

Letter

Chicago school

Ben Lewis

Over the weekend of March 30-April 1 I was invited to speak at the Platypus International Convention in Chicago, USA. I must thank the Platypus comrades for the invitation and for their hospitality. Equally, I must apologise for taking so long in writing up my impressions of the event.

The convention, entitled 'What just happened?', was attended by about 90 people over the course of the three days. The aim was to work through some of the theoretical and political problems of the "1990s and 2000s left" as a way of understanding contemporary far-left practice.

To this end, the convention hosted a number of political organisations, groups and networks from several countries, with several competing agendas and outlooks. There were speakers from groups as diverse as the International Bolshevik Tendency, the International Marxist Tendency, News and Letters Collective and anarchist groups like Crimethinc.

This aspect of Platypus's approach - "hosting the conversation" - is to be welcomed. We on the left as a whole cannot move forward without serious and rigorous political debate and discussion, or without closely scrutinising our collective history. It was therefore encouraging to see most of the small, fragmented US left come together for the event [one notable exception was the International Socialist Organization, which, despite a strong presence in Chicago, did not attend].

However, the conference often felt less like a "conversation" and more like a monologue. The workshops saw comrades give a short talk outlining the case for their particular group,

and matters of controversy were only broached in the rather restricted Q and A session. While I was able to listen to some interesting presentations from comrades like Peter Hudis (US Marxist Humanists) and Josh Dekker of the IBT, I missed out on other groups' workshops running at the same time. In my opinion, if the groups had discussed particularly contentious or dividing issues with each other, that would have made for a far better introduction to their politics.

Yet some of the panel discussions that were held were disappointing. The one on the 1990s and 2000s left featured a smattering of far-left groups, but speakers seemed to go out of their way *not* to discuss their differences. That was a shame, and several other comrades made comments to that effect. The debate between the IBT's Tom Riley and myself was certainly not characterised by diplomacy or skirting around differences, however, and I think many of the conference attendees took a lot from it as a result.

There was one particularly worrying aspect of "hosting the conversation". For example, when one speaker from the journal *Phase II* repeatedly conflated the terms 'anti-Zionist' and 'anti-Semitic' in his talk on anti-fascism in Germany, I was the only one who challenged him on this typically protean *anti-Deutsch* method of debate. Whatever the merits of "hosting" such views, they should certainly not go unchallenged.

Having only met a few of the Platypus leading cadre in the past, the convention allowed me to gain more of an impression of the organisation and its dynamics. I was impressed that the project has been able to draw together a number of quite serious young people on the American left looking for a rigorous engagement with Marxist theory. The Platypus comrades are often, though not always, students who have simply had enough of mindless, demoralising, 'headless-chicken' activism. The comrades are often fairly up to speed with the nuances and shades of far-left opinion.

The level at which many engaged with the politics of the CPGB and the *Weekly Worker*

was certainly a refreshing change from the usual 'They're Stalinists / Kautskyites / Trotskyites' response with which we CPGBers are all too familiar. The Platypus people had lots of questions for me, and this led to lengthy, engaging and indeed exhausting discussions - in the meetings, in the breaks and at the social on Saturday evening (I have to admit that I missed the session on anarchism due to a very long argument on Lenin with Platypus co-founder Richard Rubin and several IBT and Platypus members).

I cannot say that I fully understand where Platypus is going or what it is trying to achieve. This is perhaps because it self-defines as a "pre-political" project, summed up by one comrade when he said: "The question of whether to act means asking whether it is possible to act." It would indeed be difficult for Platypus to act politically at all in its present form. It has no programme, and its 'theoretical heritage' is a complex, even eclectic, mix of Moishe Postone, Karl Korsch, Theodor Adorno and the Spartacism of Joseph Seymour. The latter's *Lenin and the vanguard party* (in my opinion, a résumé of essentially everything that is wrong with the left's understanding of Bolshevism) is still a Platypus-recommended text.

During the Lenin debate, I made the point that, for all our significant differences, the CPGB and the IBT are, for example, probably 'closer' as a project than the CPGB and Platypus. Some of the Platypus comrades, and indeed the IBTers, were surprised by this, but I still think it is true. Formally speaking, the CPGB and IBT project is the same: ie to form an international revolutionary party that can lead a revolution. As far as I can see, that is not true of the current Platypus project, because it actually questions *whether* it is possible to forge such an organisation in light of the defeats that Marxism has endured. Perhaps my belief that it *is* possible is premised on some historical naivety.

But, to repeat the basic point I made at the school, we certainly will not be able to make moves in the direction of Marxist partyism and regroupment by basing ourselves on Seymour's Stalinoid version of Bolshevism. That is the tried and tested road to sectdom. ●

May 17 2012

Response to Ben Lewis

Chris Cutrone

Thanks to comrade Ben Lewis for his report on the 2012 Platypus International Convention. We benefited greatly from and enjoyed his participation and vital representation of the CPGB, which helped significantly to raise the overall level of discussion.

On the issue of the Spartacist pamphlet on *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* (1978) that we use in our reading groups, I think it is possible to recognize how the Spartacists were correct in many important respects on the history of Lenin and Bolshevism without following the practical-political conclusions that they and their former comrades in the International Bolshevik Tendency have drawn from this perspective on history.

I and others in Platypus take very seriously comrade Lewis's point, made at our panel on Lenin and Marxism after #Occupy, on the occasion of Pham Binh's critique of Tony Cliff's biography of Lenin and the debate that this has provoked, that many have read without really internalizing properly the political lessons of Lars Lih's important original research into the history of Bolshevism.

The question, as it has come to be posed, at our recent Platypus convention panel on Lenin, as well as in various articles by Paul LeBlanc, Lars Lih and others around the debate inaugurated by Pham Binh, is the relation between 2012 and 1912, or, the actual function of history in the present. As I pointed out in my President's report to the Platypus convention that comrade Lewis attended, on "1873-1973: The century of Marxism," it is the stark and deep contrast between our time and Lenin's that needs to be grasped by any ostensibly "Marxist" approaches today. If the Marxism of the Second International was the product of post-1873 history, then, in our post-1973 crisis period of neo-liberalism and neo-anarchism, of, e.g., #Occupy, this is precisely what we lack.

This historical contrast shows the specific deficiencies of our present moment that make the kind of principled party-building advocated, quite admirably by the CPGB, difficult to begin. As Lenin put it, in the article from 1901 that became the basis for his more famous *What is to be done?* (1902), the question today is "Where to begin?"

Lenin's time was one of the task of Left unity - the cohesion of the RSDLP as part of the Second International. We in Platypus think that, today, by contrast, there are, necessarily, actually *multiple* starting points that need to be simultaneously engaged, or, a potential "division of labor" between projects such as Platypus and the CPGB. ●