The National Question Today and the Poisonous Legacy of the Counter-revolution

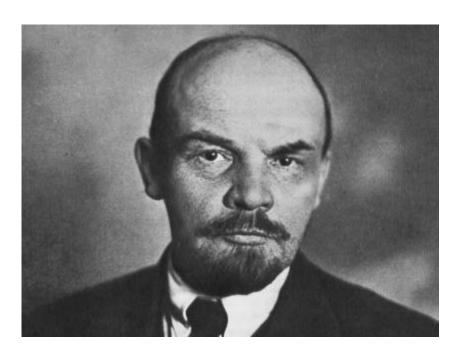


Image - Lenin lost the argument in the Bolshevik Party in 1919 but the Comintern followed him after 1921

In September 2009 the Anarchist Federation (AF) published a pamphlet entitled "Against Nationalism". The pamphlet was produced as a response to wave of support for Palestinian nationalism and its political expression, in the shape of HAMAS, which the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2008/2009, elicited from the so-called "left".

The pamphlet considers the historical evolution of nationalism and imperialism and some of the arguments advanced by socialists for supporting or opposing national struggles. The AF makes clear from the outset that they have *always* opposed national struggles even those of "oppressed nations." The pamphlet also correctly identifies national struggles as interclass struggles which undermine the workers' struggles, which, in contrast, are international. The reservoir of support for bourgeois nationalism in the British "left" ensured that voices were raised against the conclusions of this pamphlet. David Broder, of the Commune group responded with a critical review of the pamphlet in a text entitled "the earth is not flat" and the issue was made a subject of debate in the Commune's day

school in June. At the day school, which the CWO attended, the key issues were raised with different members of the Commune taking totally opposing positions on this question. Left Communists in general and the CWO in particular, consider that history has settled the issue of the national question and the theorists who have given their support to national struggles in the period from the First World War onwards have been shown to be decisively wrong. Today support for nationalism is no longer a mistaken tactic, as might have been argued in the period leading up the World War 1, it is counter-revolutionary.

We are therefore taking this opportunity to comment on the pamphlet and the issues which have been raised in the review and the subsequent debates.

"Against Nationalism"

The AF pamphlet looks at nationalism as an ideology described as a "narrative constructed by the capitalist state." It exposes its use in creating class collaboration and inducing the working class to fight the capitalist's wars and points out that the interests of wage workers "stand in opposition to those of the capitalist nation state." It, correctly points out that successful national struggles result in a re-ordering of the machinery of exploitation of the working class and do not in any way bring liberation to the working class, giving the examples of Vietnam and Zimbabwe to illustrate the point. The pamphlet calls for "class struggle in the arena of war and in the antagonist nations" as the only strategy which could be supported. Generally we endorse the political conclusions reached by the pamphlet.

However, the pamphlet has a number of weaknesses which make it unable to adequately refute the politics of the bourgeois left.

Economic Roots of Nationalism

The principal weakness of the pamphlet is that it examines nationalism as "ideology" but does not attempt to expose the material roots of this ideology or see it in its historical perspective.

The analysis therefore fails to take into account the dynamics of capitalism as an economic system, and the developments which it has undergone from the 19th century to the present, developments which are reflected in ideological changes in the key ideas of nationalism.

In the 19th century, formation of national states served the purpose of developing the national capital, often behind protective tariff barriers, capitalising agriculture and converting the agricultural population and artisans into wage labourers. In doing this capitalism was eradicating feudalism and creating the proletariat as a class within capitalism, thereby carrying out a progressive role. This role could be described as progressive since it was creating the class of wage labourers as a distinct class within capitalist society. This class was an exploited class on which the whole capitalist system depended and a class with a clear interest in ending their exploitation. It was, therefore, a class in "radical chains" which could be the agent for the socialisation of the means of production and the construction of a higher form of social organisation, namely communism. The general content of the nationalist struggle was the consolidation of the national state through a struggle against feudalism and consequent development of the capitalist system and the working class. While this was the content of nationalism, proletarian political organisations could give political support to the bourgeoisie in carrying out these tasks. The nationalist struggle could, therefore, be supported where it favoured the interest of the working class. Support for the national bourgeoisie was, in this period, a tactical issue. However, at the end of the 19th century the phase of formation and consolidation of capitalist states was, in Europe at least, generally completed. For the major capitalist states there was now a need for the national capital to secure sources of raw materials, theatres for export of capital, markets and trade routes on a worldwide scale. Capitalism, as a global system, had entered a new phase, that of imperialism.

Wars of national formation gave way to imperialist wars, of which the First World War was the most dramatic manifestation. Changes in the material needs of the major capitalist states produced a change in the ideological content of nationalism. In the period from the start of 20th century to the present, nationalism became synonymous with support for the imperialist struggle to project the interests of is, a struggle against other capitalist states. The change in the content of nationalism

demanded that the political attitude of communists to national struggles had to be re-evaluated. Whereas, in the earlier period communists could give tactical support to bourgeois national struggles, because of their generally progressive character, in the later period these struggles became part and parcel of wider imperialist struggles in which workers slaughtered each other in the interest of their national bourgeoisie. National struggles were now directly opposed to the interests of the working class and were counter-revolutionary.

By seeing nationalism as an ideology or "a narrative constructed by the capitalist class" the AF loses sight of its historical dimension and declares that they have **always** opposed it. In a similar way the Stalinists, Trotskyists and various leftists, not recognising the historical character of nationalism, see the present as basis of nationalism as essentially the same as that of the 19th century.

They conclude that support for nationalist struggles is still a tactical question and consequently pick and choose which nationalist gang they support on a tactical basis. The tactic is generally based on their assessment of how a particular bourgeois nationalist struggle would weaken the interests of the major imperialist powers. If we leave aside, for the time being, the argument advanced for this tactical support, it is clear that it is the same failure to understand the historical nature of nationalism underlies both the positions of the AF and the "leftists" against whom the pamphlet is directed.

This is the case despite the oposing conclusions they reach.

Imperialism and the State

The AF characterises all nation states as imperialist and see the state as being essentially imperialist.

The state -- they argue -- secures the material basis of its own power: it increases its own resources, wealth and ability to protect itself. It is therefore not simply a puppet of corporate interests but is an interested party in its own right.....the nation state has imperialism in its very blood ⁽¹⁾.

This passage highlights two key issues which run through the pamphlet, the nature of imperialism and the nature of the state. We will consider the issue of imperialism first. The AF's characterisation of all states as imperialist is too simplistic to stand serious scrutiny. (2) While it is true that imperialism stems from the operation of capitalism and so all states have a drive to imperialism, in practice, for the lesser states these ambitions are unrealisable.

Imperialism is a global system, a phase in the global operation of capitalism, and all states are therefore forced to participate in the system and do so, in one way or other. However, this participation is not the participation of equals. The minor powers participate as junior partners of the major powers or junior members of a bloc of powers.

What underlies imperialism is a process of transfer of surplus value to the dominant imperialist powers and it is clear that this transfer cannot benefit all states. The major beneficiaries and controllers of this process have been in the past and today still are the metropolitan capitals of the Europe and North America and Japan. The role of the minor powers is that of lieutenants of the major powers. Often their role is principally to ensure the smooth transfer of surplus value from their workers to the metropolitan capitals which exploit them. In other words to ensure the rule of capital is not threatened in their area of the globe. Although the dominance of the powers controlling the system, and their resulting privileges, are always under threat from rising powers such as Russia, China, India and others, this challenge of rising powers in no way changes the operation of the system as a whole. It simply means new powers rise to dominate the system. As we have seen in the 20th century, although the top dogs of imperialism have been changed by world wars the global system has remained essentially unchanged.

Since all states participate in this system the only real anti-imperialist struggle is a struggle to overturn the whole system. Of course, the only struggle capable of doing this is a class struggle directed to the overthrow capitalism. The so-called "anti-imperialist" struggles, so beloved of the leftists, are in reality inter imperialist struggles. Their real content is the alteration of a nation's status within the concert of imperialism. The famous liberation struggles of Africa, South America and

Vietnam have really been struggles to change the position of the various states from that of being clients of US imperialism to that of being clients of Russian imperialism. The same goes for the more recent struggles of countries in Africa, Asia or South America to reorient themselves from the US towards China...

Although the AF reaches a similar conclusion to the above, this conclusion is reached empirically.

There is no understanding of the global systemic nature of imperialism and the consequent impossibility of individual nations to free themselves from it. The arguments of the leftists that there are imperialist nations and dominated nations, and support for the dominated nation weakens imperialism, similarly stems from a failure to understand imperialism as a phase of capitalism from which there is no escape, short of the system's overthrow. The weakening of one imperialist power simply means the strengthening of another. Although the AF ridicules the arguments of the leftists, it cannot expose the false premise on which these arguments are constructed because it does not itself understand why this premise is false.

Instead of seeing imperialism as a global phase of capitalism, the AF attempt to argue it emanates from the state, or in their words the "state has imperialism in its blood." Throughout the pamphlet there is a tendency to see the state as the root of all that is wrong with the world. Hamas, for example, is condemned because it is a "proto-state force" rather than because it is a bourgeois political force. However, at the same time the pamphlet recognises that the principal axis, around which social struggles revolve today, is the class struggle within capitalism. The pamphlet also recognises that most of the imperialist actions carried out by the state are dictated by the needs of capitalism. A dual explanation of imperialism is thus presented, firstly as something resulting from the forces of capitalism and secondly resulting from the inherent imperialist tendencies of the state. This simply confuses the explanations which the pamphlet offers. In reality, excluding periods of revolution, the state can only be an expression of the economic structure of society, and can only reflect the interests and needs of the dominant class in society. When this class is progressive the state is progressive and when it is reactionary the state is reactionary. The state has no inherent

qualities in the way the AF claims. In the last analysis, despite the AF's denials, the state in the present world is the expression of the interests of national capital as a whole. However, with increased globalisation of capitalism, states are no longer simply expressions of the national capital since the national capital has been replaced by international capital. (3) States have become agents of international capital and the imperialist bloc to which they belong.

National Liberation - the Debate on the Left of Social Democracy

The imperialist phase of capitalism was ushered in by the First World War. Left Communists view this war as a critical turning point, a turning point which indicated that the progressive phase of capitalism was clearly over and that the world, not just the metropolitan countries of Europe and America, was ripe for proletarian revolution and the establishment of a higher form of economic and social organisation, namely communism. It is from this premise that we argue the Bolsheviks were justified in fighting for an immediate proletarian revolution in 1917, since revolutions in Europe could have transformed the Russian revolution into a stage in a world communist revolution.



Rosa Luxemburg had the clearest position on the national question

If the proletarian revolution was on the agenda in 1917, it followed that workers should now struggle to achieve this and could no longer give support, of any kind whatsoever, to their class enemies, the national bourgeoisie. This was recognised by Lenin in his April Theses of 1917 which led to the Bolsheviks dropping their programmatic support for the national bourgeoisie in creating bourgeois democracy in Russia.

Instead they saw the October Revolution as a first step in the world revolution.

Lenin however, despite having an analysis of capitalism after 1916 which demonstrated that that it had entered a new epoch "of parasitism and decay" tended to argue that the national question was a political and not economic issue. Indeed he had polemicised with his comrades Bukharin and Piatakov in 1915- 16 who, sharing Lenin's analysis of imperialism argued that there was no longer any right to selfdetermination.

They argued: The task of the workers is to mobilise the proletariat of both the oppressing nation and the oppressed, under the slogan of a civil, class war for socialism. (4) Lenin, arguing from his disgust with the old Tsarist Empire, the "prison house" of more than 200 nationalities, maintained the abstract right of self-determination. (5) At the height of the Russian Revolution Lenin lost the argument. At the 1919 Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) the views of Bukharin and Piatakov won the day and all reference to "self-determination" was removed from the Party programme.

Bukharin and Piatakov were not alone in opposing the rights of nations to self-determination. It was opposed on a class basis by many revolutionaries in the period leading up to the First World War.

The clearest opponent of this policy was Rosa Luxemburg who argued that workers should now fight on the basis of class, not nationality, and that national liberation divided the working class and left national workers at the mercy of their own bourgeoisie. She had herself concluded in a polemic over her native Poland in 1896 that the Polish bourgeoisie was "tied to Russia with chains of gold". She even split from the Polish Socialist Party (PSP) over its out and out nationalism (with no reference to

socialism) to form the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) on internationalist positions. This party grew rapidly in the 1905 revolution as workers "flocked into the SDKPiL and made common cause with the Russian workers". ⁽⁶⁾ The workers and Luxemburg had both witnessed how the Polish national bourgeoisie in 1905 broke worker's strikes, which were at the time combined with strikes by Russian workers, to further their nationalist cause. Small wonder that the SDKPiL won over the majority of the PSP. Its minority under Pilsudski became openly chauvinist and later would join the Western powers in attacking Soviet Russia militarily. There can be no clearer example of the incompatibility of socialism and nationalism. However this is to anticipate. In December 1905, Luxemburg described how, in practice, the national cause was used to defeat that of the working class.

Under the slogan 'National Democratic Railroad' railroad workers broke the railroad strike forcing the striking workers to return to work at gun point. Under the national slogan, the National Democracy began a crusade against the general strike and other forms of strikes claiming they were ruining 'the country's national wealth'...Under the national slogan, the National Democracy organised... 'Polish Falcons' ...armed fighting squads destined for murdering socialists and making strikes impossible... (7)

How familiar such a description sounds to us today. These words could have been written about Turkey in 1920, China in 1927, the liberated colonies, Zimbabwe, South Africa; in short, they apply to most of the significant national liberation struggles from the Second World War to the present day.

The Bolsheviks may have outlawed national self determination from their programme in 1919 but still allowed the right of secession to the outlying areas of the former Tsarist Empire, including Poland. At the time it was mercilessly criticised by Rosa Luxemburg. She wrote:

The nations (granted national self determination) used their freshly granted freedom to ally themselves with German imperialism against the Russian

Revolution as its mortal enemy, and, under German protection to carry the banner of counter-revolution into Russia itself....The Bolsheviks were to be taught, to their own great hurt and that of the revolution, that under the rule of capitalism there is no self determination of peoples, that in a class society each class of the nation strives to "determine itself" in a different fashion; and that for the bourgeois classes the standpoint of national freedom is fully subordinated to that of class rule. The Finnish bourgeoisie, like the Ukrainian petite bourgeoisie, was unanimous in preferring the violent rule of Germany to national freedom, if the latter should be bound up with Bolshevism ⁽⁸⁾.

Some have argued that the Bolsheviks had little choice and that Luxemburg's argument is unfair but in this they are missing her point.

Not one of these nations was really independent but as she makes clear they were all the tools of imperialist powers. The clarity of her position was best summed up in 1916 in *Either-Or*.

In this era of unfettered imperialism there can be longer be national wars ... For no suppressed nation can freedom and independence blossom forth from the politics of imperialist states and the imperialist war. Small nations, whose ruling classes are appendages and accessories of their class comrades in the large nations, are merely pawns in the imperialist game played by the major powers.

From Rosa Luxemburg, Selected Writings, ed R. Looker, p.223

National Liberation - a Poisonous Legacy

The majority of Bolsheviks had accepted this in 1919 but as the revolutionary tide in Europe ebbed away and the Russian Revolution remained isolated, the Bolsheviks searched for desperate expedients which could maintain the revolutionary momentum.

One of these was to support national bourgeois movements in colonies or semi-colonies of the major powers. Lenin, in line with what he had written at the end of his pamphlet on *Imperialism – the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, now argued that such movements would weaken the imperialist powers by cutting off the "super profits" they extracted from the colonies.

Without these super profits the imperial powers would be unable to bribe the "workers aristocracy" in the imperial countries to head off the revolutionary ambitions of the metropolitan workers.

The Comintern adopted this policy (despite the opposition of communists like M.N.Roy and Sultan Zade who held positions close to that of Luxemburg) and its political conclusion was that the workers' political organisations in the colonies should put themselves at the disposal and under the control of the national bourgeois forces.

The theoretical basis of this policy was that bourgeois revolutions were still on the agenda in certain parts of the world and were progressive.

It was in clear contradiction to the *April Theses* which saw capitalism as ripe for revolution in 1917 and so called into question the whole basis of the October Revolution. If bourgeois revolutions could take place in one part of the world and socialist revolutions in another then capitalism was not yet a global system ripe for revolution, as was claimed in the founding theses of the Comintern. Such a perspective also opened the door to the possibility of constructing socialism in one country since the bourgeois revolutions in the colonies or semi-colonies, were supposed to support the socialist revolution in the metropolitan capitalist countries. We will not comment here on the theoretical issues of "super profits" and "workers aristocracy" beyond noting that history has shown these ideas to be wrong. Since the Second World War we have seen decolonisation and national bourgeois revolutions throughout the colonial and semi colonial world and imperialism has not been significantly affected.

The major imperialist powers no longer directly administer these areas, this is now carried out by a local section of the bourgeois class, but the surplus value still keeps flowing to the metropolitan

countries. These regions are today dominated by international capital more thoroughly than ever before, despite their nominal independence.

The policy of subordination of the proletarian political forces to the national bourgeoisie was a complete disaster and led to the massacre of tens of thousands of workers by the national bourgeoisie, the destruction of workers organisations and the extinction of revolutionary struggle. The most tragic example of this was in China in 1927. (9) This is the legacy which the counterrevolution has handed down to their inheritors in the Stalinist and Trotskyist movements, and it has underpinned their policies on the national question since the Second World War. Trotsky, himself, reiterates these policies clearly reproducing all the contradictions they contain. In 1939, 12 years after the Chinese disaster, he could still write:

Imperialism is that stage of capitalism when the latter, after fulfilling everything in its power, begins to decline. The cause of this decline lies in this, that the productive forces are fettered by the framework of private property as well as the boundaries of the national state. Imperialism seeks to divide and re-divide the world. In place of national wars there come imperialist wars. They are utterly reactionary... (10).

Yet on the next page we read:

The struggle of oppressed peoples for national unification and national independence is doubly progressive because, on the one side, this prepares more favourable conditions for their own development, while, on the other side, this deals blows to imperialism (11).

If the nation state is a fetter to capitalism, as the first quotation clearly states, how could creation of new nation states prepare favourable conditions for national development? How could such struggles be progressive? If capitalism is in decline, as the first passage states, then workers should be struggling for socialist revolution not national bourgeois revolution. Further, if imperialist wars are utterly reactionary, as Trotsky clearly states, how, one might ask, could the Trotskyist movement support the Second World War, which was quite clearly an imperialist war? We are dealing here with a mass of contradictions rather than a theory. (12) Much effort has been spent by Trotsky's successors trying to make these contradictions less apparent.

Theories have been developed proposing that certain types of support for the bourgeoisie are not full support, but rather critical support, which we are told is quite different from support. Distinctions have been drawn between the national movement and the agents of that movement enabling one to support the movement but not the national bourgeoisie who stand behind it. However, all such sophistry cannot hide the fundamentally bourgeois nature of these political positions.

However, despite the reactionary nature of these positions, they have retained a wide following in the socalled "left."

The Earth is not Flat

The Commune's review of the AF pamphlet, written by David Broder, criticises it from the positions of the Comintern and the "leftists" described above. He argues that European nationalism and colonial or semi-colonial nationalism are different since they are different in origin. From this he concludes that the national bourgeoisie can be progressive in the peripheral countries. He gives Cuba as an example and argues that statecapitalist development in Colombia would undermine the Colombian bourgeoisie's alliance with the US and so, presumably, also be progressive. He attempts to draw a distinction between the nationalist cause and the nationalist movement which supports it, thereby opening the door to support for Palestinian nationalism and critical support for Hamas etc.

Seizing on the AF categorising of all states as imperialist, he rhetorically asks where Bolivian, Congolese or Afghan imperialism is to be found.

Concluding it is non-existent, he opens the door for the support of these nations, and their national bourgeoisie, against the US. All these arguments have been dealt with above and are not worth

reconsidering.

The issue of political support by workers organisations for the national bourgeoisie is the critical question. Although it is not specifically stated the review implies that support for the national bourgeoisie is a tactical issue and must be given in certain cases. The review concludes that,

Communists must not sideline or dismiss the national question in order to focus solely on class politics (13).

Communists should therefore, in his view, support bourgeois nationalist politics.

In opposition to support for bourgeois nationalist politics the AF advocates, as we have noted above, class struggle as the only means to overcome nationalism and achieve class unity. This is actually criticised by Broder! He argues it is wrong for 3 reasons. Firstly workers can struggle for class interests and still be racist or xenophobic. He cites Lindsey oil refinery workers striking under the slogan "British jobs for British workers." Secondly, he argues, class concerns are not the only concerns workers have. Palestinian workers, for example, share no class interests with Israeli workers; their primary concern must be to end national oppression by the Israeli state. Thirdly, he claims, obtaining better living conditions in capitalist society is "not communistic as such." These arguments are profoundly wrong.

Firstly racism, xenophobia, sexism etc. are all ideological weapons of the bourgeoisie whose very purpose is to divide workers and weaken class struggle. What binds workers together is their position as wage labourers in capitalist society. This is based on class and only class. It is precisely in class struggle that this unity becomes apparent since the fight is from a common position for a common cause. Similarly it is only in the heat of class struggle that what Marx called the "muck of ages" which includes racism, nationalism, sexism etc. can be repudiated.

Secondly it is quite wrong to claim that Palestinian and Israeli workers *have no common interests*. They share common class interests. These common interests are the only path to breaking the

nationalist prisons which have led to the present appalling situation. To advocate Gazan workers support their national bourgeoisie in the shape of Hamas is utterly reactionary. The case of South Africa is worth posing as a counter example. Before 1994 it was argued that white and black workers shared no common interests whatsoever yet today, as they together face a bourgeoisie reducing their living conditions and breaking their strikes, a bourgeoisie at whose head stands the ANC, the common interests that existed all along are glaring apparent.

The tragedy, which also applies to Palestine, is that this was disguised so effectively by leftism. The result was that workers were used on both sides to fight the bourgeoisie's battles and kill each other in the name of nationalism, and this has sown nothing but confusion.

Broder's third objection appears to come from a complete misunderstanding of the circumstances which could provoke revolution. It is obvious that workers will not make the revolution if capitalism is able to grant them improved living conditions. The revolution will only be made when workers understand that capitalism offers them nothing but deprivation and war. There has to be a total crisis of the economic and social system before it becomes clear to workers that they need to overthrow it. Before this stage can be reached international class unity and class consciousness has to be generated. This can only come from a long series of struggles in which obstacles along the road one of which is "nationalism" are exposed, both practically and theoretically, as complete lies.

Class Struggle against Nationalist struggle

The ICT ⁽¹⁴⁾, of which the CWO is a part, argues that nationalist struggles are simply disguised imperialist struggles and the wars they provoke are imperialist wars.

The only response communists can give to imperialist wars is the adoption of the politics of revolutionary defeatism. That is:

- Opposition to the war on the basis of class
- No support to either side in the struggle
- Workers should continue the class struggle against their own bourgeoisie

 Workers should give solidarity to workers from the opposing side in their struggle against their own bourgeoisie.

The orientation of this policy is towards turning the imperialist war into a civil war and the overthrow of bourgeois power. This was the policy adopted by the Bolsheviks during the First World War which was a decisive step towards the October Revolution. Today it remains the only proletarian response able to open the way to a communist world.

CP

(1) Against Nationalism 🚨

- (2) Counter examples can be given. How, for example, are states like Lesotho or Bangladesh imperialist?
- (3) An indication of the international nature of capital can be seen from a few statistics of the UK and US. In the UK for example 42% of the shares on the London Stock Market are foreign owned. An iconic company such as BP is 60% foreign owned 39% of this by US capitalists. Many other previously famous UK companies are now foreign owned, ICI, Pilkington, Powergen,, Corus, BAA, P&O, Cadbury, Thames Water, to name only a few. While in the US the three largest providers of direct investment at the end of 2009 were France, UK and Germany having cumulative investments of \$1.19 trillion, \$1.0tn and \$1.00tn respectively.
- (4) See Horace B Davis' introduction to *The National Question selected writings of Rosa Luxemburg*.

 Monthly Review Press. 1976 p. 27
- (5) For a more detailed critique of Lenin's fears about "great Russian chauvinism" (especially in relation to Stalin), see *Georgia on His Mind, Lenin's Final Fight against Great Russian Chauvinism* in *Revolutionary Perspectives 47* or leftcom.org

(6) Op.cit p.13.

- (7) "The Nation State and the Proletariat". in *The National Question selected writings of Rosa Luxemburg*. Monthly Review Press.
- (8) "The Nationalities Question in the Russian Revolution" in *The National Question selected writings* of Rosa Luxemburg. Monthly Review Press.
- (9) For a good description of these events see *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* by Harold Isaacs and for a comment on Turkey see *Publications from Left Communists in Turkey* in *Revolutionary Perspectives 48*.
- (10) L Trotsky Lenin on Imperialism
- (11) Ibid.
- (12) For more on these contradictions ee our pamphlet *Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists*. £3 from the CWO address.
- (13) See D Broder "The earth is not flat." thecommune.wordpress.com- review-of-against-nationalism/
- (14) Internationalist Communist Tendency previously known as the IBRP.