

United Kingdom: Working Class Heroes

Wednesday 23 December 2020, by [ALI Tariq](#), [DILGER, Gerhard](#) (Date first published: 8 December 2020).

Tariq Ali was a close friend and comrade of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, whom he interviewed for the Trotskyist *The Red Mole* in 1971. This interview is the finest piece on the radicalism of John & Yoko in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here, Ali remembers a few episodes from his “street fighting years.”

Tariq, tell us about your relationship with John Lennon...

Well, we criticized in *The Red Mole*, which was our left wing newspaper, the Beatles' songs “Revolution 1” and “Revolution 9”, saying these were very weak songs and very symbolic etc. And to our surprise a letter from John Lennon arrived, a letter to the editor, which we published, and I got our music critic to reply, Lennon replied back and then he rang me up. He said: Hey Tariq, you know are we going to carry on fighting in letters pages of your paper, why don't you come around and let's have a chat. So we went and had a chat and it was very interesting and my colleague Robin Blackburn went and did an [interview](#) with him, which we edited nicely and he read it and said: God, you make me sound so intelligent. And are you sure I should be published in the magazine because it's very serious, and I don't want it to lose any prestige, and I said don't be silly, it will just sell a few more copies.

I remember once he rang after the interview and said: What are you doing? Are you at work? And he said: I was so inspired by our interview that I have written a song for the movement, can I sing it to you? And I said: Yes, sing it! And it was “Power to the People”. He said: I want people to be singing it. I said don't worry, we will sing it. So he got it as a single and [we publicized it](#) as the song for the movement.

And then some time he rang and said: Will you come to my home because I'm just finishing a new LP and I want you to hear the songs. So [we went over to his house](#) and he had just written “Imagine”. I had gone with my colleague Robin Blackburn and Régis Debray had been sitting in our office, just released from a Bolivian prison. So we said Régis, this is a big opportunity. So I said to John, can I bring Régis Debray along, he said: Who is he? I said: He is a French intellectual who has just been released from prison. So when we said to Débray: Do you want to meet John Lennon? He said, who is he? So we said... this is who he is and Robin said: You have been in prison, Régis, but I thought that it would have penetrated down there that there is a group called the Beatles who are now more popular than Jesus.

So we took Régis along and John said then: Ok, I'm going to sing it to you. So he sang “Imagine” and then he looked at me. So I said: Let me think, I make some fake consultations with Robin and Régis and I said: Yes John, the politburo agrees, it can go out. But later, I said to him when we were alone, that I like “Imagine” and that it might touch people but it is a bit too sugary and I prefer “Working class hero”, which is an absolutely wonderful song, and he said, so do I, I prefer that too. But of course “Imagine” went everywhere.

But then he went to New York...

I told him, don't move to the States. He said why? Yoko hates it here, the British press is racist, the attacks on her had been disgusting. I said, we are used to them. And he said, why shouldn't I go to the States? I said, there are too many kooky people there. He said, even in Manhattan? So I said no, probably in the rest of the country, but I don't like it. I said, my instinct is against it.

So you know, he was shaken and I've kept in touch with Yoko obviously for all these years and let's say that it was an unnecessary death. And we needed him so much. During the Iraq war, for Palestine. He was very good on Ireland. Mick Jagger did some good songs on the Iraq war too after having gone through his Tory phase. But John would never have gone in that direction, anyway.

Talking about Jagger, you are the "street fighting man" from the Rolling Stones song of the same title - how did this come about?

Mick Jagger used to come to our demonstrations, he was quite intelligent, you know, and he was very ultra-left, the RAF people would have loved him, I'm sure they did. And he, once in a private talk on a demonstration, he was extremely militant. I said, calm down, already they're attacking us for fighting the cops outside the US embassy. So he wrote the song and recorded it, and the BBC of course refused to play it so he sent me the tapes, the handwritten version of the song.

And he said: Here you are, my dear, you know the BBC won't play it, could you put in the next issue of *The Black Dwarf***, so I said, fine. And that was an issue before a huge demonstration against the Vietnam war, so we put it on the cover because we had an article from Engels as well. So we put: "Engels and Jagger on Street Fighting", and he was really tickled by that. He liked it. So yeah, so the song became part of the folklore...

Do you think Bob Dylan deserved the Nobel prize?

Mmh, who knows, I like him, obviously. And he was very important for my generation and whether he deserved the prize is... (*laughs*) because quite a lot of his songs were openly taken from other sources, Woody Guthrie for instance. Joan Baez and Dylan used to sing together quite a lot. I don't begrudge him the prize, I would have been happy if he had turned it down and written a song saying why... But his line "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows", a whole political grouping was formed out of that, the unfortunate grouping, the Weathermen, who, like the RAF in Germany, went in for acts of terrorism. I know quite a lot of them are around now. And they say it was a huge political error.

You were also in Berlin, in 1967, 68...

Yes, I was in Berlin in 68 for the big anti-Vietnam war march, which is now legend, carrying portraits of Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Che Guevara and marched to the Berlin wall, where the East German soldiers were saying: What the hell is going on, these sort of photographs are carried by us (*laughs*). And you can see their surprise on their faces, saying look what is this. But one evening after this we were in the Republican Club in Berlin, which was a very popular meeting place.

And I suddenly got into a big argument with Ulrike Meinhof and I will never forget how she was shouting at me: You do not know what it is like to sit at the breakfast table with someone who now pretends to be normal but was an SS officer. And many of them showed no regret at all. And she said: I am not talking about myself, I am talking about our generation. So I said, ok I understand that but you can't wipe them all out. She said no but today many of them are supporting the Vietnam war, which for us is a war crime.

So you know one could see that it was the slightly twisted way of thinking and for the first time I

understood that that's a problem which I had never confronted. And that generation of Germans were born into this, it was difficult. Another thing was a lot of German people were very strongly for Palestine, so interestingly that has become very difficult now but after 67 huge support for the Palestinians grew up in Germany, quite openly expressed. Delegations coming to Palestine, there was no feeling of guilt, they didn't see it as something they were responsible for or that the crimes of the German ruling class were their crimes. There was confidence....

Gerhard Dilger

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