

TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY WORK

(Beyond Moral Internationalism and Towards a Materialist Approach)

The following two papers were written for a workshop on Internationalism at the Beyond the Fragments Conference. They stem largely from discussions in the BF Southern Africa Group, but have also been informed by discussions on the International Commission. They are included here as a contribution to the discussion on Ben Roberts' motion on international solidarity work, though, as we have not yet seen the final version of this motion, we will have to leave specific comments on the motion until the next bulletin.

As background to the papers, I quote Ray Wilson's introduction written for the Beyond the Fragments Conference:

Intro.

Our starting point is two-fold. Firstly the quite appalling record of British socialists over the years since the heady days of Vietnam solidarity, in supporting anti-imperialist liberation struggles - and particularly when its British imperialism that's under challenge. Ireland is a continuing saga, but we write more from our experiences in the abysmal failure of a national Zimbabwe solidarity campaign.

Secondly, the traditional response to liberation struggles has been to glorify the heroic freedom fighters during the course of the struggle, and then after they've taken power and events haven't turned out quite how one might like, we either denounce the new leaders as a bureaucratic elite/state capitalists (or whatever) who have to be overthrown by a party based on the industrial workers (however few workers there are in the country); or else, if we are Stalinists, we continue to support the unsupportable . . .

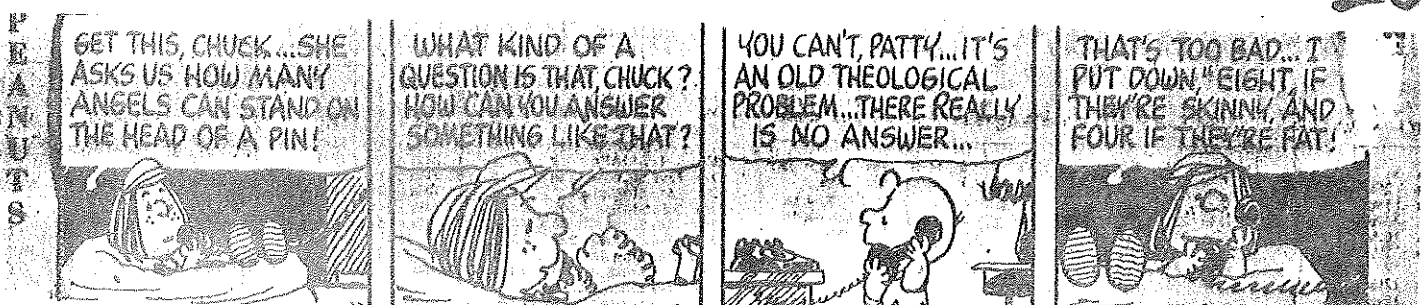
The first paper has three parts:-

- a) a look at the traditional Left approaches to solidarity work
- b) Suggestions for the theoretical basis of a mass, materialist approach
- c) the tricky question of critical or uncritical solidarity.

The second paper is a tentative attempt to tackle the problem of the implications of Prefigurative politics (especially as they have emerged through the women's movement) for solidarity work: How do you deal, for example, with sexism and anti-gay discrimination both within the liberation movements and within the solidarity campaigns?

It should be clear that we in no way claim to have solved the problems that constantly arise when you're involved in solidarity work, especially the problem of whom, how and when you criticise the national liberation movements. Maybe we should have just left it with the following cartoon:

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The traditional approach to solidarity work

This comes primarily from the Communist Party, who certainly dominate Southern Africa solidarity through Anti-Apartheid, and often other campaigns as well. Leaving aside some of the intricacies of CP politics eg why support ZAPU rather than ZANU; this approach amounts to:

- A) A moral/liberal human rights type approach appealing to the good nature and humanity of people in this country. This does make some headway with churches, student, liberals etc and also leftish trade union leaders - but it always fails to generate mass working class support.
- B) A downplaying of the interdependency of struggles, so that the struggle to overthrow white rule in South Africa is largely seen as unrelated to any struggle for socialism in this country (or even struggle against racism here). This leads to a position of trying to pressurise the British State and government into intervening on the side of the Blacks in SA - the British State being seen in a certain neutral way, particularly when there's a labour government in power.
- C) A total subservience to the policies/statements of the liberation (especially if its stalinist controlled) movement - solidarity seen as uncritical support (since any interrelation of struggles is ruled out). Here CP politicking fits in very neatly with liberal paternalism/racism/guilt? to say that we can't criticise. And since we can't criticise we only talk to the leaders of the liberation movement - because who knows, the lower ranks might be critical?
- D) Within the trade union movement all the effort is put into winning over the top leaders (more of why later) - so its anti-apartheid leaders talking to liberation movement leaders talking to trade union leaders talking to British government leaders and down at the grass roots other people organise as best they can.

The main (and better) opposition to this has come from Trotskyism. It can be characterised as such.

- A) an orientation towards the working class, and most particularly to the industrial working class (exclusively in the worst variants of trotskyism) but one which is still often very moral/human rights in approach - because
- B) Although they theoretically recognise the interdependency of struggles - the attempt to make practical linkages is often (but not always) pretty poor and prone to abstractness and moral appeals.
- C) an attitude to liberation movements which is rightly critical yet often becomes arrogant and slanderous in its criticism. Too often the 'correct line' is wheeled out without much analysis having been made of the concrete situation facing the liberation movements. The generally true statement that liberation movements are peasant based and led by elements of the petty bourgeoisie is trotted out in the manner of "well if you haven't got a workers vanguard party under the leadership of trotskyists then what can you hope for"
- D) An approach to the labour movement which is erratic in terms of going to the rank and file or the leadership (Labour Party/TU bureaucracy). This stems from the overemphasis in Trotskyism of becoming the leadership of a struggle, or winning them to your views divorced from what the membership think. Linked in to this is a practice of emphasising getting resolutions passed through small union meetings, and of over-emphasising the national campaign so that it never builds any strong local roots

So now we start to sketch out aspects of our alternative.

Theoretically we start from the position that workers in Britain do have a material interest in imperialist exploitation and are not, in general, going to be won over by moral exhortation. BUT we don't see this in a stafiz way ie, that 3rd world struggles are in the vanguard and the British working class is inevitably reactionary. Rather that this 'bread and butter' view of material interests has different meanings for different parts of the class (eg Black workers - see later) and also that it only holds over workers for as long as they identify with the British State and British Capital. Once they enter into a struggle against Capital there exists the potential for winning them to an alternative view of their material interests (though it ain't easy).

On a theoretical level we know that a struggle that weakens imperialism, and in this case Britain in particular, thereby strengthens British workers in their struggle against British Capital (& the multi-nationals) - but tell that to a docker who would lose his job if sanctions were implemented against South Africa. Its not on, of course, for as long as the docker isn't involved in struggle here.

BUT "The racist regimes of Southern Africa guarantee superprofits and cheap labour with little or no trade union organisation or political rights. For Western employers in the hunt for profits, South Africa is a literal gold mine. An unorganised factory within a multinational is a threat to all workers in that firm, whether the factory is down the road or in South Africa. British workers therefore have a real material interest in building solidarity with the struggle in Southern Africa"

- Manchester AAM leaflet

Or in other words traditional labour movement notions of blacking, solidarity, combine committees can, and need to be, extended internationally. If they aren't then the multi nationals are going to run rings round us all as they transfer production where they fancy. In the 78 Fords strike the workforce learnt how international (Europe wide in this case) solidarity from other Ford plants helped to win a partial victory. In Fords and a few other places progress is being made on European coordination but if that doesn't begin to extend to SA, Taiwan etc then the trend towards high unemployment in Western Europe and super-exploitation in the 3rd world (plus high unemployment) will get worse. If British workers don't support S.African workers etc in their struggles then sooner or later their company will get up and go - and all the reactionary cries for import controls, capital controls etc to protect British jobs won't save them.

If the above represents the most fundamental link between workers there are others of a more ideological nature - one can point out to the docker about to lose his job that the capital being withdrawn from dockland areas may well be off to richer pastures in S.Africa, or that ICL workers building computers for S.Africa's pass laws are probably building something similar for the police here etc.

But the working class is wider and much more heterogeneous than we socialists (not the ones here today) seem to think. For a start there's the black section of the British working class whose material interests - jobs, housing, education etc are very directly linked to racism and fascism in Britain. And that racism is inextricably tied in with imperialism past and present. Media propaganda about drug crazed terrorists in Zimbabwe may increase support for the likes of Smith etc but its primary purpose is to promote racism amongst the white working class in Britain and therefore help pave the way for tighter still immigration controls and so on. Any anti-racist movement that doesn't come to grips with imperialism is living in cloud cuckoo land because the consciousness is tied together - racist whites will talk in the same breath of 'shooting them all in Rhodesia and sending them all home'-racists are internationalists in a perverted way as the fascists well know.

We (white) socialists/feminists have to recognise the links that blacks in this country have with abroad and learn to act in support of their struggles. And also we should remember that racism is not just about blacks, it also hits Irish people eg Irish jokes. Anti-Irish racism and the consequent support for Britains presence in Ulster has opened the door for the State to bring in repressive measures here eg P.T.A., snatch squads, riot shields, the SPG etc. These all pioneered in Ireland - the republican movement has had many Blair Peach's

To end this sub-section with a quote from Race Today - Nov '76 - 'Building the International'

"Black workers are not simply manipulated on this historical chess board. We work to send money home because our labour in the sweat shops of the East End supports a family in Bangladesh, because the 8 hour shift in Dagenham or on London Transport is necessary to support our families and relatives in Barbados and Jamaica.

As Black workers in Britain, we are, by definition, part of an international working class. By interdependence and instinct, we aren't both part of the working class of the metropolis and the exported muscle of the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa. That is not to pose a separation of body and soul - not to say that our muscle is here and our hearts are there. No, it is to say that the money we send from here is determined by the needs out there"

and perhaps we should remember that the next time we talk about making links between British workers and the Zimbabwean liberation struggle - that many of those in the forefront of the liberation struggle in the rural areas were women and that many of those workers in industries linked to Zimbabwe, like tobacco, are women, and quite a few of them black as well.

A general point that comes out of all this is that if we are going to try and make material links then we HAVE to make those links pretty specific and concrete. We've given some examples but there's many others - like nuclear power. In the case of South Africa a lot of work is being done around the Rossing Mines in Namibia and their tie up with uranium for the British Nuclear Industry - the latest issue of Manchester Anti-Apartheid's trade union publication 'Links' goes into this in depth and should be at the conference.

A final point in this section is that some of the arguments we're putting forward are hard ones to make and win on the shop floor - there's no way round it because as we said at the beginning, there is a certain material interest in British workers supporting Apartheid (and racism in this country). The CP, with an empirical knowledge of the British working class far greater than that of the 'new left', understand this - and so they avoid the problem by only relating to trade union leaders. But even if the CP strategy actually got anywhere - say with a Bennite government - the imposition of sanctions against SA from above, with their consequent perceived detrimental effect on British standards of living, would create a right wing backlash (assuming of course that the CP and the Bennites hadn't done the necessary mass work at the base)

Critical or Uncritical Support to a Liberation Movement

Running throughout all the above is the view that struggles are interrelated and that in general the British working class can only be won to support for struggle in S. Africa on the basis of how it fits into its own struggle against capital (which isn't to deny that the principled gut internationalism of many socialists and moral ? outrage at racism are . good things which we'd like to see spread) . This leads on to how we relate to liberation movements.

We support liberation struggles and movements because at the very least, in their anti-imperialism, they are struggling against the capitalist system on a world level. And our support is conditional on that anti-imperialist content - we don't just support any old nationalist who comes along. But since their struggles have a bearing on our own then we have a right to make comment/criticism of them. BUT in so doing we have to be aware of a number of things.

- a) When there is such a massive amount of propaganda being put out by the bourgeois press attacking the liberation movement then a lot of our energy has to go into publicly defending them and stressing their strengths. And so most of the criticism will have to be private - comradely criticism of ones allies/friends who you think are making mistakes. However that can't become a total public subservience to the liberation movement because that would be creating a manipulative relationship between those who know what the movement is 'really' like and those who read our propaganda. It's a tricky problem knowing what to say when but it can be managed.

- b) a liberation movement will have a far better knowledge of the concrete situation in its country than us and therefore will have an advantage in developing concrete analyses of what to do - but that is not a blank cheque to say its always right - bad theory leads to wrong actions whatever ones empirical knowledge. Also we should remember to put more faith in what the liberation movement says than what the bourgeois press says (some of us sometimes develop a fatal soft spot for the Guardian).
- c) A liberation movement is rightly going to be much more open to criticism or advice from those who have worked hard in solidarity with it and have proven themselves trusted friends, This is particularly the case when one is a member of the imperialist country that they are struggling against and therefore in a sense part of the enemy. Also we shouldn't forget that in places like SA far more use is made of spies/infiltrators/agent provocateurs than we like to imagine is the case here. This will lead to suspicion on the part of the liberation movement. 'Earning the right to criticise' is a matter of practicalities and building up trust etc; it isn't about "you must do X amount of solidarity work before you can open you're mouth!"
- d) Criticism goes two ways - the liberation movement can and should criticise us for our inadequate support.
- e) Our starting point is different from that of the liberation movement - their focus of attention will be on the needs of their own struggle, ours will be on the needs of the struggle in Britain. A good example of this occurred in the ZECC campaign. At Lancaster House the Patriotic Front were forced to accept a particular British intervention including British troops in Zimbabwe over the election period. Many PF members including some leaders were quite open about that in private. Those of us involved on the far left saw no reason why we in the solidarity movement should not oppose this intervention because it would be used to strengthen British Capital and imperialism - explaining in our leaflets why the PF had signed the agreement. But the CP would have none of it - their uncritical support tied them to the public position of the PF, and the agreement and British troops were okay. It was only as Soames quite blatantly flouted the agreement that the CP could be dragged into doing much.
- f) There will be times perhaps when the interests of the struggle in the colonial country conflict with the interests of the struggle in the imperialist country. For instance a case can be argued that IRA bombings in Britain raise morale in Ireland and also weaken British support for the army's presence there. But that the resulting war weariness in Britain and the response of a racist - 'get our boys home and let the Irish shoot each other) - makes the struggle for socialism in Britain that much harder. Its a debatable point but even if it were true we would still have to say that we supported the bombings. Taking the struggle for socialism at home as ones starting point and using liberation struggles to liberate people here from their misconceptions about imperialism must not become an excuse for accomodating to the chauvinism of ones own country.