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Greet Liberation
on its 70th Anniversary



INDIAN WORKERS' ASSOCIATION GB **National Conference**
SUNDAY 24 NOVEMBER 2024 10 AM - LEICESTER LE5 0HL

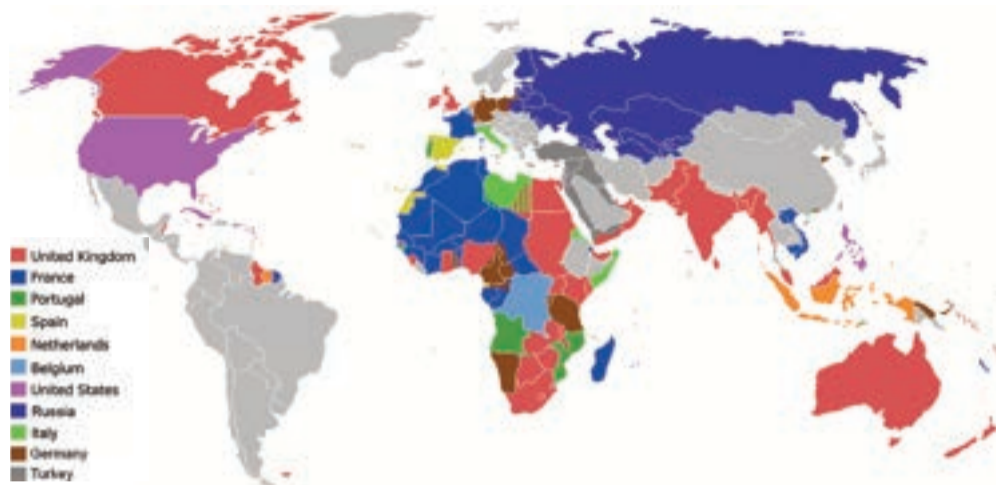
Liberation

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History/Liberation

Liberation, with its links to movements in the Global South, is again beginning to undertake the same role it did in the 1950s and 1970s, a conveyor belt for the arguments for peace, cooperation as well as political and economic liberation



70 years of struggle

By **John Foster**

Liberation created alliances of key importance for the political development of Britain's working class movement. It helped bring together, in active campaigning, those in Britain and elsewhere representing the Global South with the strength of Britain's labour and trade union movement. Today the need for that unity, at British and global level, continues unabated

LIBERATION was founded in 1954 as the Movement for Colonial Freedom. Sixteen years later in 1970 it changed its name to Liberation. The first period coincided with the closing years of formal colonialism. The second, after 1970, saw Liberation confront the new system of imperialist oppression, neo-colonialism, less formal but no less destructive of human life and dignity.

In both periods the movement created alliances of key importance for the political development of Britain's working class movement. It helped bring together, in active campaigning, those in Britain and elsewhere representing the Global South with the strength of Britain's labour and trade union movement. Today the need for that unity, at British and global level, continues unabated.

The history of MCF/Liberation is therefore studded with the names of those who, in the process of these interventions, have transformed our country.

From the 1950s and 60s there were those like Claudia Jones and Billy Strachan who mobilised London's Caribbean communities to build wider working class resistance to fascism and against racism. There were those from the Indian subcontinent who combined their own traditions of struggle with a commitment to secure justice in the British labour market – as well as political leaders from Africa like Kwame Nkrumah and Seretse

Khama seeking to free their countries from external control. The communist Kay Beacham was there more or less from the start, famed for her association with movements for Indian liberation in the 1930s.

It was, however, members of the Labour Party who were initially instrumental in the creation of the MCF. They included Tony Benn, its first Treasurer, Jenny Lee, Barbara Castle, Harold Wilson and another hundred parliamentarians. Not least, there was Fenner Brockway, a former member of the Independent Labour Party and Labour MP from 1946 to 1964. Brockway, with a long commitment to anti-colonial work, was largely responsible for founding the organisation.

The second period from 1970 saw the links with the Left of the Labour Party maintained and for a time strengthened. Stan Newens MP was for a long period Chair and was later supported by a new generation led by Jeremy Corbyn, today joint president with Maggie Bowden. The years after 1970 also saw a heightened trade union presence sustained politically by the newly radical shop stewards movement of the 1970s.

A new stage

In summer 1970 Stan Newens MP summed up this new stage in the *Liberation journal*: '... not so much a fight against direct colonial rule by the imperialist powers but against neo-colonialism. We live in the era of the multinational company ... combines [which] depend for their raw materials and primary products on the developing countries ... there is more power in the board rooms of these huge companies than is wielded by the Cabinets of the developing countries'. Yet in this new period, he added, there were now visions of hope and resistance – in revolutionary Cuba, in the successful opposition to US arms in Vietnam, in new developments in Chile and in the developing struggle in Southern Africa. The Global South was rising.

In order to understand the current relevance of MCF/Liberation, especially faced with the challenges today, it important to remember contexts.

Why was 1954 special? For an explanation we need to think about British imperialism in its international context and, rather like the United States today, the consequence of being a world power facing challenges that exceeded its strength. By the 1950s these challenges had reached dimensions which, if not met effectively, appeared likely to precipitate rapid decline.

At the time Britain still ruled, directly or indirectly, half the world's population. Its armed forces, just short of a million strong, protected the flow of income from its imperial possessions, oil, rubber, copper,

bauxite, uranium and gold, critical for maintaining the City of London as the world's second biggest financial centre.

By the 1950s, however, this control was challenged both by the US as the competing world power as well as those living under colonial rule. To understand its immediate origins we have to go back a little in history.

In 1941, under the terms of the Atlantic Charter, US military aid to Britain was made dependent on opening the empire to US trade. The US saw access to this massive world market as essential if its post-war economy not to suffer a recurrence of its 1930s recession. Britain's rulers very reluctantly agreed. Post-war the US also took upon itself a global mission both to defeat what was claimed as Soviet expansionism and, through the Bretton Woods Agreement, to establish the dollar as the world currency giving it privileged access to the world market.

As a result Britain's post-war Labour government quickly found itself locked into new Cold War treaties that required massive rearmament expenditures – expenditures that compromised its electoral commitment to the welfare state. The resulting cuts to the NHS split the parliamentary Labour Party. A minority led by Aneurin Bevan resigned their government positions. Those remaining formed an even closer political relationship with the US. Then, in the wake of the public sector cuts, Labour lost the 1951 election.

Ultra imperialism'

Under the Tories Britain then moved into a period that has been described as 'ultra-imperialism'. The new Eden government was determined to retain all existing empire possessions – and if possible reverse recent losses in the Middle East. In Iran they secured US backing for the August 1953 coup overthrowing the elected government to the material benefit of both. But elsewhere the US wished to maintain its image as a free trade decoloniser. The final flashpoint was the invasion of Egypt in 1956. The US ordered a British retreat from Suez and the Eden government fell - replaced by that of Harold Macmillan committed to closer relations with the US, gradual decolonisation and a new US-based nuclear weapons system.

However, the intervening years, 1951 to 1956, had seen a carnival of reaction. Kenya witnessed the creation of concentration camps where the scale of the killings and torture still remains under investigation. Malaya saw the same. Cyprus felt growing repression – as did Britain's African colonies. In the Americas the democratically elected government of Guyana was deposed and its leader imprisoned. Across the Caribbean repression intensified.

This was the context for the formation of the MCF and for the particular character it took. The Labour MPs who joined were almost all from the Bevanite wing of the party – quite often former members of the ILP. Few, if any, came from the dominant wing of the party led by Hugh Gaitskell. None at all came from the Fabian Colonial Bureau run by Rita Hinden. This, as we now know, was funded by US agencies – as was *Socialist Commentary* and other pro-Gaitskell organisations. The US did not like the kind of Third World leaders with whom Fenner Brockway associated - most of whom questioned or opposed US international policies.

At the same time, in face of Cold War prohibitions Brockway, in common with most former ILP members of the MCF, found it necessary to distance themselves from Communists in Britain and internationally. No Communists were allowed on the governing committee until Jack Woddis in 1961. MCF's London Committee, its biggest and most active by far, was in constant trouble with the executive for allowing Communists to take leading positions.

Nonetheless the MCF was, in these years, a highly effective organisation. Its members of parliament were able to table hundreds of questions each year which went some way to expose the otherwise hidden activities of military commanders and colonial administrators. Its MPs had the status to hold local campaigning meetings that gave platforms to anti-colonial leaders and could take issues into the trade union movement.

Unions in action

MCF trade union affiliates tended to be more on the traditional Left. While their combined membership was only three million, a minority of the total, it was nonetheless very significant. Those not affiliated included right-wing unions like the General and Municipal and the giant T&G where the ghost of Ernest Bevin still lingered – though soon to be evicted by Frank Cousins, an active personal supporter of the MCF.

So, to sum up this first phase of the MCF/Liberation. What were its achievements?

The MCF exposed the savagery of Britain's Ultra Imperialism. It built a base for anti-colonialism in the trade union movement as well as the Labour Party. It brought together representatives in Britain of colonial liberation movements and thereby also strengthened the standing of those settled communities in Britain in their local struggles against racism. After the third defeat of the Labour Party in 1959 the MCF shifted its focus more to trade unions and direct links with colonial freedom movements – acting as an initial thrust focus point for the development of new solidarity organisations, Vietnam, South Africa, Greece, Cyprus, Cuba.

Yet there was an increasing recognition that further change was needed. The shift away from Labour was accentuated when Labour finally came back into power in 1964. Some Labour MPs believed that the aims of the MCF could now be achieved directly by Labour in government. Indeed the former MCF member Harold Wilson did, as prime minister, resist US pressure to support its war in Vietnam.

New imperialism

More directly, however, the key issues of the time did not easily fit the old ILP mindset. In Cuba, Vietnam, South Africa, in Greece and Portugal, liberation and resistance tended to involve broad popular movements in which Communists often had a leading role. And, as noted earlier by Stan Newens, history had moved on. The challenge was no longer, mainly, the exercise of colonial power but neo-colonial: the informal grip of the great banks and multinationals. By now Britain had been firmly replaced as the dominant global force by the US. The new imperialism was no less ruthless and brutal but operated politically, in large measure, through local proxies, Pinochet, Videla, Papadopoulos, Suharto and the Shah in Iran, and did so to maintain the market power and freedoms of the dollar and US multinationals.

It was this realisation that gave birth to Liberation. The 1970s became a decade of redevelopment. Liberation's trade union and working class base had been transformed by the new power of the shop stewards movement and the repeated general strikes that were carried forward through the decade – strikes also signifying, and dependent on, a wider working class community solidarity. Actions against the Industrial Relations Act and in support of the miners were supplemented by those against workplace racism in which Liberation was often involved both directly and through its member organisations.

Labour radicalised

The same forces also radicalised the Labour Party. The *Liberation journal* for April-May 1974 celebrated the new government's cancellation of the Royal Navy's visit to Greece,



Liberation Heroes. Fenner Brockway, Stan Newens, Kay Beauchamp, Maggie Bowden, Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn sought to build a strong membership base and loyal supporters on the Left of both trade union movement and in the Labour Party. They ensured that Liberation became one of the few effective organisations campaigning against imperialist war and for political freedoms in the Global South



its arms ban on South Africa, its withdrawal of aid to Chile although it regretted the government failure to loosen restrictions on the entry of immigrant workers's spouses to Britain. It also advertised Liberation's new pamphlet *Danger: Racialists at Work* which stressed the threat posed by racial division in the workplace to the solidarity needed for further trade union advance.

These years saw Liberation achieve an almost unique fusion, in terms of its scale, in bringing together organisations ultimately focussed on the struggles of the Global South, of communities in Britain from the Global South and a mobilised working class and labour movement, one that now increasingly saw itself as also engaged with these struggles as well as against racism in Britain.

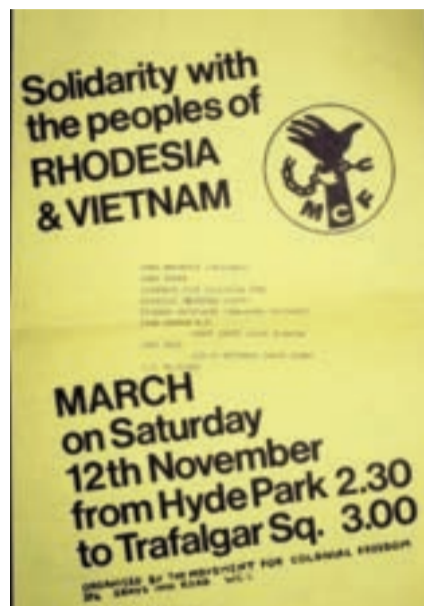
In his annual report for 1976, Tony Gilbert, by now Liberation's new general secretary, spoke of the year as one 'of increased activity on such a wide range of issues that we can only cover a few'. Those highlighted included a major international conference organised by Liberation and the World Development Movement on a New International Order. Held in the TUC's Congress House representatives came from many trade unions, sixteen embassies, the ILO, the Labour Party and the Cooperative Movement. In terms of specific interventions, Liberation mobilised a movement that stopped the execution of Desmond Trotter in Dominica, sent delegates to the conference in Angola to build international opposition to the South African invasion and in doing so acted in close organisational cooperation with the Anti-Apartheid Movement, SWAPO and the African National Congress.

Ireland

Amid the intensifying conflict in the north of Ireland a conference was organised jointly with the Connolly Association in St Pancras Assembly Rooms to draw the British labour movement more actively into the search for a solution based on both working class unity and a recognition of national rights. Interventions were also made to build opposition to the illegal Turkish occupation of Cyprus – as well as Britain's 'secret war' in Oman and the repression of human rights in Iran.

Support was given to the campaign in Indonesia for the release of the 100,000 political prisoners still held ten years after Suharto's US-backed coup. There were similar initiatives for the release of political prisoners held by the military regimes of Brazil and Chile.

Finally, there had been a range of conferences and political interventions against the rise of racism – seen as a consequence of sharply rising



unemployment and the Labour government's rightward turn after 1975. 'Liberation has been seen throughout the year as a unifying force in fight against racist forces in Britain'. 150,000 leaflets had been distributed. More were being printed.

For the following year the report set out an even more demanding agenda. It was Tony Gilbert and Kay Beauchamp who took forward this work – becoming, for the following decade and a half, a presiding presence within both Liberation and the multitude of organisations with which it worked.

The following period, from the 1990s on, was a demanding one for Liberation. By then the trade union movement had halved in size and lost the grass roots strength previously supplied by the shop stewards movement. The Labour Party abandoned Clause 4 in 1995 and by the mid-1990s was increasingly identified with interventionist policies by which the United States sought a new level of imperialist dominance following the dismantling of socialism in the Soviet Union. In 1992, both Kay Beauchamp and Tony Gilbert died.

However, at this point a new leadership took over. Maggie Bowden became general secretary along with Jeremy Corbyn as Chair and Stan Newens as President and sought to build on Liberation's remaining strengths - a strong membership base and loyal supporters on the Left of both the trade union movement and in the Labour Party. For the two following decades they ensured that Liberation became one of the few effective organisations campaigning against imperialist war and for political freedoms in the Global South.

Caribbean solidarity

Strong solidarity links existed with movements in the Caribbean. These had been re-developed following the US invasion of Grenada in 1982 – especially with anti-imperialist organisations in Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad – and were now further strengthened by joint involvement in campaigns to defend socialist development in Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba. In the Mediterranean Britain maintained its military grip on Cyprus with two massive air bases and subsidiary military installations. Again Liberation led the way in the demand for their removal and to raise Britain's responsibility, as conferred by the United Nations, to act as arbiter to end the illegal Turkish occupation. At the same time Liberation campaigned for the victims of another Anglo-US military base: the displaced inhabitants of Diego Garcia and the Chagos Islands. By the very end of the century Liberation again faced war: the illegal NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and, from the start of



Far Left: Colonial possessions in 1914
Left: Liberation pamphlet
Middle: MCF anti-imperialist solidarity poster
Right: Kwame Nkrumah writes to the MCF



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Sliman

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the new century, the British Labour government's support for a new cycle of imperialist aggression in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – wars that followed the game plan of the Project for a New American Century.

In doing so Liberation played a very important role in bringing together the forces, across the trade union movement and Britain's multi-cultural communities, that by 2002 had created a much broader anti-war movement.

A new turning point

Today, a quarter of a century later, the world again seems to be at a new turning point. US policy makers see their country's century-long economic hegemony as under threat - much as Britain's was after 1945. Dollar dominance, its ability to cover its massive deficits by borrowing from elsewhere, depends on the US economy being seen as bigger and more stable than any other. Washington knows this is no longer so.

In consequence, the past four years have seen a drive by the US to re-militarise the 'old' world against the new. It did so first in the Pacific in 2021-22 with new treaties tied to aggressive nuclear rearmament and then across Europe with a rapid extension of NATO – though also one partly triggered by pre-emptive Russian action in Ukraine. This breakneck rearmament has been matched by America's return to protectionist policies which have wrecked leading economies in the EU, Germany in particular, with dangerous internal political consequences. Public discussion, in Britain as elsewhere, has been largely choked by the return of Cold War prohibitions. The new US presidency seems unlikely to change this.

This is why the strong redevelopment of Liberation's activities over the past decade – particularly the strengthening of its dialogue with the Global South - has been so important. Despite the economic toll of neo-liberalism, the Global South now has an economic clout and political coherence unknown in the 1950s. It demands peace and offers economic cooperation. In particular, the BRICS countries, however disparate, are now beginning to provide coherent alternative policies to the imperialist North. And Liberation, with its links to movements in the Global South, is again beginning to undertake the same role it did in the 1950s and 1970s, a conveyor belt for the arguments for peace, cooperation and politico-economic liberation.

John Foster is a historian of the working class movement. His most recent publications are *The Great Tradition of Independent Working Class Power* Volume IV of the *Unite History* (Liverpool UP 2022) and *Languages of Class Struggle in Britain and Ireland* (Praxis 2024).



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Liberation

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AKEL thanks Liberation for its significant contribution to the struggles for freedom and justice for people all over the world for seven decades and wishes Liberation to stay strong, massive and in the frontline for many more decades

akelbritain@gmail.com Akel in Britain

CODIR warmly congratulates Liberation on its 70th anniversary and wishes it success in its campaigns for peace and justice in the Global South.

CODIR campaigns for peace and human and democratic rights in Iran.

We are proud to be an affiliate of Liberation and look forward to continuing to work together closely.

Gawain Little
General Secretary
Alex Gordon
President
Jamshid Ahmadi
Assistant General Secretary

