

The presence of Tariq Ali at the “Socialism 2010” conference

David Walsh
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If a political meeting is to be judged by its featured speakers, then the presence of Tariq Ali at “Socialism 2010” is pretty definitive. Ali is a political opportunist of the worst sort, as demonstrated by his decades-long political record.

Born into a prominent family in Lahore, his uncle the chief of Pakistan’s military intelligence, Ali went to England to study at Oxford. He became part of the International Marxist Group in 1968. The IMG was the British section of the Pabloite movement, a group specializing in political provocation, with more than its share of ‘naughty schoolboys.’ Dressed in Mao caps and the latest gear, they would occasionally show up at picket lines or in working class neighborhoods. Mostly they stayed on the university campuses. Their supporters helped produce journals such as the *Black Dwarf* and the *Red Mole*.

At a time when the Labour Party and the trade unions continued to find support in the working class and Marxists had to adopt sober tactics to dispel the illusions workers had in these organizations, the IMG opposed any such effort. During the general election campaign in 1970, famously, the IMG’s Robin Blackburn advocated breaking up Labour Party meetings. These were the most light-minded people.

In June 1974, the adventurism of the IMG played directly into the hands of the police and the state. At Red Lion Square in London, in a demonstration against the fascist National Front, the IMG organized a skirmish with the police, who were only too eager to oblige. The confrontation led to the death of student Kevin Gately, 20, the first fatality in a British protest in 55 years.

Equally damning, at the inquiry into the affair, which was headed by Lord Justice Scarman, an unidentified IMG member—who remained anonymous with the

agreement of the organization’s leadership, including Tariq Ali!—supplied the tribunal with information contradicting the previous testimony of IMG members. The statement was a political windfall to the state, leading to the police being absolved of responsibility for Gately’s death.

Ali’s brief spurt of leftism fizzled out as the radicalism of the 1970s waned. The IMG dissolved itself as an independent organization in 1981 and its members attempted to enter the Labour Party, which it had suggested assaulting a decade earlier. Ali joined the campaign supporting longtime left reformist Tony Benn as Labour deputy leader.

Looking for greener pastures, Ali turned to a career in publishing and the bourgeois media. His “Street Fighting Years” (the title of his boastful autobiography) now over, Ali became a novelist and a political pundit. He told the *Guardian* in May 2010: “It’s a problem people have had to come to terms with at different times in history: what do you do in a period of defeat?”

This is the response of a middle-class freebooter who has lost his audience. Now officially “a former Marxist,” Ali had even less responsibility toward the working class than when he was a member of the International Executive Committee of the “United Secretariat” of the Pabloite “Fourth International.”

Ali has never offered an explanation, anywhere, for any of his political peregrinations: Why he supposedly adopted Trotskyism in the later 1960s, or why he abandoned it some years later; why he wanted to disrupt Labour Party activities at one moment and later tried to install himself as a member. He embodies the French expression, “Before 30 a revolutionary, after 30, a swine!”—except, in his case, the swinishness developed early on, and just grew.

Ali was revived somewhat by Gorbachev and

perestroika in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, which he considered a great advance for socialism. He dedicated his book *Revolution From Above: Where Is the Soviet Union Going?*, published in 1988, to Boris Yeltsin, the man who later presided over capitalist restoration in the USSR. His tribute declared that Yeltsin's "political courage has made him an important symbol throughout the country." He argued that "The scale of Gorbachev's operation is, in fact, reminiscent of the efforts of an American president of the nineteenth century: Abraham Lincoln."

It should be noted that Ali maintained a relationship with Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and a leading bourgeois politician in her own right, over the course of decades. In his 2008 book, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, Ali wrote, "I knew [Benazir Bhutto] well over many years."

In the 1980s, after she had taken refuge in London from the Zia dictatorship, Ali acted as an unofficial advisor and continued to do so even after she became prime minister in 1988. As he noted in his obituary for Bhutto published in the *Guardian*, "She changed again after becoming prime minister." (December 29, 2007)

That article concludes with this effort by Ali to promote illusions in the Pakistan Peoples Party, one of the country's leading bourgeois parties, and the venal Pakistani ruling elite:

"It is difficult to imagine any good coming out of this tragedy, but there is one possibility. Pakistan desperately needs a political party that can speak for the social needs of a bulk of the people. The People's party founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was built by the activists of the only popular mass movement the country has known: students, peasants and workers who fought for three months in 1968-69 to topple the country's first military dictator..."

"The People's party needs to be refounded as a modern and democratic organisation, open to honest debate and discussion, defending social and human rights, uniting the many disparate groups and individuals in Pakistan desperate for any halfway decent alternative, and coming forward with concrete proposals to stabilise occupied and war-torn Afghanistan. This can and should be done."

By 2000, Ali was writing that "Capitalism's triumph at the end of the last century was sensational. The

collapse of all systemic alternatives is plainly visible."

In 2004, he endorsed the Democrats' pro-war candidate John Kerry, arguing: "A defeat for a warmonger government [George W. Bush] would be seen as a step forward... I don't go beyond that, but there is no doubt in my mind that it would have an impact globally."

No one at the "Socialism 2010" conference, we predict, will be rude enough to ask Ali about Red Lion Square, Boris Yeltsin or his role as adviser to Pakistan's ruling political circles.



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