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POUR LES AFFICHES  
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LA LUTTE  
CONTINUE

MAY 68  
IN  
REVIEW



# A socialist campaign for the general election

**CHRIS REYNOLDS** interviewed **JOHN O'MAHONY** about the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory. O'Mahony is a member of the provisional steering committee of the SCLV and also of the editorial board of the revolutionary socialist weekly **WORKERS' ACTION**.

□□ We've had a Labour government which came to power on the crest of a wave of working class militancy; since then we've had as clear proof as you can imagine of the bankruptcy of reformism. But there hasn't been a shift to the left in the labour movement; there's been a shift to the right. Why do you think that is, and what can we do about it?

■ ■ In a sense the movement has followed the experience of the government. The government was elected with quite left talk and on a real class upsurge; but it had no means of dealing with the capitalist crisis other than according to the laws of capitalism. The Labour Party was committed to capitalism; the government couldn't have broken with it.

The Tribunites' harking-back to war-time controls is in fact the worst kind of sectarian schemamongering; but that was the nearest thing to a 'socialist' set of proposals available in the broad movement. The result has been that reality has moulded the way the Labour government has behaved, it has behaved as a straightforward capitalist government, and the 'left' has been disarmed.

The other side of this is that the previous labour upsurge, beginning in 1966 or 1969, was on a direct-action, objectively syndicalist, basis, even when it was fighting for political objectives. This direct action, which was so powerful that it was able to smash the offensive of the Tory government, wasn't armed with a programme which came to grips with the political reality. Much of the previous limited active socialist consciousness, summed up in Clause Four, had been eroded as the 'socialist' projects for nationalisation were realised as state capitalist reorganisation of industry after the war, leading to disappointment and — for workers in those industries — 'proof' that nationalisation wasn't necessarily in their interest.

The movement proved strong enough to win a mini-1926 and defeat the government, but was politically disarmed. It had no policy to answer the crisis, and no organisation to impose itself on the government.

The industrial militancy collapsed in 1975 and after that the movement effectively lined up with the government.

The government at least had some awareness of the laws of the system. The Tribunites hadn't; and in fact direct action, short of leading to the seizure of power by the working class, doesn't come to grips with the realities of capitalist crisis or spontaneously generate a plan to deal with it.

If you look back: the bureaucracy had been able to impose itself firmly and powerfully on the labour movement as a result of the defeat of the 1926 General Strike. It remained firmly in control until the middle 1950s. The first real break in the domination of the working class by the bureaucracy was the defection of the 'Blue Union' from the TGWU on the docks, which began the process which shattered the right wing domination of the T&G and was also the beginning of a wave of unofficial struggles.

You had the possibility of easy gains through local struggles, mainly wildcat strikes, and the trade union bureaucracy was more and more raised above and separated out from the process of industrial bargaining, especially in engineering. It became increasingly distanced from the rank and file.

As from the struggle over 'In Place of Strife' there was a quite serious reversal of this process.

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The first wave of industrial struggle against the Labour government began with the imposition of that wage freeze in July 1966. It was largely a rank and file movement, although you had the seamen's strike which was led by the officials. Then after the real beginnings (in 1969) of the upsurge which culminated in 1974, the trade union officials played a leading role.

In the previous period, since 1926-7, the trade union bureaucracy had related to the bourgeois state as a collaborator. The TUC entered into collusion with governments both Tory and Labour. This collaboration goes back to Mondism, and developed qualitatively after the beginning of World War 2. The TUC became regularly involved in discussing state economic policy with the government, giving its cooperation in return for limited concessions to corporate working class interests.

With 'In Place of Strife', for the first time in decades, there was a situation where the trade union bureaucracy was split not only from the Labour Party but also from the government, as a government. In retrospect one can see more clearly than was possible at the time that much of the great wave of struggle was partly produced

by the trade union bureaucracy's split from both the Party and the Government.

This was reinforced when Heath came to power with his Selsdon policies. The Tory line of letting 'lame ducks' succumb to the laws of the market undercut the customary 'responsible' collaboration between government and trade union bureaucracy. This development went further still with the Industrial Relations Act and the fight against it. At the same time the TUC turned to the Parliamentary Labour Party as its society-wide bargaining agent.

The growth of real struggle did allow real gains to be made by groups like IS. But the bureaucracy was still playing a leading role, partly rehabilitating itself.

This rehabilitation of the trade union bureaucracy is a major factor behind the experience of the present Labour government.

All that means that the possibilities of the revolutionaries, even if we had had a much bigger implantation, were very limited.

Given this situation with the Labour Government, what do you think revolutionaries can do now?

■ ■ The perspective of do-it-yourself reformism has been seriously undermined. The normal depressing effect on wages struggle of a slump has been strengthened by the effect on the movement of its 'pyrrhic victory' in putting Labour into power, on the eve of the slump.

But the experience of the working class in the last four years has led to a great deal of bitterness and a mood of searching for solutions. It's necessary to find a way of organising that, to give it political perspectives, and to articulate a socialist programme for it. That socialist programme must be linked to the daily class struggle; we have to rehabilitate the perspective of direct action, which, after all, in any Marxist understanding, is the necessary agency of the socialist struggle.

One might not choose to organise such activity around the election, but the fact of the matter is that for a period of time now there has been a depression in the movement. The IMG had various projects to organise a class struggle left wing two or three years ago. They were premature; therefore they became a bit gimmicky, and now the IMG have decided to concentrate on electoral activities of a very limited sort round Socialist Unity.

Now the election creates a situation where people have to make a choice; where the Tories, for the first time in many years, do represent quite seriously different policies to the Labour Party; where the Tories are a real threat — and that is galvanising an interest in politics in the labour movement. The campaign has worked out a platform which, we think, roughly answers the objective needs of the working class now. What we need to do is organise the left that is prepared to fight back, including against this or a future Labour government.

Initially we've had quite a lot of success. Broad forces from many different sources and many different tendencies are involved. I think that's an indication of a felt need for such a campaign; in the run-up to the election people are feeling that they shouldn't just passively go along with the smug right-wing propaganda, nor should they go along with the line that the Tories are

so bad that we must forgive the right wing Labourites — who have actually been better Tories from the point of view of the bosses than the Tories themselves could have been, over the last four years.

We've found a formula for combining the struggle for our politics, for class struggle politics, with a drive to keep the Tories out. The campaign challenges the monopoly of the right wing. We already have at least one constituency party that will be campaigning in the elections on our politics, in a sort of parallel election campaign to the official Labour Party.

The campaign is also a means of preventing the cessation of discussion of working-class politics in the period up to the election. It prepares for a fightback, and that fightback will be necessary if Labour wins just as if the Tories win.

The campaign enables us to politicise the labour movement side of the election campaign, in a way that would not be possible if we had to accept the monopoly of the right wing leadership, which of course is accepted by the do-nothing Tribune pseudo-left.

What sort of forces do you think you can draw into the campaign?

■ ■ Over the last four years, with the slump and the Labour government, many industrial militants who are reformists in the sense that they have no perspective for the overthrow of the system have found themselves without a perspective of struggle. Some of them can be drawn to our campaign, and, in the course of the campaign, educated politically. We aim to give them a perspective for struggle and for organising, linking industrial action with socialist policies.

One of the important things about the campaign is that we are completely committed to support of direct working class struggle, irrespective of the implications for the fortunes of the Labour Party in the elections.

Also, there are a lot of people in the labour movement and the Labour Party who are trotskysts with a small 't' — people who accept many of the basic ideas of Trotskyism, and who have had some education in the Trotskyist movement, but who, because of the failure of the movement to organise a coherent and serious party, have lost the perspective of reorganising the labour movement and creating the force that can really overthrow capitalism. They have not lost their commitment to the working class interest, but they have lost hope. They tend to sink into routine activity in the labour movement.

I think we can give a perspective of struggle to many of these people; minimally, for the election, but also perhaps a perspective beyond that.

We can also draw in sections of the Young Socialists. The 'Militant' leadership of the Young Socialists is characterised by sterile maximalism. They know the general objective but they have no idea how to get there. They relate in a very tail-ending, minimal way to the class struggle.

The maximalist propaganda of 'Militant' does appear extremely radical to many young people, but the hegemonic position of 'Militant' in the YS has kept the YS shrivelled and unhealthy. As regards organising against the present government, they have proved as bankrupt as 'Tribune' — and with less excuse, because 'Militant' is better organised.

We can hope to enlist segments of the YS for a perspective of struggle — not just proclaiming socialism but struggling for it. And then we could begin to challenge the hegemony of 'Militant'.

Did you approach 'Militant'?

■ ■ At the YS conference we issued an open letter inviting them to take part in the campaign. They didn't respond. They tend to be rather arrogant and regard themselves as the mass movement.

In fact the 'Militant' shows that you can find the worst forms of classical sectarianism even within the mass movement. They have a schema which says that if they keep their heads down long enough, eventually they will be able to take over the Labour Party, and the Labour Party can introduce socialism peacefully. And they counterpose their schema to the class struggle.

Isn't there a danger that in aiming for a broad campaign you could dilute your politics to the point where the campaign becomes just a cover for left reformism?

■ ■ Yes, there is always a danger of that. But for us it's no use bringing people in if they're not prepared to fight. We've got no motive to dilute our platform to bring in people who aren't willing to fight.

Tribunites who really wanted to fight for the interests of the working class wouldn't fight for the imposition of war-time controls or withdrawal from the Common Market. They would, in fact, be drawn by the logic of reality to most of our demands — because our demands aren't sucked out of our thumb, they are drawn from the experience, the struggles, and the needs of the working class.

If the Tribunites are at all likely to fight, we can get them to fight fundamentally only on the sort of issues we have raised.

A more real danger than diluting is to wind up as a small sect that puts forwards its "Action Programme" and says: we demand of you agreement with every word of this Action Programme in advance. That is why we haven't insisted that people joining the campaign agree with every dot and comma of the platform.

There's another problem. In the election, Socialist Unity and the SWP will be standing left wing, anti-Labour candidates. Couldn't this campaign, in as much as it is oriented to Labour rather than an independent challenge to Labour, detract from the building of a revolutionary alternative, at a time when the discrediting of Labour means that the revolutionary alternative could get real support if presented in a bold way?

■ ■ I'm not sure it's a true claim for Socialist Unity that it has a bold and sharply independent presence. In fact it's very woolly. Our platform is closer to a hard Marxist platform than Socialist Unity's.

And Socialist Unity, standing in about a dozen constituencies, are not at all an alternative to Labour.

In the election, the vote for Labour will be a class vote in the sense of it being a vote for the labour movement's own organisations. As the election draws near, the fact of Labour being the alternative to the Tories is going to lead to a re-

versal of the trend which has led to some quite impressive results for Socialist Unity in one or two areas.

Socialist Unity has got itself into a blind alley. SU's policy for its dozen or so constituencies is of course to elect SU MPs. Apart from those areas, SU's policy is 'return a Labour government'. They don't even call for a Labour vote, presumably because they don't want to contradict their own candidates; they call for a Labour government, to square the fact that they are standing, as their contribution to political clarity, with the knowledge that the Labour vote will be the class vote.

What that means in practice is that instead of a wide-spread campaign in as many constituencies as possible, certainly more than 12, a campaign such as ours which says vote Labour but fight for our policies, a campaign which takes away the alibis of the right wing and prepares for a fight-back, you have a campaign where SU pays for putting up candidates by a general endorsement of lesser-evilism — keep out the demon Tories, Callaghan is better than the Tories.

I personally sympathise completely with the feelings of the SU comrades about the need to challenge the Labour Party right wing. But we're doing that, and I think we're doing it more effectively, and in far wider areas of the labour movement.

SU's project is premature. At the very best it will be a way of building the IMG and one or two tendencies around it.

They have done particularly well in some immigrant communities. That's a tremendous contribution, in my opinion. But it's also another indication of the weakness of their campaign: surely, while recognising and fighting the racism that exists in the labour movement, it's necessary to integrate the immigrant workers into the labour movement, to take their militancy and their alienation from British capitalist society into the movement, where it can be a healthy tonic force.

We start from the same basic impulse as Socialist Unity; but the fundamental task in the election, of indicting the government and putting forward alternative policies, is most effectively done not in SU's way but in ours.

That's the key question. It's not a matter of having an emotional break with the Labour Party, it's a matter of whether one can most effectively fight Callaghan from within 'his own' castle or outside it.

The SWP is different. It has a harder and in many ways better electoral presence than SU, but the SWP is in fact an Oehlerite sect which stands in elections for no other reason than to build itself. Of course, from the point of view of the SWP, it is quite legitimate to want to build their organisation in the election. But I can't see why those who don't agree that the SWP is the party should want to build it.

Its claim to stand as an alternative to Labour is complete illusion, and the illusion has been shown up very clearly in their very weak performance in the elections. If you read the Internal Bulletins of the SWP, and the communications of the Central Committee, what preoccupies the SWP in the elections is how to dish Socialist Unity.

Lenin was fond of saying that for the mouse there is no animal bigger than the cat. Obviously the IMG is the mouse to the SWP's cat. But it looks as if the SWP no longer believes that it is

the cat in relation to electoral activity.

Now SU is orientating to the sectarian, semi-Oehlerite SWP rather than to the mass movement. I suspect that the strategists of Socialist Unity might be convinced that what they are doing isn't the best way to fight the right wing here and now, if it wasn't for the tremendous temptation to conduct what they call a unity offensive against the SWP.

And while SU is relating to the SWP, the SWP, according to their conference statement, is calling for an agreement between left-of-Labour forces for the election, which means almost certainly that they'll try for an electoral non-aggression pact with the CP, and you'll have a SU-SWP-CP daisy chain.

The cat and mouse game of the SWP and Socialist Unity is not a real contribution to the central task of building against reformism.

**The SWP would say: the only way you can really deal with reformism is to build an independent revolutionary party. To do that it's no good building up left caucuses in the Labour Party, you have to come out openly, recruit openly, stand openly in elections.**

**It is necessary to build an independent revolutionary party. The question arises as to how that is to be done, given an enormously powerful labour movement with a mass reformist party of a structure unique among reformist parties for its relative openness.**

Proclaiming the revolutionary party — a 'revolutionary party' which like the SWP in Lambeth can get 200 votes — doesn't actually build the party. The SWP proclaims itself as the alternative to Labour in the elections, and it can't even beat the IMG... That's a good measure of the gap between the pretences and the realities.

There's a recurring pattern of tendencies which proclaim the party as a principle, irrespective of whether they are able to be a party in any sense. They proclaim the organisational hardness and separateness as the principle, and then have to face the fact that they haven't got the support. They have to compete for that support with the reformist party, and they wind up diluting their politics and cutting corners.

We can look back in Britain on at least 15 years of a very bad Oehlerite experience: where tendencies proclaim 'the revolutionary party' in a situation where that party doesn't actually exist, and the members of those tendencies would be much better occupied in doing serious work to implant themselves in the broad labour movement.

The first Oehlerite experience was that of the SLL. In 1964, after working in the Labour Party for 16 years, this grouping decided to pull out. It has a myth which it peddles to its members that it was expelled. A few of its members were expelled from the YS, but in actual fact the SLL took a decision to get out and they provoked expulsions. Not long after their paper came out with a major middle-page spread saying the answer for the miners, faced with massive redundancies, was to join the Socialist Labour League and break with the Labour Party! This raving unreality, fuelled by subjective desires, continued until now they have completely lost contact with reality, seeing imminent military putsches and all sorts of other things. Of course, the quality of the leadership of this tendency

may have speeded up this degeneration, and it might perhaps not be necessary for the self-proclaimed party of 1965 to wind up in 1977-78 supporting Gaddafi of Libya — but there is a clear logic... and a dreadful warning to the SWP.

Premature independent organisation, proclaiming independence as the principle, can lead to political bowdlerisation, as we can also see in Socialist Unity. But it is possible to organise within the Labour Party for politics which reflect the working class interest, to take those whose first reaction to Callaghan is one of class hatred and give them a perspective of transforming the movement.

Over the last 15 years there has been an uneven radicalisation... Relatively small groups of radicalised workers, and, more so, petty-bourgeois and white-collar workers, who have become radicalised in advance of the labour movement but without political education to enable them to relate to the labour movement, have very often wound up counterposed to the broad movement, and — at least in the WRP — have ended in a sectarian blind alley which destroys them as militants.

The temporary downturn of industrial militancy since 1974 left the radicalised minorities isolated. In the SWP that provoked a crisis leading to serious defections in 1975.

I don't want to say that the radicalised element must at no point go ahead of the broad movement. That would be stupid. But equally it is necessary to maintain contact with the movement.

**You seem to present a rather long-term perspective of burrowing away in the Labour Party until some far-off day when the revolutionaries will have very large forces. But in fact, as you have said, in the late '60s, for example, a lot of people were radicalised and went outside the Labour Party. Surely, if revolutionaries had not gone with them, what would have happened is that those forces would have been wasted and the revolutionaries would have been left trying to recruit the less militant, the less daring, the more stick-in-the-mud sort of people.**

**I agree entirely with your assessment of the '60s. But in retrospect one must accept that, for example, 'Militant' was able to make gains and can now play its present role partly because the revolutionaries did not just go with the radicalised people, who were often immature and ultra-left; they capitulated to them, and completely abandoned their previous understanding of the Labour Party and the problem of the broad labour movement. The old leaders of the Trotskyist movement, those who had a political education, served very badly the people who became radicalised in the '60s.**

I'm not advocating a slow, decades-long perspective of burrowing in the Labour Party. For example, a revolutionary tendency of a certain size, still not remotely comparable to the forces of the reformists, might decide that some of its forces would be best occupied not working in the Labour Party. One must keep that option in mind, not least because the present relatively liberal regime in the Labour Party may not continue.

But however one decides to allocate forces, it is necessary to keep at the centre of our perspective the epochal task of revolutionaries, transforming the labour movement.

## THE RUN-UP TO THE 1968 GENERAL STRIKE

**FEBRUARY-March 1967.** *Strike with occupation at Rhodiacéta textile works, Besançon.*

**OCTOBER 1967.** *Workers from the Renault factory and elsewhere in Le Mans clash with police in street-fighting.*

**JANUARY 1968.** *Street fighting in Caen between strikers from La Saviem [truck factory] and cops.*

## THE EVENTS OF MAY-JUNE '68

**FRIDAY 3rd May:** About 500 students, gathered for a protest meeting at the Sorbonne (Paris University), are arrested by CRS (riot police) called in by the university authorities. The 500 go quietly, but other students on the scene attack the police vans and street fighting breaks out.

**MONDAY 6th, Tuesday 7th, Wednesday 8th:** Student demonstrations demanding the release of those arrested and the removal of the police from the university premises. 50,000 are on Tuesday's demonstration. The CP denounces the students and the 'German anarchist' Cohn-Bendit who is one of their leaders.

**FRIDAY-Saturday 10th-11th:** *The Night of the Barricades.* Students erect barricades in the Latin Quarter (the university district) and fight the CRS until early morning. The Action Committees begin to spread across Paris and beyond.

**MONDAY 13th:** The unions call a 24-hour general strike, in protest against the police repression. The government tries to placate the movement: the police leave the Sorbonne and the students occupy it. One million take to the streets of Paris in a joint unions-students demonstration. There are also demonstrations in the other major cities of France.

**TUESDAY 14th:** *The workers of Sud-Aviation, Nantes, occupy their factory.*

**WEDNESDAY 15th:** Renault-Cléon is occupied.

**THURSDAY 16th:** The biggest Renault factory, at Billancourt, is occupied. The occupations spread. On the 16th, and again on the 17th, the students organise marches to Billancourt to show their solidarity with the workers. The union leadership refuses to let them into the works, but many younger workers greet the students favourably.

**SUNDAY 19th:** Pierre Mendès-France, an old Radical politician, now a member of the left-socialist PSU, calls for a new government.

**MONDAY 20th:** *The strike move-*

*ment becomes general, though the unions at no point call for a general strike. Six million have stopped work.*

**TUESDAY 21st:** The Communist Party appeals for the setting up of 'Action Committees for a Popular Government'.

**FRIDAY 24th:** Over nine million workers on strike. De Gaulle announces he will hold a referendum. In the course of a student demonstration, the Stock Exchange is set on fire. The night of Friday-Saturday 24th-25th sees the fiercest street-fighting yet.

**SUNDAY 26th.** A Central Strike Committee takes control in Nantes, monitoring traffic, petrol supplies, and food distribution. It retains control until 31st May.

**MONDAY 27th:** The government and unions announce the 'Grenelle Agreement'; a 35% increase in the national minimum wage, plus concessions on union rights, holidays, social welfare, etc. But CGT leader Georges Séguéy is booed by 15,000 workers at Renault Billancourt when he tries to get them to accept it. *The general strike continues solid, involving about ten million workers.* Meanwhile the students hold a 50,000-strong rally at Charléty. Mendès-France is there, boosting his credibility as a left-wing replacement for de Gaulle.

**TUESDAY 28th.** The peak of the strike movement. Mitterand holds a press conference and stakes his claim to replace De Gaulle.

**WEDNESDAY 29th:** De Gaulle visits Germany to talk to French military commanders there. 500,000 on a CGT demonstration in Paris.

**THURSDAY 30th:** A new statement from de Gaulle. He will not resign. The referendum is called off and elections are announced. He calls for "civic action" against the revolutionaries. Over half a million join a pro-Gaullist demonstration in Paris with slogans like "Cohn-Bendit to Dachau".

**FRIDAY 31st:** Armed police occupy the post office at Rouen. CRS reopen petrol supplies. Under the pressure of the police and the union leaders, a *return to work begins*, particularly after the holiday weekend of 1st-2nd June.

**FRIDAY 7th JUNE:** The police try to break the occupation at Renault-Flins. There are several days of fighting between the police and workers and students until the CRS leaves and the workers re-occupy on 11th June. A student is killed in the course of the fighting, on 10th June.

**TUESDAY 11th:** Police break the occupation at Peugeot-Sochaux, killing two workers.

**WEDNESDAY 12th:** All the revolutionary left groups are banned — under a 1936 law outlawing fascist organisations...

**SATURDAY 15th:** Salan and other extreme right-wing officers imprisoned since Algeria mutiny are released; it is generally thought this is the result of a deal that de Gaulle has made with the extreme right.

**SUNDAY 16th:** *The Sorbonne 'falls' to the police.*

**TUESDAY 18th:** *Renault-Billancourt returns to work.*

**SUNDAY 23rd and Sunday 30th:** The Gaullists win a big majority in the elections. The return to work is now almost complete.

## THE WORLD 1968-78:

1969. The 'creeping May' in Italy. Mass strike movement and street battles in Argentina. Catholic districts in Derry and Belfast become 'no-go' areas.

1970. 'Black September': King Hussein of Jordan crushes the Palestinians.

1972. General Strike in Québec, with the beginnings of dual power. In Britain: miners' strike with flying pickets smashes the Tory government's pay policy. Escalating strike movement in July forces the release of five dockers jailed under the Industrial Relations Act and maims the Act. 'No-go' areas again established in Northern Ireland.

1973. Mass (illegal) strike movement of black workers in Durban (South Africa). Most radical strike movement in West Germany since the war. But the army takes power in Chile and imposes a bloody dictatorship.

1974. Caetano dictatorship falls in Portugal. In Britain, miners' strike finishes off the Tory government.

1975. Portugal in near-revolutionary crisis from March to November. National liberation movements take over in Portugal's African colonies. Dictatorship of Haile Selassie overthrown in Ethiopia. US driven out of Indochina.

1976. Uprising, spearheaded by school students, in the black South African city of Soweto. Spain: biggest strike wave since the Civil War. Franco dies and Francoism crumbles. Military dictatorship imposed in Argentina.

1977-78. US miners' strike, defying the Taft-Hartley Act.

# The lessons of May

**ALAN GILBERT** looks at the analyses made by socialists of the May events in France, 1968.

For many activists on the revolutionary left today, 1968 is not part of their lived political experience. Many active in 1978 were at primary school in 1968. Yet after the current spate of 'ten years after' articles in the left press is finished, there will be much less generally available in the way of accounts and analyses of the French general strike of 1968 than of the French general strike of 1936 or the British general strike of 1926!

1968 was a far bigger movement than 1936 or 1926 (nine or ten million strikers as against 2 million in '36 or '26). It was politically more far-reaching and momentous; its historical importance and world-wide impact was much greater. There is at least as much to be learnt from it, especially since it is much closer to our time.

## Strike

1968 in fact vindicated the Trotskyists who had fought for many years, 'against the stream', against all the jeers about 'sectarianism' for the Leninist conception of preparing and organising a vanguard with a sharply-defined revolutionary programme. Not only did they play a highly creditable **practical** role in the events: on the **theoretical** level they proved better able to understand the new revolutionary upsurge than all the people who had been ridiculing their 'dogmatism'.

The lack of available material is first of all an indictment of today's academic Marxists. They are willing enough to write (often usefully) about revolutionary crises safely buried in the past (and the bourgeois publishers are happy to keep their books in print); but 1968 is too close for comfort.

The pamphlets rushed out by the revolutionary groups in 1968 (and now, mostly, long out of print) are intellectually far superior to the few academic or semi-academic Marxist works which were published

All the revolutionary tendencies outlined the same basic analysis and lessons, more or less clearly.

The general strike, by its very nature, paralysed the bourgeois order and posed the question of revolution. In the minds of the great mass of workers, there was no more than a vague desire for radical change and a new consciousness of their own class power: but a revolutionary party with even a minimum of serious implantation in the factories could have led the workers forward (probably through a complex revolutionary process, with twists, turns and setbacks) to state power.

The official 'revolutionary party', the Communist Party, did the opposite. It tried to limit the strike movement to economic demands, and then, when that became impossible, to the demand for a 'popular government'. (As the Trotskyists of the PCI commented, "but who could call for non-popular government?...All anyone knows about such a government is that the Communists are to participate in it, as in 1945" *Quatrieme Internationale*, no.29).

## Treason

Because the CP refused to challenge De Gaulle except on his own chosen terrain of bourgeois parliamentary elections, it betrayed even the limited demands of the most backward strikers, drove disappointed participants in the May movement back into the arms of the Right, and lost heavily in the elections of June 1968.

In short, the CP was **counter revolutionary**. That was no surprise for Marxists. The CP had been a party of treason since the 1930s. It got away with its treason because no new revolutionary party had been built; indeed, in most factories revolutionaries had no presence at all. The task was to build a new revolutionary workers' party.

Yet the events had reaffirmed the revolutionary potential of the working class — even

in the most prosperous capitalist countries, even in conditions of relative economic upturn (\*1). A new period of revolutionary opportunities was opening world-wide.

Some of the lessons of May, of course, were not new: but to re-state them was not simply to repeat them. The idea of the need for a revolutionary party, for example, had often been reduced to shamefaced muttering or empty sectarian proclamation: for it to be re-stated boldly, concretely, as an idea not counterposed to but closely linked with the spontaneous socialist potential of the working class, was a real step forward.

The responsibility for letting the story of May 1968 fade into the past does not, however, rest solely with the academic Marxists. References to the lessons of May have been surprisingly rare in the propaganda and debates of the revolutionary left since 1968, the major exception being the systematic use of the 1968 experience by the **Workers' fight** group in its propaganda on the general strike question in 1972-4 (\*2).

The fact is that many revolutionaries fell short in registering and absorbing the lessons of 1968: one tendency, decisively so.

#### THE OCI: A SECT FACES THE REVOLUTION

On the 'night of the barricades', 10th-11th May, the OCI led their comrades away from the barricades on the grounds that the vanguard could not afford to sacrifice itself in hopeless battles with the police.

This irresponsible sectarianism discredited the OCI deeply and deservedly in the eyes of the revolutionary students. It was not an accidental mistake or miscalculation. On 17th May OCI leader Charles Berg wrote: "So, I am not afraid to write that we were right, after coming to the barricades in a body, to call on the students to dissolve this demonstration which was necessarily going to be transformed into butchery..."

"The FER (the OCI's student organisation), after having, by its slogan '50,000 workers to the Latin Quarter', imposed this demonstration (the trade union/student demonstration of 13th May), claims the political leadership if the students' mass movement" (\*3).

They "claimed the leadership" but counterposed themselves in the most arid fashion to the spontaneous revolutionary upheaval. In a leaflet of 13th May, "The national bureau of the FER denounces the junketing organised by Cohn-Bendit and Co. at the Sorbonne" ([19]); that was not an accidental mistake, either.

"Two years later, what remains of the 'ideas of May'? Nothing! The reason is very simple, there never were any 'ideas of May'. This engaging description was a label for old

ideological rubbish. The Sorbonne and Censier (the Faculty of Letters at Paris, also occupied), following Nanterre, became ideological flea markets" (S. Just: **Revisionnisme Liquidateur contre Trotskysme, Paris 1971**). Similarly the OCI attacked the Action Committees (Just, p.211 et seq).

In the 1969 presidential elections the OCI called for a vote for the CP or SP candidates, and violently denounced the revolutionary candidature of Alain Krivine as a 'divisive manoeuvre'. (\*4)

During the May events, a central theme of the OCI's agitation continued to be mobilisation for a rally they had scheduled for 29-30 June! They coupled it with demands of the official leaders of the workers' movement. Firstly, to call a general strike, secondly, to create a national strike committee. As we have seen, they claimed that the strike and demonstration of 13 May was result of their agitation.

The 'ideas of May' were confused. But they had enough revolutionary lucidity to show up the OCI's cant.

For decades the OCI tendency (and, to one extent or another, the other revolutionary tendencies) had existed as a propagandist opposition within the reformist workers' movement. 'Demands on the leaders' which were originally tactics had become a way of life, and indeed almost principles. The May events found the OCI (for all its bluster about the proletarian revolution) actually incapable of envisaging any political horizon beyond what it calls a "workers' government", a joint government of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. For so long they had spoken of the revolution only in parables; in May it turned out that those parables had become more real for them than the revolution itself.

Politics, for this tendency, had become a matter of the literary politics, this was highly sectarian. The demands on the leaders were originally intended to be tactical mobilising slogans, expressing aspects of the basic revolutionary programme in a form which large numbers of workers could readily under-

\*1. See *Workers' Fight* nos 7 & 12, 1972; and the pamphlet, 'The Industrial Relations Act and the Fight for a General Strike'.

\*2. Between 1958 and 1968 France's GNP increased 63%: "the upheaval of May 1968 occurred just as France was emerging from its second bout of stagnation" (Singer, [9], p.70-73).

\*3. *Combat*, 17.5.68; quoted in [4], p.44, and in Freyssat/Dupré/Ollivier, *Ce qu'est l'OCI, Paris 1977*

\*4. Just op. cit. p.240 et seq. The OCI called for a "common candidate of the workers' parties" — irrespective of programme!



stand and act on. The more they became doctrinaire formulas, incomprehensible and unrelated to action, the more they appeared to be 'principles'. And so distinctly non-revolutionary formulas, like the OCI's preaching of the Workers' United Front without a programme and without an independent active role for the revolutionaries, came to be defended with a fierce intransigence that would be more appropriate for the defence of real revolutionary principles.

During the May events, the OCI cut itself off from the spontaneous revolutionary movement — yet placed itself **behind**, not ahead of, the best elements of that movement(\*5)

Other Trotskyist tendencies had, to one extent or another, suffered similar deformations from existence as a propagandist opposition. But they came out positively from the test of 1968. The OCI did not. For those tendencies, like the WSL in Britain, which have come from the same political tradition as the OCI — the post-1963 'International Committee' — 1968 is an experience which demands reassessment.

#### THE USFI: STILL VICTIMS OF THE SCHEMES THEY THREW ASIDE

The USFI, like the OCI, had become accustomed to speaking about revolutionary socialism in parables. During the 1960's they had argued for a strategy of "anti-capitalist structural reforms". This was meant to be a more popular name for "transitional demands". (see[3]). But if such transitional demands as workers' control were called "reforms", then obviously they would tend to be used in a reformist way.

There was, indeed, an article by Mandel (a leader of the USFI) ([4],p.48) which argued that the May events could not reach to the seizure of state power, and therefore 'dual power' should be set as the objective: "...the aim today must be to seize the greatest possible number of guarantees and key positions..."

Given the weakness of the revolutionary organisations the fact that French capitalism survived May-June 1968 was indeed predictable. But for revolutionaries to calculate their own limitations, and then **in advance** to translate them into limitations for the millions of mobilised workers and students, was still wrong. The task of the revolutionaries was certainly to fight for the movement to go **as far as possible**; then, at all events, the most advanced lessons could be learnt(\*6). To propose "guarantees and key positions" as the aim of the movement (as if dual power could be relatively stable and durable) was to nourish reformist illusions.

Yet the USFI militants on the spot, in France, did call clearly for a workers' government, explaining unambiguously that they meant, not a combination of bourgeois or reformist politicians, but the rule of workers' councils (JCR leaflet of 21 May; [4], p.33 or [19], P.93). In fact they were apparently the only tendency to do so (\*7). They were able to throw aside their "structural reform" formulas (which had, in fact, always been more definitely tactical for them than the OCI's formulas had been for the OCI) (\*8)

The notion of a strategy aimed at dual power has reappeared in the USFI since about 1973. Dual power is a precarious and necessarily short-lived conflict of a decaying (but not yet overthrown) bourgeois state power and the developing (but not yet victorious) power of workers' councils; it cannot be a strategic aim any more than you can aim to jump halfway across a ravine. Yet the USFI has come up with the notion that revolution will be possible only after a long enough experience of dual power to convince working people that proletarian democracy is "better" than bourgeois democracy (Tariq Ali, [8]). Ernest Mandel suggests that this experience of dual power must last several years! ('New Left Review' 100,p.111).

A fresh look at 1968 should be sufficient to convince USFI militants that this 'strategy' is completely scholastic and static.

Another major question in 1968 was the relation between students' and workers' struggles. It was debated at a big meeting of the revolutionary students on 9th May.

The JCR and Cohn-Bendit declared that the students should above all pursue their own struggle against the state as audaciously as possible and seek an alliance

\*5. The same would have been true if it had adopted the slogan recommended to it (three years later) by the SLL: a CP government. But it should be said that the OCI's militants did play an important positive role locally in Nantes, where they were involved in the Sud-Aviation occupation and the Central Strike Committee.

\*6. Compare the method used by Marx in the 'March Address' of 1850 (in 'The Revolutions of 1848', Penguin). Mandel's method curiously parallels that of the right wing in the Fourth International in 1944-48, who argued that there could be no revolutionary perspectives at the time because the FI was too weak...

\*7. The Maoists called for a 'popular government', like the CP.

\*8. The 21st May leaflet does include a call for widespread *nationalisation* which must be a product of formalistic thinking. Nationalisation by what government?

struggle. In addition they proposed to organise meetings at the factory gates. The Maoists of the UJCML proposed that the revolutionary students should scatter to the factories in order to put themselves "at the service of the workers". The OCI proposed that the meeting should pass a resolution demanding the CGT call a general strike. (\*9)

The JCR and Cohn-Bendit were proved right: the Maoists' tactic would have dissipated the student struggle, the OCI's would have reduced it to passivity. The complaint made against the USFI by the OCI, SLL and IS/SWP, that it took the students as a substitute for the working class, is slanderous; in fact the whole revolutionary student movement of 1968 stressed from the start that the key revolutionary force must be the working class.

The JCR did, however, argue that the student movement was a sort of substitute for the revolutionary party [5]. This idea was not entirely devoid of sense: given the absence of a sizeable revolutionary party, the student movement, did in a partial way take on the role of an **initiating minority**.

The result for the USFI was however a glorification of student confrontations (\*10) and a distinct tendency, for about five years after 1968, to see party-building in ultra-left terms of bringing the word from the students to the advanced sections of the working class. The rightward drift of the USFI over recent years has come as a reaction to the inadequacies of ultra-leftism, its failure to relate to the day-to-day concerns of the working class.

#### **LUTTE OUVRIERE: REVOLUTIONARIES WITH A SELF-DENYING ORDINANCE**

LO distinguishes itself from all other currents of the revolutionary left by its insistence that in May-June 1968 "THE SITUATION WAS AT NO TIME REVOLUTIONARY" ([6]). "The workers were not ready to outflank the (trade union) organisations".

It is true that **workers power** was not raised as an active slogan by the majority of the working class. It is true that the organs of workers' power (workers councils) did not come into existence. LO's insistence may even have had some value in arguing against impatient students and young workers who were inclined to under-estimate the task of winning over the majority of the working class.

But Marxists who await the coming together of all the necessary conditions before they will recognise a revolutionary situation are probably doomed never to see a revolution. For revolutionary explosions necessarily dev-

elop unevenly. The tasks of Marxists in such situations is to **make**, not to wait for, the revolution.

The answer to the question: 'Is the situation revolutionary?' has to be the same as Trotsky gave in 1935:

"The situation is revolutionary, as revolutionary as it can be, **granted the non revolutionary policies of the working class parties**. More exactly, the situation is pre-revolutionary. In order to bring the situation to its full maturity, there must be an immediate, vigorous, unremitting, mobilisation of the masses, under the slogan of the conquest of power in the name of socialism".

And what LO renounced was agitation aimed at the conquest of power. Even in **Voix Ouvrière** of 31 May — when the regime was most precarious — the objective of workers' power was stated only in a general, propagandistic way, in the course of the newspaper's articles. It was LO's view that slogans such as a workers' government and workers' councils were meaningless until democratically elected strike committees were widespread. The leading slogans of VO on 31 May were almost minimalist: 'No to de Gaulle. Long live the general strike.' (\*11)

LO also had a distinctive position on strategy for the student movement: that is, it did not have a position. VO's report on the 9th May debate among the revolutionary students, for example, expressed no opinion of its own on the issues at dispute. LO had resolved not to do work (other than individual recruitment) in the student milieu, and the advice they gave to their student militants in case of disputes was to vote with 'other Trotskyists', i.e. the JCR (\*12)

This peculiar self-limitation was central to the perspective LO proposed after May 1968: the creation of a unified revolutionary organisation, encompassing all tendencies, Trotskyist, Maoist, anarchist. Replying to

\*9. For accounts of this meeting see [5],[16],[17],[19], and *Voix Ouvrière*, 15.5.68.

\*10. Bensaïd & Weber [9], p.21 to 27, comment approvingly on the "new forms of struggle" represented for example by the German SDS's Springer campaign: "the aim was to provoke by the permanent action of the students an awakening of the workers...". The USFI internationally endorsed the notion of student 'red bases' or 'red universities'.

\*11. LO utilised the same method in relation to the situation in Portugal in 1974-75 — coming out with an even more minimalist policy. See the article, 'The Politics of Lutte Ouvrière', in ICA.

\*12. See 'Force, faiblesses et perspectives des gauchistes' (LO, numéro spécial, juillet-août 1969) and 'Lutte Ouvrière' ou la 'tendance prolétarienne', F. Lourselev (USFI), Maspéro, 1971.

the objection that the unified organisation would need a programme, LO argued that a programme was not just the general perspective of socialism, nor just the basic political arsenal of the Transitional Programme, but an entire system of slogans, demands, tactics, forms of struggle and methods of work.

"No tendency today has a real programme, worthy of that name, worthy to be the programme of a party... And how can the revolutionaries do that (develop a real programme) rapidly? Certainly not by carrying on a struggle in a scattered way, each in his own corner, in innumerable little groups in opposition to each other and without contact between themselves, most often working in different milieus: students for some, like the Ligue Communiste, the AJS or certain Maoist groups; the reformist trade union bureaucracy of Force Ouvriere or the FEN for others like 'Informations Ouvrieres' (the OCI); workers in major factories for 'Lutte Ouvriere' or certain other Maoist groups" ('Force, faiblesses, et perspectives des gauchistes', LO, 1969).

The 'modesty' of this proposal is disingenuous: for the downplaying of programmatic differences gives priority to **methods of work** as the key differentiating question for revolutionaries — and in that context LO gives itself the place of the 'proletarian tendency' within the proposed united revolutionary organisation. LO's proposal was possibly well calculated to attract the 'average' revolutionary-minded worker or working-class oriented student to LO; but certainly not well calculated to achieve any revolutionary unity.

Revolutionary unity was indeed a task of the hour in 1968. The duty of a Marxist tendency was to sketch out minimal programmatic and organisational outlines, and campaign for unity on that basis. Neither LO, nor the JCR/LC (whose approach at the time was by its own later account 'triumphalist') did that.

The gist of LO's failure in May-June 1968 is that it failed to rise sufficiently above the limits of its propagandistic routine.

### **I.S.: GRAPPLING WITH THE PROBLEM OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY**

In France it is the Trotskyist (or, at least, nominally Trotskyist) organisations, the LCR, LO, and the OCI, which have had the most serious success in organising the militants attracted to revolutionary politics in and after 1968. In France, and in most other European countries, there was also a brief flowering of eclectic, unstable, and usually short-lived Maoist groupings. Britain was the exception. There the tendency which benefited most seriously

from the impact of 1968 was IS: an eclectic tendency, certainly, but also one with a certain background in Trotskyism.

For the IS (now called the SWP) the question posed most sharply by 1968 was the problem of the party.

Before 1968 the IS had practised a loose, federal method of organisation, and preached a 'Luxemburgist' concept of the revolutionary party.

Certainly much of what Rosa Luxemburg wrote on the need for revolutionary strategy to base itself on the spontaneous, self-acting mass mobilisation of the workers is highly relevant to the May events. But that emphasis on the potential of working-class spontaneity does not resolve the question of party organisation, that is, of what revolutionaries must do to develop that spontaneity, to make it conscious, and to free it from reformist diversions — **nor did Luxemburg ever say that it did!**

In Poland Luxemburg helped to build a party which was more strictly centralised and delineated than the Bolshevik faction in Russia. In Germany she linked her argument on spontaneity with a critique of the conservatism of the party leadership and an appeal for a **more dynamic, active, leading role for the party!**

The notion of a 'Luxemburgist party' is false; in fact, the whole trend of Luxemburg's thinking was towards the 'Leninist' conception of the early Communist International. At least until the last months of her life, she was slow, compared to Lenin, in understanding the importance of the preparatory selection and organisation of the vanguard **before** the great upsurges of mass action; to make a 'theory' out of that slowness is both stupid and disloyal to Luxemburg's memory (\*13)

In early 1968, with a rapidly increasing membership, IS started to talk about building a **centralised** party. They seized on the May events to provide theoretical backing for this turn. "For a long time what was lacking in the West was mainly a spontaneous and massive opposition of the working class. This is being changed..." they wrote in their pamphlet on the May/June events [2].

But the pamphlet contains remarkably little about the **political tasks** of a revolutionary party in a situation like 1968: a comment on the role that party "with a daily newspaper or even a radio transmitter" could play in breaking the bourgeois monopoly of information, some comments (clearly reflecting the influence of Lutte Ouvriere: see above) on not running too far ahead of the workers...and

\*13. See Trotsky's article, "Luxemburg and the Fourth International", in 'Writings' 1935-36.

that's all.

The passage in IS's pamphlet on 1968 specifically arguing the need for a revolutionary party is baffling until you understand the IS/SWP method of writing on both sides of the question at once. First, it directly equates the role of the party in the proletarian revolution with the role of the Jacobins the French bourgeois revolution; then with no comment it quotes Trotsky contrasting the relatively slight role which political and ideological preparation in the form of a party plays for the bourgeois revolution with the crucial role it plays for the proletarian revolution...

Within decaying feudal society, the bourgeoisie organically developed its own wealth, its own access to culture, even its own economic forms. Its revolutionary movement sometimes needed firm organisation — like Cromwell's New Model Army — but an organised struggle for a lucid, scientific understanding of society was neither necessary nor possible for a movement whose aim was merely to open the road for the economic mechanisms of free trade. For the proletariat, on the contrary, such a struggle is vital.

The IS/SWP has never really absorbed this idea. Consequently it continually regresses to a merely technical, organisational view of the revolutionary party as 'linking up the militants'.

This pamphlet on 1968 deals with the question of the general strike just by quoting a couple of paragraphs from Trotsky on the revolutionary implications of a general strike (so much for all IS's previous scorn for the 'dogmatism' of the Trotskyists...) When in Britain it came round to "our '68", in 1972 [8], IS was all at sea: they screwed themselves up to calling for a general strike only at (and after) the end of the mass strike movement against the jailing of five dockers under the Industrial Relations Act.

For IS, 1968 was less an experience seriously learnt from than a *point d'appui* for a tactical turn.

For revolutionary Marxists, however, the May events are not that, nor are they just a romantic memory. They are an inspiration, and a rich source of tactical and strategic lessons to help us prepare for future 'May's'.

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*Note: Many of the works cited appeared in French first, and were later published in English translations: in such cases only the English edition is given.*

# Key

- AJS: Youth organisation after 1968 of the OCI (qv)  
CFDT: Socialist-oriented, ex-Catholic, trade union federation.  
CGT: CP-controlled trade union federation.  
CP: Communist Party.  
FER: Student organisation of the OCI (qv)  
IS: International Socialists, former name of the SWP (qv).  
JCR: 'Revolutionary Communist Youth', a movement created in 1965 by a split in the CP student organisation: influenced by but not formally affiliated to the USFI.  
LC: Organisation created by the militants of the PCI and the JCR after those groups were dissolved by the government in June 1968. French section of the USFI.  
LCR: New French section of the USFI, created in 1974 after the LC was banned by the government in 1973.  
LO: Lutte Ouvrière, a Trotskyist organisation continuing the work of 'Lutte de classes' (1939-48) and 'Voix ouvrière' (1956-68).  
OCI: French Trotskyist organisation linked (until 1971) with the SLL in Britain.  
PCI: Parti Communiste Internationaliste, French section of the USFI until it was banned by the government in June 1968.  
SLL: former name of the Workers' Revolutionary Party (Britain).  
SP: Socialist Party (France); actually called the SFIO before 1971.  
SWP: Socialist Workers' Party (Britain).  
USFI: United Secretariat of the Fourth International, international mainstream of the post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement.  
VO: Voix Ouvrière, predecessor of LO: banned by the government in June 1968.

## Appendix Other accounts

Seale & McConville [17] is the most accessible and perhaps the best of the journalistic accounts. It is by the correspondents of the 'Observer'. Rioux and Blackman [16] is a far more detailed (and longer: 615 large, closely-printed pages) account, by the correspondents of the leftist weekly magazine *Nouvel Observateur*.

Of particular interest in filling in the picture are the accounts of struggles in particular workplaces. Three deserve mention: on Renault-Flins, Renault-Cleon, and the Nuclear Research Centre at Saclay ([13],[14],[15]).

All give vivid proof of the desire for radical change among the workers, the new spirit of solidarity and comradeship which developed in May — and the cruel lack of revolutionary leadership in the factories.

The book of Flins is a collection of testimonies and comments from Flins workers and local people, together with leaflets issued during the strike. It concentrates heavily on the events after 7th June, when the CRS went in to try to enforce a return to work. There was heavy fighting between the CRS and the workers (aided by students), and one Maoist school student was killed.



The Committee of Action responsible for the book on Renault-Cleon was set up, apparently towards the end of the strike movement (the book does not give an exact date) when the strike committee (controlled by the union leaderships in the factory) blocked a leaflet calling for shop committees. This book gives a better idea of what happened during the strike in the factory than does Talbo's book on Flins. The last chapter contains the record of a very interesting discussion between trade union militants and rank and file militants on the balance sheet of the strike movement.

Pesquet's book [15] refers to a different sort of workplace: the 10,000 workers at Saclay were mostly scientists and technicians. But they established a real workers' council, probably more fully developed than anywhere else.

Partisans 42 [19] gives a big collection of leaflets and newspaper articles on the events, arranged according to the day they were put out. Gretton's book [18] is a curious mixture. There are large, if apparently arbitrary, lumps of 'background' (on the development of the French education system, trade unions, industry etc); there is a haphazard, and on the whole disappointing, collection of interviews and leaflets; and, interwoven with these, there is an account of the 'events' as they happened. The book is written from the viewpoint of a bourgeois sympathiser, but unpretentiously: 'I was, and am, 'for'...' the movement; but — "There are some men in France, even among the Gaullists, who are to some extent aware of the significance of what happened. The problem is whether there are enough of them with enough influence to carry on where the students and workers left off..."

# I-CL versus Spartacist League

**Debate**

*On 5th May, the International-Communist League held a public debate in London with the Spartacist League/Britain, on 'What programme for the socialist revolution?' We are printing major extracts from this debate:*

*The SL/B was recently founded as the British section of the international Spartacist tendency, a current which has its major centre in the USA. A major component of it was a faction which split from the Workers' Socialist League.*

*It should go without saying that accounts of the I-CL's positions given in contributions from the SL/B are not necessarily accepted by us as accurate.*

## **M. Thomas, ICL**

In the 1940s our movement faced three major tests. One, the revolutionary transformations in Yugoslavia, in China, and in Eastern Europe. Two, the revival of bourgeois democracy, and the revival with it of the reformist and Stalinist parties, and the need to work out revolutionary tactics in relation to them. Three, the complexities of the national question in the Middle East.

It was those problems which drew the political lines of demarcation in the movement. And it is those same problems, or similar ones, which continue to draw the lines of demarcation to this day.

What answers has the I-CL given?

We recognise that the social transformations which took place in Yugoslavia, in Eastern Europe, and in China, created deformed workers' states. At the same time, we recognise the incompleteness of those revolutions; we stress the need for a working-class political revolution.

On the reformist parties, there was a general loss of Leninist sharpness throughout the '50s and '60s. They were defined usually as "workers parties" — with bad programmes, perhaps — or, eclectically, as on the one hand bourgeois, on the other hand working class. With this analysis went orientations like 'Labour to power with a socialist programme', 'CP-SP government with a socialist pro-

gramme' in other countries.

Our tendency, as far as we know, was the first, in Britain at least, to revive the Leninist definition of the Labour Party and similar parties as bourgeois parties. Bourgeois parties based on the working class; bourgeois workers' parties in a certain sense — but not in the sense of having two parallel, equal class characters...

On the Middle East we have taken a position of unconditional solidarity with the struggle of the Arab peoples against Zionism, without any of the afterthoughts or back-handed concessions which characterise a great deal of the left on this question — for example, the idea of self-determination for the Hebrew-speaking Jewish people: back-handed support for Zionism. At the same time we have consistently pointed out the petty bourgeois nature of Arab nationalism and stressed the need for a revolutionary working class struggle against both Zionism and the Arab regimes.

Another complex national struggle, in Ireland, concerns us especially as revolutionaries active in Britain. We have been pretty well the only tendency to take, consistently and unambiguously, a revolutionary defeatist position against our own imperialism — a position of solidarity with the Irish national struggle against British imperialism. And we have also been pretty nearly the only tendency, again, to refuse consistently, throughout, to go along with the illusions about the national struggle in the north growing over into, evolving into, or gradually turning into; a socialist struggle.

Now in addition to these major questions, our tendency also defines itself by a number of other key programmatic positions which we think are central to the programme for the socialist revolution here and now. I'll mention two of these.

In line with the general softening towards reformism which I have mentioned, many on the left lost sight of the revolutionary significance of the general strike. Sometimes you had a minimalist view, that it had to be given a political content. A political content had to be

added to a general strike by tying it to a governmental slogan in terms of the established parliamentary political party set-up.

This meant slogans like 'General Strike to Kick the Tories Out', which was very popular here in Britain in 1974, including being put forward by the comrades of the Spartacists — or, in the most extreme form, I think, 'General strike to restore the Labour government', put forward by the Spartacists in relation to Australia in 1975.

On the other hand we have had the maximalist view, that the general strike is the revolution and that it cannot possibly be launched on limited slogans. And the comrades of the Spartacists have also had this view.

When they called for this general strike to bring in the Labour Government, or restore the Labour government, they added quickly: this is the general strike to get the Labour government to make the revolution, to expropriate the capitalists. Then, after putting this forward, in October 1974 they simply called for a Labour Party/TUC government pledged to a socialist programme of expropriating the capitalists, without the general strike this time — so apparently the general strike was merely an optional extra to this expropriation of capitalism.

This we consider to be both a minimalist approach, and a maximalist approach, and a combination of them. We consider it to be an approach which fundamentally fails to see the revolutionary potential of the mass action of the working class at a certain level.

And that's why we've... insisted both on the possibility of launching a general strike from limited objectives, and the necessity once it is under way of focusing on workers control, on revolutionary objectives, rather than on parliamentary political parties.

## The EEC

Another major difference with the comrades of the Spartacists is the Common Market. To us it is obvious that faced with a choice between a cartel of capitalist states and a capitalist state outside of that cartel, revolutionaries say: we are against both equally. We counterpose an entirely different alternative to both of them.

Yet the Spartacists take the position that we should be in favour of the withdrawal of Britain — or any other country — from the Common Market. That is a preferable alternative for the working class. A capitalist state outside the cartel is preferable to a capitalist state inside the cartel. Why? They say: because the Common Market is aimed against the Soviet Union. Well, we've had this argument before, from the IMG. And we called it then: Stalinism without Stalin. Because what was Stalin's

policy for the Communist Parties? It was that they should tie their policy, they should subordinate the independence of the working class, to the diplomatic manoeuvrings, the diplomatic interests, of the Soviet Union. The same approach, but missing the weight of the Soviet Union in world politics to back it up...

On some questions, like the definition of the reformist parties, the implication of the comrades' position is opportunist. But I don't believe that that is the key to the problem. I believe the comrades sincerely set out to oppose the pressures which drive revolutionaries towards opportunism.

## Formulas

The problem is not there. The problem is that they set out to try to find cut-and-dried formulas which will outlaw opportunism, which will guarantee them against opportunism. In real Marxist politics the dividing line between opportunism and tactical flexibility is one that is constantly drawn by concrete judgments. It is 'guaranteed' (in quotes) only by the maturity of the party, the firmness of its hold on its principles — and by the potentially revolutionary logic of the class struggle. Without that — reliance on the potentially revolutionary logic of the class struggle — there is no difference between tactical flexibility and opportunism. There is no difference between putting forward partial demands and liquidation.

However, the Spartacists constantly stress the need to fight for the full transitional programme, meaning the document of 1938. And it's a very strange answer to the question of opportunism, in fact: because all the would-be Trotskyist groups sell their copies of the Transitional Programme on their bookstalls and defend its basic ideas in a general way. Where the question of opportunism really comes up is when you have to give concrete answers to concrete questions....

Now of course, as soon as you start relating to that problem, as soon as you start putting forward partial demands, there is a danger of opportunism. But the approach that says it is always the full programme you put forward doesn't answer that problem. In fact once you have said that you have to say: 'well, of course, at times you can put forward partial demands', as a qualification. It doesn't answer the problem of opportunism.

What the insistence on putting forward the whole, full programme constantly means is that the comrades refuse to base their programme on the logic of the class struggle. They don't have the confidence that such an approach must lead to revolutionary conclusions. Therefore they try to find guarantees

in advance that the agitation, that the work will lead to revolutionary conclusions.

And what does that do for the general ideas of the Marxist programme? It converts them into **good ideas**.

You can see this very clearly on the national question, where the comrades' position on the Middle East and on Ireland is basically: would it not be a **good idea** if the Palestinians gave up their struggle against Israel and resorted instead to class struggle against the Arab bourgeoisies; would it not be a **good idea** if the Catholics gave up their struggle against the Orange state, and resorted instead to class struggle against the Green bourgeoisie.

The key, I think, to this difference in method lies in the question of the deformed workers' states. Now at first sight our tendencies might seem to be relatively close on this question. We agree on the stress on political revolution; we agree on which states we characterise that way, apart from the case of Cambodia.

But let us look at the case of Cambodia and the case of Cuba.

Cambodia is a state which — we have said so far — we do not think we have sufficient information and sufficient clarity on yet to characterise it definitely. But for the Spartacists there was no such problem. The day of the military victory in Phnom Penh, the next issue of **Workers Vanguard**, no doubt about it: Deformed Workers' State. No detailed study was necessary; nothing of that sort at all. No probing through the rather inadequate information that came out of Cambodia: it wasn't necessary.

Now the Spartacists **formally** play lip-service to the idea, which we stress, of the exceptional nature of the development which led to the deformed workers' states. Yet what did that approach in Cambodia mean? It was not considered as exceptional at all. It was considered as a norm, a pattern that you can see an event falling into at once. And the same goes for Cuba... What was the characterisation of the revolution in Cuba? Is there any study of the concrete details that were very substantially different from China, say, or Yugoslavia? No. That, too, was a Stalinist state from the start.

Now the peculiarity here lies essentially in the fact that for these comrades the deformed workers' state is not defined as a heavily bureaucratised workers' state. For example, if you read their documents, you will find that they recognise that Cuba in the early years after the revolution was not heavily bureaucratised. Nevertheless for them it was a Stalinist state, qualitatively identical with the other Stalinist states. Now this makes sense **only** if you define a deformed workers' state not as a qualitatively bureaucratised workers' state, but as a different form of **society**: not a

different state form, but a different form of society.

And, if you look more closely at the comrades' theories, it is a form of society characteristically created by the petty bourgeoisie. They say flatly, the petty bourgeoisie. None of the qualifications about, for example, the very considerable radicalisation of the petty bourgeois leadership in Cuba. And it's created by revolutions which are typically those of the petty bourgeoisie. They explicitly repudiate the idea that the leadership was inadequate in relation to the revolutions — so, it's perfectly adequate for making **those** revolutions.

So you have a society which matches the revolutions which created it, which matches the forces which made those revolutions: petty bourgeois through and through. In short, a new form of society: in fact bureaucratic collectivism under another name.

The comrades justify this analysis by denouncing the people who blur over the distinction between a workers' state — a healthy workers' state — and a deformed workers' state. And it's true there certainly is that tendency.

## Dialectic

But the neat model breaks down if you compare it with Trotsky's analysis of the USSR, which was a really dialectical analysis. If we are to believe the comrades' model, the USSR is the one example of a society which crossed the Chinese wall between a deformed workers state and workers state — from the other way round — and it did so in 1933. But quite clearly there was no fundamental change in the social character of the USSR in 1933; and quite clearly also there were qualitative changes in the political form of the USSR in 1923-24, again in the late 1920s, and in the mid-1930s. Not quite as simple as one Chinese wall dividing all post-capitalist societies into two neat, distinct categories. So, let me be clear. We agree that Cuba even in the earliest days was qualitatively different from a healthy workers' state. We agree that the programme of political revolution had to be fought for from the first days. But this neat model of two sorts of post-capitalist society, absolutely separated, with just one qualitative difference when in fact there are a great deal more, has very serious implications. And we are not accusing the comrades of holding to a 'third camp' position. We accuse them of reducing the Marxist programme to a mere doctrinaire good idea. The Marxist programme becomes simply a good idea which you counterpose to the evils and the disappointments of the historical process, since there are only two



ways forward from capitalism, which are quite distinct forms of new society.

And actually there is a key here to the whole set of positions — because there is one other position which comrades in the British labour movement will be very familiar with, which is the same in seeing the deformed workers' states as the lawful product — the lawful product — of a historical process quite distinct from the historical process towards a genuine workers' state. That is the Grant tendency. And the parallels on the maximalist insistence on the full programme, the adoption of an eclectic rather than dialectical definition of the reformist parties; the ultimatist position on the general strike, the Middle East, and on Ireland — that is where the parallel comes, despite the subjective intentions of the comrades.

## A. Green, SL

... The I-CL is a left Pabloite organisation, but in many respects marked and shaped by the IS. The core of Pabloism is a fundamental contempt, a disregard for the importance of programme and the party. The I-CL shares that. It is content to exist as the child of what it sees as the unmitigated chaos of post-war Trotskyism, while naturally retaining a strong respect for the mainstream represented by the United Secretariat of Mandel and Hansen...

But the only reason for existence of a revolutionary organisation is the confidence in the ability of its programme to measure up to the historic interests of the proletariat. And that confidence the I-CL lacks — and it lies at the bottom of its political positions...

For the I-CL the programme does not exist; it has to be recreated... [But] you cannot recruit to a non-existing programme... This kind of sophisticated know-nothing-ism that the I-CL puts forward is of a piece with its practice as an organisation. Because its consistent approach is one of pessimism... it sees its formal programme as a barrier to greater influence and its response to that is to actually water down that programme or jettison it.

So... the defence of the Soviet Union becomes a tenth-rate question...

They think that the idea of a communist women's movement is a nice one, but impractical. So what do they replace it with? The necessity to build a mass working class based women's movement. However, that doesn't exist, comrades. So what is the thing which is actually going to help build a substitute for what you should really have. That's the Working Women's Charter. The WWC collapses. So what do the I-CL do? They urge the socialist feminists to help win

over the radical feminists to socialism. That is the level to which the disparity between their formal programmatic positions... and their real position is reduced.

In the same spirit, on the question of the trade unions, they maintain that we struggle to replace reactionary trade union leaders with new militant leaders, where possible on our programme. It doesn't matter if it's not on our programme but where possible we'll try and do it. That would be a nice thing but maybe it's not practical, so we'll leave that aside...

[The same adaptationist methodology is shown on the question of the Fourth International. The international Spartacist tendency pursues a policy of hard programmatic struggle aimed at splitting the centrists, especially the United Secretariat, and building a democratic centralist international tendency] The United Secretariat is not the best of a bad lot as the I-CL would maintain. It is a thoroughly rotten opportunist organisation which has capitulated for 25 years and has betrayed the Trotskyist programme for 25 years...

[The I-CL has shared United Secretariat opportunist on Stalinism in Cuba and on guerilla warfare]. The United Secretariat has consistently capitulated to Popular Frontism... The I-CL's attitude to this roadblock to the building of a revolutionary party, to the United Secretariat, is worth examining with some care. Most honestly it has been expressed in a position of critical support for the USFI, a position which the I-CL no longer formally holds...

However, the most important thing in their understanding of the history of the Fourth International is the fight against sectarianism. God forbid that we should be associated with those people like the SLL or the SWP of the 1950s who actually defended the fundamental tenets of the Trotskyist programme... The I-CL prefers the happy family of fake-Trotskyism... So the United Secretariat is the mainstream...

The genuine, deep-felt affinity of the I-CL with the Pabloites is most evident in their discussions with the IMG over the possibility of a debate in 1976. On the 7th May 1976 Sean Matganna wrote an introduction to a pamphlet for the I-CL in which he said: "We now accuse the International Secretariat of treason to the programme of Trotskyism", as opposed to the previous position of critical support... So, there are discussions between the I-CL and IMG for an organisation-to-organisation debate. Not junior comrades, but the central leaderships of those organisations are involved. And what do they have to say to each other?...

The I-CL: "The term Brandlerite is a bit too sweeping and short-hand. We don't write off

the USFI". Again the I-CL: "Our political demarcation from IS, WRP is pretty clear. We see little political interest in the ideas of groups like the Spartacists. Discussions with IMG do have greater political interest for us than with rest of revolutionary left".

And another representative of the I-CL: "There is a sort of family relationship between I-CL and IMG... The USFI has made pernicious adaptations, but they have been part of a real attempt to come to terms with new reality, mistakes rather than treachery".

"Treason to the programme of Trotskyism", for public consumption. 'Mistakes rather than treachery' for the real character of the I-CL...

On the question of the Labour Party, which the comrades have brought up, the I-CL in fact shares in the British left's traditional capitulation to Labourism. The thing that differentiates them is that the capitulation is flavoured by a workerist, ISish distance from the Labour Party, codified in their simple-minded characterisation of the Labour Party as a bourgeois party...

It is true that the international Spartacist tendency considers the social democratic and Stalinist parties to be bourgeois workers' parties. That is because there is a contradiction between the historical advance represented by the formation of the Labour Party as an organisational expression of the independent interests of the proletariat, and the programme and leadership of that party. And we wish to exploit that contradiction...

It's true that the I-CL has a consistent position of being opposed to 'Labour to power with a socialist programme'. It wants 'Labour to power with a minimal programme'...

Their position on the Labour Party continues into a refusal to recognise the Lib-Lab pact ... as the class-collaborationist roadblock with it actually constitutes. That's extended to their position on the French Popular Front... For us, one of the key tests of the international class struggle is the question of the popular front: whether one is prepared to give critical support to the open, naked class-collaboration represented in a formal sense by the alliance between a bourgeois party and a workers' party...

Our position is of no critical support to such class-collaborationist blocs; that such support is conditional on the break with the bourgeois party...

[The I-CL also shows opportunist minimalism in its trade union work].

## J. Price, ICL

[Taking up Alistair Green's charge against the I-CL of 'know-nothing-ism', Price said:]

'Know-nothing-ism is represented much

more adequately by an approach which says: well, maybe we don't have the answers, but we've certainly got the right phrases... This is really the approach of the international Spartacist tendency. It's most noticeable if you have a look at their attitude towards the IC...

A long period of a close relationship with the IC... [Then] we find later the following kind of characterisation of the International Committee:

"It is their own sordid history which gives the lie to the Healyites' claims of internationalism and anti-revisionism. The Lambertists, who in 1952 launched the struggle against Pabloism, never transcended centrism and have now hardened themselves in opportunism by their line on Bolivia and their conduct at Essen. The Healyites' pretensions of principle have always rested on sand" [\*].

Not quite the same attitude of those who sold the 'Newsletter' [before 1966]... Then it was the revolutionary continuation, a profoundly progressive movement. But now we find it's centrist, based on sand, full of pretension, and just as Pabloite as the other Pabloites...

Now it is a very odd idea of programme which begins to emerge. [A concept of programme continuity being transmitted through 'sterile orthodoxy' and pretences 'based on sand'...] This particular way of looking at a programme, this particular way of looking at its reduction to a set of formulae where as long as those are kept intact that's all right, this particular way of looking at things is the mark of many sectarians, and the mark of this sectarian tendency, the international Spartacist tendency, too... [On the national question, too] the formulae... for the international Spartacist tendency are everything. The working out of a concrete analysis counts for very little. [Thus 'anti-sectarian workers' militias' are put forwards as a slogan for Northern Ireland when by the Spartacists' own account the conditions for this slogan to take on life do not yet exist. And in the Near East the Spartacist tendency places self-determination of the Hebrew people and of the Palestinians — of the oppressors and of the oppressed — on the same level].

What is being put forward instead of a relation to the actual struggle going on is a good idea. I agree that nationalism is a very bad idea..... [But the Spartacists then proceed effectively to ignore the national struggle and thus to condone the status quo. This is shown particularly in their neutralist stand on the civil war in Lebanon and their attitude to the Palestinian struggle...]

\* This is from 'Centrist debacle in Bolivia', a 1971 article included in a Spartacist pamphlet, 'Healyism à la carte'.

## J. Vetter, SL

Well, comrade Price left a lot of questions covered up, and I want to begin to try to deal with them, specifically dealing with cases of special oppression and the national question.

But in order to actually begin to be able to deal with cases of special oppression and the national question, comrades, it's necessary to assert one fundamental thing. And that's that we believe that it is possible to build a revolutionary party which can intervene and change consciousness and can change history. We do not have to begin by accepting the existing consciousness either of the masses of workers or of any section of the specially oppressed. It is the job of the revolutionary party to **smash** the existing consciousness of the specially oppressed.

Comrade Price wants us to be oh-so-practical. He says you have a pie-in-the-sky programme for Ireland, you have a pie-in-the-sky programme for Lebanon. He wants us to be oh-so-practical.

Comrades, there have also been people in the history of the communist movement who have also been oh-so-practical. Two of the names of those people were Zinoviev and Kamenev, who were oh-so-practical on the eve of the October Revolution. That's the kind of practicality we're talking about. We're talking about the practicality of people like Brandler and Thalheimer, who were oh-so-practical in October of 1923 in Germany.

The comrades of the I-CL published a very interesting document. It explained their position on the Workers' Government... If you read this document, it's not centred round Trotskyist-Leninist positions, it's centred around quotes from Brandler and from Thalheimer, the people who led the defeat of the German October. [The reference is to 'A bold tactical compromise', in IC 7].

The comrades of the I-CL are very practical. What they do is, they furnish us with statistics ... to prove how impractical anyone who tried to achieve class unity in the situation of Northern Ireland would be...

You're oh-so-practical about telling us about what we cannot do, about telling us how we cannot lead workers in revolution, about how we cannot have the unity of Protestant and Catholic... Comrades, the point is that we cannot as a revolutionary organisation accept the consciousness of the oppressed and the oppressor as it is; and the I-CL begins from that standpoint...

[The I-CL's attitude is] that only the specially oppressed can deal with the problems of special oppression... [But only the working class can end oppression.] It is not an appeal to the working class, it is a demand by the revolution-

ary party. We must fight to **smash** the backward consciousness of the working class. We must fight to **smash** the backward consciousness of the oppressed... That is the job of revolutionaries. It is a job of being **impractical**, of being abstract and presenting ideas to the masses that cannot come from their existing consciousness. Bourgeois society prevents them from getting that consciousness.

[The 'key to victory' is 'not simply a nice set of programmatic ideas', but 'the will to lead a revolution']. And that's what we want and that's what we aim to build: a party with the will to lead a revolution, with the **audacity** to say what is, instead of capitulating to the consciousness of the masses.

The comrades... have a position which downgrades the role of revolutionary leadership. They say in their Manifesto: "Socialism not based on the potential of proletarian spontaneity is passive propagandism, essentially rationalist, utopian — a relapse into the 'Enlightenment' socialism of the Owenite superman who has (or whose party has) understood everything and has only to bring 'the word' to the class'. So therefore we can understand **nothing!**... The I-CL is fundamentally **pessimistic** about its role...

[This is shown in the I-CL saying that socialists in Britain 'can't' build a revolutionary party in Ireland, and that during the civil war in Angola Portuguese troops could stay there if they were under the control of the MPLA... And on the Lebanon the I-CL ignores the sectarianism of the Lebanese national movement. The I-CL was uncritical towards the NLF in Vietnam until it took power.]

Now, we have a programme for these countries. The comrades don't like that programme. It was written in 1938. It's called the Transitional Programme. We believe, comrades, that we can intervene, that we can intersect the masses of workers, that we can break them from their backward consciousness... The Transitional Programme according to Trotsky ... is not for the advanced workers; it's not for the most advanced elements... it's for all the working class, including the most backward. It's designed to lead them to proletarian revolution...

You see, we want to use that. Now the comrade makes fun. He says: this anti-sectarian workers' militia, wouldn't it be a nice idea? He says we don't have a party to advance it. Well, comrades, the way you get a party is you start advancing your nice ideas... That's what your programme is for... It is not designed to make you popular, to allow you to better associate with the IMG...

You see, we have a programme, and it starts with the idea of pushing anti-sectarian workers militias. But if you want the anti-sectarian workers' militias to take hold in a real form, it's

got to be connected and it's got to answer the question of: what's going to happen with British troops? out now... and what, comrades, is going to happen to settle the social questions? You see, Protestants and Catholics don't fight each other because they just don't like each other's religion. There are social differences between the two. There's a scramble over a limited number of jobs, a limited amount of very bad housing in Northern Ireland. That's one of the reasons why they fight each other. So... a party has got to have a social programme to answer it. Now the comrades don't like it. You see, it's the 1938 Transitional Programme...

... The comrade says: we recognise the right of the Palestinians to establish their own state, to smash the Zionist state... The problem is, your solution is unrealistic. The Palestinians ain't got no social power. They ain't got no imperialist backers. So the only way you can smash the Zionist state is if you can win the Hebrew working class...

**[The 1948 Arab League invasion of Israel was the result of manoeuvring between the Zionists and the Arab states; no-one cared about the Palestinians. It also served the Iraqi ruling class as a way to head off class struggle in Iraq.]** We have an answer to the Palestinians. We don't call on relying on one or the other Arab state, supporting one or the other side ... you try to win the Hebrew workers, you break them from supporting the Zionist state, you bring down the Zionist state and at the same time you march against Damascus. You take the Red Army and you march against Damascus... United class struggle, it's called, cutting across national lines...

## L. Foster, ICL

I want to take up the question of Ireland. I think the Spartacists are very proud of their position on Ireland. They say, we're against nationalism... for the Transitional Programme, and so on...

They've had two positions... The first of them was, self-determination for Northern Ireland. And the second one was, self-determination for an independent, democratic Ulster, whatever that is. It's hardly necessary to spell out what that implies. What it implies is giving a pseudo-Marxist justification to what they themselves in 'Spartacist' called, albeit in inverted commas, a 'sectarian Orange state-let'...

The comrades have now dropped that; but the logic... of their present position is the same.

The comrades argue that neither side has the right to self-determination, for its exercise

would purely mean the reversal of the terms of national oppression. This means, and the comrades say it explicitly, that they are accepting partition of Ireland as both legitimate and permanent until socialism. In 1920, the comrades say, the possibility of a single Irish nation was removed from the agenda. Again: prior to Partition, revolutionaries would have opposed it; with the Partition and the establishment of a bourgeois republic in the South, it was necessary to oppose forced re-unification of the Six Counties with the rest of Ireland.

This means, practically, arguing that the forum for conducting the struggle for socialism is the sectarian bearpit of the Northern Ireland state, set up with a large Catholic minority against their will within that state, and practising systematic repression and discrimination against them.

The comrades try to cover themselves by putting forward a demand:... 'Full democratic rights for the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland'; and also the smashing of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Defence Regiment, though they don't quite say who's going to do it.

The first question is, how can full democratic rights exclude the right of self-determination for the Catholic minority, who have made it clear time and time again that they do not want to be part of that state. Secondly and more importantly, the course of the struggle over the last ten years has shown precisely that that is not possible. Full democratic rights for the Catholics is not possible within the Six County state. In 1968-9 both British imperialism and the Catholic population had that as their immediate aim. As the comrades correctly argue, the British imperialists have no long-term interest any longer in holding up the Six County state. They tried to bring about a situation where that state was reformed to have power-sharing for the Catholics and so on. And they failed.

It's important to ask why. It's because you **cannot** have democracy within the framework of the sectarian bearpit of the Northern Ireland state. **[The Spartacists' position]** that you **can** guarantee full democratic rights for Catholics puts you in the same camp as the Communist Party and the Official IRA, except that you say... we've got the full Transitional Programme...

... Trotsky, talking about a country where the intermingling of the population was far greater than it is in Northern Ireland, that is, the United States, in regard to the Negro question, in 1932...

"We do not obligate the Negroes to become a nation... If the Negroes want it, then we must fight against imperialism to the last drop of blood, so that they get the right wherever and

and how they please to separate a piece of land for themselves. The fact that they are today not a majority in any state does not matter. It is not how they please to separate a piece of land for themselves. The fact that they are today not a majority in any state does not matter. It is not a question of the authority of the state but of the Negroes. And this is important.

"... We do not need today to break our heads over the possibility that some time the whites will be suppressed by the Negroes..."

And I think that clearly indicates what Trotsky's position was on the national question

## D. Hunter, SL

... What really separates us from the I-CL is that the I-CL really wants to be loved. You go to an IMG meeting. You get some rubbish from the platform. The I-CL holds up their hand to make some friendly criticisms... The Spartacists blast away at the IMG... The I-CL say: Oh no, we're not like that. Then you get a refutation from some demagogic slime like Tariq Ali against us [Then the I-CL nods]

Now what kind of an organisation is that? It's one that cannot in practice distinguish itself from the IMG, from the SWP. Since these organisations are much larger... the average person... will go out and join the IMG. They'll go and join the mainstream... If the SWP does good trade union work, like comrade Price thinks, then of course they'll go and join the SWP...

## M. Thomas, ICL

I want to start out with a comment on the different methods of the two tendencies here.

We've had a debate where on our side we've accused the Spartacist tendency of serious errors, criminal errors, on a number of questions... On their side... they've accused us of ... bad faith, not-really meaning what we say, lacking will, and so on...

... We're even accused of being like Brandler and Thalheimer because we quote them on the nature of a workers' government. That way comrades, you would certainly end up as being like Fischer and Maslow, whose position in the German inner-party dispute you support, on the question of the workers' government...

... Where have been the political issues? the key political questions? It's difficult to tell. When you have a debate that is of the sort that the Spartacist League [say] we fight for a revolutionary programme, these people don't... it rather reminds [us] of the practices of the Healyites, who used to say: 'We're for kicking out the Tories. You're not — really'; or the

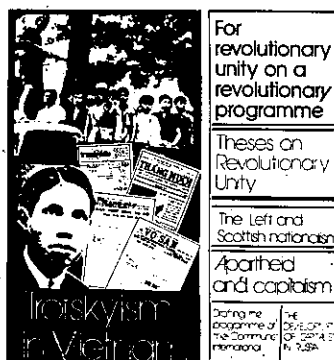
'Militant', who say: 'We're for a socialist programme. You're not — really'... It's not very rational...

[The case comes down to:] Yes, the I-CL has its revolutionary ideas; but it does other things as well. It participates in and it builds movements which are not the revolutionary party. ... What that comes down to is the objection that we practise politics rather than ultimatism...

... We're well aware that revolutionaries have to go against the consciousness of the working class very frequently...

... But can we accept the formulation that the job of revolutionaries is to **smash** the consciousness of the working class, to **smash** the consciousness of the oppressed, and in particular to **smash** the consciousness of the most oppressed? Not to develop it, not to help the working class learn, but to **smash** their consciousness. ... [This] belongs in fact to pre-Marxist socialism.

The sharpest dispute has been on the question of national movements. The comrades say that ... **all** nations have a right to self-determination. Actually, comrades, that's **not** your position. Your position is that the Zionists have a right to self-determination, the Palestinians don't ... the Zionist state stays there, until the world socialist revolution. Similarly in Ireland. [The Protestants] are the people who have self-determination... [and] not only the power to determine their own future, but the power to determine the future of 40% of the population in Northern Ireland... And to those who reject it... you say: No, you might end up oppressing them in the future... To paraphrase Marx, it's justifying the swinishness of the present with the possible swinishness of the future...



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\* Pluristops ... indicate omissions. Passages in bold type enclosed within square brackets [...] indicate summaries of passages in the speeches.

# Socialist Charter: Which way now?

HEINZ GUNTHER reviews the major re-think recently carried out by the 'Socialist Charter' group, as presented in their document 'Summary of Tasks', 'Chartist' no.65, April 1978.

The Chartists used to have as their main slogan, 'Labour, take the power!' They put forward the programme of working-class revolution, on Bolshevik lines, and called on the Labour Party to carry it out.

Finding that slogan had no grip on reality, the comrades have dropped it. But they seem to be re-thinking, not their previous blindness to the need for revolutionary organisation and activity independent of [and even against] the Labour Party, but the fundamental 'Bolshevik' programme.



The Chartists distance themselves from dogmatic and sectarian 'orthodox' Trotskyism.

For our part too, we do not see Marxism, or Trotskyism, as dogma or external truths. We seek to apply the basic ideas of scientific communism to the tasks of today and to analyse new problems which have arisen since Trotsky's death, such as the deformed workers' states and the post-war boom.

## State

At first glance the Chartist document appears to have much in common with our position. Thus they say that they "were slow to appreciate the full extent of the crisis of revolutionary Marxism" and see problems as "unanswerable simply by a regurgitation of Marxist schemas and slogans drawn from the pre-war period."

The Chartists summarise the "distortions of contemporary Marxism" as "(1) a gross-underestimation of ideological questions and the ideological struggle; (2) economism and workerism — a neglect of those struggles

of the oppressed outside of the framework of worker-capitalist relations; (3) a passive fatalism on one hand or moralism and voluntarism on the other; (4) a tearing apart of analysis and action and the severing of Marxism into a number of discrete sciences" — and certainly all these points refer to real problems.

However, the comrades go much further than this: they question not the way the revolutionary left has related to post-war problems, but also the fundamentals of Marxism. Thus the comrades write that "the meaning of 'capitalist crisis', 'crisis of leadership', 'Transitional Programme' and so on are up for discussion" (my emphasis, H.G.)

What do they mean? On one of the problems "up for discussion", the 'nature of the capitalist state', the comrades say "The fundamental problem with Lenin and Trotsky, the Third International and early Fourth International was that their whole perspective was based on a short term, war of manoeuvre, blitz-krieg type of struggle for power."

## Blitz

This is either a gross distortion of history, ignoring all the struggles of Lenin and Trotsky against ultra-leftism, or it is saying that the revolution itself is something other than a short-term struggle for power, that there is an alternative, long-term, evolutionary road to socialism of the kind envisaged by the right-wing leaders of the Second International.

One can be 'wise after the event' about the perspective of the Communist International in 1919-23 that the working-class seizure of power was, or soon would be, on the order of the day in many countries of Europe. But revolutionary struggles did take place, and, unless one believes that Marxist perspectives should guarantee victory, their defeat does not mean the revolutionary perspectives were wrong. Indeed, their defeat was sometimes due to the failure of the communists to appreciate adequately that their struggle was a 'short-term blitz-krieg'; they failed to

organise and give decisive leadership fast enough, and as a result faced the 'blitzkrieg' of the Italian fascists or the German Freikorps.

"The profound difference between East and West", the document says, "has been almost ignored by the revolutionary left — though not of late by the various West European Communist Parties". Here the document, throwing doubt on the relevance of Bolshevism to Western Europe, links up with the 'Eurocommunists', and like them invokes Gramsci.

Gramsci did write that whereas in Russia the revolution could make fast, mobile sorties against the State, and overthrow it at great speed, in the West such insurrectionary tactics would lead to defeat; "It seems to me that Lenin understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only possible form in the West — where ... armies could rapidly accumulate endless quantities of munitions, and where the social structures were of themselves still capable of becoming heavily-armed fortifications" ['Selections from the Prison Notebooks', p.237; quoted in by Perry Anderson in *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, *New Left Review* 100).

## Gramsci

But, as Anderson shows by careful textual analysis in the above-cited article, all Gramsci's comments on this theme have to be taken in the context of the Italian Communist's profound **commitment** to the essentials of Bolshevism: the building of an independent revolutionary party, the violent overthrow of the capitalist state, the struggle for the rule of workers' councils. If Gramsci's half-formed comments on 'war of position' are drawn out into a complete theory, the result is nothing else than the 'strategy of attrition' preached by Kautsky in his 1910 polemic with Rosa Luxemburg. A conclusion that is highly satisfying to the 'Eurocommunists' (though a blow to their claims to theoretical innovation) — but quite alien to Gramsci or to any other revolutionary communist.

The charge that Bolsheviks and Trotskyists have taken a 'model' from the Russian Revolution and mechanically imposed it onto the different reality of the advanced Western capitalist countries does not hold up to examination. In Russia, the Marxists were charged with importing schemes from Western Europe..

Most of the features of the Russian Revolution such as the revolutionary crisis, the formation of Soviets, the decomposition of the bourgeois state and many of the tactics used by revolutionaries can also be found in the German revolution (1917-23), the Spanish revolution

(1936-7), and embryonically in Portugal (1974-5). The 'Eurocommunists' and the Chartists are blinded by the stability of the bourgeois state and capitalism in the West in 'normal' times. But when the 'normality' of that social peace is broken, as in May 68 in France, this strength is replaced by a vulnerability similar to that of Russia in 1917.

What the Chartists fail to come to grips with here is the difference between the present limitations for revolutionaries, of winning small numbers of advanced workers and subjective revolutionaries to a communist programme, primarily through propaganda, and the **future possibilities** of gaining **mass** support for this programme when the class goes onto the offensive. Blinded by the difficulties for revolutionaries over the last decade (and before), the comrades can only see this situation extending into the distant future.

In examining their failings, looking for what is wrong in their programme, what the Chartists are throwing out here is the **positive, communist** element of their politics. Rather than rethink their perspective of indefinite long term immersion in the Labour Party, an attitude to the 'official labour movement' sometimes verging on the subservience of the 'Militant' tendency, they begin to reject the basic thinking of Marxists on the need for a revolutionary seizure of power.

The only logical development from this, if carried through, is for the Chartists to be subsumed into social democracy, even if as a 'left' tendency like the 'Militant'.

## Labour

Further, the comrades of Socialist Charter write that "the last four years of the Labour government have unearthed to the full glare of daylight the weaknesses of 'orthodox Trotskyism' and indeed any brand of would-be Marxism" (my emphasis, HG). What has been exposed is not the weakness of Marxism, but of those would-be Marxists who peddled illusions about the Labour government under the slogan of 'Labour to power on a socialist programme' or 'Labour take the power' (the leading slogan of the Chartists for a long time). The Chartists are here ascribing their mistakes to Marxism as such, rather than realising that their attitude to the Labour Party has diverged from that of Marxism.

Thus instead of openly criticising their own ability to relate adequately to the nature of a Labour government, the Chartists challenge the fundamental viability of Marxism — and, ultimately, the very *raison d'être* of militant Marxist organisation!

Either the comrades have confidence in their own organisation to take up these questions

adequately and give leadership to the advanced sections of the working class, or they are arguing for their own dissolution.

A tendency calling on workers to sacrifice their time and energy, their comfort and safety, possibly their lives, for the cause it proclaims, cannot afford indecisive 'modesty'. Trotsky wrote: "I least of all am inclined to close my eyes to the fact that our International is still young and weak. But this is no reason for renouncing our name. To you the little word 'for' [i.e. in "Movement for the Fourth International", HG] seems an expression of political 'modesty'. To me it seems an expression of indecision and lack of self-confidence. A revolutionary party that is not sure of its own significance cannot gain the confidence of the masses" ['For' the Fourth International? No! The Fourth International!], in Writings 1937-8]

On the other hand, the Chartists are quite correct to be unsure of their own significance and the viability of their policies; but then they must draw the conclusions from this rather than simply expressing it in terms of doubts.

No rational Marxist would claim to have a monopoly of truth; but nor can Marxists go to the other extreme of throwing up our hands in despair and saying that 'we have no answers'. An organisation which cannot say with confidence that it puts forward policies which will lead the working class forward, cannot say that it has a basis for continuing to exist.

## Form

This trend towards self-cancelling out comes out most clearly when Socialist Charter defines the nature of its organisation and its tasks.

They write that a "propaganda group existence is the most appropriate form of organisation in the present situation". Surely you don't mean this comrades! The "most appropriate form of organisation" for revolutionary Marxists in the present situation and any other in the present epoch, is a mass revolutionary party, able to lead the working class in its struggles and eventually to the seizure of power.

That Socialist Charter and the I-CL must define themselves as propaganda groups is not something we choose, but something forced upon us (and if they faced up to it, on such groups as the IMG and SWP as well) by our small size within the labour movement. Moreover, a small group which takes the tasks of communists seriously will participate in the life and struggles of the working class as much as possible; it will win its chances to lead particular struggles (strikes, demonstrations, etc) and it will vigorously carry on a struggle against the reformists, Stalinists and centrists

for its positions, both in ideological debate and in the course of the day-to-day struggle. Yet the document states, after correctly asserting that the task of propagating revolutionary ideas amongst the British working class is easier than it was under the Tsarist autocracy (because of freedom of assembly, universal franchise etc), that the "British working class [is] in short, almost impervious to revolutionary ideas". Again, "both these tasks (building a socialist opposition in the trade unions and in the Labour Party H.G.) can best be accomplished at this stage by an emphasis on clarifying, on a scientific basis, our analysis of the current stage of capitalist crisis".

## Active

To say that the working class is almost impervious to revolutionary ideas is "almost" to admit defeat in advance — and deny the rational basis of revolutionary perspectives. Against those tendencies which assert that the British revolution is around the corner, we recognise the strength of reformist ideas in the working class; but the fact remains that the working class can advance in struggle, at times by great strides, from its present consciousness. Thus even a small revolutionary group cannot just restrict itself propaganda but should — where opportunities are open to it — attempt to give an active lead to the class.

Here lies the crux of our disagreements with the comrades of Socialist Charter — does a small group restrict itself to propagandist, routinist work, or does it, **at the same time**, attempt to intervene actively in the class struggle and the debates of the far left?

The document seems to come down in favour of the former, particularly when the comrades write that "the emphasis is on clarifying our analysis of the capitalist crisis" and "It is to the task of clarifying revolutionary socialist theory and analysis the Socialist Charter turns with our monthly news review Socialist Charter and International Discussion Journal, as the number one priority". Seen together with the rest of the document this at least implies that the tasks of a revolutionary organisation are to withdraw into academic circles discussing the "nature of the capitalist state", the meaning of "Transitional Programme" and so on ad infinitum.

This sort of functioning is not even that of a propaganda group in the most minimal sense; for the one thing a propaganda group cannot be without is clear and definite ideas to make propaganda for!

A dire warning for the comrades exists in the Revolutionary Communist Group, which apparently takes 'theory' seriously, but have not managed to develop any serious



practice in the British working class, and whose practical policies are always entirely empirical. On 'The Question of the International', the RCG can write in their introduction: "The question of achieving political clarity in relation to the existing FI is thus a priority for the organisation"... "For revolutionaries today, an analysis of the past experiences of the movement is not an exercise in 'revolutionary history', rather it is necessary in relation to understanding the movement" and then in conclusion state, "The important issue for us is not the characterisation of any Internationalist tendency as 'betrayers' or the representatives of 'mainstream Trotskyism'. Rather it is necessary for us to warn these comrades that without a materialist basis for revolutionary strategy the USFI and other tendencies will inevitably prove inadequate to the coming struggles... The Fourth International has to be rebuilt on the foundations laid by Trotsky. The prerequisite for this is not to take an abstract position in relation to the existing international organisations but to seek ideological and programmatic clarity through international discussion. This is the way Lenin saw the building of a revolutionary international". A grosser distortion of Lenin is hardly possible! Lenin saw it as crucial to take a position in relation to the existing international organisation (i.e. breaking with the social-imperialism of the Second International). Further, in this conclusion, the RCG adds, "The struggle to build an International today, above all, means a willingness to struggle for ideological clarity. This means engaging in a struggle for ideas [**'ideas' which the RCG of course never specifies: HG]** and a willingness to listen and learn from the experiences of other comrades in Britain and internationally. We hope that the comrades of the FI will recognise the urgency of seeking ideological clarity internationally and will contribute to this vital debate. In the coming period the seriousness of a revolutionary organisation will be determined by the way in which it struggles to rebuild the Bolshevik tradition internationally".

## Life

Thus not only does the RCG misuse Lenin in its failure to "take an abstract position in relation to the existing international organisations" but further claims the Bolshevik tradition for its total agnosticism towards the history of the movement, calling this ideological clarity!

But this example is not some slight aberration on the record of the RCG. This basis is laid down in 'Our Tasks and Methods' (Revolutionary Communist No.1: January 75), the "founding document of the RCG", where,

after correctly pointing out the need for a democratic centralist party and ideological clarity against tendencies such as the SWP, they then go on to describe their own tasks: "Full accounting of the failures of the Trotskyist movement since the Second World War is an essential precondition for developing our programme". Or again, "Our first task is to relate the general characteristics of the epoch to their fundamental theoretical basis. This work will have to be concretised to understand the forms which the general tendencies of the epoch have assumed since the Second World War. Through this process of theoretical development we will be able to locate the objective situation since the war and the balance of class forces that has emerged from it providing the basis for a concrete political strategy in the coming period". Here the emphasis is quite clearly on the development of theory being a precondition for the development of active political intervention. Trotsky had much to say on such tendencies: "In order to begin political work, the Opposition has a perfectly adequate programmatic base, assured by its entire preceding struggle. This base must be taken as the point of departure. And only active participation in political life can prepare the conditions for creating a platform and not solely a platform but also the Marxist programme for the Communist International. Nothing will come of Paz's attempt to create a platform in a laboratory manner ....

## Wait

"This 'platform' fails to include many questions. But it does touch on the most vital and acute questions, failing whose solution all big plans, projects and 'platforms' will remain in the realm of phrases" [**'Letter to the Editorial Board of 'La Lutte de Classes', Writings 1929]**

"Theory" cannot be abstracted from "practice" in this way of seeing the former as a precondition for the latter, as Trotsky writes, "The relation between theory and practice bears not a one-sided but a two-sided — that is, dialectical — character. We are sufficiently equipped theoretically for action; at any rate, far better than any other organisation. Our action will push our theoretical work forward... The Fourth International... grow and develop in theory as well as in action". "Let me remind you that the Communist League was created by Marx and Engels before they wrote the Communist Manifesto. That the First International was created before the appearance of the first volume of Capital, the Second International — before the appearance of all the volumes of Capital. The Third International existed during its best period without a finished programme etc. The historic process does

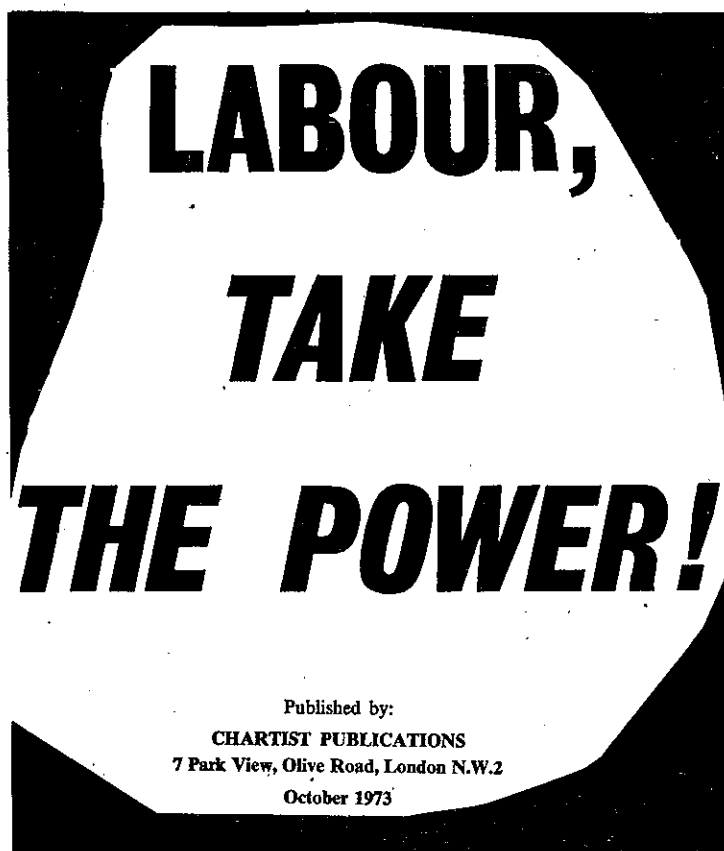
not wait for 'final', 'finished', 'exhaustive' Marxian research. We had to take a position on the Spanish revolution without awaiting Marxist studies on Spain.. Just as war cannot be postponed until the discovery of the most perfect weapon, so the revolution and the Fourth International cannot be postponed until the appearance of the most perfect theoretical work. Theory is very important. But pedantic fetishism of theory is good for nothing' ['For the Fourth International...', op. cit.].

But the RCG and Chartists would argue that the RCG has done healthy practical work on the Irish question. This is 'theorised' in the RCG's founding document as follows: "... We do not at present have the resources to mount a campaign of national dimensions in the trade unions. We believe that in Britain's present conditions a group such as ours can best employ its forces in international solidarity movements". This reduces 'Communists' to cheerleaders for struggles elsewhere rather than being those who fight on all the basic questions of working class struggle they find themselves in, most fundamentally the day-to-day class

struggle. Those who have nothing to say in that class struggle are committing a gross fraud in using the name 'Communist'.

And, if the RCG and Chartists are not "sufficiently equipped theoretically for action", then what value can anyone place on the "struggle against economism and revisionism" of the Revolutionary Opposition (forerunner of the RCG) within IS, or indeed on the existence of Socialist Charter as a "revolutionary communist organisation" since 1972 if they themselves deny that this existence provides them with the basis for a serious intervention in the working class movement and struggles.

In fact, many comrades of Socialist Charter do not see the way forward in terms of discussion circles; but that is the direction in which their document points. The group clearly feels that its routine work in the Labour Party has reached an impasse. However, the way forward lies not in discussion circles, but in a break from a sterile routinism towards a more active, interventionist attitude to the class struggle.



Excerpts from the Chartists' 1973 manifesto: "The Socialist Charter: A Programme for the Labour Party". The Chartists tend to attri-

bute the breakdown of this scenario not to an erroneous view of the Labour Party, but to some flaw in the basic 'Bolshevik' programme.

#### 27. "All Power to the Labour Government!"

... There would be only one thing the Labour Government could do in order to avoid surrender. As the old, conservative levers and apparatus of power proved unusable, so a NEW apparatus would have to be formed to take their place and gain the upper hand, destroying the outlived state machine...

... It will require an iron-hard and determined revolutionary leadership of our movement and future Government. There is only one tendency in the Labour Party which is committed to providing such leadership and preparing for the future tasks here and now. And that tendency is the Socialist Charter movement. We may be small, but events in the Labour Party are moving our way...

#### 29. TUC — Prepare for the General Strike! Labour, Take the Power!

... We are in a position in which a revolutionary situation is approaching. A General Strike is going to come, whether we like it or not...

# FRENCH TROTSKYISM

## ASSEMBLING A CADRE 1923-33

First of a series of articles by Alan Gilbert

FRANCE HAS a richer revolutionary history than any other country. And the history of the revolutionary — Trotskyist — movement in France over the last fifty years is correspondingly rich. At present very little of that story is accessible in connected form in the English language; this article aims to fill that gap.

Developing in a country with exceptionally strong petty-bourgeois revolutionary traditions but relatively weakly-developed industry, the French socialist movement was more effervescent and fluid, but also less disciplined and well-organised, than the movement in the other leading country of the Second International, Germany. That background strongly marked the early Communist Party, and, through that, the Trotskyist opposition.

In France the Communists won a majority in the Socialist Party (at the Tours Congress of 1920) despite the fact that the Party had supported the French bourgeois government during the war. The French Communist Party was thus one of the very few parties that were stronger in the labour movement than reformism; but at the same time the French CP was riddled with social-democratic methods, habits, and attitudes.

It had a galaxy of brilliant but often undisciplined intellectuals. In 1923 some of the revolutionary syndicalists round Pierre Monatte entered the party, joining their comrade Alfred Rosmer who had been with the party from the start (★). But these trade unionists were stubbornly independent-minded, often even individualistic, coming most often from unions like the printers' and the teachers'.

### Disputes

The international struggle between Trotskyism and Stalinism in the ranks of the communist movement appeared at first in the form of theoretical disputes over 'socialism in one country', the Chinese Communists' subordination to the bourgeois-nationalist Kuomintang, and the Russian communists' alliance with left reformist English trade union leaders in the 'Anglo-Russian Committee'. The Stalinists were not at first the open agents of counter-revolution they became in the Spanish Civil War after 1936; the criminal dangers of the Stalinist course were at first generally visible only to educated Marxists.

The composition of the French party meant that the Trotskyist opposition gained an exceptional amount of support there. It contrasted sharply with the British Communist Party — which was very provincial and short of educated Marxist cadres, and was scarcely affected in the 1920s by the whole Stalin-Trotsky dispute.

But the French Marxists who came over to the Opposition were often individualistic, undisciplined, with all the typical faults as well as the merits of intellectuals. At first the French opposition took the form of a scattering of discussion circles, rather than an effective militant organisation.

### The first groups

One circle formed round Boris Souvarine, who was removed from the editorship of the Party journal 'Bulletin communiste' in March 1924 on account of his Opposition sympathies, and then expelled from the Party (†). Monatte and Rosmer broke from the Party later in 1924, and launched the paper 'La Révolution Proletarienne', which described itself as 'syndicalist-communist' but had open Trotskyist sympathies (@).

Albert Treint — a sympathiser of Zinoviev, who was the secretary-general of the Party responsible for most of the expulsion of Trotskyists — was expelled himself in a later Stalinist purge in 1928, and later joined the Trotskyist movement briefly in October 1931 (§).

The most important Trotskyist group of the early period was 'Contre le courant', launched in November 1927 under the influence of the

★ The revolutionary syndicalist current before 1914 accepted the class struggle and the fight for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, but — reacting against the parliamentarism of the French Socialist Party — they rejected political parties on principle, trusting instead to trade union action as the key to revolution.

† Jedermann, *La bolchévisation du parti communiste français*, Maspéro, p.68

@ Jedermann, p.70,75,82; C.Gras, *Alfred Rosmer et le mouvement révolutionnaire international*, Maspéro, p.302.

§ Jedermann, p.83; Gras, p.372.

Russian oppositionist Piatakov, who was at that time an official at the Russian embassy in Paris. The leading figures of the 'Contre le courant' group were Fernand Loriot (who, however, quit in May 1928, moving towards social-democracy) and Maurice Paz. The group originated from the remnants of an internal CP opposition group, the 'letter of 250' (October 1925) (\*). The 'letter of 250' opposed the CP leadership's efforts to 'bolshevise' the CP, that is, to transform it from a loose social-democratic type party into... not Bolshevism, but the monolithic, bureaucratic Stalinist caricature of Bolshevism. It was an opposition strongly marked by social democratic prejudices.

## La Vérité

Soon after Trotsky was expelled from the USSR in February 1929, he opened contacts with the French Trotskyists and started trying to weld them into an effective militant organisation. He did this round the axis of a weekly paper, 'La Vérité'.

Resolutely Trotsky cut through the squabbles and pedantic debates which occupied the Opposition circles: the key question was, who was ready to join the actual work of building a revolutionary communist Opposition, and who was content to dawdle on the sidelines. "Rejecting the circle spirit, with its petty interests and ambitions, 'La Vérité' must unite around itself all the virile, healthy, and genuinely revolutionary elements of the Communist Left Opposition" (°).

Souvarine was the first leading Oppositionist to define himself out. "I cannot escape the impression", wrote Trotsky, "that it is the pen of a discontented journalist that guides you and prompts your paradoxes. The latter, moreover, are not new. I could cite many cases where a desertion from the revolution has been dressed up in analogous formulations, without perhaps such journalistic skill or such bookish culture" (★).

To Maurice Paz Trotsky had to write, in reply to his pettifogging objections to the weekly: "You can have revolutionaries both wise and ignorant, intelligent or mediocre. But you can't have revolutionaries who lack the willingness to smash obstacles, who lack devotion and the spirit of sacrifice... Your letters and above all your political attitude show me that communism is for you a sincere idea rather than a dominant conviction of life..."

A month later Trotsky exclaimed impatiently: "The editorial board of 'Contre le courant' now advances a new argument in favour of continued passivity: it first necessary to adopt a 'platform'. It is hard to imagine a more moribund demonstration of doctrinaire-

ism. I am surprised that the 'Contre le courant' group, which includes workers, does not understand how silly it is to demand that the proletariat, or its vanguard, or the Opposition which desires to be the vanguard of the vanguard, should mark time until someone writes for them, during leisure hours, a salvation platform... In order to begin political work, the Opposition has a perfectly adequate programmatic base, assured by its entire preceding struggle. This base must be taken as the point of departure. And only active participation in political life can prepare the conditions for creating a platform..." (†).

'La Vérité' appeared in August 1929, and the Ligue Communiste was founded in April 1930 with about 100 members. The leading figures were Rosmer and some younger militants: Pierre Frank, Pierre Naville, Pierre Gourget, and Gérard Rosenthal.

## The first task

Trotsky insisted that the task was not facile projects of 'mass work', but the consolidation of a cadre on firm revolutionary principles. "When the Brandlerites [Communist Right oppositionists] say 'We can't feed the German masses with the Chinese revolution', they are not demonstrating their fancied realism but their vulgar opportunism. Spanish Communists who have not assimilated the lessons of the Chinese revolution can destroy the Spanish revolution. And when a revolutionary situation develops in Germany, the German workers will look for cadres whose flesh and blood have been nourished by the lessons of the Russian, Chinese, and Spanish revolutions. At a time when we are just beginning to educate and re-educate the cadres, the Brandlerites counterpose mass work to cadre education. That is why they will have neither one nor the other. Because they have no principled positions on basic questions and therefore are unable to really educate and temper their cadres, they spend their time carrying out a caricature of mass work" (§).

But he vigorously opposed any interpretations in the direction of doctrinaire passivity. "Since 1923 the most disparate elements, in-

\* Jedermann, p.80; Yvan Craipeau, *Le mouvement trotskyste en France*, Syros, p.35-36.

° Trotsky, *Writings 1929*, p.224.

★ Trotsky, *Writings (hereinafter 'W') 1929*, p.188

@ *W1929*, p.192-3.

† *W1929*, p.242-3.

§ *W1930-31*, p.253.

cluding those whose ideas have nothing in common with ours, have rallied to the Opposition in Western Europe. Individuals like Paz graciously accepted the status or the self-image of left communists, extreme revolutionaries, but with the proviso that no-one demand anything of them and that the proletarian revolution not upset their digestion.

"All over France there are these groups that get together once a week, discuss all sorts of things, and adjourn without deciding anything. Once a month they publish a small magazine in which each individual writes whatever comes into his head...

"Undoubtedly these habits have been introduced into the League. And when the most active, most revolutionary elements begin to pose questions in an entirely different manner, they are treated like troublemakers, enemies of the peace, disrupters, etc" (\*).

## Trade Unions

Within its first year the Ligue communiste had to go through a faction fight with a tendency which combined the 'circle spirit' with the facile substitution of schemes of mass work for solid cadre-building.

The French trade union movement had been split in 1922 by the **reformist syndicalists** round Léon Jouhaux. Jouhaux led the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and the communists and revolutionary syndicalists led the CGTU (Unitary General Confederation of Labour). At first the CGTU — in line with its name — campaigned for trade union unity. But from 1928-29, the CGTU, following the CP's ultra-left 'third period' policy, took up a policy of bureaucratic ultimatums and refusing to unite with the reformists on common objectives.

Rosmer and Gourget, together with the leaders of the teachers' union — Maurice Dommanget and others — who were then and afterwards partly sympathetic to Trotskyism, set about organising an opposition to this bureaucratic policy. The Unitary Opposition was launched on 1st May, 1930. But soon Trotsky set out a severe criticism of the League's work in the UO: the League had lost any independent political presence in the unions, and was using "the policy of combinations behind the scenes, the policy of silence, of hushing up, of self-renunciation, of adaptation to the ideas and slogans of others" (°). He demanded that the League's work in the UO be accompanied by a clear, independent political presence.

The policy in the UO was defended not only by the ex-syndicalists Rosmer and Gourget but also by Naville, whom Trotsky considered to express most extremely the residues of 'circle politics' inside the League. Naville also

questioned the Trotskyist current's definition of itself as an expelled **faction** struggling to reform the Communist Party, wanting a more 'independent' status.

Naville's failure to come to grips with the actual tasks of taking the Trotskyist Opposition beyond the study-circle stage to an organisation intervening regularly in the class struggle was just the other side of the coin to his support for schemes which gave a superficial appearance (not the reality) of mass work.

## Molinier

The tactical dispute was combined with a sharp personal conflict inside the League. Rosmer and Naville objected strongly to Raymond Molinier. Molinier was a businessman with a short but slightly shady history in the Communist Party. Trotsky valued him for his energetic approach, so different from the fastidious Opposition intellectuals. Rosmer and Naville regarded Molinier as no more than a spiv, and insisted strongly that he was no fit person to have a say in deciding political and ideological questions for a Marxist organisation. Trotsky declared this was an "aristocratic and aloof attitude" (★).

The policy proposed by Trotsky won out; but the cost of the faction fight was heavy. Rosmer — who, with his record as a revolutionary syndicalist before 1914, leader of the internationalist current in France during the war, and member of the Comintern Executive and French CP leadership after the war, was by



Naville with Trotsky

\* *W1930-31*, p.269-70.

° *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, Pathfinder, p.37.

★ *Gras*, p.369; *W1930*, p.301.

far the League's most experienced and qualified leader — left active politics (†). Naville stayed with the Opposition, but Gourget and some other trade unionists also left the League. The Unitary Opposition collapsed, and with it the League's trade union work (§).

In France, as in America, 1930-33 were the "dog days of the Left Opposition" (\*). A small group, mostly of intellectuals and some immigrant workers, and mostly in Paris, struggled to surmount the group's incessant internal problems and to agitate against the Communist Party's ultra-left 'third period' policy. The Trotskyists' agitation was focused on Germany as "the key to the international situation"; only a Communist-Social Democratic united front could stop Hitler. In France, the Trotskyists called for united action against the fascists, and they criticised the Communist Party's refusal (in the 1932 general election) to withdraw poorly-placed candidates in favour of the Socialist Party on the second round (°).

The League's membership had risen only to 100 or 150 by the end of 1933 (★).

The situation in the workers' movement was unfavourable. The economic depression — with the index of industrial production falling from 140 to 94 between 1930 and 1935 — had

so far produced demoralisation rather than increased militancy. The CP — crippled by the policies of the 'third period' — had declined by 1934 to 30,000 members.

But the League in its 'dog days' had nevertheless played a major role in the **international** organisation of the Left Opposition (†), and done a necessary job of welding and holding together a revolutionary Marxist organisation, without which its intervention in the stormy events of 1934-36 would have been impossible.

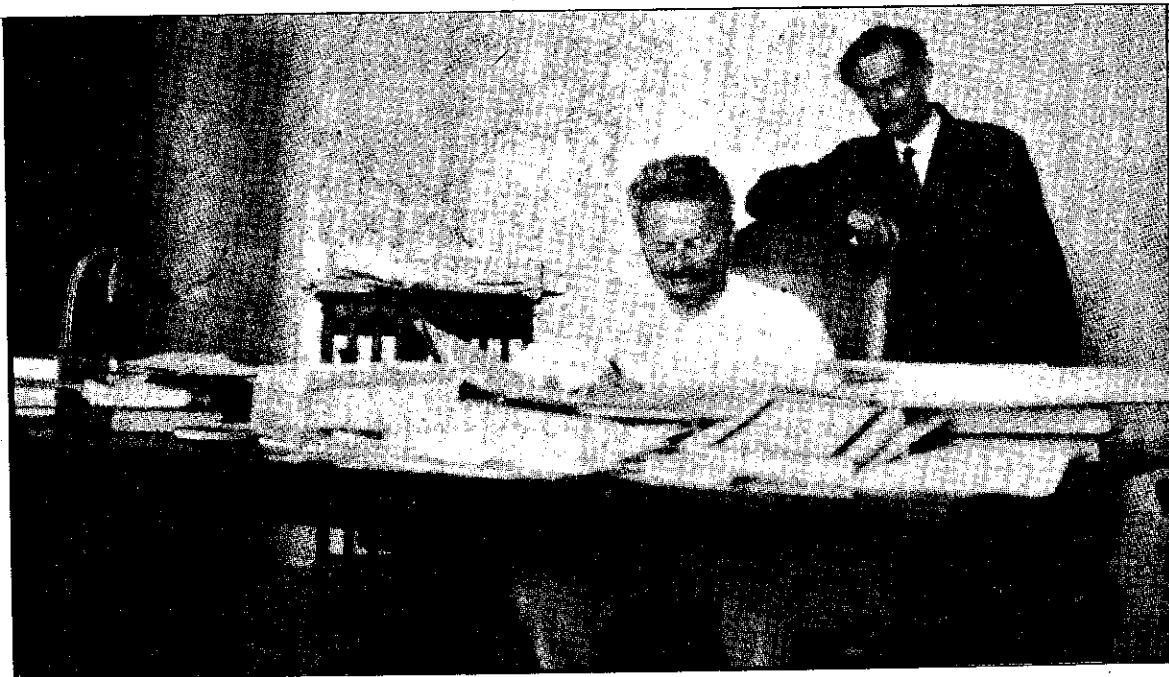
† According to Craipeau (p.57), Rosmer's main reason for leaving was the UO issue; according to Gras (p.373) it was much more the conflict with Mollnier.

§ Craipeau, p.57; P.Broué, *Le mouvement communiste en France*, p.286, 385-88.

\* J.P.Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism*, p.80-100

° Craipeau p.71-73. The CP used the excuse that the SP were in a bloc with the Radicals, and said they would withdraw only in favour of 'honest' SP candidates who accepted certain CP demands.

★ Craipeau, p.87; Broué, p.400.



Rosmer with Trotsky

# MARXISM AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION: THE BEGINNINGS

In this text, CLARA ZETKIN — the leading women's organiser of the German Social Democracy before World War 1 and of the early Communist International — describes how the early Marxists worked to arouse the working class movement to an awareness of the close connection between the emancipation of women and the emancipation of the working class.

In the 'Communist Manifesto' of 1847 Marx and Engels had taken up the most radical demands of that epoch for women's emancipation, and proclaimed them as an integral part of the programme of communism. They declared that "the bourgeois family will vanish" with the abolition of bourgeois property, and that "the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production".

Within the First International, in the 1860s, the Marxist thesis of the revolutionary potential of women drawn into industrial labour was disputed by various socialist currents who wanted to keep women in the home. But the Marxist analysis was confirmed and enriched by the activity of women workers themselves, in strikes and in the revolutionary Paris Commune [1871].

One book played a central role in rallying socialist working class opinion on the women's question: August Bebel's "Woman under Socialism", first published in 1879. It represented, in Zetkin's words, "the conclusion of an epoch of enlightenment in the workers' movement".

Under the influence of fascism, Stalinism, and the bourgeoisified Social Democracy, that work of enlightenment, and the work of organisation that followed, was annulled and reversed in the 1930s. Since the 1960s, a whole new 'epoch of enlightenment' for the workers' movement on the women's question has begun, on the basis of a female industrial proletariat which in several countries has qualitatively increased in strength.

The rediscovery of the pioneer work chronicled by Zetkin is an important element in our work today.

Marx and Engels would not have been what they were if they had looked only at those sides of industrial women's work which increased capitalist profit and were destructive, anti-working class and harmful for the future. In the clarification and evaluation of the complex of questions raised by the industrialisation of women's work, they proved themselves again to be masters of dialectical historical materialism, which grasps social processes and phenomena in the course of their development and understands not merely their decaying but also their dynamic side...

In "Capital" we read: "However terrible and atrocious the dissolution of the old nature of the family within the capitalist system may appear, it creates nonetheless large-scale industry with the decisive role which it assigns to women, young persons and children of both sexes in socially organised processes of production beyond the sphere of the household, the new economic basis for a higher form of the family and the relationship of the two sexes. It is of course just as stupid to consider the Christian-Germanic form of the family to be absolute as it is to consider the ancient-Roman form or the ancient Greek or the Oriental, which moreover constitute amongst themselves a historical process of development. It is equally clear that the composition of the combined work-personnel which involves individuals of both sexes and of the most different age-levels — although in its naturally brutal, capitalist form where the worker is there for the production process and not the production process for the worker, it is a pestilential source of ruin and slavery — must in corresponding circumstances change into its opposite, the source of human development".

From a pamphlet written by Clara Zetkin in 1905; republished in "Zur Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung Deutschlands" — Verlag Roter Stern, Frankfurt, 1971.

Translated by Stan Crook. The text has been considerably abridged.

The first volume of "Capital" appeared in 1867 but Marx's optimistic outlook on the revolutionising effect of women working in industry had been gained two decades earlier, together with Engels, as a result of irrefutable result of their research on the social relations of production. Around the turn of the years 1847/8 the corresponding conception was formulated in the Communist Manifesto.....

...during the revolutionary years of the 1840's the basic conceptions of the Communist Manifesto: on the right of women to work, independent of the man and the family, on the right of the woman to take part in the formation of social relations, had not remained unheard or uncomprehended among the growing German proletariat. In the years of reaction these principles had no more lost their validity than the stars which point the way lose their light when the clouds do not permit their radiance to penetrate our eye.

...But in the programmatic declaration of the International Working Men's Association (First International), in the Inaugural Address, and in its statutes, one looks in vain for the clear-cut basic statement of beliefs and the pithily formulated principles of the Communist Manifesto.

What is included with regard to the equality of women is completely general, and may therefore seem modest and lean if looked at merely in passing. Equal rights for "everyone who does his duty. No duties without rights, no rights without duties."

## Ensnue

... Friedrich Engels explained why. In his Foreword to the new edition of the 'Communist Manifesto' in 1890 he wrote:

"... When [after 1848] the working class of Europe had again gathered sufficient strength for a new onslaught upon the power of the ruling classes, the International Working Men's Association came into being. Its aim was to weld together into **one** huge army the whole militant working class of Europe and America. Therefore it could not set out from the principles laid down in the Manifesto. It was bound to have a programme which would not shut the door on the English trade unions, the French, Belgian, Italian and Spanish Proudhonists and the German Lassalleans. This programme — the preamble to the Rules of the International — was drawn up by Marx with a master hand acknowledged even by Bakunin and the Anarchists. For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the Manifesto Marx relied solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion..."

The silence on important communist principles in the Inaugural Address and Statutes of the International Working Men's Association therefore does not in any way mean a plot, a denial of principles, but rather a different strategy for the implementation of the principles, corresponding to the different historical situation...

The 'Communist Manifesto' declared the principles of communism before the proletariat in order to recruit it and unite it for the purpose of action for its liberation. The First International, on the other hand, took its starting point from the activity of the workers, in order to lead them from their daily distress to an understanding of communist principles, through the experiences of their economic and political struggles, and in order to raise their struggles progressively to a higher level, ultimately to the point of social revolution.

## Home

Consequently the great and decisive importance of the First International for the recognition in the German proletariat of full rights for women rests not on formal declarations of principle, but rather on its practical championing of those rights. Certainly, formal declarations of full equality of rights for the female sex also exist from the First International, and in deeds, not in words...

From the start, the General Council took up the question of women's work. Two conferences of the IWMA occupied themselves with it: the conference in London from 25 to 29 September 1865, and the Congress in Geneva from 3rd to 8th September 1866.

The London meeting cast a bright light on how the industrial work of women drastically and disadvantageously influenced the proletarian condition, but also how unenlightened the opinions were about it in the various sections. Both these factors caused the General Council to place both the women's question and the question of child labour on the agenda of the Geneva congress for the purpose of thorough discussion.

Here one firm spirit clashed with another firm spirit. Anarchistic Radicals from the Swiss Jura, in alliance with French Proudhonists, opposed industrial work for women. It was completely in the spirit and style of citizen Chaumette, when during the French Revolution — three quarters of a century previously — he kindly advised the Paris women who fervently desired to defend the Republic by arms against the approaching forces of Royalist Europe, to trot off home to the 'pious care of their household, to the cradle of their children', in order that 'our eyes may be able to rest on the delightful spectacle of our children happy



because of your tender care”.

In a similar fashion, Coullery, chairman of the section in La Chaux-de-Fonds — French Switzerland — in which the Bakuninists were later dominant, explained his antipathy to women's work with touching declamations about how the woman “as the priestess of the holy flame of the domestic hearth” has her sphere of work in the home. A Paris delegate made an assertion which any bourgeois or petty bourgeois bohemian would agree with: “The family is the basis of society. The place of the woman is at the household hearth. We do not want her to give up this place in order to sit in a political meeting or to chatter in a club, and we would not even like her, if it were possible, to leave this place in order to become involved in any industrial labour. A section of the Paris delegates presented a resolution which stated that the congress “condemns women's work in a physical, moral and social respect as a principle of degeneration and points out to the woman her place in the family, bringing up children”.

## Commune

The congress, however, did not allow itself to be moved by this stirring rhetoric. It fixed the position of the IWMA on this question by accepting the statement of the British delegation, at the suggestion of the General Council. Karl Marx had worked out the statement and deliberately limited himself in it to such points as “allow the immediate agreement and co-operation of workers and directly nourish and stimulate the class struggle and the organising of the workers as a class”.

The importance he gave to the question of women's work in industry is shown by the treatment of the question in the statement. No kind of compromise is made to backward prejudices and short-sighted fears about competition. Rather, it is presupposed that the workers will show a better insight into the social problems than the petty bourgeoisie. Tactical considerations for the international mobilisation of the proletariat never meant for Marx a surrender of communist principles.

Therefore, not the banning of women's work in industry, but protection for women workers! The female sex, it was stated, must be excluded from any “night work of whatever type and from any work which is damaging for the tenderness of the sex or exposes the body to poisonous or damaging effects”.

**Women workers joined the First International: English shoemakers in 1867, Lyons silk workers in the course of their victorious strike of 1869. In 1870 the women workers of Le Creusot struck against the great capitalist magnate Schneider and were supported by the**

**Lyons women workers of the First International**  
[These struggles] were like summer lightning in the heavy atmosphere of Bonapartism prior to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, heralding the approach of the revolutionary storm which was unleashed terribly yet magnificently in the Paris Commune. For the first time in any country the proletariat seized state power for itself with a bold understanding and a strong fist.

This tremendous event was not lacking in the typical feature of every fundamental revolution: mass participation by women — from 18th March 1871, when the women of Montmartre threw themselves on the cannons of the National Guard and with their bodies prevented them being taken away to Versailles, up to the last episodes of the ‘Bloody Week’, when the machine-guns of the troops of the bourgeoisie, who had got into Paris thanks to German benevolence, mowed down the rebels like grass at the wall of Père Lachaise.

The proletarian and petty bourgeois women of Paris fulfilled their revolutionary duty in aid for the wounded on the scene of battles, in standing guard, and in building barricades and defending them arms in hand. The barricade at the Place Pigalle was held to the very end by women, defying death.

An English newspaper wrote, in admiration and horror: “If the French consisted only of women, what a terrible people that would be!”

## Charter

In no way inferior to this was the strength of spirit with which the captured women fighters endured the insults and tortures of the soldiery and its animal-like officers, and of the women and whores of the bourgeoisie. 800 women who escaped the Versailles troops' blood-orgies at the time of the capture of the city were herded together in a prison, together with common prostitutes acting as police spies and exposed to disease, hunger and thirst. They showed great strength of spirit when they faced the firing squad, when they stood up for the rights of the proletariat and of the revolution before the infamous war-courts, and when they were sent to prisons and put under the ‘dry guillotine’, that is, forced labour in the wretched infernos of Devil's Island and New Caledonia.

One name has for ever become the expression, the synonym for the courageous, self-sacrificing heroism of the female fighters of the Paris Commune: Louise Michel.

With their blood these bold comrades wrote their Magna Carta, the charter of their political maturity, their right to complete social equality with the male. The profiteers, the bourgeois

order, and their scribblers vituperated them as 'Petroleuses' [so-called because they started fires in the defence against the Versailles troops]. So what! They too belong to the immortals who, in Marx's words, "are enshrined in the great heart of the working class".

... In France [for the IWMA] it was a matter of conquering a proletariat which had already emerged in more than one revolution as a class and fought against the bourgeoisie. In Germany, on the other hand, the proletariat had still to 'discover' itself as a class...

The revolutionary effect of the First International on the attitude of the German proletariat to women's liberation and equal rights found its first unambiguous tangible organisational expression in the founding of the 'International Trades Cooperation of Manufacturing, Factory and Artisanal Workers' [founded in 1869, among textile workers in Saxony, and including and recognising full rights for women workers]. Politically it found expression in August Bebel's book 'Woman under Socialism', which appeared in 1879 (in Switzerland, because of the Anti-Socialist Laws).

The theoretical weaknesses and scientific inadequacies of this book are insignificant in relation to its great historical importance. The effect of the book flows from its revolutionary attitude to the women's question, put forward with deep inner conviction on the basis of a historical-social analysis founded on that doctrine of scientific socialism. That foundation gives the self-taught turner Bebel a standpoint high above the horizon of professorism, and makes possible a broad and free perspective on the past, present and future.

Right from the start, a dividing line is drawn between a bourgeois and a revolutionary proletarian understanding of the question:

"The goal, accordingly, is not merely the realisation of the equal rights of women with man within present society, as is aimed at by the bourgeois woman emancipationists. It lies beyond — the removal of all impediments that make man dependent upon man; and, consequently, one sex upon the other. Accordingly, this solution of the woman question coincides completely with the solution of the social question..." (\*1)

This situation for women in socialist society is proclaimed as the final goal:

"The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of dominion and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot. Her education is the same as that of man, with such exceptions as the difference of sex and sexual functions demand. Living under natural conditions, she is able to unfold and exercise her mental powers and

faculties. She chooses her occupation on such field as corresponds with her wishes, inclinations and natural abilities, and she works under conditions identical with man's..."

The book unambiguously preaches the recognition of the fact that: "The complete emancipation of woman... is possible only by a social change that shall abolish the rule of man over man — hence also of capitalists over workingmen" (\*2)

This recognition does not lead Bebel astray to the false conclusion that the demand for equal rights for the female sex should be postponed until the state of the future, however pleasant such an escape might have been to many a short-sighted opportunist in the ranks of social democracy.

For example, as early as 1875, at the Gotha unification congress, Bebel had put forward as a programmatic demand the right to vote for men and women. The first leader of the class conscious German proletariat proclaimed the struggle for full equality of rights for the female sex as the business of the proletariat and a task of the present.

The ideas in the book which point the way forward are linked with a merciless criticism of bourgeois society, in particular of "the filth of the soul à deux" piled up in bourgeois property-marriage. The flowery veil of verbiage and the conventional lies which conceal it are thoroughly torn to pieces. The effect of this criticism and the demonstration of the socialist future as 'the iron law of historic inevitability' was extraordinary, and was increased by the atmosphere of the emergency laws against the Social Democrats.

Just as dynamite blows up the hardest rockbed, so too the thoughts in this book reduced the oldest prejudices to rubble — the prejudices which barred women's way to the battlefield of the proletariat and thus to their own complete liberation.

They awakened the self-consciousness, the drive for action, the demand for justice, and the class consciousness of oppressed and intimidated women. Thus Bebel and his book became the most important pioneer of the revolutionary proletarian women's movement of Germany and of all countries in which the oppressed and exploited women rallied around the banner of socialism; and the bourgeois women's movement is also eternally indebted to him...

\*1. A. Bebel, 'Woman under Socialism' [translated into English by Daniel De Leon], Schocken, New York, 1971; p. 5. Both here and in the other passages cited the German edition quoted by Zetkin differs noticeably but not in substance from the edition translated by De Leon.

\*2. The passages cited from Bebel's book are to be found in the English edition on p. 343. 349.

# Marx against reformism **Reviews**

**"MARXIST ECONOMICS FOR SOCIALISTS: A Critique of Reformism", by John Harrison. Pluto Press, 1977. £2.40.**

Reviewed by Martin Thomas.

THIS IS A strange book. The first part contrasts Marxist economics with reformist outlooks which seek to create socialism by tinkering with or modifying the economic categories of capitalism. Harrison focuses on Marx's critique of Proudhon.

If you just look at capitalism from the point of view of the market, then freedom and equality reign supreme. Each person is free to buy and sell as s/he pleases, and prices are equal for all. But underlying that free market — and inseparable from its full development — are relationships of inequality, exploitation, and domination in production.

Then again, if production is looked at in isolation, and capital is regarded not as a social relation but just as things (machines, money, etc) — which is the way it appears — then capitalist production appears to be no different from production in any other society.

With the full development of capitalism, there appear 'excesses' — huge fortunes made by swindlers and speculators, enormous profits, convulsive crises — which contradict even bourgeois concepts of what is right. The bourgeoisie pass these things off as a small price to pay for the benefits of free enterprise; 'bourgeois socialists' seek to cut off this or that feature of capitalism and thus at last realise bourgeois freedom and equality in a pure form.

Thus appears, as Marx wrote, "the unedifying debate in which one side asserts that there is no difference between developed and undeveloped exchange value, and the other asserts that there is, unfortunately, a difference, but, by rights, there ought not to be".

The 19th century French socialist Proudhon wanted to replace money by 'time-chits'; each week, each worker would receive 'time-chits' representing the number of hours' work he had put in, and would be able to buy goods accordingly. Loans at interest would be abolished. But, far from abolishing private property rights and market competition, these measures would in Proudhon's view allow them to flourish properly for the first time.

Harrison presents Marx's critique of these views by systematically comparing and contrasting capitalism with a hypothetical society of 'simple commodity production', made up of

independent individual producers, each owning his means of production but producing for the market. His presentation seems to oversimplify some points, but it succeeds in driving home the political relevance of Marxist economics in a clear and concise way.

The second part of the book contains three chapters on 'Early Capitalism', 'Rotten Capitalism', and 'Capitalism since the War'. Central to the argument is Harrison's theory of capitalist crisis. In his view (similar to that adopted by Andrew Glyn and Bob Sutcliffe in their book 'British Capitalism, workers, and the profit squeeze') the most essential factor pushing towards crisis is a tendency for wages to rise and eat into profits. This in turn is propelled by a "fundamental tendency... for accumulation to exhaust the industrial reserve army".

Even if one were to agree with this theory of crisis, one could hardly find satisfactory a book which attempts to expound it, after outlining and refuting every other theory of crisis put forward by Marxists, all in the space of nine pages!

One hesitates to recommend this book. A popular introduction to Marxist economics which says almost nothing about money (and yet pretends to cover the theory of crisis); an account of Marx's polemic against Proudhon which nowhere explains in a connected way what Proudhon actually proposed; a critique of reformism which says almost nothing about the state and nothing at all about the trade union bureaucracy. It is, however, original, well-written, and interesting.



Proudhon

**INTERNATIONAL COMMUNIST no.9. August 1978**

|               |   |              |
|---------------|---|--------------|
|               | Interview<br><b>A socialist campaign for the general election</b>   | p.1          |
| Alan Gilbert  | Retrospect<br><b>The lessons of May</b>   | p.5          |
| Heinz Gunther | Debate<br><b>The I-CL versus the Spartacist League<br/>Socialist Charter: Which way now?</b>              | p.12<br>p.20 |
| Alan Gilbert  | History of the Movement<br><b>French Trotskyism: Assembling a cadre, 1923-1933</b>                        | p.25         |
| Clara Zetkin  | Archive<br><b>Marxism and Women's Liberation: the beginnings</b>  | p.29         |
| Martin Thomas | Review<br><b>Marx against reformism: review of John Harrison's<br/>"Marxist Economics for Socialists"</b> | p.33         |

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