

# A lifelong fighter for the international working class

**TREVOR RAYNE**

**7 December 1949 – 2 March 2022**



**‘Coming events cast their shadows before them. In NATO’s blitzkrieg of Yugoslavia we see the shape of wars to come. For those who wonder where the war is heading, look to Russia, look to China, look to the re-emergence of German military power ... Those in Britain who watch these deeds, committed in our name, imagining they will have no consequence for us should know – the march to war has only just begun’.**

**(Trevor Rayne, ‘The shape of wars to come’, FRFI 148 April/May 1999)**

But, as share prices in Britain’s BAE Systems and Raytheon and Lockheed Martin in the US surged in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he would probably have advised us all to invest in weapons. Or gold.

**‘Let China sleep, for when she wakes she will shake the world’**

Born in 1949, the year of the Chinese Revolution, Trevor admired its extraordinary achievements – not least lifting more than 800 million people out of poverty – and the struggle and sacrifices of its vast working class and peasantry. He was initially drawn to Maoist politics as a student at the University of Essex in the late 1960s. But he was clear-eyed in analysing the changing nature of China, and the dangers created by its embrace of capitalist methods in the 1980s, which saw their expression in Tiananmen Square in 1989. China was ‘at a crossroads’, he wrote, ‘blowing in the west wind’. The only hope for resisting this process lay with the Chinese working class. But by 2006, with China’s economy doubling every eight years as it embraced the private market, and the corporations of the world beating a path to Beijing for a piece of the lucrative action, he concluded that China had taken the capitalist road. Inserting itself so largely into the world economy and asserting itself on the global stage, it presented a threat to US global hegemony. At the same time, it was driving a rift between the US and European ruling class. China is now the EU’s biggest trading partner for goods, worth about €600bn. As he put it, ‘When it comes to China, the interests of the ruling class in the United States and Europe do not coincide... China’s surging growth and emergence as a significant player in the world economy is undeniable but what this means for the global balance of forces and future of imperialism has still to be demonstrated.’

**‘High above the Bekaa Valley – in the embrace of the Kurdish revolution’**

Trevor made the Kurdish struggle for self-determination central to the political campaigning of the RCG, seeing it as key to democracy and progress in the Middle East. He investigated and condemned British arms sales to Turkey and the British state’s hounding and criminalising of Kurdish activists, especially the proscription of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the PKK. He wrote and spoke tirelessly

on behalf of the Kurdish struggle. His contribution was hugely appreciated by the Kurdish solidarity movement, both in Britain and internationally. In 1991 he was invited to visit a PKK training camp in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley to hear the organisation’s leader Abdullah ‘Apo’ Ocalan, speak. Trevor interviewed Apo – who has been incarcerated by the Turkish state since 1999 – on behalf of FRFI. As the socialist bloc was collapsing, Apo pointed out that no revolution can see itself as the ‘peak’ of the struggle: rather, he said, ‘new peaks will arise’.

**Capitalism: the road to ruin**

Trevor drew on many sources, including from a rich cultural and scientific background. Like Engels, whose brain Marx described as being ‘like an Encyclopaedia’, his range of knowledge seemed infinite, including the work of the visionary 18th century poet and artist William Blake, the Beat poet Alan Ginsberg and the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen. He was in awe of Engels’ understanding of scientific developments in the 19th century, particularly in terms of humanity’s relation to the natural world. Trevor began to develop these ideas 20 years ago. Describing the so-called Nemesis Effect on the environment – sudden qualitative change brought about by crossing critical thresholds, he pointed out, channeling Engels, that ‘Nemesis means retaliation, poetic justice and punishment – nature avenging the blows inflicted on it by modern capitalism’. Increasingly urgently, he warned that we must build a socialist movement if we are to avert the catastrophe that lies in store for humanity: ‘We are travelling at 90 miles per hour down a dead-end street and instead of jamming on the brakes we are pressing ever harder on the accelerator. This is capitalism. This is imperialism and it is madness. It is the road to ruin.’

Trevor was an activist as much as a thinker and writer. In August 1977 he was at the Battle of Lewisham in southeast London, where – dressed in a trademark pale linen suit – he was embroiled in the running street battles that prevented National Front fascists from marching through the town centre. It was the first time police deployed riot shields in Britain as they mobilised to defend the fascists. A few years later, he was selling FRFI on the 1981 Black People’s Day of Action, after the New Cross Fire that claimed the lives of 13 young black

people. In 1984, he joined the RCG, marching – again, that suit! – in solidarity with the liberation movement in Ireland. He was one of the first of our comrades to engage with solidarity work with the Cuban revolution, which he understood as a beacon of socialism in a world dominated by imperialism. He battled the sectarian attempts of the Britain-Cuba Resource Centre (later the Cuba Solidarity Campaign) to exclude the RCG from its ranks. In October 1997 he travelled to Havana with David Yaffe at the invitation of the Cuban Communist Party to address a conference celebrating the legacy of Che Guevara. He was an active NATFHE/UCU trade unionist all his working life, and just months before his death was regularly out with comrades selling FRFI on the streets of south London.

As a teacher and educator, his generosity was boundless. He would share newspaper cuttings and suggestions with younger comrades and always found the time to go over their speeches and articles. He helped develop the RCG’s education programme and was willing to give a talk on almost any topic, even at short notice. He would come to meetings armed with new nuggets of information, often gleaned from the copy of the *Financial Times* he seemed to have perpetually under his arm; a sardonic reflection on the obscene disposable wealth sloshing around the planet as he highlighted a £400,000 watch on offer in ‘How to Spend It’, or the frankly terrifying news that, always ready to adapt where profits are to be made, some hedge funds are taking environmental apocalypse in their stride by offering ‘catastrophe bonds’ to hard-headed investors.

As a speaker, Trevor was electrifying. Quiet, even monosyllabic, in daily interactions with comrades, once he stepped up onto a platform, his words took flight. Scorching and incandescent, his firepower was aimed squarely at imperialism, its savage exploitation and destruction of humanity. He rained down facts on us – and called for the only solution, socialism. Veterans of the Non-Stop Picket against apartheid in Trafalgar Square in the 1980s remember his iconic image: ‘Every bullet fired from the AK47 of a South African freedom fighter reverberates through the chandeliers of the Palaces of Westminster!’ Even as he railed against capitalism, against the destruction of all the best that humanity can aspire to, against the military-industrial complex, against the drive to war, he taught us its opposite: solidarity, struggle, socialism.

Trevor was witty, self-deprecating and kind. In 1991, addressing an RCG meeting after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when social democrats and every kind of opportunist scum were diving for cover, he reached, in true eclectic style, not for the words of Marx or Engels, but for those of Mafia boss Lucky Luciano, enjoining us all to ‘Keep the faith, baby, keep the faith’. And that’s what we will do. But, comrade, we will miss you like hell. ■

The death of our great comrade Trevor Rawnsley (who wrote as Trevor Rayne), following a short and brutal illness, leaves a gaping hole not just in the RCG but in the anti-imperialist movement. But he also leaves a tremendous political legacy. No one who ever heard Trevor speak, his voice ringing out in a passionate condemnation of the crimes of imperialism, or who read his dazzling array of articles in FRFI on everything from Engels’ dialectical materialism to the sordid financial shenanigans revealed in the Pandora Papers, can fail to have been inspired. All his life he stood on the side of the oppressed, in Palestine, in Ireland, in South Africa, with the Tamils in Sri Lanka and most of all, in Kurdistan, condemning the role Britain played in their subjugation. Steeped in Marxist theory and history, he made crucial contributions to the development of the RCG’s politics.

The sheer range and depth of his knowledge was breath-taking. Behind every memorable turn of phrase lay detailed, forensic analysis. From his bulging notebooks, Trevor named names: the CEOs of companies engaged in the depredation of the planet and its people – of Glencore, Unilever, the oil companies, the banks; the intertwined interests of bankers, politicians and arms manufacturers. More than that: he could give you their profit margins, the hard cash figures that flowed from capitalist exploitation, suffering and death. Every time a British soldier shoots dead a child in Afghanistan or Iraq, he told us, ‘somewhere, a cash register rings’. He would illustrate China’s inexorable rise by telling you that by 2025, 70% of the world’s construction cranes will be operating there. Or skewer both the venality of capitalist society and the hypocrisy of imperialist aid in response to the catastrophic flooding of Mozambique in 2000 by mentioning that the £5.8m promised by Britain was precisely one hundredth of the amount spent on male toiletries in Britain that year. He resurrected Mark Twain’s dictum on the US invasion of Puerto Rico – that the

white stripes of the American flag should be painted black and the stars replaced with skull-and-crossbones – repurposing it for the US attack on socialist Cuba.

**The shape of wars to come**

Crucially and relentlessly, he warned of imperialism’s inexorable drive to war. It felt poignant that he should die just days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For more than 20 years, he had been warning that the intensification of the capitalist crisis was driving inter-imperialist rivalries which, unless halted by a socialist movement, would plunge the world into catastrophe and war. In a prescient article on the imperialist war against Yugoslavia in 1999, which flowed from attempts to turn Kosovo into a NATO protectorate, he described it as a harbinger of what was to come. Citing work done by the RCG and particularly David Yaffe, he wrote: ‘The very tendency of capitalism towards crises of profitability and accumulation drives it towards monopolies, a fusion of banking and industrial capital, and the partition of the world between competing capitals. The world is divided between spheres of rival imperialist powers’ interests and into oppressor and oppressed nations. This is the fundamental economic trait of imperialism that drives it towards wars.’

By 2016, with NATO fomenting bloody conflict in Syria, he drew out the underlying narrative – that behind the scenes the US and British military were planning for war on a grand scale. ‘US Defence Secretary Ash Carter said the US must prepare for “a return to great power competition” with a “high end enemy”, meaning Russia and China, “we must have – and be seen to have – the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an advanced aggressor that will either dissuade them from taking provocative action or make them deeply regret it if they do”’ (FRFI 253, October/November 2016). In his last article for FRFI, ‘US and China: danger ahead’ (FRFI 285, December 2021/January 2022), Trevor argued that everything suggested preparation for conflict.