

Interview with Ken Weller  
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What is Libertarian Socialism?

**FLUX:** Solidarity always called itself 'libertarian socialist', but this probably doesn't mean a lot to most people. So, can you say what you mean by libertarian socialist?

**KEN:** We didn't think the term counted for anything in itself. We tended to use it to stress the anti-statist side of our politics. We believed that the working class should directly control society and rule their own lives, and that therefore they should directly control their own struggles. So we tended to use 'libertarian' socialist to distinguish ourselves from 'authoritarian' state socialism - in all its forms, from the Leninist left to the social-democratic right.

**FLUX:** A critique of what you called the traditional left was always central to Solidarity's politics.

**KEN:** We argued that the traditional left do share a number of fundamental attitudes. Although I'm not making an amalgam because there are many differences. But basically there was the question of achieving state power: Leninists said you seized state power and reformists said you did it by permeating the existing system.

And with this there was the central role of the political elite. With Leninism it was the vanguard party, where the only real discussions take place and where

decisions are taken on behalf of the working class. Often the working class didn't even know that the party existed! But it's not only Leninism, it's there on the right too. There's a statist tradition where socialism has meant bureaucratic, managerial elites. One of the forgotten books by the Webbs\* was a handbook for works managers!

**FLUX:** Of course, a Leninist would suggest a rather different picture...

**KEN:** Leninists have said many things. So has the Labour Party. And so have the Tories, but what *they* do is not the same as what they write in their manifestos. We have to find the real ideas behind the rhetoric. The whole thesis of Lenin, from 'What Is To Be Done' through all his serious writings on the structure of the party and the management of the Soviet economy is that what counted was the elite. For example, in the 'Tasks







## The FLUX Interview

of the Soviet Government' you have the introduction of one-man management, the complete subordination of the worker to the Soviet manager, the introduction of piece rates and so on.

And it's there in Trotsky's Transitional Programme' too. This is based on the idea that you put forward demands which can't be achieved under capitalism. And that although ordinary people won't know this, they'll still fight for these demands. So, you'll achieve socialism without the people who carry out the struggle really knowing what's going on!

I'll give you an example of all this. Years ago in Fords we had a Shop Stewards committee controlled by the Communist Party, under a man called Sid Harroway. They called for a one-day strike in support of the nurses and called for a meeting of the body group at Dagenham. They said that South Wales and Halewood had both voted to take action and that we should support them. I was in favour of this. Later we found out that none of the other places had even had meetings!

The thing was to go to the most militant place first and tell them the others had voted to strike. After, you'd go to the other places and tell them about the vote and then get these places to support it. What's it all about?

Lying and manipulation! And it flows from an ideology which says that it doesn't matter whether workers understand or not. If

they do the right thing - it's enough!

There are deep roots here. Seeing the working class as actual or potential clients. Saying the working class needs this elite. And all sorts of things flow from this attitude. If you have an elite it has to live and it needs privileges because, for example, it can't spend all its time in bread queues. And there you have the origins of the self-interested bureaucracy we saw in the Soviet Union.

And when you have people living off other people in this way they have to justify this. And 'socialism' becomes the self-advocacy of an elite!

This is a complex process and there are many lines in the matrix. There was the whole process of bureaucratization in local government, where more and more focus went on administration and less and less on people. And where did this leave the 'left'? Defending the status quo, and a system that didn't work. And why? Because that's what the 'left' became, hanging onto the control of this apparatus out of self-interest. And take the old GLC. There you saw this sort of process of clientelisation at work.

There was this ideology which said 'create a Rainbow Alliance of women, ethnic groups and gays' and so on. Now this wasn't an alliance of women, ethnic minorities and gays but one between people who claimed to represent them - and who expected to be paid to do it - along with the politicians. Now these weren't people who had an interest in overcoming the divisions of society. Rather, you had hierarchies rooted in division which justified their positions by creating myths: all whites are racist, all men are sexist!

Listen to the discussions on this 'left'. And to the denial of free debate. "We won't permit you to talk about this - it's an ethnic question": "Only we're allowed to talk about this - it's a gender question". As I said, there's a whole matrix here. But what you saw corrupt bureaucracies! I'll give you an example. One of the Labour councillors around here came out publicly in support of the killing of Salmon Rushdie. What was that about? Unprincipled deals with minority religious

leaders where a councillor or two or a grant or two are exchanged for delivering a Labour vote!

**FLUX:** So, the role of socialists is not to be an elite in the Leninist - or in the social-democratic - sense. Then what is it?

**KEN:** There is a role for all kinds of people and all kinds of discussions, providing they take place in the open. But the role of organisations is not to be a

government in exile - that's one thing it's not!

There are a number of very important roles for groups. Open discussion, putting forward ideas, spreading information, putting people in touch with each other, creating links, helping in the presentation of ideas. Socialism won't happen spontaneously, there are all kinds of structures and networks involved.

But libertarian socialism means that the people involved will decide. And this is a complex thing because if they decide they won't necessarily decide in detail exactly what you want. All you can say is that the direction will generally be a positive one. It doesn't mean there won't be political argument. And you have to fight for what you think is right as well. But you never substitute yourself. It's not about gaining control.

One of the struggles Solidarity was involved in was the King's Hill struggle of homeless families\*. I think this illustrates what I mean.

King's Hill was a hostel in Kent. The system was that husbands weren't allowed to stay in the hostel and after three months the family were evicted and the

*Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others - even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.*

*From the Solidarity Pamphlet As We See It*



# SOLIDARITY



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children taken into care. It wasn't that there was an accommodation problem - the place was never full and, in fact, the hostel was made up of self-contained flats. It was like the old workhouses. It was systematically made unpleasant to force people out. Now one day the place exploded and the husbands refused to leave.

People from Solidarity were involved in the struggle right from the start, along with other unattached socialists. Now, people are products of their society - especially people in difficult circumstances - and there was this feeling that they couldn't do anything for themselves; that they had to manoeuvre other people into doing things for them and to shift responsibility. There was this tendency to say "You do it", but we said "No, we won't. You've got to do it for yourselves".

Now, they made lots of mistakes. People were fragmented. People were trying to inform on each other to save themselves if the struggle was lost. But as it continued you found people giving interviews on TV and to the press. They were managing the struggle themselves and in the process they became different people. Ultimately they won.

And this is what I mean by the role of an organisation. With the traditional left the organisation substitutes itself. Often people don't know what's going on. There are all kinds of caucuses and so on. In the end, if it's a victory no one's learnt anything positive, and if it's a defeat there's just a suspicion of being manipulated - and rightly so.

But there has been this attitude - and it's permeated great chunks of the left - that manipulation is OK. But if you manipulate you're making a very important political statement: that you have the authority and ordinary people don't.

**FLUX: You came out of this 'traditional left'. Perhaps this is why the critique has been so central. Can you tell us something about this development?**

**KEN:** Solidarity was formed in 1960, by people who came out of the SLL\*. Before that some of us had been in the Communist Party but had left after Hungary 1956. Both the CP and even more so, the SLL were totalitarian

in their politics and organisation. There was never any real discussion allowed. So after we left, we started asking questions about the fundamental character of our politics.

We soon discovered that we weren't really Trotskyists, and later that we weren't Leninists. After much longer discussions we decided that we weren't really Marxists. We thought that whilst these things weren't all the same, nevertheless there were connections. In this we were influenced by the French paper 'Socialism or Barbarism'\*.

**FLUX: People might argue that your attitude towards Marxism was simply an expression of your experience of Leninism...**

**KEN:** People do say that. Of course, there are many variations of Marxism and people are always rewriting Marx. All you can do is base yourself on what he said. I think he was a great man, who created a framework upon which much later discussion could take place. But despite his many valuable insights, on many central things he was wrong, the continual impoverishment of the working class for example. There are many examples. But a key thing in Marx is a vision of the working class as simply commodified labour power, and in this dehumanised conception of the working class you can see one of the roots of Leninist authoritarianism. There are other connections. If you read Marx and Engel's correspondence you'll see the justification for the way they acted in the First International. They describe how they lost control and so shipped it off to New York - basically to let it die. The classical justifications for many of the methods used in the Leninist movement are there.

But the point is Marx has to be treated as a human being and he hasn't been. He's been treated like a god, although people deny it. People have justified what they do simply by lifting quotes from Marx and so on! This isn't a rational way of looking at things.

**FLUX: I think that one of the problems facing people trying to think through an alternative socialism is that**



## The FLUX Interview

the ground has been occupied by Leninism on the one hand, and the Labour Party on the other. Other traditions are not readily available...

KEN: That's right. When we came out of the SLL we were reading everything. We discovered a whole tradition of socialist critique of Leninism: Pannekoek and Gorter, Pankhurst, Kollontai's Workers Opposition within the Bolshevik Party, some of the Anarchists\*. These were ideas that had effectively been suppressed.

But it wasn't just a question of socialist ideas, we found that the practical history of the working class movement had been distorted by the proponents of the dominant ideas.

Where do we start? Read stuff on the unemployed movement in Britain or the mutinies in World War 1. It's all been distorted in the most crass way!

Take Wal Hannington\*. I could never work out why the unemployed movement reached its peak before the National Unemployed Workers Movement had really been formed. The NUWM was controlled by the CP, who were struggling for leadership of the unemployed movement nationally. And I'll give you an example which has completely been written out of history. One of the leaders of the unemployed movement in London between 1921 - 22 was a man called Gunnar Soderburg, a Scandinavian who'd been in the IWW\*. In 1923 the CP sent a circular to their members telling them to pack a meeting of the London Unemployed Workers Groups and more or less telling them to get Soderburg out. The archives of the Kentish Town CP are available to us now. They alleged he was a police agent and so on. Hannington refers to this incident in his book without referring to Soderburg by name. Anyway it split the movement wide open with many of the active groups - for example, Poplar - breaking away. After that it went into decline. Hannington never mentions this.

The interesting thing is that when Hannington wrote his book he must have known that Soderburg was in the States, in Sing Sing, serving a 20 year jail sentence, for leading a major dock strike in New York!

Major episodes of the unemployed struggle were never described, and why? Because the CP - as it was in this case - had to be seen as the begetter of the movement!

Then there were the mutinies after World War 1, which involved hundreds of thousands and which effectively restricted Britain's ability to intervene in Ireland. Except for a few chapters they've gone undescribed. Why? Because they were autonomous movements of the working class. And although they involved all sorts of people from a socialist background, there was no party there to take the credit!

There's a subliminal line that everything needs to be tight and structured and under the control of the people who understand and so on. And so, there's a richness of history that has been completely suppressed!

FLUX: Finally, I want to consider the situation now.

What about the working class, has it disappeared as some say? And what should socialists be doing?

KEN: Something very important has happened. People have retreated, they feel isolated. They don't think they can influence the society around them. The industrial working class has got smaller and been modified. There are problems. The working class don't work in vast factories producing steel anymore, but in smaller factories, in service industries, in shops and so on. Factories employing thousands were easy, but there are alternatives.

But I don't think it's that the working class has changed so much as the socialist movement has gone elsewhere. The working class has become completely alienated from the socialist movement. It's not only a question of the 'downturn in class struggle' - the classic argument. There is truth in this but it's not a recent phenomena. The seeds were already there in an ideology which didn't see the working class as the revolutionary class but as clients.

First of all socialists have got to reestablish contact with working people, taking their interests as determined by them as being important. There are many different tasks. Rearticulating the vision of socialism, documenting and criticising what went wrong. It's not a monolith, different groups of people can do different things.

You've also got to create an environment of free discussion going beyond political groups, and trying to create an environment - however small to begin with - which reflects the vision of the society you want.

### NOTES

THE SOCIALIST LABOUR LEAGUE WAS THE FORERUNNER OF THE WORKERS' REVOLUTIONARY PARTY. THE 'KING HILL STRUGGLE' OCCURRED IN 1966 - IT WAS A KEY EVENT IN THE FORMATION OF THE SQUATTERS MOVEMENT. PANNEKOEK, GORTER AND SYLVIA PANKHURST WERE PART OF THE LEFT OPPOSITION TO LENIN. PANNEKOEK AND GORTER WERE CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE 'COUNCIL COMMUNIST' MOVEMENT. PANNEKOEK'S 'WORKERS' COUNCILS' IS PUBLISHED AS 4 PAMPHLETS BY ECHANGE ET MOUVEMENT, AND GORTER'S 'OPEN LETTER TO COMRADE LENIN' HAS BEEN REPRINTED BY WILDCAT. ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI'S CRITIQUE OF THE BOLSHEVIK PARTY, 'THE WORKERS' OPPOSITION', WAS PUBLISHED BY SOLIDARITY. WAL HANNINGTON'S BOOK 'UNEMPLOYED STRUGGLES 1919 - 1936' IS PUBLISHED BY ROUTLEDGE KEGAN & PAUL. SOLIDARITY PRINTED THEIR OWN PAMPHLET ON 'MUTINEES: 1917 - 1920' BY DAVID LAMB.

John French



From the Solidarity Pamphlet, As We Don't See It