The rights and wrongs of Political correctness

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The debate over 'Political Correctness' has hit the British headlines recently. Stories of 'loony leftism' have been gleefully reprinted by the tabloids and even Tory ministers have joined in the fray. But behind the headlines, serious issues of censorship, discrimination and how to fight oppression are at stake. Lesley Day examines the issues.

New novel by the author of Jurrassic Park is launched in a blaze of publicity. Michael Crichton's Disclosure tackles sexual harassment - but the victim is a male who is later the subject of a false accusation of harassment himself. In the theatre a serious drama Oleanna plays to packed houses. It is about a college professor brought to ruin by an unjustified charge of sexual harassment. The instigator is a female student who offers to withdraw the charges if a series of 'politically incorrect' books, including the professor's own, are withdrawn from the library.

Meanwhile the British tabloids are delighting in the misery they have inflicted on a headteacher. After allegedly turning down a theatre trip using arguments associated with 'political correctness', she finds her job threatened and her sexuality under public scrutiny (see page 2).

Offensive
Social workers and teachers have come under attack from Tory ministers for a wide variety of practices from equal opportunity programmes, through anti-racist curricula to opposing trans-racial adoption. All of these are given the convenient label 'Political Correctness' and then ridiculed and attacked.

In this right wing offensive, reactionary writers and politicians have posed as the defenders of liberalism and free speech. They have sometimes been joined by those more often associated with progressive left wing causes. Supporters of 'Political Correctness' (PC) have been accused of being authoritarian, of stifling free thought or of being the equivalent of new witch-hunting McCarthyites. This extraordinary upending of reality helps the right wing justify their own witch-hunts which are aimed at anyone who challenges the enormous inequalities of our society.

The reactionaries try to suggest that the odds are now stacked against white males, especially at work in terms of recruitment and promotion. All the advantages, they claim, now lie with women and people from ethnic minorities.

But the facts remain that women's average earnings are still 70% of men's, that unemployment rates among black youth are twice as high for whites, and that surveys have shown a huge under-reporting by women of sexual harassment they suffer at work, particularly from managers. Amongst the sea of grey suits in parliament the red and electric blue suits of ambitious women MPs stand out precisely because of their tiny numbers. Amongst the 1,736 members of the judiciary only 92 are women and just six are from ethnic minorities. In 1989 black people occupied just 207 of the 18,644 posts in the top seven grades in the civil service.

So the first response of socialists to the reactionary opponents of 'Political Correctness' is straightforward. We know very well that the Tory ministers who demonise single mothers and lock up visitors from Jamaica over Christmas are opponents of equality and free speech and have to be fought tooth and nail.

Reactionary
But fighting this reactionary backlash should not make us uncritical supporters of Political Correctness. Amongst the many differing practices and attitudes that are labelled PC there are some we should support and some we should reject. The method that underlies PC can be wrong-headed and dangerous.
The term "Political Correctness" was a term first coined in irony or self-deprecation by left wingers in the United States referring to those whose political activity became increasingly confined to dealing with appearance, language and attitude rather than tackling the underlying causes of inequality. Indeed, preoccupations with these issues reflected the decline and disintegration of the mass political movements: black, women and lesbian and gay in the late 1970s. The right wing and the media then took up the term as part of the backlash under Reagan and Bush against progressive policies, particularly in the universities.

These policies were the legacy of the political radicalisation of the 1960s and early 1970s. Students and staff in universities fought for changes in the curriculum, in language and admissions policies. The universities had for long been the preserve of the middle class and privileged. There were bitter battles to get more black students admitted. As numbers increased and more working class, black and women students arrived in classes, they increasingly challenged what was being taught. Feminist academics set up the first Women's Studies courses. Black students and teachers challenged the traditional views of the history of civilisation and literature which excluded and ignored the contributions, and often the very existence, of cultures other than the European and Anglo-American.

Many mainstream academics have resisted this. They try to argue that the traditional liberal curriculum was value free and objective, whereas PC ideas mean promoting second rate writers and second rate civilisations. This is nonsense. Curricula are not neutral, and for the most part they reflect the predominant ideology of the time—that of the ruling class. When teachers and students make some progress in challenging this they are always opposed by those in command. For instance the Tories intervened to try and get the History component of the National Curriculum restricted to teaching the traditions and values of British imperialist history.

But mistakes have also been made in the name of PC. In reaction to traditional Eurocentric history and literature some PC supporters railed against "Dead White Males" dominating the curriculum. Famous literary works have been denounced as sexist, racist and offensive to students. The answer is not however to censor such works, to remove them from course lists and libraries. Students have to be taught to recognise them as products of societies dominated by oppression and colonialism which have to be viewed and analysed critically. The working class and the oppressed have to appropriate these works for their own, sorting out what is valuable and worth learning from and what is not.

Language

In Britain the focus of debate over PC has concentrated on language. Some of the most obviously daft aspects of PC have emerged in this area and the wrong method behind aspects of PC can be seen at work. Theorists such as Dale Spender in Man Made Language and other writings in the cultural field have developed idealist notions of the origins of inequality. Instead of a materialist explanation which recognises the roots of inequality and oppression in class society, language takes on an overwhelming importance. Supporters of this PC perspective seize on terms and labels and insist that anyone not using the "correct" term is a supporter of oppression. Accusations of racism and sexism get hurled about and in the midst of the furore, the question of policies and action for real change get forgotten.

It has often been in the white collar unions and workplaces that these issues are taken up obsessively. Words such as "disabled? are declared insulting to the "differently abled". A recent National Association of Probation Officers conference ruled a motion which had the term "tinkering" in it as offensive to Gypsies. Strike breakers could no longer be called "scabs" as this was offensive to people with skin diseases and so on.

Abusive

As socialists, we know that changing language will not change the most important aspects of social reality. For instance, the changes needed to deliver decent chances for disabled people will come from fighting for a society which isn't run in the interests of profit, which provides proper facilities and so forth, not from deciding which term is the best to describe them.

But this does not mean to say that language is not important at all. Part of the fight against sexism in the trade union movement has been changing the terms used. "Chairman" carries a certain expectation which we want to change. And even more important has been the fight against abusive or patronising language used to describe women and black
people or other racially oppressed groups. Such language reinforces their oppressed position.

Trotsky took the question of language very seriously. He welcomed some of the new terms thrown up by the revolution and looked forward to a creative fusion of old and new forms. He fought for clarity above all: ?Language is the instrument of thought?. This phrase is very telling. The origins of exploitation and oppression may not lie in language but language contributes to shaping attitudes. That is why Trotsky and Lenin fought against rudeness when it re?ected contempt by someone in a privileged position.

**Target**

Trotsky fought against the tendency in the Red Army to revert to the old Tsarist habit whereby of?cers could use the familiar of ?you? (like the French ?tu?) while those in the ranks were expected to use the formal version. ?Of course the polite and familiar forms are only matters of convention, but de?nite human relationships are expressed in this convention?.

Positive discrimination, known as af?rmative action in the USA, is generating the most controversy at present. It has become a prime target of the anti-PC campaign.

Livelihoods and life chances are at stake. Whenever bosses and managers cut jobs or training programmes workers will be left competing for limited opportunities. Selection is never fair under capitalism. But in order to appear fair, capitalism provides?and continually recreates?prejudices to justify unequal treatment, appealing to one section against another. Usually, the bosses turn on those already suffering discrimination. This used to happen with policies of ?women out ?rst?, for instance.

Modern managers are quite capable of using equal opportunities policies to foster divisions. ?Well of course you deserved it? a manager whispers to a worker who fails to get a promotion or regrading, ?but in the current climate of course the women/black candidates have to get the preference?. This insidious divide and rule ploy has to be fought head on?most obviously through a united ?ght for better conditions and pay for all.

**Programme**

But our programme should also encompass policies to combat inequalities, including where necessary ?positive discrimination?, and to right wrongs that are the product of oppression. Socialists try to unite all sections of the working class in ?ghting for the necessary resources to deliver these reforms. At the same time we point out that such measures will not eliminate oppression until its root?capitalist society?is overthrown. But the working class will not win its oppressed members for this battle if it does not take such issues seriously. ?Wait for socialism? is no answer to give to the black student who sees an array of white staff running the college or the black railworker who sees all the cabins occupied by white drivers.

The politics of Political Correctness has become at best an inadequate and pale re?ection of the thoroughgoing ?ght needed to uproot inequality. At its worst it is muddleheaded and misleads workers and young people in how to ?ght oppression. But its weaknesses should not prevent us ?ghting for an effective programme to combat oppression and exploitation and to see off the reactionary offensive that lies behind the attack on ?Political Correctness? on both sides of the Atlantic.

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