

UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw rants against Trotskyism

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29 November 2004

UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw sent an extraordinary letter to the *Independent* newspaper on November 16. It was in reply to an article by Robert Fisk the previous Saturday. In a description of Yassir Arafat's funeral, Fisk had disparagingly referred to Straw, who attended on behalf of the British government, as a former Trotskyist or "an old Trot."

Straw responded to Fisk's factually incorrect aside like a man accused of a heinous crime, stating that to call him a Trotskyist was "a malicious libel." Far from being a former Trotskyist, Straw indicated that his political sympathies and training could be traced back to Stalinism.

No leading British politician has ever made a similar statement, and it is extraordinary that a foreign secretary who has worked so closely with the United States feels free to do so. The reader is left wondering whether Straw has taken leave of his senses, or whether he has become so arrogant since the invasion of Iraq that he thinks he can get away with saying anything.

Straw addressed the letter cynically to "Dear Comrade Editor," before explaining, "I have been consistent in my opposition to Trotskyism and the false consciousness it engenders. I was first taught to spot a Trot at 50 yards in 1965 by Mr. Bert Ramelson, Yorkshire industrial organiser of the Communist Party."

Apparently unable to resist the urge to show off the lessons he had learnt under the tutelage of Ramelson, he added, "PS. Further reading Isaac Deutscher: Trotsky (3 vols). Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder, V. I. Lenin 1919." This latter book was, he claimed, "a prescient warning about Trotskyist adventurism."

A week later, Straw was back in the letters column of the *Independent* on the same subject, responding to a number of letters attacking him. This time he accused Trotskyists of "revanchism, false consciousness and objectively counter-revolutionary tendencies." He had, he said, been reading Lenin's *Collected Works* in the Foreign Office library and found in Volume 17 an article Lenin wrote in 1914 entitled "Disruption of Unity under the Cover of Outcries for Unity." Mixing this article together with a reference to Lenin's article "Left Wing Communism" Straw accused Trotsky of "factionalism," "splittism," "ultra-leftism," and "wider infantile disorders."

In a failed attempt at wit, he added, "PS Quiz question: Name a successful Trotskyist government (or revolution, for that matter)."

As a reader shot back the next day, October 1917 was just such a revolution. Trotsky led the Russian Revolution along with Lenin, on a programme based on Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, and the only people who have ever attempted to deny it are the Stalinists. The accusations that Straw makes in fact go back not to Lenin in 1919 or even to 1914, but to the 1930s, when Stalinists created a lie machine to pervert history and justify a series of political show trials at which all the old Bolsheviks were framed up and murdered.

The books Ramelson taught Straw to refer to do not say anything even remotely like what he attributes to them. Deutscher's biography of Trotsky, whatever its failings, has convinced more than one person to join

the Trotskyist movement because the events it details reflect so well on Trotsky as a great revolutionary leader—and so badly on Stalin. (The 1914 article that Straw refers to was written when there were sharp political differences between Lenin and Trotsky, because Trotsky was still trying to achieve unity between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.)

There is no reason for anyone to dwell overlong of Straw's attacks on Trotsky. History has settled beyond doubt the question of which tendency, Trotskyism or Stalinism, was "objectively counter-revolutionary." Straw may write as if he is still in a period where the Communist Party of Great Britain and its fellow travelers could attempt to silence their critics by referring to "actually existing socialism" and the power and might of the Soviet Union. But contemporary political reality is a world in which the USSR was destroyed and capitalism restored by Stalin's heirs, as the final political crime of a bureaucratic tendency whose only lasting legacy has been to disorient the working class through its crimes against socialism and communism.

Moreover, an attack by the likes of Straw, who is even now presiding over Britain's occupation of Iraq, must be worn like a badge of honour by anyone who fights for a socialist alternative to capitalism, colonial conquest and military barbarism. Indeed, far from being, "a prescient warning about Trotskyist adventurism," "Left-Wing Communism" offers a startlingly accurate portrait of Labour functionaries like Jack Straw. Lenin might almost have met the man who as British Foreign Secretary has sent troops to seal off Fallujah while US forces lay waste the city and massacre its inhabitants when he wrote that he wanted workers to learn "from their own bitter experience the absolute impotence and spinelessness, the absolute helplessness and servility to the bourgeoisie and the utter vileness of the government of the paladins of the Second International." [V.I. Lenin, "Left Wing Communism," in *Selected Works*, vol. 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1967, p. 399]

Nevertheless, Straw's response is significant in two respects:

Firstly, it draws attention to the usually unacknowledged contribution made by Stalinism to the training of a significant layer of bureaucrats within the Labour Party in a ferocious brand of anti-communism masquerading as anti-Trotskyism.

Secondly, it indicates a fear and hatred that is usually unstated within the highest echelons of the Labour government of the threat posed by the socialist and internationalist programme of Trotskyism to themselves and the exploitative system they defend.

The slanders Straw makes against Trotsky were the stock references that Communist Party organisers used as they fought to prevent Trotskyists gaining a hearing in the student movement and trade unions in the 1960s. This was at the time when the CP was building up a body of trade union officials and student leaders who, while often nominally in the Labour Party, took their line from Ramelson. Arthur Scargill, who eventually became president of the National Union of Mineworkers, is perhaps the best known of these, but there were many others.

As aspiring careerists in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, they

knew that the best way to preserve their positions and the privileges that went with them was to use the virulent anti-Trotskyism of the CP to prevent the working class members of their organisations from developing an independent political consciousness. This was at a time when a broad-based radicalisation was taking place amongst workers and students alike, and when the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League was winning growing support—to the point where it had taken control of the Labour Party's youth movement and had a substantial presence in many trade union branches.

Straw came under Ramelson's influence when he was a leader of the National Union of Students in Leeds. He was clearly grateful to Ramelson for providing him with weapons to use against his Trotskyist opponents from the arsenal of Stalinist slanders.

Straw's foray into anti-Trotskyism is not a return to the haunts of his youth, but reflects fundamental lessons that he learned from Ramelson and that have stayed with him throughout his political life as a Labourite. There is an essential consistency in Straw's life between his later political career as a Labour politician and his earlier relationship with Ramelson. And it says much about the fundamental character of Stalinism that Ramelson's heir is someone like Straw.

Ramelson worked for the Communist Party in Yorkshire until 1966 when he became the national industrial organiser. He was number two in the Communist Party hierarchy and the public face of the organisation. Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson named him as one of the "tight knit group of politically motivated men" who, he claimed, were behind the seamen's strike of 1966. He retired in 1978 and died in 1994. His reputation as an industrial organiser rests on the wave of militancy that defeated the Wilson Labour government's attempt to introduce legislation against the right to strike and to limit wage rises and defeated the Heath Tory government's attempt to do the same.

But his real achievement was that he and the union leaders he trained managed to contain an upsurge in the class struggle that lasted from the middle of the 1960s to the mid-1970s to the level of industrial militancy and prevented it from taking a political form. In these years, Britain entered a profound political crisis, and the only ones kept in the dark about it were the workers themselves. Sections of the ruling elite were fully conscious of the extent of the crisis and, when the Heath government fell in 1974, considered declaring a state of emergency and overthrowing parliamentary rule. Ramelson and those he had trained were instrumental in returning a Labour government and averting an open political confrontation. Ultimately, therefore, Ramelson can claim a large measure of the credit for saving British capitalism in those years.

Like many others of his generation, Ramelson joined the Communist Party because of the mass unemployment he saw around him, the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism, and the drive to war. But unlike others, he stayed loyal to the party long after it had degenerated and become a vast bureaucratic apparatus that saw revolutionary struggles as a threat to its position and privileges. Trotskyism was a threat to the Kremlin bureaucracy because it represented the continuation of the revolutionary Marxist perspective, and as a result they waged an unrelenting struggle to physically liquidate Trotskyists, to slander Trotsky, to manufacture lies about his record as a revolutionary and to prevent his ideas reaching the working class.

Ramelson's commitment to this perspective was unwavering. When he visited the Soviet Union in 1956 after Krushchev's speech had partially acknowledged some of Stalin's crimes, he was reunited with his sister who had stayed in the Ukraine. He had sent her a telegram in 1945 to tell her that he was still alive and received a reply that appeared to come from her, saying that she was well and would write more fully later. When they met face to face, he discovered that she had spent the last 20 years in a Stalinist labour camp, where her husband had died. She had been arrested at the height of the Stalinist purges, one of the many thousands of workers

and intellectuals who were imprisoned as the Stalinists tried to destroy the best elements in the younger generation who were increasingly responding to Trotsky's perspective during the 1930s.

Ramelson's loyalty to the Communist Party was not shaken even by this direct personal evidence of the nature of the bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union. He had long since committed himself to the anti-Trotskyist perspective of the Kremlin bureaucracy. Some speculated whether he worked for Stalin's secret police—the GPU. There is no evidence that he did. But what is clear is that he had the mentality of a secret policeman, who devoted himself to suppressing the socialist political development of the working class.

That was a task that met not only the needs of the Kremlin bureaucracy, but also those of the British ruling class. Which is why Straw never had to make a break with this essential aspect of his past, even after he had long abandoned the pretence of supporting the socialist transformation of society. And his past associations must be well known to the British state security services and have been no obstacle to his political career.

The Kremlin bureaucracy treated the Communist Parties outside the Soviet Union as tools of its foreign policy, rather than as potential leaders of revolutions. For Stalinists working in Britain, the Labour Party became central to their strategy during the Cold War period because it seemed to offer the best prospect of a government sympathetic to the Soviet Union. A generation of factory militants was trained in this perspective, so that instead of fighting for working people to overthrow capitalism and take power into their own hands, they restricted the class struggle to issues of wages. Ramelson had built up such a structure of bureaucrats in the trade union movement by the 1970s that he believed the Communist Party had only to "float an idea early in the year and it will be official Labour Party policy by the Autumn." [Francis Beckett, *The Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, John Murray, London, 1995, p. 174]

What remains of this work today? Straw is by no means the only member of Blair's team that has a background in Stalinism and its periphery. John Reid, the health secretary, is a former member of the Communist Party, according to Derek Simpson, leader of the trade union Amicus, himself a former Communist. Kim Howells, MP for Neath in South Wales, is a former Communist Party member. He was responsible for helping end the 1984-1985 miners' strike by organising a return to work in the South Wales coalfield that created a snowball effect in the rest of the country.

Perhaps the most high-profile is Peter Mandelson, now a European Union commissioner, and one of the architects of New Labour, who was a member of the Young Communist League. Mandelson worked as an adviser to Neil Kinnock, John Smith, who succeeded him as leader, and Tony Blair.

The links between the formation of New Labour and the Communist Party are also expressed quite explicitly in the close relationship that developed between Kinnock and the group associated with *Marxism Today*, which included Martin Jacques, Stuart Hall, Eric Hobsbawm and Geoff Mulgan. *Marxism Today* began life as the theoretical organ of the Communist Party, and later became identified with the Euro-communist faction of the party. During the 1980s, it argued that "Thatcherism" could not be challenged unless the Labour Party accepted that class struggle had been superseded by consumerism and identity politics.

They argued that it was necessary to junk the old Keynesian perspective of minimal welfare state reforms and embrace the free market in an appeal to aspiring sections of the middle class. What became Blair's Third Way can be traced to these ideas first developed in *Marxism Today*.

Straw's letters have unintentionally drawn attention to this vital contribution made by the Communist Party to the Labour Party and Labour governments in the post-war period. But this is a history that is not usually made available for public consumption, since it contradicts the

official view that there was an unbridgeable divide between the two and that Trotskyism was an insignificant political tendency.

Why then does Straw break the silence? It is the case that political crises often emerge in political parties in unexpected ways, because of the strain they put on the individual psyche.

Straw sits at the top table of a government now seeking its third term in office and apparently without a serious political opponent in sight. But he knows that he is pursuing a foreign policy that makes him hated by the majority of the population. Sensing a threat from below, he turns to the lessons he learned 40 years ago from Ramelson in order to attack Trotskyism—because he recognises that it was then and remains today the tendency that expresses the objective interests of the vast majority of the population. It shows that the lessons he learned went very deep indeed, precisely because they became an essential part of not just his own persona but the social being of an entire bureaucracy—animated as it is by visceral hatred for, and fear of, the prospect of a politically independent movement of the working class.



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