWC and its predominant force, the SWP, of being soft on political Islam and even acting as apologists of the Iranian regime. This theme was taken up by Weekly Worker of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Hopi's current secretary Yassamine Mather wrote in Weekly Worker in February 2007 that StWC/SWP had "deliberately watered down the politics of the movement - to the extent of avoiding any critique of political Islam... and taking up 'Islamofriendly' slogans and positions." She singled out for attack the slogan, "We are all Hezbollah now" used in the 2006 demonstrations against Israel's invasion of Lebanon, when Hezbollah led the resistance, and claimed that the SWP had dropped its own principles and slogans in the antiwar movement.

It is certainly true that the Campaign Iran speaker at the November 2007 Stop the War conference (and at previous StWC meetings) went out of her way to excuse the crimes of the Iranian regime, claiming it was a democracy, downplaying its anti-Semitism and so on, with the SWP uncritically supporting many of these arguments. Leading SWP members on the platform were correct to emphasise that the antiwar movement had to concentrate on defending Iran from US threats - but they should have made clear their differences with these other claims.

The 2007 conference took the ludicrous decision to deny Hopi an affiliation to the coalition - despite the campaign being unequivocal in its call for the withdrawal of US and UK troops from the Gulf, which is the central demand of the StWC. In his executioner's speech at the conference, Andrew Murray, on behalf of the officers of StWC, accused the Hopi founders of trying to build an alternative to the Coalition.

As a result Hopi was formally launched at a December 2007 conference with a founding statement opposing both imperialist war and the Iranian regime, in contrast to StWC's central slogan of Troops out now/stop the war. So, is Murray right, is Hopi's intention to build an alternative to the StWC, and should the anti-war struggle in Britain link opposition to imperialism with opposition to the Iranian regime?

Even more importantly, if we are serious about stopping a future war on Iran, is it not the case that the Stop the War Coalition remains the best possible vehicle to do it? So why a build special campaign, such as Hopi, to focus on this? Or is Hopi a campaign, whose central point is to build solidarity with repressed opposition activists and organisations in Iran?

Of course Workers Power recognises that the issues are linked to one another, in the sense that the

Iranian working class is the only force that can lead a successful struggle against US imperialism and against clerical dictatorship at home. But in the event of an imperialist attack on Iran, the working class must not only defend the country against a possible Iraq-style occupation, alongside the troops and other military forces of the regime in the first instance, but also, by its determination and militancy, come to the head of this justified and progressive struggle, thus putting itself in the best place to overthrow the theocratic regime as soon as possible.

The first tactic is the "anti-imperialist united front" - a tactic adopted by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International before its Stalinist degeneration. The second - a question of strategy, not of episodic tactics - is the programme of permanent revolution, whereby the working class both fulfils and goes beyond democratic tasks (including national independence from imperialism).

This position is known as revolutionary defencism and is totally consistent with a parallel policy in the imperialist attacker countries - revolutionary defeatism. We in the imperialist heartlands must seek - by the widest mass mobilisations and militant direct action - to break the will of our rulers to carry on the war, i.e. we seek the defeat of our "own side" quite simply because it is not our own side.

But to make opposition to the theocratic regime a condition for supporting Iran in a war against the US and its British ally would unnecessarily narrow the forces of opposition in Britain. In Iran it could be a pretext for standing aside from the national struggle, thus isolating and condemning to impotence any working class forces, which took up this disastrous position.

We came to the following conclusions. First among these is our concern that Hopi is nothing more than a propaganda bloc that splits the difference between third campism and revolutionary defeatism.

### **What should be the objectives of the antiwar movement in the imperialist countries?**

It goes without saying that Hopi's main two slogans - No to imperialist war! No to theocratic regime! - are ones that Workers Power and most democrats and socialists would generally agree with. We are opposed to any war against Iran, but we are also opposed to the Iranian regime. By extension we are against all dictatorial or religious states, and fight for secularism and democratic rights as part of the struggle for socialism.

Nor do we believe that the imperialist aggression against Iran obliges us to tone down or suppress our opposition to this regime. Indeed in our propaganda during the current two-year sabre rattling against Iran, as in the run up to the 2003 Iraq war, Workers Power has put forward demands that link the struggle in such semi-colonial states against an imperialist attack to the revolutionary struggle by the working class to overthrow the regime itself and fight for socialism.

In 2003, as the war became a certainty, we advanced the slogan "Victory to Iraq", and called for the defeat of the US and UK military forces, arguing that the tactic of the anti-imperialist united front was crucial to uniting all those in the military struggle against attack. We also called on socialists in Iraq to fight for demands that allow the working class, under the leadership of a revolutionary party, to advance to the forefront of the resistance, opening the road to a successful revolutionary overthrow of the Saddam regime.

We will adopt the same approach in any attack on Iran or any other semi-colony (the Marxist term for a the great majority of "third world" countries today that are oppressed by imperialism, exploited financially and economically, and existing under the threat of the imperialism's military might, but, unlike an outright colony, formally independent with its own government).

However we are socialists; the StWC is a mass anti-war organisation that unites many different forces that

are not - trade unions, bourgeois pacifist groups, such as CND, religious groups, including Islamic groups, Labour against the War, and so on. That is why we are against linking together these two slogans - no to war, no to the regime - as the basis for mass anti-war campaigns in the imperialist countries.

In addition, such a dual slogan cannot but imply that the two forces in question - US imperialism and Iran - are equivalent to one another. In reality, of course, Iran has none of the economic, political and military power of US imperialism. It is not even an imperialist country - what other countries does it oppress and exploit? - but, rather, suffers from imperialist oppression. Raising the two slogans together carries with it the tacit assumption that, in the event of a war between the US and Iran, one would be neutral - when revolutionaries should side with Iran against the imperialists. Workers Power and, to their credit, the SWP opposed the attempts by the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) to get the antiwar movement to adopt the slogans "no to war, no to Saddam" prior to the Iraq war in 2003.

This does not mean that one should demand that the whole antiwar movement should adopt the slogan "Victory to Iran", because this would limit the antiwar movement to its explicitly anti-imperialist elements. However, the movement should be built around the call for an immediate and unconditional end to the wars and occupations. This can potentially mobilise largest number of forces for the de facto anti-imperialist objective of blocking an attack on another country, such as Iran, or securing the immediate withdrawal of the troops in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan today.

Within such a limited basis for common action, we are in favour of revolutionaries making their own propaganda for their own positions, the need for defeatism in the UK and the USA, the need for workers to overthrow the Iranian regime, etc. We do not need the permission of Lindsey German or Murray to do this. We have done it repeatedly, raising such burning issues as the demand that the union leaders on StWC platforms be pressed to call out their members (as in February and March 2003). Indeed our criticism of the leadership meant that these forces ousted us from the steering committee of StWC. But since our prime purpose is unity in action against the occupation and future attacks, we will not walk out in a huff or create a tiny imitation of an antiwar campaign.

### **An alternative to Stop the War Coalition?**

We think it is worth clarifying these principled differences we have with the Weekly Worker on the question of communist policy and the resistance to imperialism because it is the context, in which we have to view the whole Hopi initiative. Is Andrew Murray right to claim that Hopi is seeking to build an alternative to the StWC? If so, then we agree with Murray; the slogan of the StWC - Troops out now - must be the slogan of our movement; we have no need for Hopi.

If there is a fundamental problem with the StWC it is that on several occasions - for example, as the occupation took hold in spring 2004 - it dropped the call for immediate withdrawal of troops. German even shared a platform with a pro-occupation Iraqi Communist Party member at the European Social Forum in 2004. Similarly, a further problem with StWC is its failure to build a campaign of systematic direct action - including strike action - when this was possible and necessary in 2003. But these faults are hardly solved by setting up a third campist alternative "political centre" either within it or outside it. We need to fight within the StWC for militant direct action and against any concessions to the "troops home sometime" argument of the Liberal Democrats et al.

We do not need a third campist antiwar campaign - far from it. Murray also pointed to formulations from Weekly Worker to make his case. For example, he used the following quote from an aggregate the CPGB held last year:

"An important goal is to establish a viable alternative political centre to the rotten politics of the Stop the War Coalition and Campaign Iran. Obviously the main purpose is to oppose any attack on Iran by imperialism, but also, and crucially, to support working class resistance to the theocracy. Whenever any country is attacked there is a tendency to tone down criticism of the regime, and we need a conscious, principled effort to avoid such a drift. We are attempting to build links with groups of workers and protesters in Iran - such support always has the material effect of boosting morale of those struggling against autocracy."

## **Debating perspectives**

There is more confusion than clarity here. On the one hand, formulations like the "rotten politics of the Stop the War Coalition" confirm that Hopi is indeed perceived as an "alternative political centre". We do not conceive of StWC (or Hopi) as a "political centre", ripe or rotten. We have no need for single-issue campaigns developing political guidance for anyone. That is the task of political organisations, groups or parties with a programme, principles, and members loyal to these. But immediate and burning tasks require united fronts for common action. Confusion of these issues is a major weakness of the British left and a key feature of centrism - forces that vacillate between reformism and revolution

Likewise, Hopi's claim that its "main purpose is to oppose any attack on Iran by imperialism" is immediately qualified and confused by the addition: "but also and crucially, to support working class resistance to the theocracy". Weekly Worker's third campism is plainly on view when it states: "whenever any country is attacked there is a tendency to tone down criticism of the regime".

It is plainly untrue in the imperialist countries that, when a war breaks out against a semi-colony, there is a tendency to "tone down criticism" - the complete opposite is true! The media is howling with every criticism, true and untrue, that can be levelled at the regime to justify attacking it. Presumably, Mark Fisher, the author, means such a tendency exists on the left. While this may be true in some instances - for example, the Socialist Workers Party on occasion - the stronger tendency within the working class and even the far left is to what V.I. Lenin called "imperialist economism", that is, refusing to side with the oppressed state against the imperial invader, because it is a capitalist state too, because its leaders are bourgeois too, because they are dictators, etc.

The question of whether you give unconditional support to the forces fighting imperialism is the crux of the matter. A case Hopi and Weekly Worker make frequent recourse to is the protest against the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in June 2006. For example, in its leaflet to the StWC conference, responding to Andrew Murray's claim that they wanted to be an alternative, Hopi said:

"Rather than becoming an 'alternative' to the StWC, Hopi sees its main task as giving a voice within the Coalition to left activists inside Iran, who were deeply hurt and angered by pro-Hezbollah slogans raised in last summer's anti-war demonstrations in London and elsewhere." Even if it does not want to be an alternative, Hopi clearly does perceive its role as raising third campist politics inside the StWC. This, of course, should be its right, and it was nonsense for Hopi to be excluded for this.

But in our view, the anti-imperialist sentiment of the July 2006 demonstrations across Europe was to be celebrated, not criticised. It was a good thing that so many people on those demonstrations stood alongside Hezbollah in the war against Israel. When Israel was defeated, this was a victory not only for the people of Lebanon, but also for workers across the Middle East and the world. We do not need to give any political support to Hezbollah whatsoever to be alongside them against Israel.

## **Permanent confusion**

Quite aware of the third campist politics of its founders, we criticised one formulation in the Hopi motion to last autumn's Stop the War Conference that stated the "Iranian regime is not anti-imperialist in any sense". Our reasoning, simply, was that this implies we do not side with the Iranian state in the event of war. Certainly, the Iranian regime is not consistently anti-imperialist, but in the event of a war with the USA, it will carry out military actions against the imperialist armies, which should have our support. In this respect, we should be pleased that the founding conference of Hopi in December amended out this formulation, in favour of the correct formulation: "the Iranian regime does not represent a progressive or consistent anti-imperialist force".

There are also other demands we agree with in the founding statement. Hopi is clear on fighting for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the whole gulf region. It is opposed to Israeli expansionism and aggression. It supports progressive and working class forces in Iran against the regime. Hopi also took a principled stance on protests for imprisoned trade unionists organised by the International Trade Union Confederation on 6 March. They argued correctly that it was not permissible to support protests organised by these forces, because they were silent on (and have a record of complicity with) US imperialism. The founding conference also passed an amendment which said the "main enemy was imperialism".

Hopi also now includes Permanent Revolution. Unlike the Weekly Worker, it is not third campist, but has a revolutionary defeatist position on imperialist wars. Permanent Revolution intervened into the founding conference and improved some of the founding statement's formulations. It also moved the deletion of the formulation in the founding statement that called for a "nuclear free Middle East", arguing, quite correctly, that semi-colonial states have a right to nuclear weapons, if they so wish, in order to defend themselves against imperialism (but lost the vote).

Members of Permanent Revolution have argued that Hopi is not third campist, by pointing to its principled positions on the immediate withdrawal of US/UK troops from Iraq, and then contrasting this to AWL's refusal to raise this demand. But in truth the AWL's refusal to call for the withdrawal of troops in Iraq - the logical development of third campism - does not make Hopi's founding declaration in any way inconsistent with third campist assumptions. It is quite clear that the CPGB sees Hopi's founding declaration as entirely consistent with its third campist outlook, for example.

### **Hopi's identity crisis**

There is nothing wrong with third campists and revolutionary defeatists uniting in a solidarity campaign with Iranian workers, students and youth, who oppose the regime - though one has to say that it has not organised any actions, or practical solidarity that could match fine words with deeds. The problem is that Hopi clearly perceives itself as a hybrid campaign - including elements of solidarity work, plus making anti-imperialist and third campist propaganda.

In this respect, Hopi has something of an identity crisis: it does not know what it is or where it is going. If it is a campaign of actions to stop the war on terror, then it is attempting to be an alternative to StWC - one that is far smaller, far less likely to stop any future war. If, as the quotes above suggest, it wants to be an alternative "political centre" within the coalition that makes propaganda for third campist politics, then that is its right, but it is not something revolutionary defeatists are interested in.

The attitude of Workers Power to the whole campaign is the following: we will support any actions Hopi calls that we agree with, but we will not support a propaganda bloc, which carefully words its founding statement so that revolutionary defeatists and third campists can agree on it. Rather than clarifying the principled differences between the discourse of the "third camp" and a revolutionary defeatist stance, such a bloc

serves only to confuse it.

If Hopi becomes a campaign of actions, then reaching programmatic agreement is not necessary, as one only needs agreement on what action to take around which slogans. For example, take the Palestine solidarity demonstration Revolution and Workers Power initiated in Leeds recently with Palestinian activists and other leftists. This action was organised around very basic agreement - end the siege of Gaza, freedom for Palestine. A solidarity campaign need not require a great deal of programmatic agreement. Look at the brief statement of principles of the Columbian Solidarity Campaign. In contrast, Hopi throws into its founding statement a whole number of programmatic positions.

But, at the same time, if Hopi wants to go down the route of hammering out programmatic agreement, then its current statement is far from sufficient. For example, it says that it supports "socialism in Iran". Naturally, we also support this - but this poses more questions than it answers. How exactly does one get socialism in Iran? What programme should revolutionaries advance in the country? If we can agree with Hopi on what the revolutionary programme for Iran is, then we have a principled duty to take further steps towards revolutionary unity: i.e. a common revolutionary organisation to fight for this programme.

Of course, the problem is that we know from the outset political differences with Hopi's main forces are likely to stand in the way of programmatic unity. Not only is there the difference between revolutionary defeatism and third campism in the event of a war, but we also have other programmatic differences - for example, the Weekly Worker rejects the transitional programme and method.

## **Propaganda**

It seems very unlikely that Hopi could lead to real programmatic agreement between its component elements. But this makes the whole thing quite problematic for as long as it remains little more than a propaganda campaign. In the event of any war against Iran, either Weekly Worker, on the one side, or Permanent Revolution, on the other, could adopt the other's position. Or, more likely, the "unity" of Hands off the People of Iran would effectively break down, as different tendencies in it produce, well, different propaganda on the war.

There is something peculiarly British about the drive to set up such campaigns with a highly propagandistic founding statements over the last ten years. Look, for example, at the SWP's ill-fated Globalise Resistance, which drew up a radical democratic, anticapitalist but non-socialist programme of demands. It effectively collapsed - surprise, surprise - when it ceased taking action on the streets.

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