

Black and white and red all over: Public Lives

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'The problems mankind and womankind are facing are huge. To tackle them, we have to think big, to have radical new visions.'

Hilary Wainwright, self-styled libertarian socialist and feminist, sheds light on her own solution — a magazine called *Red Pepper*

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Public Lives

Jan Moir

IT IS Mayday at the Mechanics Institute in Manchester and there is a meeting on. It is the kind of meeting that has carrot cake at 35p a slice and a brace of tea urns standing proud on a trestle table, and which urges all-comers to *Keep The Red Flag Flying!* There are representatives from, among others, the Manchester Anti-Fascist Action Group, the Manchester Troops Out Movement and the Latin America Information Service, all appealing to an already-converted audience united by their radical left credentials and their willingness to sit in a stuffy second-floor hall on a warm spring evening, listening to speakers such as Michael Mansfield QC, Sinn Fein's Mitchell McLaughlin and the ANC's Zueliswa Mlakalaka.

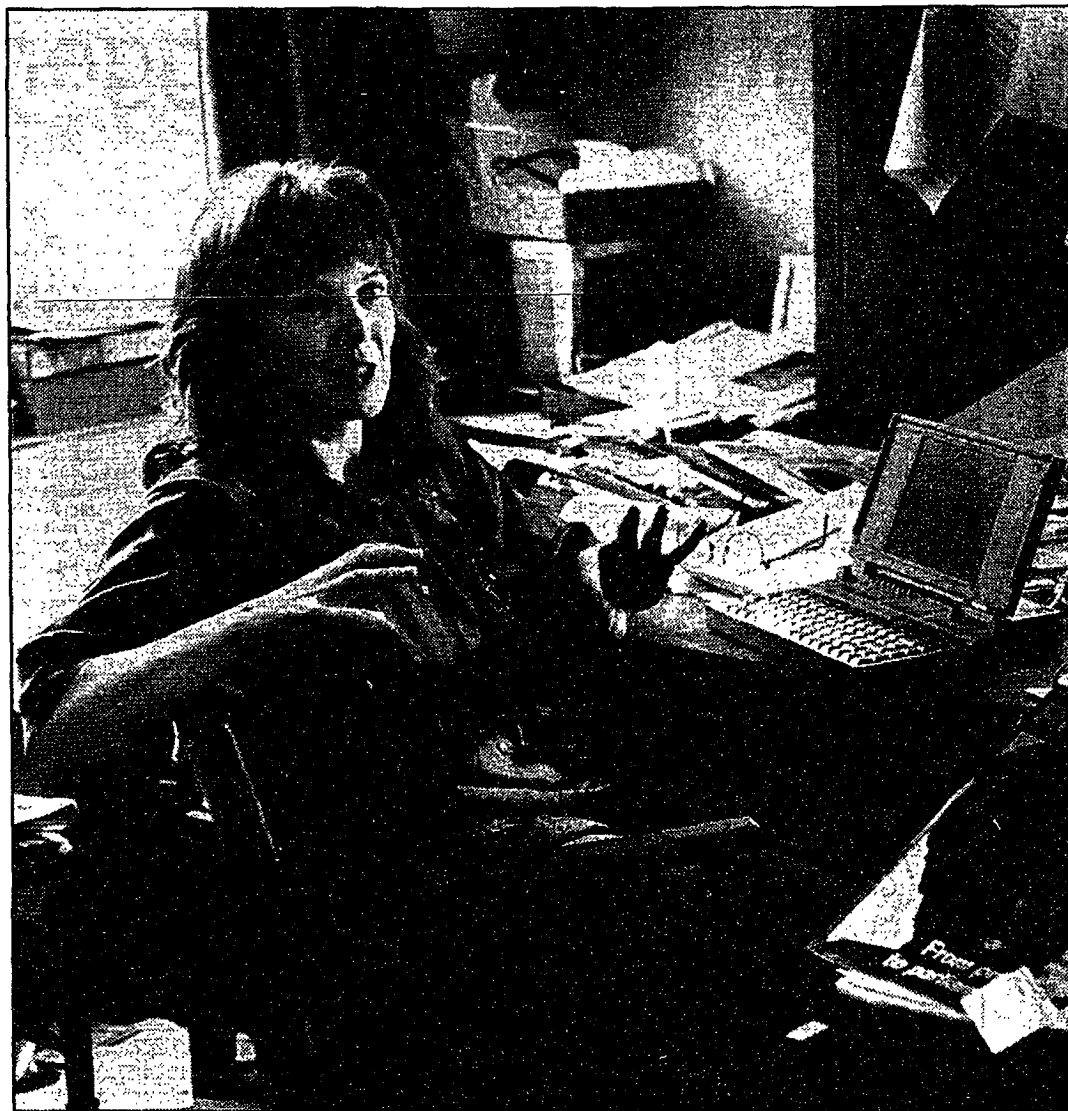
Over by the door, Hilary Wainwright — a veteran believer, the kind of activist who has not stopped campaigning since the heady days of 1968 — is setting out her own stall. She makes neat piles of her new subscription leaflets and information packs as she rehearses a fresh spiel. Her mission tonight is to explain why anyone should want to buy a new magazine called *Red Pepper* when they didn't want to buy its predecessor, a fortnightly newspaper called *Socialist*. "I want to explain

that this is a magazine for them to read and to use, one that does not toe a party line," says Wainwright, who is the magazine's political editor and chief fund-raiser.

Wainwright has the perfect credentials for this sort of thing. Her father, Richard Wainwright, was a Liberal MP for Colne Valley in the Pennines for over 15 years. The family — her brother Martin is a reporter for this newspaper, her sister Tessa teaches children with special needs — were all involved in politics from an early age. "I remember at election times the house would be full of loud-hailers and manifestos and leaflets. They were as much a part of the furniture as record players and Kenwood mixers."

At the Mount School in York, Wainwright was always campaigning for change, from a wider choice of school dinners to co-education. After studying PPE at Oxford, she published a number of books, the most recent being *Arguments For A New Left* (Blackwell), described by one reviewer as the first serious attempt by a Western radical activist to respond to the political challenge of the New Right. "My books aren't exactly bestsellers but I keep on writing because I think you have to do whatever you can to help," says Wainwright, who is 45.

As a fund-raiser, she has been heavily involved in many doomed projects over the years, most recently *Socialist*. It was launched in 1991 as the brainchild of the Labour and libertarian left, and



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acted as the mouthpiece of the Socialist Movement. Even its supporters could see that it was an optimistic venture, but it somehow managed to struggle on until after the General Election of 1992, whereupon it collapsed, wheezing, with mortal debts of £40,000.

How typical, some may have scoffed, more daft socialists finding themselves at sea, lost without the ballast of a proper business plan but eternally buoyed by their beliefs. No longer, Wainwright says. After the crash, they decided to relaunch editorially and get professional. "It was a half-cocked business," she admits. "Now we have become very hard-headed, commercially." She renegotiated the debt with the paper's creditors and begged them to trust in her one more time. "We didn't

want to give up. So a lot of people said forget about the debt or pay us back over the next few years."

This ability to conjure money from the trees bears testament to Wainwright's fantastic charm. Tariq Ali — who was a fellow member of the International Marxist Group in the seventies — says: "She was always very ebullient and it was infectious. She could convince people of the need to do certain things because she is very straight and people always believe her."

Today, Wainwright and her sympathisers — including Denise Searle, former *Socialist* editor, now in the same position at *Red Pepper* — cannot be shaken from their belief that the radical left, suffocated by the Labour Party's "terror" of proper debate and new ideas, need a place

to "think aloud". They want to provide a forum that revels in argument. "Without sounding grandiose, we feel that the problems mankind and womankind are facing are huge. To tackle them, we have to think big, to have radical new visions."

THE TEAM had endless debates about the name, wanting something that was positive, cheeky and confident. What kind of names did they reject? "Umm. Seditious," she says, after a long pause, her cheeks turning a suitable shade of peppery red.

It was only after they had settled on *Red Pepper* — which launches on May 19 — that they discovered it was also the name of a publication sold in the early days of the Russian revolution, produced by satirists



PHOTOGRAPH: DON MCPHEI

and critics of the increasing bureaucratisation of the Bolshevik revolution. Wainwright has copies of the original Roter Pfeffer on show at her stall at the Mechanics Institute. "This symbolises our tradition," she says, pointing to a copy. "We, too, are radical socialists, we are anti-bureaucratic and libertarian."

But whereas the original's circulation was boosted by the enormous Russian underground resistance, where is the British equivalent? Wainwright says they are appealing to an invisible force, but a strong and vibrant one. How strong can they be when they are not represented by any sort of political party? Exactly who is going to subscribe to today's Red Pepper and why would they want to buy it in the first place? "For the first time, we want to

combine humour and satire with serious politics," Wainwright says.

There will be articles from all the usual suspects: John Pilger, Carlos Fuentes, Sheila Rowbotham, Sue Townsend. There has been financial support from, among others, Ruth Rendell (who has written a short story for the second issue) and Harold Pinter. An advert in this very newspaper last November resulted in 300 interested parties asking for a copy of the new business plan and many subsequent investors pitching in with anything from £50 to £10,000. The magazine has an initial print run of 15,000 and although some copies will be available in newsagents, it will be subscription-based. They have given themselves two years to reach their 12,000 subscription target. "We need that to be viable," Wainwright says.

Once more, everyone is optimistic. "The people who will buy this magazine are the people who think that, politically, we can do better than this and who are tired of the narrowness of political debate in Britain," Denise Searle says. She sees no problem in finding enough readers; she sees the problem as a general lack of left-wing publishing in this country. "If you want a good read, you don't think of buying a left magazine," she says. "It is a chicken-and-egg situation. New Statesman is the only other independent around and they have welcomed Red Pepper. They think we will help to open up the market."

Steve Platt, editor of New Statesman, broadly agrees, although his own magazine's circulation has been in long-term decline since the seventies and now hovers around the 20,000 mark. "Any newcomer is welcome — the more going on, the better," he says. "The whole arena for left or dissenting publications has been squeezed and shrunk over the years but there are now a lot of people who are interested in new, socialist approaches to problems. The pendulum is swinging back."

Meanwhile, back at the terraced house where she resides in Manchester — she is a senior research associate at the Centre for Labour Studies in the city's university — Hilary Wainwright is swigging coffee from a china mug bearing the legend Free Namibia! She is married to Roy Bhaskar, a philosopher at Oxford University, and splits her time between their London home and here.

Right now, she is helpfully trying to pinpoint her political standpoint. "I'd say I was a libertarian socialist and feminist. I believe in equality of wealth and power, and I believe in the democratic government of society and the economy."

There is no party for her here, she says — if she lived in Germany, she would belong to their Greens — but this does not bother her or make her worry about Red Pepper's committed, but so far invisible, possible readership. "I feel that I am part of a growing breed, not a dying one," she says. "There are a lot of people like me out there."