

AS WE SEE IT

PARTY POLITICS



Beyond Eurocommunism

The British Communist Party has been taken over by self-styled 'Eurocommunists'. Many libertarians view the occasion of leninists falling-out as a time for revolutionaries everywhere to rejoice; others cautiously welcome any inching away from stalinism. Have the changes in the CP gone far enough? Paul Anderson doesn't think so, and here he tells why.

IF ANYONE had suggested in 1975 that in ten years' time a monthly magazine published by the Communist Party would be making the intellectual running on the British left, nobody 'in the know' would have been able to resist a snigger.

At that time, the CP had the air of a corpse which had been

decomposing for thirty years. It was losing its membership rapidly; its ideology seemed neanderthal; and its practice consisted largely of bureaucratic manoeuvrings within a few trade unions. Nothing about the CP was remotely appealing. And yet in 1985...bright young (well, fortyish) boys and girls, wearing expensive glasses and chic knitwear and calling

themselves 'Eurocommunists' (a term which went out of fashion on the Continent several years ago), have revamped the party magazine Marxism Today; and even the Financial Times recognises it as pivotal to current left debates.

What's more, these Eurocommunists have - with a little help from CP apparatchiks anxious to dump some 'awkward comrades' - removed the Stalinist old guard (the 'Tankies') from positions of influence within the party (though the Tankies still control what used to be the Party's daily newspaper, the Morning Star).

Rivalry between diehards and Eurocommunists

It is too soon to tell whether the Eurocommunist takeover of the CP and the success of Marxism Today will reverse the decline in CP membership. There are nevertheless signs that the 'new look' CP will prove attractive to a wide range of people - those who find the Labour Party too bureaucratic and traditionalist, the varieties of Trotskyism too authoritarian, workerist or simplistic and the peace or women's movements lacking in broad political perspectives. At first sight, the CP of the Eurocommunists seems flexible, intelligent and modern, determinedly civil libertarian, committed to democratic pluralism and feminism. It seems to have abandoned the worst of workerism and pro-Sovietism.

Libertarian socialists can only welcome the re-thinking within the CP. But there are good reasons to believe that this process has some way to go before any self-respecting libertarian socialist could consider completely trusting the Party.

First, the Eurocommunists have at no time questioned the organisational principles of the

'democratic centralist' Leninist party. Indeed, they beat the Tankies and expelled their leaders from the CP in an essentially democratic centralist power struggle. The Tankies were convicted of breaches of party discipline - they had committed the 'crime' of not following the leadership's 'line'.

Not one Eurocommunist has bothered to ask whether this is the right way to go about politics. Not one has raised doubts about the right of leaderships to define 'lines', let alone wondered aloud whether radical politics really is a matter of the formulation of 'lines' which, if correct, the masses will follow. In such circumstances, it is rather difficult to believe in the Eurocommunists' stated commitment to the creation and maintenance of a culture of genuinely plural discourse on the left.

Second - and, it has to be said, consistent with this - the Eurocommunists have failed to engage in anything like an adequate critique of the regimes of 'actually existing socialism'.

They have certainly raised doubts about the human rights record of Soviet-type societies; they have provided (lukewarm) support for opposition movements in such societies (on condition that these do not 'overstep the mark'); and they have criticised certain 'errors' in Soviet foreign policy (such as the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan).

But they have refused to analyse critically and systematically the harsh social reality of 'actually existing socialism': instead, they clutch at straws, hoping against hope that one or another change of leadership, one or another official hint of 'reform from above', will somehow lead to the triumph of the 'good aspects' over the 'bad aspects'. Even though

is preferable to the Party's position at the time of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 - when the CP cheered as the tanks rolled in - it remains lily-livered and simplistic. Perhaps more important, it does nothing to dispel suspicion as to the sort of 'socialism' the CP would bring about if it ever had the chance.

Political limitations of Eurocommunism

Third, the Eurocommunists' abandonment of the old 'workerism' as a rejection merely of the way the old-style CP, by giving almost exclusive priority to jockeying for position in the trade union bureaucracies, ignored many important issues outside the sphere of production. The Eurocommunists, in other words, see the battle for office as just one activity for good Communists. They have offered neither a critique of the ideology and practice of bureaucratic corporatist union politics, nor an alternative model of workplace politics (though this is hardly surprising given their reliance on their majority in the CP on such figures as Mick McGahey).

This simply will not do. If we are to develop an adequate workplace politics (which we must, even if we reject workerism) we have to understand the ways in which the interests of trade union bureaucrats (even those on the 'left') and the interests of those they claim to represent often conflict. We need to emphasise the importance of direct democratic control of workplace struggle by those immediately involved. And we have to go beyond the demands for 'more jobs and more money' which characterise traditional trade union militancy - forcing onto the political agenda projects for massive reduction in working time, the disassociation of income from productivity, the self-management of production, and the transformation of productive

techniques. This will not be an easy task: but that is no reason to shirk it.

Fourth, the Eurocommunists' medium-term strategy of creating a 'broad democratic alliance' to defeat 'Thatcherism' is rather less exciting than its proponents would have us believe. Insofar as the Eurocommunists are arguing that the new right's attempts to make its ideology the common sense of the age should be fought against on all fronts they make a sensible point. And their emphasis on a plurality of oppositional social movements and the need for coalition building among these are also to be welcomed (with the proviso, of course, that the Eurocommunists' continued commitment to leninism makes their enthusiasm for pluralism rather unbelievable).

Unfortunately, their idea of the possible basis for such a coalition is extraordinarily wide of the mark. Because they identify the problem as 'Thatcherism' they cannot but end up (in spite of their Gramscian rhetoric) seeing the apotheosis of their political project as everyone-to-the-left-of-Ghengis Khan 'uniting to kick out the Tories'. Now the Tories are very nasty and it would be nice to kick them out. We should not, however, misidentify the problem; just as we stress that 'you can't blow up a social relationship', we have to stress that you can't vote one away either. 'The problem', in other words, is not 'the Tories', but something deeper; which we can formulate as our lack of control over the decisions that fundamentally affect us. Rather than attempting to unite the social movements around a simple anti-Toryism, we should be emphasising the potential for a far more radical unity based on a common refusal of powerlessness in everyday life and the project of generalised self-management.

PARTY POLITICS

Taking the British road



In a further attempt to crack down on indiscipline over 'The Morning Star', British Communists staged an emergency congress in mid-May. To get in and out, delegates were forced to run the gauntlet of members already expelled over the issue (see picture). Nino Staffa, a member of the Italian Communist Party, expresses here his sadness at the way his British comrades have behaved. We print this article not because we agree with it — we don't — but because it throws light from an unusual angle on this dispute.

MANY PEOPLE on the left find the current bitter struggle inside the Communist Party not only amusing but also further proof of the righteousness of their views. I believe, however, that what is going on inside the CP should

worry everybody who thinks of themselves as being on the left, since it is symptomatic of the way politics is conducted in this country in all parties and political groupings.

In the CP a vicious fight has

been waged between two factions with fundamentally opposing views and models of socialism. Both models have their attractions because they are based on the experiences of, loyalties to, Communist Parties in other countries, and the policies adopted are defended by each faction with even more fervour than the originators of those policies would care to use. Hence we have the phenomenon of 'Eurocommunists' who know their Gramsci by heart, holiday in Italy every year, and take in the Unita Festivals, but who haven't noticed that the Italian CP (PCI) stopped using the term 'Eurocommunist' about five years ago.

On the other hand, we have the pro-Moscow faction (the 'Tankies'), who defend the Soviet Union's past policies with even more enthusiasm than the Soviets do themselves. So while relations between the CPSU and the PCI have been improving over the last few years, despite the strong attacks on Moscow by the Italians over issues such as Poland and Afghanistan, the pro-Moscow faction of the CPGB is still showing a remarkable Paisleyite fervour in upholding the view that all evil comes from Rome.

The Euros are mostly influenced by the politics of 1968 and student politics of the sixties and seventies. They have worked hard to get their progressive views on feminism, gays, blacks and youth accepted by the Party, with much opposition from the Tankies, who rolled out the old chestnut of these issues 'being a deviation from the class struggle'. The Euros have analysed 'Thatcherism' as being a new right wing phenomenon in British politics, which calls for the building of broad alliances to combat this government's reactionary policies.

Predictably, the Tankies have replied that there is no such thing as Thatcherism; class

struggle is the only answer to this "new phase of Toryism". What we face, they have claimed, "then [i.e. 1926] as now" is "a crisis of capitalism". As for the policy of building broad alliances, the Tankies have been charging the Euros for several years with wanting to drag the CPGB into the SDP.

At the recent Special Congress of the CP, the Eurocommunists swept the board. Leading Tankies were expelled from the Party; and all Tankies were removed from the executive committee. They now control only what used to be the party newspaper, the Morning Star.

The reason it came to this between Euros and Tankies is that

WHO'S WHO ?

Eurocommunists



Self-styled 'British Roaders' the Eurocommunist faction controls the weekly newspaper Focus (UK circulation 3,500) edited by ex-Morning Star man Paul Olive, and monthly magazine Marxism Today (UK circulation 10,500) edited with breathtaking opportunism by Martin Jaques. Operating out of the party headquarters at 16 John Street EC1, the Euros are led by General Secretary Gordon McLennan (inset) and, since May, the entire Executive Committee.

WHO'S WHO?

Hardliners



The hardline Communists control the party's daily newspaper, the Morning Star (UK circulation 16,000), and operate from the paper's offices at 75 Farringdon Road EC1. Key protagonists are Mary Rossner, Secretary of the Peoples Press Printing Society (the trust which manages the Star), and the paper's editor Tony Chater, and deputy-editor Dave Whitfield (inset). The May congress saw Chater and Whitfield's expulsion from the party confirmed by 166 votes to 76, and 166 to 77.

inside the CP there has been a breakdown of the fundamental mechanism of a Communist Party, 'democratic centralism'. Neither side felt able to debate their differences in their local branch meetings or elsewhere, and the decisions of Congress or the leadership were by and large not accepted as binding by the whole party, because the losers (often the Tankies) did not feel that they had been given a fair hearing. The reason for this is simple: there is no tradition of political debate in this country - there are only victors and vanquished. If the vanquished are not totally obliterated they will continue to indulge in factional activity.

As far as I am concerned, the

current situation, total hostility between the Morning Star and the CP, is absurd, and whoever allowed things to get into this state should be sent packing. The party leaders failed to lead, and even now are being led themselves by the victorious Eurocommunists. I can't help feeling, however, that if the other lot had won Gordon McLennan would have carried on as General Secretary quite happily.

Having met people on both sides of the political divide in the CPGB I am saddened by the whole affair. Many worthy comrades have been forcefully drawn into one faction or another and hence prevented from working together where previously they had fought side by side on a whole host of initiatives. In NALGO, for instance, Euros and Tankies worked together very well to produce a coherent 'Broad Left' policy supported by the non-Trot left in that union. After the expulsion from the CP of John Beavis (currently Metropolitan District Secretary of NALGO and a leading Tankie), a whole area of work is potentially threatened and open to the ravages of both the Trots and the old NALGO right wing.

To take another example, in Tottenham a very good campaign was organised by the local CP branch (which included several leading Tankies) to 'Save the Prince of Wales Hospital'. They managed to mobilise local churches, kicked the local Labour Party into life over the issue, worked with community groups, and so on, in the best manner of building broad alliances. Yet most of the same Tankies' factional in-fighting consisted of bitter criticisms of the Euros for their policy of 'building broad alliances'.

Why didn't people learn from all this? Perhaps it is because the two sides now hate each other on a personal level; when hate is deeply ingrained, any excuse for factionalism will do, and any policy will do.