

Jimmy Reid, Stalinist union leader who betrayed Scottish shipyard struggle, dies at 78

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Jimmy Reid, the leader of the famous 1971 “work-in” at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in Glasgow, Scotland, died on August 10. His death was marked by an extraordinary outpouring of sympathy from leading capitalist politicians, the media and celebrities. His funeral, broadcast live on the BBC, was treated as a virtual state occasion.

Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who first met Reid in the early 1970s, described how he had “admired his commitment and determination to the cause of social justice ever since”.

Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond claimed Reid had “been Scotland’s great rallying figure over the last four decades”.

The Murdoch-owned *Scottish Sun* described Reid as a “workers’ hero” and a “man steeped in the rights of the working man—particularly the right to work”.

Writing in the right-wing *Spectator* magazine, journalist and novelist Allan Massie proclaimed, “You didn’t have to share Jimmy Reid’s political views to recognise his virtue”.

What sort of workers’ leader generates such sympathy from leading political representatives and media organs of British capitalism? In the *Guardian*, the long-time supporter of Tony Blair, Martin Kettle, let the cat out of the bag. Complaining that, “There is no one like him today”, Kettle continued, “In the finest moment of his finest hour, Reid insisted that the UCS workforce should respond to the prospective closure of their plant not by striking but by working”.

Brown, Kettle et al. are concerned that, in 2010, in conditions of sharply deepening recession, sustained opposition will develop in the working class to the unprecedented attack on jobs and living standards now underway. They sense acutely the absence of figures capable of emulating the role played by Reid during the last great crisis of British capitalism in the early 1970s in suppressing the class struggle.

During the UCS dispute, Reid and his Stalinist allies in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) were decisive in diverting a powerful movement in the working class away from a fight to bring down the then Conservative government of Edward Heath. The CPGB and Reid helped prolong the term in office of the Tory government and opened the door to a sharp escalation of attacks by the employers on workers’ jobs and living standards across Britain. Through the “work-in”, the UCS dispute became synonymous worldwide with the promotion of class compromise and reformism in a militant guise—what Kettle refers to as “co-determination” between management and the unions.

Born in Govan, Glasgow, Jimmy Reid joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1948. In 1952 he was elected as the national chair of the Young Communist League. By 1959 he was on the national executive and political committee of the CPGB. After a period in London, he returned to Glasgow in 1964 where he served for a time as secretary of the Communist Party. In 1971 Reid was the convenor of shop stewards in the former John Brown’s shipyard in Clydebank, just outside Glasgow.

Glasgow was then still a major industrial area, a key component of the network of heavy engineering industries, which had dominated most of

Britain’s major cities for more than a century. Tens of thousands of workers were employed in vast shipyards, steel, engineering, railway and chemical works. Like the rest of Britain’s once globally-dominant industrial base, however, Glasgow’s shipyards—which in 1913 had produced over 20 percent of total world tonnage—and the city’s railway, steel and vehicle works were outmoded, badly organised, starved of investment and unable to compete internationally. Conditions in the highly unionised shipyards were primitive and brutal. Housing for many workers was ageing and overcrowded.

The UCS work-in

In 1969, the Labour government of Harold Wilson attempted to introduce legislation seeking to ban strikes, which provoked huge opposition from the working class. In 1970, Labour’s Conservative successors, under Edward Heath, proposed an Industrial Relations Act to suppress strikes and set about trying to revive British capitalism by closing down outmoded industries and slashing social provision.

In June 1971, the government announced that, in the face of a world slump in shipping production and a collapse in orders, UCS’ four shipyards at Clydebank, Govan, Linthouse and Scotstoun would close. The decision threatened to throw 8,500 workers onto lengthening dole queues, and undermine jobs in supply industries. In all some 130,000 people’s livelihoods were under threat.

The UCS closure threat coincided with strike votes at Ford, British Leyland and British Steel, along with a 47 percent pay claim by the miners’ union. Mass demonstrations were in preparation against the Industrial Relations Act. Large sections of the working class in Britain were coming to the conclusion that to defend their living standards the government had to be removed. UCS became a symbol for all those who wanted to get rid of the government as workers rallied to the slogan “Heath Out”.

In a 1973 pamphlet, the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) described the atmosphere of the period:

“It is difficult to convey in words the feeling of the Clydeside working class at the time of the UCS liquidation. The call for solidarity from the yards brought forth a massive response. Two General Strikes occurred in the west of Scotland, and Glasgow saw the largest street demonstrations since the struggles that rocked the government during World War 1. This spontaneous movement was not just based on a feeling of sympathy for the shipyard men. Rather workers had found a focus for the outrage and hatred they felt for the Tory government. The dramatic stand taken in the yards galvanised hundreds of thousands into united action. Everyone talked about one thing—the intolerable nature of the government and their desire to get rid of it.

“What was quite new was that workers had begun to realize that they had the power to make this ultimate political challenge. They were beginning to act as a class. That deep and brooding hostility to Tories and employers characteristic of Clydeside had broken to the surface once more. It had been fuelled by months of rising unemployment, petty Tory attacks like taking milk from school children and the general bombastic arrogance of Heath and his cabinet. UCS had been the spark. The feeling spread to all corners of the country. UCS became a symbol for all workers who wanted to get the Tory government off their backs”.

The trade unions in the threatened yards, however, were politically led by a handful of members of the CPGB, including Reid and Jimmy Airlie. Although never a mass organisation, the CPGB had significant influence—particularly in the engineering unions where its members held leading positions.

The role Reid and Airlie played at UCS flowed directly from the Stalinist conception of peaceful co-existence through subordinating the working class to the demands of the capitalists. This served both the foreign policy interests of the Kremlin bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and a layer of the national union bureaucracy in the West. Across Western Europe, the role of the Communist Parties was to defend capitalist rule by suppressing the class struggle and potential revolutionary movements by tying workers to their “own” ruling class.

Airlie and Reid devised a tactic whose central purpose was to prevent UCS becoming a rallying point for a struggle against the government. Workers who had acted on union policy by seizing the shipyard gates when liquidation was announced, had to be prevented from taking initiatives to broaden and deepen the struggle against Heath.

They were encouraged by the Stalinists to “work-in”: the occupied yards, which had full order books, would continue to function normally. Ship building would continue. Presented as a militant stance, the real purpose of the “work-in” was to prove the yards’ potential profitability to a new capitalist buyer and the readiness of the trade union to force the workforce to accept stepped up exploitation.

The political impact of UCS

The SLL intervened throughout the dispute in the teeth of bitter hostility from the Stalinist stewards. It explained, “The work-in gave the appearance of defiance but did not challenge the authority of the liquidator or jeopardize the government’s plans. It also provided a smokescreen for negotiations with the government or any private bidder for the yards. Finally the work-in took the political ‘heat’ out of the situation, diverted the bulk of the cash raised for the fight to provide a free labour force for the liquidator, and dissipated the spirit of the men”.

The work-in, covered with the militant sounding and moralising rhetoric in which Reid specialised, also isolated shipyard workers in Scotland from the movement against Heath and legitimised attacks on other workers. Some 24,000 jobs were lost in Scotland alone during the first months of the work-in, with large redundancies in the Vale of Leven and Dundee.

When buyers, US-owned Marathon and Govan Shipbuilders, were eventually found, Reid and Airlie proclaimed a great victory. But the dispute ended with thousands of workers having lost their jobs. Of some 8,771 workers at the start of liquidation in 1971 only something over 6,000 were employed in 1972. At Marathon, the new employers were offered a ban on unofficial strikes and productivity increases of 120 percent.

The work-in gave vital breathing space to the employers and the government. Politically, it promoted reformist illusions, not just in Britain but across the world. Reports have noted that a speech Reid made to

students as rector of Glasgow University on “rejecting the rat race” in 1971 appeared in full in the *New York Times*. First Minister Alex Salmond has promised to make it available to all Scotland’s school children.

Reid and Airlie insisted that the closure was not a product of basic trends within world capitalism, posing the working class with the need to re-order economic life rationally, in its own interests, but the result of a vindictive policy carried out by the Tories.

Over the subsequent two decades, the legacy of the UCS dispute was the destruction of the British engineering sector, including almost all of the shipbuilding industry at the expense of millions of jobs. Numerous struggles against factory closures and the destruction of entire industries, in Britain and internationally, were fought on the basis of appealing to a section of capitalists.

In 1981 Reid claimed that there had been 100 occupations in Western Europe, with similar outcomes to UCS. Within Britain, occupations took place at Lee Jeans in Greenock, Lawrence and Scott electric motors factory in Manchester, a Meccano factory in Liverpool, and Gardner diesels in Salford in 1981 alone. The UCS dispute was also seminal in encouraging a wave of workers’ co-operatives in the 1970s such as the *Scottish Daily News*, Kirby Manufacturing the Engineering and Meridien Motorcycles. All of these were based on workers seeking to continue, or even organise, their own exploitation, and they all failed.

The CPGB and Scottish nationalism

The dispute was also used by the CPGB to promote Scottish nationalism and regionalism in order to divide the working class. Reid was one of the chief architects of this policy. In 1969 he told the CPGB’s 30th Congress, “We reiterate our demand that the national aspirations of the Scottish and Welsh people for self-government must be met. This is not a socialist but a democratic demand”.

Following UCS, as much of the industrial sector across Britain was systematically shut down, every plant closure in Scotland was to be fought on the basis of an all-class alliance of workers, unions and employers to find new buyers, preferably Scottish ones. The nationalist confusion injected into the working class resulted, as early as 1973, in the election of the Scottish National Party’s Margo MacDonald as the MP for the shipyard constituency of Govan.

In Glasgow today, although one major shipbuilding company, BAE Systems, still exists, it employs a fraction of its former workforce and only makes warships. Govan and Scotstoun where shipyards remain open are, like much of Glasgow and indeed most of Britain’s cities, areas of immense social tension and poverty.

While millions of workers faced the consequences of the Stalinists’ betrayal, Reid’s subsequent trajectory, along with that of the entire Stalinist milieu, was ever more openly rightward. In 1974 Reid stood and failed to win a seat as CPGB candidate for parliament. In 1976, he failed to win a leading position in the AUEW engineering union. At the point where it was interfering with his career aspirations, Reid discovered the CPGB’s “narrow dogmatism”.

Reid and the origins of New Labour

He found a new home in the Labour Party. In 1979 Reid stood for the parliamentary seat of Dundee East, where George Galloway was his aide. In 1981, amidst the Thatcher government’s preparations for major attacks

on the working class and the definitive end of Keynesian reformist state regulation of the economy, he attached his name to a “Radical Manifesto” along with Frances Cripps, Francis Morrell and other prominent Labour lefts associated with the *New Left Review* and Labour politician Tony Benn.

Aimed at a future Labour government, the manifesto called for an alternative national economic policy based on developing the British economy. Claiming that, “Britain has become a subject nation, unaware of its own subjection,” it called for departure from the European Economic Community—the precursor to the European Union—railed against multinational capitalism and called for a tax on imports. The manifesto, at odds with the entire trajectory of world economy in which globalisation was even then accelerating, won little response.

Reid concluded that the ship had sailed on the nationalist economic utopias of his former Stalinist allies and Labour lefts such as Benn. In parallel with that section of the Stalinists known as the Euro-communists, which had broken relations with Moscow and sought leading positions in the Labour bureaucracies based on cultivating the closest relations with big business, Reid became an ally of Labour leader Neil Kinnock. It was Kinnock who initiated Labour’s move to the right, which culminated in New Labour and Tony Blair. Reid provided him with a pseudo left “working class” and “trade unionist” cover that complimented the ideological justification provided by the Euro-communists grouped around the magazine *Marxism Today*. They proclaimed the arrival of a “post-Fordist” society in which the end of class-based politics had brought a halt to Labour’s “forward march” and necessitated an emulation of Thatcherism’s “popular” embrace of the market, home-ownership, etc.

Reid won lasting appreciation from the British capitalist class for his role during the 1984-85 miners’ strike. When thousands of miners struck in defiance of the Tory government’s pit-closure programme, Reid repeatedly criticised his former Stalinist ally and National Union of Mineworkers’ leader Arthur Scargill from the right—over the miners’ union’s refusal to hold a national ballot on strike action. This was the central demand of the Tory government, the press and the right wing of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as it would have meant calling off the ongoing strike and given maximum potential for using prosperous areas such as Nottingham to prevent a fight-back.

Reid came forward to act as the spokesman for the “millions of ordinary punters in the country” whom he claimed opposed the strike. He went on national TV to denounce Scargill as the “ideal choice for leader” for a kamikaze pilots union.

For services rendered, in 1987 Reid was offered a column in Rupert Murdoch’s *Scottish Sun*. He wrote a TV documentary, “Moscow Gold”, to accuse Lenin and the Bolsheviks of being terrorists. He was also given a column in the *Glasgow Herald* to add to his numerous celebrity appearances on TV and radio chat shows.

A warning to Labour

Unlike many former Stalinists, such as former Home Secretary John Reed who advanced seamlessly into the upper echelons of the New Labour apparatus, Reid’s progress was hampered by his concern that the cabal around Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were making serious political errors that threatened the party’s ability to police and suppress the class struggle. He devoted a considerable amount of time of his later years to attacking Blair, which has been presented by those such as Galloway as a move to the left late in life.

It was nothing of the sort. Reid’s concern was firstly that the trajectory of the Labour Party was so nakedly right wing as to make it

indistinguishable from the Tories, and secondly that Blair’s declared intent to divorce the party from the trade unions would leave it incapable of demobilising a potentially revolutionary challenge from the working class such as that which developed in the 1970s.

He wrote in 1995 in his *Herald* column to castigate Blair for his declaration that there was no such thing as class antagonisms: “There are different social classes in our society, in every country in the world. To deny this is like denying the world is round. Yet we have a Labour leader who talks as if nobody out there was being paid wages or salaries for their labour.... There will always be a potential conflict of interest between payers and paid. Good industrial relations are best served by recognising this reality and devising procedures which seek to resolve the potential for conflict”.

To this end Reid strenuously opposed moves by the Labour Party to break its links with the trade unions. He warned of the “gross insensitivity of those who have taken a cleaver to the finely evolved structures of what was a pluralist political party uniquely designed for the task of changing Britain for the better through a democratic parliamentary process”.

In other words, he recognised the great utility of the trade unions as tools for the preservation of capitalist rule.

Reid finds a new home

Reid finally left the Labour Party in 1998 to immediately announce his intention of voting for the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), formed the previous year through an alliance between the Scottish Militant Labour, the Communist Party of Scotland and other pseudo-left and nationalist groups. The SSP, founded in time to stand candidates for the Scottish parliamentary elections of 1999, advanced a reformist program coupled with a central emphasis on demands for Scottish independence.

Reid was quite explicit in the need for such a perspective, stating that “many will be disenfranchised unless from the Scottish Labour movement emerges as a group that will give such people the possibility of voting Real Labour/Social Democrat/Democratic Socialist”.

Any principled party genuinely committed to a struggle for socialism would have pitched into crisis over support from someone with Reid’s political record. Instead, the SSP welcomed his move and encouraged him to join. Tommy Sheridan, then the SSP central leader and now leader of his own party, Solidarity Scotland, said of Reid after his death that, “He was a real leader of workers who practiced what he preached and unlike so many of his trade union peers he has never sold his soul or sold out his class”.

Reid never joined the SSP, which made only limited gains. In 2001 he launched his own vehicle, the *Scottish Left Review*, whose pages were thrown open to Scottish nationalists, ex-radical academics and former lefts. The review’s primary function was, and is, to orient towards the very party for which the SSP merely acted as a stalking horse—the Scottish National Party. In 2005, Reid finally marked a path for other Scottish ex-radicals and ex-Stalinists by joining the SNP, the party of the Scottish financial establishment that is currently in power in Edinburgh.

Reid’s legacy is not to be celebrated, but it must be learned from. He was a key figure in the ranks of Stalinism and the trade union and Labour bureaucracy—the central forces responsible for the continued survival of capitalism in Britain. Politically, Stalinism’s legacy persists in the confusion it has created among wide layers of working people over the viability of reformism and nationalism. However, the great apparatus it once possessed is dust, and its old leaders are dying off.

A new generation of workers seeking to defend themselves against the

current depredations of the British financial elite will demand new leaders, offering a viable way out of the social crisis into which capitalism seeks to propel them. These leaders must of necessity base their struggles on a perspective of class struggle conducted on internationalist socialist principles and the historical capital represented by the Trotskyist movement's implacable fight against Stalinism.

* The Socialist Labour League's powerful intervention in the UCS dispute is captured in *Reformism on the Clyde, the Story of the UCS*. The 128-page pamphlet explains the context of the UCS dispute and documents its betrayal by Reid and his allies.



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