

The Workers' Movement and Salman Rushdie (1989)

14 August 2022

*This is an editorial published by the Bulletin, the newspaper of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US) on February 24, 1989. The comment was a response to Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini's proclamation of a fatwa ordering the execution of British author Salman Rushdie on February 14, 1989. Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in September 1988, was proclaimed "blasphemous against Islam" for its "mocking satire," as the editorial points out.*

The Workers League emphatically condemns the threats which have been made by the Khomeini regime in Iran against the life of the noted British author Salman Rushdie. We call upon the international workers movement to extend solidarity to Rushdie, whose assassination has been demanded by a crisis-ridden bourgeois nationalist regime that has in recent months carried out the execution of hundreds of left-wing political opponents. In the face of growing internal opposition, it is apparent that the leaders of the Islamic Republic have seized upon the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in order to exploit religious sentiments and restore the regime's political base.

The defense of Rushdie by the workers movement is motivated by a principled opposition to the latest attempt by the bourgeoisie in both Iran and Pakistan, which have also been the scene of mass demonstrations, to utilize religion as a means of diverting the masses away from a direct revolutionary struggle against the two politically bankrupt capitalist regimes.

Moreover, this principled defense serves to undermine the combined efforts of both the Khomeini regime and imperialism to create a wall of distrust, misunderstanding and suspicion between the working class of the Middle East and Indian subcontinent and that of the imperialist countries of Western Europe and North America.

Thus, our denunciation of Khomeini's death threat has nothing in common with and is implacably hostile to the reactionary anti-Iran frothing of the bourgeois press and reactionary elements among the middle class intellectuals.

Workers should view with disdain their cynical attempts to portray imperialism as an ally of democratic rights. In fact, one of Rushdie's friends in Britain noted that the [Margaret] Thatcher regime was hardly in a position to present itself as a champion of freedom of speech, inasmuch as it has imposed unprecedented gags on the reporting of news and spent more than a year trying to prevent the publication of a book, *Spycatcher*, which exposed the activities of the British intelligence agencies.

Since the overthrow of the blood-drenched US-backed dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlevi, the Workers League has unequivocally defended Iran against the threats and provocations of American imperialism. We have never wavered in our principled defense of Iran as an oppressed nation. However, our unflagging and continuing defense of Iran against imperialist provocation, based as it is upon the strategic interests of the revolutionary proletariat and the development of the class struggle within Iran itself, neither implies nor is reducible to support for the policies of Khomeini. The economic foundations of his regime are thoroughly

capitalistic, and the policies of the theocratic rulers have, in essence, served the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie. That is why the Workers League's defense of Iran against American provocations has been inseparable from our revolutionary opposition to the Iran-Iraq War, the denial of the democratic rights of Iran's national minorities and the persecution of working class parties.

The Political Situation

We are by no means indifferent to the sensibilities of the millions who remain devoted to their ancient faith. As Marxists who fight unrelentingly for the development of scientific materialist consciousness in the working class, we appreciate—far better than Mr. Rushdie—that patient education is in the long run a far more effective weapon against religious beliefs than mocking satire. But the present controversy over the Rushdie book is rooted not in religion, but in politics. It is impossible to understand how the publication of *The Satanic Verses* has led to mass demonstrations in Pakistan and the call for Rushdie's execution in Iran without examining the political situation in both countries.

There is no question that in the immediate background to the political tumult over *The Satanic Verses* lies the deepening crisis of bourgeois rule in both Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan, this takes the form of a growing opposition amongst the masses to the recently elected US-backed bourgeois government of Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Peoples Party, as it becomes more and more obvious that the promises made by the PPP in last November's elections are being betrayed.

At the present time, the opposition to Bhutto is dominated by the Islamic Democratic Alliance, a coalition of right-wing parties and fundamentalist groups. Discredited by the support they gave to the military dictator Zia ul-Haq, they are as fearful as Bhutto of the development of a mass movement on any of the explosive social questions which the national bourgeoisie is organically incapable of resolving. Rooted in the most reactionary social interests, the IDA has utilized the issue of Rushdie's book to mobilize the masses on a religious issue instead.

This is possible only in countries where religion is the very axis of bourgeois rule. The state of Pakistan was established on the basis of religion as part of the bloody dismemberment of India by imperialism in 1947. Faced with the development of the movement against British colonialism, imperialism moved ruthlessly to defend its interests, dividing the masses along the lines of religion. In the communal violence fomented in order to impose this reactionary settlement, more than one million people were killed.

The concern with which US imperialism views the current crisis in Pakistan was expressed during a visit last month by Stephen Solarz, congressional watchdog of imperialism in South Asia. In a clumsy attempt to strengthen Bhutto's hand, Solarz described her as a "first-rank world leader," an accolade which in fact did nothing for Bhutto's popularity in the eyes of the masses.

In Iran, a similar crisis is gripping the bourgeoisie as the forces of Khomeini desperately attempt to restore their credibility by inflaming religious sentiments with the issue of the Rushdie book. This follows a

series of moves by the bourgeois nationalist regime towards an accommodation with imperialism.

Fearing the development of a mass opposition to the Islamic Republic, the Iranian regime has stepped up its brutal repression of political opponents, particularly on the left. Since the ending of the fratricidal war with neighboring Iraq, which cost the lives of more than one million workers and peasants, massacres of political prisoners have continued almost uninterrupted in Iran. At the same time, a ferocious power struggle has broken out among the different factions of the ruling Islamic Republican Party. All of these are thoroughly hostile to the Iranian working class which, it should not be forgotten, has a long history of secular revolutionary thought.

Censorship by Bookstore Chains

Another important issue has been raised by the Rushdie controversy, relating to democratic rights within the United States. In an unprecedented action, the three largest bookselling chains removed *The Satanic Verses* from their shelves. The Workers League emphatically opposes any moves to ban Rushdie's book and to remove it from bookstores. This action was first taken by the president of Waldenbooks, the ex-FBI agent, Harry Hoffman (Waldenbooks happens to be owned by the biggest retail sales chain in the United States, K-Mart). B Dalton and its subsidiary, Barnes & Noble, followed suit the next day.

Thus, under the pretext of Iranian threats, an ominous precedent has been set for the removal of any controversial publication from retail outlets which are collectively responsible for more than 30 percent of all book sales in the United States. This decision by the capitalist barons of the book industry has now opened the way for the most effective method of censorship to be enforced against any form of controversial literature, from books on abortion or evolution to political writings and Marxist works.

As Marxists, we uphold at all times the interests of the international proletariat. It must never be forgotten that imperialism, especially that of the United States, remains the most reactionary political force in the world and bears the central historical and political responsibility for the oppression of the masses of the Middle East and Indian subcontinent who still adhere to the Moslem faith.

Consequently, while workers must firmly condemn the death threat issued against Rushdie last week by the Khomeini regime, it must be stressed that the task of settling accounts with the Iranian bourgeoisie and its reactionary theocrats belongs to the working class. Any attempt to use this issue to side with imperialism against Iran must be vigorously and unconditionally opposed.

There is something really obscene in the spectacle of overrated literary lions of yesteryear like Norman Mailer and the authors of best-selling potboilers like Gay Talese appearing on television to advocate military action by the United States against Iran, supposedly in defense of "free expression." One would hope that other writers would come forward to dissociate themselves from such reactionary and chauvinist ravings, which seek to chain legitimate concern for artistic freedom to the war chariot of the US State Department.

No less insidious is the attitude taken by the former leading Pabloite, Mr. Tariq Ali, who was recently interviewed on Canadian Broadcasting Company television. Having transformed himself into a respectable bourgeois democrat, Ali did not in any way indict imperialism for its policies in the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. He did not point out that during the more than three decades which preceded his overthrow, the Iranian shah was imprisoning, torturing and murdering gifted writers who opposed his puppet regime. Nor did Tariq Ali make the slightest attempt to explain the sinister way in which religion has been utilized by imperialism in Pakistan, with which, as a native of the country, he is extremely familiar. He might have pointed out that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, British imperialism arrived at the calculated decision to

promote the discredited Muslim League and set the stage for the tragedy of partition.

Call for Interpol

Instead, having presented the case as merely the defense of the democratic rights of Mr. Rushdie against Islamic fundamentalism, Ali went on to make the reactionary call for Interpol, the international police agency of imperialism, to arrest Khomeini. Thus, he "answered" the death threat against Rushdie by calling upon the imperialists to take out a contract on Khomeini. In issuing this appeal to the butchers of all oppressed nations, Ali has made it extremely clear that he would completely support a military intervention by imperialism against the Iranian people.

It never occurred to this petty-bourgeois celebrity to call upon the European proletariat—not to mention that of Iran, Pakistan and India—to defend Rushdie by fighting against imperialism, as well as Khomeini, Bhutto and [Rajiv] Gandhi, on the basis of a socialist program.

Ali's reactionary performance raises yet again the dubious nature of those elements who, like Ali, were promoted during the 1960s as leaders in the international Pabloite movement, the revisionist organization which played the crucial role in sabotaging the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in country after country, particularly from 1968 onwards.

Ali originated in a wealthy Pakistani landowning family and in Britain received the political backing of Ernest Mandel and Joseph Hansen. Along with the International Marxist Group, as the British Pabloite organization was then known, he was thoroughly implicated in a series of provocations against the workers movement, which included fingering members of the IRA to Scotland Yard. Ali and the IMG pushed the most bankrupt variety of middle class single-issue politics, specializing in protest demonstrations, one of which resulted in the death of a student, Kevin Gately, in 1974.

In 1977, Ali chaired the meeting in London which became known as the Platform of Shame, a gathering of renegades from Trotskyism from different countries who came together for the purpose of rejecting a call by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Trotskyist movement, for the setting up of a commission of inquiry to examine evidence concerning the penetration of the Trotskyist movement by the Stalinist GPU, which had carried out the murder of Leon Trotsky in 1940.

Ali's outburst last week expresses the anti-working class evolution of the entire layer of petty-bourgeois radicals of the late 1960s and early 70s. With all the cynicism peculiar to erstwhile radicals, Ali has long ago put his "street-fighting days" behind him and is today promoted as a "well-known author and filmmaker." Personifying the alliance of bourgeois democracy with the imperialist police, Tariq Ali has exposed his role as an imperialist lackey and a political agent of the blood-soaked international bourgeoisie.

The controversy over *The Satanic Verses* illustrates in a particularly graphic way that the solution to all the political, social and cultural dilemmas confronting mankind today is bound up with the development of the international proletariat as a consciously independent and revolutionary force. The fight for this historic perspective is being spearheaded by the International Committee of the Fourth International, with which the Workers League is in political solidarity.



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