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# Editorial

## End of an era?

*Francis King*

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This issue of *Socialist History* is the last to be published by Lawrence Wishart. From next year the journal will be published directly by its parent organisation, the Socialist History Society (SHS). While this decision has been prompted primarily by commercial pressures on our publisher, it also reflects processes of rapid and accelerating change in the world of historical journals overall. How we deal with these processes will shape the longer-term future of *Socialist History*, of the SHS itself, and of its open and pluralistic approach to socialist history.

The transformation of the Communist Party History Group into the SHS in 1992 was not simply a name-change necessitated by the self-destruction of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It represented a genuine desire to broaden both the appeal and the intellectual basis of its activity, and a belief that socialist historical inquiry is more fruitful and stimulating if it reflects a range of viewpoints. The desire to attract a more diverse set of contributions was one of the main stimuli for Willie Thompson, as *Socialist History*'s founding editor, to seek to professionalise its appearance and production standards by partnering with Pluto Press to launch it in 1993. This approach proved successful, and so the society continued to work in partnership with progressive and labour movement publishers: in 1998 the journal was taken on by Rivers Oram, and from 2015 to the present we have been published by Lawrence Wishart.

Over that period, and under successive editors, *Socialist History* has increasingly taken on the appearance and format of a modern academic-style journal. At the same time, we have tried to ensure that it is written in plain language, avoiding jargon and some of the worst excesses of some 'academic' writing. In general, the feedback we get from our readers suggests we have succeeded in this aim. Over the past three decades, we have published some excellent articles on a very wide range of topics, including many by first-time authors. However, there have been other changes during this time which present growing challenges to the entire

project of producing a journal like ours, printed on paper and mailed to subscribers.

The most important fact about *Socialist History* is that it is the journal of the SHS. It is produced first and foremost for its members, who receive it in the post as they have done since 1993. Without that relationship with the SHS, there would be little reason for this journal to exist. But both the publishing landscape, and the pressures on our authors, are radically different from what they were thirty years ago. Most historical journals now exist mainly online, and many no longer publish paper copies at all. Some are freely accessible to anyone with an internet connection, but most are hidden behind a ‘paywall’, available to subscribers only. Their readers, mostly within the academic sector, access their content via accounts held by public or academic libraries, and for the most part download and read individual articles rather than entire journals.<sup>1</sup> This is radically different from the position when journals were all physical paper artefacts. Nowadays, only the most specialist online journals can be said to have a ‘readership’ as such. Meanwhile, scholars and researchers working (or seeking work) in the higher education system – like most of our contributors – are under intense and increasing pressure to ensure their output is widely disseminated and available. Necessarily, at the very minimum, this involves online publication.

It has not been easy for *Socialist History* to adapt to this new landscape. Both the journal and its publishers have lacked the cost advantages enjoyed by the large commercial academic behemoths when it comes to making material available online, and it has only been in the last eight years that we have even begun to have a web presence. In this respect we have lagged far behind comparable publications.

As most readers will know, the SHS, as well as producing this journal, also publishes a series of historical pamphlets in the series ‘Occasional Publications’. In this it has followed the practice first established by the Communist Party History Group in the 1970s, when, alongside the pamphlet series ‘Our History’ it began publishing *Our History Journal*. But this practice is not set in stone, and it is likely that the SHS will undertake a review of its entire publishing operation to see how far it matches the society and its resources as they are today. In the meantime, *Socialist History* carries on, and members and subscribers will be kept informed of our plans.

### **This issue**

The first feature in this issue is a tribute to the life and work of Willie Thompson, our founder-editor, who died aged eighty-four in June this

year. In his introductory remarks, Mike Makin-Waite presents Willie's life and work, not least his many years of service to the Communist Party History Group, the SHS and *Socialist History* in a wide variety of roles. There are also assessments of some of his most important writings, and excerpts from a previously unpublished interview.

Northern Ireland's industrial history in the 1920s is the topic of Fearghal Mac Bhloscaidh's study of the 'Coalisland miracle', a mine which was supposed to fuel the Unionist province's transformation into an industrial powerhouse. As Mac Bhloscaidh shows, the venture was troubled from the outset and never lived up to its sponsors' expectations. The class struggles which erupted around the mine in the mid-1920s appeared to show, for a brief time, the possibilities of workers' cooperation across the sectarian divide. But the Unionist elite's tactics of divide and rule proved successful in buying off much of the Protestant section of the workforce.

In July this year, we were pleased to co-sponsor a day symposium on the 'Contradictions of Liberalism' in history, at which contributions on the Americas featured prominently. We include one of the papers from that symposium, in which Antonio J. Pinto looks at the case of Haiti and the limits of the 'liberalism' of the French revolutionaries and other 'enlightened' thinkers when faced with a slave insurrection. He shows how the methods used by European 'liberal' powers to try to crush and then contain the rebellion set in train the process which has led resulted in the dysfunctional and impoverished Haitian state of today.

Finally, Mike Makin-Waite marks the centenary of the publication of György Lukács' most celebrated work, the collection of essays *History and Class Consciousness*, in an extended review article considering his work and two recent analyses of Lukács. One hundred years on, he concludes, there is still much to be gained from reading the writings of the great Hungarian Marxist.

## Notes

- 1 Anyone curious about the economics of the far-from-transparent and often frankly corrupt world of commercial academic publishing should watch 'Paywall: The Business of Scholarship' on <https://paywallthemovie.com/>