

## **The radical left's #metoo moment – all thirty-plus years of it**

By Simon Pirani, April 2018

The #metoo campaign may have started with last year's revolt in Hollywood – but it has produced an avalanche of action, by women who couldn't live further from that elite make-believe factory, against sexual violence and abuse. [Migrant farmworkers, restaurant and other workers](#), [American trade union activists](#) and [socialist feminists organising the “international women's strike”](#) are among those who have taken up the cudgels.

The #metoo movement seems to be helping to rewrite the rules of powerful men's behaviour. It has built on decades of feminist militancy, and given some victims, and potential victims, more tools to resist: not only workplace procedures or contract clauses, but also changing perceptions of, and wider understanding of, how to challenge abuse. #Metoo has fed into new battles over the gender pay gap. It helped inspire the US school students' revolt against gun violence.

Where discussion about #metoo has gone past the superficial, it has involved critical reflection about social realities in which sexual abuse is committed: the power structures and complicities; the blind-eye-turning and denials; and the relationship between rape and physical abuse and the context-setting harassment, misogyny and machismo.

Here I attempt some reflection on how allegations of sexual violence and abuse are treated in radical social and political movements (with which I have long been involved). If you're looking for a conclusion that movements of social liberation are inherently damaging to women, or to individuals, look elsewhere. If you're reading this in the *Daily Mail* office, looking for a stick to beat Jeremy Corbyn with, go take a running jump; I am not talking to you.

My conclusions include that reactions to sexual violence and abuse range from principled on one hand, to cover-up and support for powerful men who are accused, on the other. Combating patriarchy is reduced to words, as powerful urges to protect “revolutionary” organisations and “leaders” take over. Ethical nihilism is presented as supposedly superior “revolutionary” morality. These are ways of reproducing oppression; superseding them is a necessary precondition for any truly radical social change.

The words “radical left” in the headline are shorthand – a category so shifting as to be almost meaningless. Reactions to the Syrian uprising of 2011, for example, showed that there are so-called “revolutionaries” who don't recognise a revolution when it stares them in the face. Attitudes to sexual violence show that some “lefts” don't recognise extreme expressions of patriarchy up close, either.

The first part of the article refers to recent cases that suggest some “left” organisations have failed even to start to fashion an approach to sexual abuse appropriate to hopes of fundamental social change. The second compares these cases to some in the Irish Republican movement. The third considers an older case – the expulsion from the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in 1985 of its then leader, Gerry Healy, for sexual abuse – in historical perspective. The fourth draws some conclusions.

### **1. Some recent cases**

Two of the UK's largest left-of-Labour political groups, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), have in recent years both failed dismally, when confronted with serious allegations of sexual abuse against prominent members.

In March 2013, Steve Hedley, a senior officer of the Rail Maritime Transport union (RMT), was [publicly accused](#) by his former partner, Caroline Leneghan, of “physical and mental domestic violence”, culminating in a violent assault in which he “threw me around by my hair and pinned me to the floor, repeatedly punching me in the face”. Leneghan, also an RMT member, published photos of her injuries. Hedley rejected Leneghan’s allegations, and [issued his own public statement](#), accusing her of having assaulted him several times, including kicking him in the stomach shortly after a hernia operation.

Hedley was a member of the Socialist Party. The way that group dealt with the allegations speaks volumes. Six days after Leneghan made her case public, Hedley [resigned from the Socialist Party](#) “to concentrate on dealing with an allegation of domestic violence”. After a further two weeks, [the Socialist Party executive committee announced](#): “Following an in-depth investigation, the RMT has concluded that there is ‘no case to answer’ against Steve and decided that the union ‘will not be taking any further action on this matter’. The police had previously investigated and concluded they would be taking no action.”

This was evasive and untruthful. There was no “in-depth investigation”. The RMT had not concluded there was “no case to answer”. Rather, the union’s general secretary decided not to refer the matter to the national executive – that is, *not* to do an in-depth investigation. (See “Note A. Caroline Leneghan’s case” below.)

In terms of affording support to victims of domestic violence, the RMT’s procedure fell well short of the minimum many trade union organisations strive for. Leneghan’s account suggests she would have met a friendlier response in any police station where basic standards were met.

And in fact the police officers who dealt with Leneghan’s case exhibited a care apparently lacking in the RMT. They said they believed her. The police wrote to Leneghan to say that, were her case to go to court, “we would be able to say that your account remains that you were assaulted, and that we have no reason to suspect you made the matter up”. (The problem, in their eyes, was that the Crown Prosecution Service requires common assault charges to be brought to court within six months of the incident complained of, and this had lapsed.)<sup>1</sup>

So the Socialist Party’s claim that the police “had previously investigated and concluded they would be taking no action” was, strictly speaking, true, but – combined with its untruthful account of the RMT’s procedure – served not to explain what really happened, but to trash Leneghan’s reputation and rescue Hedley’s.

Rory McKinnon, a journalist for the *Morning Star*, which claims to be a voice of the “left”, later [faced his managers’ wrath](#) for trying to report on the RMT leaders’ mishandling of Leneghan’s case. At an RMT women’s conference, in a session on combating sexism, McKinnon asked union official Alan Pottage whether the lack of formal investigation into Leneghan’s allegations had affected women members’ perceptions of the union.

McKinnon was ejected from the conference and suspended from his job at the *Morning Star*. Tony Briscoe, the paper’s company secretary, made clear that its support from unions was far more important than reporting how domestic violence is dealt with. Asking such questions was “bad news for the Morning Star in terms of its reputation with RMT and other unions”, Briscoe said at [McKinnon’s disciplinary hearing](#).

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<sup>1</sup> These details emerged in [a response to Steve Hedley’s public statement](#) by Andy Littlechild, Leneghan’s RMT representative.

The Socialist Party was happy to leave it to RMT officials to prevent Leneghan's complaint being properly heard. The SWP, by contrast, did the dirty work itself, when confronted with an allegation of rape, and another of sexual harassment, against Martin Smith, then a leading member.

An SWP disputes committee packed with Smith's friends contrived an investigation "procedure" tilted against the women making the allegations. The party's central committee wielded crude disciplinary measures against members who dared to discuss the issues raised. The whole episode, in 2012-13, was widely reported. There's [a good summary here](#), and [masses of links to articles and reports here](#).

Many hundreds of SWP members reacted to this travesty by quitting the organisation, which was reduced to a pale replica of its former self. There was a wide, public discussion among them about what had happened. They almost all shared the belief that the SWP's reaction to the rape allegations was fundamental, not a side issue; they accused the party's mini-bureaucracy of placing the interests of the organisation, and its "leaders", above socialist principle; many defined the party's actions as "rape apologism".

In both these cases, the dynamics in "communist" groups operated to protect powerful men accused of sexual predation, in a manner reminiscent of the corporate and state institutions exposed by the #metoo campaign.

Even where there has been no obvious lying or cynical manipulation, groups have failed alleged victims of sexual abuse through incompetence, heartlessness and an apparently desperate need to protect their own reputations.

For example, in January this year a former member of the Alliance for Workers Liberty took to the internet to [recall how, when he was 16, he was sexually assaulted by an adult member](#), and was "made to feel that I was at fault for failing to resist". The AWL did then [give some serious thought to, and take action on, the issue](#), following the victim's decision to speak out publicly.

In some cases, people who demanded action against sexual abusers were accused of ulterior "political" motives. That pattern [seems to have been followed recently by the Revolutionary Communist Group](#).

## **2. Comparison with Ireland**

The Republican movement in Ireland, i.e. Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), has recently faced accusations that it protected, and covered up for, perpetrators of rape and sexual abuse. This is relevant to the radical "left" in the UK, which in the 1970s-80s sided with – and in some cases, glorified from afar – the Republican armed struggle against British forces. The Republican movement was widely regarded – rightly, in my view – as part of wider resistance against violence perpetrated in Ireland by the British state and its proxies, that in more recent decades has been meted out in Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere.

Rape and sexual abuse took place in the midst of a militarised struggle obviously different from the relatively peaceful UK context. But both in organisations' reflexes (to hurt victims in order to protect "leaders"), and in resistance to those reflexes, there were similarities with the UK cases.

In October 2014 Mairia Cahill, a former Sinn Fein member, [waived her right to anonymity to claim that in 1997, when she was 16, she was subjected to a year-long cycle of sexual abuse, including rape](#), by a member of the IRA. (See also [timeline here](#) and [a detailed interview with Mairia Cahill here](#).) The IRA's so-called investigation of the case – and those of two other

young anonymous victims – began in 1999, i.e. after its 1997 ceasefire and the Good Friday agreement of April 1998. Cahill was questioned repeatedly, sometimes for several nights a week, by IRA members, and then summoned to a meeting with Martin Morris, her alleged abuser.

Morris’s power was in a military organisation rather than a solely political one. As [the journalist Ed Moloney put it](#), Morris “was a member of the IRA’s secret police force, the so-called Administrative IRA, a much-feared body with the power to blow a person’s kneecaps into the next street.” Moloney claimed that the IRA investigation aimed to “cover up the allegations or force their withdrawal”. The IRA’s internal disciplinary procedures were “designed not to get at the truth but to force the accusers to back down so that their buddy Morris would walk free”.

Republican leaders only shifted their position after Cahill spoke out publicly in 2014. Gerry Adams, with whom Cahill had met repeatedly in 2000 to ask how the issue was being dealt with, wrote that he “never doubted that she suffered abuse”, but that Sinn Fein “has not engaged in any cover-up of abuse at any level”.

Cahill and other alleged victims were deprived of justice not only by the Republican movement, but also by the police to whom they reported the attacks, and by public prosecutors. The trial of the rape charges collapsed, with Cahill and others withdrawing evidence, in 2014. [A report by Keir Starmer](#), the UK’s former director of public prosecutions, blamed multiple failures that “weakened and delayed” the cases and made it “almost inevitable” that the victims would withdraw.

Cahill and others have said ([e.g. here](#)) that sexual abuse in the IRA was much more widespread. In 2015 a second victim, Paudie McGahon, [alleged that he was raped at the age of 17 by an IRA member](#) and subjected to a secret IRA “court” when he reported it. The *Sunday Independent* reported that [McGahon’s case was the subject of a Sinn Fein document](#) that also recounted other allegations of abuse by the same IRA member, and the punishments reportedly imposed by the IRA (breaking legs, removal from the country, and so on).

Predictably, Sinn Fein’s parliamentary political opponents, both north and south of the border, have lambasted the party for its role in these cases. More interesting in the context of this article, though, are conclusions drawn by Republicans, socialists and feminists in Ireland. The points I have drawn out of reading some of their comments include:

- The Republican movement sought to protect its reputation, and that of its “leaders”, instead of protecting victims of sexual abuse – just as some UK left groups did. One former IRA volunteer and political prisoner, Anthony McIntyre, [dismissed the claim by Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams that there had been no cover-up](#), and argued that, whereas the party had “frowned severely on [sexual] abuse and approved the [IRA’s] sanctions” against abusers, “what was being protected and covered for was the reputation of the party and the IRA”, just as the Catholic Church had tried to cover up for abusive priests. Another former prisoner and participant in the “blanket” protests, Gerard Hodgins, [argued that Gerry Adams had also viewed the case of his brother, Liam Adams](#) (who in 2013 was sentenced to 16 years in prison for child abuse), solely from considerations of political advantage.

- Even when Sinn Fein and the IRA sought to deal with sexual abuse allegations, they simply did not have the capacity or the skills to do so. [As Ed Moloney put it](#), the function of the IRA’s internal police force “was not to assist rape victims or bring the rapists to justice, especially if the alleged perpetrator was one of their own, but to beat the living hell out of joyriders, glue-sniffers and burglars”, knowing that that would boost its popularity in Catholic areas hard-pressed by petty crime.

■ [The background to the sexual abuse was a patriarchal culture](#), Fionnghuala Nic Roibeaird, a Belfast-based anarcho-feminist, argued. The Republican movement “exploit[ed] female sexuality ‘for the cause’”, using women for such tasks as transporting weapons, spying on British soldiers, and so on – which the male IRA leadership had no problem with, “because women’s liberation had no place in the movement”. “The masculinity of the movement made its way into their [women Republicans’] psyche, which meant that the sisterhood came second to a united Ireland.”

### **3. The WRP and Gerry Healy**

These instances of resistance to the protection of alleged sexual abusers were preceded by the expulsion from the WRP more than thirty years ago, in 1985, of its leader Gerry Healy, on sexual abuse and other charges. The expulsion led the organisation – hitherto one of the largest left-of-Labour groups, with a daily newspaper and a significant presence in the workers’ movement – to split and then break up.

There is no doubt about Healy’s guilt. A letter by Aileen Jennings, who had worked as his secretary, brought his sexual abuse of a large number of alleged victims (26 of whom she named) to WRP members’ attention. The cases were examined by a control commission. [A redacted version of its report](#) was published in 2005 in [the memoirs of Norman Harding](#), one of its members. (I was in the WRP. [An article I wrote in 2013](#) says more about the case, for readers who have not heard of it before.)

Because Healy’s abuse was so central to his “leadership”, and because we now have the benefit of hindsight, this case provides important context for later ones. Features of Healy’s abuse, which was conducted on such a large scale, were reproduced in later, sometimes smaller-scale cases. My own opinion has hardened over time: expelling Healy was the most revolutionary thing his “revolutionary” organisation ever did.

#### *Does sexual abuse matter?*

This may sound like a stupid question, but it was the first one the WRP had to answer. For Healy’s most consistent supporters, it was wrong even to raise the issue of sexual abuse by the great leader. In terms of procedure, Healy’s supporters on the WRP central committee did not get as far as voting against his expulsion; they voted against even laying charges against him (i.e. against tabling a motion that would allow the accusations against him to be considered). This single decision formed the basis of a short-lived faction that they formed under the WRP constitution. When the motion was nonetheless tabled, they quit.<sup>2</sup>

The late Corin Redgrave, making the case that the abuse allegations should not be considered, notoriously listed Healy’s achievements and concluded: “If this is the work of a rapist, let’s recruit more rapists.” ([The context is described here](#)). At a stormy meeting of WRP members in London, Redgrave responded to assertions that Healy was personally corrupt by saying: “We are neither for nor against corruption, we are for social revolution.” Those who raised the issue were “Mary Whitehouses”.<sup>3</sup>

Vanessa Redgrave, another of Healy’s strongest supporters, publicly denounced his victims as “demented middle-class women”. She added: “I don’t care whether it’s twenty-six, thirty-six or 236 [cases]. They’re all liars.”<sup>4</sup> This moral nihilism has not eroded over time. In her autobiography, published in 1991, Vanessa Redgrave said that WRP members who wanted to

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<sup>2</sup> “G. Healy’s expulsion: the facts”, *News Line*, 30 October 1985

<sup>3</sup> “The facts about the split”, *News Line*, 16 November 1985

<sup>4</sup> Ray Moseley, “Sex scandal rends Britain’s Trotskyites”, *Chicago Tribune*, 10 November 1985; Dan Callahan, *Vanessa: the life of Vanessa Redgrave* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2014), p. 160

deal with Healy were influenced by “the morality of Thatcherism”. In 2006, pressed by a newspaper interviewer, Redgrave adamantly defended Healy’s legacy.<sup>5</sup>

This year, Aileen Jennings, Healy’s initial accuser, with five other former WRP members, wrote [a letter asking whether the #metoo campaign had caused Redgrave to rethink](#). The *Guardian*, which has carried tens of thousands of words on sexual abuse in Hollywood, had no room for the 180-word letter, which was then published in the left wing magazine *Red Pepper*.

Healy’s supporters have never come up with a coherent explanation of why their guru was expelled. For thirty years they have shouted accusations that state forces generally, or MI5 particularly, were involved. Since MI5 surveillance of, and interference in, labour movement organisations was widespread in the 1980s, this might sound plausible. But the fact such interference was used in general does not prove that it caused any particular event. More evidence is needed. Whereas other cases, such as state and quasi-state measures against the miners’ union, have been catalogued in detail, no-one has found evidence that covert police activity caused Healy’s downfall. It is telling that Healy’s supporters have not tried. (See also “Note B. Healy’s supporters”, below.)

While no signs that the MI5 caused Healy’s expulsion have been found, there is a truckload of evidence – statements, to the control commission and in party meetings, from Healy’s accusers, and from other party members who supported them – that the expulsion was a reaction to Healy’s abuse. It was what it appeared to be. Healy’s supporters were unable to deal with this evidence, and so they concentrated on (i) attempting to discredit his victims, and (ii) denigrating the party’s overwhelmingly working class rank and file: “the disgruntled ones, the backward, anti-theory members, the ‘workerists’ and those simply tired of revolutionary politics” (Paul Feldman, a journalist); “old lags”, “awakened sleepers in every funk hole” and “a lynch mob” (Alex Mitchell, once Healy’s right-hand man).<sup>6</sup> Revealing language.

*How did sexual abuse fit into the wider picture of cult-like organisation?*

To answer this, the 1985 split in the WRP caused by Healy’s expulsion may be compared to the 1974 split, that followed an attempt to change the party’s political positions. These were two different stages of the WRP’s cult-like evolution. (I substantiated the argument for comparing the WRP to a cult in [a previous article](#).) In both cases, a small group of devoted members reached a point where their doubts about the WRP’s political strategy merged with fears about its hierarchical, bullying organisational regime, and a realisation that its leader was a sexual predator. There were two different outcomes:

■ In 1974, a group of worker members of the WRP, based in Oxford and across western England and led by the car industry militant Alan Thornett, found themselves increasingly at odds with Healy’s cataclysmic analysis of UK politics. Their attempts to dispute the WRP’s programmatic documents met organisational measures to suppress discussion, and violence. Early on in this dispute, Healy attempted in private to sexually assault Kate Blakeney, one of three central committee members (along with Thornett and Tony Richardson) who were moving into political opposition. One account of these events, based on an interview with Blakeney, suggests that “Kate, and Healy’s sexual appetites” was not just one issue among others, but “the catalyst” for Healy’s political offensive against the Oxford group. Blakeney

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<sup>5</sup> *Vanessa Redgrave: An Autobiography* (London: Arrow Books, 1992), p. 253; Lynn Barber, “[Interview: She’s Got Issues](#)”, *The Observer*, 19 March 2006

<sup>6</sup> Corinna Lotz and Paul Feldman, *Gerry Healy: a revolutionary life* (London: Lupus Books, 1994), p. 305; Alex Mitchell, *Come the Revolution: a memoir* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 2011), p. 463

“was sure that this was how the struggle began”.<sup>7</sup> At the height of the dispute, Richardson was violently assaulted. Blakeney protested to the central committee about this, and was immediately suspended from membership and thrown out of the meeting.<sup>8</sup> Then more than 200 members were expelled. In a continuing political battle with Healy, the Oxford group highlighted the connection between his erratic, opportunist politics and the WRP’s internal regime and violence – but omitted mention of sexual harassment or sexual assault from their published critiques.<sup>9</sup>

■ In 1985, a group of full-time employees in the WRP apparatus – mostly people who had turned their backs on other careers to become “professional revolutionaries” – began to understand and discuss (in private) Healy’s sexual abuse. At a public meeting convened a decade later to consider the events in retrospect, Dot Gibson said: “After years of kickings and ill-treatment, she [Dot] and Aileen [Jennings] spent years piecing together information about what Healy had done, trying to understand it and working out what to do.” Then they began secretly to talk to others. Clare Cowen, one of the group, said their conversations focused on three issues: the “wrong policies of the party”; “the crazy, autocratic way Healy ran the party companies and finance”; and Healy’s sexual abuse of women. The group decided that sexual abuse was “the central issue”, and in July 1985 supported Aileen Jennings in writing her letter accusing Healy.<sup>10</sup> In the months that followed, as the WRP’s cult-like control mechanisms were weakened, an unprecedentedly open political discussion also began, and its apparatus creaked. But it was the decision to charge Healy with sexual abuse – taken after attempts to silence his accusers, pension him off, and execute various other manoeuvres failed – that finally split the WRP.

I do not know why Thornett and his comrades decided in 1974 not to accuse Healy publicly of sexual harassment or sexual assault. But I can imagine. First, it was the 1970s, when sexual abuse was not thought of in the terms it is now. Rape and sexual assault were crimes, then as now, but definitions of these, and of harassment, consent, coercion and other related issues, were not as clear, either in the labour movement or in society generally, as they later became. Second, I don’t know if Thornett and his comrades knew of other victims apart from Kate Blakeney, but they may have felt duty-bound to protect her and others; she and/or others may not have been prepared to waive anonymity. In any case, the place of sexual power relations in Healy’s tinpot dictatorship was not widely discussed for another decade. The 1974 opposition connected the outwardly political dots with physical violence and intellectual intimidation, but not with sexual harassment. It was seen as something separate. (To make it crystal clear: I am trying to reflect. I am not retrospectively criticising anyone. I have nothing but respect for Thornett, and others who were in the 1974 opposition, as principled, lifelong militants.)

Even for many who supported Healy’s expulsion in 1985, it was not immediately obvious how sexual abuse functioned at the centre of a cult-like control mechanism. The Women’s Commission established in the party after the expulsion discussed this, and wider issues of

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<sup>7</sup> Blakeney’s account of Healy’s attack on her was published in 1993 by Tim Wohlforth, a former leader of an American Trotskyist group allied with Healy’s UK organisation. See: Tim Wohlforth, *The Prophet’s Children: travels on the American left* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 264-267

<sup>8</sup> There is an account of this meeting, on 23 November 1974, in: [The Battle for Trotskyism: documents of the opposition expelled from the WRP in 1974](#)

<sup>9</sup> The published critiques are *The Battle for Trotskyism* (see previous note), and [Behind the Smokescreen: an analysis of the politics of the WRP](#) (1976). Thornett and John Lister wrote in 1986 that, as they had tried to understand the WRP’s politics more than a decade earlier, “we found all the things that have emerged now – violence, corruption and abuse of women comrades” (*Workers Press*, 22 February 1986)

<sup>10</sup> “Healy’s expulsion from the WRP”, *Workers Press* 14 October 1995

power and gender relations. Two members of the Commission, Clare Cowen and Liz Leicester, argued in an important article in 1986<sup>11</sup> that Healy's abuse could more accurately be defined as incest, rather than rape, which in this case meant "sexual abuse by someone in a position of power and trust". In some cases Healy's victims felt that the submission he demanded from them was a sacrifice for the cause, of fighting oppression, to which they were committed: "they were not coerced by law or tradition or physically, but every pressure was brought to bear on them as revolutionaries". Moreover, this coercion was "shrouded in total secrecy". Cowen and Leicester reported on a discussion that the Women's Commission held with Incest Crisis Line on the power relations inherent in many kinds of incest. They rebutted fellow party members who said that Healy's sexual abuse was "secondary, a historical accident". (Cowen has written a memoir, to be published this year, describing her experiences in Healy's WRP.)

The 1985 split brought out the much more fundamental problem that lay behind the political disorientation that the 1974 opposition had confronted: young people who joined the "revolutionary" organisation had to be moulded into tools of the great leader's will. For men, it might mean humiliation at a meeting or the occasional punch. For women, it might mean feeding the leader's need for sexual control (in private and unknown to one's comrades). Just read [the WRP control commission report](#) on Healy's grotesque references to "training cadres" – a justification for his behaviour used by him to his victims in private, and by his supporters in public, once the abuse was uncovered. (They combined this with more traditional tropes of rape apologism, e.g. saying victims "asked for it" by the way they dressed, greeting victims' personal testimony at meetings with smiles, and so on.)<sup>12</sup>

The WRP's disoriented politics was the face – a real face with real features, but nonetheless just the face – of a sick organism.

*Were accusations of sexual abuse a way of avoiding "political" questions?*

The relationship between the sexual abuse and overtly "political" issues can also be examined in the frame offered by David North, the pompous, self-aggrandising leader of Healy's organisation in the US. North supported Healy's expulsion, and then spent thirty years insisting that the leader's sexual predation was *not* part of the wider picture of patriarchal and other hierarchical relations on the "left", or in society, and *not* the cause of anything – but merely the result of Healy's abandonment of North's ideal view of Trotskyist politics (?!). I am not exaggerating. A statement by North's "International Committee for the Fourth International" (ICFI), issued in 1985, ludicrously summarised the roots of Healy's personal behaviour like this: "Those like Healy, who abandon the principles on which they once fought, and who refuse to subordinate themselves to the ICFI in the building of its national sections must inevitably degenerate under the pressure of the class enemy. There can be no exception to this historical law."<sup>13</sup>

Having shifted the subject matter, from sexual abuse to "politics" – as though the two could be separated – North ended up denying that sexual abuse was part of any system of power relations between people. So in 2015, when [the lenient sentencing of Brock Turner](#), a Stanford University student who sexually assaulted a woman while she was unconscious,

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<sup>11</sup> Liz Leicester and Clare Cowen, "Healy's sexual abuse: towards a theoretical understanding", *Workers Press*, 6 December 1986

<sup>12</sup> Re Healy's supporters, see Cliff Slaughter, "Political degeneration and its defenders", *News Line*, 16 November 1985. This is a verbatim report of a speech by Slaughter prior to Healy's expulsion, in which he catalogued the defences of Healy offered in that and previous meetings

<sup>13</sup> David North, *Gerry Healy and his place in the Fourth International* (Detroit: Labor Publications 1991), pp. 102-103

provoked a storm of protest by women's organisations and others, [North's World Socialist Web Site angrily opposed them](#). For the protesters, the issue was the male and class privilege of the abuser; they reviled e.g. Turner's father's plea that judicial punishment was "a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action"; they popularised [the victim's impact statement](#) that vividly described the effects of sexual assault. For North's journalists, "hysterical 'sexual violence' campaigns" (why the quotation marks?) were "designed to pollute the political atmosphere"; it was doubtful whether victim impact statements were "even appropriate in a criminal prosecution" where "judgments should not be clouded by emotions".

And the #metoo campaign? For North's [finger-wagging colleagues](#), it's "an openly right wing operation" with a "reactionary, anti-democratic and socially and politically repressive political agenda", a "sexual witch-hunt" that will obviously turn into an "offensive against political subversives". Really.

Admittedly, the World Socialist Web Site's misogynistic ravings are an extreme example. But they are rooted in a belief much more widely held on the "left", that sexual abuse is not *really* political, in the way that class violence or racism or war is.

#### **4. Some conclusions**

I see no evidence that sexual abuse, or tolerance of it, is prevalent in radical "left" organisations. When powerful men in those organisations have committed rape or sexual abuse, and/or those organisations have tried to cover it up, there has often been a strong reaction from the organisations' members, many of whom regard combating the oppression of women as fundamental to their beliefs about changing the world. There have also been damaging delays and denials. The process is messy, as it is in society. Aspects of the most extreme case, that of Gerry Healy, have reappeared in other cases.

Many "left" organisations have demonstrated an instinctive reflex not to support victims of abuse, but to protect organisations' and "leaders'" reputations. What are reputations for? Whether competing to win seats in parliament (Sinn Fein), or to recruit trade unionists or students (some UK groups), the group has to prove it is better than its competitors. This group-building is far from any liberatory or really revolutionary practice – just how far can be seen by the strength of the reflex to throw victims of "leaders" to the wolves, in order to preserve the group's outward image. Groups sacrifice, suppress or demoralise young people who have set out to fight capitalism, for small-scale, and probably illusory, political gains. In doing so, they reproduce the institutional defence of abuse seen in corporations and political forums from the Weinstein companies to the Russian parliament.

Against this background, the damaging propositions that sexual abuse allegations are either a weapon in, or a diversion from, "real, political questions" have recurred. David North's fatuous "analysis" of the WRP is an extreme example. But these falsities also found echoes in Sinn Fein, and in the SWP. (With respect to the latter, [an especially idiotic headline](#) proclaimed: "rape is not the problem". Oh yes it is.)

Rape and sexual abuse are not only crimes on a simple human level, and in the eyes of the state; they are written into systems of power relations. Powerful men use rape as an instrument of their power, just as they do other forms of violence. And yet, in "left" groups, those who challenged powerful men accused of rape were themselves accused of embracing "bourgeois morality", in place of which "revolutionary morality" was proposed. Here is the radical "left"'s heart of darkness. A critique of one version of this "revolutionary morality"

was developed in the WRP;<sup>14</sup> a critique of another, many years later, in the SWP, [e.g. by China Mieville](#).

The “revolutionary morality” claptrap implies that “left” organisations are somehow superior to the state in their ability to deal with their members’ crimes. In the UK, in cases of rape and sexual abuse, this was and is clearly not so, as Tom Walker [argued so convincingly](#) with regard to the SWP. Even the IRA – which perhaps had more experience than the entire UK “left” put together in creating institutions independent of the state – also found itself [woefully ill-equipped](#) to deal with rape allegations. Counter-power and collectivist, communist democracy, where are you? Far, far away – and even further, to the extent that those who aspire to a post-capitalist society will not admit to themselves their own limitations.

The more cult-like radical “left” groups are, the stronger their members’ belief that they are somehow better than other people. Even groups that don’t share the strongest versions of vanguardist and “democratic centralist” ideologies tend collectively to feed an illusion that their members are superior. Their reactions to sexual abuse, especially by “leaders”, have shown that the groups not only try to challenge, but also reflect, the power relations in capitalist society. Future socialist and emancipatory movements will hopefully supersede such radical “left” organisations, look back on them as primitive, and find new forms to counter and overturn power.

#### **Note A. Caroline Leneghan's case**

When Caroline Leneghan complained to the RMT that Steve Hedley had assaulted her, the RMT general secretary (then the late Bob Crow) instructed Mick Cash, then RMT senior assistant general secretary (and now general secretary), to conduct an initial inquiry.

Cash then reported his findings to Crow, who had to decide whether or not to ask the RMT Council of Executives to conduct a full investigation. He decided not to do so, and told Leneghan that this was (1) because her RMT membership did not cover the date when the incident of which she complained took place, and (2) there was “a lack of corroborating evidence”.

Crow’s letter to Leneghan (subsequently cited by Andy Littlechild, Leneghan’s RMT representative in [an exchange with Hedley](#)), said that both she and Hedley “agree an incident took place”, and concluded, “I will not be taking any further action on this matter”.

As a result of trade union battles for women’s rights, which have been given extra energy by the #metoo campaign, some big companies have policies under which complaints of serious assault, such as Caroline’s, could not be investigated by close colleagues of the accused. But such minimum standards of natural justice were not applied in this case.

Neither were approaches followed that are basics for anyone dealing with domestic abuse cases, e.g. “believe the victim and reassure them that it was not their fault”.

Leneghan said in her public statement that she was “subjected to what is known as ‘victim blaming’.” She claimed that Mick Cash questioned her and “tried to make a link between my mental health and the assault”.

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<sup>14</sup> An early attempt to analyse the issues is: Cliff Slaughter, “Political degeneration and its defenders”, *News Line*, 16 November 1985, and “A right wing group blind to corruption”, *News Line*, 20 November 1985. There are further pieces in the WRP Internal Bulletin of 1985-86, which is stored in some university archives. See also [my 2013 article](#)

She added: “I was also shocked that Mick Cash asked me to explain how someone of Steve Hedley's build, and proficient at boxing, did not cause me more injuries. The investigator also accused me of causing the injuries myself. [...] I felt degraded and that I had done something ‘wrong’ in reporting the attack.”

This part of Leneghan’s public statement has not been questioned. The RMT had no formal procedures in place to deal with this type of complaint, which made an unjust approach all the more likely.

Many transport workers would never tolerate such methods of dealing with domestic abuse allegations in their workplaces.

Leneghan said that such responses to allegations of domestic violence “contribute to a culture where perpetrators of violence are never punished for their behaviour. It is a well known fact that women do not come forward when they have faced abuse, because they fear the treatment they will get.”

### **Note B. Healy’s supporters**

Much of the WRP minority that opposed calling Gerry Healy to account for sexual abuse were united by a conviction that the great leader had been deposed by the MI5 or other state security services. The technique of “offering stories of sex and violence” is “used by state security agencies in every country”, wrote Vanessa Redgrave about the appearance of newspaper reports about Healy’s abuses.<sup>15</sup> Maybe so. But in this case the stories were true, and appeared in the newspapers because the WRP expelled him on that account.

Paul Feldman wrote: “Driving on the [WRP’s] difficulties and differences were well-placed state agents.” Feldman blamed the victim: “someone [working for the state] had ‘turned’” Aileen Jennings, whose letter about Healy triggered his expulsion.<sup>16</sup> In the twenty-odd years since making this accusation, Feldman has never lifted a finger to substantiate it. (Time hasn’t healed anything. The book in which this slander appears is still on sale by the crackpot A World to Win organisation, with which Feldman is associated.)

Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London and a fan of Healy’s, claimed several times in the early 1990s that MI5 broke up the WRP, using an agent, “a high-ranking member of the leadership” who “wreak[ed] havoc under cover of traditional left rhetoric”. Pressed in correspondence by Cliff Slaughter of the WRP to produce details, Livingstone said that one of his advisers had seen reports by Special Branch officers who had surveilled left-wing meetings in the 1970s – but offered no further details on the WRP in the 1980s. “The identity of the agent [in the WRP] is not known to me”, he conceded. Without pausing to consider whether there was an agent at all, and whether e.g. Healy’s sexual abuse might have played a part in the WRP’s demise, Livingstone speculated that it might take between five and 15 years to prove MI5 involvement.<sup>17</sup> After 18 years, Livingstone seemed to be having doubts. He “did not repeat his [MI5] theory” when interviewed for a biography published in 2008. Soon afterwards, Livingstone described in copious detail his cooperation with Healy, and much else, in his own 680-page autobiography – but said not a word about the WRP’s

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<sup>15</sup> *Vanessa Redgrave: An Autobiography*, p. 252

<sup>16</sup> Lotz and Feldman, *Gerry Healy*, pp. 300-301

<sup>17</sup> “Where’s your proof? Back up your MI5 smear, Livingstone!”, *Workers Press*, 10 March 1990; “Corruption sparked WRP split”, *Workers Press* 21 July 1990; “The WRP, MI5 and Libya”, *Lobster* 20 (1990), p. 20

collapse or MI5 activity in it. Given the importance of developing our retrospective understanding of such activity, the silence speaks loudly.<sup>18</sup>

Covert police action against the labour movement and socialist groups in the 1980s is a big subject, outside the scope of this article. Researchers believe it was widespread, and driven politically by the Thatcher government, most obviously against the miners' union. Both the Special Branch and MI5 used a wide range of agents, from occasional informants to undercover operatives such as those used in the 1990s against environmental campaigners. The WRP was a target, although far from the highest priority.<sup>19</sup> When it comes to Healy's expulsion, the question is not whether state forces might have been interested, or might have liked to stir up trouble, but specifically whether they *caused* it. No evidence has emerged that points in that direction, and Healy's supporters never tried to look for any.

Such evidence is lacking, too, from the only substantial account of the 1985 WRP split by any Healy supporter, in Alex Mitchell's self-obsessed, self-exculpatory memoir. Mitchell is a liar, and I do not intend to refute his hatchet job point by point (although if anyone has queries about points of fact, they are welcome to contact me). But it is worth noting that unsubstantiated insinuation about the MI5 is combined with:

a. Blatant lies, most significantly about the WRP control commission that investigated Healy. Mitchell cheerfully writes that "it never met", and that he consequently established, from chats with two alleged victims, that "claims of Healy's sexual depravity were a wild exaggeration".<sup>20</sup> In fact the commission met constantly, and reported to a WRP special conference, in October 1985. Its conclusions were made public by the WRP in 1986. [A redacted version of the commission's report](#) was published six years before Mitchell's memoir.

b. Classic victim blaming. Mitchell asks why victims of Healy's abuse did not speak up sooner. "If mature-aged party women knew Healy was a sexual predator, why did they allow him near any of [his younger victims]?" he writes<sup>21</sup> – not because he wants to know how abuse works over long periods of time, or about the secrecy integral to it, but in order to discredit the victims.

c. Trivialisation of abuse. Allegations that Healy had tried to abuse several dozen women were "an impressive record" for a 72-year-old who was "seriously overweight and with a bad heart condition". (Readers may compare this to Russian president Vladimir Putin's comment about the former Israeli president Moshe Katsav, a rapist: he "turned out to be quite a powerful man. [...] We all envy him.")<sup>22</sup>

*Please repost and circulate*

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hoskens, *Ken* (London: Arcadia, 2008), pp. 230-231; Ken Livingstone, *You Can't Say That* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011)

<sup>19</sup> See for example Stephen Dorril, *The Silent Conspiracy: inside the intelligence services in the 1990s* (London: Mandarin, 1994), pp. 8-9; Mark Hollingsworth and Nick Fielding, *Defending the Realm: MI5 and the Shayler affair* (London: Andre Deutsch, 2000), pp. 86-89

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *Come the Revolution*, p. 455

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *Come the Revolution*, p. 454

<sup>22</sup> Mitchell, *Come the Revolution*, p. 453. On Putin, see Pirani, *Change in Putin's Russia* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 125