

# Britain's Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire apply political chloroform over Trump's coup

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Pseudo-left groups all over the world have responded to the attempted coup led by Donald Trump with one voice. It is a position best summed up by Alex Callinicos, the theoretical leader of Britain's Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its sympathising groups in many countries: "No need to panic—order will be restored in Washington."

Callinicos tweeted this at 5.51pm (EST) on January 6, just over three hours after hundreds of rioters including armed fascist thugs entered the Capitol building. In those three hours, millions throughout the world had witnessed historically unprecedented scenes of the evacuation of the Senate Chamber over fears for the safety and lives of members of Congress. But Callinicos was adamant that everyone must "Keep calm and carry on". In another tweet he wrote:

"Weimar Washington but this not a coup. This is how the Trump presidency ends, not with a bang or a whimper, but with a roar of impotent rage."

Callinicos's tweets throughout the day were always to oppose any reference to the attempted coup taking place. He wrote, "One reason why Democrats are so eager to call this a coup is because it makes them the guarantors of constitutional legitimacy. This is one reason why so many of Trump's allies in the Republican leadership, headed by [Mike] Pence and [Mitch] McConnell, have been so quick to condemn the alt-right charivari"—a cynical reference to a noisy protest targeting an alleged wrongdoer.

Callinicos insisted there was no support for a coup in ruling circles, outside of a narrow periphery around Trump. The dominant sections of the ruling class were committed to democracy and were happy that Biden and the Democrats had won, supposedly because "Capital in the United States values the existing constitutional order. And why shouldn't they? It continues to make the rich ever richer and to bear down hard on working people."

The next day, SWP National Secretary Charlie Kimber wrote in the *Socialist Worker*, "This was not a coup... For now the bosses don't need the far right. They like the present system that has delivered record stock market gains amid the mass death and suffering of the pandemic. And real power lies in the boardrooms and the state, not government buildings."

This statement sums up the complacent and politically dangerous role of the SWP. Coups have repeatedly targeted government buildings—the centres of the political power of the bourgeoisie. In this case, Trump's supporters wanted to storm the Capitol to prevent the acceptance of Biden as victor in the presidential elections by seizing and possibly murdering leading politicians, using those kidnapped as hostages. They could count on the collusion of sections of the state apparatus—in the Pentagon, the military more generally, the CIA, FBI and the police.

Had Trump's forces succeeded, the substantial sections of the Republican Party who never wavered in their support for Trump, and his

backers in big business, would have been joined by those who belatedly took their distance from him. Unlike the SWP, they would calculate, as Trump anticipated they would, that someone audacious enough to seize the Capitol building and dictate terms to the incoming Democrats was the person best able to represent their interests in the ongoing struggle against the American working class. Even now, discussions in US boardrooms and on Capitol Hill will centre on how to leverage the far right threat to secure maximum concessions from the Biden administration and to continue and deepen the relentless offensive against the working class on behalf of the financial oligarchy that spent billions on Biden *and* Trump's election campaigns.

Callinicos and the SWP have spent months minimising the threat from Trump, despite mounting evidence that he was planning a coup and, though he did not enjoy majority support in either the bourgeoisie or the state apparatus, enjoyed significant support in both. To cite one example, on October 8 the FBI announced the arrests of 13 men involved in a plot to kidnap and kill the Democratic governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, as part of a plan to overthrow the state government. The arrests were preceded by the April 30 occupation of the state Capitol building by armed militias, including two of those later arrested.

Four days after the exposure of a plot that was a dress rehearsal for the January 6 assault on Capitol Hill, Callinicos wrote an article that made no mention of the arrests but insisted that Trump was "too obsessed with his personal status and wealth to be interested in creating a new regime. And big capital doesn't need fascism to crush the US's weakened trade unions."

On January 8, Callinicos retweeted what he described as the "excellent analysis" published January 7 by Marx21, the US group sympathetic to the SWP.

Marx21 had boasted December 17 in *International Socialism*, "During Trump's presidency, our organisation, Marx21, argued that Trump was not a fascist and that full-blown fascism had not descended on the US." Their "excellent analysis" poses the question, "A Trump coup?" and again insists that "neither the military nor even the federal police are at the point of supporting an insurrection against the state."

Marx21's political line proves that Callinicos's attack on Biden, like the SWP's criticisms of the Blairites in Britain's Labour Party and boosting of Jeremy Corbyn, is bound up with an orientation to the "left" representatives of the Democrats. They argue that a "left response" to January 6 is to build "the broadest possible unity of all anti-racists" including supporters of Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America and other "mainstream organizations". Nothing is proposed as a means of combating the immediate and ongoing threat posed by a developing far right movement headed by someone who still holds the position of President of the United States.

The Counterfire group was formed in 2010 as a major split from the SWP by leading figures including Lindsey German and John Rees. Its immediate response to the events of January 6 was identical to its factional opponents, bringing together “Some immediate thoughts on the scenes of armed Trump supporters taking over the Capitol building on Wednesday.”

Kevin Ovenden insisted, “What is happening in Washington is a morbid symptom. It is not a coup.” Rees declared that “the Trump supporters are neither numerous enough or organised enough to mount a coup. Nor are any significant section of the police or armed forces going to join them. So this is an extreme form of protest, and Trump is already issuing statements backing the police, having stirred up the protest in the first place.”

Counterfire specialises in offering a platform for the flotsam and jetsam of pseudo-left politics. Illustrative of the politically diseased character of this milieu is the closing commentary of Tariq Ali, the former leader of the now defunct British Pabloite outfit, the International Marxist Group, and now a self-promoting media commentator of no fixed political abode. He concluded his own dismissal of events by wishing success for the political violence planned by Trump’s supporters, writing, “Instead of running scared and being taken out by the cops, [Mike] Pence and [Nancy] Pelosi should have waltzed out together, down the street till they reached the White House... and then? Fill in the blanks as the mood takes you.”

In the days following the siege of Capitol Hill, the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported daily on the mounting evidence of high-level support for Trump’s long-planned assault—within the Pentagon, the FBI, the Capitol police force, most Republican representatives in Congress, and on the plans for further political violence during the inauguration of Biden on January 20. The WSWWS has also pointed to the well-informed concerns of senior figures in and around the military that Trump has significant support in the armed forces.

The pseudo-left never allow such political realities to influence what they say. The SWP wrote January 11 on the historic features of past fascist movements solely as a platform for Tomáš Tengely-Evans to once again insist, “Today the US ruling class is not looking to a fascist movement to restore order,” “The scenes in Washington were not a serious effort to seize state power” and “The US Capitol riot was the last gasp of the Trump presidency.” For Counterfire, Ovenden wrote the same day of “last Wednesday’s fascist riot,” stressing that “for all the talk of a coup... it wasn’t”.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has now published articles on the response to Trump’s coup of Jacobin in the US, and pseudo-left groups in Europe, Latin America and Australia. Their message remains the same, come what may. It is naked propaganda, made up of assertions and misused historical analogies aimed at chloroforming and politically disarming the working class. What accounts for this?

In the foreword to *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*, WSWWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North provided a “working definition” of the “pseudo-left”:

\* The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class. Examples of such parties and tendencies include Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, and numerous offshoots of ex-Trotskyist (i.e., Pabloite) and state capitalist organizations such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France, the NSSP in Sri Lanka and the International Socialist Organization in the United States. This list could include the remnants and descendants of the “Occupy” movements influenced by anarchist and post-anarchist tendencies. Given the wide variety of petty-bourgeois pseudo-

left organizations throughout the world, this is by no means a comprehensive list.

\* The pseudo-left is anti-Marxist. It rejects historical materialism, embracing instead various forms of subjective idealism and philosophical irrationalism associated with existentialism, the Frankfurt School and contemporary postmodernism.

\* The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society. It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic.

\* The pseudo-left promotes “identity politics,” fixating on issues related to nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in order to acquire greater influence in corporations, the colleges and universities, the higher-paying professions, the trade unions and in government and state institutions, to effect a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population. The pseudo-left seeks greater access to, rather than the destruction of, social privilege.

\* In the imperialist centers of North America, Western Europe and Australasia, the pseudo-left is generally pro-imperialist, and utilizes the slogans of “human rights” to legitimize, and even directly support, neo-colonialist military operations.

These are all groups that either broke from socialism more than half a century ago, or never had any connections to it. The level of political cynicism in these circles is staggering. Callinicos, a professor at King’s College London, earning a salary that places him in the top 10-15 percent of UK earners is not untypical of the upper middle-class figures within the leadership of the pseudo-left groups whose comfortable lifestyles within the existing social order set the limits of their verbal “radicalism.”

Spending their days as political apologist for the Labour and trade union bureaucracies, rubbing shoulders with other academics, well-heeled journalists and “community activists” on the government’s payroll, or connected in some way to the trade union apparatus, they bestow on this milieu the honorific title of “the left”. It is to these forces that the pseudo-left orient and offer their services as advisors and an ideological police force. They refuse to acknowledge Trump’s coup attempt for what it was because to do so raises the necessity for a mass movement of the working class to combat this threat, which would sweep aside their friends, allies and patrons in the unions, Labour and Democratic parties.

No one is more convinced of the power and longevity of capitalism, or as hostile to the working class and genuine socialism than Callinicos et al. Their occasional and cynical use of Marxist phrases, and even rarer references to the Russian revolutionaries Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, is for the sole purpose of opposing the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a revolutionary and internationalist programme. They are self-proclaimed “revolutionaries” bitterly opposed to revolution. And though this is never admitted, their polemical swipes against defining the events of January 6 as an attempted coup are not targeted at the Democrats, who want nothing more than to establish a modus vivendi with the Republicans, but against the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Parties and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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