

The political activist – Leon Kuhn

At 59, Leon Kuhn has been an active political cartoonist for over 35 years. Unlike a number of cartoonists who fell into the job by chance, he started copying political cartoons at the tender age of six, and for him it was a life long ambition.

As an active revolutionary socialist, he always draws the line at attacking minorities, the oppressed – with the exception of the ruling class and Nazis of the BNP, EDL and NF variety – and is against sexism. His views somewhat differ from other cartoonists: “I don’t believe in the often stated idea by cartoonists and others that everyone should be a target for attack, the so called ‘free speech’ or ‘no censorship’ theory. We have a duty to the victims of this society and not to their oppressors. I will not join in attacking Muslims, especially now when they are constantly being vilified by the government and the media as a cover for bombing their countries”. He is also very clear he would not have published the cartoons of Mohammed by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*: “I would not have permitted them to be published. Would you have defended the right of a newspaper in 1930s Germany to publish derogatory cartoons of Jews and the Jewish religion?” He can see how it could be claimed there is no equivalence between 1930s Germany, but points out that with the deep slump in Europe, an extreme Nazi party ‘Golden Dawn’ are growing rapidly in popularity in Greece, and last year the Nazi Front Nationale in France alarmingly received over 6 million votes in the presidential elections.

As a political activists, Kuhn does not follow the traditional route when it comes to commissions. His work is of a more personal nature, inspired by oppression and injustice. He recalls a successful piece based on the torture of Iraqis by their American captors in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004: “I did a cartoon of the hooded man as the Statue of Liberty. At that time I was involved in trying to build an alternative party to the Labour Party called ‘Respect’ and we were contesting the European elections. It was decided to use my image to launch the campaign”. Respect printed half a million cards using Kuhn’s image on the front, with the aims of the party on the rear. They were distributed all over the UK by the party’s activists by hand (due to limited budget). However the cards were successful and in Respect’s first ever election the representative George Galoway just missed out on getting elected as an MEP.



Leon Kuhn
Statue of Liberty, 2004.

With such strong political motivation, Kuhn has found himself locked out of the press. He discovered unity in 'Artists Against the War' – a loose coalition of writers, actors, artists and film-makers whose overall aim is to make an impact on society and 'to change hearts and minds of the people'. (artistsagainsthewar.org.uk) He identified an outlet to deal with his frustration: "I decided to take a very large poster of one of my anti-war images onto the first anti-war demo together with postcards of it which 'Artists Against the War' had printed to publicise the new group. It was a big success with hundreds of demonstrators buying the postcard. This gave me the confidence to continue doing this and over the last ten years I have been on many demos and sold many cards of my work". Kuhn found this form of circulating his work very satisfying, going directly to the intended audience and getting immediate feedback. The impact was clear: "It may have been through this wider distribution of my work that I finally got accepted as regular cartoonist for the *Morning Star* after a 30-year quest to get a regular spot in a left-wing national daily newspaper".

As for technology, Kuhn sees it as entirely positive, giving his work a new lease of life: "I believe I am the only cartoonist who composes the complete work from start to finish on the computer. Also the ability to produce very large and sharp images and small glossy postcards has enabled me to take my work with confidence onto the streets". He believes the idea of taking political art to the masses is where the future lies and other artists will follow, however his outlook is less positive: "Unless the capitalist system is overthrown I don't see any real future for humans be they artists, cartoonists or illustrators". (Appendix 5)



Leon Kuhn

Kuhn pictured at an anti-war rally in 2007. He is holding his latest work *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, where he visualised George Bush as a crazed dog out of control, it's 'keeper', Tony Blair, hanging on, but still smiling, as they leave a trail of mass destruction behind them.