

Britain's Socialist Workers Party and the defence of national reformism-Part 1

A review of Alex Callinicos's An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto

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An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto by Alex Callinicos, Polity Press, London, 2003, ISBN 0-7456-2904-0

The following is the first of a three-part review.

Alex Callinicos is the main theoretician of the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, which has satellite formations in various countries around the world. What makes his book of interest is that the positions he advances in order to justify his party's orientation to the politically corrupt milieu of the World Social Forum and its offshoot, the European Social Forum, are held in common by the majority of the former left radical groups.

In the guise of a supposedly anti-capitalist manifesto, Callinicos has drafted a rationale for abandoning any pretence of advancing revolutionary politics based on the working class. He proclaims instead that the nation state remains the basis for implementing a reformist programme and that to this end the SWP will seek to cobble together a political movement that is not based on the working class, but on alliances with various protest groups, think tanks and other more or less left-leaning formations.

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It is through these alliances that the SWP is seeking to establish a place for itself within the highest levels of the bourgeois political establishment. Callinicos makes play of updating the *Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in 1848. His closing line is "now more than ever, we have a world to win"—an allusion to the closing declaration of the work by Marx and Engels.

But the difference between the two manifestos could not be more fundamental. Marx and Engels wrote a manifesto aimed at securing the political independence of the working class from all the representatives and defenders of the bourgeoisie and its profit system and popularising the perspective of revolutionary socialist internationalism. The *Communist Manifesto* closes with words designed to appeal to the most forward thinking sections of the working class and the intelligentsia.

Marx declares, "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of all countries unite!"

The purpose of Callinicos's work is to subordinate the working class to a perspective based on the preservation of the bourgeois state and the leadership of various groups who are the political defenders of

the profit system. For this very reason, he cannot openly declare his ends but must resort to sophistry, half-truths and lies.

A genuinely anti-capitalist manifesto would have to address itself first of all to the task of alerting the advanced workers and youth to the fundamental features of contemporary capitalism and so outline a perspective on which to take up the struggle for a socialist world.

Essential to such a manifesto would be to explain the objective significance of the globalisation of production that has developed over the past two-and-a-half decades and its implications for the class struggle.

The unprecedented integration and interdependence of the world economy today is incompatible with the nation-state system upon which capitalism is based. This has had a fundamental impact on all social and political relations worldwide.

Domestically, in every country the social position of the working class has been massively eroded. National governments, whatever their political coloration, compete with each other to attract investment from giant transnational corporations, which operate on an international scale in a search for cheap raw materials and low wages.

This has fundamentally altered the relationship between the working class and its old parties and trade union organisations that were based on a national perspective of utilising the machinery of the state to implement a limited programme of social reforms.

The traditional orientation of the social democratic and Stalinist parties was founded on the premise that the protection and development of national industry would provide the means for securing higher wages and better working conditions—through a combination of collaboration and placing pressure on the employers, and working through parliament to implement certain social reforms.

This possibility has been dramatically undermined by globally integrated production and the consequent unprecedented mobility of capital. The universal response of the old labour organisations has been to abandon their reformist programmes and declare themselves unambiguously for the capitalist system.

Only an ever-declining rump of the labour bureaucracies still make a pretence of advancing reformist policies. But they remain wedded to a national programme that offers no way out of the political impasse into which the working class has been led, or of combating the attacks being waged against their past social and political gains by their old parties. Rather the "left" wings of the old organisations, or parties that have split from them, act as an obstacle to the political reorientation of the working class on a socialist and internationalist programme that corresponds to the reality of the class struggle today.

Under imperialism, the conflict between global production and the division of the world into antagonistic nation states resolves itself not only into class warfare at home, but a ruthless struggle for control of the world's markets and resources. The violent eruption of US militarism that led up to the bloody conquest and occupation of Iraq represents an attempt to establish American hegemony over the world's markets and resources through force.

The working class cannot combat these developments by turning back to the national soil. Global production must become the basis for a new revolutionary and internationalist orientation for the labour movement. Globalisation not only creates the possibility for rationally integrating and expanding the world's productive forces in order to eliminate poverty and raise living standards for everyone. It creates the objective basis for the unification of the working class in an international political struggle.

The issue is not to oppose globalisation, but to take control of the world's productive forces, liberate them from the profit motive and organise production to meet social need. Essential to such a struggle is that the working class rejects all forms of economic nationalism and protectionism that are designed to subordinate their interests to those of the employers.

It means maintaining a vigilant hostility to the apparatus of the nation state, which functions as an instrument of the bourgeoisie for suppressing the working class at home—dividing it from its brothers and sisters overseas—and as a mechanism for securing the right of the national bourgeoisie to a share in the exploitation of the world's peoples and resources.

A defence of the nation state and reformism

Callinicos takes an entirely opposed position.

He advances a programme the starting point of which is an insistence on the continued viability of the state and an identification of the interests of the working class with the preservation and extension of its powers.

He says of his own list of demands/prescriptions:

“Firstly, the demands listed above are generally placed on states acting either singly or in concert. This reflects the fact that, whatever the effects of globalisation, states are still the most effective mechanisms in the world as presently constituted for mobilising resources to achieve collectively agreed goals. To recognise this is not to renege on anything I have said earlier about the limitations of any political strategy that identifies the nation state as the main counterweight to global capitalism. States are part of the capitalist system, not a countervailing power to it. But states, because they are partially dependent on securing the consent of their subjects, are vulnerable to political pressure from below. Mass movements can therefore extract reforms from them” (page 139).

Equally revealing is his argument for capital controls, which he justifies as follows:

“International law still allows states to impose capital controls under the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, which set up the IMF and the World Bank.... Reintroducing them would allow governments to exert some control over the inflow and outflow of capital. Like the Tobin tax [a proposed tax on international capital transactions supported by various radical groups] capital controls would begin to allow some

degree of political control over financial markets, in this case at the national level” (page 133).

Callinicos seeks only to place pressure on states for reforms, not to mobilise the working class to bring an end to the nation-state system and inaugurate socialist planning on a world scale. He even declares, “The ambiguity of reformism as a political strategy is that it represents both a challenge to the system and a means of containing that challenge. There is no easy way round this problem.”

His political orientation is to the decaying fragments of the old social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies. He even says of his demands that they have the benefit of having all been raised by “existing movements.” His book is an attempt to synthesise under a pseudo left-wing cover a programme culled from the demands made by various bourgeois or petty-bourgeois formations. These demands are designed firstly to safeguard their own privileges, and secondly to avert the possibility of a revolutionary struggle developing against capitalism by appealing for the preservation of certain minimal social palliatives to counteract the depredations of globally organised capital.

Under conditions where the old parties have lost much of their support amongst the working class as a result of their rightward lurch, ostensibly left formations of the type epitomised by Communist Refoundation (PRC) in Italy act as the essential cover for the entire labour bureaucracy. That purpose is not changed one iota by the fact that they have formed new parties or are speaking about new parties. Since those new parties are conceived of purely as an instrument for reorienting the working class back to its old parties.

They are complemented by a host of so-called nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), charities and think tanks whose aim is to persuade the major parties and national governments that a limited programme of reforms and checks on the worst excesses of capitalism is still essential if the class struggle is to be prevented from taking revolutionary forms. These groups—such as Attac in France—are nothing more than advisors to the labour and trade union bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie itself.

Callinicos, the SWP and their ilk occupy what passes for the extreme left of this milieu, utilising occasional Marxist rhetoric to paint these movements, grouped around the World Social Forum and the European Social Forum, as the nucleus of a new supposedly anti-capitalist leadership for the working class. In this way the radicals have secured for themselves a place at the top table amongst those who function as the last line of defence for the capitalist order.

To be continued



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