

## THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

### Twisting and tailing

THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY leadership is currently engaged in a far-reaching purge. Anyone opposed to their "downturn" perspective is being driven out of the organisation. The members left are being given intensive training in the basic politics of the SWP tradition. With all their schemes for growth having been dashed on the rocks, Cliff is steering the battered hulk of the party into political dry-dock for a refit, ready for the day that a new upturn in the class struggle will put wind into the organisation's sails once again.

The latest overhaul in the leadership's perspectives will be justified to the membership as a clever and realistic tactical adjustment to changed circumstances; a shift made necessary by a different balance of class forces. Cliff has always maintained that the SWP's 180 degree turns are no more than "bending the stick". The truth is very different.

The zig-zags of the SWP are not tactical responses to changed circumstances on the basis of a consistent marxist strategy. They are the ill-conceived twists and turns of a tendency that lacks any real political, programmatic ballast. Marxists have a name for such tendencies - centrism.

The truth is that the SWP has had its day. It is long past its peak. In the early 1970s it was the largest grouping of potential revolutionaries in Britain. In the late 1960s a tide of militant anti-imperialism, revulsion at Wilson's Labour government and the example of the French General Strike of 1968 pushed a significant number of young students and workers towards revolutionary politics. The leaders of the IS group, (as the SWP was then known), opportunistically swam with the stream.

In previous years they had refused to back national liberation movements supported by the Soviet Union. Their theory of state capitalism had led them to adopt reactionary neutralist positions on the Korean war against the US, and on Ho Chi Minh's struggle against the US backed regime in South Vietnam in the 1950s. Sniffing an opportunity to recruit from the ranks of those now opposing the US's onslaught on Vietnam, the IS decided to support the NLF's struggle. This paid off and their membership grew to 1,000 in 1968.

The growth of the IS coincided with a mounting crisis for the British ruling class. It was preparing a counter-offensive against the strong shop floor organisations that the working class had built up in the boom years of the 1960s. Wilson's Labour government and the Tories under Heath tried to break the strength of shop stewards through anti-union laws, incomes policy and a drive to tie pay bargaining to productivity and Measured Day Work deals, struck with the trade union bureaucracy.

Working class organisation proved resilient in the face of the initial attacks. Wilson had to ditch his planned anti-union laws. Heath's incomes policy was smashed by the miners and his anti-union laws broken after solidarity stoppages freed jailed dockers. Large numbers of militant workers, disillusioned with Labour and confident in their own fighting strength, were pushed towards revolutionary politics by the pressure of the class struggle itself.

Of all the left groups in Britain the IS group was able to take most advantage of the struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They turned their organisation "to the class" in 1969, focusing their resources on relating to the industrial struggle with factory bulletins and - in 1970 - Tony Cliff's "Employers' Offensive" book on the fight against productivity deals. In contrast the IMG (forerunner of today's Socialist League), was fixed on building amongst the student vanguard and the SLL (forerunner of the Workers Revolutionary Party) was already a hardened sect. The 1972 IS conference claimed 2,300 members of whom over half were industrial workers. By the end of 1974 the IS was claiming over 4,000 members.

THE  
**CHARTER**  
PAPER FOR RANK AND FILE MOTOR AND ENGINEERING WORKERS

The IS grew because it was cutting with the grain of spontaneous militancy at the time. With its calls for more militancy and anti-Tory campaigns it was giving voice to the mood of a considerable number of militants. However, it failed to create a cadre of political militants out of the workers it recruited. The Cliff leadership maintained the organisation on a diet of gimmicks and organisational tricks precisely because it had no alternative to - indeed it saw no need for an alternative to - the anti-Tory spontaneous Trade Union struggle of the early 1970s.

The centrism of the IS over this period was dominated by political accommodation to the class struggle as it was. Cutting with the grain of trade union militancy was easy. However, standing firm against the political prejudices of many workers proved to be beyond them. In 1969 IS refused to call

for immediate troop withdrawal when the British army occupied the six counties of Northern Ireland, fearing to confront the social-democratic illusions large layers of militants had in the Labour government's "peacekeeping" role. In 1972 and 1974 IS repeated their crime when the IRA's mainland bombings in Aldershot and Birmingham brought forth centrist style denunciations of both British terror and IRA resistance.

From 1972 Cliff was trying to solve the problem of building a "workers' party" through the organisational device of factory branches. By 1973 he had, by scandalously bureaucratic means, got his way. At the same time the Cliff group staffed the National Committee with politically inexperienced workers, quite inappropriately called a "workers' leadership", who they were able to demagogically manipulate. None of this worked. The turnover of members in this period was considerable as hundreds of workers who could have been won as the proletarian cadre of a revolutionary party were miseducated and wasted by the Cliffites. What was the use of a party that could only encourage militants to do what they had been doing for years, especially as the limits of trade union militancy were becoming clearer after the return of a Labour government.

A party whose perspectives were ever more out of touch with reality could only serve to politically disarm militants. The election of Labour in two General Elections in 1974 delivered a body blow to the International Socialists. At first the IS leaders expected this to be but a brief pause before they could get back to business as usual. Their April 1974 perspective blithely declared that "This honeymoon between the trade unions and the Labour government will be much shorter than it was in 1964-66. This time it will be a matter of months rather than years." In fact the Labour government and trade union bureaucrats proved far more successful in making their Social Contract stick. The organisation was wracked by crisis as the tide of anti-Tory militancy temporarily receded. Membership started to decline sharply. Serious political differences developed in the organisation. The Left Faction (formed in 1973 and expelled in 1975 when it founded Workers Power) argued against the "economism" of the IS and for a cadre party fighting for the communist programme in the working class. On the right of the organisation the IS Opposition reflected the political pressure on many worker members to draw closer to the Broad Lefts in the unions.

#### THE TWISTS AND TURNS BECOME FRENZIED

Typically the Cliff group sought to avoid confronting the political crisis facing worker militants by bureaucratic expulsions and a search for a new layer of young workers whose minds weren't tainted by Labourite illusions or bureaucratic habits. Socialist Worker was redesigned with bigger print, shorter articles and shallow politics, all to make it more accessible to the new young audience. The paper never reached that audience however. The IS Opposition was eventually expelled in late 1975. But the expulsions and strengthened bureaucratic regime solved none of the problems of the IS. Since 1974 the Cliff leadership has carried through a series of frenzied twists and turns in a desperate bid to revive the fortunes of the organisation.

\* Between 1974 and 1977 the Cliffites tried to "Steer Left". IS-dominated pseudo rank and file movements were built. In 1974 they launched the National Rank and File Movement and added the "Engineers' Charter" to their list of front organisations. In 1975 the Right to Work Campaign was launched as another stunt for reaching the "raw youth". From the autumn of 1976 to early 1978 the Cliffites stood against Labour in eight by-elections, achieved laughable votes and few recruits. Ambitious plans to challenge Labour in 60 seats were dropped. In anticipation of major recruitment in the expected forthcoming industrial struggles, and with a great deal of triumphalism, the Socialist Workers Party was declared in January 1977. In August 1977 the SWP joined with other militants in driving the fascists off the streets of Lewisham. By and large, however, the SWP refused to argue for this course of action in the trade unions. Instead, in sectarian fashion, they simply encouraged their own members to "get on with it". The whole "steer left" course was nothing more than, in Trotsky's phrase, fear of the opportunism which was gathering pace in their own ranks after Labour's election.

\* After Lewisham the organisation turned right. Their "steer left" policy had led to their marginalisation in the Trade Unions. They became frightened of their own isolation after a press witchhunt against the SWP in the aftermath of Lewisham. The right turn of 1977 primarily took the form of an accommodation to the petit-bourgeois radical elements that it is now fashionable for SWPers to call "the swamp".

The right turn was heralded in the Autumn of 1977 when the SWP hailed a state ban on a National Front march in Tameside as a victory, even though it was deliberately aimed at preventing the left from mobilising. Soon afterwards the SWP

took the initiative in forming the Anti-Nazi League. Although the ANL was described as a united front, the SWP in fact allowed the politics and actions of the ANL to be determined by the liberal and clerical allies that they coaxed into it. This way they hoped to offset and overcome their isolation. The bitter fruit of this opportunism was tasted in September 1978. The SWP refused to argue for the second ANL carnival to march back to Brick Lane in the East End of London to defend the Asian community against a thousand strong fascist march. In their "Right turn" the SWP were in no mood for breaking their festive pact with Peter Hain, Tom Robinson and the now reviled Tony Benn.

In this phase the SWP also accommodated to feminism in an opportunist manner. Before 1972, the economist IS had spurned the struggle for women's emancipation as a diversion from the class struggle. In the ANL days however, the SWP paper for women, *Womens Voice*, became a platform for feminist politics, and the politics of feminism spread rapidly in the ranks of the SWP.

It was a champion of the anti-porn marches in Soho regardless of their objectively reactionary logic. It concentrated on every concern of the petit-bourgeois socialist feminist milieu. Far from striving to win these women to revolutionary politics, the SWP's accommodation to them helped speed the disintegration of that movement in Labourism and lifestyleism. Moreover, a good number of the SWP's own women fell victim to feminism. The price of pumping the SWP back up to its 1974 size through a turn to the radical campaigns was a deteriorating social composition and the corrosive impact of petit bourgeois fashions in Cliff's ranks.

Anti  
Nazi  
League

\* In the aftermath of Thatcher's first electoral victory Cliff tried to steer left once again. *Womens Voice* and the black paper *Flame* were closed down in 1981. As usual the Cliff leadership could not grasp the political crisis that lay at the root of the isolation and disorientation of many shop floor militants or the impasse faced by the recruits from the campaigns. The campaigners are the principal victims of the present purge, since the "downturn" dictates - no campaign work! As for the dwindling ranks of the SWP's worker militants, their isolation is blamed on the "bureaucratism" of the shop stewards' movement. Without explaining the political crisis underlying developments amongst the stewards, Cliff gave a green light for members to resign from elected official posts and shop stewards positions in the unions. While this line has recently been modified - SWP members are again allowed to stand for stewards' positions - it remains an important component of the SWP's strategy for dealing with the "downturn".

The main emphasis of party-building now, however, is to shake off members raised in the ways of previous turns and construct a new slimmed down SWP trained up for future battles. To do this the leadership have again targeted students as their prospective new raw material, geographical branches - once denounced as barren propagandist forums - have replaced workplace branches, and the clock is being turned back to the late 1960s. In this scheme the SWP will be ready and waiting for another 1970s style upturn in the class struggle. This is the stuff dreams, not revolutionary parties, are made of.

#### THE BANKRUPTCY OF CENTRISM

The history of the IS and the SWP is a history of opportunism and accommodation. The present crisis and purge in the SWP is the fruit of that tradition. Periodically, oppositions have developed in the IS/SWP in response to the twists and turns of the Cliffites. In general they have refused to go to the roots of the IS political tradition and only rejected the latest turn or switch. The experience of the SWP has served to turn many serious militants against the very idea of building a revolutionary party and been but a prelude to re-entry into Labourism, trade unionism or apathy. We in Workers Power reject both the tradition of Cliff and the rightmoving accommodation to Labourism that is prevalent on the British Left.

The SWP tradition has failed the test of struggle. It squandered the opportunities that were presented to revolutionaries from the early 1970s. It served to break the political will of many sincere militants who wanted to build a revolutionary party. SWP members are now given to sneering at the "swamp" of ex-revolutionaries. But it is their leadership that has played a major role in creating that swamp with its bankrupt politics and bureaucratic regime. We urge all serious militants who are sickened with the SWP but still committed to building a revolutionary party to read our analyses of the SWP tradition, discuss it with us and break with the rotten tradition it represents.



WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

## The question Economism can't answer

the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat." And then he goes on with condescending irony: "Whether or not it is possible to find slogans or 'demands' that meet these exacting specifications depends, very obviously on circumstances. If at a given time today's consciousness of wide layers is decidedly non-revolutionary, then it will not be transformed by slogans. Changes in actual conditions are needed. The problem at each stage is to find and advance these slogans which not only strike a chord in at least some sections of the class (ideally of course, the whole of it) but which are also capable of leading to working class actions. Often they will not be transitional in terms of Trotsky's very restricted definition.

Of course Trotsky cannot be held responsible for the tendency of most of his followers to fetishize the notion of transitional demands, and even the specific demands of the 1938 programme - most obviously the "sliding scale of wages". The emphasis he gave to this matter was, however, excessive and encouraged the belief that "demands" have some value independently of revolutionary organisation of the working class." (Trotsky's *Marxism*, p.104).

Behind the SWP's hostility to "slogans and demands", especially transitional ones, lies their total inability to see beyond the horizon of the immediate economic or trade union political struggles. Thus they present themselves as specialist advisors on action (invariably militant trade union tactics), on generalisation, (solidarity action between sectional struggles up to, but no further than "mass strike action") and on organisation (where they advocate joining the party to link together the rank and file militants.)

### AGITATION AND PROPAGANDA

Traditionally the SWP therefore attempts at all costs to avoid political issues that are not immediately posed in working class economic struggle. Either they try to ignore questions such as Ireland, women and race altogether. If that will not work then they will trim their positions to keep them in line with relevant consciousness. They did this on Ireland for example, where they refused to call for the withdrawal of British Troops when Labour sent them in and denounced the 1972 Aldershot bombings as "individual terrorism" despite their formal position of unconditional but critical support for the IRA. The only alternative to this in the SWP leaders' book is to set up a "separate" campaign or paper on the issue to keep in with those concerned about it. That is what happened with *Women's Voice* and the Anti-Nazi League for example.

The agitation of the SWP consists of "calls to action" to continue and step up existing struggles with realistic ie, immediately realisable, goals. Alongside this the SWP maintains a separate diet of propaganda aimed at exposing the evils of capitalism and presenting necessarily abstract arguments for socialism and workers' control. Agitation and Propaganda occupy the distinct and separate terrains of "Action now" and passive education for the "Great Day a'commin" precisely because the SWP rejects the method and tradition represented by the Transitional Programme. It has no programme to take the working class from its present struggles to the creation of workers' power. They once produced a draft programme but it never got beyond the internal bulletin. In reality their programme is split into a maximum/minimum one as much as that of the traditional Social Democracy. There is only one major difference; the Social Democratic minimum programme glorifies the terrain of electoral politics and delegates economic struggles to the affair of the unions.

The SWP does the exact reverse. SWP loyalists will object that they stress the "self-activity" the direct action, the do-it-yourself approach. This is true but when sectional trade union militancy or even mass direct action for trade union political ends develops to the fullest extent it indeed poses questions such as the political general strike, who rules in society, and how to really deprive the bosses of political and economic power. Only the socialist programme contains the answer to these questions. This answer is not an abstract one of "Socialism", but a series of methods of organisation, and goals of struggle, which go further than the existing everyday demands and slogans of the movement. Communist propaganda has to prepare the ground for the fight for these demands and slogans. If these answers are not given, if these slogans are not raised, if a new leadership does not emerge on the basis of a strategy and tactics which are a leap forward for the class, then bourgeois answers will be given - by the existing union and Labour leaders.



Lenin

MANY CRITICS OF the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party have accused it of Economism. Unfortunately the total failure of most of these critics to orient themselves towards work in the largest mass workers' organisations - the trade unions - has discredited this correct charge.

When the student vanguardist, the feminist, the "anti-fascist", Trotskyist-Bennites demonstrate in words and deeds their aversion for the "backward", "white male skilled working class" they completely undermine their criticism of the IS/SWP. Indeed their "politics" are simply the obverse side of the coin of the SWP. Where the latter concentrates almost exclusively on the economic struggle, the former say that politics is enshrined in the Labour Party. Both represent a "slavish bowing to spontaneity" - Lenin's charge against the Economists' trend in the Russian Social Democracy.

The SWP theoreticians have a holy terror of Lenin's pamphlet *What is to be done?* Fearing the sharpness of its criticism, Cliff and other SWP writers have manufactured a totally false picture of *What is to be done?* "Economism" is caricatured as "opposition to building a revolutionary party" or the ignoring of political questions and since the IS/SWP is not guilty of either of these it is concluded that it cannot be economistic. Cliff attempts to discredit *What is to be done?* by claiming that Lenin "overemphasised the difference between spontaneity and consciousness", that Lenin's supposed "complete separation of spontaneity and consciousness is mechanical and non-dialectical" and that Lenin later admitted this to be the case.

Cliff wishes to hold fast to the proposition that "An economic demand, if it is sectional, is defined as 'economic' in Marx's terms. But if the same demand is made of the state, it is political." Cliff asserts the internal evolutionary logic of the economic struggle: "In many cases economic(sectional) struggles do not give rise to political (class wide) struggles, but there is no Chinese wall between the two, and many economic struggles do spill over into political ones." (Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, vol.1, pp.80-82)

Duncan Hallas, writing in 1973 explains this with respect to the events of 1972: "Thus the builders' strike was an economic movement; the strike to force the Pentonville Five, a political movement, a successful non-sectional struggle to coerce the ruling class. But the origin of the Pentonville struggle was the Midland Cold Store dispute; a very economic, very sectional dispute - an attempt to protect the jobs of registered dockers against cheaper labour. The economic struggle led, in this case, to a political struggle and generally speaking this is usually how political, class wide actions - other than purely electoral ones - develop." (*International Socialism*, No.56, first series).

From this supposed law of development Hallas asks and answers the question: "How do revolutionary socialists get into positions, gain the authority, that commands a hearing? By serious, active and persistent struggle on these issues that actually concern their fellow workers, maintained consistently over time. And these issues will be economic issues, sectional issues, issues of conditions, bonuses, gradings, wage rates and at one remove union politics."



For Hallas this means concentrating on giving a "better, more successful, lead on the concrete day to day, bread and butter issues, than their non-revolutionary fellows." There is no fear that this will make revolutionaries indistinguishable from pure and simple trade union militants because of an inherent logic propelling economic struggles into political ones, a logic provided by government intervention into the economic sphere (via "incomes policy", police on the picket line, anti-union laws etc etc). Thus Hallas concludes: "This political struggle can be carried through only on the basis, in the first place, of economic struggles, of sectional struggles. No magic general slogans can replace clear, realistic, and concrete leadership in these sectional struggles. The central slogans have to arise from these and generalise them."

Now Economism is not "the absence of politics". Lenin makes

this crystal clear in *What is to be done?* The Economist "...does not altogether repudiate the political struggle." Lenin cites Economist writings that talk about "combatting the government". Lenin however points out that the Economist believes that 'politics always obediently follows economics.' He continues: "If by politics is meant Social-Democratic politics (ie, socialist or communist politics - WP) then the theses of (the Economists) are utterly incorrect. The economic struggle of the workers is very often connected with bourgeois politics, clerical politics etc. (The Economists) theses are correct, if by politics is meant trade union politics, viz the common striving of all workers to secure from the government measures for alleviating the distress to which their conditions give rise, but which do not abolish that condition, ie, which do not remove the subjugation of labour to capital". Lenin concludes: "There is politics and politics. Thus we see that (The Economists' position) does not so much deny the political struggle as it bows to its spontaneity, to its unconsciousness. While fully recognising the political struggle, which arises spontaneously from the working class movement itself, it absolutely refuses independently to work out a specifically Social Democratic politics...."

### SPONTANEITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Lenin notes the Economists' charges against the Iskra tendency of "setting up their programme against the movement." Against this he replies that it is the task of Marxists to "raise the (spontaneous) movement to the level of its programme. Surely it is not its function to drag at the tail of the movement."

Lenin in no way denies that the working class "spontaneously" - ie, out of the very conditions and struggles of its exploited position under capitalism - develops class consciousness. Nor does he deny that the economic struggle has a "spontaneous" tendency towards politics. What he does say in the famous and willfully misunderstood quotation is that: "Class political (our emphasis - WP) consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers."

This quotation, along with Lenin's observation that "there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement" draws attention to the fact that the creation of a workers' movement with socialist consciousness and a socialist programme is a conscious active task, not a "spontaneous" one. The raising of spontaneous class struggle, whether "economic" or "political" into socialist consciousness is an indispensable task and one which only a vanguard party can undertake.

None of this is in contradiction with a correct appreciation of the revolutionary creativity of the masses. But if workers spontaneously engage in epic class struggles, spontaneously create soviets and spontaneously erupt into insurrection they also - and necessarily for longer periods - spontaneously succumb to bourgeois ideology. Lenin's attack is on those who tail the economic struggle and who, in the name of "spontaneity", denigrate socialist class consciousness. He attacks those who will not develop a specific socialist programme, strategy and tactics and will not struggle to win the "mass movement" to it; to raise the struggle from the "day to day bread and butter issues" (Hallas).

Cliff likes to pretend that Lenin left all the immature nonsense of *What is to be done?* behind once he had seen the mass movement of 1905. These words from that year refute him: "We cannot be content to have our tactical slogans limp behind events and to their being adapted to events after their occurrence. We must have slogans that lead us forward, light up the path before us, and raise us above the immediate tasks of the movement. To wage a consistent and sustained struggle the party of the proletariat cannot determine its tactics from occasion to occasion. In its tactical decisions it must combine fidelity to the principles of Marxism with due regard for the progressive tasks of the proletariat." (*Revolution Teaches*, 1905)

The SWP's objection to *What is to be done?* is in essence their objection to Leninism itself. Once (before 1968) this was overt and consistent - ie, they objected to the democratic centralist party structure which was the organised expression of the Leninist method of theoretical, political and economic struggle. Yet Cliff's acceptance of the formalities and terminology of Leninism hides a deep hostility to its programme and method.

Of a piece with this is the SWP's rejection of Trotsky's and the Communist International's utilisation of transitional demands. Thus Duncan Hallas objects to the transitional programme. He quotes Trotsky's famous statement that "It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of



In the Callinicos article referred to earlier, the author describes the NRFM as stillborn. He is right, but whereas he blames this on the objective state of the class struggle at the time (the beginning of the downturn) we blame the politics of the IS/SWP. The organisation built the NRFM on a syndicalist basis. The refusal to direct workers into a conscious conflict with 'reformism from above'—the Labour Party—was justified on the grounds that it was already discredited in the eyes of the workers. On the eve of Labour's election victory in early 1974 Andreas Nagliati, the IS industrial organiser at the time, wrote:

*"The traditional party of the working class, the Labour Party is an empty shell organisationally and in terms of active involvement. Politically it is so discredited that even the Tories vicious anti-working class measures have not really restored it to working class favour."* (ISJ February 1974).

The conference called by the rank and file papers—the Car-walker, Collier, Platform, NUT and File etc—in March 1974 downgraded any discussion of the political situation facing the working class under Labour. Resolutions put forward by the Workers Fight group on racialism and workers control and nationalisation, were all opposed by IS and given short shrift at the stage managed conference. The programme adopted at the conference was one of militant trade union demands. The IS itself decided in advance that it would not fight openly for its own socialist policies, for fear of scaring away militants. At some stage in the unspecified future, IS claimed, it would raise its politics. The logic of this syndicalist approach was explained by Nagliati. Writing of the non-aligned militants he argued:

*"What can bind them together is a programme for fighting around certain minimal demands—against wage freeze and incomes policy, for an end to the Industrial Relations Act and laws against picketing, for democratisation of the unions, for a fighting policy on wages. In this lies the rationale for the rank and file organisation."* (ISJ February 1974).

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The challenge of the rank and file



History of IS  
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The 1974 conference gave birth to the NRFM. It was a 'united front' controlled by supposed revolutionaries who were boycotting their own politics within it and suppressing anybody else! They simply joined in with the militants at the conference in relating particular experiences from their workplaces. The meeting was more of a rally than a working conference in discussing strategy and tactics for militants in the light of the fall of Heath and the election of a Labour government.

Fear of reformism and the political incapacity to fight it prevented IS from raising and discussing the question of strategy and tactics vis-a-vis the Labour Government. Realism, or rather a deep feeling of their own impotence, stopped IS from posing itself as "the alternative leadership". Of course at the end of the day an IS speaker stood up and sang the praises of socialism (much as Cliff did at the end of his productivity deals book), but it had little bearing on the strategy of the NRFM. The second conference of the NRFM took place later in the same year. In the meantime Wilson had been re-elected. Yet again, however, these developments did little to affect the nature of the conference. It followed the same recipe as the first and with the same results. The IS leadership were eager to avoid a discussion in the NRFM of what they often scornfully referred to as 'big politics'.

The modest success of the two conferences—approximately 500 delegates to each—reinforced the political modesty of IS. An internal bulletin in April 1975 recognised that the NRFM was not "strong enough to launch independent action" but argued that a serious campaign to root the NRFM in the localities would overcome this in the short term. The IS firmly believed that the 'honeymoon' with Labour was merely the prelude to a 'big bang' and the resumption of militant struggle. This perspective was rooted in IS's false understanding of the nature of the trade union bureaucracy and its hold over the workers' movement. IS hates the bureaucracy. Its vivid expression of this hatred gains it the sympathy of those workers sold out and betrayed by the bureaucrats. But the IS/SWP does not understand how to defeat the bureaucrats—its hatred is based on fear and fear leads them to seek a way around or behind the backs of the union leaders.

This incomprehension dates back to Cliff's *Economic Roots of Reformism*, an article written for Socialism in June 1957. Here Lenin's theory of the Labour Aristocracy and bureaucracy is grotesquely caricatured and smugly rejected, "a small thin crust of conservatism hides the revolutionary urges of the mass of workers. Any break through this would reveal a surging revolutionary lava. The role of the revolutionary party is simply to show the mass of the workers that their interests are betrayed by the 'infinitesimal minority' of 'aristocracy of labour'". (Neither Washington Nor Moscow p.109).

Cliff then mobilised the apparently knock down argument that the mass of workers are in fact reformist in their consciousness. Brushing aside, with a few inconsequential statistics, the very idea that the skilled workers benefit differentially from imperialist super-exploitation he alights on the much simpler argument:

*"The expansion of capitalism through imperialism made it possible for the trade unions and Labour parties to wrest concessions for the workers from capitalism without overthrowing it. This gives rise to a large reformist bureaucracy which in its turn becomes a brake on the revolutionary development of the working class. The major function of this bureaucracy is to serve as a go-between the workers and the bosses, to mediate, negotiate agreements between them, and 'Keep the Peace' between the classes... But the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy are effective in disciplining the working class in the long run only to the extent that the economic conditions of the workers themselves are tolerable. In the final analysis the base of reforms is in capitalist prosperity"* (as above, p.115/116 emphasis in the original).

The conclusion then flows "when capitalism however, decays to the extent that any serious demands of the working class reach beyond its limits, the bell will toll for reformism." (ibid p.117). This theory is false on all counts. As a critique of Lenin it is nonsense. Lenin did not hold that the working class was a constant "revolutionary lava", spontaneously ready to erupt but held back by a thin layer. He did hold—with Marx—that the proletariat had no objective and intrinsic ties to capitalist private property and that the demands of the profit system constantly led (though obviously not continuously) to collisions between the workers and the capitalists. Obviously there are periods of boom and slump of expansion and contradiction which effect the frequency, scope and direction of the class struggle. But what Lenin was asserting was that under Imperialism a sizeable stratum of skilled workers had emerged, well paid, with the conditions of life of a comfortable petit-bourgeois which had made its peace with capitalism. Disproportionately represented in the unions they were a conservative force on which the union officialdom could erect a bureaucratic structure. This frustrated the democracy of the mass of the members and often excluded the mass of non-unionised or unemployed workers. This theory explains how it is possible for the union bureaucracy to maintain its hold even in periods of crisis when capitalism manifestly cannot meet the "serious demands" of the working class—indeed when it claws back previous concessions. Such clawback periods, 1920/23, 1929/33, 1979/83, do not in any sense automatically undermine the bureaucracy because the workers-as-a-whole are no longer prosperous.

### THE NATURE OF THE UNION BUREAUCRACY

Cliff's theory tends to obscure the communist concentration on the mass of the proletariat, its concern for the interests of the class as a whole. This includes focusing on its most oppressed and exploited sections the unskilled, the unorganised, the unemployed, women, immigrants—regarded not as 'minorities' but as part of the majority of the proletariat with nothing to lose but their chains. Of course the well organised, militant sections provide invaluable cadre for the labour movement but without taking up and fusing with the majority of the class this minority remains a base for the bureaucracy. Cliff and the SWP theoreticians reflect an accommodation to this stratum when they voice their view of the bureaucracy. Thus for Alex Callinicos it is not based on any really existing social forces. Rather it is the natural result of the bargaining process. This is because the bargaining process necessitates organisation and organisation breeds bureaucracy.

*"A division of labour naturally and spontaneously emerges between the mass of workers and their representatives, whose time is increasingly spent in bargaining with the employers."* (ISJ Autumn 1982, our emphasis).

And: *"The trade unions even if they are born out of elemental struggles between labour and capital, inevitably produce a layer of full-time officials whose task it is to negotiate a compromise between the two classes"* (Callinicos, *The Revolutionary Road to Socialism - our emphasis*).

This analysis, which owes more to the bourgeois sociologist Michel and his iron law of oligarchy or the Webbs than it does to Marx and Lenin, leads to a shallow, contingent hostility to the bureaucrats. It leads to a self-defeating attempt to bypass the official leadership, and a completely one-sided stress on self-activity and self-organisation, not as means to challenge and replace the bureaucrats, but to offset or control them.

Thus Cliff in an article written in July 1971, "The bureaucracy today" (IS Journal No 48 - first series) concludes:

*"The struggle for democracy in the unions - regular elections of all officials, the right to recall them, giving them the average pay of the workers they represent get, the decision on the conduct of all strikes to be taken by mass meetings of workers, etc. - will become of cardinal importance. A vacillating bureaucracy needs the steady, controlling hand of the rank and file"*.

These formulations, and others like them in the pages of SWP publications, are based on the Clyde Workers' Committee declaration: *"We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them"*.

Now while this stress on the independence of the rank and file is fine so far as it goes, it does not go far enough. It leaves

out - and given the Clyde Workers' Committee was dominated by industrial syndicalists this is not surprising - an organised political challenge to the officials with the objective of wresting the national unions from their control and replacing them with a revolutionary leadership subject to rank and file democracy.

From a communist standpoint, i.e. from that of the need for a political struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie and its state power - Cliff's position is hopeless. Union democracy is necessary not merely to prevent sell-outs now, to bind the bureaucracy's hands. Workers need the full use of that centralised national union apparatus to make their struggles more effective. They need a "general staff of labour" that leads, mobilises and fights instead of today's tame cat TUC.

Therefore the bureaucracy must be dissolved and replaced with a militant, communist leadership. Such leaders would both guard and promote the democracy which alone really makes the unions schools of struggle, schools of socialism. But they would also have a positive duty. The rank and file also vacillates. The job of communist leadership is to answer the fears of the rank and file, overcome their vacillations and mobilise them for struggle. To blather about "self-activity" or spontaneity is to cover up one's total lack of direction. The working class will not think, and more importantly will not choose, "advisors" who just flatter their "self-activity" or "spontaneity".

The IS, because it feared and had no tactics to defeat and replace the bureaucrats, effectively put a sign-board up on their rank and file groups: "No bureaucrats need apply", "Officials keep out!". This is what the IS/SWP propaganda about the fat salaries and perks of office amounted to. The method of the united front and of demands placed upon bureaucrats like Scargill was absolutely beyond them. It might "sow illusions", "reduce self-reliance and self-activity". Thus it left these bureaucrats free to cultivate their (enormous) influence over the rank and file whilst the IS contented itself with the tiny handful who would break with them as a first step.

### FEAR OF OPPORTUNISM

Like their argument about Labour Party membership - to go in is, to be defiled, it leads to capitulation - in the rank and file movements the IS excluded the "leaders" because it feared the reflection or shadow of its own opportunism. Their horror of contamination masks a deep inner feeling that they have no strategy distinct from or inconsistent with that of the left bureaucrats.

In the struggle with the officials, revolutionary politics as a guide to action are absolutely decisive. An action programme for the unions can rally the membership and defend its interests against the bosses and the officials who try to sell these interests short. It can mobilise the forces to oust the reformist bureaucracy and clear the way for the transformation of the trade unions into organs of revolutionary struggle, instead of being organs for domesticating the workers. In the course of doing this, revolutionaries strive to win the leadership of the rank and file movement and the trade unions as a whole.

The SWP's syndicalism has always prevented them from beginning such a struggle. Their conception of the NRFM as a body of militants grouped on a self-limiting trade union programme, always meant that they had to conceal their politics within the NRFM, fine words about the socialist millennium notwithstanding. They could not connect these fine words with the struggles against the participation schemes and wage-cutting policies of Labour. Every rank and file programme that ever emerged from the IS/SWP stable was based on minimum demands, while those willing to subscribe to socialism (always posed in an abstract and maximalist manner) could join the party. This concept of the NRFM was increasingly untenable under Labour.

It was useless in equipping militants to fight Jones and Scanton in the unions and Wilson and Callaghan in the government. Militant shop-floor reformism was redundant under these circumstances. Not surprisingly, the SWP turned away from the NRFM and towards the Right to Work Campaign. This was launched by the NRFM, but by the SWP's admission, the child gobbled up the parent. It was a campaign of isolated actions and marches which mobilised the angry jobless youth and unleashed them at TUC congresses. The youth obliged by kicking the shins of the despicable time-servers. While one can sympathise with the sentiments of the youth who did the kicking, what this whole RTWC period reflected was the SWP's turn away from building rank and file organisations on the shop floor. Nor did it represent a real fight to get the unions to organise the unemployed. It was an expression of their inability to answer the problems of militants.

Thus from 1974 to 1977 the NRFM faded into obscurity. Then in 1977 it was wheeled out for a conference in November during the firefighter's strike. The SWP hoped, opportunistically, to cash in on this strike by launching the NRFM. However, the daily bulletin produced by the SWP in the name of a mythical firemen's rank and file group repeated all the errors of the early 1970s. More and more militant, bigger and bigger pickets were





That this is the case is shown by the fact that the "spontaneous" continuation of the militant struggles of the early 1970s was the Labour Government of 1974. In this period of militant trade union struggles, both political and economic, the International Socialists were unable and unwilling to offer an independent action programme which led from these remarkable struggles (the Kill the Bill strikes and demonstrations, the builders, postal workers, and two miners' strikes, the Pentonville jailings mass political strike) to the question of working class power. Instead they tailed every one of these struggles claiming it would "bring down the Tories."

Thus after the miners' stirring victory over the Tories in early 1972, after mass pickets and widespread solidarity action had demonstrated a mass class hostility to the Tories, the IS were still trying to keep the struggle at its existing economic level and even at its existing sectional level. True they "lent the struggle itself a political character." They said that the struggle had a political character but no more than that.

## THE REJECTION OF TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS

A typical front page of *Socialist Worker* in the miners' strike - under the misleadingly bold "Demand the TUC call a General Strike" - said: "If the miners do not win their full claim, demand that the TUC call a one day general strike of all affiliated unions against the Tory lockout." (*Socialist Worker*, No. 259, 19.2.1972) When the miners after their 1972 victory were in the firing line again the SW was still tailing and indeed advocating tailism for most of the working class: "The powerful battalions of the trade unions can organise to smash Phase Three. They can blast a hole through which every other section can march. It is a defeat which this Tory Government of riches for the few and misery for the many could not survive."

During the Pentonville jailings in mid-1972 the IS did not manage to call for a General Strike until after the TUC had threatened to call one. And even then, true to form they avoided like the plague the "political" and "too advanced" slogan of a General Strike to Smash the Industrial Relations Act.

Faced with rampant double figure inflation in this period *Socialist Worker* could not get beyond "Pay: Use Your Muscle for More!" It again renounced, cursing with bell, book and candle, the sliding scale of wages because such a slogan, if granted (a big if indeed!) might put a stop to the wages struggle. In fact

if the working class or substantial sections took up and fought for this generalised, class wide slogan on wages, it would have been a clearly political slogan. Even if - in exceptional circumstances - it had been conceded it would have been a ceaseless bone of contention with a government and an employing class determined to lower wages and bring down inflation at the workers' expense.

Forms of sliding scale have been fought for, won and fought over in massive struggles in Italy, Belgium and the United States. Even Heath's indexation fraud linked to the last phase of his incomes policy, and preserved by Labour, when triggered by inflation rates far in excess of the threshold Heath had thought safe, led to a rash of strikes by poorly organised, often women, workers. Here again the actual spontaneity of the workers proved to be more advanced than the tailism of the International Socialists.

Above all what the Cliffite economist schema fails to realise is that the vacuum it leaves, where there should be the fight for a communist action programme - including as well as transitional demands, immediate economic and political (democratic) ones - is filled in life by Reformism. Thus the SWP has no alternative, even at the pinnacle of struggle, except to grind its teeth and "Vote Labour with no illusions".

Economism is helpless when faced with bourgeois politics in the working class, which in Britain takes the form of Labourism. The SWP hates it, curses it, wishes it dead and develops theories to prove that it is. Yet each time the SWP thinks that the Hercules of working class self-activity has hurled it to the ground (the early 70s) it rises up again with renewed force, even temporarily subduing the economic struggle. The SWP can't comprehend that this is because political reformism is the true born son of the trade union struggle. It renews its strength constantly from it. The Miners' militancy put Wilson and Benn into office who then turned on the miners and did all they could to ensure that never again would they find themselves returned to office in such an extra-parliamentary fashion.

The political struggle does not begin only at the ultimate limit of the bread and butter struggle. It begins with revolutionaries transforming that struggle - not by slogans alone - by winning leadership on the basis of policies and tactics, encapsulated in revolutionary slogans, which can transform spontaneous action into a conscious political struggle for socialism. The SWP - despite the good intentions of its militants - is simply the other side of the coin to the Left Labourism they so despise.

tion of reformism from above" (p. 135) - i.e. the Labour Party. The tasks that flowed from this analysis were of course to encourage shop floor 'reformism', but at the same time to overcome the fragmentation of the stewards movement and thereby finish the working class' lingering belief in reformism from above: "The principal task of socialists are to do what we can to unify the working class and to encourage the movement from below." (p. 135). This unity was to take the form of a national shop stewards movement.

This whole analysis was short sighted and impressionistic. It was certainly true that workers looked to shop floor organisation and bargaining as the main means of achieving economic gains in the 1950s and 1960s. It was not true that this shifting locus of reformism, as IS called it, sounded the death knell of the Labour Party.



Indeed when economic crisis, mass unemployment and inflation, on the one hand, and statutory wage freezes, cuts in social services and attacks by the law on hitherto established trade union rights replaced the boom conditions of the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s the need for state wide, governmental answers would come to the fore. Before this situation became critical there lay five years in which the shop floor militants of the 1960s were able to utilise their stewards organisation for an effective fightback. These were halcyon days for Cliff's prognosis and practice. But the problem of the Labour Party - reformism from above - was not, indeed could not be, resolved by reformism from below.

Yet IS continued to blithely keep politics to a minimum in its trade union work. In 1970 a second major book by Cliff was launched. In 230 pages Cliff described in detail the nature of productivity deals and spelt out a trade union programme on how to fight them. In one and a half pages at the end in a section entitled 'Politics' it was asserted that "We need a revolutionary socialist movement" (p. 232). No connection between this asserted need and the struggle against productivity deals was made in practice. Trade unionism and politics were presented as separate entities. In their practice in this period the IS followed Cliff's cue. In the struggle to free the jailed Pentonville Five dockers the IS refused to demand that the TUC call a general strike despite the mass strike movement that was erupting to free the dockers. Symptomatically they refused out of the fear of TUC misleadership! Mass sympathy strikes by the rank and file were in their view safer. Only when the TUC itself called a one day general strike did the IS shamefacedly see fit to raise the call. Thus they tailed not only the working class, but, inevitably, the bureaucracy. Morbid fear of the bureaucrats, attempts to avoid rather than challenge and break their influence led to capitulation to it. Also in the miners strike of 1972 despite extensive rank and file self organisation and strength and despite the existence of a right wing leadership the IS refused to call for, build a rank and file movement during the strike. They cheered on Scargill's militancy but would not attempt to organise the rank and file during the strike. They claimed that after the strike, that is outside of the context of struggle, they would call a conference around their paper, *The Collier*.

During the early 1970s the IS did gain recruits amongst workers, thanks to their energetic intervention in workers' struggles and because they voiced these workers' views. Generally they did not hold onto those recruits for very long and the dream of IS filling the vacuum on the left as a mass alternative to Labour did not materialise. To overcome this failure to become a mass alternative, the IS increasingly turned towards the building of rank and file movements, around newspapers, in particular industries: the mines, London Transport, amongst teachers, amongst car-workers and others. Encouraged by the winding down of the Communist Party's 'rank and file movement' the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, consequent to their capture of a number of unions, IS in 1974 decided to launch a National Rank and File Movement. This was conceived as a bridge to the party for advanced militants, and a means whereby a tiny party could play a big role. Tony Cliff described the relationship between the party, the rank and file movement and the mass of workers as a series of cog wheels - a small one, the party, setting in motion a larger one, the NRFM, setting in motion a larger one again, the mass of workers. The mechanical analogy was apt because the relationship was conceived of as mechanical rather than political. The party was simply one element of the 'unifying' process, not the political leadership of the NRFM.

Cliff forgot that the big cog wheel turned under the motive force of economic and political crisis. When in 1974 a very powerful crisis rolled the working class in the direction of a Labour Government, the great cog-wheel tore the teeth of the other in its sequence. The rank and file fell back under the influence of the new left leaders. The IS 'members' passed back over the bridge to staff the rank and file groups.

## TRADE UNION STRATEGY

# Syndicalism's fear of the bureaucracy

IT MIGHT AT first sight seem curious to accuse the Socialist Workers party of syndicalism. After all is it not a party? Does it not openly proclaim its goal to be state power for the working class - even insisting that without soviets and workers' control of production there can be no workers' state?

Certainly the SWP is not a classically anarcho-syndicalist formation that denies the need for either political action or the proletarian dictatorship. Yet the pre-1914 French CGT, or American IWW were by no means the only syndicalist formations. English 'Industrial syndicalism' and the DeLeonite Socialist Labour parties on both sides of the Atlantic eclectically combined a syndicalist practice in the unions with parties devoted to making propaganda, including electoral propaganda.

We must leave aside for the time being the SWP's conception of the workers' state. In a future article we will show that this too is closer to a libertarian and syndicalist view than to the Marxist, Leninist and Trotskyist understanding of the proletarian dictatorship. Here we will look at the SWP's thoroughly syndicalist notion of the rank and file movement and the struggle for union democracy.

In essence it is this. The SWP has no clear or consistent commitment to the struggle to oust the trade union bureaucracy and to replace the present reformist leaders with revolutionary ones. Instead the IS/SWP looks to the de-centralising syndicalist idea of a system of democratic checks over leaders. Thus in the (unpublished) IS programme we find the slogan of "Workers control over the Unions". Workers control over production, a system as Trotsky said of dual power in the factory, of control over management is possible in a period of pre-revolutionary crisis and may extend for some period after the seizure of power as a school for workers management under a centrally planned economy. Certainly we seek to check, control, limit the sell outs and betrayals of the trade union bureaucrats, but a system of checks and balances over them is not our goal. Our goal is a communist leadership in transformed fighting industrial unions. Communists fight for a structure of workplace union branches and factory committees which are capable of creating action councils in heightened periods of class struggle and can develop in a revolutionary situation into workers councils (soviets). Communists do not hide their party label from the mass of workers but openly form fractions in the existing unions. They willingly form united fronts with non-communist rank and file workers who wish to fight for militant policies and trade union democracy. This unit-

ed front may be episodic and local or long lasting and national. The best example in Britain was the National Minority Movement in its earliest years and the various reform movements, vigilance committees and rank and file groups which preceded it. Democracy and openness about party affiliation and party policy is, however, a jealously guarded right for communists even when, or rather especially when, it is the leading tendency in such a movement for these formations remain united fronts and not parties. Freedom of criticism alone enables the workers to select and reselect the leaders and the policies proven correct in struggle. The history of the IS/SWP's attempts at rank and file organisation indicate the foreignness of this tradition to them.

## TAILING THE STRUGGLES OF THE CLASS

In 1966 the IS group focused its attention on the relationship between shop stewards - whose numbers had increased enormously during and after the war - and the trade union bureaucracy. The IS group recognised that the Labour Government's attempts to impose incomes policies and anti-union laws was causing stewards to move into action against a reformist government. In response to this rift the IS published a book by Tony Cliff and Colin Barker called *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards*. Despite their current insistence that in the 1960s they were not calling for a rank and file movement (see Alex Callinicos' mendacious account in ISJ Autumn 1982) this book did put forward an early version of the rank and file movement slogan. It argued that the principal problem with the militant shop stewards was their fragmentation of their struggles and their consequent narrow horizons. Their reformist consciousness was recognised but not regarded as a major problem by Cliff. Ever the optimist he said that it was fortunately being whittled away: "The importance of state sponsored, central reforms has been declining; today the workers have less to gain and less to hope for from national reforms. And thus the role of their national representatives, the Labour MPs, has been declining too." (p. 126)

Workers were turning instead to the shop floor and the shop stewards to get "do-it-yourself reforms" - better piece work rates, bonuses, holidays and so on. While admitting that the conscious revealed by this process remained reformist, Cliff argued that since it was reformism located in the shop floor and based on self activity it was thereby spontaneously "destroying the tradit-



# The Socialist Workers' Party

urged, but the problems of mobilising other sections of the public sector and fighting the TUC which engineered a sell-out, were not answered.

The last gasp of the NRFM came in 1979, in June after the Tories had won the election. This was conceived by Tony Cliff as an anti-Tory rally, not a serious revival of the NRFM. He was opposed in this conception by the industrial organiser, Steve Jefferys. However the conference, as a rally, was a great success. Over a thousand attended it (double the attendance at previous gatherings). But its political content marked the low point of the SWP's wretched economism. It launched a campaign around a "Code of Practice". This called on workers not to cross picket lines, not to break the closed shop, and to observe trade union norms. Yes, it was the old refrain, basic trade unionism.

The Code of Practice was, when measured against the tasks of fighting a Tory government committed to a whole series of anti-union laws, pathetic. As the bosses limbered up to launch their most ruthless offensive for years, Tony Cliff, John Deason and the SWP could only call for a return to basics. After 1979 and the failure of an anti-Tory movement to emerge from the conference, the shrouds were prepared for Steve Jefferys and the NRFM. Both disappeared in the subsequent years. They were followed by the various rank and file papers - *Carworker*, *Redder Tape*, *Engineers' Charter*, etc - all of whose sales had been steadily dwindling.

## THE STEEL STRIKE AND THE RANK & FILE

This disappearing act was for a time officially unacknowledged. It even went into partial reverse during the 1980 steel strike when the SWP re-launched their bulletin *Real Steel News*. Having learned nothing and forgotten nothing, the SWP Bourbons set about pursuing an identical course to that followed by the IS in the 1972 miners strike.

With the rank and file mobilised on a huge scale and acting independently of the officials, the opportunity for forging a real rank and file movement was there. To be realised it would have to take up issues like jobs, the transformation of the notoriously undemocratic ISTC and so on. RSN eschewed these tasks and refused to organise the rank and file during the strike, against the officials. It concentrated solely on mobilising workers around the pay claim. At some unspecified future date the time would be ripe for a rank and file movement, but not while the rank and file were actually in motion on a mass scale.

*Socialist Worker* reported an RSN meeting as concluding: "After the strike *Real Steel News* will have to take up issues like the reform of the ISTC and the fight against redundancies as well as the general political arguments" (our emphasis). After the strike had been sold out by the unreformed ISTC and after the Tories massacred jobs in the steel industry, and after the militants had once again sunk into apathy, it was too late to take up these issues. Not surprisingly, RSN has not been heard of since.



By late 1981 it was obvious to the SWP leadership that their rank and file perspective had collapsed. They were forced to come up with an explanation. Cliff as usual shifted the blame onto his members and the objective situation. The members, it seems, were guilty of doing what he had told them. They had built the rank and file groups as militant trade union bodies, and had themselves acted as militant trade unionists within them. Lo and behold, they had actually liquidated themselves into these bodies and, in so doing, turned them from being a supposed bridge into the party into routes out of the party. According to Cliff: "Instead of recruiting people from rank and file groups into the party, comrades disappear into the rank and file groups" (*Socialist Review*, May/June 1982). Earlier a rank and file activist - no doubt put up to it by Cliff - had shamefacedly admitted: "Our rank and file paper was devoted almost exclusively to what was happening in our own corner of the world and this determined our priorities". (*Socialist Review*, November/December 1981).

The SWP's official historian, Ian Birchall, describes the members of this period as having got lost "in the minutiae of trade union routinism" (*The Smallest Mass Party in the World* p24). All of these charges are undoubtedly true, but they beg the question, why did this happen to members of a supposedly revolutionary organisation? The answer is quite straightforward - the SWP leadership ensured that it happened because they designed the rank and file groups as bodies concerned purely with trade union matters.

The second reason cited by Cliff for the collapse of the NRFM perspective is the "downturn" in the class struggle. Since 1974 there has been a gradual collapse of militancy and confidence inside the working class. Combined with high unemployment, this makes the building of a rank and file movement impossible, goes Cliff's argument. While at one time this would have meant at least keeping alive the notion of rank and file organisation, now it means dropping the idea altogether and, in the case of the

health strike, actively opposing the formation of a national shop stewards' organisation (see WP 37 for a full account of this). All that can be done, says Cliff, is to be at the picket lines but "to play it low key - until the upturn comes" (*Socialist Review* April 1983). This is classic. In the upturn (1972-4) the SWP played it "low key" so as not to frighten away militants from the IS or the NRFM. In the downturn they play it "low key" until the upturn! By "low key" they mean not pushing "big politics", but concentrating on organising pickets and taking collections in order to win over the "ones and twos".

## BACK TO BASICS

In any and every situation, all the SWP can shout is "back to trade unionism". Sometimes its on a big scale (the upturn), sometimes its on a small scale (the downturn). So now, despite the doubly treacherous role of the officials, and the ferocity of the bosses' offensive, the SWP have wound up their rank and file groups, have retreated into their own geographical branches where "politics" are to be discussed. Of course, they continue to intervene in disputes, but here they must only raise small things: "In locating the ones and twos by collecting money for strikes, we are locating the ones and twos who are prepared to fight and who are prepared to identify with our politics. It is out of such small scale activities that a leadership is built for the struggles of the future" (Cliff in *Socialist Review*, June 1983).

Cliff and the SWP are turning away from the real problems posed by the bosses' offensive. Like it or not, that offensive raises big, that is national, political issues like privatisation, union rights, the welfare state, war and peace - which class shall rule. To concentrate only on "the little things" and hope that the big ones will go away until the SWP and the working class are ready to handle them, is sheer folly. They won't go away. Despite the often tireless activity of SWP members in support of particular strikes, as an organisation the SWP is turning away

from the problems that confront the militant minority inside the working class. The SWP's hostility to questions of leadership and politics, and their faith that an upturn will spontaneously rekindle a fighting spirit are condensing it to sectarian irrelevance.

It appears that there is a purge going on in the SWP at the moment. This is inevitable as the organisation turns in upon itself. Workers Power, which began life as the Left Faction in the IS in 1972/3, has drawn a lesson from the party's history. We believe that despite the defeats that have been suffered by the working class, the building of a rank and file movement is a burning task. But it will only be of use to the militant minority in the class if it addresses the ideological and organisational crisis that has facilitated recent defeats. It must challenge and defeat the reformist bureaucracy. To do this, it will require a political strategy, a revolutionary action programme. Revolutionaries do not have programmes for self-education circles alone. A programme is a set of policies, tactics and goals capable of mobilising workers in action. For us, therefore, intervention in the trade unions must be communist intervention. We seek to win - by democratic means - leadership of a genuine rank and file movement.

To do this we need to be absolutely open about and fight for our revolutionary politics, and not hide them for fear of frightening people away. This does not mean we present these politics as an ultimatum. On the contrary, we are prepared to take any step, however minimal, that takes the workers forward alongside reformist workers. However, unless we fight for our own politics at the same time, we cannot expect the working class to break with reformism and march with us along the road of revolutionary struggle.

The SWP's failure to inject politics into the NRFM left the militants of the 1970s to be duped by Jones, Scanlon and the Labour government. In the 1980s their "low key approach" will leave today's militants at the mercy of Evans, Duffy, Kinnoch and Scargill. Such is the bankruptcy of syndicalism today.

## CLIFF AND THE PARTY

# A parody of Leninism

ONE STICK THAT SWP members repeatedly beat the rest of the left with is that they alone are "building the party". The SWP's publications regularly assert the need for a revolutionary party. Not a few books from the SWP stable - Volume One of Cliff's *Lenin* and Chris Harman's *The Lost Revolution* to name but two - have as their theme the centrality of the party for the making of a revolution. Despite this breast-beating and dogged repetition of truisms, the IS/SWP have never understood the real nature of a revolutionary party on the Leninist model, let alone come close to building one.

In the days before Tony Cliff became a "Leninist" he openly espoused a Luxemburgist model of the revolutionary party. That is, he argued for a non-cadre, non-vanguard party, a party of the whole working class, organised on a federalist - as opposed to democratic centralist - basis. The first edition of his subsequently doctored pamphlet on Luxemburg stated: "For Marxists, in advanced industrial countries, Lenin's original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's, notwithstanding her overstatements on the question of spontaneity." (1959 edition of *Rosa Luxemburg*). Even after his supposed conversion to Leninism in 1968/9, Cliff's attachment to spontaneist notions of the party persisted when he argued that Luxemburg's position was superior to Lenin's 1902-4 position: "which was copied and given an added bureaucratic twist by the Stalinists the world over." (1969 edition of *Rosa Luxemburg*). In plain language Cliff is attributing the monoliths created by Stalinism to the model developed by the early Bolshevik party.

The shift to a "Leninist" model of organisation by the Cliff group came in 1968/9. Cliff justified his previous federalist position on the grounds that IS had been a propaganda group and "all branches were like the beads on a string". (*Neither Washington nor Moscow*, Cliff, p.215). However, the shift to more agitational activity, he argued, necessitated a shift to democratic centralism. The second justification for the shift was the defeat of the French general strike. Cliff had empirically registered that a spontaneous mass strike (the biggest ever in Europe) had not produced the revolution. The reason had been the absence of a combat, that is, a "Leninist" party.

## CLIFF'S EMPIRICAL METHOD

Both pretexts were based on an empirical method. Neither accounted for the actual shift in position in the Luxemburg pamphlet. The doctored text (Cliff's right) was not in any way acknowledged or accounted for (Cliff's deceitfulness). As such the new turn to "the party" was not the result of a real understanding of the essence of the Leninist model. It was based on a copying - and distorting - of the organisational form of that model. Since their turn to "Leninism" the IS/SWP tradition has developed a standard explanation of the need for a party. For example, Cliff wrote, in "Lenin and the Revolutionary Party": "For the achievement of a socialist revolution a revolutionary party is needed because of the uneven levels of culture and consciousness in different groups of workers. If the working class were ideologically homogenous there

would be no need for leadership." (IS 58, p.10). This leaves out of account the question of political consciousness, the ideas about society, the state and so on which are held by the workers. If the class were ideologically homogenous on the basis of wrong ideas, for example reformism, nationalism or even racism; there would obviously still be a need for communists to fight for the leadership of the class. This would have to be done in such a way as to break workers from these ideas and win them to revolutionary communism. The crucial question is whether the working class can develop a revolutionary consciousness out of its own struggles. Cliff argues that it can, the problem is that different workers reach such consciousness at different times.



Tony Cliff

In *What is to be done?* Lenin argued most forcibly that the spontaneous ideology of the working class was trade unionism and that this meant "enslavement by the bourgeoisie". The role of the party, argued Lenin, was to bring scientific socialism into the working class. Of course, even in the supposedly one-sided *What is to be done?* Lenin recognised that the workers did spontaneously gravitate towards socialism; but the task of the party were to conquer and subordinate this spontaneity in order to transform it into revolutionary consciousness.

The SWP have made much of Lenin's later comment that "What is to be done?" suffered from being a one-sided polemic against Economism. Molyneux, following Cliff, argues that: "if we accept Lenin's formulation that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought into the working class then precious little is left of Marx's fundamental dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself' on the contrary the role of the working class would be a strictly subordinate one." (*Marxism and the Party* p.48). This argument fails to understand either Lenin's original argumentation or the one-sidedness that Lenin later identified.

What Molyneux wants is not to correct a certain polemical one-sidedness but to deny any validity in Lenin's position. Molyneux believes that the spontaneous struggle can achieve revolutionary socialist consciousness: "Indeed it was from the insurgent workers of Paris that Marx learned that the working class cannot simply take over the existing state machine



but must smash it." (ibid.p.50). In addition he cites the Chartists, the Russian workers of 1905 and similar examples of major working class political struggles to "prove" his point. Molyneux is merely parroting Cliff when he argues this. Indeed Cliff argues that Lenin reversed his 1902 position in 1905 "Lenin had to protect his followers from allegiance to What is to be done? His formulation there of the relationship between spontaneity and organisation still bedevils the movement. Yet in 1905 he clearly reversed his position: 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic....'" (IS Journal May 1973 - the dots are Cliff's).

Here Cliff is not simply purblind - he is wilfully twisting Lenin's actual position. The quotation he ends with dots is, actually in context, much fuller and more careful than Cliff suggests. Lenin points to the fact that in the 1905 upheavals the workers were fighting "in a purely Social-Democratic spirit" because: "The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social-Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness." (Lenin on "The Reorganisation of the Party", *Collected Works*, vol. 10 p.32).

## Tony Cliff

## LENIN

## Volume 1: Building the Party

Far from being a change of position, this was entirely consistent with Lenin's 1902 view that: *It is often said that the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, provided however this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, provided it subordinates spontaneity to itself.* (What is to be done?)

The SWP's failure to understand the relationship between spontaneity and consciousness lies at the root of their false notion of the party. Take the examples cited by Molyneux of the Chartists, the Communards and the workers in the soviets. These workers did not raise themselves to the level of revolutionary communist consciousness. Certainly it was the Commune which provided Marx with the historical experience from which he - the revolutionary communist - generalised the theory of the state. That generalisation, which is essential for the development of a revolutionary strategy, was not made by the Communards who were led by non-communists. Similarly the first soviets, in 1905, did not raise the call for armed insurrection against Tsarism, the Bolsheviks did and in Moscow they won workers to that position. Equally, it was the experience of 1905 which, much later, was generalised into a revolutionary strategy "All Power to the Soviets!" by Lenin.

Their inability to understand the primary role of the party as the ideological vanguard of the class means that for the SWP the party plays a primarily organisational role. It simply links up existing struggles. Molyneux argues: *The fact of workers achieving socialist consciousness spontaneously does not entail a return to the social democratic gradualist view (of the party-WP) for this consciousness does not develop gradually, accumulating steadily and inevitably...so the consciousness of the advanced socialist workers must be organised and centralised to increase to the maximum its influence within the ideologically heterogeneous class as a whole.* (*Marxism and the Party*, p.50)

To argue against this idea is not, of course, to deny that the Party does have a very important organisational role to play. However, if the ideological role, the role of political leadership, is ignored, then the precise nature of the organisational one is equally ignored. In order to fight effectively against capitalism and the capitalist state, particular forms of organisation of the working class are needed. What those forms are, for example, revolutionary trade unions, soviets, militias, etc, can be learnt from past and present struggles but that is no guarantee that the working class will now adopt them, spontaneously or that it will adopt them in time. The lessons of past battles have to be brought into today's struggle because they have either been forgotten by today's generation of militants or have never been learned. If the party does not argue for the correct forms of organisation and methods of struggle (tactics) and against insufficient or wrong ideas then those wrong ideas that is, bourgeois ideas, will dominate.

The direct consequence of viewing the party merely as the "generaliser", the weapon for simply linking up of struggles, is a rejection of the idea of a cadre party. Consonant with his early positions on Luxemburg, Cliff has always (falsely) counterposed the broad mass party to the supposedly elitist vanguard party. For the IS/SWP, therefore, party building means opening the door to the masses on a minimal basis. Ian Birchall defended this line in his history of the party in the following terms: *As had always been the practice in IS, the aim was to win recruits to the organisation on the basis of a minimum agreement on activity and leave the question of education and the wider aspects of IS politics to be developed in*

*the process of work inside the organisation.*"

He goes on to admit that many recruits were soon lost - he does not explain why - but insists: *"But there was no way this could be forecast in advance, no magic mark engraved on the foreheads of potential recruits."* This is disgraceful. It is a recipe for deceiving potential recruits, diluting the political level of the organisation and demoralising members, causing them to drop out. It deceives people by recruiting them often on purely trade union grounds and then bewildering them in a branch meeting where political questions beyond their comprehension are debated. It dilutes the organisation by bringing in people not trained or educated in the often complex problems of revolutionary marxism, leaving them prey to demagogues, personal prejudices and so forth. It demoralises members because, more often than not, they are unable to cope with life in a revolutionary organisation because they have not been trained, in advance, to deal with the problems that this involves. The result - the IS and SWP bear the responsibility for destroying probably thousands of potential revolutionaries as a result of their short term opportunist membership policies.

Precisely because the party is a party of leaders it has got to be selective in its recruitment. It has to select, train and recruit people who can stay the course, people who, in their fields of work have the political culture to be able to lead others. In other words before it can become a mass party and in order that it may become a mass party, the party has to be a cadre party.

Cliff justifies the rejection of a cadre party on the grounds that it is inherently substitutionist. His essay *Trotsky on Substitutionism* written in 1960 and republished as recently as 1982 expresses this libertarian view of the party. He argues that there was a causal relationship between the Bolshevik organisation and counter-revolutionary Stalinism: *"However if the State built by the Bolshevik Party reflected not only the will of the party but of the total social reality in which the Bolsheviks found themselves, one should not draw the conclusion that there was no causal connection at all between Bolshevik centralism based on hierarchy of professional revolutionaries and the Stalinism of the future."*

He quotes Trotsky's Menshevik position against Lenin approvingly. Trotsky wrote: *"The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the central committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally, the 'dictator' substitutes himself for the central committee."* Cliff comments: *"In Trotsky's words about the danger of 'substitutionism' inherent in Lenin's conception of the Party organisation, and his plea against uniformity, one can see his prophetic genius, his capacity to look ahead, to bring into a unified system every facet of life."*

### THE PROBLEM OF SUBSTITUTIONISM

For Cliff, then, the Leninist conception of the democratic-centralist party is inherently substitutionist. By saying this he is giving support to every anti-communist philistine who argues that Stalin simply took over and continued the work of the party of Lenin! It is quite clear that, for Cliff, a Leninist party without a Lenin to run it is a dangerous monolith. Why else praise Trotsky's "prophetic genius" instead of making clear Trotsky's gross misconception. It was not the cadre organisation that was substitutionist, but the political programme of the Stalinists after Lenin's death. They substituted reliance on the Kuomintang and British TUC officials for the building of a revolutionary party and the political independence of the working class. The reason Cliff ignores this real substitutionism is because for him the question of leadership in a programmatic sense, is irrelevant.

Ironically Cliff's distortion of the Leninist party leads to substitutionism in the SWP. Real democratic centralism requires a real internal party life, an educated and involved membership and an accountable leadership. None of those things exist in the SWP. The leadership's centrism - its twists and turns, errors and follies - preclude democratic centralism. The established Cliffite clique cannot afford to risk training a membership that could hold them to account. The history of expulsion and the present purge are eloquent testimonies of this. The result is a high turn-over of members, with the recruits from one turn being sacrificed during the next turn. This is a parody of democratic centralism. It substitutes the rule of the clique in the central committee for the real democratic centralist Leninist model.

This has been the situation in the SWP for many years. Each successive "turn" is accompanied by a significant loss of members who were recruited mainly, if not solely, on the practice of the preceding turn. Such comrades are accused of not being able to get out of the rut of routinism, of being conservative and too caught up in their own areas of work to be able to see the need for the party to reorientate. In an immediate sense this may often be true but if this is the case then the fault lies primarily with the party leadership that allowed them to become routinist, single-issue campaigners, not with the comrades themselves. Cliff's justification for this approach is based on the theory that the party is necessarily built by the leadership "bending the stick" in different directions as circumstances change.

Once more we find the quote-doctor Cliff enlisting Lenin as a supporter of party building via "bending the stick". Cliff argues: *"The readiness to bend the stick far in one direction and then to reverse and bend it far in the opposite direction, a characteristic he had throughout his life, took clear form already at this early stage of his development as a revolutionary leader."* And further on: *"He always makes clear the task of the day, repeating a thousand times what is needed, using the heaviest, thickest strokes to describe the tasks. Tomorrow, Lenin will recapture the balance, will unbend the stick and*

*then bend it in another direction.*" ("From Marxist circle to Agitation", *IS Journal*, 52,p.22).

This picture of Lenin as the sole arbiter of the political practice of the Bolsheviks, the genius who twists and turns his organisation as he thinks fit; again leaves out of account the political strategy that guided Lenin. It is obvious that any leader needs to be able to shift the emphasis and the focus of work. This is true of the Pope, Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock. Lenin was able to do this extremely well and, it



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could be said, this made him a great leader, but it wasn't this that made him a great revolutionary leader. It was his ability to fight for the communist programme, stemming from his role as a part of a highly developed and trained cadre party, in all sorts of very different circumstances that made him this. In fact his changes of strategy, that is, of programme, were quite rare; the realisation of the bankruptcy of the Second International and the need to call for a Third, the de facto jettisoning of the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" in favour of the strategy of Permanent Revolution after April 1917, for example.

In short, Cliff believes that a Leninist party is only healthy if there is a Lenin in charge. If there is, then the party leader, or leadership, operates by being able to swing the organisation from one direction to another, at will. As Rosa Luxemburg put it (in another context) the membership develop the passive virtue of obedience.

### DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM IN THE S.W.P.

Naturally, the leadership of the SWP has to pay lip service to the norms of democratic centralism. Chris Harman's recently re-issued essay *Party and Class* is a case in point. The fact that he can give an account of democratic centralism that is formally correct on many points only makes the organisation's practical tramping underfoot of these norms all the more shameful. In talking about the concept of discipline, for example, Harman writes: *"Discipline for Lenin does not mean hiding differences that exist within the party but rather exposing them to the full light of day so as to argue them out."* (p.17). However for such conscious discipline to exist, which means every comrade being convinced through argument and debate of the line of the organisation, there must exist a machinery within the organisation for conducting that argument and debate. Yet the SWP does not have an Internal Bulletin in which the membership can air differences, expose them to the full light of day. Nor does the SWP accept the right of members who disagree with the line, and therefore, want to argue against it, to organise themselves as factions. Such debate is essential and cannot be restricted, as in the SWP, to a "pre-conference period". Political arguments do not conform to calendars, they are dictated by the course of events. By only allowing limited argument against its chosen policy the leadership of the SWP ensures that it can prepare the membership to accept its position long in advance of any counter argument. As a result the inner leadership acts, in fact, as a permanent faction. Not surprisingly it becomes ever more isolated from the pressure of the rank and file, and is increasingly restricted to the members of the apparatus of the organisation.

In every phase of its existence, the SWP Cliffites have got it wrong on the question of the party. On its role in the working class, its organisational principles and the criteria for membership, the SWP make fundamental mistakes and revisions. This is why we attack them. To the right of the SWP, the Socialist Organiser and Socialist Action criticise them for raising the call to build a revolutionary alternative to Labour. That is not our criticism. We are 100% for the building of a revolutionary party as an alternative to Labour. What we insist is that the SWP have not done that and, crucially, cannot do it. Workers Power can. Join us and help to build it.