

THE NATURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

Introduction.

There are many comrades in IS who are at times worried about the organization. Some protest at the lack of democratic centralism; the rule in many areas of non-elected party functionaries, the erosion of branch control by branch members, the substitution for branch or district political committees of administrative committees made up of the most efficient administrator, the best treasurer, the most enthusiastic salesman of socialist literature. Other comrades express concern at the fraudulent nature of some of the rank-and-file papers, eg "The Steelworker". Some object to calling rallies "conferences", or jamborees "recruiting meetings". Indeed the list of complaints is endless, from SW publishing the collected writings of Norma Levy, to the sectarianism of IS over the November '73 Chile demonstration.

In the group's leadership itself there has been a most vitriolic split as a result of the formation of some sort of opposition to the present path of IS. But, as Laurie Flynn stated at the recent South Wales aggregate, cdes Hallas, Higgins, and their co-signatories are none too long-standing in their concern for democratic centralism. Further, their documents speak only in terms of "mistakes", they make no attempt to identify the roots of these mistakes. And this is not surprising since their politics are virtually indistinguishable from those of the leadership majority (as is evident from the way in which the following critique of IS makes its points with reference to the published statements of members of both the Cliff/Root grouping and the Hallas/Higgins "opposition").

We ask comrades to think their criticisms through, to realise that they are dealing with symptoms, not mistakes, to accept that it is not a question of Cliff bending the stick, but rather of the nature of the stick he is trying to bend. This document does not claim to be a complete analysis of IS, but rather one step in the process. Because we believe our conclusions have a real importance for the revolutionary movement, we make no apology for incompleteness, the lack of a fully-rounded analysis. The urgency of the situation is our justification.

It is the contention of this document that the road being pursued by IS leads to disaster: that, despite the many correct stands IS has taken in the past, and in some instances continues to take, despite the servicing given by the group to sections of the working-class movement, IS can no longer be judged an organisation on the road to building a mass revolutionary party as it is understood in the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist tradition.

To suggest this when IS has more members, produces more written material and when SW has more readers than ever before, may appear as flying in the face of reality. But what is really regrettable is that many members of IS should think along such lines, should assume that because IS extends its influence this somehow displays the correctness of its politics and policies. It is itself a sign of the neglect of Marxism in IS that such an ahistorical approach can be adopted. It is a sign of IS's neglect of Leninism that it judges its progress on how many membership cards it can sell and not on how many revolutionaries it produces.

Socialist Worker

On the front page of SW 355 there appeared the following:

"Harold Wilson once accused a tightly-knit group of politically motivated men of holding the country to ransom. That is a fair description of what is happening today".

The article continued to ascribe to the Tory government the role of holding the country to ransom. "A fair description"? Nothing of the sort, but obscurantist nonsense from the Marxist view of the class struggle. Marxism denies that a country or nation can be held to ransom in this manner. For Marxists societies are divided primarily into classes, not nations. To speak of the country being held to ransom is to undermine the whole argument that we have no "national interest". This is to reflect bourgeois ideology, and to echo the sentiments of member parties of the 2nd International who trooped off to the imperialist war on the basis that they were defending their country.

This article was no accident. We are not basing our critique of IS on the careless use of a couple of words. Rather the article is representative of the ideology SW, and, through SW, IS expresses. Instead of arguing from socialist premises, socialist values, SW constantly and consistently finds itself arguing from the terrain of bourgeois ideology. In an editorial on terrorism in Ireland, SW replied to the hysteria of the capitalist press under the headline: "Hypocrites"

"Heath has written in his reply to Roy Jenkins that "it is not necessarily fruitful" to denounce the super-terrorism of Nixon. Relatively small-scale violence by the IRA Provisionals brings forth a torrent of moral indignation from Tory ministers. The most savage, murderous, whole-scale violence since Hiroshima does not produce a murmur".

Our point could hardly be illustrated more clearly. Instead of arguing from the socialist standpoint which makes a clear distinction between the violence of the oppressed and the violence of their oppressors, SW speaks only of a difference in scale between the "small-scale violence" of the IRA and the "super-terrorism" (whatever that means) of American imperialism. Thus, argues SW, it is hypocrisy, a double standard, to condemn the IRA and not to condemn Nixon. Actually there is no double standard: representing the interests of imperialism, Heath will obviously condone imperialist violence and attack the violence of the oppressed. But, rather than talk in these terms, SW prefers to blast off moralistic strictures, to talk of hypocrisy, of nasty Ted Heath not being fair.

SW abounds with this type of argument, eg with headlines such as "It's a Con Trick", "It's all Lies", "Exposed Two-Faced World of Wage Freeze Hypocrites", "Tories Pants are Down". Against the charge of greedy workers, SW replies with cries of greedy bosses, Paul Foot produces a menu from the Connaught Hotel.

This type of muck-raking journalism is what we mean when we say that IS bases its arguments on the terrain of bourgeois ideology. We are not saying that IS preaches straightforward bourgeois ideology attempting to justify and reconcile workers to capitalism. Obviously not. What IS does is to turn everything upside down, to produce, so to speak, an inverted bourgeois ideology, to say Nixon is a bigger terrorist than the IRA, to say bosses are greedier than workers. All of this may be true, but to base one's agitation on stressing such differences contributes nothing to a Marxist understanding of capitalist society. The question of "Their Morals and Ours" is not raised in the manner of Trotsky. IS criticises bosses from the same premise from which they criticise workers, essentially applying the norms of bourgeois ideology. At the end of the day, is it, for a revolutionary, important that Reggie Maudling is a crook? Of course not, for to suggest so is conversely to suggest that Ted Heath is somehow less of an enemy because he didn't know Poulson.

We are not saying there is no room in a socialist paper for exposure articles. There is - provided the essential features of the system, rather than its "unacceptable faces" are made clear. Unfortunately SW does not do this.

Agitation and Politics

SW's exposure journalism cannot be attributed to a desire to make use of Paul Foot's considerable talents in this field. Cde Foot is by no means alone in using this technique, and quite honestly if there was no Paul Foot SW would soon invent one. Rather the ideology IS purveys is consistent with deeper faults in IS. It flows directly from the group's attitude towards politics and agitation.

Writing in "What is to be Done?", Lenin said of revolutionary social-democracy:

"In a word it subordinates the struggle for reforms as part to the whole, to the revolutionary struggle for freedom and for socialism". How can this apply to revolutionary practice today? In that, however many strikes we support, however much we agitate on trade-union issues, however much we attack the corrupt dealings of individual capitalists, such agitation must always be subordinated to the generalised struggle for revolutionary socialism. Agitation and propoganda should not be compartmentalised, there is a dialectical relationship between the two. Our agitational demands should flow logically from, thus testing in practice our propoganda.

But, in opposition to this, IS separates its agitation on the economic struggle from its political propoganda, separates its criticism of the effects of capitalism from its analysis of the nature of capitalism. IS concentrates upon the immediate, strikes, the economic struggle, the effects of capitalism, failing to relate these issues to assisting the development of a clearer theoretical understanding of the nature of capitalism and of how to overthrow it. In the words of the former Left Faction:

"As a result, the "political section" of the paper and the industrial reporting remain unconnected",

and:

"Politics find their way into SW as sensational exposures, or disguised as articles on Labour History".

This process has accelerated in the last two years, and we shall take one recent example, "Women's Voice", 9.

From reading this publication it is entirely obvious why the leadership wishes to kill "Women's Voice", since from their point of view it fulfills no useful function. They see the struggle for women's liberation as no more than an adjunct of the trade-union struggle, significant only in this respect, and "Women's Voice" has failed as a recruiter to IS on this basis. And the discussion is conducted within these limited horizons. Articles on sexism, the nature of the family, male chauvinism are notable for their absence from the publication. Instead, in issue 9, we see talk of "housewives", "wives and their men", and "families on trial". Bourgeois concepts are encouraged and applauded. In an article, "We're Behind the Miners", the women who are considered as having something important to say are in one instance a women convenor, in another the wife of a miner, and in the third the wife of a carworker. In the first case the woman appears because she is a good trade-unionist, and in the others the women are quoted on the basis of their marital status. Presumably the women would not be quoted if she was not the wife of a miner - she is important only as such. The other major article deals with the families of the Shrewsbury building workers, and again the women and their children are important only in that the fathers are building workers.

Such a crude sexist position evolves because IS fails to consider the women's struggle in its own right. This struggle is important only in relation to trade unionism, in which women or more often "their husbands" are involved. "Women's Voice" is considered redundant by the leadership because women's liberation is important only in so far as it

involves trade-unionists, and, as we already have umpteen pamphlets, articles, and papers given over to extolling the virtues of trade-unionists, we hardly need another.

This is one example of the way IS separates politics and agitation. The more significant theoretical issues are avoided, there is no relationship between the trade-union articles in "Women's Voice" and the propaganda which all Marxists should be putting forward with regard to women's liberation. The end result of the process is inevitable: "Women's Voice" ends up with pictures of happy families and shouts shame that such families should be broken up, ends up in other words exalting the very unit of enslavement of women.

We say such a process is inevitable. It is so because there is no going back once the process of dividing agitation from politics is commenced. The agitation becomes an end in itself, and the politics which are supposedly behind this agitation are forgotten and eventually disavowed.

Trade Unionism and Politics

The separation between agitation and politics receives its most consistent application in IS's approach to trade unionism. The political and the economic struggle are separated. Consider the following from the editorial of SW 256:

"To those workers who still have the illusion that politics are to be kept out, it has to be made clear that this is impossible nowadays. The Tories have made it impossible".

Unfortunately it is not a question whether "politics should be kept out" ("howadays" or any other time). Politics cannot be kept out of the economic struggle. A basic premise of Marxism is that both are part and parcel of the class struggle. Marxists make no excuse for seeing the economic struggle as political, they do not say the present crisis is political because the Tories have chosen to introduce politics into it. To suggest such an explanation is to suggest that the crisis would not have been political had the Tories not introduced the politics. Marxists do not shout revolution on every occasion, but there is never any excuse to deny the Marxist view of the class struggle.

In maintaining a division between politics and economics, a division which Heath and the Tories are accused of breaking as if it were a gentlemen's agreement, IS renders great service to the ruling class. The separation of politics and economics is one of the key ideological concepts which the media of the bourgeoisie attempt to instill in the working class. These media persistently attempt to obscure from the working class that political power is directly related to economic ownership and control, encouraging the working class to participate in politics through a parliamentary game in which the dice are loaded against it.

We shall take another example of the manner in which IS chooses to "introduce" politics into its agitation. Duncan Hallas states on the front page of SW 355:

"The three-day week is organised for political ends. Coal stocks at the power stations this week amounted to 14 million tons. That is rather more than on January 1st 1972 when the miners' strike began".

Now in the first place such an argument is embarrassingly silly. If it escaped cde Hallas, it did not escape Heath that the government actually lost its 1972 struggle with the miners. One reason it did so was that it didn't plan ahead, didn't build up coal stocks. We can safely assume that having learnt from their mistakes in 1972 the Tories won't make them a second time, despite cde Hallas.

More serious is the logic used by cde Hallas. The three-day week is

organised for political ends, he says, because in actual fact the Tories have enough coal to be going on with. Does it follow then that if coal stocks were low the three-day week would not be political, that the Tories would be justified in imposing it? Of course Cde Hallas would not say such a thing, but whether he likes it or not his logic lends itself to the posing of such questions. Nor is the quotation taken out of context. On the same front page we read that:

"The oil and petrol shortage is something of a fiction too. Information compiled by Lloyds of London shows that the tanker tonnages sailing from the largest oil terminals has in fact increased considerably in the last month ... the energy crisis is nine-tenths fake ... yet there is no necessity for real wage cuts or unemployment. Britain and the other capitalist countries are richer than ever".

Again, does it follow that wage cuts and unemployment would be justified if the oil crisis was not a fake? This picking of holes in the bourgeois argument does nothing to challenge the method of argument. There is no counterposing the bourgeois with the Marxist method, bourgeois with Marxist ideology. What we end up with is two bourgeois arguments and it is left to the reader to judge who is the best debater. Leninism is turned on its head, and theory, political propaganda is subordinated to gaining points in terms of the bourgeois method.

"Trade unionism", said Lenin, "means precisely ideological enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie". But the trade-union struggle is sanctified by the IS leadership, all other issues are sacrificed on its behalf. We have already shown how the Marxist approach to women's liberation is sacrificed for trade unionism, and there are many other examples. IS concentrates its anti-racialist work on agitation among black workers (an essential task), instead of concentrating on the main task of combatting racialism among white workers. The group retreats from its still official position of unconditional but critical support for the IRA, by failing to challenge in practice the chauvinism of the British working class, because to do so might alienate British workers. In a handout on the railway dispute IS tried to show why the ASLEF claim was "fair" and comrades were instructed by Cottons Gardens to concentrate on handing the leaflet to railway workers. Marxism was forgotten, we merely showed the claim to be just in bourgeois terms, and this agitation, incorrect as it was, had no purpose other than recruiting ASLEF members into IS by showing what good trade-unionists we are.

Thus IS rarely relates its agitation to the final goal of socialist revolution, and never argues in any of its publications that a revolutionary engages in trade-union activity for the purpose of raising the working class to a realisation of the necessity to overthrow capitalist society. Instead trade-union activity is seen as an end in itself, and thus the best revolutionary is simply the best union militant.

To take a recent example, the editorial of SW 367 concludes:

"Above all there must be no let-up in the struggle to build a rank-and-file movement in the unions".

Certainly the need to build such a movement is important - but above all? No, above all, the task of a revolutionary movement is to display that trade-union militancy is not enough. To suggest otherwise is to deny the Leninist view of trade unionism as essentially bourgeois.

Of course IS has pamphlets, books, journals, in which the politics are raised, but not in a programmatic manner which relates these politics to agitational policies. The raising of the sights beyond the immediate struggle to the struggle for a socialist society, giving a political lead is avoided. Political leadership implies being at the front, and as such

always carries the danger of being cut off from the movement, however temporarily. IS opportunistically accommodates itself to the existing political level: normally fleeing from the slogan of General Strike, we quickly turned out thousands of posters proclaiming it when workers had already downed tools in protest at the Pentonville jailings. This, says Tony Cliff, is being one step ahead of the class!

IS and the Working Class

The unwillingness of IS to give a lead is rooted in the widely false and over-optimistic political interpretation which it places on the spontaneous activity of the working class.

We shall take a couple of examples spread over the last two years, looking first at the IS analysis of the protests at the Pentonville jailings. Here were, said the Interim Political Report, "direct political anti-government actions, striking right at the sham of parliamentary rule". The protest strikes were "a direct, conscious and political challenge" to the government. In fact the strikes were not at all consciously directed at bourgeois legality, bourgeois rule, but rather at one application of a particular "bad" law. IS views the spontaneous actions of the working class through rose-coloured spectacles, wildly exaggerating the possibilities.

In terms of the present crisis, Tony Cliff is quoted in the November NC report as saying that:

"The confrontation between the government and the miners demonstrates clearly just how little room for manoeuvre the Tories and the trade-union bureaucracy have. The government's incomes policy is breaking down, they are not strong enough to solve the problem by direct confrontation".

But the truth as it turned out was somewhat different. The Tories did have a direct confrontation with the miners, and although they did not win neither was the result an unqualified success for the miners. Despite Jim Higgins' confident assertion in SW 364 that "the miners will have no truck with a shoddy compromise", there was virtually no resistance to precisely such a compromise, a settlement which for surface and non-face-working underground workers fell, respectively, £3 and £4 short of the claim. Further, although the Tories did not win the election, the confrontation with the miners gained as great an accommodation by the TUC as had been seen for many years (the promise not to cite the miners in other negotiations). All of this displayed just how much room there was for manoeuvre. It is one thing to make a mistaken prediction, another to seriously overestimate the possibilities of working-class spontaneity, and thus to underestimate the strength of the ruling class.

Moreover, in SW 356, we had the following similarly euphoric assessment of the state of the class struggle:

"The class enemy is half-way down. It is time to deliver the knockout punch".

Either the composer of this wonderful piece of ultra-leftism confined the class enemy to the Tories, or perhaps he really did believe we were on the verge of revolution. Either way it is undiluted rubbish, and explainable only by the IS desire to attach to spontaneity a significance which it does not have. Thus we have the group's attitude to the working class: on the one hand the belief that workers will be turned off by "too much" politics, on the other the belief that revolutionary politics develop, spontaneously, in the course of the struggle. Both aspects of the attitude result in accommodation to the existing level of consciousness, and have nothing to do with the building of a revolutionary party.

The Revolutionary Party

From the attitude of constantly overestimating the possibilities of spontaneity, flows underestimation of the need for a conscious minority. For, if political consciousness is developed through economic struggle alone, then it is clearly the duty of the party simply to do all it can to ensure that workers engage in economic struggle as frequently as possible: to place such struggle on a pedestal, to service, to cheer, to encourage from behind. What is thus neglected is any need for a conscious element, for the minority which is an integral part of the working-class movement, but is ideologically apart from its illusions, backwardness, and vacillations. Such neglect is consistent with IS history, and it is worthwhile to briefly refer to this history in evaluating the IS view of the party.

In the Trotskyist movement in this country there is an unhealthy tradition of internal preoccupations with political leadership, posturing vanguardism, and divorce from the working class. Against this background the "Socialist Review" group, later to become IS, attempted a different approach. But in "bending the stick" IS has unfortunately rejected not only the notions of the purity of the sect, but also the positive side to the Leninist/Trotskyist tradition: the recognition of the imperativeness of a conscious minority, the belief that trade unionism, working-class spontaneity is by itself incapable of leading to socialism. In seeking to avoid the divorce from the class IS ended up by accommodating itself to the existing level of class consciousness. Thus, if the spontaneous working-class movement wants a general strike, IS posters demand it, but if not then IS, fearing to distance itself from the class, refuses to put forward the demand.

This approach has deep roots in the group. In 1959 Cliff opined that, in building a revolutionary party, "Lenin's original position can serve much less as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's". This statement from Cliff's pamphlet on Luxemburg was replaced with its opposite in the reprint of the pamphlet, but such rewriting of history did not accompany a learning from past mistakes. Consider Cliff's article on Lenin in ISJ 58, where he quotes

"The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic ... extend your bases, rally all the worker social-democrats, incorporate them in the ranks of the party organisation by hundreds and thousands".

Now this would appear to justify Cliff's view of spontaneity. But let us look at what Cliff represents by "...". In between "spontaneously social-democratic" and "extend your bases", Lenin wrote:

"and more than ten years of work put in by social-democrats has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into class consciousness". This transforms the argument: while Cliff tries to prove that Lenin, in an abstract manner, placed great emphasis on spontaneity and its revolutionary potential, Lenin was in fact saying specifically that such emphasis only applied after "more than ten years work by social democrats".

Such distortion of Lenin characterises IS. His views on party building, on imperialism, on national chauvinism, have all been rejected. He is denuded of all theoretical significance and we are left with Cliff's worship of his organisational abilities: Lenin the consummate opportunist, the bender of sticks, the smart operator.

Let us consider what Lenin said elsewhere on the subject of spontaneity:

"The greater the spontaneous upsurge and the more widespread the movement, the more rapid the demand for greater consciousness in the theoretical, political and organisational work of social-democracy". How does this relate to IS over the last couple of years, which have indeed seen a spontaneous upsurge? Has IS increased its theoretical and

political work, related to its organisational work? Quite the contrary, branches have been split up into work cells, administrative and servicing units, and the scope for theoretical discussion among the membership has been all but abolished. The circulation of NC and EC minutes was abandoned, the IB suspended, and the journal, while appearing more frequently, carries less articles of a theoretical nature than previously. (Though the recent split in the leadership has occasioned some rethinking here). Factions have had their freedom to criticise severely limited, the decision to expel the "Right" was never put to the membership, as was the previous decision to expel the Trotskyist Tendency, and the members of the Left Faction were largely herded into a ghetto branch and thus prevented from contaminating the "bunco". Education has been relegated to special meetings, while in fact the most effective means of developing consciousness and producing cadres is through constant debate, argument, and self-criticism. NC meetings were declared closed, on spurious grounds of security, and in place of debate there developed the growing number of party functionaries answerable to none but this closed NC onto which most of them were co-opted.

The rapid numerical growth of the organisation, achieved by the waiving of political conditions of entry, as well as the vaguest requirements for activity, gave enormous importance to the mediating role of the full-time functionary. But, to quote Trotsky:

"A revolutionist is brought up only in an atmosphere of criticism of all that exists, including also his own organisation. A firm discipline can only be attained by a conscious trust in the leadership. This trust can be gained not only by correct policy but also by an honest attitude to our own mistakes. The question of the internal regime thus acquires for us an extraordinary significance".

But, instead of this we have an organisation which freezes the political development of members on entry. Instead of an integrated membership, held together by a shared programme, we have an atomised membership tending their isolated gardens, and in contact with the organisation only through the apparatus of functionaries.

This is no way to build a conscious minority. IS has redefined "cadre" as those most able to recruit workers, to sell papers. The conscious minority is replaced by salesmen and smooth talkers who can get signatures on membership cards. The result is the ignoring of democratic centralism, the decline in the political consciousness of members, and the staggering increase in membership turnover.

Summary and Conclusions

We believe that the following are symptomatic of IS:

1. The purveying of an inverted bourgeois ideology.
2. An uncritical approach to spontaneity.
3. Concentration in SW on trade-union militancy at the expense of political propaganda.
4. Failure to combat reactionary ideology on such questions as Ireland and Women.
5. The compartmentalising of agitation and propaganda.
6. The waiving of political conditions of entry.
7. The decline of membership participation in the evolution of the group's politics.
8. The growing number and power of non-elected party functionaries.
9. The breaking-up of political units for servicing units.
10. An increase in co-optation at all levels within the group.

The essentially polemical nature of this short document provides an introduction to these major faults. But it should also be restated that we believe and have attempted to illustrate that the various "shortcomings" are

related to, and flow from, one another. We suggest that the decline in membership control results from factors which include the dropping of political conditions of entry, and the neglect of raising the political consciousness of the membership. Clearly, with no political development of the membership, the leadership will be hesitant about permitting any measure of rank-and-file control. And the all-inclusive view of membership it itself determined partly by the nature of the agitation in SW. Similarly there is a relationship between the dismissal of the Leninist model for the party (albeit via sanctifying Lenin) and the uncritical, idolatrous approach to trade-union militancy.

With its current theory and practice, IS will necessarily fail in the most fundamental task of the epoch: the task of building a revolutionary party on a Marxist programme. We urge comrades to consider carefully what we have said, however unpalatable, as a contribution to the present debate within the organisation

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