The “reactionary anti-imperialists”

“Reactionary socialism… half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future.”
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto

We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
The heart’s grown brutal from the fare;  
More substance in our enmities  
Than in our love…
W B Yeats

The left is defined, grouped and regrouped, and redefined again and again, by responses to major events — for example, to the October Revolution of 1917. The left is now undergoing another redefinition, around its responses to the series of wars that began with the Kosova war of 1999 and continued through to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those who stand for working-class socialist politics are lining up on one side, and on the other are those who are for a nameless, classless, almost depoliticised and entirely negative “anti-imperialism”.

The shouting-down of Subhi al Mashadani, general secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, at the European Social Forum on 15 October, neatly epitomised this process of differentiation.

Al Mashadani had been invited not as a member or supporter of the Communist Party of Iraq — which we understand he is — but as a trade unionist, as a representative of the trade unions which Iraqi workers have been rebuilding since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Free trade unions were impossible under the totalitarian regime of Saddam. On things like that, Saddam modelled himself on Josef Stalin.

Those who howled down al Mashadani and would not let him speak — the meeting had to be abandoned — were, some of them anyway, people who think of themselves as Trotskyists (though the SWP, which has done most to create the political hysteria in which such things happen, has criticised those who shouted him down).

In fact they are true Stalinists, and not only in their thuggish disregard for free speech. They stand squarely on the Stalinist tradition in their attitude to the Iraqi working class and to the fate of the newly reborn Iraqi working-class movement.

They say they are anti-imperialists, and their objection to al Mashadani is that the trade union movement which he represented at the the ESF meeting does not call for the immediate withdrawal of US and British troops from Iraq; that it does not side with the military activities of the combination of Islamic fundamentalists and Saddamites who make up “the resistance”.

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There are a number of Iraqi trade union groupings, divided by political affiliations. Not one of them supports the Islamist and Ba’thist “resistance” militias.

Why not? Because they know that the victory of the spiritual and political totalitarians who lead “the resistance” would create conditions in which trade unions could not exist. In which no labour movement would be possible. In which many of the militants who organise the trade union movements would immediately be killed or jailed — not as “collaborators” but as trade-unionists and “communists”.

Those who howled down al Mashadani are Stalinists also because they believe that the supreme revolutionary virtue is not, as Solidarity maintains, commitment to the working class and to the creation, growth, and education of a labour movement, but “anti-imperialism”.

They do not express it like this, but they held to a rigid and fixed Stalinist-type “stages” conception of socialist politics for Iraq.

First “the resistance” must defeat “imperialism”; and only then should those working-class activists who survive the tender attentions of those who set off bombs to kill Iraqi civilians, in Baghdad and elsewhere, organise trade unions and a political working class movement to fight for working-class power and socialism in Iraq.

(The fact that some of the hooligans may think that such a policy is “permanent revolution”, and that the war of “resistance” will somehow lead to socialism, does not make their programme any less idiotic and any less anti-working class or any less self-betraying.)

They are like the old Communist Parties — but worse; for they, after all, had a certain, albeit reactionary, coherence to their ideas. One-sided “anti-imperialism”, for the old CPs, meant politics which helped what they identified as socialism, the USSR — which was, in fact, Russian Stalinist imperialism. What was more important for them than the working class and its development was finding ways to help the real “socialist” power in the world, the USSR.

It all made a sort of horrible sense, according to their conceptions of socialism and of progress. The “anti-imperialism” of those who would not listen to a representative of the Iraqi working class at the ESF makes no sense. They are entirely incoherent and politically nonsensical.

Yet, treating al Mashadani as one would treat a fascist has its own coherence and its own terrible reactionary logic. Why did they object to him? Because the trade-union movement which he represented in London — like the other trade-union groupings in Iraq — refuses to eviscerate itself on the altar of an “anti-imperialism” whose social and political banner is that of out-and-out religious, social, and political reaction.

The militant and revolutionary-sounding slogans about “victory to the resistance”, and the calls for US and British withdrawal “now”, translate, in the real Iraq, into support for the unleashing of civil war and for the victory of clerical-fascist reaction (or perhaps, “at best”, of the Ba’thists again).

Unless socialists are to shut down their minds and their commitment to the working class, and operate by mechanical, eyes-closed deductions from super-abstract notions like “imperialism” and anti-imperialism — in the spirit of Orwell’s “Two legs bad, four legs good” — we must ask
ourselves what such slogans mean in practice. That is the only rational, responsible, socialist and Marxist way to pose the issues.

Revolutionary socialists did not support the attempts to organise a Nazi “resistance” to the US, British and Russian occupiers of Germany, in 1945.

To say that the only thing socialists can do is back the clerical fascists against Britain and the USA involves giving up on the new Iraqi labour movement. It means concluding that something like the revolutionary Islamist regime that took power in Iran in 1979 — and still, slightly softened up, holds power there today — is the least bad outcome that it is now possible to hope for in Iraq.

It is to tell the Iraqi working-class and its movement that it should surrender to the clerical-fascists — and to refuse even to listen to those Iraqis who dare to disagree with the kitsch-left’s toy-town anti-imperialists.

Of course, it is possible to imagine a situation in Iraq in which the “resistance” would be not what it is now, a relatively small spectrum of Islamists, Saddamite Ba’thists and others, but a movement of more or less all the peoples of Iraq, pitted against an American imperialism committed to slug it out with them in a butcherous imperialist war of conquest.

In such a situation, socialists might have to decide that even the victory of outright reaction in an Iraq freed from the horrors of war would be better than the continuation of that terrible war.

That is what happened in Vietnam, with other parts of Indochina, such as Cambodia, being drawn into the slaughter.

Is that how things stand in Iraq?

Have things reached the stage at which socialists have to recognise that all the possibilities for the development of a working-class movement that were opened up by the destruction of the Saddam regime have been crushed, and the best thing left is a war against imperialist conquest, dominated by the religious, social, and political ultra-reactionaries — clerical-fascists, to give them their generic name — who will, having defeated their enemies, including the Iraqi trade unions, then fall heir to the state power in Iraq?

Are we at the stage where socialists have to recognise that the victory of political Islamists who will, in power, destroy even the quasi-secularism and root out the quasi-liberation for women that existed even under Saddam’s Ba’thist bloody totalitarianism, is the lesser evil now because it is preferable to continued slaughter on a Vietnamese or Cambodian scale — and there are no better possibilities in the situation that now exists?

In fact, the situation in Iraq can lead socialists to no such conclusions. The evidence is that most Iraqis do not support the “resistance” — those who set off bombs in Baghdad without warning and with the goal of killing as many Iraqi civilians as possible. Not even the brutal stupidity of the US occupying forces has so far driven them to such a despairing conclusion.

Certainly the new Iraqi labour movement has not reached such a conclusion. The Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions believes that the establishment of some sort of bourgeois-democratic system — even with the continued presence of US and British troops, which they oppose — is a better way forward for the Iraqi people. In that they are entirely correct.
Socialism would be better. But if the working class is not yet able to win socialism, then the IFTU is right that the establishment and consolidation of the sort of bourgeois-democratic rights that now exist de facto, despite the bloody chaos in Iraq, and without which the trade unions cannot survive — that that is the best possible option for the Iraqi working class. They are right not to rush to despair and commit the social, political and trade unionist suicide which the idiots of classless “anti-imperialism” urge on them.

For socialism to become possible, the Iraqi working class and labour movement will have to have time and space to educate and clarify themselves politically. Even the terrible situation there now is more conducive to that than the victory of clerical-fascist “anti-imperialism”.

The hard truth, however, is that the “anti-imperialist” left arrive at the crazy position of rushing to identify with Iraq’s clerical fascists and Ba’thists — even against the Iraqi labour movement, as in the shouting down of Subhi al Mashadani — not by reason but by reflex, by unreflected-upon tradition, and by pixillatedly wrong-headed politics.

Some of them believe that military struggle is, in itself, a politically higher order of things than the alternative road that is still, probably, possible — the evolution of Iraq, pushed along by working-class organisation and struggle, towards some sort of bourgeois democracy and the resumption of independence.

They are excited and thrilled by the violent “revolutionary” struggle. The “resistance” is defined for them as “revolutionary” and progressive not by what the clerical-fascists are and aim for, but by the bare fact that they are in arms against the USA and Britain. Even clerical fascists striving for the power to repress everything progressive in Iraq — workers’ rights, women’s rights, free speech, any degree of secularism, freedom to organise — even they are rendered “progressive” by their all-enobling military opposition to “imperialism”. This is what might be called “apolitical” or “de-politicised” “anti-imperialism”.

They have learned very little from either the relatively recent experience in Iran, or the more distant experience in China in 1927 — response to which was one of the pillars of Trotsky’s movement.

In Iran a powerful mass movement, led by Ayatollah Khomeiny and the Shi’ite Muslim clergy, challenged the repressive but secularising regime of the Shah. The left backed the movement for a variety of reasons — because the Shah was in alliance with the USA against the Stalinist USSR, or because there were serious working-class mobilisations against the Shah.

In fact when the Islamists came to power, they quickly crushed all independent movements, and subjected a comparatively advanced and secular society to rigid medievalism. Iranian women were thrown back generations. The independent working-class movement was crushed. Political opponents of Khomeiny were butchered — in the first place, those socialists who had supported him in the struggle against the Shah.

A quarter of a century later, Khomeiny’s heirs still rule Iran.

In China, in the 1920s, a bourgeois-nationalist movement, the Guomindang, led by Chiang Kai Shek, fought to reunify the country. The relatively strong working-class Communist Party of China allied with the Guomindang and, under the leadership of Stalin and Bukharin in the Communist International, submerged themselves politically and organisationally in it.
The result was that just after the Communist Party, at the head of the working class there, had helped deliver Shanghai to the Guomindang forces, Chiang Kai Shek turned on the CP and the workers who supported it and killed many thousands of them.

The policy which the kitsch left urges on the Iraqi workers is a policy of political and possibly physical suicide. These “militant idiots”, despite what they intend, are with their classless and nameless “anti-imperialism”, for practical purposes, simply reactionaries.

They are erstwhile socialists in process of inadvertently redefining themselves as “anti-imperialist” reactionaries.

The root of it is that they are people who now operate almost entirely with negative politics. They know what they are against. Apart from a vague and undefined, and increasingly “classless”, socialism, they do not know what they are for. By negative repulsion against the USA and Britain, they back themselves into a de facto unity with the politics of downright anti-working class reaction.

Those who shouted down al Mashadani on 16 October thought they represented virtuous anti-imperialism, but, no longer caring what they represent positively or with whom they ally themselves, were in fact siding with the clerical fascists against the emerging Iraqi labour movement.

The brutal rulers of the USA and Britain are perfectly capable of bungling and blundering into the destruction of all the progressive possibilities that now exist — or may still exist — in Iraq, and thus into making their stated aim of a bourgeois-democratic Iraq impossible. They may already have dealt irreversible blows to those prospects. That is one reason why the pixillated right-wing inverse of the pixillated “anti-imperialists”, those who let commitment to the Iraqi working class lead them into backing Britain and the USA, that is, into political suicide as socialists, are in their own way no less foolish and even more ridiculous than their mirror-images.

The toy-town anti-imperialists at least maintain a pseudo-revolutionary opposition to their own ruling class. That is something. It is not enough, but it is better than self-prostration before the British and US ruling classes. Many of the young people misled by the toy-town “anti-imperialists” can and will be helped to know better.

The left that in this process is being sifted and sorted, defined and redefined, is on the “anti-imperialism first” side a purely negative populism, a politically empty receptacle willing to let itself take on the positive imprint of any “anti-imperialist” force — even, in Iraq, of clerical-fascists, as earlier (during the 2003 war) of Saddam’s Ba’thists. (Socialist Worker even made a stab at “explaining away”, that is, half-heartedly justifying, the Taliban’s treatment of Afghan women (SW, 6 October 2001).) They have let themselves be drawn into the position of opponents of the Iraqi working-class movement, so long as it refuses to become a political tool of the clerical-fascists.

The characteristics of the other side in the differentiation of the forces of the left that is now taking place are as follows. We are above all else for the development of the labour movement and the political development of the working class. We are for the freedoms without which that will not happen — without which the labour movements and the working class cannot develop politically towards socialism and the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Everything else is subordinate to that.
There is nothing — except the socialism that the working class must win — higher for us than that. “Anti-imperialism” that is indifferent or hostile to the working class and the labour movement is a contradiction in terms: it is the working class and only the working class that will finally bury capitalism and imperialism.

In the early 1980s, we rejected and fought against the outlook of those who supported the Polish Stalinist state against the working-class movement, Solidarnosc, because Solidarnosc threatened state-owned nationalised property, which most of the left thought of as an all-overriding good. (The SWP was on the same side then.) Today we reject the view that the “anti-imperialism” of clerical fascists is superior to a labour movement that wants to see bourgeois democracy develop in Iraq.

Socialists who do not support those trade unions; those who seem not to care whether the Iraqi labour movement survives and develops, or is crushed by the clerical fascists or a new Ba’thist regime; the hooligans who howled down al Mashadani; and those like the SWP who have the same politics while hypocritically distancing themselves from the hooligans — all are abandoning socialism for an “anti-imperialism” which, by analogy with what Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto called “reactionary socialism”, is a species of “reactionary anti-imperialism”.