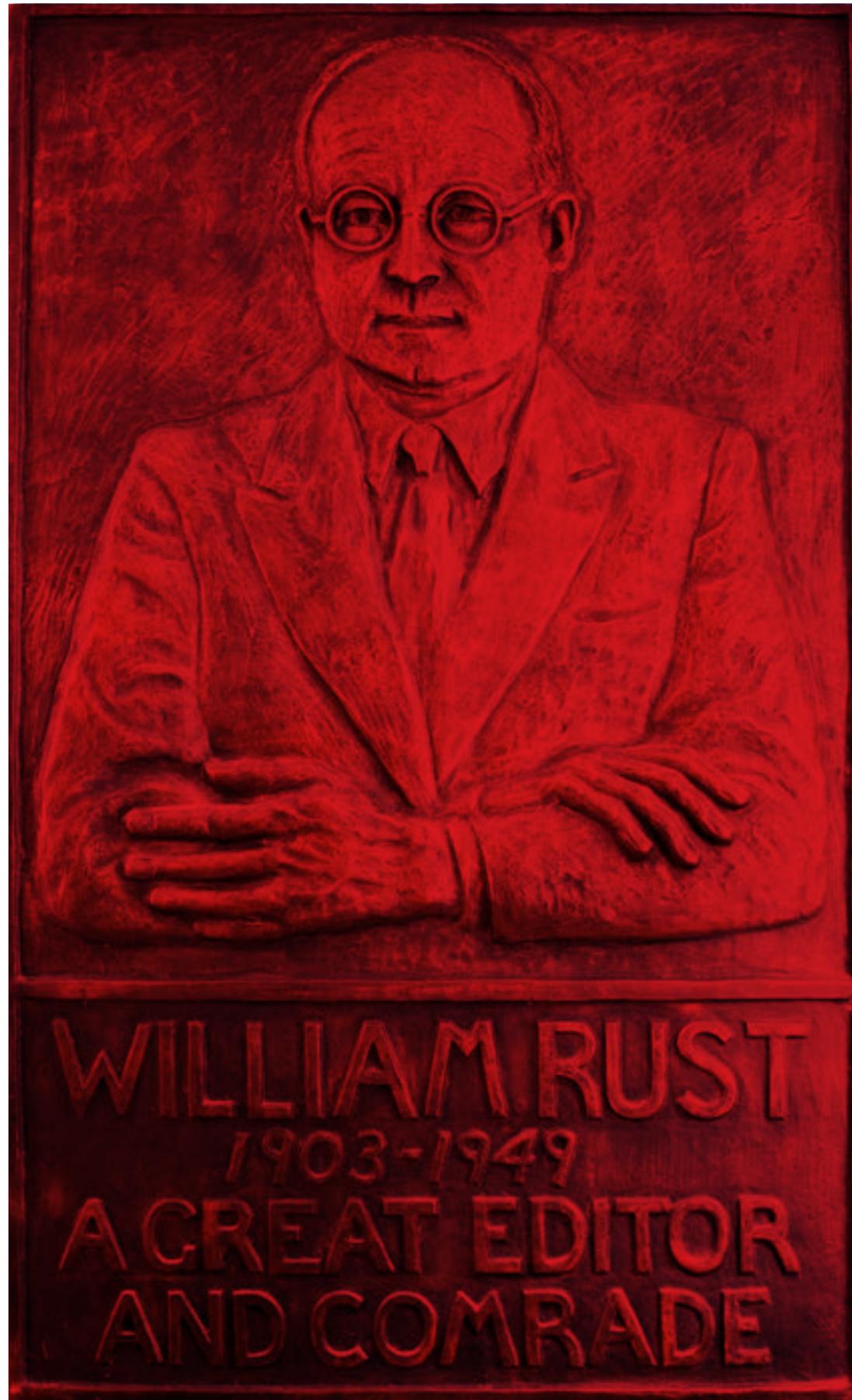


Red all over

Can a young, Mandarin-speaking Oxbridge graduate revive the world's only English-language communist daily newspaper?

By Edward Platt



LEWIS KHAN

In 1930, a stern, working-class Londoner named William Rust was appointed as the first editor of the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He was only 27 but he had solid credentials. Besides writing for the *Workers' Dreadnought*, a newspaper produced by the suffragette campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst, Rust was an early member of the CPGB and had suffered for the cause. Five years earlier, he and 11 other activists had been charged with violation of the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797, accused of distributing "seditious communist literature".

Rust went to prison for a year but the experience did not weaken his beliefs, and his two spells as editor of the *Daily Worker* marked the paper's golden age. When he returned to the role in 1939, after a seven-year period in which he represented the CPGB in Moscow and the *Daily Worker* in Barcelona during the Spanish civil war, it was selling 40,000 copies on weekdays and 80,000 at weekends. After the Second World War,

he spoke of turning it into "a front-rank national newspaper with a circulation of 500,000 copies daily", and he oversaw the move to a new office on Farringdon Road in the City of London. When in 1948 the first editions came off the press in William Rust House, a "torchlight procession of 20,000 supporters" carried him "shoulder-high to Clerkenwell Green, where he auctioned the first two copies for £45 each" – or so CPGB history says.

Rust died following a heart attack three months later, aged 45, and his successor, Johnny Campbell, called him "the greatest editor in British working-class history". In the decades that followed, the paper declined in step with the ideology and organizations it served. In 1966 it was renamed the *Morning Star*, and it survived through Soviet patronage: Moscow paid it £3,000 a month in the 1960s, and in the 1970s and 1980s purchased 12,000 copies a day. By the time President Mikhail Gorbachev cancelled the order in 1992, the CPGB had

ceased to exist and the *Morning Star* risked going the same way.

Yet it has managed to stumble on, and in May it appointed its youngest editor since Rust – a 31-year-old, Mandarin-speaking Oxford University graduate called Ben Chacko, who is plotting the paper's revival from another office block that bears the name of his revered predecessor.

The current William Rust House is in Hackney Wick, a minute's walk from the Olympic Park, site of the greatest exercise in state-sponsored gentrification London has witnessed. The building preserves the iconography of an earlier era, though: there are red stars on the name above the reinforced steel door and stars embossed on the mirrors in the gents. On the stairs is a bronze relief of Rust.

Chacko's office is on the third floor, adjacent to the newsroom, which was gutted by fire in 2008. The air-conditioning unit that started the blaze has never been replaced, and on the July day that I visited the ►



Not just for the miners: Chacko says the paper “joins the dots” between left-wing interest groups

dozen or so of the paper’s 30 staff putting together the next day’s edition were working in sweltering conditions.

The *Morning Star* is proud to call itself the only English-language socialist daily newspaper in the world, and it covers industrial disputes, anti-austerity protests and international affairs in a brisk, populist tabloid style. Recently, it has earned praise for its coverage of women’s sport and corruption in sport. Jeremy Corbyn, the candidate for the Labour Party leadership and *Morning Star* contributor, has called it “the most precious and only voice we have in the daily media”, and Frances O’Grady, the TUC general secretary, says it is “essential reading for many union activists”.

Nonetheless, the paper remains in a state of “near-permanent” financial crisis, in Chacko’s words. Last year its circulation fell by 5 per cent: it has a print run of 13,000 copies and Chacko says it sells about 10,000 copies at £1. Advertising revenues rose by 25 per cent, though they remain modest because most of the ads are placed by trade

unions, “solidarity bodies” and individual readers. The People’s Press Printing Society, the co-operative that owns the paper, made a surplus of £1,137 last year – compared to a loss of £41,179 in 2013 – but only after “significant donations”, including a set of cartoons by Martin Rowson. Its “Summer of Heroes” appeal for support raised nearly £200,000, which was meant to insure the paper against “a continuing financial crisis”, but it still tries to bring in £16,000 every month through its Fighting Fund, with running totals updated on the paper’s website. “The rich don’t like us, and they don’t advertise with us, so we rely on you, our readers and friends,” the appeal says.

The closeness of the relationship between readers and their paper became apparent to Chacko in 2011, a year after he started working on the *Morning Star*, when it nearly went out of business and had to call on donations to save itself. “It was very clear that people were prepared to make a lot of sacrifices because the paper plays such an important role in their lives,” says Chacko,

who has shoulder-length dark hair, and was casually dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved shirt as we sat in his office. Among the page proofs on his desk was a bust of Lenin.

In some ways, he regards the absence of a wealthy proprietor as an advantage. “Media ownership in Britain is concentrated in the hands of six men, which distorts the press. They’re rich, they live abroad, their interests and outlooks are not the same as normal people’s,” he says. The *Morning Star*, by contrast, tries to tell the story of “working people”, aided by an ownership structure that is another consequence of its contentious history: the CPGB established the People’s Press Printing Society in 1945 to run the paper, and anyone can buy a share in it and vote at the annual general meetings.

Chacko had just completed his first round of annual general meetings since his appointment was confirmed: they took place over five days in five cities – Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff and London – in early June. In his write-up he described them as “a baptism of fire”, though “that didn’t mean there wasn’t time for fun, whether that was what our Scottish supporters politely term a ‘convivial gathering’ or the moving social in honour of [a] departed comrade” in Liverpool.

Len McCluskey, the leader of Unite, Britain’s biggest trade union, had another meeting in the same building in Liverpool, and Chacko wrote that he brought them “platters of sandwiches and snacks”. “If the devil could cast his net!” he [McCluskey] chuckled, as he surveyed the assembled members of the People’s Press Printing Society.”

Chacko has half a lifetime’s experience of such events. Robert Griffiths, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) – the successor to the Communist Party of Great Britain – remembers him coming to meetings of the Young Communist League when he was 15. He did not inherit his activism from his family: his mother, who came from Lancashire, and his father, who came to Britain from India at the age of eight, were “leftish” but not particularly interested in politics. He was born in London but grew up in Cheltenham. “We were pretty poor until I was 12 or 13, when my father qualified [as an actuary], and things started to get better after that.” His brother is a barrister. It sounds like a comfortable upbringing, I say, and he agrees, with one significant qualification. “I think the family would be considered middle-class in traditional British class definitions,” he says. “I personally don’t like the term ‘middle-class’ because I don’t think it has a clear economic meaning.”

Instead, he offers what he calls a Marxist definition of working-class, which includes

anyone who is forced to “sell their time” for a wage, rather than living off assets or investments. Teachers, doctors and civil servants would be included: he believes that 80 to 90 per cent of the British population is “working-class”, and it is testament to his ambitions for the paper that he believes it should speak to them all.

“We don’t say the *Morning Star* is the paper for people who work down the mines – we’re a paper for working people across the board, whatever work they do. And the character of jobs is very different to what it was 40 or 50 years ago – though often actually worse paid and more insecure than traditional working-class jobs.”

Such an expansive definition lends new significance to his view that the Conservative government is leading an attack on what he calls “our class”. “This is a government of the super-rich,” Chacko says. “The Conservatives operate on behalf of the people who provide their funding. Most of what they have done is in the interests of a very small elite.”

The difficulty of leading resistance against the government was apparent at the anti-austerity protest in London on 20 June when I met Chacko for the first time. He had marched from the City and I joined him on the edge of the crowd in Parliament Square, where the speakers included Jeremy Corbyn. A small group of the paper’s staff and other contributors were gathered round the CPB flag, while all around us were banners of the parties, union chapels and assorted special-interest groups – from hunt saboteurs and anti-fascists to dreadlocked ravers – that make up the People’s Assembly, the movement leading the campaign against austerity.

The rally’s diversity was a strength but also a weakness: it is hard to see how such disparate voices and concerns can come together in a coherent campaign. Yet Chacko believes that the *Morning Star* “joins the dots” between the variety of causes and speakers in a way that few other papers can. “Rather than attacking a few isolated symptoms of the problem, we analyse how the capitalist system works,” he tells me.

Other than the presence of *Morning Star* contributors on the platform, there was little evidence to suggest that others at the rally saw it like that. Still, Chacko is hugely encouraged by Corbyn’s candidacy for the Labour leadership: he believes it has demonstrated “real enthusiasm” for a left-wing Labour leader who will challenge the Tories from a socialist perspective. He is less enthused by Andy Burnham, another *Morning Star* contributor, though he is too

diplomatic to dismiss him altogether: he praises Burnham for having “thought hard” about mental health and social care in a way that is “unusual in a senior politician”, but is disappointed by many of the things he has said since the general election. “He has gone for the idea that Labour should be more right-wing, which obviously we don’t support.”

Chacko has a simple answer to those who say that the electorate delivered a conclusive verdict on the Labour Party’s leftward shift under Ed Miliband. “If they thought the manifesto was left-wing, they weren’t paying attention.” He believes the problem was another much-cited flaw: the Labour Party had become too “metropolitan” and lost its connection to its traditional supporters – hence Corbyn’s popularity at the hustings. Yet even if the left were to gain a prominence and acceptability it has not enjoyed for at least a generation, it is not clear that the *Morning Star* would become “the voice of the movement”, for many people still see it as the voice of one faction.

For several decades after the creation of the People’s Press Printing Society, the CPGB continued to control the *Morning Star*, and the paper was at the heart of the

Chacko is too diplomatic to dismiss Burnham altogether

factional dispute that led to the party’s demise. According to Francis Beckett’s history of the party, *Enemy Within*, the split was between the staff and supporters of the *Morning Star*, who saw themselves “as class warriors, first and foremost”, on one side, and the Eurocommunist leadership of the party, which wanted a “broad democratic alliance of the working class, women, gays and ethnic minorities”.

The Eurocommunists dismissed the members of the *Star* faction as “tankies”, “because they were supposed to have applauded when the Soviet Union sent tanks into Czechoslovakia”, while the *Star* faction in turn blamed the Eurocommunists for “betraying communism”. In 1988 the Eurocommunists expelled the tankies from the party, though that didn’t save it: the CPGB gradually disappeared from view through a series of name changes and mergers that severed its connection with its past.

In the meantime, a new Communist Party – the CPB – emerged to take over the *Morning Star*, which was still following the Kremlin’s line, even as the Soviet Union fell

apart. “GDR unveils reforms package” was its front-page headline the day after the Berlin Wall started coming down. “The German Democratic Republic is awakening,” the story said, quoting the version of events provided by East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party. “A revolutionary people’s movement has set in motion a process of serious upheaval . . . The aim is dynamically to give socialism more democracy.”

More than 25 years later, the *Morning Star* has still not lost “its reputation for bone-headed Stalinism”, says Paul Anderson, a former editor of the socialist weekly *Tribune*. “It runs articles extolling the virtues of single-party ‘socialist’ states on a regular basis – North Korea, Cuba, China, Vietnam. Its default position on just about everything happening in the world is that anything any western power supports – but particularly the United States – must be opposed, which has led to it cheering on Putin, Hamas, Assad and a lot of other real nasties.”

Jim Denham, who blogs under the name Shiraz Socialist, says the *Star*’s coverage of Ukraine “has been a dishonest pro-Putin disgrace”. He is even more scathing about its anti-EU stance, saying it “plumbs the depths of reactionary Little England nationalism”.

Chacko insists the *Morning Star* has “no sympathy” with the government of Russia. He calls himself a “big fan” of China, which is perhaps no surprise, given that he lived there for several years after studying Chinese at university, yet it isn’t clear how much his personal views matter. Attempts to revitalise an editorial line that Paul Anderson says has always been “ploddingly traditional” will inevitably be hindered by the *Morning Star* being tethered to the programme of the CPB, *The Road to Socialism*, which concludes: “For the sake of humanity, the future is communism.”

Robert Griffiths, the party’s general secretary, says the programme is broad enough to win the support of many people on the left, even if it hasn’t won the support of the groups that call themselves communist. There are at least ten of them, according to Griffiths, including the Communist Party of Great Britain (Provisional Central Committee), the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist). “It’s a bit *Monty Python*-esque,” he says. “We’re ten times bigger than all the others put together, but I won’t make too much of that, because we’re still pretty small.”

He maintains the relationship between paper and party has changed. The People’s Press Printing Society is now run by a management committee that includes representatives of nine national trade unions,



Worker's pride: William Rust (second from left) checks layouts before the paper goes to press, 1945

▶ each of which contributes £20,000 to its costs and “they wouldn’t do that if it was a communist front”. Griffiths maintains that the involvement of non-communists is “genuine and substantial”, though he concedes that the relationship between paper and party remains strong: he was in William Rust House on the same day as I was, to attend the monthly meeting of the CPB’s political committee. Chacko is also a committee member and he was attending the meeting, though Griffiths said he wouldn’t be “taking orders”.

“I don’t tell him what to put in the paper, and I don’t agree with everything that’s in it: that’s the nature of a broad left paper. I think we have a clear separation.”

Ben Chacko says past feuds do not concern him, yet they may have helped him in one sense: the lack of new recruits in the 1990s created a “generation gap” that accelerated his rise to the editor’s role. He isn’t the only recent appointee to the paper’s management – a new company secretary, Chris Guito, was appointed at the same time as Chacko replaced Richard Bagley. The *Morning Star* lost a lot of experience with the departure of two “stalwarts”, the paper said, but Chacko and Guito welcomed the chance to overhaul its editorial line and business operations at the same time.

Guito had been a civil servant for 28 years – and a Communist Party member for three, having left the Labour Party “in disgust” at “Blairism and Iraq”. He says he was dismayed by what he found at the *Morning Star*. “There was a lack of structure and process, and a working culture that was – dare I

say it – amateurish. We needed to get some professional systems in place to allow the paper to fulfil its potential.”

It is now halfway through a three-year plan that includes developing a new sales strategy, relaunching the website and raising its social media profile. (The *Morning Star* Twitter account has attracted an additional 6,200 followers since September, but with 21,300 followers it is still tiny by newspaper standards; the digested version of the *Independent*, the *i*, has 72,500 Twitter followers.)

While an electronic edition of the paper was launched late year, with sales “riding

steadily”, according to Guito, these still represent only a small proportion of print income. The commercial and political challenges of overhauling its operation for the digital era are considerable.

Charlie Beckett, head of the department of media and communications at the London School of Economics, says: “We have seen how left-wing voices like Owen Jones can use a combination of social media, real-world activism and exposure on mainstream media to get a profile for strong ideologies such as socialism. But there are limits. The left lost the last election badly in the real world and on media, both social and mainstream. I suspect the inward-looking factionalism and self-indulgence that the left is prone to makes it less good at the kind of open, public-centred journalism that will thrive in the digital era.”

Yet Chacko insists that the *Morning Star* is broadening its appeal and cites one encouraging aspect of an otherwise dispiriting election campaign: he was contacted by Green Party members who said they had always thought the *Morning Star* was a communist paper and were surprised to discover that it was “the best paper for Greens”.

“Anyone who challenges capitalism should make the *Morning Star* their daily paper,” Chacko says. “We’d like to be the voice of resistance, and loud enough not to be ignored. But we know there’s a long way to go before we reach that influence.” ●

Edward Platt is a New Statesman contributing writer. His most recent book is “The City of Abraham: History, Myth and Memory – a Journey through Hebron” (Picador)

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