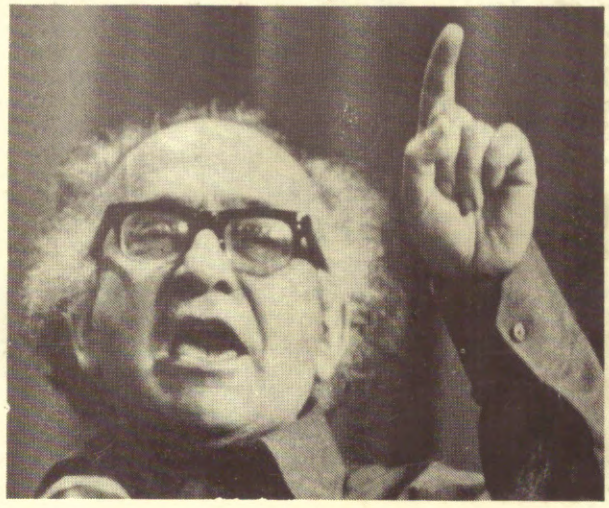
The politics of the SWP



a Trotskyist critique

a **workers power** pamphlet ★ £1

Introduction

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the largest group on the British left, began the 1990s in an optimistic mood. With the fall of Thatcher heralding a new period of instability in British politics, the party decided it was time to "go for growth".

Such optimism is to be welcomed. But what many newer recruits to the SWP will not know is that only a few years ago the party was in the grip of a self-defeating pessimism. The SWP's politics, for most of the 1980s, was dominated by the perspective of the "downturn".

The move towards the current optimism and away from the preceding mood of doom and gloom represents a dramatic shift in the perspectives and orientation of the SWP. Such shifts are characteristic of its entire history and of its forerunner, the International Socialists (IS). The leader of the SWP, Tony Cliff, likes to justify such 180 degree turns as "bending the stick" in the face of new developments. This is a far cry from the truth.

The zig-zags of the SWP are not tactical responses to changed circumstances in the class struggle on the basis of a consistent Marxist strategy. They are a series of ill conceived political gyrations, inevitable for a group that lacks the ballast of a revolutionary *programme*. The situation in the real world is made to fit the SWP leadership's latest schema for the growth or preservation of the party.

These lurches by the SWP, first one way and then another, have bred a form of opportunism known to Marxists as "economism". That is, the SWP accommodate their politics and arguments to the the ideas prevalent within the working class and the existing level of struggle, failing to mount a practical political challenge to the leaders of that struggle and to give it a revolutionary direction. Occasionally, however, it has led the party to present a "left" face and indulge in sectarian binges. In both variants the remarkable thing is that the SWP never advocate anything other than a set of minimalist, if militant, demands and tactics—most of which are already being fought for by the workers in any case.

In the 1970s the IS cut with the grain of working class militancy but refused to challenge the reformist political limitations of such militancy or the political prejudices of many workers on issues such as racism, sexism and lesbian and gay rights. After the election of a Labour government in 1974 the party attempted to hold the ground it had made by consciously "steering left". Systematic work in the

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unions was increasingly subordinated to building party fronts like the Right to Work Campaign. Instead of challenging the reformist leaders the SWP set its supporters off on marches around the country and lobbies of TUC congresses, which ended up with them kicking the shins of the bureaucrats rather than challenging their misleadership politically.

On other issues too, the SWP veered wildly. From militant anti-fascism, culminating in the Battle of Lewisham in 1977, the party retreated in the face of media hostility into a popular frontist campaign, the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), which organised rock concerts *instead* of physically confronting the fascists. From disregarding the importance of the fight for women's liberation the SWP became prominent activists in the thoroughly feminist and objectively reactionary (i.e. pro-censorship) anti-pornography campaign, "Reclaim the Night". After declaring "the party" in 1976 and standing against Labour in the period before 1979, they became Labour's undemanding supporters at the election. Their mass party perspective was quietly shelved.

In the course of all of these sharp turns the IS/SWP preferred to rid itself of internal opponents bureaucratically rather than honestly account for the problems with their politics and perspectives. Hundreds of people—including the Left Faction, the forerunner of Workers Power—were expelled simply for raising differences. This process went on and on, and was particularly intense in the period between 1973 and 1979, until the party was thoroughly purged of many of its leading cadre. The Central Committee was, by these means, guaranteed that its past mistakes would not be called to account and that its future policy swerves were unlikely to generate any opposition.

Then came the justification for the SWP's failure to become the mass party in the 1970s, and its excuse for not trying to become it in the 1980s—the "downturn". This perspective was a perfect alibi for Cliff and the other SWP leaders. It begins in 1975, the year when the SWP's period of growth from a tiny propaganda group into an organisation 4,000 strong with roots in the working class came to an end.

Now, they claim, it is beginning to give way to a "new mood" of confidence inside the working class, just at the point when the SWP are recording their best rates of growth for many years. How convenient that the entire class struggle can be understood and categorised according to how well or badly an organisation is growing, especially one which, by the SWP's own admission, is still not a major factor in the class struggle.

From all of this we can see that the SWP's view of perspectives has little in common with Marxism. Their perspectives are framed for the benefit of the party, not the class. They are designed to justify the latest turn of the leadership, not equip the members with practical revolutionary answers to take into the class struggle.

What holds the SWP together through all of these chops and changes is its adherence to state capitalism. This theory, which claims that the USSR and Eastern European states were capitalist and that the Stalinist bureaucracy is a collective capitalist class owning and controlling the entire economy, is the fundamental basis of the SWP's politics. It was over this issue that Cliff split from the Fourth International at the end of the 1940s. It remains the distinctive and unifying theory of the party. Whatever the tactical twists and turns it engages in, all members can still agree on this theory.

State capitalism explains how the SWP has been able to establish international links with other left groups with whom, at many other levels, it has profound disagreements. Its international co-thinkers all agree that the USSR was a capitalist country and are content to unite with the SWP on that basis. The SWP is a profoundly national centred organisation. Its internationalism does not consist of a serious attempt to refound a revolutionary International on the basis of a common world programme. It is scornful of such efforts and has repeatedy argued that until there are mass parties in a number of countries any efforts directed towards constructing a revolutionary International are doomed.

This lack of active internationalism means that it has no problem uniting with other groups despite major differences. The SWP itself reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the British labour movement. Its syndicalism and economism are the manifestations of an adaptation to Britain's traditions of trade unionist politics. Its fraternal organisations reflect different national pressures and often pursue very different tactics to those the SWP would endorse.

Indeed throughout the history of its international work the SWP has coquetted with groups with a Maoist and even guerillaist orientation (the PRP-BR during the Portugese revolution, and more recently the pro-Albanian Communist Party of New Zealand). So long as they all agree that the USSR was state capitalist these differences are relegated to secondary issues by the SWP. Each national group gets on with its own work and democratic centralism at an international level is not even considered.

The SWP's attitudes to perspectives, party building and the construction of an International demonstrate their inability to advance a consistent and coherent Marxist strategy. The twists and the turns flow directly from their refusal to develop such a strategy, to anchor their politics in a revolutionary programme.

Marxism has a word for such a method—centrism. The SWP are a centrist organisation. In this pamphlet we demonstrate the different ways in which, at different times, the SWP's centrism has revealed itself. We appeal to all those members of the SWP who read the pamphlet to discuss its contents with us; we appeal to all those who agree with us to join us.

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STATE CAPITALISM
"Call that socialism?"

Tony Cliff's theory of state capitalism lies at the very centre of the Socialist Workers Party's politics. Since 1950 Cliff's tendency has defined itself against all others on the international left mainly over the argument that the USSR, China and Eastern Europe were "state capitalist" societies. In the face of the momentous crisis wracking Stalinism since 1989 Chris Harman has argued that ". . . this theory alone can make sense of the otherwise bewildering events of the last few months, pointing to future options both for the world's ruling classes and those of us committed to fighting them" (ISJ 46). ***Mark Abram*** *contests this claim and shows why state capitalist theory fails.*

SO YOU think it's socialist? This is the stock question that comes back at Trotskyists when they try to explain how and why the USSR and Eastern Europe are "degenerated workers' states".

Our answer is simply, no. The USSR is not socialist nor moving towards socialism. It is a society where the workers took power in 1917 and took the first steps of transition towards socialism.

There was no possibility of building socialism in one country, especially in one as backward as Russia. Lenin and Trotsky believed that if the USSR remained isolated and revolutions in the advanced west failed, then the first workers' state would be overthrown and capitalism would return.

The revolution did remain isolated. But instead of succumbing to counter-revolution from outside the Soviet working class fell victim to a a different kind of counter-revolution from within; the new Stalinist bureaucracy seized political power and crushed all forms of workers' democracy.

At the same time it massively extended and consolidated the property relations established by the Soviet dictatorship in the early years after 1917.

Industry, which had been nationalised in the 1918-21 period, was greatly enlarged in a series of Five Year Plans, starting in 1929. Private property on the land was liquidated, as were millions of peasants themselves. The threads of agricultural and industrial production were pulled together into the hands of centralised planning agencies that directed resources between different sectors according to the political criteria set by the new conquering bureaucrats.

Trotsky described this whole process as a political counter-revolution. The social relations established by October 1917 had not be overthrown. But workers' power—the only thing that could employ these relations in the service of transition—had been crushed. The result was a degenerated workers' state.

Cliff was not the first person to claim that Russia was state capitalist. From the very beginning of its life "left communists" and Mensheviks claimed that the USSR was, and could never be anything other than, state capitalist.

But Cliff's theory attempts to stand by the early experience of the Bolshevik Revolution and by Trotsky's fight against Stalin. Even today Cliff's followers claim that "state capitalism" is based on Trotsky's method and that today Trotsky would be a proponent of state capitalist theory. (ISJ 47)

It is the inability of the SWP to fully grasp the significance of the transition period under the dictatorship of the proletariat which is the single most important methodological error that lies at the heart of the theory of bureaucratic state capitalism. For revolutionary Marxists the dictatorship of the proletariat necessarily ushers in a transitional period.

The central task facing the working class in that period is to gradually transform property relations, social life and political power so as to make possible the creation of a communist society. In the transition the productive forces must be massively expanded in order that a society arises which can "inscribe on its banner: from each according to his ability to each according to his needs". (Marx) Gradually, to the degree social antagonism disappears the working class itself disappears, for the proletariat "is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite . . . private property." (Marx and Engels, Collected Works Vol 4 p36)

In the field of politics the dictatorship of the proletariat under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky faced three tasks. First the suppression of counter-revolution which was carried out ruthlessly during the civil war period 1918-21. Secondly, this workers' state, based on soviet power, encouraged the widest democracy of the toilers, recognising that for socialism to be built progressive measures had to

be taken to ensure the withering away of the state as a separate power. Thirdly, in order to create the material conditions of a communist society and in order to ensure its very existence the Soviet Republic had to be an instrument for internationalising the revolution. Ultimately the working class can only be victorious on a world scale.

Lenin and Trotsky recognised the impossibility of an immediate leap out of backwardness. The Soviet dictatorship destroyed the bourgeoisie's rule and ushered in a period of economic transition in which the working class would have to fight to eradicate the forms of capitalist production, exchange and distribution. As Marx had said:

"What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerged." (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*)

Marx presumed that, for example, remuneration for labour would still take the form of wages which in the early transition would represent exactly what each individual worker had given to society. Bourgeois right or capitalist forms of distribution would inevitably operate in the workers' state so long as the economy remained impoverished and scarcity was generalised. Only the conscious effort of the workers to progressively raise labour productivity and increase productive wealth could undermine the continued operation of such forms inherited from capitalism. Economically, the key task facing the Soviet workers after 1917 was the subordination of all elements of capitalism—commodity production, profit, law of value, wage inequalities, money—to the principle of conscious planning. The creation of statified property was a necessary means to that end.

However even in the hands of a healthy workers' state, statified property does not have, in the immediate aftermath of the proletariat revolution, an automatically socialist character. This is determined by whether or not the direction of the property relations is towards the triumph of conscious planning and the creation of socialism. As Trotsky said:

"The latter has as its premise the dying away of the state as the guardian of property, the mitigation of inequality and gradual dissolution of the property concept even in the morals and customs of society." (*Writings* 1935-36 p354)

In turn, this triumph can only occur at all if the workers are democratically organised to exercise their own power. Only the self-emancipation of the working class can guarantee the transition to socialism. Because of the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy—itself a product of Russia's material backwardness and the isolation of the first workers' state—the transition to socialism was blocked in the USSR. Trotsky himself was the most intransigent opponent and analyst of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. He recognised the material forces that shaped that degeneration:

"The upsurge of the nationalised productive forces, which began in 1923 and which came unexpectedly to the Soviet bureaucracy itself, created the necessary economic prerequisites for the stabilisation of the latter. The upbuilding of the economic life provided and outlet for the energies of active and capable organisers, administrators and technicians. Their material and moral position improved rapidly. A broad, privileged stratum was created, closely linked to the ruling upper crust. The toiling masses lived on hopes or fell into apathy." (*Writings* 1934-35 p175)

The developing Stalinist bureaucracy lashed out first against the communist Left Opposition, crushing it by 1928. Over the next five years it crushed the restorationist right wing around Bukharin, established a bureaucratic command economy and destroyed each and every remnant of proletarian democracy. By 1927 the political defeat of the working class at the hands of the Stalinist clique was complete. Yet in the process of creating this Stalinist Bonapartism the economic foundations created in the aftermath of destroying capitalism were not only preserved but actually extended on a massive scale, with the liquidation of the Kulaks and the extension of the planned economy. Stalinism's contradictory character reveals itself in its political expropriation of the Russian proletariat and its extension of bureaucratic planning to all the major elements of the post-capitalist economy. Against the proletariat Stalinism is counter-revolutionary in that it strangles the only force that can effect the transition to socialism. But it does it on the basis of property relations that have a post-capitalist character. It is this dialectical understanding of Stalinism's contradictory nature that completely eludes each and every state capitalist theorist.

IS IT CAPITALIST?

Cliff's method of analysing the class nature of Stalinist Russia has nothing to do with Marx's dialectics. He compares the reality of Stalin's Russia with the norms of a healthy workers' state in transition towards socialism. In fact he sums up his own method well when, after discussing Marx and Lenin's programme of proletarian democracy, he continues:

"To the conception, let us now counterpose the reality of the Russian Stalinist state." (*State Capitalism in Russia*, 1974 p96)

Not surprisingly Russia fails Cliff's normative tests. Of course the USSR is not a healthy workers' state and neither is it socialist. But it is impossible to deduce the class character of a state by contrasting it with programmatic norms. Trotsky himself warned his critics:

"In the question of a social character of the USSR, mistakes commonly flow, as we have previously stated, from replacing the historical fact with the programmatic norm." (*In Defence of Marxism*, Path-

finder p3)

A revolutionary method of analysis does not counterpose "norm" to "fact" but seeks to analyse their contradictory unity:

"The programme of the approaching revolution in the USSR is determined on the one hand by our appraisal of the USSR as an objective historical fact and on the other hand, by the norm of the workers' state. We do not say 'Everything is lost, we must begin all over again.' We clearly indicate those elements of the workers' state which at the given stage can be salvaged, preserved and further developed." (ibid p3)

Using his own method Cliff is only able to prove that Russia is not socialist and not in transition to socialism. So what? Trotsky said that first and with far greater clarity. But Cliff and hundreds of SWP educational meetings, leap from the evidence that Russia is not socialist, to that claim that it is therefore capitalist.

In order to prove Russia is capitalist the Cliff school has had to mangle the very meaning of capitalism and its laws for the Marxist tradition. Cliff applies his own formalistic, non-dialectical method to the sphere of political economy too.

The case for calling Russia state capitalist essentially rests on the nature of the accumulation process in the USSR. For the SWP this argument is used to explain how, why and when capitalism was restored in the USSR. Cliff interprets the creation of the bureaucratically planned economy of the USSR as a social counter-revolution that inaugurated bureaucratic state capitalism in the USSR. For Cliff, the bureaucracy is transformed into a collective capitalist because it undertook the "bourgeois" task of accumulation. As he says:

"Under capitalism the consumption of the masses is subordinated to accumulation." (p34)

"What is specific to capitalism is accumulation for accumulation's sake, with the object of standing up to competition." (p168)

". . . The fact that the bureaucracy fulfils the task of the capitalist class, and by doing so transforms itself into a class, makes it the purest personification of this class." (p169-70)

Cliff has no problem in showing figures for the First Five Year Plan (1929-33) which show a marked shift in priority away from individual consumption towards accumulation of the means of production. These are not in dispute. But within the use to which Cliff puts these figures lies that key element of Cliff's method, the use of the syllogism: under the first Five Year Plan consumption was subordinated to accumulation; under capitalism, consumption is subordinated to accumulation; therefore the First Five Year Plan was capitalist.

Accumulation by the bourgeoisie is the accumulation of capital which, of course, takes on the concrete appearance of machines, tools etc. However, whether such use values are capital in any given situation is not determined by the mere fact that they are accumulated. As early *Wage Labour and Capital* Marx argued:

"Capital consists not only of means of subsistence, instruments of labour and raw materials, not only of material products, it consists just as much of exchange-values. All the products of which it consists are commodities . . . Capital does not consist in accumulated labour serving living labour as a means for new production. It consists in living labour serving accumulated labour as means of maintaining and multiplying the exchange-value of the latter." (*Wage Labour and Capital*, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* p212-3)

The means of production in the USSR do not have the character of commodities, they are not produced for eventual sale on the market. They are transferred from one state enterprise to another, according to a predetermined plan which has decided the proportions in which different sets of commodities will be produced. It is not left to the market to decide which is needed and which, by dint of its inability to find a purchaser is useless.

The healthiest of workers' states would have to accumulate use-values, in particular means of production. If it is to progress towards socialism it will have to expand production on a huge scale. Consumption will have to be subordinated to accumulation in any workers' state or socialism is impossible. Under Lenin's leadership the early Soviet Republic did not somehow become capitalist because all consumption was cut back in an effort to produce munitions and supplies for the Red Army to resist the wars of intervention!

In order to buttress his case Cliff claims that what makes Russia's accumulation "capitalist" is the fact that it is carried out in order to survive in competition—to repeat a quote from Cliff:

"What is specific to capitalism is accumulation for accumulation's sake, with the object of standing up to competition." (p.168)

He decides he does not need to prove that the social relations of production are primarily concerned with the accumulation of exchange values. In order to do so he would have to establish that the wage labour/capital relationship dominates the production process and that, as a result, labour power is a commodity in the USSR. But in the various versions of his book (1948, 1955, 1964, 1974) Cliff has consistently denied this:

". . . if one examines the relations within the Russian economy, one is bound to conclude that the source of the law of value, as the motor and regulator of production, is not to be found within it. In essence, the laws prevailing in the relations between the labourers and the employer-state would be *no different* if Russia were one big factory managed directly from one centre, and if all the labourers received the goods they consumed in *kind*." (T Cliff op cit. p208-9)

Assuming that the USSR is just like one large company operating on the world market, Cliff believes he only has to prove the existence of, and determining nature of, the competitive relations

between the "state capitalist" blocks to demonstrate their capitalist character. Thus:

"But as it is, Stalinist decisions are based on factors outside of control, namely the world economy, world competition." (p209)

Cliff argues that although the USSR has replaced commodity exchange within the USSR by a mere technical division of labour, the law of value dominates it through the exigencies of world capitalism. Cliff is aware that the USSR's trade with the imperialist countries is relatively small. He does not stop to consider the implications for a "state capitalism" that deliberately abstains from and avoids capitalistic exchanges.

Instead he tries to prove that the capitalist nature of the USSR is determined by the character and scale of US military competition with the west. Because this competition does not take place through exchange, Cliff is driven to argue that the use-values (i.e. tanks, guns, nuclear warheads) act as though they were exchange values:

"Because international competition takes mainly a military form the law of value expresses itself in its opposite, viz a striving after use-values." (ibid)

Once again Cliff equates the accumulation of use-values with the accumulation of capital. "Striving after use-values" is only another way of say "striving to accumulate material wealth", something which has been a common feature of all societies save the most primitive.

There is no doubt that the pressure of military competition does exercise a distorting effect on the Soviet economy, as it will have on the economy of any workers' state—healthy or unhealthy. But none of this means that military competition can take the place, or have the same results as capitalist competition.

One cannot explain the capitalist character of an economy from an analysis of competition. As Marx explained:

"Competition executes the inner laws of capital; makes them into compulsory laws toward the individual capital. But it does not invent them. It realises them. To try and explain them simply as results of competition therefore means to concede that one does not understand them." (K Marx, *Grundrisse* p751-2)

If it is impossible to prove the existence of the law of value from an analysis of competition it is also equally impossible to derive the capitalist character of competition by focussing on the military form of competition. There is nothing specifically capitalist *per se* about military competition. Again to prove it was such, Cliff would have to show that the state engaging in the competition was producing capitalist commodities, which is exactly what he admits he cannot do. Instead he tries by sleight of hand to invest use values with the character of exchange values.

IS LABOUR POWER A COMMODITY?

Cliff's attempts to prove that either "accumulation" or "competition" made Russia capitalist clearly do not stand up. Evident unease at Cliff's categories has encouraged a debate within the SWP over the question of whether labour power is a commodity in the USSR. Binns and Haynes stand on one side in the argument. In ISJ 2.7 they argued that:

"Labour power cannot be a commodity in the USSR because with only one company (USSR Ltd) purchasing it, there cannot be a genuine labour market there." (p29)

This is, in effect, Cliff's argument of thirty years ago, and one we presume he still holds. It does however threaten to bring the entire theoretical edifice of "state capitalism" crashing to the ground. Duncan Hallas obviously sensed this and replied quite sharply:

"If labour power is not a commodity in the USSR, then there is no proletariat. Moreover, if labour power is not a commodity, then there can be no wage labour/capital relationship and therefore no capital either. Therefore, there can be no capitalism in any shape or form." (ISJ 2:9)

Apart from anything else this is a refutation of Cliff's work. More recently, Alex Callinicos (ISJ 2:12) has gone to great length to back Hallas up and even openly attacks Cliff on this point.

A false argument has ensued which revolves around whether or not labour power in the USSR is "free" in the sense Marx described it; i.e. free from means of production so that each labourer must sell his/her power for a limited period and be free to change their employer. On the one side, Binns and Haynes can marshal evidence to show what restrictions exist on the free movement of labour in the USSR. On the other hand, Callinicos argues that:

"When we look at the reality of Soviet society, there is no doubt that labour power is a commodity there. Enterprises compete for workers, offering all sorts of illegal bonuses to persuade people to work for them. Workers have a considerable degree of

workers power

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choice—they are not compelled to work in a particular factory." (ISJ 2:12 p15)

Both approaches are equally one-sided. They emphasise certain aspects of the situation in order to "prove" or "disprove" the commodity nature of labour power. In fact, all Hallas proves is that the Soviet working class is not a slave class. Following the logic of Cliff's variant of state capitalism Haynes and Binns suggest it is. That fact that wage incentives, bonus payments etc exist in the USSR does not in itself enable Callinicos to shore up Cliff's state capitalist theory. As we have seen, they would exist in a healthy dictatorship of the proletariat as a result of the fact that it would arise out of capitalism and could not immediately leap to communism where inequalities no longer exist.

For Marx, free labour in the sense of the purchase and sale of labour power was a juridical question, and an essential part in the whole question of the production and exchange of commodities. It is in this area that massive restrictions exist in the USSR, which do not exist under capitalism. The correct starting point is not to focus on the abstracted question "is labour power a commodity?", but "to what extent is there generalised commodity production in the USSR?" It is clear that commodity production and exchange only exists in pure form in the black market, and co-ops, but even here it is predominantly simple commodity production, not capitalist commodity production.

As far as the state sector is concerned the matter is different again. The bulk of material production in the USSR concerns the production of the means of production. These goods are not produced for the market, as explained earlier. By and large they are not the subject of sale and purchase transactions so the labour and valorisation process in this sector cannot be a process of commodity production. The labour expended in them is directly social labour. In the consumer goods sector, the nature and volume of these, as with capital goods, is determined by the bureaucracy's "blind planning mechanisms". However, there is something of a commodity character imparted to consumer goods because unlike capital goods, a considerable portion of consumer goods are distributed in a different manner, not according to a plan. They are produced for an unknown market and are exchanged against money wages. The labour carried out in this production is not directly social labour, as it is only recognised as such after the sale (if at all).

The same, dialectical, view should be taken of "labour power as a commodity". The fact that the worker sells, and the bureaucracy purchases, the worker's labour capacity via the medium of money indicates the continuing commodity character of labour power. However, on the other hand, the market price of labour power is not determined by supply and demand under the pressure of an army of unemployed. The wage fund is set in advance by the bureaucracy which determines general wage levels in different sectors. It is possible to make similar observations about other economic categories such as prices of production, money etc, which achieve their fullest and most developed expression under capitalism but which continue to exist in the USSR in an underdeveloped form as they would in any post-capitalist society.

THE BUREAUCRACY AS RULING CASTE

Behind all the garbled economic categories lies one argument that is always at the centre of the state capitalist case. In arguing against the Trotskyist view of the USSR as a degenerate workers' state, state capitalist theory constantly repeats the refrain that it cannot be any form of workers' state if the workers are oppressed and have no political power, and that the bureaucratic agent of this oppression must therefore be a ruling class. To quote Alan Gibbons:

"1929 saw the abolition of independent trade unions, the abolition of the right to strike, the forcing down of wages. That these are the policies of Tory governments today shows that Russia has become but one capitalist power among other—the only difference being that in Russia the state itself was the ruling class, that it was state capitalism." (*How the Revolution Was Lost*, Alan Gibbons p28)

The central problem is whether the working class can be said to be the ruling class where its political power is not expressed through mass organs of proletarian power or the rule of its vanguard party? Can the class rule of the workers exist where a bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class has been established? At the heart of this dispute is the question of how Marxists define the class nature of any state. Trotsky argued on this:

"Friederich Engels once wrote that the state, including the democratic republic, consists of detachments of armed men in defence of property, everything else serves only to embellish or camouflage this fact." (*Whither France*)

It followed that the class nature of any state was determined by the property relations that it defends. Despite the monstrous tyranny of the Stalinist bureaucracy the property relations of the USSR—state planning—remain those that the proletariat must take hold of if it is to carry through the transition to socialism. To that extent the property relations remain proletarian despite the rule of the bureaucracy and the need for the revolutionary overthrow of the bureaucracy as a prerequisite for using those property relations to effect a socialist transition.

Hallas and Binns have attacked this method of evaluating the character of the soviet state:

"This is a fundamental break with Marx and Lenin and with Trotsky's own earlier position." (ISJ 91 September 1976)

It can hardly be call a fundamental break with Marx. This is how Marx posed the question of evaluating the character of a given state:

"It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct produc-

ers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political forms of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state." (*Capital* Vol 3 p772)

For Trotskyists the USSR remains a proletarian state because it defends, and even in certain circumstances extends, the expropriation of capitalism and the subordination of its laws. The SWP's attempts to prove that the USSR is capitalist do not stand the test of serious examination. But what of their negative case against the "degenerate workers' state" theory that the non-existence of workers' power proves that the USSR cannot be a workers' state?

The history of capitalist development provides instances where the capitalist class did not exercise political power directly but the state was still capitalist. For example, in France in the Napoleonic era, the Restoration period, and the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon all excluded the bourgeoisie from direct access to political power. Trotsky was the first Marxist to develop an analogy between this experience of bourgeois development and the degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

The proletariat lost political power in Russia without the immediate re-introduction of capitalism. However there are important differences between a capitalist state where the bourgeoisie has lost political power and a proletarian state where the working class is politically expropriated. The bourgeoisie did not need to directly rule for capitalism to grow and develop because it is based on the blind spontaneous mechanism of the market. However, the working class cannot move forward to socialism without ruling politically. That is why the transition in the USSR is not only blocked but is reversed.

The bureaucracy undermines the continued existence of even the blind planning that exists. It prepares the ground for the restoration of capitalism. The result of this contradictory state of affairs is that the "state" in the USSR continues in precisely the "form" but not the social content that Marxists seek to abolish—set above and against the toilers. Far from a tendency to ever greater equality, inequalities continue and are even exaggerated.

The capitalist norms of distribution and exchange that Marxists seek to destroy and replace will remain and are strengthened by "market reforms". All this demands a political revolution by the working class to once again clear the road for the transition to socialism and communism.

The SWP, on the other hand, reduce the question of workers' state to a political and superstructural question, to the political forms through which the dictatorship was organised. This is at one with the un-Marxist normative method employed in every dimension of the state capitalist argument.

The designation of the Russian bureaucracy as a capitalist ruling class because it performs tasks "normally" historically undertaken by a bourgeois class, is another example of crass schematic thinking. Cliff expressed it in the following way:

"The fact that the bureaucracy fulfils the tasks of the capitalist class, and by so doing transforms itself into a class, makes it the purest personification of this class. Although it is different from the capitalist class, it is at one and the same time the nearest to it historical essence." (Russia: A Marxist Analysis p118)

Trotsky showed how the "normal" progress of capitalism in Russia could not occur as it had in western Europe when he developed his theory of permanent revolution. What is "normal" in one historical period becomes "impossible" in the next. In just this fashion it will fall to the international working class in the greater part of the world to undertake extensive industrialisation. Will the proletariat therefore become a bourgeoisie?

If the bureaucracy does not constitute a capitalist class is it possible that it does still, nonetheless, constitute a ruling class? Cliff and co have always attempted to steer clear of the implication that the USSR was some kind of "new class" society as Shachtman, Djilas and others since have claimed. Cliff simply asserts that the bureaucracy is a class because their role can be squared with an extracted quote from Lenin:

"We call classes large groups of people that are distinctive by the place they occupy in a definite historically established system of social production." (ibid p166)

In fact Cliff fails to grasp what is meant by "definite historically established system of social production". The USSR is a transitional society comprised of elements of post-capitalist society and elements of capitalism. This is reflected in the fact the bureaucracy has no "definite historically established" role to play in the USSR. While the bourgeoisie under capitalism is a necessary component of the relations of production of the capitalist system, the Soviet bureaucracy is not such a necessary element in the planned property relations of the USSR.

On the contrary its monopoly of political power, its control over distribution is, and always has been (even during the most dynamic phases of Soviet economic development), an obstacle to the full realisation of the potential of the property relations of the USSR.

In all hitherto existing societies the property relations, and the class structures that necessarily flowed from them, became a brake on the development of the productive forces of mankind. In the USSR it is not the property relations but a layer of administrators and distributors who block the development of the productive forces.

When we strip away the jumble of pseudo-Marxist categories we can begin to see state capitalist theory for what it is. It proceeds from authority relations in the USSR, from outrage at the evidently repressive coercive regime, to reject Trotsky's dialectical understanding of the USSR. This is the same method all other "new class" theorists have used and is why it is no surprise that when its use of Marxist terms is debunked state capitalism looks remarkably like a "new class" theory.

"NEITHER WASHINGTON NOR MOSCOW"

The view from the third camp

Conflicts between imperialism and petit bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist-led forces in the semi-colonial world have raged throughout the post-war era. From Korea in the 1950s through to Afghanistan in the 1980s revolutionaries had to declare which side they were on. Here, ***Dave Hughes*** *asks this question of the SWP and its forerunners.*

THE THEORY of state capitalism has led Cliff and his various groups into fundamental errors over a series of post-war conflicts. Cliff's first organisation was built around the journal *Socialist Review* (SR), which began publication in November 1950, inside the Labour Party. It was the first publication to appear from this stable after Cliff's break with the Fourth International (FI).

To this day the leaders of the SWP take much pleasure in ridiculing the inability of the FI to come to terms with the nature of the world at the end of the Second World War. Certainly it was true that the majority of the FI proved incapable of recognising that Stalinism emerged from the war strengthened and that imperialism, re-ordered internationally under US hegemony, was set for a sustained period of economic recovery.

It was also the case that increasingly after 1948 the FI revised the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism and abandoned the view that the Stalinist bureaucracy was counter-revolutionary. However, Cliff's view that Russia was state capitalist and that the world had been divided into two giant capitalist camps provided no better a view of the post war world.

It shared with the FI the belief in an imminent "Third World War". Also it failed to develop a revolutionary strategy independent of both Stalinism and imperialism. While the FI's programmatic degeneration led to capitulation, primarily to Stalinist and petit bourgeois nationalist currents, the state capitalists' "alternative" ended up capitulating to imperialism under the guise of "third campism".

According to the early SR both Truman's America and Stalin's Russia were being propelled by the same motive force in their drive for world domination. Conflict between the two imperialisms threatened mankind with the more or less immediate prospect of a new—albeit atomic—world war. As SR No 1 declared:

"The 'Peace' Campaign of Stalin's Russia is no less hypocritical than Truman's 'Defence of Democracy'. . . in their mad rush for profit, for wealth, the two gigantic imperialist powers are threatening humanity with the terrible suffering of atomic war." (SR Vol 1, No 1, November 1950)

The Cliffites thus accepted the view that the Stalinist bureaucracy was an expansionist class set on global domination at the expense of Truman's America. This echoing of Cold War propaganda was the constant refrain of the Socialist Review Group (SRG) throughout the early 1950s. In 1954 it was declaring that the two powers were driven towards war with each other by their respective economic problems. Overproduction was increasingly presenting US capitalism with a stark choice:

"Slump or war are the two alternatives facing western monopoly capitalism, and faced with this choice, there is no doubt what the ruling classes of the west will choose." (SR Vol 3, No 7)

Notwithstanding the "fact" that the Soviet Union was supposedly capitalist as well and propelled by the same laws of motion as the USA, the USSR was depicted as heading to war for different reasons. Underproduction and economic shortages were driving the Soviet bureaucracy towards war by making a grab for Western Europe ever more attractive to the Kremlin:

"The crisis of underproduction pushes Moscow to imperialist expansion. How magnificent the dream of establishing SAGs or mixed companies in Western Europe!" (ibid)

When Soviet withdrawal from Austria, in exchange for guarantees of neutrality on the part of the Austrian bourgeoisie, seemed to confound SR's perspective, and demonstrated the class collaboration of the Soviet bureaucracy, the journal argued that this was only a temporary turn occasioned by the industrialisation of China and its demands for more steel: China's need for steel may still push the Kremlin to invade Western Europe later, so SR claimed.

In fact the SRG's characterisation of the Soviet Union as a state capitalist and expansionist imperialist power gave rise to a totally false understanding

of the nature of Stalinism. All the evidence, from Stalin's foreign policy and from the Soviet Union's attitude to revolutionary situations which threatened capitalist dominance, demonstrated a totally different role for Stalinism than that ascribed to it by the Cliffites.

Far from being an expansionist force looking for every opportunity to extend its rule at the expense of western imperialism, the Soviet bureaucracy demonstrated in the post-war years, that it was a social formation bent on international class collaboration and compromise with the imperialist bourgeoisie. Not only did Soviet withdrawal from Austria contradict Cliff's schemas, but in both Greece and Indo-China Stalin demonstrated his intention of maintaining his pact with the bourgeoisie on "spheres of influence" by sabotaging the struggle against imperialism. In Eastern Europe the bourgeoisie was kept in power after the war and no steps were taken to ensure a Stalinist take-over until after the offensive launched by Truman in 1947.

The "Truman Doctrine", promising military intervention anywhere in the world "threatened by communism" combined with the economic offensive of Marshall Aid, aimed at Eastern as well as Western Europe, faced the Soviet Union with a choice. It could either retreat from Eastern Europe, thus massively weakening its own position in the face of an imperialist offensive, or complete a Stalinist overthrow of capitalism. It chose the latter.

Yet even during the US-led Cold War offensive Stalin continued to demonstrate his reluctance to overthrow capitalist property relations. Until the eleventh hour he repeatedly advised Mao against toppling Chiang Kai Shek's disintegrating regime. The USSR handed back "its" part of Austria in return for the country's neutrality and proposed the same for Germany—i.e. a reunified, capitalist, but disarmed and neutral country.

THE THIRD CAMP

This did not fit in with the SRG's analysis of Soviet expansionism, but their analysis did fit in very well with a group which wanted to swim with the stream in Cold War Britain. The political consequence of this view for the SRG was that a conflict between the USA and the USSR was a conflict between two imperialisms and as such it was necessary to adopt a position of neutrality in the conflicts between them. (In fact SR's pages were heavily weighted towards anti-Soviet propaganda during this period, with a regular series of articles from Tony Cliff on the miseries of life in the USSR).

This neutrality took the form of a commitment to building a "Third Camp" under the slogan raised in the first issue of SR: "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international Socialism". SR was not the first to raise the idea of a "third camp"—it was the stock in trade of the Tribune group. Figures such as Foot, Mikardo and Crossman denounced Soviet and western imperialism with gusto. But with the Cold War, these social democrats loyally trooped behind NATO and the Anglo-American alliance. It was the Cliffites who picked up the rhetoric and bolstered it with state capitalist theory. Not surprisingly the call for a third camp was raised first in SR by one Stan Newens (later a leading Tribunite MP) in the following fashion:

"The present power of the two world camps is largely based on the dragooning by force and trickery of the many by the few. Let us set up our standard against all such methods and lead the way to working for a genuine international socialism—not for Washington, nor for Moscow." (SR Vol 3, No 4)

For the SRG the slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow" suited the prejudices of the left reformist current in the Labour Party, in which they were immersed, very well. It led the SRG into alliance with a motley variety of political tendencies. SR of October 1955 carries a favourable report of a "Third Way is the Only Way" international conference attended by 110 delegates.

While it is silent as to which organisations were represented the nature of SR's allies is made clear in its pages over the next months. The October 1955 issue contains an article by Max Shachtman extoling the "third way". By May 1956 SR carried—as a supplement—Tony Cliff's "The future of the Russian empire" published by *Labour Action* Shachtman's US paper) in collaboration with SR.

The Shachtmanites did not hang around in the "third camp" for very long. They were very soon declaring Soviet totalitarianism a greater threat to socialism than US democracy, and putting themselves firmly in the camp of US imperialism. But it was not only the Shachtman group that rallied to the banner of the "third way". It also attracted the anti-Leninist libertarian "Socialisme ou Barbarie" of P Cardan whose material also appeared in SR and early issues of *International Socialism*. The Third Camp conference proved a rallying point for libertarians and social democrats who, ultimately, had nothing in common except their hostility, both to the Kremlin bureaucracy and revolutionary Leninism.

Even if the Cliffites pulled back from the logic of Shachtman and Newens' Third Camp position they nevertheless ended up by refusing to support genuine struggles against imperialism. Their slogan for "International Socialism" was never given a revolutionary communist meaning in the actual struggles against imperialism. This would have meant developing slogans and tactics which both supported unconditionally the struggle against imperialism and aimed to mobilise the working masses against Stalinist counter-revolution. It remained instead a political fig leaf to cover their refusal to give support in the struggle against imperialism. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in the Korean War.

NEUTRAL IN THE KOREAN WAR

The formation of the SRG coincided with the onset

of the Korean War. The programmatic conclusions that logically flow from state capitalist theory meant that the SRG inevitably adopted a position in that conflict that failed to distinguish between Stalinist-led struggles for national liberation against imperialism and the forces of imperialism itself. The Communist Parties were seen as agents of Kremlin imperialism—or as SR No 2 (January 1951) called them "Moscow's Foreign Legion".

At the end of the Second World War Soviet and US forces occupied Korea. At the same time "Committees of Preparation for National Independence" mushroomed throughout Korea predominantly under Stalinist leadership. An all-Korean People's Republic government was declared on 6 September 1945. The USA refused to recognise this government and created its own under the much despised emigré rightist Syngman Rhee. The ensuing conflict between the Northern, Soviet backed and Southern, US backed governments was therefore a form of civil war in Korea within which the northern Stalinist regime had the leadership of those forces fighting imperialism and its agents.

When direct military hostilities broke out between the two regimes and the Northern armies overran the South in June, it should not have been difficult for revolutionaries to see which side they were on. They would have been for a victory of the North against the Rhee puppet regime and its US backers. And when—under the cloak of a UN peace keeping force—the USA poured troops into Korea and provoked a direct military conflict with China, it should have been even easier for any socialist not blinded by cold war anti-communist hysteria to know what side to take.

Revolutionary socialists should have unconditionally defended the North Koreans and their Kremlin allies on the recognition that a defeat inflicted upon the really expansionist USA would have been a massive blow to its plans. Unlike the SRG it was necessary to draw a distinction between the Stalinist leadership (which eventually sold the struggle short) and the popular mass forces involved, striving to overthrow a hated regime. Defending North Korea and seeking to win the leadership of the Korean masses were complementary not contradictory tasks.

The SRG, however, proceeded to demonstrate quite how reactionary the programmatic conclusions of the theory of state capitalism really are. SR took a predictable and logical view of the conflict. In an article entitled "The struggle of the powers" R Tennant declared that, "The war in Korea serves the great powers as a rehearsal for their intended struggle for the redivision of the globe." (SR Vol 1, No 2, January 1950) and in an attack on *Socialist Outlook's* (a paper run by Gerry Healy) support for North Korea Bill Ainsworth talked of "our opinion . . . that Russia no less than the USA, is imperialist and bent on world domination". (ibid) It followed that:

"We can, therefore, give no support to either camp since the war will not achieve, the declared aims of either side. Further, so long as the two governments are what they are, viz, puppets of the two big powers, the Korean socialists can give no support to their respective puppet governments." (SR Vol 1, No 2, January 1951)

The Korean position was not a blunder inadvertently committed by an innocent, fledgling organisation. It flowed logically from the theory of state capitalism. The SRG drew exactly the same conclusion from a similar conflict in Vietnam between Stalinist led anti-imperialist forces under Ho Chi Minh and imperialism's puppet Bao-Dai. In February 1952 they printed and entirely endorsed a statement of the French *La Lutte* that declared:

"In Korea, the war continues in spite of the parties for an armistice in which, of course, the Korean people have no say. In Vietnam, likewise, the war continues and the people vomit with disgust at both Bao-Dai, the tool of the colonialists, and at Ho Chi Minh, the agent of Stalin." (SR Vol 1, No 7)

CUBA'S REVOLUTION

The Cuban revolution demonstrated the reactionary logic of state capitalism as once again the Cliffites turned their face against those struggling to defeat imperialism. In the face of a US economic and military blockade the Castro regime proceeded to expropriate US holdings and reorganise the Cuban economy on the basis of bureaucratically planned property relations modelled on those of the USSR. At the same time Castro adopted the Stalinist model of state and party.

The Soviet bureaucracy moved to support the Castroite regime with the threat to place Soviet missiles in Cuba which would have served both to extend the international bargaining position of the Soviet bureaucracy and defend the Cuban revolution against imperialist counter-revolution. Cold War warriors and pacifists alike raised a hue and cry against Castro's "undemocratic regime" and against the shipment of Soviet arms to Cuba. So too did Cliff's renamed International Socialism group (IS).

The Cliffites took Soviet economic aid to the blockaded Castro regime as evidence that dynamic Soviet capitalism was now ready to do battle for the markets of US imperialism. Doubtless hoping that the USSR was about to indulge in some real capitalist competition. An IS editorial, entitled "From Cold War to price war" took increased Soviet trade with India and the shipping of Russian oil to Havana to indicate that:

"Russian oil exports look to be the harbinger of mighty economic conflicts between the giants of capital on either side of the Iron Curtain." (IS No 3, Autumn 1960)

Mirroring Khruschev's pompous fantasies about the USSR being poised to outstrip the west economically, the editors continued:

"There seems to be a growing realisation that Russia is beginning to present an economic challenge to western capitalism potentially far more persuasive and threatening than the politico-mili-

tary challenge of recent years." (ibid)

As long as the Castroites steered clear of Russian aid the editorial offices of International Socialism were prepared to support them. IS No 6 (NB. there were two number sixes) argued that:

"The pressure on Cuba towards integration into the Soviet bloc will exert pressure towards bureaucratisation of the revolution. But this, so all the evidence seems to show has not yet happened ... The Cubans only turn to Russian power because there is no power of the international working class for them to turn to. Our defence of the Cuban revolution could itself be a step, even a small one, towards creating such a power."

Cliff's "Third Campism" could not deliver oil or guns. Neither could it break an American blockade. As soon as the Castroites looked to Soviet aid in order to defend themselves the Cliffites deserted the Cuban revolution.

To cover their retreat a series of articles were printed by Sergio Junco pushing the view that Cuba had none of the features of a workers' state and thus deserved no support against the USA. Following in Shachtman's footsteps Junco very soon decided that because Castro's internal regime was repressive, it represented a form of society lower than that achieved in the bourgeois democracies.

He spelt out his position in the pages of *Young Guard* (IS Youth Paper in LPYS):

"Given the fact that there has never been any popular control of revolutionary institutions in Cuba, it makes no sense to say that this is a socialist or even a progressive society. Nationalism is conducive to socialism only when there exists a state which is owned and controlled by the majority of the people. Otherwise, we get a type of state and society which is less progressive than say, liberal democracy, since in the latter the popular forces are able to organise and actively work for the earliest possible substitution of the system." ("Cuba and socialism", *Young Guard* No 4, December 1961, emphasis in original)

It was IS members, most notably Paul Foot, who sprang to Junco's support in the face of criticism in the pages of the paper.

If the political forms adopted by the Castroites had already turned the Cliffites off the Cuban revolution, the dispatch of Soviet atomic weapons completed the retreat of the IS into their neutralist corner. While being perfectly aware that the Soviet Union assists anti-imperialist struggles only to the extent that it can safeguard its own privileges and security, we would defend the right of anti-imperialist struggles to defend themselves by any means—including Soviet weapons.

In the face of US imperialism's military might the Castroites really had little choice but to seek Soviet aid. In this situation the IS fulminated with liberal pacifist rage. Once again the conflict was seen as simply a conflict between two imperialist superpowers:

"The terrible fact was that the Cuban people and the rest of us were held to ransom from both sides of the Iron Curtain. If that has not laid the myth that rocketry on one side of the curtain is somehow more humane and defensible than it is on the other, nothing short of war?" ("Cuban lessons", IS 10, Winter 62-63)

Once again, therefore, the third campists declared themselves against both the USA and the USSR. *Young Guard* raised the slogan: "All hands off Cuba, no war over Cuba." (*Young Guard* No 13, November 1962) The pacifist Paul Foot denied any legitimacy to Soviet nuclear backing for Cuba. Instead he begged his readers:

"Socialists must ask the question: Why did Russia establish nuclear bases on Cuba and more important what political justification was there for doing it?" (Young Guard No 15)

In one sense he was right, his problem was that he could not answer his own set questions. In order to defend itself the Soviet bureaucracy was—in certain circumstances—prepared to extend that portion of the globe that is not directly open to imperialist exploitation. It does not do so because it is a revolutionary force but because the very property relations upon which it rests are in permanent antagonism with the interests and nature of world imperialism.

Soviet military backing for Cuba was not a nuclear umbrella for a capitalist price war. It was a means of increasing the strength of the Soviet bureaucracy through military advantage by underwriting the defence of another (degenerate) workers' state.

FROM KOREA TO VIETNAM

The theory of state capitalism logically led the SRG and the IS to argue against support for anti-imperialist struggles that were led by Stalinists. On the surface therefore, the IS group's support for the Vietnamese NLF's struggle against US imperialism may seem either inconsistent or even a healthy break with the positions adopted on Korea and Cuba. This seeming inconsistency is easily explained by other consistent elements in the tradition and method of the Cliffites.

As a political tendency they have accommodated to every prevailing wind on the British left. Their position on Korea reflected and adapted to, the fierce climate of Cold War anti-communism of the early 1950s. The Cuban missile crisis coincided with the growth of CND first time round. The IS group's denunciation of the nuclear arms race, their rejection of any legitimate role for nuclear weapons as a defence against imperialism reflects its accommodation to the CND milieu in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Things had changed quite drastically by the late 1960s however. The Vietnam war had become an inspiration to thousands of youth. To have called for opposition to both North and South, and for a plague on the Stalinist-led Vietcong, would have been programmatically consistent for the IS. But with theoretical consistency threatening to isolate the IS the Cliffites threw themselves in behind "support for the

NLF and a North Vietnamese victory". (IS 32)

They declared the Vietnam War to be unlike previous Cold War conflicts:

"The Vietnam war does not fit neatly into the pattern of belligerent incidents between east and west since the war. Such incidents were often the result of direct confrontation between the major powers, each jostling for military or strategic advantage along the undemarcated border between their respective empires—the raw wound that ran through Central Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and South East Asia." (IS 32)

The small scale of Soviet and Chinese backing at this time was sufficient for the IS group to salve their consciences and decide that China and the USSR were not involved. As a result of this view of Indo-China it was not difficult for the IS to immerse itself in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign as supporters of the Vietnamese Stalinists they had refused to support in the early 1950s.

In defending their decision to back the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong against the USA, the IS had to plumb the depths of state capitalist logic. The IS journal declared that it was giving support:

"In the same way, socialists were required in the nineteenth century to support bourgeois liberal movements against feudal or absolutist regimes." (IS 32)

Only bourgeois tasks were on the agenda of the Vietnamese revolution:

"Of course, when the issue of American power is settled, we know what kind of regime and policies the NLF will choose—and be forced to choose by the logic of their situation. But that is, for the moment, another fight, the real fight for socialism." (ibid, emphasis in original)

For the state capitalist theorists then, the fight against capitalism was relegated as a later stage of the Vietnamese revolution.

The Vietnam episode brings to light another essential programmatic ingredient of state capitalist theory—its Menshevik position on the possibilities for socialist advance in the under-developed and "backward" countries. For the Mensheviks every underdeveloped country had to experience a stage of bourgeois capitalist development.

The 1950s and 1960s saw important nationalist movements against imperialism in Egypt and Algeria as well as in Indo-China. Large sections of the centrist and reformist left presumed that this signified a decisive shift in the terrain of the class struggle to a struggle between the "first" and "third" worlds. Against this impressionistic and defeatist "third worldism" the IS constructed their own, no less one-sided, metropolitan centred view of the world. The positions developed by the Cliff grouping in the 1950s and 1960s effectively deny the possibility of the struggle for socialism, for workers' revolution in the semi-colonial world.

In his initial work on Russia Cliff had declared that state capitalism in Russia was inevitable given the revolution's isolation and the need to industrialise in order to survive in a hostile environment. In his analysis explicitly states that the only two realistic economic programmes open for Russia in the 1920s were private capitalism or state capitalism.

This is how he explains it:

"One solution to the conflict between state industry and individualist agriculture would have been to make the development of industry depend on the rate at which agricultural surpluses developed. It would have inevitably led to a victory of private capitalism throughout the economy. Alternatively the conflict between industry and agriculture might have been resolved by rapid industrialisation based on 'primitive accumulation' by expropriating the peasants and forcing them into large mechanised farms thus releasing labour power for industry and making agricultural surpluses available for the urban population." (T Cliff, *Russia: A Marxist Analysis*, p97)

PROSPECTS FOR THE SEMI-COLONIES

Cliff wrongly argued that the subordination of consumption to the accumulation of the means of production was *ipso facto* a capitalist task. The implications of this is that in societies where pre-capitalist modes of production dominate, or where capitalism is weak, a stage of private or state capitalism is inevitable, unless a revolution in such a country is accompanied by other revolutions in the advanced capitalist world.

This explains the apparent indifference that the IS showed at the prospects of a Stalinist victory in Vietnam—after all what else could be hoped for? Certainly not a genuine workers' revolution.

The IS theorised this view systematically in the 1960s. It accompanied, necessarily, a thoroughgoing and explicit junking of Lenin's theory of imperialism and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. By 1962 Michael Kidron was declaring that imperialism was now the "highest stage but one", having been replaced as a world system by the "permanent arms economy" (i.e. military competition) as the fundamental motor maintaining stability and expansion in the major capitalist economies:

"It [Lenin's imperialism] must be rejected on at least four counts: finance capital is not nearly as important for and within the system as it was; the export of capital is no longer of great importance to the system; political control, in the direct sense meant by Lenin, is rapidly becoming dated; and finally, resulting from these, we don't have imperialism but we still have capitalism . . . If anything it is the permanent war and arms economies that are 'the highest stage of capitalism . . .'" (IS 20, Spring 1965)

Kidron argued that imperialism had suffered the loss of its colonies "without disaster, without indeed much dislocation or discomfort". He even refers to the "spontaneous withdrawal of classic imperialism" from the colonies. Imperialist relationships, we are told, were being replaced by new relationships:

"Now, after independence, despite many points of friction and competition that remain, the overriding element is one of mutual independence and convenience." (IS 20)

Leaving aside this bizarre view of the relationship between the imperialist and imperialised world which would do more credit to a White House briefing than an article written by a socialist, the programmatic implications for the underdeveloped world were stark. Whereas both Lenin and Trotsky had seen a vital role for the working class in leading the struggle against imperialism, because of the weakness of the national bourgeoisie and its enmeshing in world imperialism, now, according to Kidron, "the national bourgeoisie—or failing it, the national bureaucracy—has been rescued from oblivion by imperialism's withdrawal". (IS 20)

Kidron goes on to muse that it might well be that the only form through which capitalism can triumph, "in large sections of the world is through state initiative and bureaucratic state capitalism—and the destruction of its bourgeois democratic cousin and rival". (IS 20)

One result of these developments he argues is "the growing irrelevance of national struggles". If Kidron poses this development of state capitalism as a possibility, Tony Cliff has no such doubts. Drawing on the "experience" of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, Cliff states forthrightly that Trotsky's perspective of permanent revolution, whereby the working class can lead the struggle of the oppressed masses both against imperialism and for socialism, is no longer tenable. Trotsky he argues was clearly wrong in assuming "the revolutionary character of the young working class" in these countries:

"In many cases the existence of a floating, amorphous majority of new workers with one foot in the countryside creates difficulties for autonomous proletarian organisations: lack of experience and illiteracy add to their weakness. This leads to yet another weakness: dependence on non-workers for leadership. Trade unions in the backward countries are almost always led by outsiders . . . Once the constantly revolutionary nature of the working class, the central pillar of Trotsky's theory becomes suspect, the whole structure falls to pieces . . . . the peasantry cannot follow a non-revolutionary working class." ("Permanent Revolution", IS No 12 Spring 1963).

"DEFLECTED" PERMANENT REVOLUTION

In this situation according to Cliff, the intelligentsia of the underdeveloped world is ready and able to constitute itself as an embryonic new state capitalist class and "deflect" the permanent revolution into a stage of totalitarian state capitalist development. In Vietnam what was at stake was the construction of "a state-class, not a private or bourgeois class, that is spearheaded by the NLF and has already been instituted in the North." (IS 32)

Throughout the underdeveloped world the intelligentsia:

"... care a lot for measures to drag their nation out of stagnation but very little for democracy. They embody the drive for industrialisation, for capital accumulation, for national resurgence. Their power is in direct relation to the feebleness of other classes, and their political nullity. All this makes totalitarian state capitalism a very attractive goal for intellectuals." (IS 12)

So having distorted Marx's analysis of capitalism, junked Lenin's theory of imperialism and abandoned Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, the Cliff grouping rounds off its complete rejection of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky by abandoning the revolutionary potential of the working class in the vast majority of the globe! There only remains for these metropolitan chauvinists the "pure" working class of the advanced industrial world.

The leading theoreticians of the IS grouping here demonstrate once again the inability of their theory to provide a way forward for the international proletariat. The special nature and difficulties of the proletariat in the semi-colonial world are nothing new for revolutionaries. Indeed, despite Russia's position as an "old" imperialist power, the country's very backwardness meant that its working class showed many of the characteristics which Cliff believes should make us write off the revolutionary potential of the working class in the imperialised world.

The ability of the Bolsheviks to lead a socialist revolution in such a "backward" country was not, as Cliff believes, because of Lenin's organisational genius, but because the Bolshevik party developed a political programme, tactics and strategy which was able to unite the working class behind a revolutionary perspective and draw the peasantry behind it. By rejecting the theory of imperialism and consequently seeing only the "growing irrelevance of national struggles", the SWP abandons the major weapon in the fight for socialist revolution in the semi-colonies—it abandons the fight for working class leadership in the national struggles against imperialism.

But, of course, it is only to be expected from this grouping, steeped as it is in syndicalism and economism, that once they had decided the working class in the semi-colonies was not spontaneously revolutionary they would write off the possibilities of socialist revolution in these countries.

For Cliff, however, the non-revolutionary nature of the working class in these countries does not mean that there will be no revolution:

"A concatenation of national and international circumstances makes it imperative for the productive forces to break the fetters of feudalism and imperialism." (ibid)

But these revolutions will not be led by the working class but by the much more cohesive "revolutionary intelligentsia" who are attracted to "totalitarian state capitalism":

"These forces which should lead to a socialist

workers' revolution according to Trotsky's theory can lead, in the absence of the revolutionary subject, the proletariat, to its opposite, state capitalism . . . Mao and Castro's rise to power are classic, the purest and most extreme demonstration of deflected permanent revolution. Other colonial revolutions—China, India, Egypt, Indonesia, Algeria etc. are deviations from the norm . . . but they can best be understood when approached from the standpoint of, and compared with the norm." (ibid)

So the best that the semi-colonial world can hope for in their struggles against the oppression of feudalism and imperialism is their replacement by some form, pure or otherwise, of "totalitarian state capitalism". The only hope that the Cliffites offer for the masses of these countries is that in the "long run", under these regimes they might well increase in "numbers, cohesion and social weight". And presumably once they reach the level of the industrialised west they too can have a socialist revolution!

Thus in the mighty struggles against imperialism, in Algeria, in Cuba, in Vietnam and Indo-China, in Nicaragua and Central America today, the SWP's programme offers no goal worth fighting for.

They are left only with a chronic fatalism, with the belief that all these struggles can only end in tears, in a new exploiting, totalitarian system. This fatalism was most clearly summed up in a notorious article by Kidron on the LSSP of Ceylon (the LSSP was an ex-USFI section, then part of a "socialist" coalition government). Kidron argued in his article, entitled "Tropical Trotskyism", that the difficulties facing Ceylon in escaping from semi-colonial servitude were insurmountable.

This is all he had to offer the workers and peasants by way of perspectives:

"If the transition (to a modern competitive economy) is to be made at all—and it is undeniably necessary—productivity will have to be jacked up and wages held down. There is no alternative. All the LSSP can hope for is that the workers will make the sacrifice willingly." (*Socialist Worker*, 3 July 1969)

It is a measure of the bankruptcy of state capitalist theory that what started life as a theorisation of moral outrage at the horrors of Stalin's Russia became a rationalisation of the inevitability of state capitalism except in that portion of the globe where productive forces were ripe enough for the immediate transition to socialism. State capitalist theory has proven itself to have no real understanding of the dynamics of international class struggle. On each occasion the state capitalists have done little more than retail the options and moods of western radicalism.

It has led the SWP to adopt reactionary positions on major struggles in the post-war world. SWP members can either follow their leadership and prepare to repeat the old mistakes again, or they can take stock of the compromised history of state capitalism and look once again to the tradition embodied in Trotsky's Fourth International.

BOSNIA
Which side are you on?

The SWP has consistently refused to support the right of multi-ethnic Bosnia to defend itself against ethnic cleansing. This article, from ***1993****, debunks Socialist Worker's the lame excuses*

SEPTEMBER 1993 saw the imperialists attempt to put the finishing touches to an agreement which ensures the destruction of the state of Bosnia-Hercegovina. In the same month *Socialist Review*, the journal of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), led with an article attacking those on the left who called for an end to the arms blockade, and for the arming of the Bosnian Muslims in order that they could defend themselves and their state.

The SWP refuses to take sides in the war in former Yugoslavia. It has constantly argued that revolutionaries should give no support to the "nationalist demagogues who have plunged the ex-Yugoslavia into civil war".

This "plague on all your houses" position sounds very revolutionary, until we look at the concrete and complex reality of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Then it reveals itself to be not a revolutionary position but a pacifist one.

The war in the former Yugoslavia has gone through many turns and stages. The current phase, which began in October 1992, has been dominated by a concerted Serbian and Croatian offensive to carve up Bosnia between them.

BLOCKADE

The results are indisputable. Over a million Bosnian Muslims have been driven from their homes as a result of a massive programme of ethnic cleansing by both Croat and Serb forces. The Muslims, who made up 44% of a population that included 32% Serbs and 17% Croats, have been driven into a tiny area of the country, less than 20% of the territory. Under the latest plan the Serbs control 52% of the territory.

The imperialists and the UN troops on the ground have overseen this bloody war. They have imposed an arms blockade which in reality has only had an impact on the Bosnian Muslims. The Serbs have

their own arms industry, while the Croats have no problems receiving arms courtesy of their German backers.

Each defeat of the Bosnian Muslim forces has been followed by a new imperialist plan giving them an ever-dwindling piece of territory. The Vance-Owen plan offered them barely a third of Bosnia-Hercegovina. The latest proposal offers little more than a South African-style "homeland" with the Izetbegovic government desperately trying to win a narrow outlet to the sea.

These are the circumstances in which *Socialist Review* denounces those who want, as it puts it, to "reduce the civil wars in the ex-Yugoslavia to the suffering of the Muslims". This, according to the article, is "single issue politics of the worst kind". Those who call for the arming of the Muslims, for ending the arms blockade, are involved in an "act of conscience salving".

This is the position that led the SWP to have nothing to do with the Workers' Aid to Bosnia Campaign. Fortunately the average British worker has a better sense of internationalist solidarity than this supposed "vanguard" party. Despite the very small forces involved, large numbers of trade union organisations rallied to this campaign.

Does supporting the Bosnian government and its army in the current phase of the war mean we are uncritical supporters of its government? Absolutely not. Workers have no interest in supporting the nationalist policies of Izetbegovic, nor of forcing Croats or Serbs into a Muslim-dominated state. We fight for a workers' republic in Bosnia with autonomy for minority groups and a Socialist Federation in the Balkans.

But by showing that revolutionaries and the workers' movement are willing to support a just struggle for national rights, and even survival, by fighting alongside and aiding this struggle, socialists can undermine the hold of the nationalists.

By refusing to support this struggle, the SWP's policy plays into the hands of the extreme nationalists and reactionaries. They can say to workers and small farmers: "Look who the only people actively supporting us are : the Iranian government, the Afghan Islamic fundamentalists etc. They are your real allies".

Does it mean we have to cover up for the actions of the Bosnian army that also have committed atrocities and "ethnic cleansing" in the war, although on nothing like the scale of the Serbs or Croats? No, we condemn them when they occur. We call for the disbandment of the Musulmanskaya Brigada—the main, overtly Muslim nationalist unit in which many of the Arab fundamentalists serve—and the disciplining and reorganisation of any unit found to be involved in ethnic cleansing.

But *Socialist Worker* goes out of its way to *equate* the two sides with such headlines as "Terror used on both sides" (SW 19.6.93), as though this justifies a position of neutrality in the war. Does *Socialist Worker* think that the NLF in Vietnam never committed atrocities? The FLN in Algeria? The ANC in South Africa? Marxists decide to support a struggle on the basis of whether it is a just one or not, not on the basis of the methods used in it.

The SWP has correctly argued against imperialist and UN intervention, rightly arguing that any such intervention can only be for the benefit of the imperialists. They have argued that any bombing of the Serbs will drive the Serbian masses further into the arms of the nationalists, just as the economic blockade has. Yet at the same time the SWP opposes the lifting of one key element of the economic blockade: the arms embargo. It is this embargo that has prevented the Bosnian Muslims from defending themselves. It is an embargo imposed by the imperialists—a form of imperialist intervention just as surely as an embargo of food or fuel.

The SWP strategy for breaking the masses from the nationalist leaders in Serbia and Croatia is as deeply flawed as its strategy in Bosnia. All hopes for change are pinned on a spontaneous "popular revolt" against nationalist "warlord leaders" resulting from the growing war weariness.

Of course it is greatly to be hoped that such a movement develops. But to ensure its success, to prevent it leading to a reactionary outcome or even fascism, a party of Serbian workers who are free from national chauvinism has to be built. In concrete terms this means supporting the right of Bosnia to defend itself against a predatory war of conquest and genocide being pursued by the Serbian rulers.

The perspective of a spontaneous revolt conveniently absolves the SWP from taking sides in various phases of the war. So keen are they to bolster their position that they have consistently exaggerated and painted up in progressive colours all oppositional movements.

First they looked to the pacifists, who organise amongst the students and intellectuals. Most of these groups are now small and isolated. Many of them wanted UN intervention to ensure peace—precisely what the SWP argues against.

In August *Socialist Worker* declared that the real hope for peace lay in the outbreak of a strike wave in Serbia, including a one day general strike. These were strikes for better pay to compensate for hyper-inflation and back pay owed. Of course such strikes resulting from the economic crisis caused by the war and blockade are vitally important. But they do not necessarily take an anti-war or anti-nationalist direction. Workers in Serbia can only be broken from the nationalists if they are won to an internationalist position. For this they need a party which campaigns not only for the defeat of Milosevic and his army but clearly stands for the rights of the Bosnian Muslims and victory in their struggle.

In fact the mass "oppositions" to Serbian leader Milosovic are just as nationalist or further to the right. The "democratic" opposition of Draskovic stands for a Greater Serbia but opposes the present war, while the Serbian Radical Party is both powerful and openly fascist. Workers' discontent could just

as easily be funnelled in these directions as any progressive one.

TACTICS

The latest "most hopeful sign yet" discovered by *Socialist Worker* (25.9.93) was the revolt by Bosnian-Serb soldiers in Banja Luka. Crack troops and tanks seized the town and demanded measures be taken against war profiteers mainly ensconced in the local government.

Socialist Worker seems to find it particularly hopeful that these were "the largest and toughest outfit in the Bosnian Serb army". Indeed they are. They are also responsible for many incidents of ethnic cleansing against Bosnian Muslims. These are precisely the units that are most opposed to any concessions on territory they have seized and "cleansed".

That is not to say that all these troops can be written off. But their current revolt would have to be entirely transformed if it were to become a vehicle for a progressive solution to the war.

The situation in the former Yugoslavia has brou into focus all the weaknesses in the SWPs politics the face of a bloody civil war it is politically armed. It can only rail against the nationali while having no tactics that relate to workers Bosnia who are fighting a just war of defence but under nationalist influence.

It opposes UN intervention, but opposes the l ing of the arms embargo—a key imperialist pol that has disarmed one side in the conflict. It desp ately hopes that somehow the economic struggle w reassert itself and solve all problems. Rather th worry its head about developing strategy and tact that can take the workers forward, it relies as ev on the spontaneous explosion to sweep away t nationalism that infects the workers.

SWP members have the chance at their forthco ing conference to change this rotten position. Th should take it.

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BUILDING 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". Every week in *Socialist Worker* a column records the week's new recruits and urges more to join the revolutionary party.

Many 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 the revolution. Despite this breastbeating 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 the advanced industrial countries, Lenin's original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's, not withstanding her overstatement on the question of spontaneity." (1959 edition *Rosa Luxemburg*).

Even after his supposed conversion to Leninism in 1968-69, Cliff's attachment to spontaneist notions of the party persisted as, for example, when he argued that Luxemburg's position was superior to Lenin's 1902-04 position "which was copied and given an added bureaucratic twist by 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 1968-69. Cliff justified his previous federalist position on the grounds that the 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 in May 1968. 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.

Both pretexts were based on an empirical method. Neither accounted for the actual shift in position in the Luxemburg pamphlet. The doctoring of the 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 copying—and distorting—the organisational form of that model.

Since their turn to "Leninism" the 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 homogeneous there would be no need for leadership." (IS 58, p10)

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 homogeneous 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.

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 tasks 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*, p48)

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, p50)

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 break in the quota is Cliff's)

Here Cliff is not simply purblind—he is wilfully twisting Lenin's actual position. The quotation above is much fuller and Lenin is 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, "The Reorganisation of the Party", *Collected Works* vol 10, p32)

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 this 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 strateg was not made by the Communards, who were not le by communists.

Similarly the first Soviets, in 1905, did not rais the call for armed insurrection against Tsarism. Th Bolsheviks did, and in Moscow they won workers t that position. Equally, it was the experience of 190 which, much later, was generalised into a revolu tionary strategy, "All power to the Soviets!", b Lenin.

Their inability to understand the primary role o 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] 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*, p50)

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 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 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 simply for the 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 recruits, diluting the political level of the organisation, leaving new recruits passive and politically untrained, and demoralising members.

It deceives people by recruiting them on minimal grounds rather than on the real politics of the organisation. It dilutes the organisation by bringing in members who are not aware of the basis or principles of Marxism, leaving them prey to demagogues, personal prejudices and manipulation by those who are "in the know". It demoralises members because they have not been prepared for the real political tasks facing Marxists, not trained to swim against the stream. It is a recipe for a pliant membership accustomed to accepting the line from above rather than taking part in the internal discussion, debate and criticism that is the lifeblood of a genuine democratic centralist party.

Precisely because a Leninist party aims to lead, any group trying to build such a party must 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 ability to lead others. In other words, before it can become a mass party, and in order to 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, 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 these things exist in the SWP. The leadership's centrism precludes democratic centralism.

The established Cliffite leadership cannot afford to risk training a membership that could hold them to account. The history of expulsions and purges are eloquent testimonies of this. The result is a high turn-over of members, with the recruits from one period being sacrificed or demoralised during the next. This is a parody of democratic centralism. It substitutes the rule of the faction 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 later 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, p22)

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 could be said, this made him a great leader, but it was not 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 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 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 SWP

Naturally, the leadership of the SWP has to pay lip service to the norms of democratic centralism. Chris Harman's 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 trampling 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." (p17)

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 a regular internal bulletin in which the membership can air differences and expose them to the full light of day. It has three or four IBs in the weeks before a conference. Nor does the SWP accept the right of members who disagree with the line, and therefore, want to argu against it, to organise themselves as factions.

Such debate is essential and cannot be restricte as in the SWP, to a "pre-conference period". Politica arguments do not conform to calendars, they ar dictated by the course of events. By allowing onl limited arguments against its chosen policy th leadership of the SWP ensures that it can prepar the membership to accept its position long in ad vance of any counter-argument. As a result the inne 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 why we attack them.

To the right of the SWP, *Socialist Organiser* and *Socialist Outlook* 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.✪

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THE SWP AND TROTSKYISM

Would Trotsky have joined the SWP?

*The Socialist Workers Party has always made a point of distancing itself from "orthodox Trotskyism". Rather than describe itself as a Trotskyist organisation it claims merely to stand in the tradition of Trotsky or to "stem from" Trotskyism . **Arthur Merton** examines this claim.*

THE REASONS for the SWP's attitude to Trotsky are not hard to find. When, in the late 1940s, Tony Cliff's grouping embraced a state capitalist analysis of the USSR, it began a process of rejecting all the essentials of Trotskyism. Permanent revolution was revised by Cliff in a manner that afforded the petit bourgeoisie of certain semi-colonies (India was his favourite example) a historic role in the struggle for "democracy".

The *Transitional Programme* (TP), and its entire method were rejected in favour of a strictly militant trade-unionist practice in the class struggle. Trotsky's struggle for a new international party was dismissed as a futile adventure which itself disoriented post-war Trotskyism.

The Cliffites justified their rejection of Trotskyism by pointing to the gross opportunism of the post-war Trotskyists. The International Secretariat of the Fourth International, led by Pablo and Mandel, and its rival, the International Committee (of Gerry Healy fame), committed a whole series of political errors. These errors, though, stemmed not from the Trotskyism of these groupings, but from their definitive break from it. Unwilling to recognise this, the Cliffites threw out the baby with the bathwater; the writings of the revolutionary leader with the writings of his confused imitators.

Of course the Cliffite groupings (Socialist Review Group/International Socialists/SWP) have always paid tribute to selected aspects of Trotsky's politics, his grasp of tactics such as the united front, his understanding of fascism, his analysis of the popular front etc. These elements of Trotsky's heritage will, rightly, be praised during the SWP's lectures on the fiftieth anniversary of the FI's foundation. However, the question SWP members must face up to is whether the party's break from the essentials of Trotskyism—in particular the TP and its method—has been compensated for by a superior revolutionary practice.

Workers Power, having once been a faction inside the IS, is convinced that the SWP are as guilty of trampling on the revolutionary programme as are the degenerate centrist fragments of the Fourth International.

We base this on our experience of the SWP's practice in a whole range of major struggles—steel 1980, health 1982, Warrington 1983, miners 1984-5, printers 1986 and health 1988. In each case the SWP has steadfastly refused to raise demands that the workers themselves were not already raising. The SWP refused to give a lead to those workers when they came up against the limitations of both their spontaneous demands (their existing consciousness in other words) and their limited and sectional forms of organisation. In particular in the 1988 health dispute the SWP opposed steps towards a solidly based, national rank and file steward's organisation.

The reasons the SWP give for their refusal to fight for the class to take up transitional demands vary. Recently it was because of the "downturn". In the early 1970s it was because the "upturn" was automatically transforming workers' consciousness. At root, however, the reason lies in their rejection of Trotsky's programmatic method.

This shows through clearly in the major books that SWP leaders have written on Trotsky. John Molyneux has written the most serious and extended critique of Trotsky from the point of view of the SWP. He argues that while Trotsky, especially through the experience of 1917, transcended many of the weaknesses of the Second International tradition (as well as incorporating its strengths), there were important residues of this method which left key aspects of Trotsky's politics fatally flawed.

Trotsky's failure to understand the need for a combat party of revolution before 1917, his "brilliant failure" to grasp the social nature of the USSR under Stalin, his over mechanical attempt to map out all

the stages of revolutionary strategy in the TP and his inflated view of the prospects for the Fourth International in the 1930s, are all "rooted in the deterministic interpretation that Trotsky inherited from the leading authorities of the Second International".

While he was evidently "permanently inocculated" from fatalism with regard to revolutionary policy after 1917, this "did not lead to a reassessment of his basic philosophical position which remained determinist and positivist".

Molyneux, not surprisingly, singles out the TP for attack. It is, he writes, "to a far greater extent than many of Trotsky's other works . . . both profoundly flawed and historically limited". The criticisms he raises are themselves "profoundly flawed". In the first place he criticises Trotsky's conception of productive forces in which he states that the economic prerequisites for revolution had already "achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate". The SWP argue that this was only ever at best half true for the 1930s, that the whole edifice of transitional demands are tied to this view and thus only applicable in a period like the 1930s which was one "of revolutionary or near revolutionary situations".

Whilst Trotsky's perspectives were based on the idea that capitalism had now placed absolute limits on the productive forces, there was nothing fatalistic about his conclusions. He correctly identified the national limitations on the international economy as the source of World War I and its ensuing revolutionary possibilities, and pinpointed the very same contradiction as the source of two decades of stagnation and the drive to the Second World War. He wrote:

"Each nation tried to repulse all the others and to seize the world market for its own purposes. They could not succeed and now we see that capitalist society enters a new stage."

On the basis of this he postulated only "socialism or barbarism" as immediate perspectives. Given that one nation, the USA, actually succeeded in "seizing the world market" there is clearly an error. But it is an error of analysis—the underestimation of the untapped economic potential of the USA—entirely similar to the one committed by Marx and Engels who saw capitalism as exhausted in 1848.

Only once did Trotsky refer to a third possibility of a potential respite for the bourgeoisie. In March, 1938 he argued, "'that is not excluded, but then we will be obliged to realise a strategic retreat".

The implication of Molyneux's argument is that this "strategic retreat" would have to involve abandoning the transitional method for the old maximum/minimum programme, tailored for a period of extended social peace.

This ignores the whole history of the development of transitional demands and action programmes. It was precisely in a period of strategic retreat—after the First World War and the ebb of the revolutionary tide—that the Comintern elaborated transitional demands. After the Second World War and it thwarted revolutionary aftermath it was necessary to outline a new perspective, and refocus the TP to that perspective.

The new situation did not destroy the validity of the TP as a whole. This was because despite the "long boom", imperialism could not escape and throw into reverse all the features of the imperialist epoch. It remained one of wars and revolutions, in which the uneven and combined development of world capitalism produced a whole series of crises in a whole series of countries—China, Korea, Algeria, Hungary, Indo-China, Indonesia, etc.

In each case transitional action programmes focused on the immediate crisis facing the workers and peasants of those countries, and directing their struggles towards the establishment of working class power, was essential.

Even in the imperialist west during that period of long boom, transitional demands and method did not lose their validity. The SWP claim that transitional demands do not strike "at the foundations of the bourgeois regime", as Trotsky's programme envisaged, if the situation is stable. For the SWP the alternative, as expressed by Molyneux, is:

"In struggles in non-revolutionary situations (for example, a strike) it is more important for revolutionaries to find demands that fit the situation, and therefore actually carry the struggle forward, than it is to search for demands which, in words, lead to the conquest of power, and in reality lead to irrelevance."

It is true that the TP was written for a period in which the convulsive crises of the 1930s and the imminence of world war raised the possibility that partial struggles would rapidly lead to a situation of generalised working class action and to the question of poltical power being posed repeatedly in a number of countries. In these situations the whole range of demands from the factory committee right up to the workers' militia and workers' government could be expected to become a key question of agitation by the revolutionaries.

But outside of these situations the demands that need to be advanced agitationally still need to include ones that are imbued with the central method of the TP, namely, workers' control. This is what Trotsky meant in the TP when he says:

"The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution."

The SWP caricature this statement from Trotsky. Not infrequently they accuse us of raising the dictatorship of the proletariat at a time when an all out strike is necessary. This caricature betrays a very dangerous short-sightedness on the part of the SWP. It fails to grasp that the fight, even for partial elements of workers' control in a particular struggle, serves as a bridge between the struggle for reforms and a revolutionary struggle against capital.

Nor does Trotsky, as the SWP imply, counterpose partial demands and transitional demands. For Trotsky immediate demands fought for by revolutionary tactics could become the starting point for winning the masses to broader transitional demands:

"Every local, partial, economic demand must be an approach to a general demand in our transitional programme."

And the fight for that demand can take forward the political and organisational struggle of the working class, even if it does not lead to mass revolutionary consciousness at once.

Take the example of nationalisation in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. We know it was not socialism, we know it was undertaken to rescue ailing capitalist industries. Revolutionaries would have emphasised agitationally the question of workers' control over all aspects of the job (hiring and firing, safety, speed of work etc) and no compensation to the bosses. In other words it was possible, through encroaching on the rule of capital, to use workers' control and the demand to make the bosses pay (by refusing them handouts) to prepare for future battles when renewed crisis made concessions and compromises less and less tenable for the bosses.

The SWP's refusal to adopt such a measure actually leads them, not Trotsky or ourselves, to counterpose partial and transitional demands. Trotsky wrote:

"The Fourth International does not discard the programme of the old 'minimal' demands to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct, actual, that is, revolutionary perspective."

This is what the SWP will not do. They never connect the struggle for partial demands with a revolutionary perspective based on the fight for workers' control. Rather they limit their demands to ones aimed at generalising working class support for the existing level of struggle and the spontaneously arising demands. It is implied in the SWP's critique of the TP that they see some use for transitional demands in revolutionary or near revolutionary situations. But in fact they do not. Why? Because as Molyneux indicates, in quoting Gramsci favourably, it is possible "to foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle".

This is nothing less than a rejection of the scientific nature of the Marxist programme and the leading role of the party in drawing it up. If the party is the memory of the class then the programme codifies the general experience of the class internationally and applies it in any situation.

The TP's historic merit was that it outlined the major tactics that the working class will have to deploy on the road to power. It did not and could not detail every minor conjunctural demand or concrete expression of these general tactics.

In rejecting the whole programmatic method of Trotskyism it is the SWP who lapse back into a form of "Second Internationalism". They fall back into the rigid separation of minimum and maximum demands. At the moment this takes the form of combining a purely trade unionist practice with general propaganda for socialist ideas. The SWP are well known for devoting time and energy to providing organisational solidarity for workers who are in struggle.

The SWP see it as the key task of the revolutionary party to generalise support for that struggle on the basis of the existing level of demands. In the Great Strike of 1984-85 they argued that the way forward was primarily to build bigger and better pickets to fight for the demands of the strike. The limited nature of these demands—limited by the NUM leadership—was never questioned. Only the leadership's failure to build bigger pickets was attacked.

The SWP justify such an approach by arguing that there is an inherent logic in the class struggle which turns economic struggles into political ones through the intervention of the state into economic battles (use of police, courts, laws etc). Duncan Hallas, another SWP leader who has written a book on Trotsky, has said:

"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, realisitic and concrete leadership in these sectional struggles."

The SWP are right to suggest that workers' struggles can and do give rise to "spontaneous" political consciousness and are a key point of departure for revolutionaries seeking to win worker militants to a revolutionary party.

They are dead wrong to suggest that the political struggle emanating from this will be automatically revolutionary. As the miners' strike showed only too well, the spontaneous political class consciousness of the majority never raised itself above that of the miltiant sectional trade unionism of Scargill. The strike was defeated for that reason.

The SWP did nothing to raise demands which were politically in advance of that consciousness. Even on the question of pickets they refused to call for their organised defence—despite the obvious need for such defence in the face of a militarised police force—on the grounds that such a demand was too advanced. In fact miners, who organised, albeit in a haphazard way, their own defence groups, were in advance of the SWP.

Inevitably the SWP's attitude to programme has implications for their attitude towards the building of an international revolutionary tendency. In a nutshell the SWP reject the idea that an International can be built at present and go on to say that the Fourth International (FI) itself was a tragic mistake, that it should never have been built.

The whole evolution of the Cliffites since their split with the FI in the late 1940s has been more and more towards a national-centred view of how to build an International. Their starting point is to question whether or not Trotsky should have founded

the FI given the weakness of the groupings that constituted it in 1938.

In explaining Trosky's insistence after 1936 that his followers found an International as soon as possible Molyneux declares that it was because "he needed an apocalyptic view of the future to sustain his revolutionary will" (p185).

A "now-or-never" outlook took hold of him and impaired his judgement. This is a rejection of Trotsky's own justification; namely, that the struggle of the Left Opposition since the late 1920s had produced a wealth of analyses and documents that codified and welded together a coherent revolutionary pole of attraction.

In addition the imminence of world war required the creation of a democratic-centralist organisation and leadership capable of guiding the sections of the FI in immensely difficult situations. And an International was vital if sections were to take advantage of the revolutionary crises as well as survive the repression that was expected to come with the war.

Duncan Hallas does concede some of these points but argues that Trotsky's supposed "messianism" was a "necessary deviation from his mature view"—necessary to hold his followers together, but ultimately doomed to failure.

This ignores completely the gain—in terms of maintenance of a revolutionary banner in the midst of the carnage and reaction of the war—that the foundation of the FI represented.

The SWP insist that an International can only be founded when it is rooted in strong national parties. The defeats of the 1930s had isolated the Trotskyists and according to Hallas the events of 1936 in Spain "had demonstrated the indispensability of parties rooted in their national working classes through a long period of struggle for partial demands" before launching an International.

Hallas turns cause and effect on its head. The events in Spain and particularly the regionalist and nationalist deviations that underlay the opportunism of the POUM testified to the need for an international party. As Trotsky said in the TP:

"A revolutionary proletarian tendency . . . cannot thrive and develop in one isolated country; on the very next day after its formation it must seek or create international ties, an international platform, because a guarantee of the correctness of the national road can only be found along this road. A tendency which remains shut in nationally over a stretch of years condemns itself irrevocably to degeneration."

The SWP itself is evidence of this. Real internationalism begins with the "international platform" (i.e. programme) and a leadership which can intervene to correct the tendencies towards an adaptation to the prejudices and preoccupations of the national working class.

The SWP, with its persistent adaptation to the spontaneous trade union consciousness of the powerful British trade union movement, has degenerated along national lines. It is a degeneration that has led it on a variety of occasions (from Kore through Cuba to the Malvinas) into abstentionis or neutralism in relation to struggles between tl USSR and imperialism and between the imperia ists and semi-colonies.

The project of building big national parties first a guarantee that a genuine international programm cannot be constructed at all.

The cost of such a project will inevitably be a vie of international class struggles from the distorte lenses of the national terrain leading to an over c under-estimation of the weight and centrality c certain questions.

At best what is arrived at is a mutual admiratio society in which a polite agreement is reached tha the national groups know best about their ow national class struggles and should be left to get or with them.

This bore fruit for the SWP in its disastrous mid-1970s attempt to unite "nationally rooted" groups as diverse as the Maoist Avanguardia Operaia (Italy), the guerillarist PRB-BR (Portugal) and the abstract propagandist Lutte Ouvrière (France).

From the point of view of this fiasco the SWP have nothing to teach Trotskyists or those struggling to refound a revolutionary International.

The SWP is not a Trotskyist group. In effect they want to have their cake and eat it. Duncan Hallas concludes that Trotsky's lifelong struggle was "an indispensable contribution" to the synthesis of theory and practice.

Yet of the four main areas of Trotsky's thought he identifies—permanent revolution, Stalinism, strategy and tactics, party and class—the SWP's theory and practice is seriously at odds with all of them.

We only have to consider the contradiction between Trotsky's support for the USSR against Germany in the Second World War and the SWP's understanding of it as an inter-imperialist war to see the fragility of their veneration for the FI's founder.

Given their position on the USSR should they not brand Trotsky as a social chauvinist defending Russian imperialism—despite his previous contribution to Marxism?

By attacking Trotsky's programmatic method, and hence his international strategy for working class power, the SWP's defence of certain of his conjunctural analyses and tactics is rendered shallow and inconsistent.

It is possible and necessary to be sharply critical of Trotsky's weaknesses as long as we know how to correct them on the basis of his method. But it is the method of Trotsky that the SWP critics find most objectionable.

Trotskyism needs to be re-elaborated certainly, but that can only be done by understanding the full importance of Trotsky's contribution.

The crowning point of that contribution was the completion of the TP and the founding of the FI, which Trotsky himself judged to be "the most important work of my life".✪

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The question economism can't answer

Many members of the Socialist Workers Party have heard their organisation accused of "economism". But what does it mean exactly? In this article from 1990 Clare Heath looks at the origin of this term in Lenin's polemics at the turn of the century and finds that it is an accurate label for the SWP's approach to struggles as diverse as the strike against Heath's Tory government in the 1970s to the Poll Tax battle of the late 1980s.

MOST OF the SWP's left wing critics level the charge of economism at them. But the failure of these self same critics to orient themselves in the largest mass workers' organisations—the trade unions—has discredited this correct charge. When the student vanguardists, the feminists and the Trotskyist-Bennites demonstrate, in words and deeds, their aversion for the "backward, white male skilled working class" they completely undermine their criticism of the SWP.

Indeed their "politics" are simply the obverse side of the coin of the SWP. In different ways both represent a "slavish bowing to spontaneity". Lenin's charge against the economist trend in the Russian Social Democracy.

The SWP theoreticians have a holy terror of Lenin's pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*. In the SWP "Economism" is caricatured as "opposition to building a revolutionary party" or the ignoring of political questions.

Since the SWP is not guilty of either of these they insist they cannot be accused of economism. 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, p80-82)

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 free 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). 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 clear in *What Is To Be Done?* The economist ". . . does not altogether repudiate the political struggle." Lenin cites economist writings that talk about "combating 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 [i.e. socialist or communist politics] 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, i.e. which do not remove the subjugation of labour to capital."

Lenin concludes:

"There is politics and 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' "spontaneity"—i.e. the militancy that grows out of the very conditions and struggles that arise from 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 wilfully misunderstood quotation is that:

"Class *political* 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." (our emphasis)

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 socialist consciousness, and a socialist prograr is a conscious, active task, not a "spontaneous"

The raising of spontaneous class struggle, whe "economic" or "political", into socialist consciousr is an indispensable task and one which only a guard party can undertake.

None of this is in contradiction with a cor appreciation of the revolutionary creativity of masses. But if workers spontaneously engage in class struggles, spontaneously create soviets spontaneously erupt into insurrection they als and necessarily for longer periods—spontaneou succumb to bourgeois ideology. Lenin's attack is those who tail the economic struggle and who, in name of "spontaneity", denigrate socialist class c sciousness. He attacks those who will not develo specifically socialist programme, strategy and t tics and will not struggle to win the "mass mo ment" to it, to raise the struggle from the "day-to-d bread and butter issues" (Hallas).

Cliff likes to pretend that Lenin left all the imm ture nonsense of *What Is To Be Done?* behind once had seen the mass movement of 1905. These wor from that year refute him:

"We cannot be be content to have our tactic slogans limp behind events and to their being adapte to events after their occurrence. We must ha slogans that lead us forward, light up the path befo us, and raise us above the immediate tasks of th movement. To wage a consistent and sustained stru gle the party of the proletariat cannot determine it tactics from occasion to occasion. In its tactica decisions it must combine fidelity to the principles o Marxism with due regard for the progressive task of the proletariat." ("Revolution teaches", 1905)

The SWP's objection to *What Is To Be Done?* is, ir essence, their objection to Leninism itself. Once (before 1968) this was overt and consistent. The IS objected to the democratic centralist party structure which was the organised expression of the Leninist method of theoretical, political and economic strug gle. Yet Cliff's later 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 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 those 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*, p104)

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 advisers 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 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, or if that will not work then they trim their positions to keep them in line with prevalent consciousness.

They did this on Ireland for example, when they refused to call for the withdrawal of British troops when Labour originally sent them in. They denounced the 1972 Aldershot bombings as "individual terrorism" despite their formal position of unconditional but critical support for the IRA. The 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. 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, i.e. 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'comin" 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 leaves economic struggle as the exclusive business of the unions.

The SWP does the exact reverse. The 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 demands, 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.

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 (IS) 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 and the mass political strike over the Pentonville jailings) to the question of working class power. Instead they tailed every one of these struggles claiming each 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 offered no more this that comforting description.

REJECTION OF TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS

A typical front page of *Socialist Worker* in the 1972

miners' strike—under the bold headline "Demand the TUC calls a general strike"—said:

"If the miners do not win their full claim, demand that the TUC calls a one day general strike of all affiliated unions against the Tory lockout." (*Socialist Worker* No 259, 19.2.72)

When, after the 1972 victory, the miners were in the firing line again the SWP 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 even 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 the sliding scale have been fought for, won and fought over in massive struggles in Italy, Belgium and the USA. 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 IS.

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 1970s) it rises up again with renewed force, even temporarily subduing the economic struggle.

The SWP cannot 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 in 1974.They 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.

But it is also true that illusions in Labour and electoralism are not just a product of trade union victories. It also occurs as a result of serious defeats. Witness the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-85. The Labour Party leadership in its majority ran away for the duration of the dispute. They were embarrassed by it; they worked behind the scenes to get it called off.

But once the miners were defeated then the vanguard gradually became infected with "new realism" and disillusion set in about the possibilities of victories against the Tories on the industrial/trade union front of the class war. In turn, working for a Labour victory, even with much reduced expectations in what it will do in office, became the order of the day. It was, and is more and more, accepted that only a Labour victory at elections will stand a chance of unseating Thatcher.

THE DOWNTURN

In order to justify their economism the SWP have constructed a theoretical and perspectival alibi; the downturn theory. A report from a party council in May 1990 summarised its essence. It stated that there was an upturn of struggle from 1970 to 1974:

"Then from 1975 onwards there was a downturn both in the industrial struggle and in left wing politics."

To use one of Cliff's favourite phrases, the downturn theory was "bloody rubbish". It bore no relation to the reality of the 1970s and 1980s. How is it possible for people who have lived through those years to describe them as ones of "industrial downturn"?

We witnessed mass struggles under Labour (notably the strikes of car workers, lorry drivers and whole swathes of the public sector in 1978 and 1979). Under the Tories some of the most momentous strikes in British labour movement history took place. Engineers, steel workers, health workers, civil servants, miners, printers, seafarers and dockers have all done battle in this period. The miners' one year struggle was a milestone of working class militancy.

Yet the SWP insist that because of the downturn these strikes were doomed to defeat. We are clear that the key battles did go down to defeat. This has produced periods in which militancy has been considerably subdued. But none of this was inevitable. The struggle itself threw up the possibility of victory. The reformist misleadership consistently squandered that opportunity. Correct and vigorous revolu-

tionary politics, intersecting with the rank and file militancy of these disputes, could, on various occasions, have prevented defeat. Such is the dialectic of the living struggle. Its outcome is not predetermined by the arbitrary perspectival schema of a left group.

Faced with this reality the SWP stretched the downturn theory to the point of incredulity. During the miners' strike Tony Cliff argued:

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

This absurd position was justified by the fact that the strike was a defensive one—it was defending jobs. Yet the occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilding yard, which according to Cliff "radically turned the tide of the Tory attack" in 1971, was equally defensive. It came just after the defeat of two national groups of workers—power workers and postal workers. Why was this not an extreme example of a "downturn"?

Many strikes in many periods are defensive, yet they can rally the forces for a fightback, turn the tide from retreat to advance, alter the balance of class forces. There was nothing inherent in the struggle of the UCS workers, led as they were by treacherous Stalinists who tried to turn it into a popular frontist jamboree, that made it an "upturn" strike. Nor was there anything inherent in the miners' strike that meant defeat was the inevitable outcome.

What was a problem was that, as a result of their false perspective, the SWP argued vigorously that it was impossible to organise the rank and file in the disputes of the later 1970s and 1980s. They had decided to wind up every one of their rank and file organisations and vowed not to get involved in any other ones—such as the National Rank and File Miners' Movement that emerged from the Great Strike. This meant that the misleadership of the reformists went unchallenged by an organisation that had, at least in the past, developed extensive roots inside the working class. The SWP in 1984 insisted that:

"What is clear is that the idea that you could create an alternative leadership in the downturn by revolutionaries coming together in some kind of rank and file organisation did not work."

In place of this the SWP retreated in on itself. It structured its organisation around branch meetings with a high educational content to steel members against the corrosive effects of the downturn. All of this avoided the real problem of both the class struggle in the 1980s and the SWP's politics within the rank and file organisations that they were winding up. The problem was not an absence of class struggle nor an unwillingness of rank and file workers—who were not yet revolutionaries—to organise themselves against the bureaucracy. The strikes of the 1980s demonstrate both the extent of rank and file militancy and the preparedness of workers to organise themselves. No, the real problem is that the crisis of leadership amongst rank and file workers required a revolutionary socialist answer translated into the aims and objectives of particular struggles.

In the steel strike this meant linking the pay fight to the issue of jobs and posing the need for workers' control. The SWP would have none of this. After the steel strike there was a jobs massacre. In the miners' strike it was necessary to consciously fight for the generalisation of the struggle and the organised defence of pickets to make them effective. Once again the SWP simply argued for a trade unionist response to a political attack. Faced with mass arrests and physical harassment, workers' defence squads were not only needed, they began to be built by the most militant miners. We argued consistently for them to be built and extended. The SWP instead stressed:

"The way to stop arrests like this is to spread mass pickets as far as is possible and stretch the police operation."

At Wapping in 1986 the same refusal by the SWP to advance demands and forms of organisation that could challenge the reformists was evident. Every time the problem is not the "upturn" or "downturn" context, it is the SWP's deliberate refusal to advance a revolutionary solution to the struggle.

The claim that the downturn was also characterised by a lack of interest in left wing politics doesn't bear a moment's serious inspection. It merely reveals the economism of the SWP at its worst. In the early 1980s significant numbers of workers did move left. To be sure this movement was not towards the revolutionary left, but towards the Bennite left.

The Bennites were promising the working class that "never again" would "their" government act as Callaghan did in the 1970s. Benn was addressing massive meetings of workers all over the country. The movement in support of him became a powerful force inside the Labour Party, to the point of coming within a whisker of defeating Healy for the position of deputy leader in 1981.

This was of course a reformist movement. But it offered a very good opportunity for revolutionaries. The illusions of militant workers in left reformism could be put to a sharp test through a revolutionary intervention into the Bennite movement. A political struggle occupied the attention of thousands of worker militants. The SWP turned their back on it. They elevated their refusal to enter the Labour Party into a principle and effectively abstained from attempting to win workers away from left reformism.

They had defined politics narrowly as the politics of the workplace. When the centre of gravity shifted to the Labour Party they had nothing to say. And throughout the 1980s this abstentionism was their hallmark. They were afraid to compromise their "hard" politics for the simple reason that those politics were abstract and had no relevance to the central political struggle taking place.

Moreover, like all abstract and inoperable "hard" politics, they were no protection from the effects of opportunism. They were not operable against opportunism. Underlying the SWP's abstentionism was

their fear of losing people to the Bennite movement.

This did not stop them proposing unity with *Militant*, despite the fact that *Militant* espouse the peaceful road to socialism via the Labour Party. But then like so much of the SWP's practice this manoeuvre, devoid of political principle, was merely a means of stemming their losses.

All of these deficiencies remain in evidence despite the SWP's new perspective of a new mood in the class struggle. One single example demonstrates this clearly—the Poll Tax. Here we have a generalised attack on the whole working class. It requires a general, political answer. The SWP themselves believe that it holds the possibility of being the means to drive Thatcher from office. Even leaving aside their previous hostility to non-payment—which kept them on the sidelines in the first phase of the campaign—their answers are just as inadequate in this "new mood" struggle.Nowhere do we find the SWP arguing now for strike action against the tax itself by the working class. Nowhere do we find them advancing the call for a general strike. Nowhere do we find them arguing for workers' defence squads against the bailiffs.

Instead, despite the new situation, we get the same old solutions. All we need to do is wage a militant trade union struggle. The Poll Tax, *Socialist Worker* informs us, is not really anything different from other economic attacks:

"The government's assault on our living standards through the Poll Tax, welfare cuts and rent and mortgage rise is no different from the employers' attacks on wages, conditions and jobs."

This downplays precisely the generalised and political attack represented by the Poll Tax. It is a crude attempt to reduce this attack to the level of a wage dispute with a single boss. Far from enabling us to make the links between workers in struggle over pay, or Poll Tax workers in struggle over pay and conditions, with the mass of non-payers and trade unionists in general, it makes the job much harder.

For if economic demands are met, even though only partially, a sectional struggle will end. If Poll Tax workers on strike are given better pay and conditions they will go back to work and the tax itself will still be in place. The same goes for sectional wages' struggles by other workers.

The SWP are running away from the task of politically arming rank and file workers with the weapons—the demands, the action and the organisation, especially delegate based action councils in every area to link the struggles and fight the tax on a class wide basis—necessary to defeat the Tories. And this is excused by the SWP by their ravings about Thatcher ruining herself and getting into problems from which she cannot extricate herself from.

The Poll Tax positions of the SWP are merely the latest attempt to turn a political struggle into a bread and butter issue that the SWP feels at home with. But whether we are facing wage struggles, resistance to sackings or the imposition of a hated tax, political struggles do not begin only at the ultimate limit of the bread and butter struggle.

They begin with revolutionaries transforming those struggles—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 working class power.■

SWP AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Economism versus feminism?

OVER THE past few years the SWP leaders have been arguing over whether working class men benefit from women's oppression. The answer seems fairly straight forward. Yes. They have higher wages than women, are more unionised, have more valued skills, they don't have to do much housework, and don't face problems of sexual harassment and assault.

Indeed, one of the leading contributors to the debate, Lindsey German, points out: 'The appeal of the argument that men benefit from women's oppression is a real one, and highly understandable. It appears to reflect reality.'

Yet she, along with Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and in the background Tony Cliff, argue that to hold to such a view is non-Marxist, automatically leading to theories of patriarchy and separatism. Waging a battle on this powerful group is John Molyneux, arguing that it would be absurd to deny the benefits male workers receive.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE

An important aspect of the economism that char-

acterises the politics of the SWP is the tendency to deny the existence of privilege within the working class itself. While the SWP acknowledges the existence of oppression, it fails to fully understand the consequences of this within the working class.

In the early 1980s a sharp debate took place within the SWP. In the previous period the SWP had organised amongst women with a special paper *Women's Voice* and had organised *Women's Voice* groups. This was in response to the pressure from the Women's Liberation Movement in the mid 1970s. Subject to this continuing pressure, *Women's Voice* (WV) became a vehicle for bringing feminist theories and practice into the SWP.

A revolutionary leadership, committed to a thoroughly Marxist programme should have fought to turn this situation round, making WV a vehicle for taking revolutionary ideas to working class women and combating feminism. There were enormous possibilities in that period for building a militant working class women's movement, with revolutionaries in the leadership. But instead, the SWP leadership fought to shut down *Women's Voice*.

Cliff, who had led the attack, convinced the majority of the leadership that separate organisations for women were dangerous, but doubts remained. The subsequent debate focused on trying to find a theoretical justification for the SWP's about turn on the question of work amongst women. In particular, they sought to deny that male workers benefited in any way from the existence of women's oppression.

First came an article by Lindsay German "Theories of Patriarchy" in 1981 (ISJ 2,12). German correctly argued against the feminist idea that men are the cause of women's oppression. But she went further:

"I would argue ... that not only do men not benefit from women's work in the family (rather the capitalist system as a whole benefits) but also that it is not true that men and capital are conspiring to stop women having access to economic production."

Of course part of this is true. There is no "conspiracy" by all men, ranged alongside the capitalists in a class war against women. But what about the attempts by generations of craft workers to exclude women from the workforce to "protect" their trades? This needs a proper analysis and understanding rather than simple denial.

Similarly in trying to show that working class men do not have any real interest in perpetuating women's oppression, German ends up denying the inequalities that exist between men and women in the family.

JUST AN HOUR OR TWO A DAY?

To bolster the SWP leadership's arguments Chris Harman repeated German's position in an article in 1984. He outlines a general understanding of women's oppression, within which he once again tackles the problem of the role of male workers. He does it in the form of answers to an imagined opponent against the Marxist position—that 'working class men are involved in maintaining the oppression of women and benefit from it, so they can't be involved in the struggle to end it'. Against this Harman states:

'In fact, however, the benefits working class men get from the oppression of women are marginal indeed. They do not benefit from the low pay women get—this only serves to exert a downward pressure on their own pay...The benefits really come down to the question of housework. The question becomes the extent to which working class men benefit from women's unpaid labour.'

Harman goes on to try and measure the benefits men receive from housework:

'It is the amount of labour he would have to exert if he had to clean and cook for himself. This could not be more than an hour or two a day, a burden for the woman who has to do this work for two people after a day's paid labour, but not a huge gain for the male worker.'

In this argument he says he is excluding the labour involved in bringing up children, an invalid, formal division since for most women housework is done for the whole family, whether there are children around, older relatives or anyone else she is expected to care for. But even if we take Harman's category of a couple with no dependents, the idea that 'an hour or two a day' less work for the man is not much of a gain is patently absurd. How many workers would accept one to two hours on their working day without a struggle? The fight for the eight hour day has been one of the working class's most determined battles, and now Harman happily adds two hours onto this for women when they get home, saying it makes little difference!

Harman lapses into idealism in assessing the relative importance of the marginal gain that he concedes men do get as a result of women's oppression. He argues:

'...It cannot be said that the working class man has any stake in the oppression of women. Whatever advantages he might have within the present set-up compared with his wife, they are nothing to what he would gain if the set up was revolutionised.'

Socialism will be better for all of us. But the whole point is that outside of the context of major class battles that place class wide struggle and socialism on the agenda, advantages gained within the status quo by sections of the working class are very important to people. If the prospect for the dramatic change referred to by Harman seems a dim and distant one, with closures and unemployment the more immediate prospect then, hanging on to existing benefits becomes a real motivating force for many working class men.

becomes real and immediate—and here the building of a mass revolutionary communist party is decisive—can the defence of sectional, or in this case sexual, advantages be really transcended and replaced by the fight for the historic, common interests of working class men and women.

MEN OPPRESSING WOMEN

It was this particular aspect of Harman's article that drew fire from John Molyneux. He wrote:

'The problem with the Harman/Cliff/German position is that in minimising or denying the material roots of the sexual division in the working class it underestimates the obstacle to achieving class unity and therefore underestimates the conscious intervention required by the revolutionary party to overcome that obstacle.'

Molyneux himself puts forward a position which recognises the benefits male workers gain from women's oppression. He points to this as the material root of the strength of sexism within the class. Hence it is necessary for the revolutionary party to take special measures to counter this pressure. But from saying this Molyneux slips into arguing that men oppress women within the family.

The fault with Molyneux's position (despite it being much more sophisticated than that of his opponents) is that he does embrace tenets of feminist theory. He bases his argument exclusively on the relationship between men and women in the family. He fails to take the relationship of social forces as his first premise. Materialists must start from an understanding of oppression within the context of the dominant determining features of society, namely class antagonisms. All oppression is subordinate to, though stemming from, this fundamental contradiction in class society. The family is an integral part of capitalist society, but it is impossible to understand its role and the relationship of individuals within it if you do not start from its function for capitalism. Molyneux starts, not from the role of the family, but from the unequal division of labour within it. He asks how this is maintained:

'To a considerable extent of course it is maintained directly by the system through its socialisation of women into the housewife role, and, even more importantly, through its payment of higher wages to male workers...But it is also maintained by the system through male workers who refuse to do an equal share of the housework or, worse, insist that their wives do all of it.'

By simply looking at the family Molyneux cannot see that the key is not really who does what housework, but the actual existence of a privatised sphere of domestic labour. He concludes that men are actually the oppressors within the working class family. His paraphrase of Engels' analogy that 'within the working class family he (the male worker) is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat' does not save him from lapsing into feminism. The key question is what social conditions give rise to this oppressive relationship and how can they be overcome. For Engels, the systematic exclusion of women from social production was decisive in explaining why women were oppressed, not the division of labour within the family itself. This was in fact the result of capitalism's exculsion of women from the factories.

Women have to lose their chains to the household if they are to aquire the strength and solidarity to be fully liberated. Marx and Engels recognised this:

'We can already see...that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labour. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.'

THE THEORETICAL QUESTIONS ANSWERED

To understand the role working class men do play in the oppression of women it is necessary to look at the material roots of that oppression. It is wrong to look at the division of labour within the home, with women doing more than men, and simply conclude that therefore men oppress women. In this instance Sheila McGregor is actually partially correct in her reply to Molyneux when she says: 'Women's oppression does not consist in an unequal division of labour in the home but in a division of labour between the point of production and the home.' But McGregor herself then proceeds to make the equal and opposite error of denying the important role that the unequal divisions within the family have on determining consciousness.

The oppression of working class women is rooted in the existence of the family as the place where people live, are fed and clothed, and children are brought up to become the next generation of workers. The whole process, the reproduction of labour power, actually results in workers, both the existing generation and the next one, being presented to the bosses ready for work. That special commodity, labour power, without which capitalism would perish, is produced not by a factory or in a socialised sphere of production, but in the private household of each family.

The role of women in this process is very specific. Women are the prime domestic workers who labour, unpaid, to bring up children, keep the house and care for any other dependent relatives. This occurs whether or not women have jobs outside the home. The primary role of the vast majority of working class women remains that of mother/wife. The centrality of this to capitalism is clear. Without the labour of these women in the home workers could be reared, fed and kept alive, but only at the cost of massive investment in the socialised places that would take the place of the family. Capitalism is incapable of completely socialising housework in this fashion even when women are needed to work in

the factories and offices.

The role women have in the family is the very basis of their oppression. It is not a matter of a technical 'division of labour' such as exists in the class generally between different trades, because it actually condemns women to a sphere of work which is isolated, where the work itself is tedious, the pressures of feeding and maintaining the family are enormous—in short as Lenin described it:

'...She continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.'

This work, not only tedious and unproductive in itself, also means that women are denied social contact with others of their class outside their immediate family. This is of central importance in preventing women from becoming organised, politically active and rebellious—they never have the solidarity and support of socialised production.

So McGregor is correct to say that the root of women's oppression lies in the distinct area of domestic labour in the family. Where she is wrong is that in concluding that since 'wives perform their duties on behalf of capital' she can reject the idea that working class men receive any benefit from that oppression. She argues that the division of labour is imposed on men and women, and that neither can escape their respective roles under capitalism. She notes that this division is reflected in wage bargaining, yet appears to be saying there is nothing that can be done about this under capitalism. The problem with her approach is that in trying to show that this is a class not a gender issue, McGregor ends up saying both sides suffer the same, thereby almost denying the fact that it is women, not men who are oppressed. This leads to a capitulation to the backward and conservative prejudices of men in the labour movement.

Working class men do benefit from the oppression of women, not because they are the cause of women's oppression, or that they are in some sort of unholy alliance with the bourgeoisie to keep women downtrodden, but by the very fact that they themselves are not specially oppressed as a result of their gender. The institution of the family is of greater material benefit to them than it is to women. This simple fact of life has enormous implications for the class and its consciousness both as individuals and collectively. Working class organisations are not automatically or spontaneously opposed to women's oppression, just as in fact they are not spontaneously socialist, contrary to the economist views of the SWP which see socialist consciousness stemming purely from struggle and not from the fight for communist leadership.

The struggle of revolutionaries is to win the class to a conscious opposition to women's oppression, which we know to be in the overall interests of the class, will be precisely that. A struggle. There are many examples of the problems women have had in attempting to get their own struggles taken seriously by the labour movement. Recent examples such as the Greenwich women and the Trim strikers only add to the list. The resistance men have is certainly partially based on their own position, whereby they fear loss of wages if women are brought into their jobs, and fear lack of a stable family or not having their tea on the table when they get in from work. When this happens—for example men opposing their wives' involvement in the miners' wives movement, something that was, unfortunately, common—then it must be fought.

OPPRESSION AND SECTIONALISM

Understanding the roots of women's oppression in the family provides the clearest answer to the problem being debated. Do working class men benefit from women's oppression? The question must be answered dialectically, something neither side in the SWP debate manage. When looked at in terms of the relationship between social forces, classes, as historical materialism must, then clearly the answer is no. Oppression weakens and divides the class. It creates an obstacle to the unity of the workers against the common class enemy. Women's oppression and the existence of the family also deny the working class, men, women and particularly youth, many rights and freedoms. It imprisons them in relationships and commitments which are often unhappy and oppressive.

But this answer is not enough. Oppression serves to divide and weaken the class precisely because it does create different interests between groups. The clearest examples are perhaps of oppressed nations, where imperialist powers plunder the land, the natural resources and the labour power of the indigenous people. The super-exploitation of workers in imperialised countries undoubtedly weakens the world working class and drives up the overall level of exploitation. But more than that, the acceptance by sections of the working classes in the oppressor nations that 'their' country is doing the right thing, weakens the world proletariat even more, as Marx explained with regard to British workers over the question of Ireland. But the reason why British workers fail to challenge the imperialist banditry of their rulers is not just based on excellent bourgeois propaganda, powerful as that may be. Relative to the workers in the oppressed nations, the workers in the imperialist country are better off. Indeed the superprofits from imperialism are in part used to grant improved living conditions to the working class of the 'home' country in order to try and maintain social peace. This is the material basis of the labour aristocracy.

The SWP's economism means for them that any and every economic struggle can—from within itself—generate [illegible]. The sectional and social divisions in the working class are down played. Yet, [illegible] that many struggles

are conducted on a sectional, not a class-wide basis. Divisions in the class, between men and women, skilled and unskilled, black and white, cannot be wished away or overcome by exhortation. The SWP have no scientific understanding of these divisions. This was clear in Cliff's analysis of the labour aristocracy quoted approvingly by John Molyneux to back up his case. Cliff basically attacks Lenin for suggesting that imperialist capitalism divided the working class, by bribery, into an aristocracy and a mass, and that the aristocracy was the social base of reformism and the bureaucracy. Not so, says Cliff.

Capitalist prosperity allows the whole working class to gain and is thus the root of reformism; capitalist crisis sounds its death knell. This jimcrack 'Marxism' led Cliff to declare that reformism was as good as dead in the early 1970's. Yet, like Lazarus, it rose from the dead and later ushered in the 'downturn'. Cliff's theory did not equip the SWP to understand reformism's 1974 triumph at the polls. For them, no labour aristocracy existed; therefore, in an economic crisis reformism would collapse, having no social base.

This theory in fact reflects the sectionalism that exists in the working class. It suggests that not only are workers' historical interests identical but so are their immediate interests; hence, ever more sectional struggles would eventually add up to revolution. This ignored the reality of differentials, demarcation disputes, racist strikes, opposition to women's strikes. All of these testified to the fact that as capitalism did go into crisis and as the leadership of the unions failed to defend the interests of their members on a class wide basis , the real existing divisions in the class did not always disappear.

Sometimes they sharpened. Certainly, the divisions in the class are more complex—and Lenin was well aware of this—than simply between an aristocracy and 'the masses', but that division does exist and does have a material basis.

Chris Harman, Sheila McGregor and Lindsey German deny that the working class can ever have contradictory interests. To accept that contradictions do actually exist within the working class leads to revolutionaries having to argue with certain sections of the class that they support others in struggle for the solidarity and strength it gives to the whole class. The SWP would find such political arguments hard. They prefer therefore to opt for an analysis which says all workers have identical immediate interests.

McGregor poses it most clearly when she takes up the analogy used by Molyneux about the relative privileges of protestant workers in Northern Ireland. Molyneux argues, correctly, that these material privileges, in terms of jobs, housing and pay, although nothing in comparison to the privileges of the ruling class, nevertheless have an important effect on the protestant workers. They form the material roots of Orangeism and of the powerful cross class alliance between these workers and their exploiters. Whilst it is certainly true that the oppression of the Catholics is not in the overall interests of the working class, to the Protestant workers it appears that the defence of their own jobs and privileges is of more immediate importance than the civil rights of other workers.

Against Molyneux, McGregor argues:

'If, however, you separate off the immediate from the long term interests of Protestant workers, as John does in his article, then you end up arguing not only that it is in the immediate interests of Protestant workers to preserve their privileges over Catholics, but that unity is not in the immediate interests of the Protestant working class and therefore that Protestant workers realising their revolutionary potential is not in their immediate interests.'

This is a shoddy piece of polemic. McGregor hopes to show that Molyneux is ditching revolutionary Marxism. Having pointed out to us already that revolution is already on the agenda, McGregor, using chop logic, believes she has disproved Molyneux' argument. Molyneux clearly uses the example of the Protestants to show why revolutionaries must understand conflicting sectional interests in order to try and consciously overcome them, not pander to them as, McGregor suggests.

McGregor uses the example of the Nottinghamshire scabs to try and show how false it is to believe that one section of the class can have different interests. In an amazing feat of logic she points out:

'The majority of miners in Nottinghamshire thought it was in their immediate interest not to join the national miners strike but scab instead. Do we therefore postulate that their deeply held backward views somehow coincided with their immediate interests? Is it true they got 52 wage packets striking miners did not receive, so did they immediately benefit from working? Does that mean it was in their immediate interests to scab?'

Yes! That in fact would be a good definition of scab: someone who puts their own immediate, short term gain before that of the class or his or her workmates. But you cannot deny that they did get 52 wage packets and a better wage deal as a result of scabbing. Of course revolutionaries must point out that in fact the Notts scabs have severely damaged their own interests by their actions. Their 52 wage packets will seem little compensation when their pits are closed, when management impose stricter working conditions and pay restraint. They are left weakened by having lost their collective strength as trade unionists, committed as they are now to company unionism and class collaboration. It was on this basis that militants had to argue against the scabs, not just on money or immediate gain. In fact the whole basis of that Great Strike was the class conscious understanding of 'us now, you next'. Arguing these points with any section of workers can be difficult, especially in conditions where so few struggles are victorious. The SWP with its method of tailing the most advanced militants rather than offering revolutionary leadership, are left unable to argue for anything other than consolation to work

ers that little or nothing can be done, however, because of the 'downturn'. When that is over we can get back to good old basic (sectional) trade unionism.

The examples of the Nottinghamshire scabs and the Protestant workers in Ireland points to another important factor in the argument. The bourgeoisie are well aware of the sectional divisions within the class. They consciously exploit these. They like nothing more than to see workers in pitched battle with each other. They are prepared to fund and fuel these divisions, hence the payment of scabs during strikes even when they are unable to actually produce anything because no-one else is at work. By offering higher wages to certain sections, and by encouraging prejudices they hope to weaken the class.

WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND WORKING CLASS MEN

To return to the original debate, the position of working class men is similar to other sections of the class with particular benefits or advantages. Working class men do not cause the oppression of women, either generally or in their own families and relationships. However, they certainly do perpetuate that oppression, all too often in brutal ways. When men deny their wives rights to go out, to decide when to have kids, when to go to work, they are oppressing them. But similarly, when mothers deny their daughters rights to go out, wear what they want, do what they want, they too are perpetuating oppression.

But this is not way really the point. Relations between individuals are not of the same scale in determining roots and causes of oppression as class antagonisms. It would be false to conclude that since women often oppress their daughters that they are therefore the oppressors or that they have any real interest in maintaining that oppression. But what has to be understood is that the existence of the family, the ties that women, men and children have to it in terms of the necessary functions it performs (which capitalism fails to provide in any other way), affect behaviour and consciousness.

Perhaps the best way to explain the difference between working class women and men is to understand that they are not social equals. And if a man enjoys greater opportunities relative to a woman then clearly he has certain benefits over a woman and these benefits are sanctified by an edifice of sexist ideology. Far from this edifice crumbling as a result of common struggle alone, as Harman, McGregor and German assert, the Bolsheviks—in the shape of Trotsky—had a different view. After the conquest of state power Trotsky argued that social inequality still existed and found its reflection in the oppressive relations that prevailed in the family. His standpoint is a million miles from that of German et al:

'But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more arduous problem. All our domestic habits must be revolutionised before that can happen. And yet it is quite obvious that unless there is actual equality of husband and wife in the family, in the normal sense as well as in the conditions of life, we cannot speak seriously of their equality in social work or even in politics. As long as the woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme.'

A rather different perspective on the one or two hours Harman so complacently writes of. The real world of household drudgery that millions of working class women endure every day is seemingly a mere trifle to him. Real communists recognise the weight of these chains and fight to smash them.

Ideas do not fall from the sky. Peoples' consciousness is based on material conditions, which themselves are extremely complex. Bourgeois ideology is very important, but does not in itself explain why, for example men are sexist to the extent that they are. Such sexism is based at least in part on the fact that men would prefer to keep their dominant position which has led to certain apparent advantages. Of course women themselves are often the most vigorous defenders of the family and in many societies, the church. They defend those things which most reinforce their own oppression. It is clear that women are often backward in their ideas due to their isolation in the home and their lack of contact with other workers.

However, it is also true that it is women (a militant minority of women) who understand and struggle against their oppression. This is where the difference between the sexism of men and the 'sexism' of women lies. It is women workers, not male workers, who will lead the struggle against that oppression, and most rapidly ditch their prejudiced ideas. For men it will always be more of a struggle because it challenges so much and yet does not appear to immediately benefit them, not that is until they fully understand the liberatory potential of women's emancipation and its inseparable links with the achievement of proletarian power.

When it comes down to the question of how revolutionaries relate to women workers the purposes of the debate in the SWP becomes apparent. If male workers gain nothing but actually suffer as a result of women's oppression, then it should be no problem to convince them of the need to support women's liberation. This is the argument of Harman/McGregor/German who say that in periods of struggle, like the miners' strike, the Russian Revolution and other examples, it becomes apparent to all that women's oppression weakens them and it is thus in the interests of all workers to fight it. McGregor points out that: 'The role of miners' wives during the strike is, in fact, a powerful illustration of the fact that it is in the immediate interests of working class men for women to fight their oppression and for men to support them in doing so.'

This is in fact a gross oversimplification of what happened. In the first place, the women were struggling in support of the men, not against their own

oppression. As the strike developed a small (but very militant and prominent!) minority of miners wives broke out of the confinement to soup kitchens and welfare, and began going out to pickets, to speak to other workers and build solidarity. These women necessarily came into conflict with their own and their husbands' ideas about 'women's roles'. And it was often not easy. Many women would tell of the problems they had getting the men to agree to stay at home and look after the children whilst the women went out to picket. Obviously as a result of these battles the consciousness of many miners and their wives changed. But it was by no means automatic. The fact that the wives' organisation was denied associate membership status of the NUM soon after the strike shows the remaining prejudice of many of the men, not just to women, but to the militancy they represented.

Attitudes do change in the course of struggles, and this is why revolutionaries can be confident of winning millions of workers away from their prejudices in such situations. But it requires the conscious intervention of revolutionaries and class fighters to achieve this. The Russian Revolution—the other example used to show how anti-sexist the class is—demonstrates the potential. But the battles which women, in the Bolshevik Party as well as outside, waged in order to get their interests taken seriously, deserve study. The Bolsheviks were not themselves perfect; it took Kollontai, Inessa Armand, Nikolaeva and others to pressure them into setting up Women's Departments.

A communist conclusion to this debate would understand that women themselves are central to the struggle against their own oppression. Not all women are, however, because this is not primarily a sex question; but working class women, who have most to gain in overcoming oppression and exploitation, and from liberation and working class power. Recognising the central part women will play in their own liberation is not a concession to feminism as the SWP old guard would say:

'We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves.'

And what rabid feminist said that? Lenin, in a speech to a conference of non-party women in September 1919. What Lenin also said which contradicts the SWP line of being opposed to special forms of work and organisation for women inside the party and outside, was:

'The Party must have organs—working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called—with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among women...We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organisation. This is not bourgeois 'feminism', it is a practical revolutionary expediency.'

The members of the SWP who are confused by the debate over benefits would perhaps do better to spend their time studying the real history of revolutionary parties and their work on women. Cliff's distorted histories of Zetkin and Kollontai, followed by these shrouded excuses for a failure to take the woman question seriously, will teach them little of value. Study of the Bolsheviks, and of the German Socialist Women's Movement under Zetkin will be far more use.

Then perhaps the SWP would have more to offer the heroic miners' wives at the end of the strike than the patronising—"well join the SWP if you want to remain active". Women from the mining communities, just like other working class women who are thrown into militant struggle need to organise themselves, build a mass working class women's movement, fight not for feminism but for class unity including their own demands as women.

Within such a movement communists will fight for their own programme and their own leadership. Such a mass movement is not counterposed to the party, but an arena within which it can fight and grow. The SWP refuse to sanction or build such a movement. They fear too much their own weakness They cannot stand the possibility of contamination with feminism again. So rather than fight such ideas in practice, they retreat into their journals to conduct their debates in private.

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SWP AND THE UNIONS

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? But **Colin Lloyd** *argues that in fact the SWP has a thoroughly syndicalist notion of the rank and file movement and the struggle for union democracy.*

THE SWP is certainly not a classically anarcho-syndicalist formation. 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? The classic anarcho-syndicalists denied 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 De Leonite 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.

In essence 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 SWP looks to the de-centralising syndicalist idea of a system of democratic checks over leaders.

In the (unpublished) International Socialists' (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).

Communist 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 united 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 foreigness of this tradition to them.

TAILING THE STRUGGLES OF THE CLASS

In 1966 the IS 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 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' meticulous 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 the fragmentation of their struggles and the 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." (op cit, p126)

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 consciousness 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 tradition of reformism from above" (ibid, p135) 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 tasks of socialists are to do what we can to unify the working class and to encourage the movement from below." (ibid, p135)

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 the 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 blithely continued to 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" (p232). 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 or 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 Union, consequent to their capture of a number of unions, IS in 1974 decided to launch a National Rank and File Movement (NRFM).

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 two in sequence. The rank and fileists 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.

In the Callinicos article referred to earlier, the author described 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 Carworker, Collier, Platform, NUT Rank and File etc—in March 1974 downgraded any discussion of the political situation facing the working class under. Resolutions put forward by the Workers Fight group on racism 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 of 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)

The 1974 conference gave birth to the NRFM. It was as "united front" controlled by supposed revolutionaries who were boycotting their own politics within it and supressing anybody else's. They simply joined in with the militants at the conference in relating particular experiences from their workplace. The meeting was more of a rally than a working conference to discuss 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 in relation to 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 Socialist Review 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, 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 between the workers and the bosses, to mediate, negotiate agreements between them, and 'keep the peace' between the classes.

"But the trade-union and the 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 issue of reforms is in capitalist prosperity." (ibid, p115-4, emphasis in 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, p117)

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 class", 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 affect 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 bourgeoisie 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, since 1979—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 communists' concentration on the mass of the proletariat, our concern for the interests of the class as a whole. This includes relating to 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.

For Alex Callinicos the bureaucracy 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 bureaucratism:

"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" (ISJ 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 other 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, but 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 thank, and more importantly will not choose, "advisers" 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". So 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 movement the IS eschew 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 millenium notwithstanding.

They could not connect these fine words with the 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 usless in equipping militants to fight Jones (TGWU) and Scanlon (AUEW) 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 NFRM 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 we 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 relaunching the NRFM. However, the daily bulletin produced by the SWP in the name of a mythical firefighter's rank and file group repeated all the errors of the early 1970s. More and more militancy, bigger and bigger pickets were 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 Jeffreys. 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 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 Jeffreys 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 AND FILE

This disappearing act was for a time officially unacknowledged. It even went into partial reverse during the 1980 steel strike when the SWP relaunched their bulletin Real Steel News (RSN). 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 strike.

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 redundancy as well as the general political arguments" (our emphasis).

After the strike has 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 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 bride into a series of routes out of the party. According to Cliff:

"Instead of recruiting people from rank and file groups into the party, the 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. 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 (1972-74) 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 it's on a big scale (upturn), sometimes it's 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 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, Socialist Review, June 1983)

Cliff and the SWP turned away from the real problems posed by the bosses' offensive. Like it or not, that offensive raised big, that is national, political issues like privatisation, union rights, the welfare state, war and peace—which class shall rule. To concentrate only on "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.

In the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-85 the same tailing of the existing leadership of the left bureaucracy was revealed. In their publications the SWP certainly criticised the bureaucrats—including lefts like Scargill—and posed as the defenders of the interest of the rank and file miners. They argued that picketing should have been in their hands.

But they had no perspective or programme for transforming the unions and breaking the grip of the bureaucracy. They warned militants not to trust the officials but advanced no programme by which the NUM rank and file could have organised to transform the NUM during the dispute.

But the miners' strike unleashed the energy of thousands of new militants. In the Midlands it led to

the formation of a determined, militant, organised minority. This was the stuff of which a rank and file movement could have been built. Tony Cliff once stumbled into the potential of the militant minority when he said:

"The key problem in Nottinghamshire is how to mobilise the minority of miners, the 7,000 who voted for a strike. If they had been organised from the beginning and had picketed their own pits then the police operation would have been paralysed." (SW, 14.4.84)

But Cliff had no answer to his own problem. The effect of raising no call for a rank and file movement was to offer no alternative to Scargill that militants could actually fight for. All the SWP could say was:

"There is only one way rank and file activists can protect themselves from this danger [Scargill's weakness]. It is by making sure that as much of the strike as possible is organised from below, by strike committees in each pit, and with co-ordinating committees between pits to organise the picketing." (SW, 7.4.84)

The SWP's only answer was for the rank and file to somehow by-pass the weakness or treachery of the union officials. They offered no way of putting the leaders to the test and, behind their hot anti-bureaucratic talk, they let the left leaders off the hook. In the Health dispute of 1988 we were to see the same thing happen again.

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 condemning it to sectarian irrelevance.

We believe that, despite the defeats that have been suffered by the working class during the 1980s, the building of a rank and file movement is a necessary 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 1970's to be duped by Jones, Scanlon and the Labour Government. In the 1980's, their "low key approach" left the militants at the mercy of Evans, Duffy, Kinnock and Scargill.

In the 1990s we must seize the opportunity of new struggles to forge a revolutionary communist vanguard in the trade unions. If the SWP comrades want to be part of this then they will need to turn their back decisively on their syndicalist past and present.✪

1984 AND 1992

Revolutionaries and the general strike

In 1984, in the midst of the greatest strike in Britain since 1926, the SWP refused to raise the call for a general strike. Eight years on the call suddenly appeared in the pages of Socialist Worker. This article, from ***October 1992****, examines why.*

THE WAVE of anger that greeted the announcement of the pit closure programme led the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to demand the TUC call a general strike.

Through petitions, lobbies, placards and resolutions the SWP, the largest organisation on the British left, have placed themselves to the fore in agitating for the general strike. Workers Power welcomes this development and we hope that joint work between our organisations can bring the practical realisation of a slogan we both agree on a step closer.

To achieve this, however, the serious weaknesses in the SWP's application of the call for a general strike need to be recognised. In the first place, the SWP have offered little in the way of a strategy to actually get a general strike. Their call doesn't go beyond a demand upon the TUC. In itself this is

correct. But it is not enough.

In a major article in the SWP's theoretical journal, International Socialism, Tony Cliff explains that the last time the TUC called a general strike, in 1972 to free the striking dockers in Pentonville prison, it was against the background of intensive militancy and widespread rank and file action. The TUC's call was a deliberate attempt to contain and head off this militancy.

Today we do not have such an outbreak of militant action. The mood of anger is undeniably great. But unless it is matched by action the 250,000 signatories of the SWP's petition calling for a general strike will count for nothing. Indeed, one of our own supporters found that virtually everyone in his workplace would sign the petition. But when he put a motion calling for a strike in support of the Tories on 21 October, he couldn't get a seconder.

This shows the danger of the SWP's belief that the current mood of generalised hostility to the miners will be sufficient pressure to push the TUC into action. It also shows that work has to be done to build action and organisation in the workplaces that can prevent the TUC bureaucratically strangling a general strike wave.

Yet the SWP are not seriously addressing this problem. They are not consistently building for the sort of action that can get a general strike. In a resolution put by the SWP-controlled NALGO Broad Left, for example, the only demand they raise, in addition to the call on the TUC for a general strike, is for support to be given to demonstrations and protests by other sections of workers under attack. There is no mention of the need to build strikes. No perspective for linking the various NALGO strikes across the country to other sections in struggle is contained in the resolution.

In the special edition of Socialist Worker, the same failure to map out a strategy of building strike action now amongst the rank and file is evident. Workers are told:

"Demonstrate on Wednesday. Get everyone you know to show their support for the miners. Join the protests called by the TUC next Sunday. But on top of that insist the union leaders take up the call for a general strike."

You can insist all you like, but unless your insistence assumes the threatening form of strike action the union leaders will remain deaf to your petitions and resolutions.

By keeping their call for the general strike as a demand on the TUC not linked to building rank and file action between workers who are actually under attack in the here and now, the SWP are guilty of indulging in abstract propaganda. They are calling for a general strike they will not get, in order to appear as the militant wing of the mass movement that has erupted. That way they hope to grow. But they are not taking the actual fight to get a general strike forward, nor are they preparing the rank and file to defeat the TUC traitors.

Worse, the SWP are against organising the sort of rank and file bodies that are necessary to fight for a general strike and run such a strike. If the rank and file are to use the current situation to get a general strike they need to unite their struggles. The best way of doing this is through councils of action: councils that bring together workers in struggle and enable them to coordinate their action. Such councils will be vital to running every aspect of a general strike if we get one. The whole history of the British General Strike in 1926 shows this clearly.

Through such councils of action we will be able to organise the working class to run society through the experience of running a general strike—organising the distribution of supplies, administering communications, etc. Alongside such councils we will build the military power of the working class through workers' defence corps to defend pickets, resist police attack etc. The general strike requires such organisations.

Yet everywhere the SWP opposes the setting up of such bodies. When Workers Power proposed such organisations, in a health workers' rank and file conference and in the Leicester labour trades council, for example, the SWP voted against us. This is not only wrong, it is in flat contradiction to what the SWP said back in January 1985.

Then, in an article in Socialist Worker Review an SWP leader, Chris Harman explained:

"And once the point is reached where the slogan of the general strike is correct, you have to be ready to supplement it with other slogans that begin to cope with the question of power—demands about how the strike is organised (strike committees, workers' councils), with how the strike defends itself (flying pickets, mass pickets, workers' defence guards) and with how it takes the offensive against the state (organising within the army and the police)."

Not only are the SWP not raising these demands that Harman claims are essential, they are voting against us when we raise them. This reinforces our view that for the SWP the general strike call is really just a piece of propaganda designed to make themselves sound militant.

After all, the SWP have a poor record of fighting for the general strike at previous points in the British class struggle in the past. In 1972 they refused to call for a general strike around the Pentonville dockers until after the TUC itself called for one. Worse still, in 1984/85, when the miners' strike posed both the need and possibility for a general strike, the SWP vigorously opposed the fight to get one.

Their argument then was that the slogan "does not fit at the moment because of the way the Labour Party leadership and the TUC general council have sabotaged the movement in solidarity with the miners". (Harman, in Socialist Worker Review, quoted above). Yet today, despite the fact that there is no miners' strike, no solidarity action, and a TUC and Labour Party leadership vigorously committed to sabotage, the SWP say a general strike does fit!

In reality, in both cases, the slogan "fitted" be-

cause the issues at stake superseded sectional struggles and posed general questions. In both cases the objective situation posed the need for a general strike. The Tories in 1984 knew they had to break the miners so as to be able to carry out a series of attacks on other sections of workers, prove that their anti-union laws could stick and "break trade union power" in Britain.

The general strike was as necessary then as it is now. But fighting for the general strike meant fighting to break the sectionalism that prevented solidarity being delivered to the miners.

It meant fighting to win support for the struggle despite the divisions in the miners' own ranks that led to the creation of the scab UDM. It meant fighting to forge real links between the miners and the dockers, who struck twice and who were twice betrayed by the leaders of the TGWU.

In the face of all of these difficulties the SWP capitulated. The "mood" wasn't there, they said. It was easier to "support" the miners through collections and raffles than to win action from other workers in solidarity with them. So the SWP took the soft option and in the crucial months of the strike counterposed collecting money and food to fighting for a general strike.

Today, the SWP believe that despite the absence of actual action, the "mood" is there for a general strike. As Socialist Worker puts it:

"No one can remember a wave of anger like the present one. No one can remember a time when a general strike was not just necessary to defeat a government, but when the mood of vast numbers of people was so in favour of one."

The SWP often remind people that "the party is the memory of the class". Clearly the SWP is not that party, for it has a very short memory.

Thousands of miners can remember when a general strike was necessary. Thousands of miners can remember the mood in every striking pit village and amongst thousands of dockers in favour of a general strike in July 1984. True the mood of sympathy wasn't as widespread. But the necessity for the strike was there and there was an immediate focus for realising it because two key sections of workers were actually out on strike.

The SWP forget this because they are not a serious revolutionary party. They are revolutionary in word only. They tailor their politics to fit what they perceive to be the "mood" of the masses. If the mood is angry, let's call a general strike so that we are the left wing expression of that mood. If the mood is more sombre then let's forget what is necessary and argue against the general strike.

This is not revolutionary politics. It is crude "tailism". To determine their slogans the SWP leaders lick their forefingers and hold them up to the wind. They do not make a revolutionary assessment of what the working class needs. And this is not just an academic argument. If the SWP, the biggest left organisation in Britain, had thrown its weight behind the general strike agitation, instead of throwing its weight against it, perhaps the slogan would have taken off. Perhaps the miners' strike would have sparked a general strike and the defeat could have been avoided.

IRISH PEACE TALKS

Give peace a chance?

The war in Northern Ireland has always been the acid test for British revolutionary socialists. Faced with the prospect of an imperialist sponsored peae deal, the SWP has once again failed that test

THE PEACE being prepared in the talks between Major and Albert Reynolds, as well as those between John Hume and Gerry Adams, is a reactionary settlement. It is the latest in a long line of capitulations by armed middle class nationalist movements, where a place at the bosses' negotiating table is exchanged for a ceasefire in an armed struggle that seems to be going nowhere.

The one "concession" British imperialism has made to the Republican movement—the denial of any "economic or strategic interest in Northern Ireland"—does not mean that Britain has any intention of quitting Ireland. It merely shovels the whole responsibility for legitimising Britain's presence onto the will of the Protestant population to maintain the union.

It is the duty of revolutionary socialists, both in Britain and Ireland, to warn those with any illusions in the proposed peace deal, especially the war-weary working class of Northern Ireland, that no good can come of it. It will maintain imperialist domination of Northern Ireland. It will cement the privileges of the Protestants, with the added bonus of the Republican leadership playing the role of a Mandela or an Arafat in selling the surrender to the masses.

Britain's two main left organisations, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Militant Labour, have failed in this duty.

On 6 November Socialist Worker castigated John Major for not responding positively to the Hume-Adams' peace initiative. Attacking Major because he had "snubbed the one real chance of peace", it suggested:

"The one thing Major could do is immediately meet representatives of all sides."

PROPOSALS

The Hume-Adams proposals, still not published, are clearly a formula worked out between the Republican leadership and the pro-imperialist SDLP for a face-saving ceasefire. Instead of focusing their fire on this, the SWP criticise Major for failing to take up Sinn Féin's offer of surrender!

When Major responded with his own formula, the Downing Street declaration, the SWP's tune changed slightly. The January issue of Socialist Review states:

"Socialists welcome the possibility of peace. But we remain sceptical about the [Downing Street] deal and critical of the Republican politics which have carried Gerry Adams down this road."

Why welcome the "possibility of peace" if that peace is going to mean outright defeat for a just struggle? In reality the SWP's scepticism about the deal is because of its inability to bring a ceasefire, not because it is a betrayal of the struggle for national self-determination:

"Of course [Major and Reynolds] would like the war in Ireland finished. It is an enormous drain on the resources of both governments. But neither will be distraught if Sinn Féin and the IRA reject the declaration. They hope such a rejection will cost Sinn Féin support. Then they will blame Gerry Adams for the war . . . This is clearly no recipe for peace. But it could help raise the standing of Major and Reynolds themselves."

Certainly the Republican leadership—which has placed all its hopes on "bombing Britain to the negotiating table"—faces the threat of renewed repression and loss of mass support. But the proposed talks are not just a cynical attempt by Major to expose the Sinn Féin leadership. They are a genuine attempt to stitch up a reactionary deal.

If socialists are to be consistent in their criticism of the politics which have brought Gerry Adams so close to this sell out, then they must draw the logical conclusion and demand the rejection of the deal offered by Major.

But the SWPcould not bring themselves to do this..

On the contrary, they regard any "peace" as the best possible condition for taking the fight for socialism forward. Even a peace deal dictated by British imperialism is preferable for the SWP.

In order to pose itself as the best fighter for "peace", the SWM, the SWP's sister organisation in Ireland, lumped the justified and progressive anti-unionist struggle in with the reactionary activities of the loyalist paramilitaries under the general heading of "sectarianism".

Its leaflet to the 3 November peace demo in Derry proclaimed:

"Today must be the start, though not the end, of a strike movement throughout the country against sectarianism, for peace . . . The loyalist campaign of sectarian murder and the IRA massacre on the Shankill Road have united most working class people in terror and grief."

This is rubbish. Far from uniting working class people, the upsurge in violence and the "concession" to the Republicans contained in the Downing Street statement have, if anything, hardened support for the loyalist paramilitaries amongst the Protestant working and urban middle classes.

Sceptical

If the SWP is "sceptical" about the Major-Reynolds' declaration, how does it see "peace" being achieved? SW tells us:

"Permanent peace can only come from a fight against [the Irish and British Tory governments] that unites Protestant and Catholic workers north and south of the border."

Workers' unity is a worthy goal, but socialists have the responsibility to ask on what basis this unity can be achieved if it is going to take the struggle of the working class forward rather than to lead it into another dead end.

Unity of workers, Protestant and Catholic, north and south, is vital to the success of the Irish revolution. But workers need to be united against not only economic oppression and attacks on the welfare state, but against the very existence of the sectarian northern state.

BORDER

It is the border and the British presence that maintains the relative privileges of the unionists of the North. It is Britain and the border that tie Protestant workers to the Orange bosses. The imperialist presence is what divides the working class, and the road to unity must come through a struggle against the sectarian state led by the working class.

The SWP's economism blinds them to this fact. Economism is a deviation from Marxism which suggests that the day to day economic struggle of the working class has the power on its own to generate revolutionary consciousness and to overcome all forms of oppression: racial, sexual and national. Socialist Review says:

"It is up to socialists to argue that Irish workers, whether Protestant or Catholic, whether living in the north or south, can expect nothing from Reynolds and Major. Together they can fight to create a new Ireland free from poverty, repression and discrimination."

True, but unless socialists also argue that the new Ireland will have to be united, will have to be created by throwing out British troops and smashing the Orange state, and by eliminating all the anti-Catholic discrimination in employment, housing etc, the much vaunted "workers' unity" will disintegrate every time the national question is posed.

In 1990 SWM leader Kieran Allen wrote:

"The type of unity built by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has depended on ignoring the reality of discrimination . . . it has never targeted the British

army and the RUC as the source of the violence. As a result, this 'unity of the working class' amounts to nothing when sectarian tensions rise."

But now Socialist Review tells us:

"A working class fightback against low pay, unemployment and hospital closures could be a major start in breaking down sectarianism."

What will happen when "sectarian tensions rise"? The SWP has to pin all its hopes on the imperialist peace deal in the vain hope that "peace" will mean an end to sectarian tensions.

Far from seeing the Irish national question as a key component of the class struggle, the SWP sees it as a diversion from that struggle. Because of their economism they have no strategy for resolving it. They wish that this decisive political question would quietly disappear, letting workers get on with the task of fighting Major and Reynolds on wages and jobs.

This is why we find Socialist Worker "welcoming" not only the prospect of peace but the reactionary peace process itself.

Amid this vague, confused and, at root, opportunist reaction to the peace talks, what has happened to the SWP's much vaunted anti-imperialist position on the Irish war?

Every week in Socialist Worker's "Where we Stand" column they tell us that they "support all genuine national liberation struggles".

Now all trace of support for the Republican struggle against the British state has disappeared from the SWP's publications. Even the call for Troops Out of Ireland Now, the formal position of the SWP, appears less frequently, and it certainly is not part of the SWP's strategy for achieving "peace".

If socialists support all "genuine national liberation struggles" then we should support the IRA's struggle against the British occupation forces, even though we criticise its wrong strategy and methods of struggle. It is not simply a question of supporting the IRA's right to defend the anti-unionist population from sectarian killings. Revolutionary socialists in Britain—from Karl Marx onwards—have always supported, unconditionally but critically, the armed struggle of Irish Republicans against the British state.

The SWP has consistently flinched from supporting this fight openly. Despite its anti-imperialist "principles" it has discovered that you cannot just throw membership cards at workers and students if your paper stands against the stream and takes the side of Britain's enemy in the Irish war.

Militant Labour commits all the errors of the SWP but openly and unashamedly. It has never supported the armed struggle against the British state, even critically; it has consistently equated republican and loyalist violence; it has peddled the abstract formula of "workers' unity" around economic issues as a fig leaf for its refusal to take the anti-imperialist side in the Irish war.

Little wonder that faced with the prospect of a reactionary peace deal Militant has even fewer qualms than the SWP about accepting it with open arms, in order to get on with the economic struggle alone. As Militant's editorial (17 December 1993) states:

"Should an agreement be reached it will only represent the first stage of a complicated process fraught with tremendous obstacles. Peace however would be seen as a great step forward throughout Ireland and Britain."

PROCESS

By the ruling class, yes, but why should socialists welcome the "complicated process" of selling out the national struggle?

"An agreement is still possible and with it a reduction in the intensity of the violence. This would give the chance to the trade unions to unite Catholic and Protestant workers in common struggle."

Militant Labour—in a classically economistic manner—has always argued that if only the "sectarian" national struggle would go away then workers could "unite" on the bread and butter issues. It is only logical—albeit a total betrayal of the anti-imperialist struggle—for Militant to welcome British imperialism's attempts to "get rid" of the national struggle for them. Militant Labour's economism is distinguished from the SWP's merely by its more blatant pro-imperialism.

The SWP and Militant Labour, faced with British imperialism's latest manoeuvre against the anti-unionist revolt in Northern Ireland, have jumped aboard the peace bandwagon. Whether they realise it or not, they are sharing seats on this wagon with imperialism itself. They are betraying the anti-unionist revolt. And this marks them down as centrists—revolutionary in their rhetoric and reformist in their deeds—not revolutionary socialists.

Harsh words. But the 25 year old revolt against the Orange state and British occupation has been too bitter too allow for any diplomacy. The British state has hurled everything it could against the anti-unionist population—its troops, its assassination squads, its non-jury courts, its bouts of internment with out trial, its daily raids on the nationalist community. Still that revolt continues.

It is unworthy of any socialist, let alone a socialist in Britain, to reward that spirit of resistance, to repay the sacrifices made in that revolt—prison, torture and death—with calls for peace on Britain's terms. The struggle against Britain's occupation of Northern Ireland deserves much more than the counsels for surrender being offered by the centrists of the SWP and Militant Labour.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is the largest far left organisation in Britain. It has fraternal organisations in another dozen countries. Its publications are read and respected by thousands beyond its ranks.

But how should we define its politics?

Its founding members originated in a split from the Fourth International - yet today the SWP claims allegiance to Trotskyism and Leninism.

This ***workers power*** pamphlet shows that the key tenets of the SWP's politics represent a fundamental break with Trotskyism: on building the party, on permanent revolution, on the analysis of the USSR and Eastern Europe, on the revolutionary programme, and on the relationship between the revolutionary vanguard and the working class.

This Trotskyist critique of the SWP's politics shows how, far from being irrelevant or purely theoretical, the SWP's departure from revolutionary Marxism leads to systematic opportunism in practice.

This is the second edition of **The politics of the SWP - a Trotskyist critique**. It is revised and updated to cover the SWP's response to the peace talks in Ireland, the war in former Yugoslavia, the relaunch of the ANL, the political situation in Britain after 1992 and the general strike slogan.

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