

The desecration of Marx's grave: A warning

Chris Marsden
19 February 2019

There have now been two attacks on the grave of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery in the space of just two weeks. The first and most damaging was an attempt to obliterate with a hammer Marx's name from the original headstone marking the burial place of Karl and his wife Jenny, which was incorporated into the monument erected in his memory in 1956. The second was this weekend's daubing of anti-communist slogans on the plinth supporting the monument's bronze bust of Marx.

Marx's burial place is a site of world historic significance, visited by thousands every year who come to honour the man whose writings did more than any other to shape the course of the 20th century and who holds a special place in the hearts of millions of workers and the oppressed masses. He was a titanic theoretical and political figure, whose entire life was dedicated to the cause of emancipating the working class and all of suffering humanity from class oppression through world socialist revolution. The October Revolution, led by Lenin and Trotsky, was the supreme vindication of this struggle.

The attack on Marx's grave is, therefore, a significant warning of the growing danger to the working class across Europe and internationally from far-right forces that have been deliberately cultivated by the bourgeoisie and given succour by the mass media.

Just as the Nazis did when they were in power in Germany, fascist attacks on left-wing monuments and graves are taking place across Europe. In Spain alone during recent weeks, the tomb of Dolores Ibárruri, the Stalinist leader of the Communist Party during the civil war, Pablo Iglesias, founder of the Socialist Party, and a plaque to honour the International Brigades have all been targeted.

In recent months, swastikas have been daubed on Jewish gravestones and a Holocaust memorial near Strasbourg, France. Similar desecrations have occurred

in Lithuania, Poland, Greece, Ukraine and Manchester, England. Such attacks are accompanied by a rising wave of direct physical assaults on immigrants and left-wing figures, including last year's attack on British rail union leader Steve Hedley and his partner, who was hospitalised.

Yet, even with fascistic parties entering parliaments in several European countries, including Alternative for Germany, the attack on Marx's grave solicited no serious response, and in some cases no response at all, from what passes for the political "left."

For the most part, political commentary on the fascist attack has come from right-wing bourgeois newspapers—who make pro-forma disapproving noises before explaining that the thugs who daubed "architect of terror," "oppression" and "mass murder" on the plinth are historically correct. Such "left" comment as there is often accepts that the October Revolution in Russia was a terrible event, but one for which Marx should not be held "directly" responsible.

The most telling silence of all is that of the British Labour Party.

The attack on Marx's grave takes place in London, directed against the author of the most significant book in the past 200 years, *Capital*, written after he fled persecution in Germany, France and Belgium and sought refuge in a city that prided itself as a haven for political refugees. Yet, as could be expected of such a right-wing scoundrel, the Labour mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has said nothing about the desecration of the grave of the city's most famous historical resident.

More significantly, not a word of condemnation or in Marx's defence has been uttered by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, or his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. Both have previously doffed their hat to Marx. Corbyn called him "the great economist... from whom we can learn a great deal," during the 2018 bicentenary of his birth. McDonnell, dubbed the

“Marxist chancellor” by a hyperventilating media, called himself a “one-man campaign to rehabilitate the readings of Marx,” and declared *Capital* to be “one of the most interesting elements of political thinking that we’ve had for a century-and-a-half.”

The degree of political cowardice involved is staggering. Corbyn, the darling of the pseudo-left not just in Britain but internationally, hailed as representing socialism for the 21st century, will do nothing to mobilise public opposition to what is both a criminal act against the most important historical figure in the workers’ movement and an implicit threat against left-wing workers and youth today.

This is not merely an expression of Corbyn’s spineless personality, but of how far to the right the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the petty-bourgeois milieu that surrounds it have travelled.

In 1947, the Labour Party reprinted the *Communist Manifesto* to mark its centenary, with an introduction by Harold Laski, which declared that “...British socialists have never isolated themselves from their fellows on the continent of Europe. Our own ideas have been different from those of continental socialism, which stemmed more directly from Marx, but we, too, have been influenced in a hundred ways by European thinkers and fighters, and, above all, by the authors of the *Manifesto*.”

In 2011, a paint attack on Marx’s grave prompted Corbyn’s political mentor, the then-retired Tony Benn, to write, “I am very sorry to hear the grave has been attacked. Marx was one of the greatest figures in history. What he said about society was very important, he is still studied the world over and this is not true of many people more than 100 years after their death.”

Today, such statements are considered beyond the pale. No trace of anti-capitalist sentiment can be tolerated within bureaucratic organisations that have made their final break with the working class and are unequivocally wedded to the defence of the profit system. Corbyn and McDonnell would rather let the political atrocity committed in Highgate Cemetery go unmentioned than risk alienating the fanatical anti-communists who make up Labour’s right-wing parliamentary majority or associate their party even verbally with genuine socialism.

The political putrefaction of the Labour Party and of the old bureaucratic organisations the world over poses

grave dangers—disarming the working class in the face of growing political reaction. As the International Committee of the Fourth International warned in its New Year statement, *The Strategy of International Class Struggle and the Political Fight Against Capitalist Reaction in 2019*:

“The growth of far-right and fascistic movements, including the revival of anti-Semitism, poses immense danger to the working class. Under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis, unprecedented levels of social inequality and preparations for world war, the ruling elites are resurrecting all the political filth responsible for the worst crimes of the 20th century... this political disease develops within a climate of extreme inequality, and especially in the absence of a political movement fighting for a socialist alternative to capitalism.

“Fascism is not yet, as it was in the 1930s, a mass movement. But to ignore the growing danger would be politically irresponsible. With the support of sections of the ruling class and the state, right-wing movements have been able to exploit demagogically the frustration and anger felt by the broad mass of the population. In this situation, the fight against the resurgence of extreme right-wing and fascistic movements is an urgent political task.”

That task falls to the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement, the Marxism of today. Its political responsibility is to mobilise the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism. The conditions for doing so are rapidly maturing, as evidenced in a global upsurge in the class struggle taking place in open defiance of the former reformist and Stalinist parties and trade unions.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact