

SWP: wrong positions on Iran and Iraq

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?The war is no longer just a conflict between two ruling classes fighting for domination of the region . . . The war now is one in which Iran faces the world?s mightiest imperial power (the USA?WP) and its European and Arab allies. Under these circumstances socialists are not neutral... We are with the Iranians?for the defeat of the whole coalition of forces, including Iraq, that is ranged against them.? (Socialist Worker Review December 1987).

This is not merely a confused position. It is extremely dangerous. If socialists in Iran followed through the logic of this position in practice they would be going well beyond the legitimate defence of Iran against imperialism. They would actually find themselves endorsing Iran?s war aims?the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the imposition of a puppet Islamic regime in Iraq. This is what the SWP?s call for an Iranian victory in the war against Iraq means.

In September 1980 when the armies of Saddam Hussein swept into Iran Workers Power argued that it was necessary to defend Iran. Neither country was an imperialist power. Both were semi-colonial regimes, suffering domination and exploitation by imperialism. However, there was an important difference between the two regimes. Iraq had been distancing itself from its putative ally, the USSR, and courting US and French imperialism. Iran, on the other hand, had just been through a mighty popular revolution which had overthrown US imperialism?s trusted ally and regional gendarme, the Shah.

Khomeini was, throughout 1980, struggling to consolidate his Islamic dictatorship. But the task of defeating him in this project belonged to the Iranian masses. Saddam?s invasion was a deliberate attempt to usurp this task, establish a pro-imperialist regime in Iran and, as a reward, receive the nomination from imperialism as new regional power.

In these circumstances neutrality in the conflict meant refusing to defend the gains of the Iranian revolution?which Khomeini had not then completely eradicated?against an Iraq covertly backed by western imperialism. The revolutionary position was to call for a military united front to defend Iran against the external threat and to develop the class struggle in Iran to defeat the internal threat.

Thus our defence of Iran in 1980 did not mean giving any political support to Khomeini or withdrawing the call for his overthrow.

The SWP refused to defend Iran against the Iraqi attack in 1980. Instead it took a position of generalised defeatism. In the words of Alex Callinicos summing up their past position:

?The war became a war of attrition between two middle sized capitalist powers, two ?sub-imperialisms??.? (?Conference Report? SW 29 September 1987).

This analysis tells us nothing about the character of the war in 1980??attrition? is a military adjective not a political characterisation. Was there a coalition against Iran similar to the one the SWP claims exists today? Yes. Did the SWP oppose this coalition then? No! Nor are we informed as to exactly what a sub-

imperialism is.

Moreover the term 'sub-imperialism' is never explained. Sub-imperialisms of whom? The USA? The USSR? Or do they mean that Iran and Iraq are minor imperialisms in their own right? No doubt the SWP theoreticians will enlighten their members one day.

In the summer of 1982 the political character of the war changed, and with it so did the attitude of communists.

The reasons for taking a defencist position in Iran no longer held. Saddam Hussein's troops had been repulsed, Iraq was desperately seeking peace, and the Khomeini regime had turned the war into a crusade to impose its own regime on Iraq. Further the war was kept going not only as a war of conquest but as a means of distracting the population from the growing social crisis at home. In these circumstances Workers Power recognised that it was now necessary to adopt a defeatist position with regard to the war on both sides. Defence of the Iranian revolution was no longer at stake.

Throughout this period the SWP maintained their business as usual defeatism. It was only during the present stage of the war—imperialism's direct military involvement in the Gulf—that the SWP decided to change their position.

The intervention of the USA in the Gulf suddenly turned the war into a just one on behalf of Iran! To support this change of line the SWP leadership had to argue that the Iran/Iraq war and the US-provoked clashes in the Gulf were one and the same thing. In the words of Phil Marshall in the conference debate:

'Reagan has now mobilised the whole of western imperialism behind Iraq. The war is now one war—on the battlefield and in the Gulf.' (SW 28 November 1987).

This is wrong. The war on the mainland is, clearly, not the same as the one in the Gulf. The war on the battlefield is being deliberately maintained by Khomeini, against the will of increasing numbers of workers and poor in Iran. The conflict in the Gulf with the US navy, on the other hand is—despite its recent escalation—one that the Iranian leadership generally wish to contain and if possible resolve peaceably. This remains so despite the regime's flourishes of anti-US rhetoric.

Also, imperialism's objectives in the Gulf are no longer straightforwardly pro-Iraq. After Saddam failed to topple Khomeini quickly imperialism began to keep its options open by playing both regimes off against each other. The US ruling class in particular has consistently kept an open mind as to how it will achieve a more pliant regime in Tehran. 'Irangate' showed it was quite willing to attempt to bolster what it believed was a moderate faction in the regime around Rafsanjani, supplying arms to fight the Iraqis. Its support for Iraq now and its attacks on Iran's fighting capabilities are certainly designed to exacerbate the problems for the Khomeinite so-called hard-line faction but there is no evidence that the US imperialists intend to join Iraq in an all-out invasion of Iran, a policy they know could seriously backfire given the hostility to US imperialism amongst the Iranian masses.

Does this mean that we, as revolutionaries, should be neutral on the imperialist intervention in the Gulf? Absolutely not. We have a duty to defend Iran, a semi-colonial country, against the attacks made upon it by the world's most powerful imperialist country (see article on p10).

It is clear then, that the positions of the SWP have been wrong at every stage. When military defence of the Iranian revolution was posed the SWP declared themselves neutral. In 1982 they failed to register the fact that the Iran/Iraq war had become a reactionary one. In 1987/88 they have confused that war with the conflict between Iran and imperialism in the Gulf.

The import of their new position is a capitulation to the reactionary Islamic regime. At precisely the time when war-weariness is mounting amongst the masses in Iran as a result of the mass slaughter of the continuing, the SWP wants to argue against strikes or other actions aimed at the war which could mobilise workers against Khomeini. At the SWP conference Tony Cliff argued: 'If you give no support to Iran it means you support every strike.' He was actually advocating a partial cessation of the class struggle against Khomeini. Well we do support every strike directed at the Iranian war effort against Iraq (and every strike in Iraq directed against its war effort). This is an important weapon to re-arm and re-organise the labour movement in struggle against the Khomeini dictatorship.

Finally perhaps the SWP leadership will now explain to its membership why it does not reverse its position on the Malvinas War. Surely this was a clear-cut case of offering 'military support against imperialism'. Or was Galtieri's dictatorship somehow qualitatively worse than Khomeini's? Or is Thatcher's imperialism somehow 'better' than Reagan's?

The SWP leaders are unlikely to answer such questions. Without a clear Leninist understanding of revolutionary defeatism, or imperialism and anti-imperialism, the SWP will continue to lurch from abstention in real conflicts against imperialism (Britain versus Argentina) to lending support for the reactionary war aims of supposedly anti-imperialist regimes like Khomeini's Iran.

They do not have to bear the consequences of such centrist zig-zags. Iranian revolutionaries do. Yet, when called upon by Iranian exiles in the Campaign Against Repression in Iran (CARI) to discuss the war and their change of position, they refused to send anyone to the planning meeting to organise such a debate. To comrades who could have been enlisted in Khomeini's army of martyrs as a result of the SWP's new tactic, the SWP leadership won't give the time of day.

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