It is obvious to everyone with eyes to see that the strike wave of public sector unions is facing defeat. Mick Lynch, widely hailed by the left as the “hero” of the strike wave, has pushed a below-inflation pay deal on the RMT Network Rail membership. The CWU’s Dave Ward, another darling of the left not long ago, is crawling to Royal Mail, endorsing a deal which would mean a massive pay cut and attacks on posties’ working conditions. The RCN, PCS, UCU and NEU are still without an agreement and have been offered crumbs, while their leaders have no strategy to go forward. They have rejected insulting offers, but without a fundamental change in strategy and leadership, or a fundamental change in the situation of the country, these strikes will face defeat.

On the other side, the Tory government has gathered strength and credibility. Early in the strike wave, the Tories were at their weakest, but the trade union leaders did nothing to capitalise on the situation. They gave Rishi Sunak the necessary breathing room to reposition himself and neutralise factions in the Tory party with the new EU deal over Northern Ireland and the reactionary anti-migrant bill, letting him restore government stability. The Tories have since taken back the initiative. The cost-of-living crisis and the collapse of public services are still raging, but it is law and order and anti-immigrant poison which dominate public debate.

The trade unions have lost round one. On one side of the ring, the government started weak, unstable and discredited, and while it has not yet delivered any serious blow to the unions, it finished the round strong. It is going back to its corner in control and emboldened for what’s next. On our side, trade union leaders launched the battle unprepared, often without strike funds. Throughout the conflicts, they have refused to build real picket lines that shut down workplaces, rendering strikes ineffective and easy to scab on. This is not out of ignorance of militant tactics but because of their utter respect for the rules set by the capitalist class and their opposition to a real confrontation with the government. They have refused to co-ordinate strikes and go beyond one-day actions not because they don’t know how to do this but because they are opposed to causing a crisis for the capitalist class.

How did we get here?

The entire problem boils down to a question of leadership. The strike wave was fuelled by the destruction of workers’ standard of living, propelling broad layers in the trade unions to action, often for the first time in their lives. It is this powerful force at the base which lifted the trade union leaders to the top of the wave. But what leaders? These were no working-class veterans steeled in the class struggle but a part of the union bureaucracy which has led the labour movement to defeat after defeat over the last decades. At every step, they have acted as a brake on the class struggle. Union leaders launched the battle unprepared, often without strike funds. Throughout the conflicts, they have refused to build real picket lines that shut down workplaces, rendering strikes ineffective and easy to scab on. This is not out of ignorance of militant tactics but because of their utter respect for the rules set by the capitalist class and their opposition to a real confrontation with the government. They have refused to co-ordinate strikes and go beyond one-day actions not because they don’t know how to do this but because they are opposed to causing a crisis for the capitalist class.

The cancelling of strikes when the Queen died was not a mere tactical mistake, as many on the left claimed, but indisputable proof that the trade union leaders had not the slightest intention of stepping on the establishment’s toes. They have refused to kick continued on page 2
Union power...
(continued from page 1)

the Tories out not because the Tories were too strong—quite the opposite, in fact. For months the government was barely hanging on and a little kick was all it needed to fall. But union leaders were dead set against doing this because of their reverence for the ruling-class Parliament and their view that the working class has no business imposing its will on it. And now they are accepting rotten deals, because rotten deals are what you get when you play by the bosses’ rules.

This whole bankrupt strategy is now coming to fruition. Those union leaders who have not yet surrendered are continuing to play the same losing game, dragging out conflicts that they themselves do not want. As a result, broad layers of the union membership which had been drawn into struggle, pushing the union togs into action, are increasingly becoming apathetic and demoralised.

As union leaders killed the strikes’ momentum, and with growing fatigue and declining participation in strike actions, the bosses smell weakness and are going for blood. The CWU has seen hundreds of its best militants suspended or sacked by Royal Mail, which has recruited an army of scabs and put the union up against the wall. This happened because Royal Mail took advantage of the CWU’s weakness.

The union leadership constantly bent over backwards to accommodate the company, cancelling strikes and undermining the union’s strength and credibility. Against RCN nurses, the government recently used anti-union laws to stop one of their strike days. UCU members at multiple universities are being targeted by management, their pay massively docked for taking part in union actions. The leadership’s losing strategy has opened these and other unions to devastating attacks.

The trade union leaders certainly lack militancy and constantly make poor tactical choices. But these are just symptoms of their fundamental problem, which is their unwavering support to the capitalist system. That is why they have been sabotaging the strikes at every stage restrains workers’ anger and channeling it into a losing strategy based on making the strikes compatible with the stability of British capitalism. The overriding lesson of the strike wave is that the working class are crippled by leaders who support capitalism, and no amount of “pressure from below” will make them change their stripes.

The laws of boxing are strikingly similar to those of the class struggle. To win a match, a boxer must be well prepared physically and mentally, know his adversary and adapt his technique accordingly. But above all, in the ring the boxer must aim for a knockout! The fight might not always end that way, but victory is possible only if that’s what you want. Precisely because the union leaders support the whole system, they enter the ring determined not to inflict a KO. They fight to lose!

The left’s criminal role

The British labour movement crawls with people claiming to be against capitalism and for socialism. Groups like the Communist Party of Britain/Young Communist League, through “pressure” on the bureaucracy:

- “Even the most conservative leaders can be forced to go further than they want to” (The Socialist, 19 April).
- “We need strike committees to build the pickets, widen participation and to act as a focus for resistance to the union leaders when they fail” (Socialist Worker, 25 April).
- “If NHS union leaders prove unwilling to continue and unite these disputes from the top—or worse, to make dodgy backroom deals with the Tories—then members must respond with unity, mobilisation, and coordination from below” (Socialist Appeal, 14 April).

All this lies in place the same treacherous leaders who are cooking up the rotten deals and whose whole strategy is the reason the strike wave faces defeat. Even when the bureaucrats are pressured to go further than they want, they do everything in their power to restrain and sabotage these struggles.

A strategy based on “keeping the leaders in check” rests on pure faith in the bureaucracy. It relies on the unlikely possibility that, for a minute maybe, they could be persuaded to stop betraying. But they work for the other side! Pressuring them without exposing their fundamentally reactionary role, without stressing the need to break with them and without putting forward a programme for a new, revolutionary leadership only lends the authority of socialists to these traitors—whatever “criticisms” they might have. Now the working class is reaping the results of this disastrous course.

Where do these left groups think rotten deals come from? Nothing in the way the strikes were organised has forced the Tories to offer anything more than crumbs. And the union leaders take the crumbs because their strategy is precisely not to defeat the Tories. To say that the problem is a matter of “deals that fall short”, and that workers’ need is to vote them down and demand an escalation of the same strategy by the same leadership which has misled the strikes from the get-go, is to deceive workers and cover for the bureaucratists. This left cannot even see this, let alone admit this because that would mean repudiating their course of the last year. This is why they can only conceive of escalating the losing strategy which led us here in the first place.

Einstein supposedly said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Well, this sounds a lot like what the left is doing right now.

Of course, rotten deals need to be rejected. But the way to fight for better deals is to halt the current course, regroup and prepare the next battle. With the strikes defeated or in deadlock, with momentum lost and with the government stronger, to push for an escalation is both criminal and a capitulation to the union bureaucracy. It can only deepen the defeat and further weaken the trade unions.

Indeed, this course of action has a suicidal quality to it. To call for an escalation when the mass of union members is becoming more disillusioned and pulling away from the struggle means that strikes rely on the small minority of the most militant and committed workers to keep going. This would serve to increase their isolation from the rest of the union membership and set them up for repression. In turn, it would sabotage the possibility of a fightback in the near future and open up the trade unions to retaliation.

This is essentially what has happened in the CWU. The Socialist Party calls for the sell-out CWU leaders to be “preparing again for a major campaign of serious escalating strike action” (The Socialist, 26 April). The CWU is being chocked by Royal Mail and its members demoralised precisely because of the strategy of its leadership. Now, the SP is demanding that these proven traitors prepare a “major campaign” of strikes “again”. As the CWU’s car is heading for a wall, the SP proposes to press the accelerator.

Leftists who think that the working class should be on the offensive, but are not Marxists but juvenile adventurists. Revolutionaries do not play with the class struggle. Our task is to guide the working class in period of both ebb and flow, with the goal of socialist revolution. Of course, revolutionary Marxists have such a compass because we approach each individual battle between workers and bosses as part of the overall war between labour and capital. We understand that the two sides have irreconcilable interests and that one side—the workers—must decisively crush the other—the capitalists. When the enemy is weak, workers should strike as hard as possible. But when the enemy is strong and workers are weak, it’s time to retreat and safeguard our forces.

This is not how the British “socialists” view the current struggles. For them, it’s an incremental process which can only go up. This is the view behind the widely shared illusion that a few more strike days will necessarily translate into a few more percentage points on pay offers. This is the British form of reformism, called “gradualism”, which is in fact totally utopian. British capitalism is sinking. The British labour movement crawls with people claiming to be against capitalism and for socialism...
Strike wave and the left: A clash of two programmes

“Summer of discontent”

“The situation in Britain does urgently cry out for a general strike! The first step to prepare such a strike is to break with the TUC-begging, [Mick] Lynch-tailing socialists who are busy building those very leaderships that stand as obstacles to victory. To advance the cause for socialism there needs to be a fight throughout the labour movement for a new leadership that is committed to the working class taking power.”

— “Workers must run the country!”, WH no 248, Autumn 2022

“A leader like Mick Lynch…is a politically advanced member of the working-class, who actually has a vision for a materially, qualitatively different society that offers prosperity for working people, not billionaires….

“Imagine where our class will be with so many leaders like Mick Lynch.”

— Young Communist League, Challenge, 28 June 2022

Enough is Enough campaign

“EIE is designed to be nothing but a toothless public opinion campaign. It is not a step in the right direction as most on the left argue but an obstacle to mounting a fight for real change…. “Socialists must fight against workers and youth being led by non-socialist movements like EIE. If they do not do this, they are not socialists but left cheerleaders for a reformist movement.”

— “Workers must run the country!”, WH no 248, Autumn 2022

“Enough is Enough is an important moment to rally big numbers of people who feel lifted by the strikes and want to hit back effectively at the Tories.”

— Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Worker, 20 August 2022

Queen croaks

“The reactions to her death show all that is rotten about the leadership of the working class in this country. Before her body was cold, Mick Lynch of the RMT and Dave Ward of the CWU—the ‘heroes’ of the so-called ‘summer of discontent’—cancelled strikes in order to join the orgy of patriotism and national unity…. As the highest representative of class privilege dies, these traitors are telling workers that fighting against their own starvation must wait, out of reverence to the monarch. These are no working class leaders but lackeys of the ruling class.”

— “Queen croaks, Labourites crawl”, WH leaflet, 9 September 2022

“For a moment the rising tide of class struggle in Britain was interrupted by the period of mourning following the death of Queen Elizabeth…. “It was clearly valid for the leadership of the RMT and CWU to postpone the strikes by a couple of weeks, given that they were one or two-day strikes which would not be made less effective by a short delay.”

— Socialist Party, Socialism Today, 4 October 2022

Strike wave stagnates

“The number of strikes shows that workers are ready to fight. The government is weak, divided and discredited. A little kick is all this anti-working-class cartel needs to fall. A bold offensive against the government would be the best way to ensure the maximum concessions now….

“What is preventing this is precisely the current leadership of the trade unions, which is terrified of doing anything that could further destabilise the already shaky situation. In a nutshell, the union tops’ impotent methods flow from their refusal to challenge British capitalism.”

— “Tories on life support…union tops won’t pull the plug”, WH no 249, Spring 2023

“The trade union leaderships can make a massive difference now with the Tories in disarray. The determination and sacrifice of ambulance workers and other NHS staff, and all other workers fighting for decent terms and conditions, must be built on. Striking together with other workers on a day of further coordinated action would be a big show of strength. Union leaders, including the tops of the TUC, must take steps now to prepare for it.”

— Socialist Party, The Socialist, 25 January
The following is based on an 18 March presentation by Workers Hammer editor Vincent David in London. The talk, which was part of a Spartacist League public meeting titled “To save the NHS—Fight for women’s liberation!”, has been slightly expanded for production in this issue.

“Never cross a picket line!” Those familiar with the Spartacist League will know that this has been one of the important angles of our intervention into the current strike wave. For the last month, we have been campaigning quite intensively for individuals and organisations to fight for the three demands laid out in our leaflet:

1) Build picket lines, don’t cross them!
2) Enough of unions scabbing on each other’s strikes!
3) Defend all those who refuse to cross picket lines!

We have widely distributed this leaflet at demonstrations and on picket lines and have sent it to various working-class organisations around the country, from trade unions to socialist groups.

Why are we campaigning around these demands? Before answering this question, I would first like to answer: what is a picket line? The purpose of a picket line is to shut down a workplace on strike. In the struggle against the bosses over wages, working conditions and jobs, stopping the flow of profit and the functioning of a workplace is the only weapon the working class has.

The picket line’s purpose is to implement this by keeping the workplace shut. Anyone who crosses it finds a way around it, and anyone who crosses any picket (not just of their own union but of any union) is a strikebreaker—a scab. It is the worst sort of crime because it sabotages workers struggle and helps the bosses by keeping the facility running. The picket line is the front line of the battle between workers and capital, the spearhead of any successful strike.

But to anyone who has been on strike in recent months it should be obvious that the basic definition of the picket line I just laid out is totally alien to how things are today. When RMT rail workers go on strike, ASLEF train drivers go to work, and vice versa. When junior doctors or ambulance drivers are out, nurses are expected to cross their pickets. When NEU teachers are on strike, all the other unions in education are instructed to go to work and keep the schools running. Many unions often explicitly instruct their members to cross picket lines. Union members crossing their own picket line is a widespread practice, which the union tops do not even pretend to seriously combat. For those who have been on strike, how many times have you seen your union rep or other officials being chummy with scabs, shaking their hands, while they cross your picket to go to work? This is outrageous.

As a result, the strikes are isolated from one another, with widespread scabbing. They have not achieved anything and have had minimal impact on the bosses and their government. “Never cross a picket line” used to be a basic rule of the class struggle. But today it is rejected by the entire leadership of the trade union movement—from the right-wing Pat Cullen, who leads the RCN nurses union, to the so-called “militant” Mick Lynch of the RMT. Building picket lines that no one crosses plays no role in their strategy.

Why? Because union leaders are refusing to engage in a real confrontation with the bosses and the government. The only way to win a strike is to make the other side capitulate, and picket lines are workers’ most crucial tool to achieve this. But the trade union leaders do not have such a strategy. Instead, they organise the struggle through one-day strikes causing minimal disruption, thinking that the Tories can be made to care for workers through PR campaigns and by playing by the bosses’ rules. This can only lead to capitulation and defeat, as the recent deals reached by the RMT, the NHS unions and others show.

It is against this that we have launched our campaign. Our aim is to bring this basic rule of the class struggle back into the trade union movement as part of the fight for a new, socialist leadership. We certainly seek to convince individuals not to cross picket lines. But crucially, we seek to initiate and cohere a struggle inside the workers movement against the treacherous and scab-herding policies of the current trade union leaders. Those three demands: we want the unions to fight for them. In this way, we want to make workers realise the crucial importance of picket lines, but also that it is precisely the leaders of the trade unions who stand as obstacles to advancing the interests of the working class.

What reception have we got?

We have called on all workers organisations, from unions to socialist groups, to unite with us in fighting for these demands. Whatever political differences individuals and other groups might have with the Spartacist League, the demands should be readily acceptable for anyone wanting to fight for the working class.

Despite our demands being quite basic, the reaction from trade union leaders and socialist groups has varied from trying to ignore us to outright hostility. Groups like the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal have refused to respond to our messages. We have tried to speak to their members in demonstrations, and they have given us the silent treatment or denounced our campaign outright with the worst sorts of slanders.

Some have been more diplomatic in their equally negative response. Individuals in Workers Fight and the Revolutionary Communist Group (which publishes Fight racism, fight imperialism!) have told us something along the lines of: “We agree with these demands, but this is not a priority for us now.” After months of a strike wave whose problem has precisely been massive scabbing and a lack of class unity—both of which point to the need to organise a struggle against the current leaders—we wonder, what other more pressing priority do they have on their agenda?

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has responded in different ways. Their older leaders mostly rage against us. To give an example, when I proposed to some of them that we work together on the basis of these demands, I was denounced as a sectarian ultralefist. Total nonsense. But other SWP members have argued that “they are already doing this” with their “rank and file committees” and therefore there is no need for such a united-front campaign.

Let’s see. If you search the SWP website, you’ll see that they push to build strike committees, one benefit being, according to them, that they help rally union members to picket lines. Alright. But the point is not merely to rally more people to picket lines. The point is to fight for a change in the trade unions, so that the three demands we have put forward become union policy. That is not the purpose of the SWP election committees. Instead, they seek to build strikes inside the framework imposed by the existing bureaucracy. Their committees are limited to applying more pressure on union leaders, leaving intact their scab-herding policies and strategy.
A proposal for co-ordinated action

Everyone is fighting the same inflation and the same Tory government. Each workplace is fighting the same employer—but the unions stand divided. When the RMT strikes, ASLEF members go to work; when the RCN strikes, GMB and Unison go to work, and on and on to defeat. Crossing picket lines has been normalised. Something must be done! Picket lines used to mean something. Think of the heroic miners strike of 1984-85. The labour movement must return to that tradition:—

Let’s unite the broadest possible forces to fight for:

• Build picket lines—Don’t cross them!
  Convince all your co-workers of this principle.

• Enough of unions scabbing on each other’s strikes!
  Reverse the policy of unions instructing their members to cross picket lines.

• And all who refuse to cross picket lines!
  Against reprimals, the labour movement must have their backs.

We call on all trade unionists and socialists to fight for these demands inside the unions, the left and the entire labour movement.

To make this campaign real, we need to co-ordinate actions. We might disagree on many questions, but it is urgent to unite to defend the basic principle that picket lines mean don’t cross! To work with us towards organising this, contact us.

—14 February 2023

Endorsed by Richard Hall, veteran of 1984-85 NUM strike, Worsop Main Colliery

Steve Hedley chooses puritanism over picket lines

The following statement by the Spartacist League Central Committee was issued as a Workers Hammer supplement dated 7 March.

Steve Hedley, a former leader of the RMT, no longer wants to work with the Spartacist League in its campaign to defend picket lines—a urgent and crucial task for the workers movement. Why? Because we oppose laws that make consensual sex illegal based on an arbitrary age limit.

So Hedley did not want to fight in the workers movement to build picket lines because we oppose sexual repression and the policing of teenage sex. That is absurd and frankly disgusting. As we explained in our statement responding to him (see below), what Hedley did is a classic example of how the morality of the bourgeoisie on sexual questions is used against the struggles of the working class and oppressed for their emancipation.

After a month of campaigning we must conclude that so far, the leaders of trade unions and socialist groups have decided they do not want anything to do with our campaign and with seriously fighting for real picket lines. On the other hand, we have also got many positive reactions from individual workers, and even some low-level union officials, who understand the importance of our demands and the need for unions to fight for them.

Several members of NEU, Unite etc have expressed willingness to fight for our demands and have taken our leaflets, sometimes stacks of them, to distribute. A supporter of the Amazon workers brought one of our placards from London back home to Coventry, where the battle to organise a union is raging first and foremost on the picket line. As the strike wave is stagnating, we are meeting workers who are fed up with losing strategies. These are the advanced elements who will be key in the coming battles to rebuild union power in this country.

What has our campaign revealed?

We have been told many times that our demands would go against the anti-union laws and therefore cannot be fought for. That’s the argument always used by union leaders. You want to build real picket lines that stop scabs? “That’s against the law.” A solid strike? “Also against the law.” Solidarity actions? “Sorry, illegal.” “Have you tried writing to your MP?”…

The anti-union laws are indeed very draconian. But the fundamental problem is that the trade union leaders have completely accepted them. They have no intention of seriously challenging them or even testing their limits and exploiting their loopholes.

In fact, they use these laws as a convenient excuse to do nothing. Moreover, multiple union leaders have imposed measures which even go further than what these laws demand. The point of the trade union leaders is the SWP just lacks any strategy, because we oppose sexual repression on these other campaigns of ours—

We communists are adamant that the state has no more place in the bedroom than in the union movement. The laws regimenting sexuality according to age have the same moral basis as the anti-union laws! This requires organising a real confrontation between the working class and the capitalists running this country. And yes, that means running the risk that some union leader might be thrown in jail…for a solid strike that has shut down a whole industry and won.

Working-class fighters being thrown in jail has always been part of the price to pay to at least maintain some sort of balance between the workers and the ruling class. But in the past several years, union leaders have taken beating after beating, on their knees, and will tell you that nothing else can be done because it’s the law. Well, we say that organising a trade union also used to be illegal, until union leaders didn’t want it.

To understand why trade union leaders refuse to lead a fight for these basic union principles, you must understand what sort of people they are. The current crop was trained in the last 30 years, a period of constant retreat and defeats for the working class. They live in the shadow of the defeat of the 1984-85 miners strike. They’ve built their entire careers on explicit rejection of the need to lead any sort of bold...
Dear comrades,

Your recent article “May Day and the need for Marxist leadership” (Socialist Appeal, 27 April) sparked our interest. In it, you explain how “the key question confronting the working class in this epoch” is “the absence of a revolutionary leadership, capable of seeing the struggle through to the end”. You also explain that the problem with the UCU and CWU “flows from the reformist outlook of the union leaders” who “believe in the potential for class peace and compromise between the bosses and workers”. You note that in the history of workers’ struggles, “what they have consistently lacked, with the exception of Russian workers in October 1917, is a revolutionary leadership at their head” and that such a leadership “must be constructed in advance of the titanic events that impend”. We could not agree more.

What sparked our interest is not so much the validity of these words but how much they stand in total contradiction with the orientation and practice of Socialist Appeal in the trade unions. In particular, the work of Arsalan Ghani and your other supporters in Unite consists of uncritically campaigning for Sharon Graham. They run on her slate and defend her leadership, with Ghani going so far as to declare: “We need to ensure that we build on our wins and grow our union by electing an EC that shares Sharon’s vision for Unite” (Socialist Appeal, 11 January). This is completely opportunist and a betrayal of Marxist principles.

Sharon Graham is a product and integral part of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy. Like all the other bureaucrats, she cancelled strikes when the Queen died, in reverence to Her Majesty. Unite might have called on NHS staff to reject the rotten pay offer in March accepted by other unions, but throughout the strike wave Graham has conducted strikes with the same methods, the same losing strategy and the same pro-capitalist programme as the rest of the union bureaucrats.

Your main argument to defend your campaign for Graham has been that she is a step to the left compared to the former McCluskey bureaucratic clique. You even declare that McCluskey’s United Left faction represented “the past period of class conciliation in the union” (Socialist Appeal, 30 March). ie, Graham supposedly represents a break from class conciliation. This is a total whitewash. Graham is a reformist trade unionist, a fact your own members do not even dispute. This means that she, too, believes in class conciliation and leads the class struggle accordingly.

Sharon Graham or Lenin? You can’t have both

20 May 2023

Just like the UCU and CWU leaders. By presenting McCluskey and his followers as the sole representatives of class conciliation, you are simply fuelling the illusion that Graham’s “militant” reformist trade unionism defends the interests of the working class. Class conciliation and reformism are inseparable. If reformists refusing to unload a tanker transporting Russian oil, in a move to force the Tories to impose tougher sanctions on Russia. A few days later, Unite published a statement calling for “effective and immediate sanctions to be placed on the Russian economy” (“Statement on Ukraine crisis”, 10 March 2022, uniteetheunion.org). We have not seen a single word on this in the pages of Socialist Appeal. Furthermore, at the last TUC Congress, Unite supported a motion proposed by the GMB calling on the British government to increase its defence spending, invoking the need to militarily support Ukraine against Russia.

Because Socialist Appeal campaigns for one of the most pro-imperialist trade union bureaucrats in Britain, all your claims to be against arms shipments to Ukraine, against sanctions on Russia, against NATO and against imperialism are empty words. You hail Sharon’s “vision” for Unite and support “the transformation of the union that has taken place under Sharon Graham” (Socialist Appeal, 30 March). That “transformation” includes her efforts to align Unite behind the interests of British imperialism and her mobilisation of workers for this reactionary aim. In fact, you are only providing a “Marxist” cover for this social-chauvinism.

Supporting “left” bureaucrats seems to be your modus operandi. Your article titled “RMT Network Rail workers win—but the struggle continues” (Socialist Appeal, 22 March) hails a below-inflation pay deal as a “victory” and attributes this in part to the “militant, class-based language by our general secretary, Mick Lynch”. This is nothing but crawling in front of the RMT bureaucrats.

The task of revolutionaries in the trade unions is to fight for a communist leadership against all wings of the trade union bureaucracy. In Unite, this means combating the old bureaucracy and Sharon Graham, by revealing to workers how her reformist and pro-imperialist programme is in contradiction with their interests and showing them that only a revolutionary programme and leadership can advance their interests. But instead, Socialist Appeal is playing the role of lackey for Graham, building a reformist obstacle to cohering a Marxist leadership.

During World War I, Lenin waged a struggle to the death against those “Marxists” like Karl Kautsky who, while preaching the virtues of socialism and Marxist leadership, maintained unity with the openly pro-imperialist social-chauvinists. He wrote: “Unity with the social-chauvinists means unity with one’s own national bourgeoisie, which exploits other nations; it means splitting the international proletariat” (“Opportunism and the collapse of the Second International”, January 1916, translated from German). These words aptly describe the reactionary content of Socialist Appeal’s bloc with Sharon Graham: 21st century Kautskysm.

Lenin continued: “This does not mean that a break with the opportunists is immediately possible everywhere; it means only that historically this break is imminent; that it is necessary and inevitable for the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat; that history, which has led us from ‘peaceful’ capitalism to imperialist capitalism, has paved the way for this break.”

The building of a revolutionary leadership of the proletariat can only come about through a break with the social-chauvinist, reformist and centrist misleaders of the working class. This split might not always be immediately possible, as Lenin notes, but the actions of the vanguard are revolutionary only insofar as they advance such a split. Socialist Appeal, by building unity with pro-imperialist and reformist bureaucrats and propping up their authority in the workers movement, is working against this break, repudiating Leninism and playing a treacherous role.

So we say to Socialist Appeal: you can either be Leninist or maintain unity with Sharon Graham, but you cannot do both.

Comradely,
Workers Hammer
Leninist leadership and the class struggle

Printed below are excerpts from the “Theses on tactics and strategy” adopted by the Third Congress of the Comintern, which met in Moscow in June-July 1921. The excerpts are taken from To the masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921 (John Riddell, ed; Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

The most important task of the Communist International at present is to gain decisive influence over the majority of the working class and to lead its decisive sectors into struggle. The economic and political situation is objectively revolutionary, and can give rise to an acute revolutionary crisis at any moment — be it a mass strike, a colonial uprising, a new war, or even a major parliamentary crisis. However, the majority of the working class is not yet subject to Communist influence. This is especially true in countries where the strength of finance capital makes possible the existence of significant layers of workers corrupted by imperialism (Britain and the United States, for example), and where genuinely revolutionary mass propaganda has hardly begun.

The Communist International does not aim to form small Communist sects seeking to exert influence on the working masses through propaganda and agitation. Rather, from the earliest days after its formation, it has clearly and unambiguously pursued the goal of taking part in the struggles of the working masses, leading these struggles in a Communist direction, and, through the struggle, forming large, tested, mass revolutionary Communist parties.

From the very first years of its existence, the Communist International rejected sectarian tendencies by calling on its affiliated parties — no matter how small — to participate in the trade unions, in order to defeat the reactionary bureaucracy from within and to transform the unions into revolutionary mass organisations of the proletariat and agencies for its struggle. Already in its first year of existence, the Communist International called on Communist parties not to close themselves off as propaganda circles but to utilise every opportunity that the bourgeois state is compelled to provide, as a weapon, a platform, a point of assembly for communism.

The experiences of two years of struggle have fully confirmed the correctness of the Communist International’s point of view. The policies of the Communist International have brought about, in a number of countries, the separation of the revolutionary workers not only from the open reformists but also from the centrists. The Centrists have formed the Two-and-a-Half Internationals, which joins publicly with the Scheidemanns, the Jouhauxs, and the Hendersons within the Amsterdam trade-union International. This clarifies the field of battle for the proletarian masses, which can only facilitate the coming struggles.

The Communist parties can develop only through struggle. Even the smallest Communist parties cannot limit themselves to mere propaganda and agitation. In all the proletariat’s mass organisations they must be a vanguard that, by pressing for struggle for all the proletariat’s vital necessities, demonstrates how the struggle should be carried out, thus exposing the traitorous character of the non-Communist parties.

The present period is one of capitalist decay and collapse, a time when capital is no longer capable of assuring workers of even the life of a well-fed slave. Social Democracy advances the old Social-Democratic programme of peaceful reforms, carried out on the basis and in the framework of bankrupt capitalism, through peaceful means. This is conscious deception of the working masses. Not only is decaying capitalism incapable of providing the workers with relatively humane living conditions, but the Social Democrats and reformists show every day, in every country, that they do not intend to conduct any type of struggle for even the most modest reforms contained in their programme. The demand for socialisation or nationalisation of the most important industries, advanced by the centrist parties, is equally deceptive. The centrists mislead the masses by seeking to convince them that all the most important branches of industry can be torn out of the grip of capitalism without the defeat of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, they seek to divert the workers from the real, living struggle for their immediate needs through hope that branches of industry will be torn out one after another, ultimately creating the basis for “planned” economic construction.

In this fashion, they go back to the Social-Democratic minimum programme for reforming capitalism, which has been transformed into an obvious counter-revolutionary fraud. Some of the centrists advance a programme to nationalise the coal industry, for example, in part as an empty promise. The bourgeoisie must fear that the proletariat’s energies should be focused on a single demand, in order to convert it into a lever for revolutionary action, whose progress would lead to a struggle for power. What we have here is empty schematism.

The working class in all the capitalist states suffers today from so many and such terrible scourges that it is impossible to concentrate the struggle against all these oppressive burdens that weigh it down by focusing on some formula dreamed up in doctrinaire fashion.

The task, by contrast, is to take all the masses’ interests as the starting point for revolutionary struggles that only in their unity form the mighty river of revolution. The Communist parties do not propose a minimum programme for these struggles, one designed to reinforce and improve the rickety structure of capitalism. Instead, destruction of this structure remains their guiding goal and their immediate task. But to achieve this task, the Communist parties have to advance demands whose achievement meets an immediate, urgent need of the working class, and fight for these demands regardless of whether they are compatible with the capitalist profit system. Communist parties direct their concern not to the viability and competitiveness of capitalist industry or the resilience of capitalist finance but to the dimensions of a deprivation that the proletariat cannot bear and should not have to bear. Demands should express the needs experienced by broad proletarian masses, such that they are convinced they cannot survive unless these demands are achieved. If that is the case, the struggles for these demands will become starting points for the struggle for power.

In place of the minimum programme of the centrists and reformists, the Communist International offers a struggle for...
Union power... (continued from page 2)

It is pure fantasy to think that isolated and partial struggles can provide a significant increase in the standard of living for working people. In what we call the age of imperialist decay, gradualism is impossible. The only path to substantially increasing workers’ standard of living lies in the expropriation of the entire capitalist class and the establishment of a socialist planned economy. And it is only by marching on the path that the working class can wrest significant concessions from the ruling class, as reforms are always the by-product of revolutionary struggle. The “socialist” left’s view of the strike wave as an incremental line of success and its advocacy of constant escalation through means of pressure on rotten bureaucrats is simply an expression of their gradualist and reformist attitude towards the class struggle.

The tasks of revolutionaries

With the strike wave receding, two interconnected tasks fall upon revolutionaries in the trade unions. The first speaks to the main pressure acting on militant workers today, which is the growing mood of demoralisation and apathy. This often comes out in the form of union members saying they can’t afford to go on strike anymore. Usually this reflects a deeper distrust in the strategy of the union leadership. The first duty of class-conscious militants is to fight so that no union members abandon their posts. The treacherous strategy of the current union leadership is not an excuse to abandon picket lines, or worse, to cross them!

Most of the left seeks to combat demoralisation by writing countless articles about how great the strikes are and how militant the mood is on picket lines. Telling lies and painting rosy pictures does not combat demoralisation but in fact deepens it while covering for the bureaucracy. The truth is that the strike wave is receding, the situation is tough, and it will get tougher. But if picket lines become sparse and union members scab, that would send a strong signal to the bosses. With a doubt, they would exploit this weakness to come down on the union involved, diminishing its fighting capacity, making the bosses more powerful in the workplace, driving down everyone’s conditions and further weakening the position of the working class. Elementary defence of the trade unions is what’s posed now.

The second task is to combat the strategy of the trade union tops, as well as their lawyers on the left, by fighting for an orderly and limited retreat. The aim must be to regrasp the forces of the vanguard, rebudding the power of the unions and preparing the next battle.

To do this, revolutionaries must build socialist caucuses in the trade unions in opposition to the bureaucracy and all its lawyers, with the purpose of ousting the bureaucrats and taking over the leadership. The platform of such caucuses must guide militants in rebuilding trade union strength and laying the basis for an offensive against the Tories later this year. Here is what’s needed:

Build strike funds! Many union leaders launched strikes without strike funds. This is criminal. Trade unions must never go on a winning offensive if their members can’t eat. Some unions have set up “strike funds”, often in a hurry, but these are too meagre and are run like means-tested benefits. A strike fund should be simple:

- if you are on strike, that is, if you join the picket line (not if you stay home), you receive your share.
- The central purpose of union dues is supposed to be for amassing strike and defence funds. We need aggressive fund-raising campaigns involving as many union members as possible. No more six-figure salaries for both trades and millions in donations to the Labour Party, which denounces strikes anyway and stands against the interests of the working class.
- One workplace, one union! In unionised workplaces, various trade unions compete against each other, steal each other’s members, negotiate separately, go on strike on different days and scab on each other’s strikes. This is entirely due to rivalry between cliques of bureaucrats, it only helps the bosses, and it must stop. The bosses stand as one; the workers must too.
- Bosses out of the unions! This should be basic. There is no place for management and its running dogs in the trade unions. Many unions, like the NEU, allow bosses to join union meetings and accept their diktats on how unions should function, while also seeing bosses’ unions as allies. These policies only weaken the unions. Trade unions are there to fight the bosses, not to serve them.
- Recruit! The current trade union leaders do barely anything to recruit new members. If some unions got an influx of new members recently, it usually had nothing to do with the leadership’s efforts. Mass recruitment drives must be launched in non-union as well as organised workplaces. The best way to recruit is for the unions to stop the demoralisation by writing countless articles about how great the strikes are and how militant the mood is on picket lines, or worse, to cross them!

An injury to one is an injury to all! Unions must defend all workers victimised by the bosses. A worker being victimised is an attack not just on your workplace but on the whole labour movement. This task is particularly urgent in the CWU, where defence of the hundreds of sacked and suspended workers is a vital duty for all workers. Solidarity is not sending a few quid and a valentine. It means action. “One in the dock! All out the doors!” This was the rallying cry dock workers raised in 1972 to free their Pentonville Five shop stewards. And that’s the spirit we need in the unions today.

Build support for the class struggle! There is much debate about how to gather support from the public for strikes. The union tops believe that the less disruptive a strike, the more support it will gain. No! People feel ashamed to even confront scabs. To win the coming battles, we must turn the tide! The British labour movement must return to its age-old strength and do its duty of putting the widespread sacrifices on everyone else’s shoulders and help the bosses and government. Scabbing must be stopped! Enough of unions condoning scabbing on each other!

What we and our comrades are basic but vital to rebuilding union power and winning the next round. We have not invented them. They have been in the tradition of the international workers movement, and in the experience of the British trade union movement going back some 200 years. But the strike wave has revealed that every single one of them is betrayed by the existing leaders, and it is the job of revolutionaries in this country simply cover for them. Thus, any step towards rebuilding union power must be made in total opposition to these forces. Oust the rotten bureaucrats! For class-struggle leadership of the unions!

The British workers movement has only just awakened from a long sleep. Now, union militants must take their brooms and do some spring cleaning. Let’s put our house in order!

South Yorkshire miners picket, 1984. Strategy of current union leaders means unions will be defeated, members will starve, scabbing will continue. Every partial action undertaken by the working masses in order to achieve a partial demand, every significant economic strike, also mobilises the entire bourgeoisie, which comes down as a class on the side of the threatened group of employers, always render impossible even a limited victory by the proletariat (“Emergency Technical Assistance” [German strikebreaking organisation], bourgeois strikebreakers in the British railway workers’ strike of Fascists). The bourgeoisie mobilises the entire state apparatus for the struggle against the workers (militarisation of the workers in France and Poland, state of emergency during the miners’ strike in Britain). The bourgeoisie will respond to the demands for partial demands will be automatically forced into a struggle against the bourgeoisie as a whole and its state apparatus.

To the extent that struggles for partial demands and partial struggles by specific groups of workers broaden into an overall working-class struggle against capitalism, the Communist Party must escalate its slogans and generalise them to the point of calling for the enemy’s immediate overthrow.
Picket lines...
(continued from page 5)

confrontation with the government or any sort of real struggle against scabs on picket lines. This is why they set up symbolic picket lines, which are toothless photo ops.

The current union leaders value their respectable credentials in upper layers of the Labour Party much more highly than their reputation among working-class people. They are tied by a thousand threads to the ruling class, in their ambitions, ideologies and worldview. And financially, too, since many of them make six-figure salaries. They have literally nothing to gain from shaking up the status quo. When they are forced to organise a strike, it is in reaction to anger from their membership. Even then they do it in the most half-hearted manner, hampering the struggle at every turn with the aim of selling out at the first opportunity.

All this explains their rejection of the methods of the class struggle and why strikes are being sold out left and right. And this is why no union leader will touch a strike movement and must be removed if unions are to become tools for real struggle.

What about the myriad of socialist groups in this country that all refused to join our campaign? Why? The reason is not really that they disagree with these demands — although we know for a fact that many of them do cross picket lines and do lawyer for scabs. The real reason is that it is impossible to fight for these demands without entering into open struggle against the trade union leaders. That is the problem for all the other socialist groups. Since the beginning of the strike wave, they have been in an open bloc with those leaders, openly campaigning for them, lauding them, giving them a left cover and justifying their betrayals. To sign up for our campaign means breaking this bloc — which is also one of our aims. The campaign poses the need to fight for a different leadership of the working class, a leadership based on the principles of the class struggle.

Groups like the Communist Party (CP), Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party etc. have spent years cultivating good relations with the union bureaucrats who are disorganising the strikes, and sometimes are themselves union bureaucrats. The Communist Party has members on the RMT executive committee and all over the upper echelons of the union. When the RMT cancels strikes for the Queen, or more recently to make workers accept a below-inflation pay rise, who helps Mick Lynch sell this to the workers? The CPBers!

Go to the Islington branch of the NEU, the teachers union, to give a local example, and you will quickly realise that it is run in the most half-hearted manner, hampering the struggle at every turn with the aim of selling out at the first opportunity. This is why they set up symbolic picket lines for the Queen, or more recently RMT’s Mick Lynch outside London’s Euston Station during June 2022 strike. Building picket lines as toothless photo ops, RMT and ASLEF leaderships scab on each other’s strikes, undermining both unions.

Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party etc. have spent years cultivating good relations with the union bureaucrats who are disorganising the strikes, and sometimes are themselves union bureaucrats. The Communist Party has members on the RMT executive committee and all over the upper echelons of the union. When the RMT cancels strikes for the Queen, or more recently to make workers accept a below-inflation pay rise, who helps Mick Lynch sell this to the workers? The CPBers!

Socialists can provide a consistent guide to fight, suffer and win than to rot for the rule of the working class. That is the case with the Labour Party. The Communist Party, the Freedom Road Socialist Organiser’s “Leninist” fraction and the Chicago Workers Vanguard are representatives of the class enemy, relying by building trans-class alliances, searching for the road to victory. Was it not Lenin who sowed illusions in this capitalist society? Leninists, too—to our party. It’s about cutting through the racist line: “This is a black nationalist organization because they are not calling to build an international communist front for the liberation of our class enemy. Against these misleaders who sowed illusions in this capitalist society, we build the revolutionary party! We need the working class to understand that the struggle is ours, that only the programme and leadership of the communist party can provide a consistent guide to fight, suffer and win.

Programmatic rearing in fight for revolutionary leadership today. ICL, press clockwise from left: Spartacist (English edition no 67, August 2022) and German-language edition no 33 (May 2023) with lead article, “The crisis of the liberal order — the communist answer”; first issue of El Antimperialista, newspaper of refounded Grupo Espartacaista de Mexico, headlined: “For workers and national emancipation! Trotskyism vs. populism” and “O Bolsevicos supplement (March 2023) published by Trotskyist Group of Greece calls for KKE/PAME workers government and demands: Cancel the debt! Throw out the austerity packages! Out of the EU and NATO! Workers Vanguard nos 1178 (5 May) and 1177 (17 March), with documents from SL/U.S. conference breaking with previous opportunist course.
to the concrete tasks for Marxists toward a movement whose main objective is police reform. Advocating police reform is not simply a faulty view stemming from a misunderstanding of the capitalist state. It is a deadly program used to rope black people behind the Democratic Party.

The point we started to develop in our letter to the SL/U.S. is that the program of police reform is inherently class-collaborationist. Unlike the fight for reforms, such as better housing or better wages, whose achievement will benefit the working class and the oppressed, police reform can only serve to further tie the oppressed to the capitalist parties and their state. It means directly involving minorities and the working class in the management of the capitalist forces of repression, whether it is through civilian review boards, municipal budgets, legislation in Congress, or the selection of the police commissioner.

The point is that you can’t fight for police reform independently from the capitalists. It is an inherently popular-frontist demand. A BLM group that opposes the Democrats but still supports police reform is still in the popular front. It is not enough to explain that police reform is impossible and that the future revolution will solve everything; it is necessary to expose how today this program is used to bind the oppressed to their oppressors. The program of police reform must be rejected as a precondition for advancing the struggle for black liberation. This is precisely what the IG and SL/U.S. have not done.

It is also necessary to put forward a concrete counterposed alternative for right now. The running down of ten black people in a Buffalo grocery store shows once more the constant fascist threat that black people face. BLM and other leftist demonstrations are also in the crosshairs of fascists. To turn the tide of class struggle in this country, labor will need powerful, militant picket lines. Instead of putting the economic pie given to workers without addressing the fact that blacks are at the bottom and receive a proportionally smaller portion will maintain the basis for racial antagonism.

Trade-union communism, which ignores the specific needs of black workers, will generate resentment and distrust and can only fuel integrationism. In the left, including the SL/U.S., has mirrored BLM in totally ignoring the fight for black liberation. The only way to advance black liberation is to win the black masses to the understanding that integration can only be achieved in struggle against all wings of the bourgeoisie, including its liberal wing. This is the premise for fighting for integrated affordable housing; free, quality health care; free, integrated schooling from preschool to university.

3. Overcoming the racial divide

The dominant pressure in the United States is to look at society through the prism of race instead of class. The white ruling class spreads racial prejudice against black people in order to keep the oppressed divided and at each other’s throats. In response to this, black nationalism and liberal integration are counterposed. Liberal integration is presented as simply “utopian,” not as a program that fundamentally restricts and hampers the struggle for black liberation. The only way to advance black liberation is to win the black masses to the understanding that integration can only be achieved in struggle against all wings of the bourgeoisie, including its liberal wing. This is the premise for fighting for integrated affordable housing; free, quality health care; free, integrated schooling from preschool to university.

Workers Hammer
call raised by Left Voice, the IG and the SL/U.S. has been for the working class to fight in defense of black people. Here’s Left Voice’s version (leftvoice.org, 25 May 2022):

“SEIU [service employees] called for a Strike for Black Lives in coordination of the ILWU [dockers] West Coast port shutdown, although few SEIU work stoppages actually occurred. Yet it showed a glimpse of what could be and what will need to happen in order to defend Black lives and end police brutality—coordinated strikes against police killings.”

You will find pretty much the same thing as this throughout WV and the [IG’s] Internationalist. The propaganda by the left simply presents strikes and working-class demonstrations as inherently progressive. The ILWU Juneteenth [anniversary of 19 June 1865 proclamation of freedom for slaves in Texas] “strike” was not a show of labor power against the capitalist class, but a rally behind liberal Democratic Party politics. To call for working-class action in the context of BLM, without it being based on a clear programmatic counterposition to liberalism and the Democratic Party, is simply building an alliance between the workers and the liberal wing of their exploiters. This is what the left, including the SL, has been doing. Workers must be mobilized in defense of black people, not on the basis of BLM’s program. For the working class to advance its own interests and to champion the needs of the black masses, the precondition is to break with its political subordination to the Democratic Party.

5. Breaking with the Democrats

It is pretty common for pseudo-Marxists to call for breaking with the Democrats, especially these days. Recently, the main argument raised in the SL/U.S. against BLM is that it is organically tied to the Democrats. “Break with the Democrats” is, of course, a necessary and principled call. However, raising this call does not automatically draw a class line. For example, as the previous example shows, it is perfectly possible to call to break with the Democrats and the bureaucrats while supporting the working class being mobilized in defense of black people, but not on the basis of BLM’s program. For the working class to advance its own interests and to champion the needs of the black masses, the precondition is to break with its political subordination to the Democratic Party.

6. The revolutionary party

Throughout WV articles on BLM—and in most of its articles dealing with special oppression—we claim we want to build a revolutionary party and refer to Lenin’s conception of the party as a “tribune of the people.” In fact, the SL/U.S.’s program has been much closer to that of the Economist Trotskyans than Lenin’s. Just like the SL/U.S., Trotskyans justified dumbing down the tasks of the party with the argument that current consciousness isn’t revolutionary. From this, he drew the conclusion:

“Since in ordinary times various social strata inevitably march separately, ‘it is, therefore, clear that we Social-Democrats cannot simultaneously guide the activities of various opposition strata, we cannot dictate to them a positive programme of action, we cannot point out to them in what manner they should wage a day-to-day struggle for their interests… The liberal strata will themselves take care of the active struggle for their immediate interests, the struggle that will bring them face to face with our political regime’”

— V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done (1902)

To put this in the context of the black question, we, just like the Economists of Lenin’s time, did not put forward a positive program of action, did not point out how to wage the day-to-day struggle and abandoned the struggle for black liberation to the leadership of the liberals. Lenin also quotes Martynov arguing that the party should function “merely in the negative role of exposers of abuses… we can only dissipate their hopes in various government commissions.” Sounds just like the Internationalist and WV, which merely write long tiradises of the abuses against black people while dissipating hopes in police reform. Blacks don’t need WV and the Internationalist to tell them how brutal police are. As Lenin responded to Martynov, they will find out directly from the police. Simply writing about different forms of specific oppression is totally compatible with today’s economy. In contradistinction to WV, which uses the tribune of the people point to justify liberal moping about capitalism, Lenin insists on the need to give the oppressed the courage of oppressed groups a revolutionary content and leadership. Towards the groups oppressed by tsarism, Lenin explained:

“We must take upon ourselves the task of organizing and organizing a political struggle under the leadership of our Party in such a manner as to make it possible for all oppositional strata to render their fullest support to the struggle and to our Party. We must train our Social-Democratic practical workers to become political leaders, able to guide all the manifestations of this all-round struggle, able at the right time to ‘dictate a positive programme of action’ for the aroused students, the discontented Zemstvo [provincial council] people, the incensed religious sects, the offended elementary schoolteachers, etc., etc.”

Lenin’s whole point is that against the economists who restrict working-class struggle to economic struggle and abandon other opponents of tsarism to liberal leadership, a vanguard party must elevate other opponents of tsarism to liberal leadership, a vanguard party must elevate consciousness and unite all opponents of tsarism behind its own banner in the struggle to overthrow the regime. At bottom, the question facing the SL/U.S. boils down to the same conflict: an economist program for the working class, leaving the black struggle under a liberal leadership, versus unity of the black and working-class struggle behind a revolutionary party.

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Which way forward for black liberation?

BLM liberalism vs Trotskyism

The following presentation by G Perrault, secretary of the ICL's International Secretariat, was given in New York City last summer as part of the fight in the Spartacist League/US to rearm with a revolutionary programme. It was first printed in Workers Vanguard no 1177 (17 March).

There have been two main waves of BLM protests in the U.S. at their peak in 2020, millions of people were in the streets. What have the results been? Well, Biden is in the White House, and Derek Chauvin [Minneapolis cop who killed George Floyd] is in jail. But when it comes to the conditions of black people in the U.S., they have only gotten worse. Blacks are gunned down as always, and the living conditions that are dreadful in normal times are getting ever more wretched due to rising inflation and other consequences of the pandemic.

That BLM has not led to any significant progress for black people is pretty obvious and uncontroversial. The real question is: why?

Black people are segregated at the bottom of American society. Any significant progress toward social integration and equality — whether it is ending police brutality, integrated housing, high-quality health care, free, integrated education — requires confronting the fundamental interests of the American capitalist class. You cannot resolve a single one of these questions while staying within the confines of capitalist America.

BLM, on the other hand, is a liberal movement for police reform. You just have to look at its main slogan — “black lives matter” — to see that it is not a call for freedom, for power, but an appeal to the ruling class to “care” about black people. The movement is based on a coalition going from liberal capitalists to unions to pseudo-Marxists. It is a classic popular-frontist movement whose entire political program and composition guarantee from the outset that it will not pose any challenge to capitalist interests. And since black liberation cannot make a single step forward without taking on these interests, a liberal movement like BLM necessarily means betraying the struggle for black liberation. Therefore, the subordination of the black struggle to liberalism and to the black petty bourgeoisie is the central reason for the movement’s current paralysis and impotence.

These liberal shackles must be broken — not as in the ’60s by black nationalism, which is just another dead end, but by a revolutionary working-class program. This raises two interrelated tasks for revolutionaries: first, to fight for a left-wing working-class break with liberalism; and second, to win activists involved in the BLM movement to Trotskyism, the only program which can bring about black liberation.

But where have the so-called revolutionaries been? They have been supporting different versions of BLM’s liberal politics. Whether it is in our own press, the Internationalist Group’s (IG) or that of Left Voice, the purpose has been to push the movement to the left, winning the more radical elements to a halfway house between the Democratic Party and revolutionary politics (which really means the Democratic Party). This is an utter betrayal of the struggle for black liberation and an utter betrayal of the struggle for workers revolution. It accepts that young black militants and others outraged by the realities of black life in America will remain tied to capitalist politics, which necessarily leads only to defeat and demoralization. While the pseudo-Marxist left is tiny and not very influential in the U.S., it nonetheless represents the main political obstacle stopping left-wing BLM activists from breaking from liberalism and finding their way to revolutionary socialism.

So far, our internal discussion has established well how the SL/U.S.’s intervention toward BLM was totally capitulatory. But this isn’t enough. It is necessary to concretely motivate revolutionary internationalism against BLM’s liberalism and the left’s tailism.

With the black movement clearly at an impasse, there is an urgent need for answers. Only Trotskyists can explain why BLM was such a failure and what needs to be done to go forward. In the rest of my presentation, I want to outline six key questions on which we have so far failed to draw a Marxist line.

1. Police reform

The main political demand by BLM is for police reform. There are a bunch of schemes—some utopian, some useless, some reactionary—all of them total dead ends.

The main response from the SL/U.S. and IG to the program of police reform has been to say that it is impossible and that only revolution can end police oppression of black people. This is as true as it is sterile. We learnedly explain that: “This system cannot be fixed by tweaking laws or cleaning out corruption, which is the content of the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement” (WV No. 1064, 20 March 2015). And then go on about the nature of the state and the need for revolution. No political conclusions are drawn as