Was it right for socialists to back the Taliban?

The 11 September attack on New York and Washington merely gave the people of the US a taste of what Islamic-fundamentalist militarists had meted out to the women, the socialists, the trade unionists, the workers and the oppressed minorities of their own countries for decades.

It was not a blow against imperialism. Al Qaeda carried out their attack, not despite the retaliation it would provoke from the USA, but deliberately in order to bring that retaliation. The ensuing war and tumult, so Al Qaeda hoped, would create the conditions for their Islamic-fundamentalist allies to overthrow the "American-Islam" regimes in countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and impose full-scale Islamist dictatorship there. Where Al Qaeda went wrong was in exaggerating their own strength — Allah did not let them prevail against the USA as they probably hoped he would — and in understating the force and courage of secular, democratic and socialist activists in Pakistan.

Socialists obviously oppose US militarism, and have no brief for the corrupt US-allied regimes of the Muslim world. We must, however, learn the lessons from Iran since the 1979 revolution. To make "anti-imperialism" mean that we side, explicitly or implicitly (by "refusing to condemn"), with the Islamists, oppressors of "their own" people in a way whose nearest European analogue is fascism, was always wrong.

By November 2001, after the collapse of the Taliban in large parts of Afghanistan, what was politically untenable had become flagrant absurdity.

Pakistani socialist Farooq Tariq, a courageous opponent of the US/UK war much closer to the scene than us, wrote at the time: "The surrender of Kabul shows the absolute dictatorial nature of the Taliban and its fast disappearing social base. The ordinary citizens of Kabul seemed quite delighted over this victory...

"The Taliban was the most hated regime that the Afghan masses had ever seen... The religious fundamentalist forces were a tiny, very committed minority who were able to hold on with the support of the international religious fundamentalist forces...

"There could be a little so-called liberal time in Afghanistan if a broad-based government is established under the influence of US imperialism".

To preach distrust of US/UK militarism — that is always a basic and irreducible duty for socialists. Anti-imperialism in the name of the positive programme of democracy, socialism and international solidarity — which entails opposition to both the Taliban and to the US-sponsored replacement regime, dominated by the Northern Alliance — that makes sense. An "anti-imperialism" based on one-sided Americanophobia, silent on or making excuses for the Taliban, and implying that we should mourn the Taliban's downfall as a "victory for imperialism" — that was nonsense, and since November has been very obvious nonsense, both politically and morally.

The Taliban was created among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with money from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US. Its version of Islamic law was drawn more from Saudi Arabia than from Afghan customs. A large number of the Taliban's fighters were not Afghans, but Islamic fundamentalists from other countries; a large number of its Afghan fighters were young men who had come to Pakistan as refugee children, and then been brought up in religious schools there, as alien to Afghan society as the Taliban's Arab volunteers.

The quick collapse of the Taliban showed that they were even more significantly an outside force, imposing itself on the population, than we thought.

So should we regret opposing the US/UK war? No, we should not. The US commanders started bombing Afghanistan saying they would continue for months or years. That was a stated intention to kill directly as many Afghan civilians as required, and many more indirectly, through famine and disease, by wrecking even more an already wrecked society. Fewer civilians were killed only because the Taliban regime proved more fragile and thin than any calculators had expected.

No serious socialist could have given the US/UK war machine credence or political confidence in advance, even to bring down the Taliban. The US was and is deep in compromises and horse-trading with scarcely-less-vile Islamic fundamentalists, and not only in Afghanistan. Civilian casualties continue. We give no blank cheque to the US to deal with the remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban with its missiles and cluster bombs.

As Farooq Tariq also pointed out: "Once the Northern Alliance strengthens its power base, the real face of these fundamentalists will come out in the open".

And more. The fact that the Afghan war went so smoothly and easily for the USA increased the weight of those US government officials who talked, after 11 September, about "ending states" and attacking "a whole series of countries" — specifically, Iraq — as against the more cautious.

The Stop the War coalition statement on the fall of Kabul, put out by Lindsey German of the SWP and Andrew Murray, declared that: "At no time has the anti-war movement in this country supported the Taliban..."

Sadly, that was a half-truth, or a quarter-truth. The vast majority of those who joined anti-war demonstrations or supported anti-war resolutions in trade unions gave no support to the Taliban at all. Whatever way they would have chosen to phrase it, in essence they agreed with the

view that we must stand for democracy and international solidarity against both US/UK militarism and Islamic fundamentalism.

And none, or very few, of the political currents within the anti-war movement said that they supported the Taliban's politics.

The biggest of those currents, however, the SWP, opposed condemning the 11 September atrocity, and opposed all moves to have the anti-war movement distance itself explicitly from Islamic fundamentalism. Denunciation of the US/UK war combined with opposition to condemning the Taliban adds up to siding —

positively though implicitly and, to be sure, "critically" — with the Taliban.

After the fall of Kabul, Stop the War spokespeople felt the need to denounce the Taliban's "contempt for democracy and human rights". But only then, when the Taliban were in retreat! When the Taliban seemed strong, they made excuses for it. The SWP, for example, explained Islamic fundamentalism in general as a natural reflex of "rage and despair" against imperialism, and the Taliban's seclusion of women as down to the Taliban's leaders' desire to protect women from the lusts of their young soldiers (Socialist Worker, 6 October 2001).

They sought alliance with the broadest forces of Islam, objecting to any differentiation from the fundamentalists because it would supposedly alienate Muslims.

Then they hastened to dissociate from the same forces, defeated, whom they made excuses for when they were strong.

This drive to latch on to whatever seems strong among our enemy's enemies is the opposite of working-class politics — the opposite of any politics which can prepare the working class to act as a force in its own right, with its own principles and its own programme.

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5pm, Mary Fisher Room, Quaker International Centre, Byng Place (just opposite ULU)
The case for a Socialist Alliance paper
Speakers include Dave Osler

SUNDAY 7 JULY
5pm, Mary Fisher Room, Quaker International Centre, Byng Place
Euro debate: should socialists save the pound?
Speakers include John Palmer

WEDNESDAY 10 JULY
7.30pm, The Plough, Museum St
Israel-Palestine: the case for "two states"
Speakers include Deborah Maccoby (Just Peace UK)

Join us on the streets campaigning for Palestinian rights and a democratic basis for Arab-Jewish workers' unity.
Israel out of the occupied territories!
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5.30pm to 6.30pm
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