

Keir Starmer, Trotskyism and Pabloism.



John Rogan · Follow

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Deep Entrist or Deep Centrist?

Was Keir Starmer a Trotskyist? Or a follower of Michel Pablo and therefore a “Pabloite”? Is there a difference? Indeed, who was this “Michel Pablo” and what on earth is “Pabloism”?

Does anyone care?

Well, some people do, including the Mail on Sunday who referred to the Labour leadership favourite as a “Posh Trot” in an attempt to expose his “radical past”.

Now, let me try and answer some of the questions I put above.

Who was Michel Pablo?



Pablo.

Pablo (aka Michel Raptis) was a leading member of the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI) after WWII. The success of the (Stalin-led) Soviet Union in establishing a number of client states after that conflict led Pablo to the conclusion that Communist Parties were, contrary to Trotsky's beliefs, still capable of leading anti capitalist revolutions. The success of Tito and Mao confirmed this, in his view. This led to him putting forward an idea of "deep entryism" (entryism "*sui generis*" ("*of a special type*")) where Trotskyists would join mass Communist Parties and seek to influence their development without revealing their politics openly. This idea did not go down well among some and the FI continued a process of splits and infighting, a tradition which continues to this day among Trotsky's adherents.

As for Pablo, a summary of his life and politics can be found [here](#) (h/t Andrew Coates).

Among the highlights was his work in the late 1950's in support of the Algerian National Liberation Front (NLF) when they fought France. After the NLF's victory, Pablo became an economic adviser to Ben-Bella's regime before the latter was ousted. He knew Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Salvador Allende and even, when in exile in France, Ayatollah Khomeini (!).

In 1968, back in Greece, he helped found PASOK along with (ex Trotskyist and later Greek PM) Andreas Papandreou. When Pablo died in 1996, he was given a state funeral there.

International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency.



“The IRMT are liquidationist revisionists who don’t even deserve to be called centrists!”

During all the political interventions quoted, Pablo continued to have his small band of followers who were in and out of the FI at various points.

Finally, he had his own international organisation — the “*International Revolutionary-Marxist Tendency*” (IRMT).

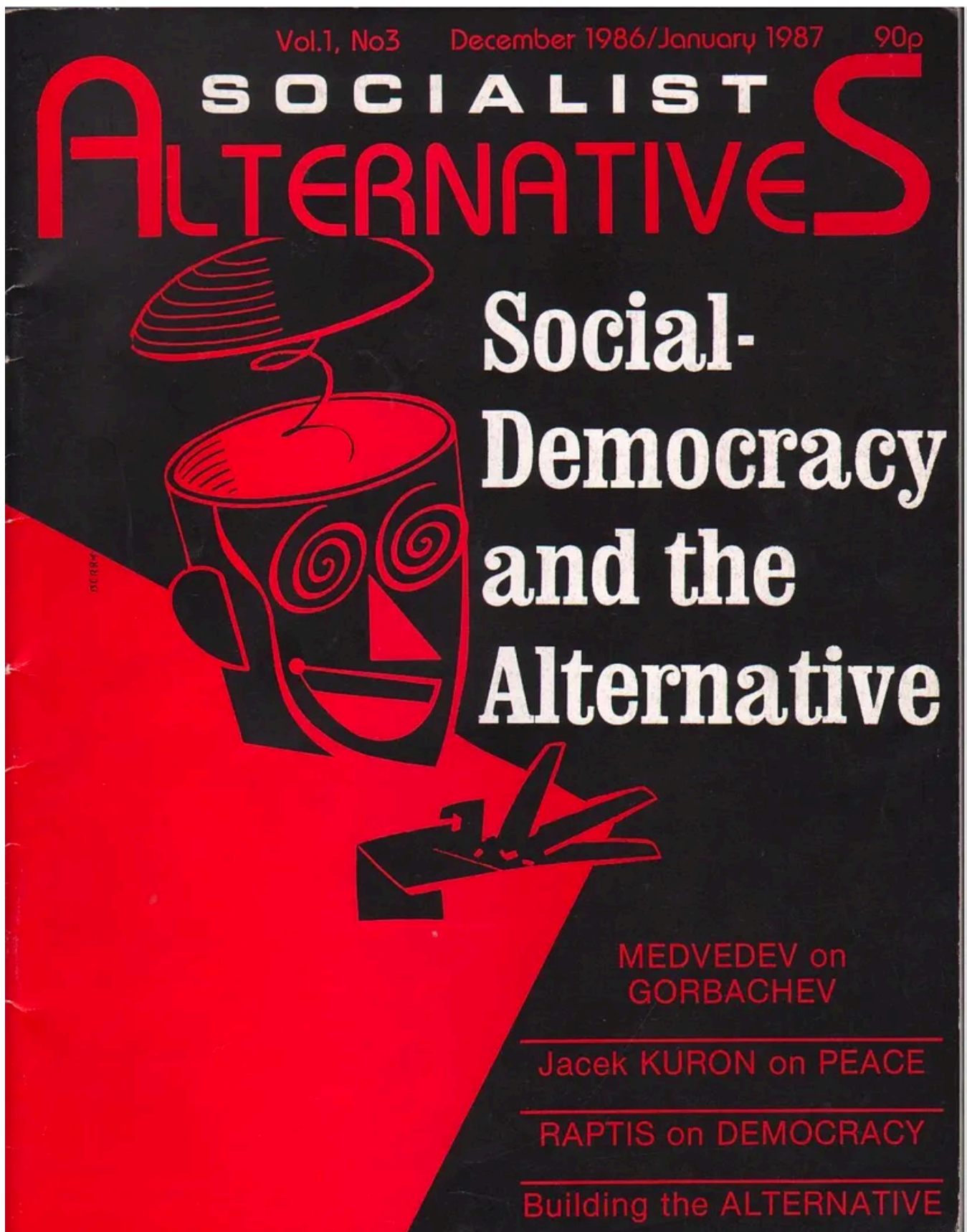
According to “*International Trotskyism, 1929–85: A Documented Analysis of the Movement*” the IRMT had a conference in 1972 where they dropped the pretence to being the World Party of Socialist Revolution and any allegiance to Trotskyism.

Evolution of International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency

Pablo and his associates soon established their own organization, the International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency of the Fourth International [Tendance Marxiste-Révolutionnaire Internationale de la Quatrième Internationale—TMRIQI]. This group had its first international meeting in 1972 when it dropped the reference to the Fourth International from its name and at the same time proclaimed that it no longer considered itself “Trotskyiste.” Nor did they any longer claim to be the party of the world revolution. They were merely a Marxist tendency which was particularly dedicated to fostering “autogestion,” that is, self-government on all levels—the workers in the factory, and so on, up through the various layers of the economy and society.

In Britain, as part of their new orientation (eg worker’s self-management, ecology, women’s liberation), they went on to produce the “Socialist Alternatives” magazine, copies of which can be [found here](#).

Socialist Alternatives, Keir Starmer and Trotskyism.



Snazzy!

Keir Starmer was on the Editorial Board of Socialist Alternatives, wrote various articles for them and interviewed leading left wingers including Tony Benn MP and Hilary Wainwright (Vol 2 No 1. April/May 1987).

Does that mean that Keir Starmer was therefore a Trotskyist?

Well, it's all a matter of definition, isn't it? As can be seen above, Pablo's political trajectory was not what could be called "orthodox Trotskyism". For example, he participated as an adviser in what Trotsky would have described as a "petit-bourgeois nationalist government" in Algeria. In this case, while the "orthodox" view would have been to support the NLF against French imperialism, Trotskyists in Algeria would have also tried to build an independent revolutionary party to carry out a programme of Permanent Revolution (ie a Socialist Revolution). As for helping Papandreou establish a social-democratic Party like PASOK, that would have been seen as another example of heresy, if not indeed outright treachery to the Greek proletariat.

Nope. It doesn't stand up. By the time, Starmer got involved with Socialist Alternatives, despite Pablo's past, the IRMT had dumped Trotskyism and developed a form of Red/Green politics which was very common on the Labour left then and, particularly with the rise of groups like Extinction Rebellion, still very much with us. A cursory view through the copies available show a magazine with articles which could easily have appeared in the Guardian, New Statesman or even Marxism Today.

Indeed, in an attempt to do a humdinger hatchet job on Keir Starmer for his "Trotskyist" past, Harry Cole of the Mail on Sunday published a pretty desperate piece outlining his opposition to the idea of a minimum wage in the 1980's in contrast to his support now. Unfortunately, for Mr Cole, "*Man changes mind over the minimum wage*" isn't something I think will sway either Labour members in the Labour leadership election or even voters in a general election. Andrew Coates discusses that article here.

In the end, if the Mail et al want to describe Keir Starmer was a "Posh Trot" due to his involvement with Socialist Alternatives, it won't really stick. That's because, while there is much that Conservative inclined journalists would describe as outrageously left wing ("*Prisoners should get the vote!*"), there's no proper Trotskyist "smoking gun" to find ("*Down with Bennite Centrism! Build the Fourth International, World Party of Socialist Revolution!*"). That's because there isn't any.

P.S. For any youngsters out there, a "centrist" in the old Marxist sense is a person or organisation vacillating between reform and revolution.

A Word of Thanks.

Thanks very much to Andrew Coates for much of the information I've put here. Opinions are all mine, of course. Andrew's website can be found here.

Further Links.

[Europe, Internationalism, Socialist Alternatives \(Pabloism\), and...Keir Starmer.](#)

[Keir Starmer and 'Pabloism' in Prestigious Spart World Column in Private Eye.](#)

[Mason and Pabloism.](#)

[The British Pabloites.](#)

Michel Pablo [biography](#) and [again](#).

[Starmer interview with Labour List. 13.01.20](#)

[Keir Starmer interview](#) (8 March 2018) with Nick Robinson.

[Sparts view](#) on Pabloism (1972).

[Socialist Alternatives Thread](#) about Starmer interview with Tony Benn and Hilary Wainwright. 8 Jan 2019.

Some more on "[Pabloite revisionism](#)" in the [post WWII](#) period from the Socialist Equality Party perspective with quotes from various FI documents. (Added 29 Jan 2020).

Derek Wall [recounts his time](#) with "Socialist Alternatives". (Added 6 April 2020).

International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement — Origins of Pablo's split with Trotskyism.

1971, defending the position of the POR, and a statement dated October 12, 1971, signed by Lora for the POR, Pierre Lambert for the OCI, and Balasz Nagy for the League of Socialist Revolutionaries of Hungary, supporting the POR's position, but saying that the party's behavior should be carefully studied by the IC, and condemning "the method used by the Workers League and the SLL."²⁴

Following this exchange, a document was issued on October 24, 1971, by the "majority" of the IC, reportedly including representatives of the SLL, the Workers League, the Revolutionary Communist League of Ceylon, the Workers International League of Greece, and the League for a Workers Vanguard of Ireland. That document denounced actions of the OCI going back as far as 1967, returned to repudiation of the POR and its behavior before and during the Torres regime, and took exception to the OCI's organizing a meeting in Paris at which Stephane Just of the OCI was described as "Secretary of the IC for the Reconstruction of the Fourth International." The document claimed that "this is a split from the IC and its politics. It is a split by a minority."²⁵

On November 24, 1971, the Central Committee of the OCI replied to this "majority" document. It denied that those who had signed the October 24 statement constituted a majority of the IC, and charged that by organizing a meeting of the five groups which had signed the statement, the SLL and its allies had in fact been the ones who provoked a split in the International Committee of the Fourth International. At considerable length it again defended the OCI and the POR, and denounced the recent behavior of the Socialist Labor League.²⁶

In any case, regardless of who had been responsible for the final acts which constituted a split in the International Committee, that split was a fact by the end of 1971.

International Revolutionary Marxist Tendency

In most of the two decades after World War II probably the most outstanding, if controversial, leader of International Trotskyism was Michel Raptis, better known as Michel Pablo. However, even before the "reunification" of a substantial part of the Fourth International in the United Secretariat in 1963, Pablo had begun an ideological evolution which was first to bring him to establish a small faction of International Trotskyism and then to lead that organization into giving up its allegiance to Trotskyism.

Origins of Pablo's Split With Trotskyism

Michel Pablo participated in the formation of the United Secretariat in 1963. However, when USEC held its first congress, he was absent, the first time since the European Conference of 1944 that he had not participated in a major meeting of International Trotskyism. By the time the 1965 meeting was held, Pablo was already outside of the ranks of that faction of the movement which was led by USEC.

The United Secretariat explained the exit of Pablo thus: "Michel Pablo, while greeting the reunification, held views on a number of points conflicting with the position of the reunified movement . . . he has gone so far as to issue his own public factional organ," and by late 1965 had been "suspended from leadership in the Fourth International."¹

According to Pablo's supporters the situation was somewhat more complicated. When Pablo was finally released from prison in Amsterdam he went to London, where he was provided with a Moroccan passport, and

went to Morocco, where he worked with Algerian rebels until the end of the Algerian War. When peace finally came he went to Algiers, where he had a long conversation with the leader of the new Algerian regime, Ahmed Ben Bella, who ended up asking Pablo to be his political adviser. This was the first and only time that the Trotskyists had ever gotten in a position of even advisory leadership in a revolutionary regime.

The Reunification Congress authorized establishment of an African Bureau of the International, headed by Pablo. This organization began issuing a periodical, *Sous le Drapeau du Socialisme*, identified as the organ of the African Bureau of the Fourth International. However, USEC soon issued a statement that the magazine had been published without the approval of the International, and did not reflect its views.²

Michel Pablo himself has stated his principal discrepancies with the United Secretariat. They were: "1) My disagreement with the assessment of Maoism by the USEC as evolving towards revolutionary Marxist positions, to which it was necessary to offer critical support. 2) My disagreement with the assessment of the Khrushchev tendency of the Soviet bureaucracy as a simple personal quarrel. I had maintained at the time that the K. tendency was more receptive to the pressures of Soviet society than the other more Stalinist tendency which sought to overthrow him. 3) My disagreement with the support given by the USEC to Holden Roberto against the MPLA (in Angola). I favored support of the latter."³

The Pabloist group subsequently described what occurred to them. They said that "for having publicly defended these ideas our comrades were accused by the USEC of the period of gravely violating 'democratic centralism,' and thus putting themselves outside of the IV International."⁴

There followed a purge of Pablo's supporters from the apparatus of the United Secretariat. These included not only Pablo himself, but Ismael Frías of Peru, Denis Ander-

son of Australia, and Simon Maillet and Gilbert Marquis of France. Some of these continued for some time to be active in their national sections of the United Secretariat.

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By 1982 the Tendance Marxiste-Révolutionnaire Internationale (TMRI) had affiliates in France, the Netherlands (where they published a periodical, *Socialisties Zelfbeheer*), Greece (For Socialism), Cyprus (For Socialism), Australia, and Austria. They had individual members in Italy and were in the process of forming a group in Argentina.⁵

By the early 1980s TMRI had developed another major divergence from the ideas of USEC: they no longer considered the Soviet Union and other Communist-controlled regimes to be "workers states." Rather, they categorized them as "bureaucratic states." A resolution of the Seventh International Conference of the TMRI stated their position, quoting with approval an hypothesis which the Soviet Trotskyist Christian Rakovsky had put forward many years before:

The total statization of the economy, brought about by the State in the hands

of the bureaucracy, reinforces its material privileges and its control over the masses, transforming it insensibly into 'a large class of rulers with their own internal divisions, a class which grows through prudent cooptation, direct or indirect (bureaucratic promotion, system of fictitious elections). What unites this original class is an original form of private property, that is, possession of the power of the State. . . . From the moment that the party-State concentrates in its hands all political power and expropriates the masses politically, depriving them of their councils, their committees, their self-governing communes, their parties, their free unions, their free press, etc. . . . the 'Thermidor' is accomplished in the following precise and new sense: in the anticapitalist State established by the Revolution there begins to develop inexorably the dynamic converting it into the bureaucratic State, and not a socialist society. During the process thus begun, the formation of the bureaucracy of the State is reinforced constantly, dominating the State and through it the whole society. . . . [T]he variant produced by history is not that envisaged by L. Trotsky; it is unprecedented.⁶

The TMRI advocated, in place of the "bureaucratic State" what it called "autogestion." It summarized the meaning of this in a manifesto it produced on the occasion of the first direct elections for the Assembly of the European Common Market: "Socialism is nothing other than the democratic power of the workers and the citizens on all levels and in all parts of society. It implies the widest political democracy, and has nothing to do with the ignoble caricature called 'socialism' in the USSR and in the so-called 'popular democracies.'"⁷

In mid-1979 the TMRI issued an "Open Letter to the Members of the Fourth International." It urged that there was need "to develop new directions, new forms of strug-

gle and of organization," as well as "the elaboration of a transition program based on socialist autogestion, and including the strategy proposed to the working class. We think that the elaboration of this program requires the calling together of the currents which support socialism and revolution. In the first place, this debate is necessary among those who claim the tradition of the Third and Fourth Internationals."⁸ The United Secretariat paid little or no attention to this Open Letter.

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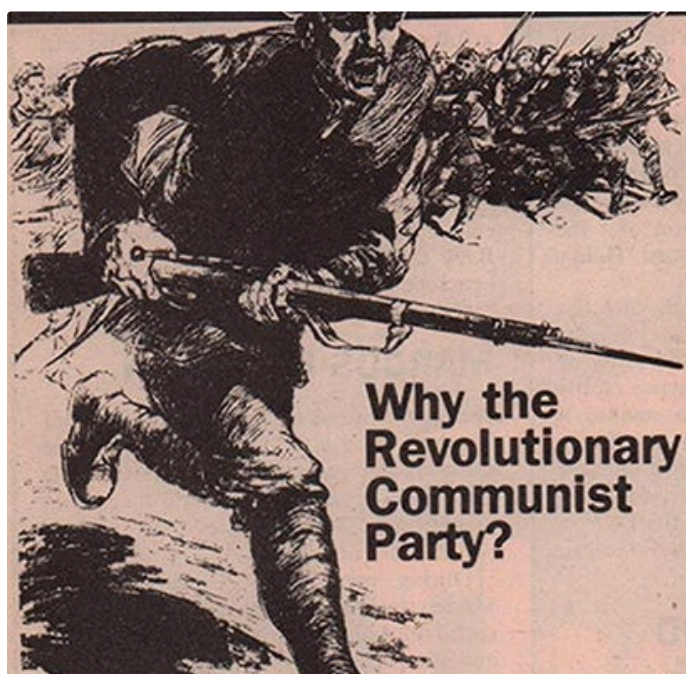


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Some old photos of Peter Capaldi.

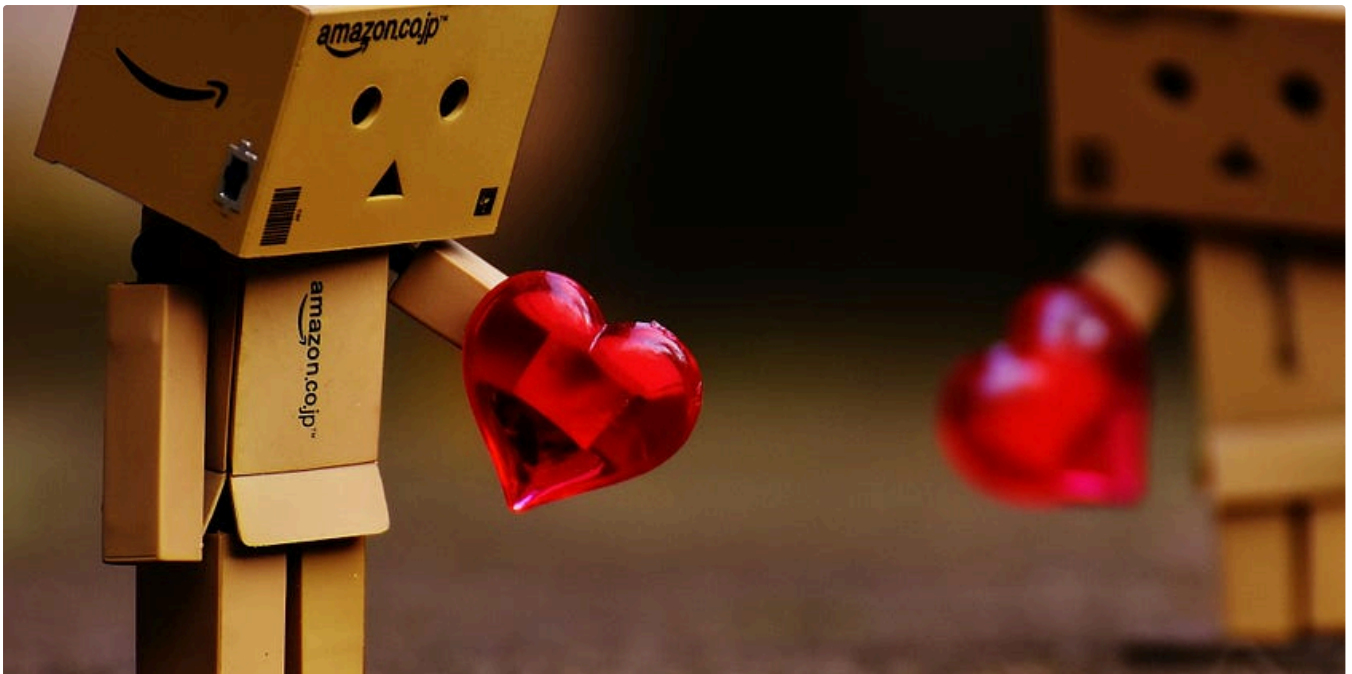
“The Bastards from Hell” first gig in late 1978 and “Dreamboys” poster.

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