

# Alliance for Workers' Liberty

## Day school: AWL vs SWP

**London: Saturday 19 November, 14:00, Sebbon St Community Centre, Sebbon St, London N1**

**Sheffield: Saturday 3 December, 12:00, St Matthew's Hall, Carver St.**

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### Agenda:

Short plenary introduction

Small-group discussions one: Transitional programme vs fake ultra-leftism

Small-group discussions two: Marxism vs Apparatus Marxism

Small-group discussions three: Striving to be "the memory of the class" vs invention of tradition

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### Discussion points:

#### 1. Transitional programme vs fake ultra-leftism

A. Consider the following slogans advanced by the SWP.

- i. "TUC must call a General Strike!" (1992)
- ii. "March on Parliament!" (1994)
- iii. "Troops Out Now!" (yesterday Ireland, today Iraq)
- iv. "One solution, revolution!"

For each: What arguments can be given for them?

And against?

If they were bad slogans when they were used, when could they be good? E.g. when could it make sense - when has it made sense - to call for a General Strike?

B. All of them have the advantage that they appeal to a chosen target audience and yet are unrealisable, i.e. they serve to expose reformists, etc. Isn't that what transitional demands are?

C. How would you explain transitional demands (to someone new to Marxism, and in a couple of sentences)?

#### 2. Marxism vs Apparatus Marxism

A. "Marxism is not just an academic body of theory. It is an instrument for building a movement which can make a revolution, or it is nothing. Socialist ideas which are correct in isolation are not correct at all, since socialism has to be a movement of the immense majority, or nothing. The SWP's politics have enabled it to grow. It is probably the strongest revolutionary left organisation in the world today. That justifies the SWP. Socialist ideas which don't enable you to grow and build in the working class are simply irrelevant".

What's to be said for this view? And against?

B. In relatively recent times the SWP has done two big U-turns.

i. Before late 1987 it was opposed to “Third Worldism” and hostile to the idea in international politics that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” (thus, “Neither Washington nor Moscow!”) Now it is gung-ho for anyone militantly opposed to the USA (Taliban, Saddam Hussein, Iraqi “resistance”, etc.)

ii. Up to about the mid-1990s it was mostly ultra-militant in industrial politics (“all out, tomorrow, forever”), and very insistent about being “revolutionary” and focusing on “the militant minority”. In recent years it has shifted so that its website “About Us” presents it as following four maxims: Build the movement; Keep it broad; Keep it radical; Fight to win.

How could these turns be justified in terms of different circumstances requiring different policies?

How do “Apparatus Marxism” and genuine Marxism differ in their approach to how “different circumstances” can call for “different policies”?

### **3. Striving to be “the memory of the class” vs the invention of tradition**

A. “You sectarians are always squabbling about old historical questions. But young working-class people don’t care about Stalinism, and even less about what Tony Cliff said in 1971. They want to know what you’ve got to offer now.” Comment?

B. “Our major theoretical contributions and distinctive political positions — the state capitalist analysis of Stalinist states, the theory of deflected permanent revolution in the Third World, the analysis of the arms economy boom and the new economic crisis, the critique of the trade union bureaucracy — have two things in common: they have been developed as responses to real problems faced by the workers’ movement in the struggle to change the world, and they have taken as their starting point and emphasise as their conclusion the fundamental principle of Marxism — the self-emancipation of the working class” (John Molyneux of the SWP: “What is the real Marxist tradition?”) Anything wrong with this summary? Anything “Apparatus Marxist” about it?

C. Someone keen but new to politics, who can see that there are lots of different groupings calling themselves Marxist and Trotskyist, asks you: what sort of Trotskyist are you? How can you reply in three sentences? (Short sentences!)

# **AWL vs SWP**

**1. Transitional programme  
vs fake ultra-leftism**

**2. Marxism vs Apparatus  
Marxism**

**3. Striving to be “the  
memory of the class” vs  
invention of tradition**

# 1. Transitional programme vs fake ultra-leftism

## Socialism after Stalinism

From the Introduction by Sean Matgamna to 'How Solidarity Can Change the World', 1998

*"Can the (socialists) be against reform? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the [socialists] the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal - the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. Between social reform and revolution there is then for the [socialists] an indissoluble tie."*

Rosa Luxemburg

*"It is necessary to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all our strength in order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link."*

V I Lenin

As we rush towards the 21st century the state of the world testifies to the truth that working-class socialism is not only a good idea, but a stark necessity for humankind. Capitalism is still a system of waste, irrationality and savage inhumanity. Wage slavery and exploitation are at the heart and root of capitalism. Every year tens of millions of "Third World" children die needlessly and horribly under this system ruled by bankers, factory owners and self-righteous media magnates. In some Latin American cities unemployment is 40%, in Europe now over 15 million are unemployed. Socialism is necessary.

Yet the credibility of socialism is buried under the debris of Stalinism, that savage and malign pseudo-socialism. That Stalinism was the "socialism that failed" is now the conventional wisdom. The ideas of socialism are everywhere under attack. They are at the nadir of influence and prestige. Socialism is reduced to a vague word. Most people haven't a clue what real socialism is about or what it would look like.

The reformist counterfeit of socialism is in a state of collapse scarcely less complete than that of Stalinist socialism. In Britain, the best fruits of reform socialism, the Health Service and the Welfare State, are in ruins. In many countries, working-class organisations now have less weight and are less self-confident than they were in the decades when they forced welfare and other reforms on the bourgeoisie. In Britain, the labour movement - without which socialism can never be more than "good ideas" - bears the scars and mutilations of two decades of defeat, and of structural changes in industry forced through on the bosses' terms.

The labour movement has been curbed and is half-stifled. The trade unions are tied up by what New Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair himself has called, "the most restrictive laws in the western world." Everything that makes for effective trade unionism is illegal in Britain - solidarity strikes, for example - actions, to take one of the finest examples of what the Tories outlawed, like the miners' strikes to back the demands of hospital workers. Wide swathes of British industry are no longer unionised. The Labour Party, organised by the trade unions a hundred years ago so that there could be an independent working-class force to fight and bargain in Parliament on our behalf, is in the process of being hijacked by cliques of lawyers, journalists, and practising capitalists, whose political outlook is closer to Thatcherism and Reaganism than to socialism - or even the drive for reform characteristic of the old Labour Party in its best days. The organised working class is being driven out of politics.

Socialists and labour movement activists are thus faced with a series of battles to remake and rebuild the labour movement and to win back the freedom for trade union action destroyed by the Thatcherites and still banned under New Labour. The unorganised must be organised into trade unions. Class must be restored to its proper place as the measure for the labour movement of everything in political and public life. The possibility of a workers' government, a government that will minimally do for the working class and its movement what the Tories in power do for the bourgeoisie, must be restored. These problems should not dishearten but energise those who understand the reason why the working class has to fight once again basic battles that were won by our parents and their parents - and then lost. It is in the nature of capitalism.

History tells us that the working class and its movement are repeatedly made, re-made, and made over again by the never-ending changes in capitalist production and technology and by the outcome of the struggles between labour and capital. The working class pays dearly for missed chances and defeats. The working-class movement is forced again and again to resurrect, remake and redefine itself. To keep their bearings, its militants are forced to probe the past for lessons, parallels, examples and precedents. The socialists are the memory of the class, the curators of its historical experiences, and the harbingers of revival.

Tremendous transformations in the consciousness and organisation of the working class can happen quickly - so quickly that they seem miraculous to those who do not comprehend why they happen. The everyday consciousness of the workers under capitalism does not correspond to their objective needs. When an event - a strike for example - makes that clear to many workers, they can be catapulted forward. In 1968 in France 9 million workers who had seemed dormant and politically depressed suddenly seized the factories. Another example: the events that launched the modern labour movement at the end of the last century. The docks had armies of casual workers employed on a short-time basis as ships came and went. They were typically brutalised and degraded men who drifted down from better work into docking. Docker competed with docker, sometimes in physical fights, to gain a few hours' work. No group of workers was more distant from the ideal and practice of working-class solidarity.

Then they were influenced by the agitation of Marxian socialists like Tom Mann, John Burns, Eleanor Marx, Harry Quelch and others, who were not themselves dockers. They struck for a wage rise and suddenly organised themselves into a trade union. Over time, these dockers, who had seemed to be the most degraded and unorganisable of workers, created a splendid working-class culture of solidarity, animated by the idea that a blow against one is a blow against all. They lived in their workaday lives by an ethic - solidarity - at stark odds with the dog-eat-dog principle of capitalism, an ethic which, generalised to society as a whole, is the seed of a higher and better civilisation. Their solidarity was legendary in the labour movement. Miracles happen!

In that case the work of socialist agitators, propagandists and organisers made it happen. Things like that can be made to happen again. There are vast stifled reserves of anger, resentment and energy in the British working class. The trade unions are still potentially a tremendous power. The possibilities for reviving genuine socialism are greater and more favourable than at any time since the rise, three quarters of a century ago, of Stalinism, which Leon Trotsky rightly called the leprosy of the labour movement. The collapse of Stalinism has opened the road for a mass rebirth of genuine socialism.

How quickly the labour movement unshackles and rebuilds itself, and once more goes on the offensive; how soon socialism is again erected into a force to challenge the domination over us of the rich and their political agents - that, to an appreciable degree, depends on the socialists. What can we do? What approaches are suggested to us by the long history of the international labour movement? How can the elemental working-class struggle for palliatives, amelioration and reform be tied to the fight for socialist consciousness and for socialism? That is the subject of this collection of texts.

## **How “reform” struggles can revolutionise the labour movement**

Nothing is more obvious than that the duty of socialists - those who are worth anything - now is to go to the working class and into the working-class movement to help organise, reorganise and regenerate it, and to plant the seeds of unfalsified socialism once more, especially amongst the youth. Yet this work is scarcely being done.

The space that should be occupied by serious Marxist socialists doing this work is filled instead by a raucous tribe of middle-class sects impotently shouting about “revolution” and conducting catchpenny pseudo-campaigns of agitation on issues calculated to “fit the mood”, advertise militancy, and attract recruits. A socialism that immerses itself in the working class and in working-class immediate concerns and, while advocating revolutionary socialist politics and perspectives, avoids becoming a toy-town “Bolshevik” sect - that today is the property of only a minority of the socialists.

Because that is so, objective possibilities for socialist renewal are being let go by unfructified. Great chances are being missed. A vastly destructive polarisation exists between the concerns of reform socialists and labour movement activists on one side and would-be revolutionary socialists on the other. The polarisation is, psychologically, a natural tendency. If it had not been overcome in the past, then the mass socialist labour movements would never have been built. How can we bridge the gap now? The burning question of the welfare state illustrates our point.

There is mass hostility to what the Tories have done and New Labour now do to the NHS, and to the Welfare State in general. They are 'reforming' it out of existence. New Labour no longer believes in the underlying principle of the Health Service Labour established in the 1940s: universal state-of-the-art health care, free at the point of delivery. They accept and apply the monstrous Tory argument that Britain cannot afford the best health care for the sick poor - that on this most fundamental question, an equal right to life, people are not equal, that the right to adequate health care exists for those in need of it only if they can pay for it. Labour's leaders have set their faces against restoring the Health Service to the principle Nye Bevan proclaimed at its inception: comprehensive state-of-the-art health care, free at the point of delivery, as a basic right of equal citizenship. Under democracy all are equal, but in the chances of life the rich are very much more equal!

The leaders of New Labour thus betray the best traditions of their own reform-socialist current of labour movement opinion. The reformist leaders of the 1940s would have responded to the ideas which the Tories proclaimed and acted upon, and Tory Blair and Frank Field dogmatically embrace, as people stung to action in defence of their most cherished and most basic beliefs - the belief in human equality, in human solidarity and in social justice. But they were convinced reformists. New Labour's leaders are not for reform in the interests of the working class and the mass of the people: they accept the gruesomely Tory elitist argument that "we" cannot afford proper health care for the poor.

Ideas are central here. You cannot fight the Tories or New Labour if you accept their basic premises and do not know how to refute their ideas, if you believe that the commercial imperatives and ethics of capitalism and not the needs of the working class are the highest court of appeal. Without the acceptance by the Labour leaders of the basic premise of what the Tories did - that "we" cannot afford the Health Service or a proper Welfare State - the labour movement's fight against the Tories in the 1980s and '90s would have been fuelled by righteous, invigorating anger and determination, and propelled forward by the determination of millions of people. If only some of the union leaders, for example, had refused to accept the Tory line, the fight against the New Labour Government would be more advanced than it is.

The opposition to the Tories was ineffective - and the opposition to New Labour may, if we do not change things, also be ineffective - because the natural spinal column around which resistance could organise, a labour movement confidently in possession of a vigorous culture and a solid philosophy of its own, did not exist. That takes us to the heart of our subject: how can the day-to-day concerns of the working class, and struggles for palliatives and reforms, be linked to the fight for a fundamental change, that is, for socialism?

The demand for "state-of-the-art health care, free at the point of delivery" is, in the prevailing circumstances, the demand for the establishment of values, priorities, and recognised working-class rights that are starkly at odds with the values, priorities and interests of those who control the wealth in our society and the politicians who serve them - the Thatchers, Blairs and the renegade one-time leftists like Blunkett and Beckett and Cook. It is implicitly to demand the re-allocation of social resources and the reorganisation of society so that we can establish equality in the right to life. It is a clear assertion, in terms of the felt needs of millions of people, of human solidarity, counterposed to the exploitative and cannibalistic, that is, capitalistic, practices dominant in our society and glorified in its governing ideas as expressed by politicians, newspapers and television. It demands and can mobilise people to fight for, the reorganisation of our society.

The idea of free state-of-the-art health care for all proposes a struggle for immediate felt needs which can in principle be achieved even under capitalism, if enough people organise and mobilise, lobby and act - by strikes, occupations of public buildings, and other forms of direct action. At the same time, even though it can be won under capitalism, it challenges the fundamentals of the capitalist system - its ideas, values, priorities, and distribution of resources. People drawn into action around the one demand will, especially if socialists explain it to them, begin to make the connection between this question and the way society is organised. They will think about society and their place in it. We "can't afford" modern health care for all? Then tax the rich! Reallocate resources! Remake society! Put human needs first.

If workers organise, mobilise and agitate even on this one issue, then other "adjacent" social issues will also be brought to the fore - for example, the right of trade unionists to take industrial action for the Health Service.

Action and success generates confidence and combativity that brings things near which, a short time ago, were far off and seemingly impossible. A big energising mass campaign on the Health Service - a campaign of the scale and scope of the old Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and that is surely possible, given the mass feeling that exists - would help prepare and generate mass working-class action for free trade unions and many other things.

Free state-of-the-art health care is therefore an explosive demand. It is no wonder the time-serving trade union leaders and the neo-Thatcherite Labour politicians have no time for it. It is what Marxists have called a "transitional demand". Such transitional demands, of which there are many - and which can be joined into a linked chain from here to the socialist transformation of society - form the bridge between reform and revolutionary socialist politics.

Such demands help call into existence the living bridge between reform and socialist politics. The working class mobilises, organises, develops combativity and confidence, learning in action and struggle. The socialists who do not engage with the concerns of the real working class, and content themselves with shouting socialist abstractions and calls for revolution are sterile; so are the socialists who bury themselves in labour movement routines or the fight for one particular reform. The "to be or not to be" question for socialism is to link immediate battles and the goal of transforming capitalist society through revolution. If we do not do that, we will miss the tremendous opportunities opened by the collapse of Stalinism and, in Britain, by the election of a neo-Thatcherite Labour Government whose conflicts with the basic labour movement will help forward the necessary recomposition of working-class politics.

## **From Karl Marx to Rosa Luxemburg**

The first programme of "transitional demands" was in the 1848 Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels, in the form of a ten-point programme on which to mobilise a mass movement and, once the workers had won power, to begin the transformation from capitalism to socialism. Principles of Communism, by Engels, included in this book, was a first draft for the Manifesto, and sums up the basic ideas of communism in question-and-answer form. The Communist League, for which Marx and Engels wrote the Manifesto, collapsed after the defeat of the revolutions of 1848. When mass workers' socialist parties emerged, from the 1880s, they divided their programme into two parts: a minimum programme and a maximum programme. The classic programme of this type was the German socialists' Erfurt Programme of 1891. The excerpt we include in this book from German Marxist Karl Kautsky's commentary on that programme communicates both some of the strengths of the socialist movement of that time - which laid foundations which all subsequent Marxists and socialists have built on - and its weaknesses.

The maximum programme was the great socialist goal in the far distance, the abolition of wage-slavery and the elimination of all exploitation. It was the intellectual property of an elite within the loose workers' parties of the time, known as "social democracy" and organised together in the "Socialist International", also called the "Second International". The minimum programme consisted of more immediate, limited, practical goals such as wage demands, the right to free trade unions, the right to vote, the building up of trade unions.

What was the link between the two? The party and the trade unions would be built in the struggles for minimum demands and through propaganda. As time went on, the party would grow stronger and capitalism would move nearer to its pre-ordained economic downfall. At the culminating point, the party would be strong enough to take the helm when capitalist disintegration threw affairs into its hands. Then the "maximum programme" would come into its own.

In the vision of the Marxists before 1914, progressive capitalism was advancing organically; so was the labour movement. One key measure of capitalist progress was that it made possible a labour movement: that capitalism bred and in day to day struggles trained its own gravedigger. The right-wing social democrats saw this process continuing indefinitely - the labour movement would win reform after reform, and thus over a long time transform society bit by bit. "The movement is everything, the goal nothing," said their theoretician, Eduard Bernstein. Kautsky and the mainstream left believed evolution involved qualitative breaks and leaps, and that the evolutionary process would have to culminate in a revolutionary proletarian seizure of power.

Both failed to link the daily class struggle with the goal of socialism. Control of the movement was left in the hands of those whose practice corresponded accurately to the separation between the minimum and the maximum programme. In practice the ultimate goal of socialism was no real part of what they did. They were reformists, and socialism was a matter of festival speeches and spiritual uplift. In turn, this overweening reality of the labour movement increasingly led the "orthodox" left to turn their Marxism into dry formulas. Kautsky

and the ‘orthodox’ left won verbal victories in debate, but in practice what the labour movement did was shaped by the right wing. The left accepted the cautious tactics of the right ‘for now’, promising that they would be revolutionary in the more favourable future circumstances sure to be brought along by social evolution. World War One shattered this movement. The reformist practice tied the socialist parties to their own bourgeoisies. The International collapsed.

Both wings of mainstream social democracy failed to see in the creative self-controlling activity of the working class the central force for socialism. Left and right had in common a bureaucratic, elitist conception of socialism. Their operational image of the relationship of the revolutionary party to the revolutionary class tended towards one of pedagogic teacher to passive pupil, or self-substituting bureaucratic instrument to inert mass.

The Marxists reorganised themselves during and immediately after World War 1. They resolved to have done with the minimum/maximum division. Aiming to mobilise the working class to fight immediately for socialism, they reverted to the model of Marx and Engels in 1848. They re-elaborated the conception of a transitional programme and the practice of linking the everyday struggles of the working class with a socialist challenge to the dominant capitalist ideas and prerogatives and with the goal of socialist revolution. They tried to focus every struggle so as to rouse workers and direct their struggles, even if in only a limited way, against the pillars of capitalist society. The great Polish socialist Rosa Luxemburg wrote the Spartacus Programme for the founding of the German Communist Party in 1918. It is the classic text of this Marxist renaissance.

The Communist Parties, founded from the revolutionaries of the old socialist parties and newly roused workers after the Russian Revolution of 1917, attempted to bring socialist propaganda down from the cloudy skies and harness it to the hard daily grind of working-class efforts at self-defence and self-betterment. The full socialist programme was broken down into a linked chain, each link of which might successfully be grasped, and the movement hauled forward, dependent on the degree of mobilisation, intensity of struggles, and relationship of forces.

Everyday demands, as on wages, were expressed not as of old within the framework of acceptance of a capitalism that the socialists believed to be maturing towards some optimum time of ripeness, when it would fall. They were expressed against capitalism, so as to challenge capitalist prerogatives on a day-to-day basis.

Central to the new Marxism was: mobilisation and involvement of the broadest layers of the working class in immediate conflict with capitalism; a break with elitism, propagandism, and waiting upon an evolution driven by abstract, mechanical forces of History; the integration of the various fronts of the class struggle, ideological, political, economic, into one strategic drive.

## **Luxemburg and Trotsky**

Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartacus Programme was written in the perspective of almost-immediate revolution. Germany’s Emperor had just been overthrown, workers’ councils had sprung up in all the major cities, the government was in the hands of a ‘Council of People’s Commissars’ led by politicians who called themselves social-democrats but were secretly working with the army’s high command to stifle the workers’ movement. But Rosa Luxemburg here outlines a whole approach to politics, valuable even when the immediate conditions are nowhere near revolutionary.

In 1918, at the same time that she advocated an end to the old ‘social-democratic’ step-by-step policy, Luxemburg told the impatient young activists of the new Communist Party that revolutionary victory would become possible only after patient, persistent work to win the majority in the workers’ councils and to give reliable leadership in strikes on the most modest issues. She argued with them that they should not boycott the elections for the National Assembly being called by the Social Democrats, but use them as a platform for revolutionary explanation.

The Communist International began to discuss transitional demands systematically in 1921, at about the same time as it accepted that capitalism had survived the post-World War 1 earthquake and reached temporary stabilisation. Fighting against those many within its own ranks who reduced tactics to a permanent revolutionary ‘offensive’, the International declared: ‘The alternative offered by the Communist International in place of the minimum programme of the reformists and centrists is: the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for demands which in their application undermine the power of the bourgeoisies, which organise the proletariat, and which form the transition to the proletarian dictatorship, even if certain groups of the masses have not yet grasped the meaning of such proletarian dictatorship’ (3rd Congress of the Communist International, 1921).



Dictatorship meant the dictatorship over the old ruling classes by the working-class organised in democratic soviets.

By 1938 Leon Trotsky was the only leader from the great days of the Communist International who remained at his post, neither struck down by capitalist or Stalinist repression, nor corrupted by the slave-driving bureaucratic class which had seized power from the workers in the USSR. He restated the idea of transitional demands, in a pamphlet, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (known usually as the *Transitional Programme*), which is also included in this book.

The *Transitional Programme* covers a range of slogans up to the most directly revolutionary, and it was written with the hope that the then-coming World War would within a few years produce revolutionary working class explosions. But the programme was designed not for the Trotskyists to keep it in a cupboard and bring it out at the time of the revolutionary explosion, but for use there and then.

The *Transitional Programme* was written, in 1938, at a time when authentic revolutionary socialism was not only terribly isolated but eclipsed by the ascendancy of Stalinism. The most militant and would-be revolutionary workers followed and were controlled by the Communist Parties, which in turn were controlled by the Russian bureaucratic ruling class and its agents. The Central Committees of all the Communist Parties included representatives of the Russian secret political police, the GPU. Since 1934, the Communist Parties had swung their members solidly behind ‘Popular Front’ politics - coalitions of working class organisations with outright bourgeois parties, supposedly against fascism. Fascism had triumphed in Germany and Austria and was about to triumph in the Spanish Civil War. The Stalinist police had already crushed working-class revolution in the Republican areas, in Barcelona in May 1937. The revolutionary impulse from the French general strike of 1936 and the CIO trade union movement in the USA had petered out.

In the USA - the country Trotsky had most in mind when writing the *Transitional Programme* - the situation was summed up thus: ‘The workers seem absolutely apathetic about a labour party [there was discussion at the time about the US trade unions forming a labour party in opposition to the Republicans and Democrats]; their leaders are doing nothing, and the Stalinists are for [president] Roosevelt’. To that comment, from an American comrade, Trotsky replied: ‘But this is characteristic of a certain period when there is no programme, when they don’t see the new road. It is absolutely necessary to overcome this apathy. It is absolutely necessary to give a new slogan’.

In the *Transitional Programme* itself, he wrote: ‘Even among the workers who had at one time risen to the first ranks... There are not a few tired and disillusioned ones. They will remain, at least for the next period, as bystanders. When a programme or an organisation wears out, the generation which carried it on its shoulders wears out with it... Only the fresh enthusiasm and aggressive spirit of the youth can guarantee the preliminary successes in the struggle; only these successes can return the best elements of the older generation to the road of revolution.’

We are now again in a period when ‘a programme or an organisation wears out, [and] the generation which carried it on its shoulders wears out with it.’ The collapse of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, coupled with the recent defeats of the working class in the West, has ‘worn out’ the Stalinist or Stalinist-influenced mainstream left wing of the West European labour movements. Yet the ‘apathy’ and disorientation comes together with a reassertion of the most nakedly brutal exploitative and oppressive capitalism, a sharpening of the objective conflict of interest between bosses and workers, and deep-seated mass disgust at the established capitalist regimes. The working-class movement needs now, as then, to be reorganised and rallied on a new basis. In Britain the labour movement needs to recompose itself in conflict with the neo-Thatcherite ‘New Labour’ Government. The *Transitional Programme* was intended to be a tool for such work.

Trotsky argued that in America the revolutionaries should initially concentrate the attention of the workers on ‘one point’ - ‘the sliding scale of wages and hours’, or automatic inflation-protection for wages and creation of jobs through cutting work hours.

‘We can present [a slogan] which is honest, part of our entire programme, not demagogic, but which corresponds totally to the situation.... We ask that Mr Roosevelt [the president]... propose such a programme of public works that everyone capable of working can work at decent wages. This is possible with a sliding scale of wages and hours. What is this slogan? In reality it is the system of work in socialist society - the total number of workers divided into the total number of hours. But if we present the whole socialist system it will appear to the average American as utopian, as something from Europe. We present it as a solution to this crisis which must

assure their right to eat, drink, and live in decent apartments. It is the programme of socialism, but in a very popular and simple form”.

As we noted above, agitation now to tax the rich to rebuild the welfare state is a close parallel to agitation then for the “sliding scale of wages and hours”. In capitalist prosperity, inflation-protection for wages or full employment on the basis of a decreasing work-week may be possible as harmless reforms. In 1938 they were revolutionary proposals. Today, a fight for the welfare state is a challenge to capitalism and to all the parties which defend capitalism.

The call to rebuild the welfare state now, like the “sliding scale of wages and hours” then, connects with a series of other slogans, from the more petty, detailed and local to the more advanced and revolutionary. It points the way to uniting the working class in a fight for control over social wealth and the organisation of the economy. It goes hand-in-hand with a fight to “re-found” the labour movement, to reclaim the right of political representation of labour which the Blairites seek to abolish, and for a workers’ government - just as in 1938 in the USA the agitation for a “sliding scale of wages and hours” went hand-in-hand with a fight for the trade unions to form their own labour party.

The essence of transitional demands is not - as both hostile and friendly caricature have it - that they cannot be realised under capitalism. As Trotsky put it, “realisability” or “unrealisability” is in the last instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle.

Each demand or proposition in the programme gains its value from its relation to the whole and to the all-round activity of the working class and the Marxist organisation. If demands from a transitional programme are conceded without the bourgeoisie being overthrown, they will either be taken back by the bourgeoisie once the moment of danger is passed, or they will be robbed of their revolutionary content and neutralised within the structure of capitalist society.

Even workers’ councils (soviets) can be neutralised this way. After the failure of the working class to seize power in the German Revolution of 1918-9, the councils (organs of workers’ struggle and self rule based on factories and working-class neighbourhoods and set up during the first throes of the battle) were given a legal position as organs of “co-determination” within the framework of normal factory life. They were thus gutted, minimalised and later abolished.

The concept of transitional demands was closely and logically linked with that of the united front of working-class organisations. In the fight for partial demands, Marxists struggle for the involvement in united action of the broadest sections of the labour movement, including the reformist and bureaucratic leaderships. Broader and more extensive mobilisation both corresponds to the immediate need for maximum strength in the struggle, and opens the way for the growth of more radical demands and mobilisations, and thus for the verification, fructification, and development by workers, through their own experience, of the ideas of the Marxist programme. Essential to the concept of transitional demands and of the united front is an orientation to the logic of class struggle and the potentialities of mass direct action. It is the opposite of all conceptions which offer the working class no role other than to join the organisation which will in its own good time see to their liberation.

In history the idea of transitional demands summed up a break with bureaucratic conceptions of socialism, whether those of the pre-1914 socialist mainstream, with their idea of cautious step-by-step evolution towards the final goal, or those of the sects, with their declamatory irresponsibility towards the inner processes of the labour movement. That is what it means for us.

## **Transitional demands and “maximalism” today**

There will be no revolution without the organised working class. Very few workers can be won to abstract calls for ‘revolution.’ Those young workers won by such calls, or by one-off shows of militant activism, will grow rapidly disillusioned unless they are set to systematic activity in the working-class movement to revive it for socialism.

The struggle for reforms and transitional demands is now the indicated way the British working class - but not only the British - and the labour movement can revive: it is the tool socialists have for use in the work of reviving it.

Reforms - restoring the Health Service, repealing the anti-union laws, for example - are not enough? No, but the focus on reforms does not, in logic or in reality, set prior limits to the march of the workers who fight for them. It

does not rule out rapid and even explosive advances in that combativity which in turn can lead to the development of mass militant action and the development of revolutionary consciousness.

Far from ruling it out, it can help it to develop. In terms of things the revolutionaries can do at will, building movements to fight for reforms - like proper health care - is the right and necessary thing to do for socialism now.

Workers who began to fight for their own and their neighbours' and workmates' felt needs can be drawn into escalating battle, to mass demonstrations, to occupying hospitals, or to (illegal) protest strikes. In the course of such a struggle they will have to think about all sorts of related issues - the nature of society, of bourgeois politics, of Labour leaders who won't fight for their members' interests, of a Labour Government that is shamelessly a bosses' government, of the social, philosophical and political implications of such a seemingly modest and limited reform demand as "state-of-the-art, universal, free health care for everyone."

To convince workers and the labour movement to fight for this single demand is to convince them to embrace the rudiments, or at least one potent and fecund element, of the socialist or worker-solidarist outlook on the world - what Marx, speaking of laws to limit exploitation, called "the political economy of the working class". They will learn as the fight develops - helped by the propaganda and all-round explanations of the socialists - and be recruited, at first, in ones or small groups, to the ranks of organised socialists.

At issue here are questions Marxists first confronted nearly a century and a half ago: what is "revolutionary" and who are the revolutionaries? It isn't enough to shout for "revolution"; just wanting "a revolution" does not make you effectually a revolutionary in relation to the world around you. In history, the Marxists have more than once had to insist, against anarchists and sectarian socialist shouters for "revolution now", on the need to step back from talk about the "ultimate goal" so as to prepare for it in the only way it can consciously be prepared - by convincing workers to organise and struggle for their own interests on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis, and in the course of this helping them to realise the need for socialist goals.

A little after the Communist Manifesto was written, Marx and Engels were the minority in a bitter struggle within the Communist League against people who said it was either "revolution now", or all would be lost. Marx told them, with not a little scorn, that these revolutionaries themselves needed 10 or 20 years to make them fit for revolution. Revolutions are not made by raw rage, or pure willpower, but only by a complex process of working-class self-organisation and self-development. The process includes sudden leaps forward as well as periods of slow, patient, grinding work - but it cannot be skipped over.

So also the experience of the Russian Marxists. Against the vaguely defined but very "revolutionary" terrorist populists - most of whom said that they were socialists - the Marxists were the "right" wing insisting on patient, unspectacular work to prepare the working class. It was not, as Trotsky later put it, those who started with bombs, but those who started with the weighty books of Marx and Plekhanov, who buried Tsarism.

## **Socialism and democracy**

The Health Service; welfare; jobs; trade union rights; restoration against the Blairites of the political representation of labour; a workers' government - all these issues call for activity by Marxists to help the working-class movement revive and reorientate, using the method of transitional demands. So does the issue of democracy. For decades Stalinism drummed into the heads of revolutionary-minded workers the idea that a serious concern for democracy was the mark of the middle class and the "rotten liberal" reformist. Democracy came to be only an empty word, to be used as and when convenient to adorn tyrannies like the so-called "people's democracies" of Eastern Europe. Even before Stalinism, the Russian revolutionaries and their comrades in the West had suffered slippage on the question, because they tended to make virtue out of the cruel exigencies of the terrible civil war that followed the 1917 revolution.

That corruption of working-class thought has made easier the operation whereby politicians like Tony Blair have transformed official democracy - institutions and rights which generations of working-class activists, from the Chartists of 1838-50s and even earlier, fought to establish against entrenched privilege and hierarchy - into little more than a branch of advertising and show business. We live in an era of the immense bureaucratisation of politics and of the growth of the power of the unelected civil service. Yet democracy is basic to working-class needs. The working class can only own the means of production collectively, that is, democratically; the working class can liberate itself through democracy or not at all. Socialism is democratic self-rule or it is not socialism. We must reorient the labour movement to the cause of winning genuine democracy as the labour movement pioneers understood it and fought for it.

Trotsky outlined an approach to this question in the Action Programme for France, a sort of first draft of the Transitional Programme written in 1934. France was then a parliamentary democracy threatened by a powerful fascist movement. Parliamentary leaders sought special (“Bonapartist”) powers in the name of defending the status quo against both the fascists and the revolutionary-minded workers. Trotsky wrote:

“As long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie. However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to ‘democratic’ socialism that they be faithful to their ideas, that they draw inspiration from the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic [the regime from 1870 to World War 2] but of the Convention of 1793 [the high point of the great bourgeois French Revolution]. Down with the Senate [the upper house of parliament], which is elected by limited suffrage, and which renders the power of universal suffrage a mere illusion! Down with the presidency of the republic, which serves as a hidden point of concentration for the forces of militarism and reaction! A single assembly must combine the legislative and executive powers. Members would be elected for two years, by universal suffrage at eighteen years of age, with no discrimination of sex or nationality. Deputies would be elected on the basis of local assemblies, constantly revocable by their constituents, and would receive the salary of a skilled worker. This is the only measure that would lead the masses forward instead of pushing them backward. A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers’ power. We want to attain our objective not by armed conflicts between the various groups of toilers, but by real workers’ democracy, by propaganda and loyal criticism, by the voluntary regrouping of the great majority of the proletariat under the flag of true communism.”

From historical experience, we believe that workers’ councils - created outside the bureaucratic framework of the existing state, free of official privilege, flexible, responsive, kept accountable by the right to recall representatives at any time - are the proper democratic form of workers’ rule. To try to establish socialism through parliamentary action alone leads to disasters like the massacre of the labour movement in Chile in 1973, when the army overthrew a parliamentary reform government which had told its socialist and communist worker supporters to subordinate their struggles to parliamentary schedules and to a tempo acceptable to the military elite. That same military elite would strike the labour movement down.

Is this Marxist view counterposed to the basic labour movement commitment to parliamentary democracy? Not at all. Socialism is not possible until the mass of workers want it and are prepared to realise it - neither is an extension of democracy beyond the level already attained. It is in the direct interests of the working class to defend the existing system against anti-democratic attacks. It is in our interest to extend it and better it. Marxists have much in common with people in the labour movement whose best notion of democracy is parliamentary democracy. We can agree to fight to rejuvenate the existing system; we could agree to defend it with guns against any threat from fascists or from Armed Forces officers of the type who in 1974 discussed a military coup in Britain (the then Chief of Staff, Michael Carver, admitted it publicly much later). Marxists can and do form such alliances with honest ‘hon-soviet’ democrats. The reason why we cannot and do not ally right now, to extend democracy, with New Labour and the soft left, is not because we are not democrats, but because they are very bad democrats. They worship the miserably inadequate system that exists, whereas we favour greater democracy.

They have, in successive Labour governments, and especially recently, done more than anyone else to discredit parliamentary democracy and render cynical large sections of the labour movement - to move back in the direction of the USA, where a majority of the electorate don’t even bother to vote. This cynicism has corroded not only democracy but the political consciousness of the labour movement. Marxists, while we tell the workers who listen to us that they should rely only on their own strength, see no advantage or gain in cynicism about politics, or even about the existing parliament. While small groups can advance to a higher understanding by way of such disillusionment, the great mass of the labour movement is thrown back by it. The mass of the labour movement will advance to a better understanding of the limits of parliamentary democracy, not by pure disgust with the Labour right - that is a passive, powerless response - but most likely by class struggle which includes attempts to use to the very maximum the existing institutions of the labour movement and of British bourgeois democracy.

## **The “Transitional Programme” and its misuse**

“The significance of the programme is the significance of the party”, said Trotsky, discussing the Transitional Programme of 1938. A Marxist programme of action is not a blueprint. We need written summaries and codifications of experience, of course, but also more - a living and fluid inter-relation of those summaries with conjunctural analyses and concrete responses on the part of a revolutionary organisation whose members educate themselves to know the background and meaning of slogans like, say, ‘workers’ government’ and to be able to

work out what to say - and when, and how - according to the needs of the class struggle. The programme is a living thing, not just a document. It can only live and develop in and through the practice of the revolutionary organisation.

Alfred Rosmer, in his book *Lenin's Moscow*, reports the comment of one Marxist when Lenin's pamphlet *Left Wing Communism* appeared in 1920 - "It is a dangerous book", meaning that people would take from it only recipes and license for artful dodges and "flexibility" of a type altogether different from that which Lenin was trying to teach the ultra-lefts. Through the decades of Stalinist misuse of that pamphlet as a cover for their shameful tactics he would, of course, be proved right.

Leon Trotsky's *Transitional Programme* is also a "dangerous book". When he wrote it in 1938, Trotsky proceeded by assuming a large background of socialist culture inside the revolutionary groups for whom he wrote and among left-wing workers around them. In 1938 the great debates of the early Communist International were still living and recent memory (16 to 18 years back) for many of the activists. In the pamphlet, on the workers' government slogan for example, Trotsky could limit himself to a very telegraphic summary of the ideas of the Communist International, adding only a brief warning about the mis-use of the slogan by the Stalinists.

For decades, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the *Transitional Programme* was used as a political recipe book - as the political recipe book - by neo-Trotskyist groups who had no living memory of the revolutionary Marxist culture in which the Programme was embedded, and often did not even have access to the major texts of that culture. Many of the slogans in the *Transitional Programme* were put about in bowdlerised form - "workers' control" to mean blueprint-mongering for trade-union influence on management, "nationalisation of the monopolies" as if its enactment by parliament would amount to full socialism, "workers' government" in the flaccid illusion-spreading and essentially ridiculous form of "Labour to power with socialist policies!".

In the Middle Ages physicians worked from anatomical textbooks by Galen, which they inherited from the ancient world. In a period when it was deemed degrading for such people to do manual work, the doctor would sit in the operating room on a high stool, with Galen's book open, giving directions to minions and apprentices who actually carried out the operations. Eventually the textbook was discovered to deal not with the anatomy of men and women, but of monkeys! Much of the use of the *Transitional Programme* by the "orthodox" neo-Trotskyist sects was painfully close to that! Many, or most, of the demands were made into fetish-objects, outside of and above rational judgment and critical and concrete assessment. This made it impossible to use them as Trotsky intended them to be used. Neo-Trotskyists would pride themselves on 'not having departed from the *Transitional Programme*'. The appropriate response was that made by Trotsky in 1930 to some Italian comrades, followers of the jailed communist leader Amadeo Bordiga, who remonstrated with him that they had 'not departed from' their programme of 1925, which in 1925 Trotsky had approved. He said that the purpose of a programme is not 'not to be departed from', but to be "applied and developed".

The debauch of the fetishists and the vandals inevitably generated reaction. The tone today is set by the SWP, who long ago rejected the idea of a systematic, connected political programme as a dogmatic relic of a bygone era. They are entirely confined to the minimum/maximum conception of a programme - minimum demands to "fit the mood", the maximum demand of "revolution" to enthuse the activists.

Hindsight makes it plain that the *Transitional Programme* was in error on some points. Capitalism had not, in 1938, reached a dead end. There were, in fact, ways out for the bourgeoisie. In World War 2 it bombed and bled its way out of the impasse. The "economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution" has been developed much further, and more widely across the world, since 1938. Trotsky was right to declare that the government of the USSR had been "transformed from a weapon of the working class into a weapon of bureaucratic violence against the working class," and that politically it differed from the pre-Holocaust Nazi regime only "in more unbridled savagery." He proposed a working-class programme against that tyranny to which nothing need be added. But he also sustained the false idea that the USSR was still a "degenerated workers' state" - with some considerable doubts, as the other writings of his last years make clear - by the false notion that the whole foul Stalinist system was on the brink of a collapse. The bureaucracy would disintegrate and working-class revolutionaries could utilise a united front with those bureaucrats tied to nationalised property in order to promote the overthrow of the whole bureaucracy and "the regeneration of Soviet democracy". He was wrong about that. The Stalinist system proved more solid, and capable of expanding enormously. Beginning in 1939 it erupted into an expanding bureaucratic imperialism that by 1945 had turned Eastern Europe and half of Germany into its protectorates and satellites. The "property wrenched away from the capitalists and transformed into state property" had long before 1938 been wrenched away from the workers and transformed into bureaucratic property, as the basis of a new exploiting class.

Trotsky, as it turned out, was also wrong to hope that there was enough common socialist culture in the labour movement of 1938 for the small revolutionary groups to hope to find ways radically and quickly to ‘switch the points’ for the ‘train’ of an already-existing revolutionary-minded workers’ movement. Perhaps Trotsky was ‘compelled’ to make this ‘error’ - or else abandon all short-term revolutionary perspectives in a situation where the labour movement faced dramatic short-term choices: mobilise for revolution or be crushed - as in fact, within two years of his writing, it was crushed right across Europe, except in Britain, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland. But the bureaucratic grip and ideological corruption of Stalinism in the labour movement was such that no quick ‘switching of the points’ was ever a realistic hope. Trotsky had underestimated the solidity of the USSR bureaucracy; he was also wrong to postulate ‘the definite passing over of [Stalin’s] Comintern to the side of the bourgeois order’.

Just before his death in August 1940, Trotsky would correct himself by writing that the ‘ideal’ of the Communist Party leaders was, ‘to attain in their own country the same position that the Kremlin oligarchy gained in the USSR. They are not the revolutionary leaders of the proletariat but aspirants to totalitarian rule.’ In the 1940s and after, Stalinist leaders in several Third World countries would fight to make reality those aspirations to totalitarian rule; they would indeed be revolutionary leaders, though not of the proletariat, whom they enslaved along with whole peoples. The consequent anti-bourgeois though reactionary vigour of Stalinism would maintain the mass influence of the Communist Parties for decades yet.

In the five years before writing the Transitional Programme, Trotsky had made several attempts at a broad regroupment of revolutionary forces in the working class. Because of the repeated defeats of the working class, those attempts failed. Trotsky was left, in the Transitional Programme, postulating a revolutionary recomposition of the workers’ movement without being able to point to any practical way that it could be achieved. In some passages of the Transitional Programme, therefore, the prospect of revolution appears in rather mystical form, almost as a sudden apocalyptic coming-together of elemental mass working-class rage and a revolutionary leadership prepared by pure willpower. As Trotsky put it in another article around the same time: ‘The harsh and tragic dialectic of our epoch is working in our favour. Brought to the extreme pitch of exasperation and indignation, the masses will find no other leadership than that offered to them by the Fourth International.’ This vision, abstracted, crudified and dogmatised, would contribute to much sectarian posturing in later years.

Despite all that, the Transitional Programme remains the most brilliant summary in the whole Marxist literature of the method of transitional demands and of the experience of socialist struggle on a vast range of issues - unemployment, trade unions, anti-fascist battles, war... Its current neglect by many revolutionary groups comes not from reasoned critiques, but from demoralisation and catchpenny opportunism. Its approach and many of its basic ideas are those we need today. ‘The Bolshevik-Leninist stands in the front-line trenches of all kinds of struggles, even when they involve only the most modest material interests or democratic rights of the working class. He takes active part in mass trade unions for the purpose of strengthening them and raising their spirit of militancy... To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one’s programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives - these are the rules of the Fourth International.’

# The SWP and its ‘March on Parliament’

By John O’Mahony. From *Socialist Organiser* 591, 3 March 1994

Between fifteen and twenty thousand students marched through London on 23 February in protest at the Government’s decision to cut student grants by one-third over the next three years. They were organised by the Student Activist Alliance, initiated by supporters of *Socialist Organiser*.

That march may prove to have been the beginning of a deep and powerful mobilisation of students for a serious fight to force the Government to retreat. It was an important event.

By contrast, the Socialist Workers’ Party’s [SWP’s] much-advertised student ‘March on Parliament’ on the same day – and, indeed, ‘on’ the same demonstration – was a silly fiasco, a real non-event. They got no nearer to ‘marching on parliament’ than making a feeble attempt to stop the march in Aldwych and pushing half-heartedly at the police lines there, over a mile away from Parliament.

The most malevolent critic of the organisation led by Tony Cliff could not have imagined or concocted the sequence of events which unfolded around the SWP’s ‘March on Parliament’ – not even as a piece of fiction designed as a parable about the faults of the SWP.

*For the left* – and on the blighted landscape of the left today, the SWP looms large: strange and weird, but comparatively very large – *for the left*, the SWP’s ‘March on Parliament’ was an important event, too.

This, as I understand it and as I witnessed some of it, is the story.

The Student Activist Alliance called the demonstration on 23 February, believing that it is now possible to mobilise tens, and ultimately maybe hundreds, of thousands of students against the Government. It was planned as an orderly march because it was intended that those attracted to the demonstration would be asked to go back to their colleges and agitate for larger-scale action against the Government – that is, to go back and agitate with presently right-wing and a-political students to get them to begin to act in their own interest against the Tory cuts.

Stunts like a major clash with the police would be counterproductive here.

Support built up for 23 February. Then the SWP decided to ‘intervene’. They started advertising it – as an SWP event! Then they called on the Student Activist Alliance to turn the demonstration into a ‘March on Parliament’. Whatever the SAA did, they announced, the SWP itself would make 23 February into a ‘March on Parliament’.

The right-wing Labour leaders of the National Union of Students eagerly picked up this notion. They urged people not to demonstrate on 23 February, because, they said, it was an SWP march, and they were concerned for students’ safety. Reports indicated that they had some success in this.

Not for the first time, there was a tacit alliance between the right wing Labour leadership of NUS and the SWP/Socialist Worker Student Society.

But the SWP seemed to know what they were doing. Large numbers of posters were put up on walls throughout the country announcing the ‘March on Parliament’ for 23 February.

SWP leaflets said that the demonstration, combined with student occupations, could ‘bring down the government’, and at the SWP’s national student event early in February there was – so I’m told – much excited talk about the ‘March on Parliament’ and how it could spark a student revolt as big as that of May 1968 in France. One SWP banner on the demonstration summed up this mood: ‘Paris, May 1968; London, February 1994’.

Thus, an organisation which claims 8000 members, at least 2000 students, seemed to be mobilising as seriously as it could to assemble the forces for a real attempt at marching on Parliament.

On the eve of 23 February, they held a SWSS stewards’ meeting to discuss tactics for compelling the demonstration to become a ‘March on Parliament’. They decided to sit in the road and provoke clashes with the police.

Of course, it was the sheerest nonsense. It is illegal to march within a mile of Parliament while it is sitting. All the formidable forces of the state would be deployed against any “March on Parliament”. Unless the police and the army were seething with rebellion and ready either to desert or to go over to the “marchers”, you would need a very good army to clear the road for a “March on Parliament”.

When a student demonstration announces that it would “March on Parliament” that is just a grandiloquent way of announcing that it will fight with the police in the streets, far away from Parliament.

A limited student campaign might reasonably decide on a publicity stunt involving clashes with the police. *Socialist Organiser* supporters have done such things, in the “Arts Attack” protests, for example. To do it on 23 February was to go in for a bit of street theatre instead of working to mobilise a mass campaign against the Tories. Unknown thousands who can be mobilised in their own self-interest would be scared, alienated or repelled by such ultra-left posturing.

The colleges and the National Union of Students have moved distinctly to the right in the last few years. They can now move quickly to the left by way of a mobilisation on students’ own interests; but they have not yet done so. The job of serious socialists is to help them do so.

Instead of developing a movement, the SWP calls for ‘instant barricades’, and proclaims as the immediate goal of the very first national demonstration against the grant cuts nothing less than a ‘March on Parliament’ and the bringing down of the Government!

This SWP approach would simply take the socialists out of all constructive work – the work that might well build towards large-scale student confrontations with the police *that would not repel but rouse up more student anger*.

The SWP leaders know all this. They know that they could not have mobilised a march the size of 23 February on the call for a “March on Parliament”. That is why they tried to hijack the Student Activist Alliance march. They probably know, too, that their hi-jacking effort lost the march much support. But those are not their concerns. Recruits, and “exposing” *Socialist Organiser*, are.

They never really believed a “March on Parliament” to be a real possibility, or a proper goal to set the demonstration. Their call for a “March on Parliament” was directed only at the Student Activist Alliance.

What happened on 23 February? As the march assembled in Malet Street, London, thousands of *Socialist Worker* placards, carrying a cartoon of John Major with a meat cleaver stuck in his head, were given out. Lots of students took placards, making the SWP seem a formidable force on the march.

Oddly, the placards did not mention the “March on Parliament”. The technique of parachuting in on demonstrations with SWP placards depends on making the placards broadly acceptable to the demonstrators. The SWP knew already that “March on Parliament” would not be acceptable.

However, little knots of SWSS people chanted for a “March on Parliament”. Why? “That’s where the decisions are made”, the very anti-parliamentary SWPers chanted, “so that’s where we should go”. “We must go where they can hear us”.

As the march assembled, one SWP organiser was shouting: “We’re going to march on Parliament... to lobby the MPs”. The demonstration would smash through police lines, take over central London – as it would have to – and then go and chat to a few MPs! Really they had no idea what their call meant.

The SWP stewards’ meeting had decided that they would try to force themselves into the front of the demonstration, but as the march set off they did not even try.

Apart from spreading the rumour that Parliament had closed down for fear of their ‘march’, they didn’t try anything until the march reached Aldwych, at the bottom of the Holborn Kingsway. The set route demanded that the marchers turn left; their ‘march on Parliament’ demanded a turn to the right.

As the march moved down the left side of Kingsway, a group of SWPers made a ‘revolutionary’ beachhead on the traffic island in the middle of the road, and, with loudhailers, called on people to assemble and turn right with them for the “March on Parliament”. Inside the march, groups and individuals took up the cry.



The march organisers said keep going to the left. The majority did that, flowing past the citizens of the traffic island like a river, disgorging SWPers who swelled the crowd on the traffic island and narrowed the channel for the march.

Organisers and SWPers with megaphones shouted themselves hoarse, competing, exchanging abuse. A group of anarchists joined the SWPers. Waverers wavered on the fringes of the island. But that did not stop the tide, which continued to flow contemptuously past as the big majority turned left, rejecting the proposed stunt. One of the odd sights was a large number of SWP placards flowing past the stranded hard-core SWPers.

The SWP stewards' meeting had – so we heard – decided that they would sit down on the road to divert the march. Now was the time for it. It might have stopped the flow. But the ground was wet, greasy, sloppy and cold.

Hasn't Trotsky described for us how the Russian Revolution in February 1917 advanced on its knees, with women crawling under the belly of Cossack horses? But no, the SWP did not want to get their backsides wet.

March on Parliament? Yes! Sit down on the cold wet ground? No. It was one measure of their seriousness.

Most of the marchers had plainly made their minds up not to go for a stunt, endorsing the arguments for the development of a mass campaign put by the organisers in a leaflet.

By now most of them had gone past the SWP, and the waverers were being magnetised and starting to follow after. What would the SWP do now?

Back in the good old days of the late 1960s, when anti-Vietnam-war demonstrations would divide on whether to go to Trafalgar Square or to the American Embassy, the separation would take place at an appropriate point and those out for a fight with the police would go and get stuck in. So, having separated the revolutionaries from the others, would the SWP now 'march on Parliament'?

They had only a few hundred people, probably a lot fewer than the number of SWP members and sympathisers on the march. Yes, but 'marching on Parliament' never meant anything but a clash with the police, and a few hundred SWPers could do that, at least.

Well, they didn't. They never meant to. Feebly, they shouted abuse down megaphones at the rest of the marches – one man was shouting that *Socialist Organiser* students were students 'from police colleges' – but they were not willing to follow their own advice and charge the police, or even push very hard.

When a *Socialist Organiser* man asked one of their organisers, a bit later, why they had not at least gone ahead and charged the cops, he was told: 'We're not adventurists!'

The slogan they raised for the whole march was adventurist? Yes, but it was not meant seriously. It was to 'expose' *Socialist Organiser*!

A few brief moments of scuffling with police now erupted at one end of the island, and three people were arrested. The anarchists, at least, were serious, but there were not many of them.

Now the heroes on the island, who would neither get their backsides wet nor risk getting their noses bloodied, had to decide what to do. They ran to catch up with the demonstration!

Having failed to 'march on Parliament', did they now loyally join the march? No. Led by full-time organisers, a couple of hundred of them dashed down a side street and came out at the head of the march, confronting it as a hostile force.

This at least made the focus of their efforts clear. Were they going to 'sit down without illusions' now, to frustrate the intentions of the big majority of the marchers? No. The ground was still just as wet and they were not, I guess, in the best state of morale by now. This was just a show of petulance.

After a ten minute delay, they let the march through. The SWP contingent crossed Waterloo Bridge ahead of the main march, turned off to the right in another feeble gesture, stopped at the police lines – and eventually turned round to chase after the main march – and accuse *Socialist Organiser* of blocking the 'March on Parliament'!

That was how the SWP 'marched on Parliament' on 23 February 1994.

Isn't all this reminiscent of something else? Haven't we been here before, and recently?

In late 1992, the SWP reacted to the widespread, but only-just-beginning, outcry against the Tory announcement of pit closures by calling on the TUC to initiate an immediate all-out General Strike. The labour movement was to go from its lowest ebb in decades to a revolutionary general strike – which is what an all-out general strike is – in one bound, and led by the TUC! This was, quite literally, a crazy proposal, and the SWP dropped it soon afterwards.

And isn't it reminiscent, too, of their call for "Troops Out of Ireland Now"? The SWP leaders do not actually mean "Troops Out Now", and sometimes they leave no doubt of it by coupling the "militant" demand "Troops Out Now" with small-print additional demands for the British first to disarm the Protestants (which would imply more troops, not fewer, and for the indefinite future).

For serious Marxists there is no such thing as a slogan or a proposal put forward merely for effect, or to "expose" opponents. For serious Marxists, developing and mobilising large masses of workers or students is our method of going forward politically. By that method – by putting forward proposals and perspectives for the broad movement, and within that work – we recruit to and build our own socialist organisation.

We do not put forward "militant" but politically nonsensical slogans like calls for a "March on Parliament" designed only to create a "militant" image.

On 23 February the SWP put forward a preposterous demand that served to distinguish them from the organisers of the march but which – as I have shown – cut against the development of a mass student movement against the Tory cuts. They are not concerned with such things any more than they were concerned with developing the on-the-ground practical action to support the miners in October 1992 which, if developed, might have been made to coalesce into generalised action against the Tories.

At the first sign of pregnancy they raise the "demand": "The Baby Now! Now! Now!". But the SWP leaders do not believe in it themselves. It is all a cynical game.

When they were trying to be a serious organisation, they were militantly hostile to "transitional demands", the breaking down of the socialist programme into a series of linked demands, geared into the developing struggle. Now they use the most vulgar and ridiculous version of "transitional demands", indeed, a hostile caricature – demands that "can't be met", used to "expose" someone. They do not use slogans and demands as tools for mobilising people on goals which are limited but which open up a perspective of developing a movement to higher and higher levels in struggle. They use them as mere literary devices for smart-alecs posturing in confrontational debate.

On 23 February, we had the strange spectacle of an organisation with at least 1000 student members relating to a national demonstration called to fight a massive Tory attack on student living standards with the sole purpose of "exposing" an opponent organisation, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and *Socialist Organiser*, whose student membership, though a lot more useful and politically better-educated than theirs, is not even a tenth of their numbers.

The word parasitic suggests itself here, except that that is only part of it.

The SWP is now a radically disoriented organisation. It uses slogans and ideas with an advertising-agency cynicism similar to that of the Labour Party leaders and "mainstream" politicians. Pretty much anything goes. Organisational self-promotion devours everything else.

Nothing matters but to recruit to "the party". We too recruit to our organisation, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. But an organisation is what it does, tries to do, represents, stands for, proposes.

At the heart of the SWP's performance on 23 February lies deep pessimism, defeatism and demoralisation. Despite their big revolutionary talk, they acted as people who could not believe in the possibility that the left can develop, build, and midwife the powerful student anti-Tory movement which is now possible.

All they were capable of doing was self-obsessed posturing and faking to "build the party". The feebleness with which they went about getting their "March on Parliament" – in practice, a bust-up with the police – is explicable only on the assumption that they did not believe in it themselves.

The SWP does now what the Healyites did in the late 1960s. The SWP slogan on 23 February was ultra-left. But they did not behave as ultra-lefts. As their organiser said, 'we're not adventurists'. These are newspaper and placard ultra-lefts, not real ones.

The "fake left" – Labour and trade union leaders talking militant for the rank and file – is an ancient and dishonourable tradition in the British labour movement. Now, in the SWP, we have a fake ultra-left! Progress, it isn't.

# 2. Marxism vs Apparatus

## Marxism

### The Degradations of “Apparatus Marxism”

By Jack Cleary. From Workers’ Liberty 2/1.

*‘Now it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible.’*

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

*‘Borodin... is characterised in the novel as a ‘man of action’, as a living incarnation of Bolshevism on the soil of China. Nothing is further from the truth! [Borodin was no old Bolshevik]... Borodin, appeared as the consummate representative of that state and party bureaucracy which recognised the revolution only after its victory... People of this type assimilate without difficulty the gestures and intonations of professional revolutionists. Many of them by their protective colouring not only deceive others but also themselves. The audacious inflexibility of the Bolshevik is most usually metamorphosed with them into the cynicism of the functionary ready for anything. Ah! To have a mandate from the Central Committee! This sacrosanct safeguard Borodin always had in his pocket...’*

Trotsky, discussing André Malraux’s novel about the 1925-7 Chinese Revolution, *The Conquerors*.

The Comintern functionary whom Trotsky discusses, using Malraux’s fictionalised Borodin as an example, was a “revolutionary” James Bond figure—a “superman” raised above the organic processes of the labour movement and the working class, and above mundane restraints and moralities. In the service of “the cause” he could say and do anything—so long as his superiors approved. As Stalinism progressed in the Comintern, there was literally nothing such people, and the working-class organisations they controlled and poisoned, would not for an advantage say and do. There was nothing that had been unthinkable to old socialists and communists that they did not in fact do.

They could ally with fascists to break socialist strikes, suppress the proletarian revolution in Spain, become rabid chauvinists for their own countries (so long as that might serve the USSR), turn into anti-semites... Nothing was forbidden to them. Nothing was sacred, and nothing taboo. Any means to an end.

Old agitational and propagandist techniques of manipulation were brought to new levels of perfection by the Stalinist rulers and their agents and allies across the world. Politics, history and, they thought, “History”, were freed from the primitive slavery to facts. Politics that were virtually fact-free and virtually truth-free became possible on a mass scale. Great political campaigns could now be lied into existence. To be sure, this was not something unknown before Stalinism; but the Stalinists, beginning with their lies about what the Soviet Union was, made it an all-embracing permanent way of political life.

Truth did not exist, only “class truth”, which meant “party truth”, which meant Russian bureaucratic truth... Consistency was a vice of lesser, unemancipated mortals. You could say and do anything. Logic? Anything was logical so long as you got the “context” right and understood the “historical process”. It was all a matter of “perspectives”. Dialectics, comrade!

At different times Trotsky described this condition as “syphilis” and “leprosy”. In the summaries of the proper revolutionary communist approach which he wrote in the 1930s, the demand to “be true, in little things as in big ones” is always central. The fact that such a “demand” had to be made and that it was made only by a tiny pariah minority, as incapable of imposing the necessary norms of behaviour as they were incapable of doing what they knew had to be done to defend the working class, was one measure of how far the “Marxist” movement had fallen, how deeply it had regressed, and how much had to be done to restore its health.

The “revolutionary superman” today is typically a “Trotskyist” builder of “the revolutionary party”. One of the things trade union supporters of Workers’ Liberty in Britain have to contend with—in the civil service union for example where the “revolutionary” left has had a presence for many years—is that many good trade unionists, honest, rational people, have come to hate the “revolutionary left” as liars, manipulators, people who place themselves outside the norms of reasonable political, moral and intellectual interaction. To a serious degree they do not have a common language with people who do not share their methods and habits of thought, or their special view of themselves and their “party”.

## II

Trotsky himself commented more than once that the small groups of Trotskyists had sometimes absorbed too much “Comintern venom” into themselves. After Trotsky’s death, not at once, but over many years, and not uniformly, organisation to organisation, but more in some “orthodox” Trotskyist organisations than others, a kitsch-Trotskyist political culture developed that replicated much that Trotsky had called leprosy and syphilis in the Comintern.

Its core was the development of the idea of a “revolutionary party” into a fetish, into something prised loose from both the social and historical context and the political content which gives it its Marxist meaning. For Marxists, the party and the class, though there is an unbreakable link between them, are not the same thing. “The Communists...have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole,” as the Communist Manifesto puts it. The programme Leon Trotsky wrote for his movement in 1938 insisted that it was a cardinal rule for Marxists to “be guided”, not by the interests of “the party”, but “by the logic of the class struggle”. And there is at any given moment an objective truth that cannot be dismissed if it is inconvenient to “the party”.

In post-Trotsky “kitsch Trotskyism”, the tendency over decades is for “the party” and what is considered to be good for “the party” to become the all-defining supreme good—to become what the USSR was to the Comintern and its Borodins. There are more limits than the Comintern functionaries had, but not too many limits. There are very few things people calling themselves Trotskyists have not done for organisational advantage. Much of the time, for many of the “orthodox” Trotskyist groups, everything—perceptions of reality, “perspectives”, truth, consistency, principle—is up for “construing” and reinterpretation in the light of perceived party interest. Their “Marxism” is “Apparatus Marxism”: it exists to rationalise what the party apparatus thinks it best to do.

Central to this pattern, of course, was the radical falsity of many of the axial ideas of the “orthodox” Trotskyist groups—on the USSR, for example, or on the “world revolution”, of which the USSR’s existence was both manifestation and pledge for its presently on-going “immanent” character; and on the linked idea that capitalism was perennially in a state of imminent 1930s level collapse. The survival and mutation of such ideas—the USSR is “in transition to socialism”, capitalism faces immediate catastrophe—were themselves often shaped by organisational considerations.

Their “Marxist” ideas had become dogmas glaringly at odds with reality; to hold those ideas you needed a special way of construing the world; and thinking about it became a work of special pleading for the fixed dogmas, of rationalising to arrive at conclusions already set and inviolable. If “Marxism” is reduced to such a role, then there is no logical or psychological barrier against “Marxism” being used to rationalise whatever seems to “make sense” for the party on a day to day basis.

The German pre-World War One Social-Democrat, Eduard Bernstein, who proposed to shed the socialist goal of the Marxist labour movement and substitute for it a series of reforms of capitalism, notoriously summed up his viewpoint thus: “The movement is everything, the goal nothing.” The kitsch-Trotskyists in their fetishistic commitment to creating an instrument, the “Revolutionary Party”, that could make the socialist revolution, stumbled into a grim parody of Bernstein’s notorious dictum: the party, short of the socialist revolution itself, is everything; all other things, including the actually existing working class, count for little and often for nothing. An obituary of Tony Cliff, one of the most seemingly successful proponents of the “Party First” approach in WL64-5 discussed this phenomenon.

[Cliff's] "was a refined, sophisticated variant of the approach developed by such orthodox Trotskyist tendencies as those of Healy and Lambert.

"These two, on the face of it, seem to be very different from Cliff. Not so. Gerry Healy came to dominate British Trotskyism from the late 40s, and Pierre Lambert much of French Trotskyism from about the same period, because in the 1940s and 50s the world posed big political and theoretical problems to the old-style Trotskyists, and most of the political leaders of the movement collapsed in demoralisation, confusion or perplexity. The Healys and Lamberts came to the fore because they cared about the ideas, and assessed them, only as crude working tools that did or did not help build the organisation. They could propose what to do on the basis of short term calculation without any political or intellectual qualms.

"The Trotskyists in Trotsky's time had drawn confidence, despite the gap between their tiny numbers and their very large perspectives, from the idea that 'the programme creates the party'. What might be called the 'organisation-first' schools of neo-Trotskyism turned this upside down. For them the old formula came very much to mean: arrange a programme and lesser postures, that will assist the organisation to grow. After he asserted his political independence in the early 60s, Healy's politics were blatantly cut, and frequently 're-cut', to fit his organisational needs and calculations. So were and are those of the Lambert groupings...

"Not 'the programme creates the party' but 'the needs of the party create and recreate the programme'. Not the unity of theory and practice in the proper sense that theory, which is continually enriched by experience, guides practice, but in the sense —Tony Cliff's sense—that 'theory' is at the service of practice, catering to the organisation's needs. 'The very literary and 'theoretical' Cliff, on one side, and Healy and Lambert on the other, had a common conception of the relationship of theory, principle and politics to the revolutionary organisation..."

### III

This approach led to the creation of a special sort of Marxism —"Apparatus Marxism"—the neo-Trotskyist version of which is really, all qualifications granted, a dialect of the old Stalinist Comintern 'Marxism'. It is the predominant revolutionary 'Marxism'.

Today Marxism has retreated deeper into academia —though there is a lot less even of that than there used to be —or, in a ridiculous parody of what Marxism was to the Stalinist organisations, into the cloistered seclusion of one or other 'revolutionary party', where it exists to grind out rationalisation and apologia to justify the decisions of the 'party' apparatus: 'Marxism' with its eyes put out, chained to the millwheel —"Apparatus Marxism".

Apparatus Marxism is a peculiarly rancid species of pseudo-academic 'Marxism' from which everything "objective", disinterested, spontaneous and creative is banished. Creativity is incompatible with the prime function of "Apparatus Marxism": rationalising. Creativity and, so to speak, spontaneity is the prerogative of the all-shaping, suck-it-and-see empirical citizens who staff the 'Party' apparatus. Everything is thereby turned on its head. The history of the 'Orthodox Trotskyist', or Cannonite, organisations is a story shaped by this conception of the relationship of Marxism to 'the revolutionary party' —as a handmaiden of the apparatus. So, too, is the story of the the British SWP. 'Party building' calculations determine the 'line' and 'Marxism' consists in 'bending the stick' to justify it.

Lenin rightly argued that revolutionary theory without revolutionary practice is sterile and that revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory is blind. "Apparatus Marxism" is both blind and sterile because it is not and cannot be a guide to practice. It exists to rationalise a practice that is in fact guided by something else — usually, the perceived advantage of the organisation. For Marxists, the unity of theory and practice means that practice is guided by theory, a theory constantly replenished by experience. In "Apparatus Marxism", the proper relationship of theory to practice and of practice to theory is inverted.

Our predominant Marxist culture is largely made up of the various "Apparatus Marxisms", protected, as behind high tariff walls, by the 'party' regimes they serve. Demurrers or questionings of cloistered certainties are inimical to that culture. This segmented 'Marxism' stands in the way of Marxist self-renewal. The kitsch-Trotskyist conception of the 'revolutionary party' —which in fact is a conception closer to that of the Stalinists than to either Lenin's or Trotsky's conception —makes revolutionary Marxism impossible. It makes the cornerstone of revolutionary Marxism —as distinct from Academic Marxism and its gelded first cousin, "Apparatus Marxism" —the unity of theory and practice, Marxism as a guide to action, an impossibility.

Apparatus Marxism is self-righteous: it serves ‘the Party’, which for now ‘is’ ‘the Revolution’, or, so to speak, its ‘Vicar on Earth’; it has few scruples, and recognises only those aspects of reality that serve its needs. Its progenitor is neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin, but, ultimately, Stalin.

One reason why it thrives, even among anti-Stalinists, in our conditions, which are unfavourable to serious Marxism, is precisely its simple, uncomplicated, easily graspable logic and rationale. It is the way to ‘build the party’, ‘catch the mood’. You don’t need background, study, work; and there aren’t any very difficult or unanswerable questions —just three or four basic ideas and a willingness to listen to the Central Committee, or whomever it is that can ‘come up with a line’ that lets ‘the party’ have something plausible to say. This approach is much simpler and far easier than ‘full Monty’ Marxism, for which reality cannot always be construed to fit what is best for ‘party-building’. The contemporary kitsch-Trotskyist superhero embodies ‘Apparatus Marxism’. From his collection of ‘Trotskyist’ formulas, ‘lines’ and rationalisation, he selects what will best advance the organisation —the ‘Revolutionary Party’ which represents socialism —whatever it says or does. The kitsch-Trotskyist superhero has no time for Engels’ comment in a letter to the German socialist Conrad Schmidt:

‘The materialist conception of history has a lot of dangerous friends nowadays who use it as an excuse for not studying history. Just as Marx commenting on the French ‘Marxists’ of the late [18]70s used to say: ‘All I know is that I am not a Marxist’...

‘In general, the word ‘materialist’ serves many of the younger writers in Germany as a mere phrase with which anything and everything is labelled without further study, that is, they stick on this label and then consider the question disposed of. But our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the Hegelian manner. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations must be examined in detail before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-law, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc. views corresponding to them...

‘You who have really done something, must have noticed yourself how few of the young literary men who attach themselves to the Party take the trouble to study economics, the history of trade, of industry, of agriculture, of the social formations...The self-conceit of the journalist must therefore accomplish everything and the result looks like it...’ —the self-conceit of the ‘party-building’ ‘Apparatus Marxist’.

# 3. Striving to be “the memory of the class” vs invention of tradition

## Our traditions: where the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty comes from

Document for 1995 AWL conference

Living in an age of apostasy to socialism and Marxism, and of a great turning of backs on the past, it is necessary for us to publicly identify and proclaim our roots and traditions.

1. We are Marxists: that is, we believe that Marx was right in his fundamental analysis of capitalist society as a regime of wage slavery; in his analysis of the roots of capitalist exploitation; in his understanding of the class struggle as the locomotive of history; in his identification of the proletariat, the slave class of capitalist society, as the bearer of a new and higher civilisation: ‘The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself’; ‘The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race and sex.’

2. We are Leninists: that is, we believe that the October Revolution was one of the greatest liberating events in human history, and that all socialists who came after that revolution must learn, critically assess, and reassess, its lessons, and adapt them to their own conditions. Centrally, these are: that the class struggle is fought on at least three fronts —the economic, political and ideological fronts —and that socialists are effective only if they fight that struggle on all three fronts in the Bolshevik way: consistently, relentlessly, implacably, irreconcilably; that to do this work in the class struggle, socialists organise themselves into a disciplined, educated, democratic collective, guiding themselves by a Marxist theory, constantly examined, assessed and sharpened in the light of working class experience; that because socialist revolution can be the creation only of a roused, active working class, socialists serve the working class by helping it rouse, educate and organise itself; that socialists connect themselves indissolubly to the working class wherever it is to be found, at whatever level it is at, in all the varying conditions —political, social, ideological —in which it is held under the rule of capital; that, because in all conditions, even when they act as a working class vanguard who believe that their propagandising, lesson-drawing and organising work is essential to the class, socialists serve the working class, and therefore can neither substitute themselves for the working class, nor adopt the role of mere passive speculators about future working class activity; that the serious socialists prepare for the class struggle when they are not fighting it, or when it is at a low ebb: without the slow, preparatory work of many years there would have been no working class revolution in 1917.

3. We are Trotskyists: that is, we root ourselves in and endorse the politics of the rearguard of the Russian Revolution, led by Trotsky; we endorse and glory in the Trotskyist movement’s fight against Stalinist totalitarianism; its efforts through a long epoch of murderous reaction to help the working class free itself from the crippling and sometimes suicidal limitations placed on it by Stalinist “communism” and by reformism; its efforts after the collapse of the Communist International to rebuild revolutionary working class parties and a new International, organically of the working class; its policies for fighting fascism in pre-Hitler Germany and for consolidating and defending the working class revolution in Republican Spain during the Civil War: in short, we base ourselves on the first four congresses of the Communist International and on the subsequent development of the politics of those congresses by the movement led by Trotsky until his assassination in 1940.

4. Trotsky summarised his approach thus, in 1938:

“To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones;



to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives —these are the rules of the Fourth International."

[The Transitional Programme]

5. The first manifesto of our tendency (October 1967) defined Trotskyism as we understood it then, and understand it now:

"Trotskyism is the basic Marxist programme of the conquest of power by the international working class. It is the unfalsified programme, method and experience of the Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky. It embodies the world experience of the workers' struggles, including the defence and development of Bolshevism by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in battle against the Stalinist counter-revolution in the Soviet Union. Trotskyism is the only developed working class alternative to venal Stalinism and supine Social Democracy. It means reliance on the self-controlling activity of the masses of the working class, which it strives to mobilise on the programme of transitional demands as a bridge to the overthrow of capitalism and the attainment of workers' power. It is the programme of the workers' revolution, organically linked with the practical struggle to aid its development. It is not only a programme, but the struggle to build a revolutionary party to fight for that programme. Its traditions are those of the Bolsheviks and the Left Opposition: workers' democracy, unremitting struggle for theoretical clarity, revolutionary activism, unbending hostility to and struggle against capitalism and those within the labour movement who stand for its continuation."

6. The Trotskyism of Trotsky, like Lenin's Bolshevism out of which it grew, suffered defeat because in that epoch the working class suffered defeat; it is not a final defeat. The malign Stalinist counterfeit of socialism is dead; the Trotskyist tradition is alive because revolutionary socialism is alive and will remain alive until the working class wins the last battle in the struggle with the bourgeoisie: "Until the last bond and debenture shrivels to ashes on the grave of the last warlord."

7. This is the tradition in which the Alliance for Workers' Liberty has its roots. In an independent history spanning nearly three decades we have on the basis of this tradition, evolved our own distinct AWL tradition. Beginning as adherents of one of the strands of post-Trotsky Trotskyism —that of James P. Cannon —we have critically re-worked and re-evaluated that tradition, supplementing and amending it on both the level of political ideas and organisational practice. We have, over the years moved a long way from our starting point.

8. We were forced to conclude that, though Trotsky's concrete analyses and descriptions of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, and of what that means for the working people there, were exact, continuous, accurate and adequate as an account of the USSR —he did not fail to record that Stalinism differed from Hitler "only in its more unbridled savagery" —and though the conclusions he drew for working class politics inside the USSR were adequate and consistently socialist —from 1935 he advocated a new working class revolution to overthrow the political and social rule of the bureaucracy, calling it a political revolution —Trotsky's conceptual framework was first inadequate and finally led him to radically wrong conclusions. We can see now that the designation 'degenerated workers' state' made no sense in the 1930s. He himself tentatively acknowledged this at the end, when he accepted the theoretical possibility that the USSR could, while remaining exactly as it was, bureaucratically collectivised property intact, be conceived of as a new form of class society [The USSR in War, September 1939]. He refused to draw that conclusion then only because he believed that the fall of the Stalinist USSR—either to capitalist restoration or workers' revolution —was imminent.

"Stalin testifies to nothing else but the incapacity of the bureaucracy to transform itself into a stable ruling class. Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous position if we affixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious downfall?"

[In Defence of Marxism]

9. Trotsky bears no responsibility for the often grotesque politics which his 'official', 'orthodox' would-be followers built on Trotsky's failure in time to draw the conclusions to which everything he wrote pointed, that the USSR was a new form of class society. Had he lived, Trotsky would either have had to reverse and repudiate his entire train of thought, or draw those conclusions. Everything he wrote on Stalinism in his last three years points to the virtual certainty that he would have diagnosed Stalinism as a new form of class society: Trotsky would not have been a post world war two 'Trotskyist' on this question. The politics of the post-Trotsky Trotskyists towards Stalinism is no part of the authentic Trotskyist tradition but a Stalinist excrescence on it.

10. The majority of the would-be post-Trotsky Trotskyists followed Pablo, Mandel and their associates in analysing the Stalinist states as degenerated and deformed 'workers' states', socially in advance of, and superior

to, capitalism. The USSR, its satellites in Eastern Europe, China etc. were, they believed, “post-capitalist”, in transition between capitalism and socialism.

Keeping Trotsky’s label for the USSR —“degenerated workers’ state”—and adapting it to the whole cluster of Stalinist formations, the post-Trotsky official Trotskyists, assembled behind the “workers’ state” label ideas and assessments starkly at variance with those Trotsky expressed in the same terms. Trotsky’s label was retained; all his analyses, perspectives and definitions—all the ideas for him encapsulated in that term—were radically changed. The Marxist politics of honestly settling theoretical accounts with the past gave way to the ancient arts of palimpsestry and to the survival techniques of the chameleon. This would be the cause of much obfuscation and confusion.

11. For Trotsky, at the end, the USSR was an unstable, transitional regime; the Stalinist bureaucracy was a “cancerous growth” on the society created by October, not a necessary social organism capable of defending the USSR or of creating the USSR’s post-World War Two empire of 90 million people.

In stark contrast to the views Trotsky expressed in the term, “workers’ state”, Stalinism was seen by Mandel and the post-Trotsky official Trotskyists as stable; as an agency for accumulating and defending the gains of an ongoing world revolution, which, tangibly, was identical with Stalinism itself. Changes could come only by way of reform (Yugoslavia, China) or political revolution (the USSR), not by regression. These were societies ‘in transition to socialism’, not, as the USSR was for Trotsky, an aberrant, hybrid formation that could not possibly last (and if it lasted, could not continue to be seen as any sort of workers’ state). The Stalinist formations were progressive, post-capitalist, on the broad highway of history—unconditionally progressive, not, as Trotsky at the end said of Stalin’s nationalised property, ‘potentially progressive’, on condition that the workers overthrew Stalinism.

12. Trotsky had in 1939/40 already recognised ‘elements of imperialism’ in Stalin’s foreign policy, and said: ‘We were and remain against the seizure of new territories by the Kremlin.’ Though the USSR had a vast empire, for Mandel and his friends it was not ‘imperialist.’

13. Stalinism destroyed labour movements and imposed totalitarian regimes on the working class of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland etc., regimes like that of the USSR which Trotsky in 1938 had rightly described as differing from Hitler’s regime “only in its more unbridled savagery”, but still this was the—deformed—workers’ revolution

According to every criterion the labour movement throughout its history had measured by—civil liberties, political democracy, the free existence of labour movements, free press, speech, sexuality—the USSR, China, etc. were at least as much of a regression as Nazism had been. But, because the—totalitarian—state monopolised property, these systems, vis-à-vis capitalism were, for Pablo and Mandel, unconditionally progressive.

14. Does the bureaucracy play a necessary role in production? You could not, on the post-world war two facts, continue to give Trotsky’s negative answer, not even for the USSR. If these were workers’ states it was not according to Trotsky.

15. Pablo, Mandel and others reinterpreted the ideas of Trotskyism so as to present the expansion of Stalinism and the creation of totalitarian states in large parts of the world as the first stage of the socialist revolution. Despite the crushing of the working class in the Stalinist states, and its quietness in the big capitalist countries, the ‘world revolution’ was continuing to ‘develop’—albeit, said Mandel and company, in a deformed way. Ernest Mandel became the word-spinning high priest of the vast, unstable and inchoate ideological edifice which grew up around these core ideas in the 40 years before the USSR collapsed.

16. Ernest Mandel and his friends accepted on their rulers’ terms, “critically”, of course, such systems as Mao’s China and Tito’s Yugoslavia, and for decades adopted the role of loyal critic, adopting for these Stalinist states the ‘reform’ politics which the Brandlerites, Lovestoneites, ILPers etc. had, for the USSR in the later 30’s counterposed to Trotsky’s call for a new—“political”—revolution to overthrow the bureaucratic caste. It was twenty years after Mao’s victory before Pablo and Mandel’s ‘Fourth International’ came out for a working-class ‘political’ revolution in China.

17. For the post-Trotsky official Trotskyists the workers’ state label expressed new ideas, not what it had expressed in Trotsky—and new politics, not those of Trotsky. Whose ideas did the term now express? Bruno Rizzi’s! Trotsky had polemicised with Bruno Rizzi’s acceptance of Stalinism as a stable system of post-capitalist rule by a collectivist new class. In fact, Rizzi—mimicking Fabians such as Bernard Shaw—believed that

Stalinism and fascism were essentially the same, and that —though Trotsky’s polemic ignored this aspect of his thought —both were progressive, both transitional between capitalism and socialism, evolving towards socialism; he saw their horrible features —such as Nazi anti-semitism —as mere kinks in an immature but sufficient anti-capitalist consciousness.

By the end of the 40s Official Trotskyism was expressing not Trotsky’s but, essentially, Rizzi’s —and Bernard Shaw’s —ideas about Stalinism in the terminology Trotsky had used to express his radically different ideas.

18. The epigones of Trotsky proclaimed that the survival and expansion of Stalinism meant defeat for Stalin’s ‘Socialism In One Country’ and posthumous triumph for Trotsky and his Permanent Revolution. Mao and Ho were Trotsky’s legatees, not Stalin’s. In fact, this assessment of the Stalinist states and the Stalinist-led world revolution implied acceptance of the essentials of Socialism In One Country.

The point for Trotsky and his comrades, as for all earlier Marxists, was that socialism had to come after advanced capitalism, could not come otherwise. Though the workers might take power in a backward country, socialism could not be built in backwardness. If the revolution did not spread to countries ripe for socialism, it would be doomed. The idea of stable, evolving socialist growth from peripheral backwardness to socialism, in competition with advanced capitalism, was a revival on a gigantic scale of the pre-Marx colony-building utopian socialism of people like Etienne Cabet, who built small socialist colonies, parallel worlds, in the American wilderness in the 1840s. Pablo and Mandel in their ‘World Congress’ documents [The Rise and Decline of Stalinism (1954) and The Decline and Fall of Stalinism (1957)] vainly chopped logic to hide this. One country? No longer one country! Socialism in isolation? Not isolated now! Etc.

It was the work of religious zealots, reasoning around daft, unquestionable, fixed ideas, not Marxism. The need for it arose because all the ‘revolutionary’ perspectives and hopes of ‘official’ post-Trotsky Trotskyism were spun from the survival, expansion and likely continuing success of ‘Socialism In One Country’, that is, of the USSR, a world power ‘in transition to socialism’.

19. Worse than that. In Lenin and Trotsky, as in Marx and Engels, the historical protagonist of the anti-capitalist revolution is the proletariat. The Trotskyism of Trotsky was the revolutionary working class politics and perspectives of the early Communist International minus, deprived of, the working class armies assembled by the Communist International to make the revolution. Stalinism had ‘captured’ and perverted them. Thus the terrible combination in 1930s Trotskyism of acute awareness, accuracy in understanding and prediction —in pre-Hitler Germany, and in Spain for example —combined with the incapacity to affect events of tiny, tiny groups whose natural identity, like their ‘constituency’, had been stolen.

All Trotsky’s ‘optimistic’ hopes and perspectives were premised on the shifts and regroupments in the proletariat and its parties which he worked to bring about. There would be working class self-clarification, self-regeneration and political regroupment in the heat of class struggle. Wrong, certainly. Fantastic, possibly. But Trotsky’s was a perspective in which ends —democratic workers’ power —and means —working class risings, the creation of soviets —were appropriate to each other.

By contrast, in post-Trotsky official Trotskyism —‘Mandelism’ —the identification of Stalinism and Stalinist expansion as the ‘actually existing’ unfolding, albeit deformed, workers’ revolution led ineluctably to the destruction of all rational notion of ends and means. The ‘official Trotskyist’ fetish of nationalised property —which for Marxists is a means, not an end, and by no means a self-sufficient means —took the central question out of rational assessment: Stalinist statification and its alleged working class character was a ‘given’, something to reason from, not about.

20. When the ‘Trotskyists’ transformed themselves into an epiphenomenon —critical, of course —of Stalinism, they thereby became millenarians.

Primitive millenarian sects, often communistic in their desires, have looked to supernatural events like the second coming of Christ, to transform the world into an ideal place. They had no notion of ends and means such as the labour movement would develop —action by named human forces for specific goals. In practice, they would look to some bandit, warlord or lunatic to begin the designated change. Central for our purposes here was their lack of a rational notion of ends and means.

In post-Trotsky Trotskyism, c.1950, both the ends and means of the proletarian revolution in the original Trotskyism, as in traditional Marxism, disappear —or are pushed to the far horizon of history. The ‘world revolutionary perspectives’, which Mandel wrote and refurbished for successive world congresses were, though dressed up in the husks of ideas taken from Trotsky and Lenin, now spun around the USSR, not around the

proletariat or its methods or its old socialist goals. The protagonist in ‘the workers’ revolution’ is, for now, the Stalinist bloc —Mandel’s mentor Raptis-Pablo once speculated that Stalinism would last for centuries —not, as in Trotsky, the working-class, self-clarified and politically regrouped. The protagonist is the Stalinist state, the ‘Red’ Army, the Chinese peasant army. Though ‘Perspectives’ and hopes for bureaucratic reform and for working class democracy are plentiful in Mandel, they are just tagged on.

21. The proletariat may be crushed under regimes akin to fascism but despite such ‘details’ this, nevertheless, they said, is the proletarian revolution. ‘Nationalised economy’ conditions and defines all. How could a Chinese peasant army led by declassed intellectuals, be seen, as the ‘Fourth International’ saw it, as a workers’ party? By circular logic: only a workers’ party could do what the Maoists did, replicating Stalin’s USSR. Ergo, this is a workers’ party. Rationalising the Stalinist phenomenon, Mandel’s Marxism became arid, eyeless scholasticism. Trotsky’s ideas of 1940 were turned into their opposite.

22. The point at which millenarianism triumphed can be dated: the Korean War and the belief that the seemingly inevitable World War Three would be a war-revolution, an international civil war. The nuclear Armageddon — albeit with early nuclear weapons —would also be the revolution. The ‘Red’ Army and its Communist Party allies in western Europe would bring working class victory in the looming war-revolution. You could not go much further from the idea of the socialist revolution —protagonist, ends, means —in Trotsky, and in all previous Marxism. When, a decade later, the Posadas wing of Mandel’s organisation took to advocating that ‘the Russian workers’ state’ start the third world war, because this would accelerate the world revolution, it only brought out the crazy other-worldly millenarian logic with which Mandel’s group had replaced the Trotskyism of Trotsky at the time of the so-called third congress of the Fourth International.

23. The tight millenarianist scenario of 1951-3 centred on Stalinism and war as the agency. Eventually that gave place to a looser millenarianism, promiscuous in its ever-changing choice of saviours. Various nationalist forces, plausibly and implausibly assessed, were anointed —though Stalinism always would be central to the ‘world revolution’ perspectives of all the factions —WRP, SWP USA, Morenists, Lambertists —that made up the ‘Fourth Internationals’ of Trotsky’s epigones. Trotsky’s tradition and Trotsky’s political terminology were thus reduced to mere building blocks in scholastic constructions. Ernest Mandel was from his youth the pre-eminent master in this work. He had many imitators and competitors.

24. Of course their adaptation to Stalinism was never uncritical adaptation —those who ceased to be critical ceased to be even nominally Trotskyist —never inner acceptance of it, never a surrender of the idea that the Stalinist states had to be democratised and transformed. But a man like Ernest Mandel used his erudition and his intellectual talents to weave, from the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky, ideological clothing which could be draped on Stalinism to identify it as part of the world revolution of the proletariat. Directly and indirectly, Mandel and his organisation and its ideological splinter groups such as the Lambertists and Healyites over the years tied large numbers of anti-Stalinist militants into accepting, tolerating or justifying, ‘critically’, Stalinist regimes and aspects of Russian Stalinist imperialism.

25. Mandel especially played a role similar to that of Karl Kautsky two generations earlier, who rationalised, from the point of view of a hollow ‘orthodox Marxism’, what the leaders of the German social democracy and trade unions did. Here Mandel and his friends were worse than Kautsky. Kautsky devised ideological schemes to depict the time-serving activities of a bureaucratised labour movement as an effective drive for working-class liberation; Mandel produced similar rationalisations for totalitarian Stalinist machines, convinced that they embodied the spirit of history and that it was his job to interpret and rationalise for it. Mandel was the Kautsky of ‘the historic process’ itself.

26. And then, fifty years after Trotsky’s death, Stalinism collapsed in Europe. It was revealed as nearer to being pre-capitalist than post-capitalist. Far from ‘defending and extending, in its own distorted way, the gains of the 1917 workers’ revolution’, Stalinism must be judged historically to have had no relationship to socialism and working-class emancipation but that of a destroyer of labour movements and an enslaver of working classes.

27. In the course of our work the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty discovered that there were other Trotskyist traditions paralleling Cannon’s, Mandel’s, and that of post-Trotsky official Trotskyism, and in conflict with its peculiar positions on Stalinism; traditions —importantly that of Shachtman’s Workers’ Party —to which our own evolution —on the question of Stalinism and of democratic procedures in our own ranks, for example — has brought us close. We have learned, and intend to go on learning, from the Workers’ Party of the ‘40s and its successor in the ‘50s, the Independent Socialist League.

28. In essence our moves away from our origins in post-Trotsky ‘orthodox Trotskyism’ have been part of a journey back to Marx’s clear doctrines of working class liberation, without the mystifications and confusions generated in post-Trotsky Trotskyism by its identification of Stalinist states, in which a savage system of class exploitation of workers prevailed, with ‘deformed’ working class revolutions.

29. Tradition is never finished so long as an organisation lives; it goes on being lived, reassessed, amended, transmuted, and developed in the life of a political tendency like ours. In sources of ideas and in the examples — negative as well as positive — we learn from, we are both Cannonite and Shachtmanite: in our continuing development we are neither: we continue to evolve our own AWL tradition.

30. Critically drawing from the experience of the whole current of Trotskyism, in Trotsky’s time and after, the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty will continue to build up its forces and fight to win influence for Marxism in the labour movement.

31. Proudly proclaiming that we are Marxist, Leninist, Trotskyist, the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty asks for the support of those who see the need to combine clear adherence to the great traditions of the working class past with a commitment to open-minded Marxist thinking about that past and about the struggles of the present. In the name of our traditions, the traditions of militant class struggle and honest revolutionary Marxist socialism — the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Mehring, Connolly and countless others — we call for the adherence to our ranks of serious socialists, determined to devote, not the spare evenings of dilettantes, but active dedicate lives to the greatest cause in the world — the fight for the liberation of humankind from capitalist wage slavery and all that goes with it.

32. Marxism is the single most precious achievement of the international proletariat. Of course, Marxism is a product in part of working class experience. The continuing experience of the proletariat is its nourishing life blood. Yet Marxism, scientific consciousness, does not arise spontaneously in the working class. Initially, as the *Communist Manifesto* rightly says, it comes from outside of the proletariat. It is created by members of the enemy class who come over to the working class, Marx, Engels and others, who fuse the early bourgeois scientific economics, German philosophy and French utopian socialism, with the experience of the first mass working class movement, Chartism, to create a new world outlook . A proletarian world outlook.

Marxism, whose adherents analyse, interpret, codify and try to shape an ever changing, evolving, permuting, social world is never ‘finished’. It grows and develops, or else — as in many of its sectarian embodiments — it petrifies or withers; and thereby dies. Marxism can not stand still, because social reality does not stand still.

33. The AWL bases itself on Marxism — that is, an awareness of the basic texts and theories, and history of Marxism, together with knowledge of the history of society and of the working class and social movements required to make sense of the codifications that make up Marxism.

One of two things then.

Either: ‘Marxism’ is the property of the whole organisation, that is, the whole organisation consists of Marxists educated above a high basic level; **or** Marxism in the organisation is the property of a minority, even a small minority, who form a mere sect inside the organisation. If they are the leadership, they assume the role of a priestly caste in relation to the rest of the organisation’s members. It is a pre-requisite of a healthy Marxist organisation, that everybody knows **the basics**; that, up to a high minimum, everybody is able to understand what is going on, what the ramifications and implications of the issues raised are.

If a basic minimum education is not a condition of participation of the organisation’s deliberations, that is, of membership in the Marxist organisation, then inequality is built into the organisation, and into its system of recruitment and induction. So is the potential of the emergence of a priestly caste, and of the corruption of the organisation’s internal life by demagoguery ; and, even as in the case of SWP, of the suppression of all real internal political life in the organisation.

34. A feature of most of the kitsch-Trotskyist sects is that in them there is a priestly caste, with an unhealthy, manipulative relationship to the membership.

The SWP which is a mutant strain of kitsch-Trotskyism is one of the clearest examples. Even when it was an open, more or less democratic organisation, ‘theory’ was the property of a small elite of bourgeois intellectuals, and not even minimally — on such a thing, for example, as the group’s fetishised theory of state capitalism — the property of the membership. We criticised them at the time, for that and for the crude and manipulative demagoguery that served the priestly caste to mediate between their theory and the rank and file of the organisation.

They did not, we said, understand what **theory was for in a revolutionary organisation**; that either it was a real guide to cogitations, discussions and decisions by *all* the members of the party, or else that the organisation could not be a functioning Marxist collective at all. We said with tragic accuracy, **before** it occurred, that this state of affairs would inevitably lead to the degeneration of the organisation ( see documents reprinted in *International Communist* No.5 1977).

35. There will of course, unavoidably, always be different levels of understanding and of learning in any organisation; and then again different levels within any leading committee. Some people will know and understand more, and contribute more in the common deliberations. A serious Marxist organisation has no tolerance for denial of this, or for demagogic pseudo-workerist demands for levelling down —no one has a right to know more, or if they know it, to express more than us poor workers can effortlessly understand —of the sort the —essentially petit bourgeois —Thornettites once made notorious in our ranks. The Marxist movement levels *up*, not down.

The serious Marxist organisation will normally insist on a process of recruitment and induction where the aspirant member is put through a basic minimum education in Marxism, and does not acquire full rights inside the organisation until such an education is completed. In conditions of major working class upsurge we would of course recruit more loosely. We can only do that with safety to our basic identity and security for our political integrity when:

1) There is already a properly educated cadre

2) and when that cadre understands that one of its cardinal functions is to educate the militants recruited in the heat of the class struggle. Thus it was with the Bolshevik Party in 1905-7, and again in 1917.

Any organisation trying —as organisations like the AWL must —to function as a collective, able to analyse the world as Marxists while making propaganda for Marxism inside the labour movement, and in the class struggle, will suffer a number of terrible, and ultimately self destroying, consequences if it recruits too loosely and neglects education.

# Where the SWP came from

Abridged introduction to a pamphlet, "A tragedy of the left", published in 1991 and now out of print.

Why is the Trotskyist left in Britain scattered and divided into competing groups? At the root the divisions are a product of the repeated defeats and the continuing marginalisation of revolutionary socialism.

Small groups-and the biggest of the groups in Britain, the SWP, is still a small group -groups without implantation in the working class, have little power of cohesion when strong political divisions emerge. When members of a small organisation whose *raison d'être* is propaganda for certain ideas begin to disagree, especially on some emotion-charged issue, then there is little motive for the minority not to break away. Little or no disruption of work follows division; there is no coercion available to the majority except persuasion or moral pressure; in practice the majority is often keen to be shot of the minority; and the minority, given will and determination, can set up a new organisation making more congenial propaganda.

The existing groups are not parties, whatever they call themselves. They are nowhere near being able to play the role of parties vis-a-vis the working class or the existing bourgeois system. This is as true of the biggest groups as of the smallest. The groups are factions, not parties. These are the structural reasons for the state of things on the left. There are, however, turning points in the history shaped by these basic conditions. The collapse in 1949-50 of the RCP, a group into which almost all British Trotskyists had been united for some five years, produced what became the Militant, the SWP, and the Healy WRP.

The next such "turning point" can be dated exactly: 4 December 1971. On that day the International Socialism (IS) group (which later became the SWP) held a special conference at which, by a vote of roughly 60-40, a motion from the National Committee was carried "de-fusing" IS and an organised tendency inside IS, Workers' Fight, which had fused with IS three years earlier.

Almost in passing the conference outlawed all groupings in IS which had differences with the leadership across the board and not just on special issues. That is now how it was phrased, but that is what it meant, as those critics of the leadership who tried to stay in the organisation soon found out in the years following the "de-fusion" of Workers' Fight on 4 December 1971.

The conference decision produced immediately - we were expelled! - Workers' Fight Mark 2, forerunner of today's Alliance for Workers' Liberty and Socialist Organiser. In early 1973 a group which soon became the RCP and RCG was expelled. In 1975 the IS regime set up on 4 December 1971 purged a sizeable chunk of the cadre and leadership of IS as it had been on 4 December 1971! That "IS Opposition" soon disintegrated.

4 December 1971 was the point at which IS changed radically, and set off down the road to becoming what it is today, a caricature "toy-town Bolshevik" party.

How did IS get to that stage, having, for 20 years before 4 December 1971, devoted much of its energy to denouncing this sort of politics? After the RCP broke up in 1949-50, the Healy group was a serious organisation. The other two ex-RCP groups, the future Militant and SWP, were tenuous enterprises at best. The group around Cliff began in 1950 with about 70 people (the figure comes from one of the group's then joint secretaries) and published Socialist Review, a small duplicated (later printed) monthly, which lasted until 1962. When an anthology of articles by the group was put together in 1965, the editor explained that no articles before 1957 were weighty enough to merit reproduction, and he was not wrong. Reading a file of the paper you are left wondering why they bothered, or, bothering, why they did not make more of an effort. The paper made stodgy general socialist propaganda with a strong pacifist tinge to it. The group's central leader, Tony Cliff, was writing studies on the USSR satellites and on Mao's China, but they were books obviously written for the academic market.

The group seems to have had little life to it, and declined slowly through the '50s. They sold the magazine of the US Shachtman group, which did have intellectual life to it, but was slowly moving away from Leninist ideas. By 1958, when the Healy group had grown into a considerable organisation, recruiting hundreds from the CP after the Russian suppression of the Hungarian revolution, the Socialist Review group numbered 20. So disgruntled with their existence did they become that a gathering of the group decided, with only two votes against - Tony Cliff and his wife, Chanie Rosenberg - to try to fuse with the Healy group (nothing came of it. Source: T. Cliff).

The decay was not just organisational. In 1950 the group subscribed to all the ideas of Leninism, differing from other Trotskyists only on their characterisation of the USSR. A decade later, they did not seem to know quite what they were.

Cliff, in his big pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg, published in 1959, said that Lenin's ideas on organisation were not suitable for West European conditions. The group was a loose and variegated federation of individuals, with an incoherent and ill-defined but distinctive libertarian tinge to it, combined with a seeming commitment to the idea of an organic ripening towards socialism by the existing mass working class movement: the job of the revolutionary, said Cliff in Luxemburg, was to stay with organisations like the Labour Party all the way through until the socialist revolution.

An attempt to build any sort of Leninist organisation, said Cliff, even one like the SLL in 1959, which continued to work in the Labour Party, was just 'toy-town Bolshevism'. Polemical opposition to the Healyites' increasing emphasis on the 'revolutionary party' lent momentum and emphasis to the Socialist Review group's evolution on this question.

When, from 1960, the group began to grow, recruiting youth, what grew was this federalist, vaguely libertarian, vaguely social-democratic, explicitly anti-Leninist hodgepodge. In the middle 1960s Cliff would, when talking to Leninist critics, tell us that 'IS is centrist' [i.e.. half-revolutionary, half-reformist], though he himself, he insisted, was a Bolshevik. The others, such as Michael Kidron, had no 'Fourth Internationalist background'; but he, Cliff, had, and that was why he remained a Bolshevik despite the group's 'centrism'!

His writings said otherwise, and so did the group he (and his writings) had built, but he meant it, and it was important for the future. The mistake of his critics - and of some of his supporters - was to take seriously what he wrote polemically and sometimes speculatively, or to serve as ideological buttressing for what he wanted to do at a given moment, when in fact he would casually ditch or re-write such arguments when external pressure, new opportunities or sheer caprice led him to want the opposite.

That would happen in the late '60s.

And yet, when all is said and done, the Socialist Review/IS group seemed the most hopeful organisation on the left by the early or middle 1960s. The Healy organisation, the SLL, was still much bigger, but rigidly Stalinist in structure, more and more destructively sectarian, and held in an unbreakable grip by men-in the first place Healy-who were going mad politically (and not only politically). By contrast, Cliff's group was alive, ostentatiously committed to maintain the freedom and the duty of its members to think for themselves, and led by people, in the first place Tony Cliff, who had not yet let their minds become pickled and petrified by dogmatism and the fear-based pseudo-political religiosity which saturated the SLL and made the rank and file of the SLL helpless against the whims of their all-controlling popes and cardinals.

More: in the 1950s Cliff would probably have said that he was trying to recast, redevelop, and refocus the fundamental ideas of the Lenin-Trotsky tradition in the new and unexpected conditions of a post-war world dominated by capitalist stabilisation and growth, and by Stalinist expansion in the more backward parts of the world. In his analysis of the USSR and of East Europe and China, and in the early editions of the International Socialism magazine (after 1960), he had tried to tackle some of this work. What went wrong?

What went wrong ultimately was that he lost heart and lapsed back into the sort of caricature 'Leninism' he then despised. What went wrong also was the quality of Cliff's theoretical work, and Cliff's method of work: it was this, I think, which, buoyed up by the conditions of that time, led him to abandon all such concerns after 1968.

Any such theoretical re-working, re-elaboration and development of the Lenin-Trotsky tradition, such as Cliff set out to do in the '40s and '50s, is either freelance work which may, one day, help build a socialist organisation, or work done in conjunction with continuing to build an organisation. If the latter, then the other basic ideas and norms of the movement must be stubbornly held on to and defended while the problem areas are tackled and dismantled, or else everything is let go to pot and to seed-as the Cliff group went to seed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Much of Cliff's work never got beyond hints and half-thoughts. For example, he wrote an important article on the question of 'substitutionism' - the fact of the Bolshevik party's progressive substitution of itself for the working class when the Russian Revolution became isolated - to mark the 20th anniversary of Leon Trotsky's death (an article heavily indebted to Isaac Deutscher's second volume on Trotsky, 'The Prophet Unarmed', published 18 months earlier). This was a variant of the question: did Bolshevism generate Stalinism? Was the Bolshevik party's method of organisation a distinct and independent cause of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution? (This was a favourite thesis of 'left' critics of the Bolsheviks).



Cliff - as the discussion in one of the articles in this collection establishes - did not manage to answer the question clearly one way or another, but, by hints and half-thoughts, he said, yes, Bolshevik organisational methods did contribute to the development of Stalinism, or may have done. But he did not decisively leave the ground of Bolshevism and take up position on another ground: he kept a foot in both camps - while building an organisation sharply committed to the idea that any sort of 'Leninist party', any sort of 'leadership', leads to "substitutionism".

And Cliff's theory of state capitalism was not a theory of state capitalism at all, as both state capitalism and capitalism had been theretofore understood by Marxists! Cliff locates the state capitalist character of the USSR's economy not in exchange values, or in any economic relationships at all, but in the competition of the Stalinist system with the West over the - potential - use values of the arms produced by the rival US-led and USSR-led blocs. He crammed a society which, by his own description, is not capitalist, but a new form of society, neither capitalist nor socialist, into a confused collage of labels taken from historic-real-capitalist formations. Subjectively and arbitrarily he argued that the USSR was capitalist as a result of something-use value competition-common to every economy throughout history.

And the place of Cliff's "state capitalism" in history? He vehemently denies as against the workers' state theories - and against Max Shachtman's bureaucratic collectivism - that this system is 'post-capitalist'. Yet he himself defines it as at the very end, at the last extremity, of capitalist development before socialism. He was right against those who believed that Stalinism was some sort of 'post-capitalist'. But, in placing state capitalism at the very end of capitalist development, he was almost as wrong as them, almost as far away from the truth, about the place of Stalinism in history. And that is the decisive question for Marxists, underlying the dispute about labels.

One tip-off, unmistakable in itself, as to the quality of Cliff's work, was his treatment, in his study of Russia, of the ideas of Leon Trotsky. He does not really come to grips with what Trotsky is saying.

His "exposition" of Trotsky's ideas is a shoddy travesty, in fact a disloyal travesty. Instead of coming to grips with what Trotsky really says, which would have been one way of going forward theoretically, Cliff chose instead to polemicise against straw men on whom he put a mask with Trotsky's face. Serious work would have had to take Trotsky seriously, especially when refuting his ideas.

Much of Cliff's work is crude economic statistics-gathering passed off as politics (in the same way, I suppose, as his party's numbers-gathering to "build the party" is passed off now as politics). In his writings on the Middle East, for example, from the 1940s onwards, Cliff focuses more on the price of Middle East oil than on the issues motivating and dividing Jews and Arabs. That was his approach even when his political conclusions were closer to ours than to his own position today (that the Israeli Jewish nation does not have a right to exist) - see, for example, his pamphlet on the June 1967 war.

Cliff uses statistics and quotes like a Stalinist - to back up a preconceived thesis or objective. Thus, when he decided to be a 'Leninist' again in 1968, he simply re-wrote a paragraph in the Luxemburg pamphlet, with neither explanation for the change nor even reworking of the exposition leading up to the changed conclusion. He was convinced now that Lenin had been right on the question of the party as against Rosa Luxemburg (and as against the Cliff of 1959!) He never explained himself even when visibly embarrassed and under pressure at internal meetings from people like the present writer. How or why he changed his mind remained a close secret. All the observer could know was that Cliff, the scourge of "toytown Bolshevism", had switched tracks 'back to Lenin'.

Cliff's attempt in the 1950s and '60s to reanalyse reality led not to disciplined constructive development, or enhancement of the traditions or positions that the Socialist Review group started out with in 1950, but to the group's decay and disintegration both politically and organisationally in the 1950s, and then, in the 1960s, to incoherent political and organisational zig-zags. Cliff the 'Bolshevik' found himself at the centre of a middle-class academic-student discussion club trained in anti-Leninism; then in 1968 he took a flying leap backwards, declared himself to be a Leninist again - and set about restructuring the organisation on centralist lines.

The group had grown rapidly in the mid-'60s, recruiting vaguely libertarian youth. It started a turn to the working class in 1965 around a pamphlet on the Labour government's incomes policy written by Colin Barker and Tony Cliff. Then came the youth revolt, and the giant demonstrations against the Vietnam War. IS grew steadily. To grow during the anti-Vietnam War movement they had to radically change the position which had differentiated them from the workers' statist Trotskyists in 1950 on the Korean War.

In 1950 they had refused to take sides in the Korean war; now they joined the chants of praise to Ho Chi Minh on demonstrations against the Vietnam war.

By 1967, when the youth upsurge was already under way, the Labour Party left had collapsed. IS pulled out of the Labour Party, raggedly. Cliff, who used ideas as buttresses and counters, hastened to produce the necessary rationalisation. He wrote articles for their paper (renamed Socialist Worker, having been Labour Worker since 1962) proving that Labour had never been socialist in the first place! As if that was ever the reason why Trotskyists were in it! Keir Hardie, he now discovered, was a fake.

The decisive change governing all the changes in the group, and probably spurring Cliff's re-thinking, was the astonishing political suicide of the Healy SLL, which had overshadowed IS and against which much of IS's anti-Bolshevism was directed. In the late 1960s the SLL started to go mad.

It responded to the big anti-Vietnam war demonstration in October 1968, at which there were over 100,000 people, with a leaflet which explained "Why the SLL is not marching". The march, it said, was a conspiracy set up by the capitalist press to boost the prestige of the march's organisers on the left at the expense of the great Marxist leaders of the SLL.

The possibilities for growth facing IS, already now having some hundreds of members, mainly young enthusiastic middle class people, were dazzling in these circumstances.

The barrier to growth was the loose, messy federalist organisation built by people educated by Cliff to equate any centralised small revolutionary group with "toy-town Bolshevism" and "substitutionism". That now stood in Cliff's way. But not for long!

Early in 1968 Cliff and his close friends came out for "Leninism", and conducted a campaign that lasted for the rest of the year to "centralise" IS. It was an astonishing change. Many of Cliff's previous supporters denounced him as a traitor to libertarian socialism! Lots of them left.

Others left the group for other reasons: an important group of workers in Manchester left in protest of IS's denunciation of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia!

The "de-fusion" conference of 4 December 1971 was the culmination of a long process of "tightening up" the IS group. The organisation was growing, the class struggle was burgeoning. A stropy democratic organisation inhibited the leadership, and constricted its room to manoeuvre.

So Cliff and his friends began to substitute themselves and the leading committee for the organisation. In 1971 it was still a volatile organisation, with many new members who did not know its history even two years back. It became necessary for Cliff to maintain prestige by, for example, denying that IS had ever had any other position than calling for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, when in fact Socialist Worker had made propaganda in support of the good work of the troops when they were first put on the streets, in August 1969.

The issue that brought it all to a head was the European Community. Britain was due to join the EC in January 1972, after much hesitation. All the revolutionary left groups had initially refused to take sides with either of the ruling-class factions, for or against EC entry. IS journal had said this in 1963, when Britain had previously attempted to join. "In or out of the Common Market, the problems facing the British labour movement are likely to be very much the same. Indeed the point is that the issues facing us are more similar to those facing European and American workers than at any time in the past 40 years". Even the Healyites had said: "What in fact has happened is that labour and trade union 'personalities' and journals have found themselves quite naturally taking sides on the question: what is best for British capitalism? In most cases that is not surprising, but it exposes the misleadership or lack of leadership of both the Right wing and the Tribune and other Lefts..."

But the Communist Party (following USSR foreign policy), the trade union bureaucrats (comfortable in their cosy coexistence with the institutions of the British state), and the Tribune left (reflecting both the latter), all came out against the EC. Narrow and obtuse British nationalism was what their attitudes came down to.

After initially treating the nationalist left with contempt, the revolutionary groups bent under its pressure and, for fear of isolation from the workers influenced by the nationalist left, changed their positions, one after the other. They used slogans like "the Socialist United States of Europe" as a deodorant to cover the nationalist smell. IS was the last to jump on the anti-EC bandwagon. It voted at its 1970 conference against a proposal to oppose Common Market entry. At Easter 1971 a motion putting the same position - ambiguously worded in places, but presented and argued for as reiterating the position of previous years - was again carried.

By June 1971, however, the IS leaders began to face the problem that the vocal militants in the labour movement influenced by the CP, by the Labour left, and by general chauvinism, were against the Common Market and would not take kindly to IS or anyone else who told them they should not be. Tony Cliff, a gifted intuitive politician, produced, with Chris Harman, *Theses on the Common Market*.

Those Theses argued, falsely, that Common Market entry represented an especial threat to the working class, but did not challenge the 1971 Conference position in principle. They were concerned with how, tactically, to relate to the anti-Market left. They proposed that IS members should put the old Trotskyist case, but ‘vote with the left’. A substantial minority of the National Committee, including Workers’ Fight members, opposed the Theses, but they were accepted.

Thereafter there was a rapid slide downhill. A longstanding position having been overturned under cover of jesuitical ‘reinterpretation’ of the 1971 resolution, and the NC having been persuaded to authorise ‘flexibility’ in voting, the leadership now had the bit between its teeth. Within a month, Duncan Hallas, the most supple-spined and least fastidious of the IS leadership, and then its National Secretary, was making propaganda in *Socialist Worker* in favour of ‘No to the Common Market’.

Workers’ Fight challenged the IS leaders’ right to behave like that. We demanded a special conference. We needed support from one-fifth of the IS branches to get a recall conference - 23 branches. We got 23 - but no conference. The National Committee put an arbitrary deadline beyond which branches could not declare for the recall conference. The Executive Committee admitted to 22 branches endorsing our call. From the 23rd branch the National Secretary denied receiving notification. He was lying or the secretary of the branch was lying, and if we ask who gained, the balance of probability tips decisively against the EC.

Thereafter the IS/SWP echoed and sometimes amplified the chauvinist ‘broad left’ rejection of European unity. Today, a mere 20 years later, faced with an anti-European furore led by Margaret Thatcher, SW has swung back, and on Europe now sounds like *Socialist Organiser*.

The argument against a special conference in 1971 was that it would take time and effort that could ill be spared - though our proposal had been that one day of a weekend rally already scheduled for October 1971 be organised as a special conference. The IS leaders were soon to find time not only for a special conference, but for a six week campaign to prepare for it. Its purpose was to eject the Workers’ Fight tendency from IS.

The leading tendency, controlling the organisation by machine manipulation and demagoguery, could no longer - so the experience of the fight on the Common Market convinced them - afford the luxury of free discussion and free debate. They had decided to grip the organisation firmly by the throat, and in the first place they gripped us by the throat. They called it ‘de-fusing’, as if it were reversing the fusion of Workers’ Fight and IS in 1968, though not more than one in six of the 1971 members of Workers’ Fight had joined IS in that fusion. The campaign to expel Workers’ Fight was the last dying kick of the effervescent, anarchic IS of the 1960s. If you discount the slanders, demagoguery, distortion of positions, and unscrupulous use of the IS machine, it was all quite liberal. When we pointed out the inexorable logic of what was happening, and the qualitative transformation that must follow, the immediate facts seemed to contradict us. The experience of IS/SWP since does not, alas, contradict us!

Workers’ Fight was duly ‘de-fused’ on 4 December 1971. On 14 January 1972, Workers’ Fight no. 1 appeared. A short statement on the separation of WF from IS concluded as follows: ‘The real tragedy, though, is that the opportunities for the revolutionary left which existed in 1968 should have led only to the consolidation of a tightly controlled left-centrist sect, which is most certainly what IS now is’.

Organisations change: few have changed as spectacularly as Cliff’s. Today the SWP has one central answer to more or less every question posed in politics: ‘build the Leninist revolutionary party’. It must seem strange to anyone familiar only with the present-day SWP to read the first document in this collection, dating from Easter 1969, a criticism of the Cliff tendency for its longstanding anti-Leninism.

Yet those criticisms are central to any explanation of the evolution of the group after it declared itself Leninist. As the document proves, and as the subsequent history also proves, in 1968 Cliff and company did not in fact set about building a Leninist party, but merely creating a centralised small political machine. They did not know what a Leninist party was then any more than they had known what it was in all the preceding years when they had identified Gerry Healy’s sect with Leninism and denounced Leninists as ‘toytown Bolsheviks’.

Today the SWP is a largely de-politicised political machine. ‘Build the party’, its central all-purpose slogan, is not politics. A party is merely an instrument of politics, it cannot be a substitute for politics. The 1969 ‘Critique

of Cliff” explained in advance why this would be so. It pinpointed the central weakness of the whole new “Leninist” project Cliff and company had taken up, and linked it with their radically false view of what a Leninist party was.

It also, albeit cryptically, criticised the IS/SWP’s approach to the Labour Party. “‘Whether the IS group will by simple arithmetic progression grow into a revolutionary party, or whether the party will grow from a yet unformed group, is not important for us’ (Political Committee document, October 1968). On the contrary, it is vital. If the strategy is one which expects any big changes from the shift to come in the already organised labour movement (all experience in the past suggests that this is the likely way a real mass revolutionary movement will develop in a country like Britain) rather than by arithmetical accretion, then this decrees the need for us to build a cadre movement to be able to intervene...”

# The Great Gadsby

The paradoxes of Tony Cliff, 1917 - 2000

By Sean Matgamna. From Workers' Liberty 64-5.

*"The miners' strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called the 'downturn' in the movement."*

Tony Cliff, Socialist Worker, 14th April 1984

*"Sammy lugged his papers up and down Fourteenth Street yelling about a war in Europe. He used to come home with a hoarse throat and 30 or 40 cents in pennies. He would count the money and say, 'God dammit, I'm yellin' my brains out for nuttin'."*

*"Several weeks later Sammy came in with a dollar seventy-eight. Papa, Momma and Israel danced around him.*

*"Sammy, you sold out all the papers?" said Papa in amazement.*

*"Yeah," Sammy said, 'There's a guy on the opposite corner doin' pretty good 'cause he's yellin' 'U.S. may enter war'"*

*So I asks a customer if there's anything in the paper about that. So when he says no, I figure I can pull a fast one too. So I starts hollerin' 'U.S. enters war'" and jeez you shoulda seen the rush!"*

*"But that was a lie," Papa Glick said. 'To sell papers like that is no better than stealing.'*

*"All the guys make up headlines," Sammy said. 'Why don't you wise up?'"*

Budd Schulberg: What Makes Sammy Run?

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Tony Cliff (Ygael Gluckstein), who died last April a few weeks short of his 83rd birthday, was one of the most influential socialists of the last three decades. He is physically dead, but, as a eulogist might put it, Cliff lives on. He taught a certain politics, and, more to the point, a certain conception of what revolutionary politics is, to generations of socialists. The biggest socialist organisation in Britain now, the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), embodies Cliff's ideas and Cliff's approach to politics. In that sense, Cliff remains very much alive.

Of the generation of revolutionary socialists formed in Trotsky's Fourth International, and, most importantly for their political characteristics, in the FI movement of the 1940s, Cliff was in his own terms the most successful.

When I heard that Cliff was dead, I remembered a conversation I had had with him in the middle of 1968. Tremendous prospects for working class socialism seemed to have been opened up by the French general strike of May that year. Nine million workers had seized the factories and for a week refused even to discuss the big concessions the bosses and the government were falling over themselves to offer. If only the workers would release the grip on their throat and let them breathe again. Everything in Europe seemed to have been shaken up, including Cliff's politics.

In Britain, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the authoritarian organisation that had dominated revolutionary politics for 20 years, was now behaving in an increasingly lunatic, and - so we fervently hoped - terminally self-destructive fashion.

The possibility of a future in which we could hope to do things better than they had been done in the recent past seemed to have opened up. We agreed that we should begin to regroup the left in an open, democratic organisation. The immediate first step? To fuse the small group of "orthodox" Trotskyists called Workers' Fight (WF) - which a few of us, believing the two existing "orthodox Trotskyist" groups, the Socialist Labour League and Militant, to be politically bankrupt, had put together in the previous 18 months - and the more eclectic, much larger group to which Cliff was central, International Socialism (IS). It had existed for 18 years and been self-proclaimedly "Luxemburgist" for half that time. But now - if Cliff won the faction-fight - IS was turning "Leninist" and "Trotskyist".

Quiet and ruminative, as if talking to himself, Cliff said: "I'm not even 52 yet. I can live to see the socialist revolution!" It was a man taking stock for a new star, having decided on his direction.

Alas, he did not live to see the socialist revolution. He lived to see tremendous defeats for the labour movement, and a tremendous reflux of socialism. He saw the fall of Stalinism in Europe and saw it replaced not by working

class power, but by chaos and capitalism. He saw the "Russian state capitalism" he had defined as the highest possible stage of capitalism - the development of capitalism in part beyond capitalism, to the degree that its economic forms overlapped with the next, socialist, stage of social development - mysteriously turn into an extremely backward capitalism (in some ways, into pre-capitalism) as if it had slipped down half a dozen notches on History's ratchet.

And he spent the third of a century left to him in building something very different from the sort of organisation we talked about in that glorious early summer of 1968. He developed an approach to the politics of "party building" that systematised traits that exist in much of post-Trotsky Trotskyism and for a very long time were exemplified in Britain by Gerry Healy and the SLL.

## II

Cliff was in political flux in 1958. He had come out in support of the Vietnamese Stalinists against the war planes and troops of the USA. There were differences, but no fundamental differences, between the war in Vietnam and the Korean war, on which Cliff's refusal to take the position he now took on Vietnam had led to his separation in 1950 from the Fourth International of the "Orthodox" Trotskyists .

For a decade, self-proclaimedly "Luxemburgist", he had been deriding the idea that Marxists in British conditions should work to build a small "Bolshevik"-style organisation in the labour movement. That, he had insisted, was "toy-town Bolshevism". The Bolshevik Party, he would heatedly tell you, speaking as one who understood Russian and knew, was a myth. Now Cliff had rediscovered himself as a Leninist and was proclaiming the need to build a revolutionary party.

But he had done it in his own peculiar fashion: by publishing a second edition of his 1960 pamphlet on Luxemburg with nothing changed in the argument and exposition, but with diametrically opposite conclusions tacked on to the old arguments. (A couple of key paragraphs were cut and surreptitiously replaced.)

He had, he would insist, been right in both his old and in his new conclusions. Or maybe he had just decided that the "myth" was a myth worth inhabiting, that it could be used as he had seen others, especially the SLL, using it.

Rosa Luxemburg - Cliff's idea of Luxemburg - had, in 1960, been the best guide: "For Marxists in advanced industrial countries, Lenin's original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's." Now Lenin - Cliff's idea of Lenin - was the model.

Workers' Fight would comment: "Of course people change their minds. When Marxists do so it would be good to know why and how... A Marxist's exposition is based on an analysis of the real world, to which he brings certain conceptions: his conclusions are drawn [in this way]. Thus the train of thought is clear, the reasoning and considerations are designed to expound, to convince. In this case there is a mystery: one and the same exposition (without supplement) leads to opposite conclusions. Why? How does comrade Cliff reach his conclusions?" (WF, new series, Easter, 1969)

That is the central question in accessing the career of Cliff. The episode in which Cliff changed from a "Luxemburgist" back to a "Leninist" was emblematic of his whole career. But so, though I didn't know it then, had been the manner in which he had become a "Luxemburgist" in 1958.

That too had been a sudden lurch when a big majority of Cliff's small organisation momentarily decided to join Gerry Healy's, then a sane, impressive and comparatively large "Bolshevik"-style organisation.

## III

With Cliff, the space between his person and his politics, where it existed at all, was a very narrow one. In most areas, it simply did not exist, as he proudly insists in his autobiography, where he boasts of his narrowness, and though he baulks at the word philistinism, in effect he boasts about that too. He would not have noticed that what was perhaps more striking than his concentration on politics, was the extreme narrowness of his concerns within politics.

You could say that all his vices were political ones, or rooted in a conception of what revolutionary politics is. But they were all-pervasive. I spent three years after the fusion of WF and IS as Cliff's factional opponent, in a small minority most of the time. Often that was nasty, as by its nature such a thing is. But there wasn't much gratuitous nastiness on Cliff's part. You could say that he was a more than halfway decent human being.

Compared with, say, his nearest equivalent, the grotesque Gerry Healy, who ran the Socialist Labour League for decades, Cliff was a decent human being. But Cliff, so to speak, was a politician, not a human being. Politics is his proper measure. What matters is what he did in politics, his way of functioning in politics. That in its turn is a matter of political judgment.

Both the practical and the political responsibility for the witch-hunt quality of much of the internal life of the post-'68 IS organisation when serious political differences emerged - on Ireland, to take the most extreme but by no means the only case - was Cliff's. So was the character of the organisation that IS became in the five years after 1968. With Cliff, to try to isolate personal traits, or to decide whether, politics aside, you found him likable or not, is especially unproductive: he was his politics.

#### IV

The memories of Cliff that come into my mind tend to be about things that instructed, surprised or astonished me: his recklessness and complete lack of scruple when he had a point to get across - 'bending the stick', he called it, adapting a phrase of Lenin's.

Late 1971, at an IS gathering at a holiday camp in Skegness. Cliff makes a very, very long speech about the history of socialism. In the audience are many who are politically very raw - youngsters and some older militants from different traditions, some of them, inevitably, influenced by Stalinism. Cliff wants to inoculate them politically against Trotsky's Transitional Programme, the main document which had been adopted by the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938.

Inoculation is very urgent. The organisation's main rival, the SLL, now far gone in sectarian craziness, uses the Transitional Programme, as they will eventually use such things as Leon Trotsky's death mask, as an icon for religious veneration. Cliff warns his audience: using Trotsky's Transitional Programme in prosperous 1971, he tells them, is like trying to find your way around the London Underground with a map of the Paris Metro! In the course of his survey of socialist history, Cliff had greatly praised Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg had, in December 1918, at the founding conference of the German Communist Party, advocated such an approach, but the audience wouldn't know that. Cliff is 'bending the stick'. He needs to damn the whole concept of a transitional programme and transitional demands: the IS opposition grouping, the Trotskyist Tendency (WF), which is in process of being expelled, are aggressive advocates of the method of Trotsky's programme.

Warming to it, whipping himself up, he screams at the audience that if they "accept" Trotsky's Transitional Programme, the logic of it will lead them to Posadas, about whom he proceeds to regale them. Juan Posadas was a crazy Latin American Trotskyist who believed in flying saucers and that they came from distant socialist planets. (They implied a higher technology than anything on earth: therefore they had gone beyond capitalism: workers' states in space...)

#### V

To say that Trotsky's 1938 Programme would get you believing in socialist flying saucers is only an especially bizarre example.

One incident more than any other sums up Cliff's entire approach to politics - the "tactical" surrender to British nationalism during the labour movement crisis over Britain joining the European Community - a startling political U-turn executed so that the group could have the organisational benefits of joining in the very powerful campaign being run by Stalinists, left-Labour Tribuniters, trade union bureaucrats, and a sizeable chunk of the Tories, against Britain entering the European Community. It was a nationalist, indeed a chauvinist, campaign, part of an upsurge of British nationalism which included the early stages of an alarming growth of the fascist National Front.

One aspect of that rising tide of nationalism was a strong current of rampant and unashamed racism even amongst industrially militant workers. Already, in early 1968, London dockers, who six months earlier had fought and lost a tremendous 10-week strike against reorganisation of the ports, struck and marched in support of Tory racist Enoch Powell. Dockers would strike in the same cause and join a fascist-inspired march early in 1972, when the Tory government let in the British-passport-holding ethnic Indians being expelled from Uganda.

In 1968 Cliff had responded to the dockers' march by raising the alarm about "the urgent threat of fascism" and calling for left unity to fight it. (It was a blatantly cynical "come on" to the radical youth of the times.)

By 1971, however, when the same sort of issues were coming to the boil again, things were different. The Tories had come back to power in mid-1970, and immediately launched a strong attempt to bring in legislation to curb the trade unions, triggering prolonged labour movement resistance. IS was now ‘centralised’ and ‘Leninist’ - indeed increasingly, though not uncontestedly, run by full-time officials. It would soon ban generalised internal opposition to Cliff.

IS had grown, and had had limited but real and very promising success in implanting itself in the factories. Its anti-nationalist politics, however, so it was reasonable to believe, might cut the group off from further serious growth in the period ahead. Socialists who were stropky about the politics of international working class unity were not best adapted to get the most out of a situation dominated by a tide of British chauvinism.

Ruthless revolutionary choices had to be made. A proper sense of priorities had to be brought into play. And subtlety, lots of subtlety. What, after all, was the main thing? The great abstractions and general political slogans of Marxist international socialism or building the organisation? That way of putting it is defeatist, comrade. The question is, how can the great ideas of socialist internationalism be served and the organisation built? The best way to serve the great ideas was to build the organisation.

Not bending to the nationalist wind would mean not being able to get maximum returns and “gate receipts” for the organisation that embodied and represented international socialist ideas. That would weaken international socialism. Only a blinkered pedant could fail to see that.

Thus, though it was paradoxical, international socialism could only be served in deeds if in mere words it was not stressed too much, indeed if, at the crucial point, it was abandoned. The tree that bends with the wind survives and grows; the stiff and stubborn sectarian old conifer is uprooted and left to rot. Cliff was equal to reconceptualising the issue for himself, and then selling it to his less talented comrades. First he proposed that the organisation should stick to its political guns. But, having said their piece against the left-wing nationalists, IS members should vote with them in a trade union branch, against “the right”. First respond to their nationalism and advocate the alternative, European working class unity, and then vote with them on the issue? But how could that not make your politics into a joke and convey to observers that you didn’t believe in them yourself.

Arguing for this absurd solution to the problem at the IS NC in mid-71, Cliff explained himself: “Tactics contradict principles.” Unsure if I had heard right, I interrupted him. He repeated it. Principles, “theory”, are in one dimension, “tactics”, practice, in another... For Cliff, the “unity of theory and practice” meant not that Marxism guides practical work and is itself enriched by the experience, but that theory serves - not guides, serves- practice.

In fact, the proposal to argue one way and then vote against your own position in order to “keep in with” the nationalist left was only a trick. Once it was through the NC, the emphasis in the paper, “the arguments”, became entirely anti-Common Market little Britainism: Cliff’s Internationalists had, so to speak, fused with the British nationalists.

You could argue that the whole issue of socialist internationalism did not hang on the attitude one took to the anti-EC campaign. Before they changed under pressure, Cliff and his friends thought it did. Internationalism that does not dare challenge rampant nationalism and chauvinism, and which dares not proclaim its own programme against the nationalists in the labour movement, is a vicious hypocrisy. The approach was quintessentially Tony Cliff.

## VI

Cliff picked up a phrase of Lenin: “bending the stick”, meaning that in politics you often have to push things strongly and even one-sidedly in a desired direction in order over time to achieve balance. Cliff worked the expression to death, but in fact, “bending the stick” was not quite what Cliff himself did. He did to political ideas what I used to see my father do with six-foot long hazel rods or “scallops” [used in thatching]. A hazel sapling can be twisted until it is stringy fibre, can be used as a sort of rope - for example, to bind big, heavy “barths”, or bundles, of other scallops together. You can even tie the, so to speak, ex-stick into loose knots. In the west of Ireland, the name for a stick thus twisted out of the normal consistency of wood but retaining considerable strength is a “gad”. Cliff did not “bend” political sticks, he twisted them into gads: the Great Gadsby.

## VII



Cliff spent his life - more than 60 of his 83 years - as a participant in the long march of the Trotskyists. Like other youngsters who rallied to Trotsky in the '30s, Cliff joined a movement that had inherited, and developed, the programme and perspectives of the Communist International, but was far too weak to win them.

This was an epoch of convulsive capitalist crisis, in which the working class was repeatedly crushed where we might have won. In order to win, we needed a revolutionary organisation of such a size and scope that it could win the leadership of the working class.

The tragedy was that the armies of subjectively working class revolutionaries were led by Stalin and by the agents and dupes of the Stalinist ruling class in the USSR, who had stolen the banners and symbols of communism. The other "big battalions" of the working class were led by the parties of social democracy - parties that had long ago made peace with capitalism and at best sought reform.

Thus when Cliff became a Trotskyist, the entire world labour movement and all its large formations was influenced by, or tightly tied to, either the bourgeois or the Stalinist ruling classes. Politically independent revolutionary working class parties did not exist, in a world rotten-ripe for socialist revolution and speeding towards the tremendous catastrophe of World War Two.

It was an experience that shaped most of Cliff's - and not only Cliff's - political life. Like others of his generation of anti-Stalinist Marxists, Cliff's conclusion from the tragic dichotomy between the communist programme and the small forces of authentic communism fighting for it, was that a "party" had to be built on any terms, almost with any politics. He veered away from that for the decade 1958-68, then returned to it with a vengeance. For his own socialist goals, he elaborated an approach to politics not too far from mainstream politicians who take a poll before they decide what they will say. It was a refined, sophisticated variant of the approach developed by such "orthodox Trotskyist" tendencies as those of Healy and Lambert.

These two, on the face of it, seem to be very different from Cliff. Not so. Gerry Healy came to dominate British Trotskyism from the late '40s, and Pierre Lambert much of French Trotskyism from about the same period, because in the 1940s and '50s the world posed big political and theoretical problems to the old-style Trotskyists, and most of the political leaders of the movement collapsed in demoralisation, confusion or perplexity. The Healys and Lamberts came to the fore because they cared about the ideas and assessed them only as crude working tools that did, or did not, help build the organisation. They could propose what to do on the basis of short-term calculations, without any political or intellectual qualms.

The Trotskyists in Trotsky's time had drawn confidence, despite the gap between their tiny numbers and their very large perspectives, from the idea that "the programme creates the party". What might be called the "Organisation-first" schools of neo-Trotskyism turned this upside down. For them the old formula came very much to mean: arrange a programme, and lesser postures, that will assist the organisation to grow. After he asserted his political independence in the early '60s, Healy's politics were blatantly cut, and frequently "recut", to fit his organisational needs and calculations. So were and are those of the Lambert groupings. (The Lambertists were, I believe, the first of these groupings to use "build the revolutionary party" as a general slogan.)

Not "the programme creates the party" but "the needs of the party create, and recreate the programme". Not the unity of theory and practice in the proper sense that theory, which is continually enriched by experience, guides practice, but in the sense - Tony Cliff's sense - that "theory" is at the service of practice, catering to the organisation's needs.

The very literary and "theoretical" Cliff, on one side, and Healy and Lambert on the other, had a common conception of the relationship of theory, principle and politics to the revolutionary organisation. The fact that Healy couldn't easily write a hack article and Cliff prided himself on the number of his books, is mere detail. It meant only that Cliff could do his own ideological chicane-work. What he did with theory was identical to what Healy and Lambert had their conscienceless "red professors" do [and what certain shameless academics do now for the SWP].

From 1970/71, if not from 1968, Cliff set out to adapt to his own needs the techniques and methods that had allowed the SLL to grow into a formidable organisation.

## VIII

Cliff worked according to his belief that for practical politics "tactics contradict principle". His genius was for political manoeuvring and "positioning", which was also his central concern. His last three decades were spent in

the elaboration of techniques for building a “revolutionary party” by way of pushing politics into the background so as to maximise “the party”’s stability and possibilities of growth and self conservation - irrespective of political events. He built up “the party” by way of a bewildering succession of political zig zags, dropping or picking up political positions according to calculations about their efficacy in “building the party”. Political positions that might get in the way of the organisational needs of “the party” were ruthlessly jettisoned; those that might help embraced.

Again and again he turned himself inside-out politically. He began as an advocate of independent working class politics and a bitter critic of the “orthodox” Trotskyists who lined up behind one of the two imperialist blocs - the Stalinist one. He ended with a spectacular example of reductio ad absurdum “blockist” politics: siding last year with Serb imperialism against its Albanian victims - because Serbia was against NATO.

Cliff’s position came more and more to be determined not by the necessary drive to shape and win support for an independent working class world outlook and policies, but by absolute negativism towards advanced capitalism - against no matter what. But to adopt that approach is to let your politics be rigidly determined by advanced capitalism - in a negative, inverted replica of big bourgeois politics. But that doesn’t matter if it helps “build the party”.

In Cliff’s conception of it, the “revolutionary party” rests on its own axis, is its own lodestar, its own self-sufficient point of reference. Like net revenue to a commercial enterprise, the organisation’s prosperity - its rates of expansion and recruitment - is, short of the revolution, the supreme revolutionary good, the criterion against which virtually everything else in politics is to be judged, and to which everything, including the specifics of politics and political doctrine, must if necessary be sacrificed.

## IX

The manner of Cliff’s quick-change act back to being a Leninist from 10 years as a “Luxemburgist” - simply reversing the old conclusions without changing the argument - neatly summed up the central paradoxes of Cliff. He was a theorist, an ideologue, a revolutionary Marxist intellectual - but to an astonishing extent he dealt with ideas just as means to an end, picking them up, using them and discarding them as primitive man picked up, used and discarded flints.

Shortly after Cliff’s death I was talking about him with a Marxist academic, who knew him. He posed the following question, which I would not have posed in that form for myself: “What was Cliff? He wasn’t an intellectual...” He had in mind Cliff’s peculiar dealings with ideas and the attitude thereby implied. I replied: “He was a militant.”

On one level that is to say a great deal on his behalf. But a Marxist militant, even one with none of the intellectual ambition or pretenses of Cliff or his deftness at juggling with “theory” for organisational purposes, has to have a radically different attitude to ideas than Cliff’s dropping or picking up political positions according to calculations about their efficacy in “building the party”.

Books clearly mattered to him. That was one of the things he did, one of the things that defined his identity and gave him a gauge for what he was: he wrote books. But books are ideas. The paradox of an intellectual, for whom ideas, or anyway books were important, who yet, in the spirit of a machine politician for whom ideas, slogans, programmes are all mere instruments in the service of something else, regards ideas as mere tokens and ciphers, loose change to be picked up or thrown away when convenient - that was Cliff.

Cliff’s near contemporary, Ernest Mandel, the representative figure of post-Trotsky “orthodox Trotskyism”, lived to see all his “revolutionary perspectives” collapse with the disintegration in 1989-91 of European Stalinism - his fancied “degenerated and deformed workers’ states in transition to socialism” - and must have died (in 1995) a bitterly disappointed, defeated man. Cliff, by contrast, to judge by the autobiography published just after his death, approached dissolution with a sense of great achievement, of having been proved right about Stalinism and everything else.

In fact, the collapse of Stalinism - which Cliff had considered the highest form of capitalism, overlapping in its economic forms with socialism - shattered Cliff’s theories no less than Mandel’s. He lived to see events refute everything specific to his theory of state capitalism, so that he could only sustain the belief that he was “right” by jettisoning all but the name and praising himself not for what was unique to his thinking, but for what he had had in common with every theory of Stalinist Russia that defined it as a class society. To Cliff, ideas, including even his own much-prized theory of Stalinism as state capitalism - though that is still in service as a “party” shibboleth to be brandished triumphantly: as someone said, sects change their doctrines more readily than their

names, or the names of their fetishes - were instruments, artifacts, means to organisational ends. As with "the party", form - here a nametag without its old content - is everything.

On the record, it is difficult to say exactly what there is, other than a tremendous shamanistic belief in himself and in the momentary centrality he could bestow for himself on whatever ideas he found useful, that is stable in Cliff's politics. There were fixed poles - building the party, and a few political generalities, positive ones about socialism and, far more importantly, negative ones about capitalism - but beyond that you are left with the record of a personality, not of political continuity. Where there appears to be continuity, it is often nothing more substantial than a continuity of words and name-tags - on state capitalism, for example.

X

First impressions are often the best. I vividly recall the first time I encountered Cliff and his entourage - and entourage is the right word - and the impression they made on me.

September 1960. The movement to demand that nuclear weapons be outlawed was reaching its peak. The Trade Union Congress had just come out for unilateral British nuclear disarmament; at the beginning of October, the Labour Party Conference would follow suit, opening up one of the most important political struggles in the history of the British labour movement. In the month between the TUC and Labour Party conferences, there took place a tremendous rolling mobilisation of the anti-bomb movement in cities and towns all over Britain, organised around a column of mainly young people - myself, an adolescent "Healyite", one of them - who were marching from Edinburgh to London.

I first noticed Cliff and his friends in Manchester, where there had been an enormous turnout - a very dark, prosperous-looking, tiny man in a crombie overcoat and frizzy hair - so my memory supplies it - surrounded by attentive, shepherding comrades.

They had just published the first regular issue of a 32-page A4 journal, *International Socialism*, and were out in force at the big rallies to sell it. (They were there too when we got to Birmingham, a week later.)

I stopped to buy the new journal and wound up wrangling with an exotic, elegant creature whose exaggeratedly smooth and effete upper-class English manner and accent set my national (Irish) prejudices on edge - Cliff's comrade and brother-in-law, Michael Kidron, whose origins were in fact South African and then Israeli.

Kidron called to Cliff, "Come over here, Tony, you are better at this than at selling anyway." I remember nothing of Cliff's arguments except his strong, strange accent and jerky, hectoring manner of speaking them. I do retain a sharp memory of the impression made on me by the grouping, that of a family and a delicate, cosseted child. Kidron's finessing comment about what Cliff was and was not good at, suggested a fond, more worldly sibling, or an organising, fussing parent, of the sort who proudly tells you that Johnny is no good at games, but...

That impression of a favourite child and his cossetting entourage was not a false one. The capacity to create, to recreate and to sustain an admiring, sustaining, family-type structure with himself at the centre of it - "his majesty the baby", Ygael, the genius - was central in Cliff's long political life, as indeed the deep need for it must also have been. This is at the core of an understanding of Cliff's highly personalised conception of what revolutionary politics is.

XI

In an essay on the film director Roman Polanski, the late Kenneth Tynan wrote: "He has the assurance of all the great imposers. Let me clarify the concept of 'imposing'. Derived from the French verb *s'imposer*, it is a quality of temperament or personality. It denotes the ability not only to impose one's will on others (although that is a part of it) but to dictate the conditions - social, moral, sexual, political - within which one can operate with maximum freedom. In other words, assuming one has talent, the gift of imposing is what enables one to exercise it to the full. It does not merely stake one's claim, it asserts one's authority over a given field of work. 'Inside this field', it says, 'you will defer to me'.

"Unfortunately, many untalented people have the knack of imposing; the arts are full of them, and very nasty they are. On the other hand, many talented people are quite unable to impose, being too gentle and reticent; and these are the saddest cases of all. Success or failure, fulfilment or frustration in almost every sphere of human activity is dependent on whether or not one has the trick of imposing."

Cliff had it in spades. There is a touch of "greatness" in the sheer charlatan effrontery of the assertion at the head of this piece, designed to square the prematurely defeat-accepting concept of the "downturn" - which left the SWP utterly disoriented during the first months of the miners' strike - with the greatest eruption of the class struggle in decades. It belongs in the same category as James P. Cannon's attempt, when the shooting and bombing had finally stopped, to assert that, nonetheless, World War Two wasn't really over. Reading Cliff's remark, one has to remind oneself that this strike lasted 13 months, that at different junctures - when Liverpool dockers almost joined the miners; when the pit deputies (overseers) almost came out - the miners could have won and destroyed the Thatcher government.

## XII

The dilemmas that led Cliff in 1958 to turn "Luxemburgist", mocking toy-town Leninism (and accepting Healy's toy-town antics as Leninism or rooted in Leninism) were real and they are similar to dilemmas facing us now as a result of Cliff's own work.

Bad slogans drive out good ones: raucous, pretend, ultra-leftism - it mainly is pretend, a matter of advertising slogan politics - makes measured, that is serious, left wing politics difficult. The existence of an ostensibly revolutionary organisation that is willing to say and do virtually anything for organisational advantage and is, in Tony Cliff's style, utterly shameless about it, is a political curse. Not only is there the poisonous reality of such a sect, there are the inversions of itself it throws off repeatedly, making its effect doubly poisonous. That is Cliff's legacy.

"The revolutionary party", because it is an irreplaceable means for the socialist revolution, can seem to be a self-sufficient end in itself. That is a self-defeating delusion.

For Marxists, two ideas qualify their proper concentration on building a revolutionary organisation. One is to be found in the Communist Manifesto: the communists have no interests apart from the working class; they merely point out the necessary course of its own development to the working class and the existing labour movements, and fight to win them to that course.

The other is in the Transitional Programme of Trotsky's Fourth International, listed amongst the cardinal principles that were to guide them in rebuilding revolutionary workers' parties: the communists are always and everywhere, no matter what the consequences for themselves or their "revolutionary party", guided by the logic of the class struggle.

Without these guiding notions there can be no such thing as a revolutionary socialist party, only onanistic sects. A revolutionary organisation not governed by these ideas in its quest for growth is free to counterpose itself to the labour movement, to access events in the class struggle according to its own needs, where the proper approach is the other way around. For Marxists guided by the injunctions of the Communist Manifesto, above, to go along with the nationalist poisoning of the working class in order to build their own organisation would be deeply senseless, though it might - and did - make sense to the "organisation first" neo-Trotskyists.

The joke is that those neo-Trotskyists who, for good "revolutionary" reasons, make an absolute fetish of "the party", thereby stumble inadvertently into a conception of revolutionary politics that is the Second Internationalist notion of revolutionary politics - at its most degenerate. (With, in the case of the neo-Trotskyist groups, Zinovievist and Stalinist organisational patterns superimposed on it.)

The worst example in modern British labour movement history of what this can lead to was what Militant (the Socialist Party) did during the all-defining miners' strike of 1984/5. In the leadership of the Merseyside labour movement, they could have thrown this substantial weight into the battle against the Tories. It might have meant the difference between victory and defeat, not only for the miners, but for the whole labour movement. Militant put its understanding of its own group's best interests first, and made a deal with the Tories that removed the Mersey labour movement from the decisive battle. (It bought them a year. The miners defeated, the Tories came after them, the leaders of the Labour Party following after them.) If the revolutionary organisation is sufficient in itself, such an approach is reasonable. But the revolutionary organisation is not sufficient in itself.

## XIII

Tony Cliff built a sect whose conception of politics puts its own structures in the central place the working class should occupy in its conception. It counterposes itself to the labour movement and puts its own perceived interests - how to recruit - above the interests of the labour movement, and even to the class struggle. It has for decades been organised as a cult around Cliff, with no democratic structures in which free debate or any power

of decision in the affairs of the organisation is available to the members. He leaves behind a sizeable organisation whose members have no experience of resolving political questions: that was Cliff's prerogative and those he chose to consult. Cliff's departure will, though perhaps not immediately, throw that organisation into a crisis of self-redefinition in which his political and organisational legacy will come in for a very severe reappraisal.

# The SWP/ IS: history and myth

By Sean Matgamna. From Workers' Liberty 42 (1997) [1]

Eric Hobsbawm somewhere discusses one of the oddest conundrums in labour historiography, one paralleled now in the historiography of IS/SWP: the 20th century reputation of the Fabian Society as far-sighted pioneers of independent labour representation - the gap between what was and what is afterwards widely accepted as having been. The facts flatly contradicted the Fabians' reputation. They opposed independent working-class politics for as long as they could, pursuing a policy of 'permeating' the Liberal Party with ideas about state and municipal enterprise. They 'come in' late to the movement for a Labour Party. Yet, by the time the Party was a force in national politics, their reputation as the vindicated pioneers was enormous. How come? Many Fabians were journalists and writers, and they 'permeated' and shaped much of the subsequent historiography.

The gap between the Socialist Review/International Socialists [SR/IS] group's 'posthumous' reputation and the facts of their history is of the same magnitude. I think it owes much to the same sort of cause. Former ISers write, reminisce, rationalise, romanticise, retrospectively select and reconstruct. From Gus MacDonald, who edited the youth paper Young Guard in the '60s and is now head of Scotland's commercial TV network, downwards (or upwards), such people are extremely numerous in the media. Many who have moved on politically but remain 'left' tend to glorify IS - themselves when young - in retrospect, clinging to the self-image they once had, even when they feel obliged to add criticism of what it has become - that is, vindicate what they themselves now are.

The SWP itself has over decades worked at honing and polishing and refining, and bowdlerising, to create a heroic myth of its own origin and early glories. And why not? What, as the cynical Stalinist once asked, is history after all but current politics and current organisational needs read backwards?

But the revolutionary movement has to be the true and full memory of the class. If history is not recorded accurately, then we cannot learn the lessons of our own experience, and the experience of the movement. We cannot develop. Awareness, intelligence, capacity to integrate experience declines. The experience of the Healyites here is a grim warning for the SWP too. By falsifying, and then again falsifying, at every turn, the SLL rendered themselves incapable of learning from their own history. It was one of the causes of their utter political destruction.

Those who falsify history, or hone and pare the unruly truth into pretty stories, cultivating myth on the soil of induced amnesia, put out the retrospective eyes of the movement. They corrupt the consciousness of those who need to learn from history if they are not to repeat it.

In Ian Birchall's history [2], published by the SWP, there are many lies, mostly lies of omission. Birchall's is 'history' reduced to a simple, uncomplicated story, to the sort of thing that might in an earlier age have furnished believers with short texts for rendition in poker-work or fretwork for display on living room walls.

Socialist Review/IS was sane, rational, balanced, realistic, modest. They were, above all else, as they continuously boasted, "modest" - self-assertively, preeningly, proudly, arrogantly, Pecksniffianly, overweeningly modest. They had a full, authentic, free-flowing Marxism, with a membership, and an overall high political culture, to match. They had learned from Rosa Luxemburg. In contrast to all others, they got it right about Stalinism. The theory of state capitalism, their talisman and lodestone, kept the group uniquely on a steady, consistently working-class course. The story is usually told as if there is only one state capitalist theory, which emerged in 1948 from the inspired brain of Cliff. IS got it right about the revival of capitalism in the '60s. SR/IS stood out for these qualities against all other things Trotskyist or Trotskyisant. They were in a league of one and in a class of their own.

In reality SR/IS was a group whose relationship, in the '50s and early '60s, to the more enterprising Healy organisation which tried to organise broad activity in the labour movement, was that they would 'intervene' in their activities - Labour Party and trade union - to make propaganda. They would score points. Often ridiculous points. (Some of the incidental things they said were, I think, right against the Healyites, as on German rearmament, for example.)

In its much-romanticised great days of the '60s, IS was distinguished from other 'Trotskyists' - and, probably, from the SR group of the '50s - by the middle-class and upper-bourgeois background of many of its members

and by the, sometimes deliberately flaunted, and even camped-up, bourgeois ethos that saturated it. It was, indeed, in a class of its own!

It operated on the assumption that capitalism was stable and expanding and would remain so, not “forever”, but for now and the foreseeable future.

In a ‘credo’ published at the beginning of 1961 for an international audience [3], the Editorial Board of IS presented its operational assumptions.

“Let us admit it: workers have lost some of the consciousness of class over the post-war years...They have lost some of the cohesion, some of the power of concerted collective action which alone can snatch mankind from the brink of disaster...the socialist movement presents a picture of lifeless orthodoxies...and sects feeding off each other...There is no point bemoaning these facts, or thinking that the socialist tradition is valueless simply because our lives happen to span a period of reaction. Capitalism is in a surge of expansion. We can do nothing about it and little in the short run to stop the setback to the socialist movement that stems from it...Our actions cannot be on a heroic scale only. A slogan, any slogan, is unlikely to catch the imagination of millions and crystallise mass action...”

This bit of middle-class despair-mongering was ‘balanced’ by grand but vague and unfocused conclusions about what in this world socialists could hope to do:

“Our job is simpler and more difficult: to help formulate and clarify the consciousness of class, the feeling of self-reliance, of constituting an alternative centre of power and government the world over...[their emphasis].”

The IS ‘credo’ was published just after the great December 1960-January 1961 general strike in Belgium. Cliff would use the May 1968 French general strike, which was spontaneous, but surely not qualitatively different, to signal a ‘return to Bolshevism’. The only lesson they learned from Belgium was that ‘Jeune Garde’, the name of the Belgian Young Socialists’ paper, was a good name. Thus Young Guard.

On the ground in Britain the organisation drew far-reaching conclusions - mirroring the Croslandite Labour right wing then, just as after 1979 it would, with its ‘theory’ of ‘the downturn’, mirror Eric Hobsbawm and Marxism Today - and - theories about Stalinism, aside - it was these, above all, that distinguished them from, for example, the Healyite SLL. In the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS), for example, they operated on a perspective of long-time boom and long-time coexistence with the Labour bureaucracy.

Hegemonised, like all the Marxist groups, only more so, by the success of reformism in the 1940s and 1950s, the group’s “Luxemburgism” meant ideas such as this: as Luxemburg did not leave the social democrats until late - 1918 - so revolutionaries will not leave the Labour Party until the revolutionary workers are on the streets. For example, the 1959 edition of Rosa Luxemburg [4]:

“Rosa Luxemburg’s reluctance to form an independent revolutionary party is quite often cited by Stalinists as a grave error and an important cause for the defeat of the German revolution of 1918. They argue that Lenin was opposed to the revolutionary lefts’ adherence to the SPD and continuing association with Kautsky. There is no truth at all in this legend. [This passage was expurgated from the 1968 edition.]”

Not only Stalinists considered it a grave error! Lenin, July 1921: “We know the history of the Second International, its fall and bankruptcy. Do we not know that the great misfortune of the working class movement in Germany is that the break was not brought about before the war? This cost the lives of 20,000 workers...”

Luxemburg understood the German Kautskyite ‘Centre’ sooner than did Lenin. It was a question not of who said what first, but of a mature summing-up by Lenin and the Communist International of the defeat of the German revolution. When Cliff dismissed this he was dismissing not a Stalinist legend but the Leninist theory of the party, in its most finished - Communist International - form. The point, however, is that Cliff - in 1959! - refused to draw serious Marxist conclusions from the experience of the German left.

As late as the crisis in the LPYS on the eve of the Wilson government, a central leader of the group, John Palmer, could hold out these perspectives for the Labour youth movement, in which IS had the leadership of the non-SLL left, and firmly rejected the idea of head-on conflict with the bureaucratic political leaders of reformism:

“The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce those frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. One thing must be

made clear above all. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement.” [5]

A tall order if a fighting socialist youth movement is meant. The right-wing Labour leaders would soon be in government, carrying out vicious attacks on the working class. The point is that Young Guard had a rather cosy view of the future. At issue with the SLL - then - was not staying in or leaving the Labour Party, but whether or not Marxists should organise a small combat party.

Until they developed a perspective of rank and file industrial work, in the mid '60s, IS did not believe much could be done or attempted. Capitalism was stable, and would remain so for many years. In the mythology IS was being realistic, as against the SLL. In fact, they were no more realistic in their assessment than the SLL - different, erring on the other side, but not more realistic.

If the Healyites were scrap-happy and, like the SWP today, bent on needless self-isolation from the existing broad labour movement, IS was not a 'sane and sensible' revolutionary alternative to the SLL, but their rightist, quietist, middle-class mirror-image. This in the mythical histories is 'the propaganda period', when nothing else was possible but propaganda. They neglect to point out that the governing ideas of the group were a large part of the reason why anything else was impossible.

Believing that capitalism was - for now - indefinitely expanding and stable, they were bitterly disappointed after 1964 that the Labour government did not deliver reforms to the working class. They drifted out of the Labour Party, where they had the leadership of the LPYS, more or less, after 1967 without a fight.

But, in fact, even if they had been right about the prospects for capitalism, for Marxists in Lenin's and Trotsky's school, their conclusion about what socialists should do and try to do, and about the nature of the organisation socialists should be building within the mass labour movement, simply would not follow. Marxists would build a serious organisation in the limited struggles, in preparation for when conditions broke.

The wild lurchings of Cliff in 1968, 'back' to Lenin and back to building a Leninist party; the scattering, in a tremendous convulsion of the group, of some of the 'libertarian' forces IS had assembled; and the transparently contrived nature of the arguments and rationalisations that accompanied the lurch of '68 - these were the measure of the nonsense spun in IS's pseudo-Luxemburg period.

Until 1967/'68 the cadres were assembled on a vehement anti-Leninism. The operational idea of the organisation was that Leninism had bred Stalinism. Committed to being citizens of the existing labour movement, they were governed by the idea that any revolutionary initiative or leadership - in practice, almost any initiative by revolutionaries - risked or committed the sin of "substitutionism", and had to be avoided lest the bad example of Bolshevism - and, nearer home, the SLL - be succumbed to [6]. Such ideas were deeply rooted in the group after '59/'60.

By hints and half-thoughts, Cliff's writings of this period [7] postulated a serious connection between Bolshevism and Stalinism. For Cliff, like the mouse in the proverb, there is no animal bigger than the cat - the Healyite cat at that point. And what was said or hinted about Bolshevism and Stalinism was really designed to say something about the Healyites. It depends on hints and ambiguities, but the effect is clear. For example:

"However, if the state built by the Bolshevik Party reflected not only the will of the Party but of the total social reality in which the Bolsheviks had now found themselves, one should not draw the conclusion that there was no causal connection at all between Bolshevik centralism, based on a hierarchy of professional revolutionaries, and the Stalinism of the future." [note: IS summer 1960] [emphasis added].

What was this causal connection? Cliff does not - can not - spell it out, merely connecting it in general with the phenomenon of 'unevenness':

"From this unevenness in the working class flows the great danger of an autonomous development of the party and its machine, till it becomes, instead of the servant of the class, its master. This unevenness is a main cause of the danger of substitutionism". "The history of Bolshevism prior to the revolution is eloquent with Lenin's struggle against this danger...". "Bolshevism" surrendered to it in the end? Centralism and a machine amount to an inherent tendency to substitutionism.



But neither the Bolshevik party nor its machine ever became the master. Stalinism did not flow evenly from organic changes in Bolshevism. It was its dialectical negation. It rose on the mass graves of Lenin's Bolsheviks, against resistance, to the death, by those who had led the October revolution, Trotsky and others.

None of it was seriously argued or intellectually weighty against Trotsky's refutations of such ideas, and it was not, in Cliff, developed into a bravely clear and unambivalent position. But, beyond the writings, in the group and on the ground, the half-hearted stuff in Cliff came crude and raw to mean - in the LPYS, for example - a bundling of Bolshevism into the same bag as Stalinism, its murderer.

In reality, to a massive extent, the group's history is the history of incoherent zig zags and numerous "quick change" operations. These were always the result of Tony Cliff's brainstorm, perceived opportunities, or factional needs, or the pet ideas of others who had captured Cliff's support. They were made - and still are made - with solipsistic disregard for logic or consistency. Or for what was said yesterday.

To take a most startling example: Cliff broke with the SR's conventionally Trotskyist ideas on Leninism and became an anti-Lenin "Luxemburgist" - anti-Leninist "Luxemburgism" until then had had its British home in the ILP [8] - in '58/9 in a mechanical, albeit panicked, response to the growth and magnetic pull of Healy's supposedly "Leninist" organisation. The SR group had mimicked and echoed the Healy organisation, even to word for word repetition of its slogans, such as - against nuclear weapons and US bases - "Black the bomb, black the bases" [black meant workers should refrain from all work on such things]. All but two or three of the members of the Socialist Review group voted - the vote was soon reversed - to join the Healy organisation.

And Cliff "moved back to Lenin" in '68 almost certainly because of the "opportunities" for group aggrandisement that then existed, concerning which much depended on the Healyite SLL's effective political hara-kiri over a long and excruciating period of increasing craziness. In an exact and perfect parallel to his appropriation of the ILP's anti-Lenin "Luxemburgism", Cliff after '68 would begin to appropriate and over years systematically adopt much of the "build the party" neo-Oehlerite culture of the '60s Healy group.

What is now "Cliffism" was then pre-crazy Healyism. The whole present SWP system - of substituting a fetish, "build the revolutionary party", for real politics; of subordinating all questions of working class politics, and all responses to the real class struggle, to the exigencies of organisation-building; of running the organisation as a tight, systematically sealed-off cult - all this was pioneered in Britain by the Healy group, to the early derision of IS, which foolishly then equated it with Leninism, Bolshevism and unfalsified Trotskyism.

In terms of the facts, SR/IS history such as this needs a lot of explaining. Birchall simply repeats Cliff's rationalisation and the "good"; as distinct from the real, reasons, at each point in the story, with a feeble little bit of academic's pseudo-criticism here and there to show independence. If what was said on day two flatly contradicts what was said, done and polemicised about on day one, that is fine. Conditions were "different", or not ripe, then, on day one; they were ripe on day two. Who should know about ripeness and unripeness, about the time to sow - and what - and the time to reap? The shaman knows. Cliff knows. On day one, it was necessary and right to "bend the stick" in whatever direction Cliff was facing that day. The same on day two, on day ten... and always. "Forever and ever. Amen."

Birchall's account is essentially history told, so to speak, in the first person. The name of the author is Ian Birchall, but the "I" is Tony Cliff. At every stage in the story, what was, just has to be so. Just so. Everything was always more or less for the best in the best of all tendencies. If this were pop music it would be a corseted, toupéed, heavily made-up, self-infatuated, middle-aged man singing "My Way"!

Birchall achieves his effects by selection and suppression, and by ignoring what does not fit the artistic needs of a mythmaking bard, spinning imaginary political genealogies. He gets maximum favourable contrast for IS by measuring it repeatedly against the habitually, though variably, silly IMG of the late '60s and early '70s, minimising the IS group's decades of interaction with the Healy group.

Typically, Birchall mythologises: IS's opposition in 1965 to a Labour government regulated Incomes Policy "left it almost completely isolated from the rest of the left", he says. Which left? Not, apart from the IMG-ingestion, any part of the revolutionary left! But the relevant - and implied - left for comparison here is the Marxist left. This is a representative example of the tricky play with definitions, on which so much depends. While making much of IS virtue in opposing Incomes Policy, Birchall is silent about Michael Kidron freakishly accepting that trade unions should be involved in the Tory National Economic Development Council [Socialist Review, December 1961; letter by Sheila Leslie, March 1962].

The SR group - which was, at the start, just a Trotskyist group with a particular analysis of the USSR - and IS did have virtues. It was an organisation in which real discussion was possible and in which differences of opinion coexisted, and where issues were discussed as often as dogmatised about, in marked contrast to the organisations of post-Trotsky "Trotskyism" and to the IS/SWP from the early '70s. It did do what it could to maintain a working class orientation; it did insist on the need for commitment to working class action in face of the soul-rotted "academic Marxism" of the late '60s and '70s.

Yet the 'virtues' were not always what you might be led to deduce from the SR/IS theoretical positions. Paradoxical though it is, the root-and-branch anti-Stalinist 'state caps' in the '60s found it much easier to cosy up to the CP and the CP-influenced peace campaigners and Labour left than the Trotskyists who believed in "defending the Soviet Union" ever did. We were more combative and usually more vociferous against "Stalinism". It was IS that was able in 1965 to publish a book [9] carrying a preface by a Stalinist trade union official, Reg Birch. The IS group in 1968 could contain people soft on varieties of Stalinism: the Manchester branch lost much-prized engineering workers - who resigned because the group condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia!

I cite these examples only to establish broadly for the reader just how unreliable the "conventional history" of the Group is. I will return to some of these points...

But it isn't only Birchall - or Jim Higgins. You get essentially the same laudatory and, as I will show, in terms of history, fantastic, version of SR and '60s IS in the non-official accounts and in the work of 'critics', for example, in the useful account of SR/IS published by Martin Shaw, a one-time member turned hostile. [10]

Most fantastic of all - but in its way useful - in the realms of IS historiography is the long account of '60s IS published by Christopher Hitchens as a review of two SWP publications under the title 'In the Bright Autumn of My Senescence'. [11]

Hitchens left IS in the mid '70s, and now works the licensed-rebel side of the street in bourgeois journalism, as a columnist for Vanity Fair and on other publications. He dislikes the organisation after he left it, when his feelings about himself separated from his feelings about the organisation. But God, how he loved it before, when he was young and an indescribably wonderful part of an incomparable organisation!

"The essential [IS] precepts descended from Luxemburg rather than Lenin. They consisted of three or four central tenets. These were that, contrary to the babble of smart-asses like Crosland, Britain was still a class society in every sense of the term... That the capitalist system had only temporarily stabilised itself.

"While in a conflict like Korea the only principled policy was that of a plague on both houses, in the case of Vietnam one should openly declare for the Vietcong while regretfully bearing in mind... I found that I rather liked the pessoptimism of this, with its implication that one could with perfect honesty keep two sets of books. The best thing to do was to work, and think, without illusions. 'Without illusions', indeed, was a signature phrase of The Group. In the coming years, I was to do many things, and hold many positions, 'without illusions'. It was a good induction, and a good training.

"We gleefully joined battle with the hippies and flower-power jerks and all the Guevara pin-up factions. Want to talk real politics? Want to get in touch with authentic struggle? If you're serious, come along and talk to us.

"There was a fair bit of talent in and around The Group in those days. Aside from Cliff there was Paul Foot, a masterly orator who specialised in the ridiculing of Labourism and the exposure of crooks and fascists. Then Alasdair MacIntyre, who could tell Kautsky from Korsch. Michael Kidron, a sardonic sophisticate with a refined taste in political economy. John Palmer, a polymathic journalist capable of synthesising the latest news into crystalline agitational prose. Eamonn McCann, a street-fighter from Derry with amazing literary gifts and Nigel Harris, who knew about the Third World and could write about it without sentimentality. Peter Sedgwick, the conscience of us all and the satirist of the ideologues. Plus a network of self-taught trade-unionists who could talk about Spain, about the tricks of their craft, about the time they had produced socialist leaflets in Germany for the prisoners of war on forced labour, about the difference between Bordiga and Gramsci, about anything.

"And in debate with other clubs or other factions, we never had to worry that our speaker would come off second. We went looking for arguments, sensing that others were trying to sit them out, or avoid them altogether."

This is narcissism raised in intensity to the power of spontaneous multiple orgasm!

Yet Hitchens' piece is itself valuable documentation of IS's real history. Here you have an undiluted rendition of the extraordinary self-image of large parts of the IS middle-class cadre at the end of the '60s. In fact, much of it had as its real substance, politics the mere outlet, the effortless, inbred, alpha dog superiority and visceral self-approbation of the big bourgeoisie.

All this, and its ideology, is there in superabundance in Hitchens. What is not there is any remotely realistic account of the group and its politics and its role in socialist affairs and in the labour movement as they really were.

There is one way, as easy as it is pertinent, to test whether the mythmakers' picture of IS is true on either the Hitchens/Birchall or Shaw level: if so, how then to explain what happened to the Manchester segment of this peerless organisation? Workers' Fight - what became the Trotskyist Tendency of IS - walked into Manchester IS in October/November 1968 and in a few weeks took over the biggest [12] IS branch in the country (one moreover with a four or five year history behind it)?

And we, be it remembered, and the mythmakers insist on it, were primitive sectarians talking gibberish on many things, and 'disruptive' too. How could such a thing happen?

Didn't all those much advertised and fondly remembered qualities of the IS, the 'IS tradition', IS theory, IS practice, and the typical IS alpha dog member, count for anything against us? If not, why not? It is a plain matter of fact that they didn't; and, moreover, it is a well documented fact that the IS organisation had to take special, non-political emergency measures to curb the Trotskyist Tendency, culminating in 1969 in the creation of ghetto branches. In Manchester that was done against the recorded vote of over 75% of the branch, the majority not Trotskyist Tendency members, all of whom then chose to be ghettoised themselves rather than submit to the diktat of the Cliffite centre and the branch minority, and ghettoise the Trotskyist Tendency.

If the golden legend of SR/IS is true, that is surely remarkable. In fact, it becomes almost inexplicable.

I know that history offers precedents where barbarians from the steppes or the dark forests invaded and overwhelmed much higher civilisations. So, the massed ranks of Workers' Fight came out of the proletarian wilds of Manchester, like Pol Pot out of the jungle, and swamped the island of Marxist political civilisation that was Manchester IS?

There were only four of us in Manchester Workers' Fight, and 51 or 55 [13] in the IS branch! And the old IS branch was part of a national organisation 1,000 strong, and Workers' Fight of one with nine - possibly 10 - members. [14]

Does history have another example of such a catastrophe for civilisation in which so many of the civilised were overwhelmed by so few of the barbarians?

To mock the IS stalwarts' Malvolian conceit, and possibly giving expression to my own, I would recall that in one of his pamphlets Dan DeLeon had compared the disciplined revolutionary socialist party he was advocating to the Spanish soldiers of Francisco Pizarro, numbering about 150, who in the 1530s had invaded and conquered the vast Inca empire (covering present-day Peru and much of Chile). I would of course, conscientiously recall, and the parallel with IS in 1968 didn't need to be stated, that Pizarro's little army had horses, guns, the force of Inca superstition and the chaos of a recent Inca civil war working for them, and the luck and audacity to capture the Incas' king-god, Atahualpa. That joke, I fear, fell far below the then regulation IS "modesty". Was it that we were, indeed, a group such as DeLeon had in mind?

Not quite! When we fused with IS, Workers' Fight had been in existence two years, and as a public recruiting organisation for a year. Though our Trotskyist political tradition - and what we made of it - was greatly superior to the pauper's broth of eclecticism and middle-class faddism we confronted in IS, our resources, knowledge and confidence were narrow, limited by age and experience.

Well then, the explanation must be - 'like unto like'. IS had recently doubled in size, pulling in a lot of politically uneducated people. Workers' Fight must have taken advantage of the fact to recruit clueless youngsters, who had not had time to absorb the rich IS political culture. No: it was the cadre of the branch who came over to the Trotskyist Tendency. Within a couple of months we won over almost without exception the entire cadre of IS's biggest branch. (And had Atahualpa lived in Manchester, we might have done even better, but, unfortunately, he lived in Stoke Newington.)

The sole, important exception was Colin Barker, and he was only a partial exception: in the first months, on every single question except the “class character” of the USSR and its “defence against imperialism”, he agreed with us and, in his honest desire to come to terms with IS’s past, in effect, though with increasing reluctance, made propaganda for what were - such was the logic of the situation in the branch - our politics.

Author’s Doppelganger: So, it was Workers’ Fight Hitchens really had in mind when he described IS, above? Ye were wonderful?

A warming idea! But it will be healthy to remember and underline the not unimportant fact - though it can only deepen the mystery Manchester IS in ‘68 must pose to the devotees of the IS myth - that what we won them to was in part, because we were wrong in our theoretical understanding of Stalinism, a false alternative to IS’s - false - theories.

The basic explanation for what happened is that there had been a long, preceding, pre-’68, political convergence between post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” and IS, and between Workers’ Fight, which on Stalinism was not quite typical of post-Trotsky Trotskyists, and IS. On its side, IS had already by 1968 - when everything was thrown into the melting pot by Cliff’s sudden declaration “for Leninism” - made so many catch-penny shifts in the direction of post-Trotsky “Trotskyist” politics - it was a process that would go on, making them, still “state caps”, into caricature ‘Pabloites’, eventually into backers of even Saddam Hussein - that many of its people did not know whether they were coming or going. After many incoherent shifts, on Vietnam, for example, IS was in transition to becoming the organisation of ‘kitsch Trotskyism with doctrinal quirks” it was by the ‘70s. Travelling the other way - too slowly, far too slowly, but travelling - Workers’ Fight intersected it.

Workers’ Fight from the beginning always drew the sharpest - we said Trotsky-consistent - anti-Stalinist political conclusions within the degenerated and deformed workers’ states schemas. [15] The Trotskyist Tendency believed it was the duty of revolutionary socialists to work for a “political revolution” and for the liberation of the oppressed nations in the Stalinist states. We followed Trotsky - so we thought - and “Defended the Soviet Union against being overthrown by imperialism” - that was how we put it and all we meant by it - but we did not see it then, in the world of the 1960s, in which the USSR was one of the two great world powers, as being of any immediate, political consequence: it was, we insisted against the IS majority, “an important orientation issue”.

If you do not know the political atmosphere of the time and the way IS related to the inchoate, populist revolutionary milieu, it will seem strange, but the Trotskyist Tendency was much harder, more consistent and more heartfelt in its hostility to all species of Stalinism than were large swathes of the “state capitalist” organisation with which we had fused.

In the three years of the fusion there was not one single practical, political issue concerning Stalinism in which differences arose between the Trotskyist Tendency and the IS majority. Where, arguably, we were “soft” - on Vietnam, letting “anti-imperialism” blunt our anti-Stalinism - so was IS, and, large parts of it, more so. It was a time when some of IS’s leading ‘libertarians’ could be seen - I saw Peter Sedgwick - snake-dancing on Vietnam War demos chanting “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh//We shall fight and we shall win.” The words would have choked me.

If the mythmakers’ picture of IS were ever true - and it wasn’t - it was no longer true by the late ‘60s; and if it was true then of the group’s publications, International Socialist and Socialist Worker - and that claim, though better founded than claims for the organisation, will not bear close examination either - then an enormous qualification has to be made: none of it was remotely true of IS as a whole. Theory, such as it was, and developed Marxist culture, such as it was, was the possession of a thin stratum of the group. The ranks had their own culture; demagogues mediated between the group and the mandarins, of which the first was Cliff, and after him John Palmer, Paul Foot and, after his resurrection in 1968, Duncan Hallas. [16]

The Trotskyist Tendency offered politics which I now think were wrong on key points of general theory but which - it is a statement that remains to be substantiated - on everything, from anti-Vietnam war work to industrial work to “building the revolutionary party”, seemed to many in IS to be - and on the whole were - more coherent than IS’s politics, because they made more sense of the political activities and political attitudes which attracted people to IS, that is of what IS was doing, than did the official group politics and the often desperate rationalisations for opportunist twists and turns that characterised Cliff.

For example: when, in 1968, Cliff decided to become a ‘Leninist’ again and advocated a “democratic centralist revolutionary party”, it was a response to the unexpected, quick growth of IS and to the fact that the SLL, getting crazier and crazier, was ceasing to be a serious competitor. But he presented it as a conclusion he drew from the

May '68 French general strike: yet he had drawn no such conclusions from the great Belgian strike seven years earlier... He issued a second edition of Rosa Luxemburg in which, without explanation, and changing only the summary paragraph, he came out for Lenin against Luxemburg where in the first edition he was for Luxemburg against Lenin! [17]

You can't be sure about such things, but probably the decisive, first stage in the Trotskyist Tendency's winning over Manchester IS was a branch meeting just after the fusion where I head-banged with Tony Cliff on this and other aspects of the revolutionary party question - which the Trotskyist Tendency thought was the decisive question. He refused to admit that he had been mistaken at any point, though he was flatly contradicting what he had been saying for a decade: his difficulty was in trying to satisfy both the old IS "libertarians" in the branch, who accused him of betraying them and the IS tradition, and those who were inclined to agree with him now, but were bewildered by the past position, on which the group as it was in 1968 had been built. Such squirming could not but bring discredit in the eyes of self-respecting, thinking IS members. We - on the "party" question - offered them coherent answers and a tradition with sense and continuity in it.

To conclude: there is no evidence that the much advertised political and ideological lucidity was ever true of the group at any point in its real - as distinct from mythical - history. Far from the real picture of IS corresponding to the organisation's self-glorifying mythology and PR stuff, the picture fondly repeated by ex-members in varying degrees of political decrepitude and amnesia, by 1968 IS was organisationally and intellectually - in first and foremost, intellectually - in chaos.

1 As in the previous article ["A funny tale agreed upon?", Workers' Liberty 41] I will, where appropriate, tell the story in terms of my own experience. The author was in IS and represented the Trotskyist Tendency on its National Committee from November 1968 to December 1971.

2 The Smallest Mass Party in the World - The SWP 1951-79 (1980). Birchall repeats the IS leadership's equivalent for the Trotskyist Tendency (TT) of the policeman accusing his target of headbutting his truncheon, that the TT caused "a serious disruption of IS's work in a number of areas". No, we didn't! I will discuss the IS leaders' response to the TT, by way of the policy of splitting branches - what the TT called "ghettoisation". While Birchall's account is evasive and, in the last reduction untrue, he does not repeat the ridiculous - but very widespread - story - Higgins repeats it - that the TT wanted the repartition of Ireland in 1969. This may be - unless my memory is badly at fault - because he himself was in or around the "Democratic Centralist" group - Constance Lever, Noel Tracey, Fred Lindop, etc. - which backed our IS conference resolution on Ireland offering only a few, no doubt sorely needed, drafting amendments.

3 In vol 3, no 1, 1961 of the Review, at the Imre Nagy Institute, Brussels.

4 Tony Cliff Rosa Luxemburg [dated 1959, actually published early 1960].

5 Young Guard

6 Even, to take a well-documented example, when they found themselves in the leadership of a shop stewards committee at the crisis-ridden ENV engineering works in west London. IS Journal, summer 1967.

7 Tony Cliff, "On Substitutionism", IS Journal summer 1960; Rosa Luxemburg, 1959/60.

8 The evidence for what happened in '58/'59 is mostly to be found in Socialist Leader, the paper of the Independent Labour Party, then a small, sectarian group [in SL 29.9.59, for example].

9 Cliff and Barker on Incomes Policy, 1965.

10 Shaw: "The 'SR group' came to represent the polar opposite to the SLL: realistic in economic perspectives, able to explain the failures of Labour bureaucrats as well as to condemn them...the SR group was the most coherent, open and Marxist alternative to the dominant 'orthodoxy' of the 'SLL'..." Socialist Register, 1978. There is evidence in Shaw of some aspiration to truth-telling: he simply doesn't understand very much about the whys and wherefores of the things he chronicles. There is curious evasion in his treatment of the prolonged '69/'70 IS discussions on Ireland. He was in the organisation then, but he merely says that he 'accepts' Ian Birchall's account. There is probably a name for lying by citing an 'authority' you know to be untrustworthy: "Lying by proxy" perhaps.

11 London Review of Books. It is surely very strange to find Tony Cliff described thus by Christopher Hitchens in January 1994 - Cliff, who has turned IS/SWP into a rigid, quasi-religious sect which expelled people for even questioning the SWP's brief lurch into campaigning for a general strike in 1992 - from the lowest point of class struggle this century to a TUC-led general strike in one step! -

"He wanted people to reason on their own. He came back to me...when I read Irving Howe's memoirs of the New York Trotskyist milieu...his description of Max Shachtman..." "in the cramped quarter of the seat he seemed uneasy as ideologue and leader". And a lot more. Nothing is said about what IS/SWP has become as an organisation; what, in fact, it had become before Hitchens' mid '70s break with it...But why should anyone

expect these people to be understanding now, in the Bright Autumn of Their Senescence, when they really did not understand all that much in Their Verdant Spring of Prime Alpha Dog Puppyhood?

12 I have to rely on memory here. It is possible one of the London branches was marginally bigger.

13 Records vary.

14 Three of us, Rachel Lever, Phil Semp, myself, and an unstable youth, Graeme Atkinson, left Militant in October 1966. In the subsequent year we produced the magazine Workers' Republic as part of the Irish Workers' Group, while doing local and industrial work - notably in the docks. Workers' Fight No.1 appeared in October 1967. For the first six months of its existence, Workers' Fight was blighted by our involvement in a fierce faction fight in the Irish Workers' Group (in which IS was also centrally involved, on the other side).

On the eve of fusion, we had nine members in Manchester. One, Trevor Fox, died in his mid-20s in an accident. Four left Workers' Fight rather than fuse with IS. Two of those who fused with IS, Linda and Harold Youd, had joined Workers' Fight in early 1968, after spending nearly a decade in the Young Communist League/CP. Harold founded the National Ports Shop Stewards Committee - which the CP immediately seized.

Leaving Trevor Fox and Rachel Lever aside, the whole pre-fusion Manchester group, those who did not fuse with IS, as well as Harold and Linda Youd, who did, had come out of the YCL/CP, and were people I'd known for nearly a decade from my days in the same organisation.

15 We had stated our basic position as follows in the Irish Workers' Group against a combination in which, as it happened, Tony Cliff had lined up his followers alongside Stalinists, Deutscherites and Guevarists:

"The Stalinist states and Cuba [are] deformed and degenerated workers' states. We insist sharply on a consistent Trotskyist understanding of what this degeneration means for the workers in these states: we are not liberal Stalinists, Deutscherites or 'Pabloites' - but Trotskyists. We stress the need for a deep-going workers' revolution in these states - as does the Preamble to the IWG Constitution. We declare that any interpretation of the deformed workers' states theory that denies the need for a "supplementary" workers' political revolution, one with very deep-going social reorganisation, which must accompany the smashing of the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy - any interpretation that denies this, or questions it, or leaves the question open, amounts to a capitulation to Stalinism, and therefore is a Deutscherite breach with all but the "letter" of Trotskyism. It entirely cuts away the revolutionary side of the workers' state designation. For us the essence of Trotskyism is first and foremost a reliance on the working class as the protagonist of history - and not on the bureaucracy and its hangers on or on the various nationalist petty-bourgeois formations which spring up. This for us is what divides revolutionary Marxists from the Left Stalinists and Deutscherites and the various brands of Deutscherism known as 'Pabloism'."

16 The peculiar relationship of theory and practice, of prattle to praxis, in IS was described thus in a document of the Trotskyist Tendency in mid '71:

"IS has a pretty solid body of theory and is nearer than almost all the 'orthodox' Trotskyist groups to a 'party' in the sense of being a rounded 'whole' - however small and however far from being able to play the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the class. The 'orthodox' groups are all to a far greater extent than IS mere factions that have failed to become anything wider.

"Yet I agree with [your] statement that IS has contempt for theory. Why? Because the IS theory is the possession of a handful of mandarins, who function as both a group mandarin and as a segment of normal academic Britain. What theory there is, is their theory: they are quite snobbish about it. For the non-initiated popularisations will do.

"This, of course, is inseparable from a manipulationist conception of the organisation. The members don't need to know the theories - the leaders can be relied upon - and demagoguery and word-spinning phrasemongers like Cliff and Palmer can bridge the gap. It is in this sense that IS has contempt for theory - contempt for the Marxist conception of theory and its necessary relationship to the organisation as a leaven and tool of the whole group.

"Contempt' is not the best expression for it, though, is it? The priestly caste most certainly have contempt - for the uninitiated - but their theory is their special treasure, their badge of rank, their test for membership of the inner elite. There actually is such open caste snobbery in IS - as you know...The second and real sense of IS's 'contempt for theory' is in their use of theory, the function of theory, the relationship of theory to practice: there is no connection between the two for IS. Do you know that in last week's debate [on the European Community] at the National Committee Cliff said and repeated that principles and tactics contradict each other in real life!

"This is organically connected, of course, with their mandarinism...It is an esoteric knowledge - for if principles contradict tactics and practice, if theory is not a practical and necessary tool, if theory and practice are related only in the sense that theory sums up (in one way or another) past practice, perhaps vivified with a coat of impressionistic paint distilled from what's going on around at the time - but not in the sense that theory is the source of precepts to guide practice, to aid in the practical exploration of reality - why then, where is the incentive to spread theoretical knowledge? What is to prevent the polarisation of the organisation into the mandarins and the subjects of the demagogic manipulation of the mandarins and their lieutenants? What is to prevent the esoteric knowledge of the mandarins from being just one intellectual 'in-group's defining characteristic, to be played with, juggled with, and to do all sorts of wonderful tricks with: after all, it is very

rarely tested since it doesn't relate to reality. Consider the state-capitalist theory...relating to China, Korea, and to Vietnam. Take those three together, look at the history of the group - there is no possible consistency. The theory is one thing - reactions to Korea in 1950 and Vietnam in 1967 entirely a matter of mood, impressions, pressures, etc., etc.

“.It is a question of the conscious method versus the clever juggling of people in the central IS leadership who are subjectively revolutionaries - but entirely bourgeois in their method of thinking and conception of politics. These people are very like the Lovestoneites...”

[Excerpt from a document by the present writer given limited internal circulation in Workers' Fight, 1971.]

17 An internal IS issue of Workers' Fight carried a long article by the present writer on the whole question of IS and the revolutionary party:

“In Luxemburg, edition '68, Cliff is a changed man! Nowhere is the result more startling than in the final paragraph of the chapter on Luxemburg and Lenin.

“1959 edition: ‘For Marxists in advanced industrial countries, Lenin’s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg’s, notwithstanding her overstatements on the question of spontaneity.’”

“1968 edition: ‘However, whatever the historical circumstances moulding Rosa’s thoughts regarding organisation, these thoughts showed a great weakness in the German revolution of 1918-19.’”

“Of course people change their minds. When Marxists do so it would be good to know why and how. The important thing here too is method. A Marxist’s exposition is based on an analysis of the real world to which he brings certain conceptions: his conclusions are drawn from his analysis. Thus the train of thought is clear, the reasoning and considerations are designed to expound, to convince. In this case there is a mystery: one and the same exposition (without supplement) leads to opposite conclusions. Why? How does Comrade Cliff reach his conclusions? ...

“The IS attitude to the question of the Leninist Party has been...contempt for the idea of organising a small propaganda group as a fighting propaganda group.

“The current change - motivated allegedly on the May events in France but seemingly owing as much if not more to the happy coincidence that the Group had just too many members to make federalism comfortable: after all, what conclusions were drawn from the Belgian General Strike in 1961? - has resembled not so much a rectification of theory and practice by serious communists, as an exercise in the medieval art of palimpsestry.

“The leadership does not have a clear conception of the party that needs to be built. ‘Whether the IS group will by simple arithmetic progression grow into a revolutionary party, or whether the party will grow from a yet unformed group is not important for us’ (Political Committee document, October 1968). On the contrary, it is vital. If the strategy is one which expects any big changes from the shift to come in the already organised labour movement (all experience in the past suggests that this is the likely way a real mass revolutionary movement will develop in a country like Britain) rather than by arithmetical accretion, then this decrees the need for us to build a cadre movement to be able to intervene. The lack of a clear strategy on the relationship of IS to the class and the organised labour movement is obvious. Consequently IS is being built as a loose, all-in type of group. Lacking a strategy the leadership looks always for short cuts.

“IS’s growth is largely the result of a series of unpredictable events - e.g. the suicide of the SLL - which have left IS as the only contender in the field and thereby transformed it from a discussion group without a future into a potentially serious revolutionary organisation. IS is thus going through a crisis of identity. It is not often that it is given to organisations to make a sharp turn, a second dedication. IS has this opportunity. It has still not decided definitively which way it will go.” [Easter 1969]

It did not occur to us that IS could evolve, as it did, into a saner variant of the SLL.