

The "IS-SWP tradition" 7

The experience of the left

THE SWP is, despite everything, the biggest self-styled revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain today. More than that: there are a lot of ex-members of the SWP (called IS before 1977) around.

It is now what the Healy organisation was in the late 50s and through the 60s — "a machine for maiming militants."

Politically, it has assumed the traditional role of anarchism. It is a movement of incoherent militant protest living politically from moment to moment, with no strategy and not much in the way of stable politics. It has one goal only — to "build the party": the party conceived as a fetish outside of politics and history, cut off from the real working class and its movement.

As an organisation it is a rigidly authoritarian variant of the Stalinist model of a party. It is organised around a pope, Tony Cliff, who has the power

to loose, bind and eject. In terms of the organisation of its intellectual life it is pre-bourgeois, in fact medieval.

Like the Healy organisation before it, the SWP leaves most of its ex-members politically bewildered and disoriented.

To help traumatised ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers its real history, we publish the symposium that follows. There will be other contributions in subsequent issues. We invite contributions. The discussion is completely free. Should representatives of the SWP wish to participate, they will be welcome.

Some of those who participate in this symposium have moved a long way from the politics they had in the IS/SWP, and from the politics of *Workers' Liberty* now. Nonetheless, at the end of this discussion we — and the thinking left in general — will be better equipped to formulate the lessons of the IS-SWP experience.

A relapse into the worst of Trotskyism

By John Palmer

I DO NOT disagree with the points that Jim Higgins made (*Workers' Liberty* 19) about Cliff and the IS Opposition. However I am not convinced that a discussion about the specific issues involved in that struggle is a sufficient explanation for the bust-up.

I think there is something in the nature of Trotskyist organisations, something about the dynamics of relatively small organisations which are marginal to the working class, and something about the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition, which leads to sectarian degeneration.

So, I think there was something predetermined about the fight in IS. The problems we discussed were nearly irrelevant to the inevitability of the fight. One underlying reason lies in the nature of democratic centralism and the inherent flaw in that type of organisation.

As IS grew during the early 1970s it became increasingly unable to allow differences of perspective to be contained within the organisation. There is something

in the nature of all but the smallest Trotskyist groups which requires issues to be fought out to the death. This has something to do with Trotsky himself, and his almost obsessive pursuit of secondary differences with his own comrades. I do not believe that some of the splits in the Trotskyist movement during the 1930s were either unavoidable or constructive. They should be understood more in terms of pathologies than as political phenomenon.

The organisation had become disoriented. IS became intoxicated by its successes.

I personally — along with many others — addressed large meetings of steelworkers, miners and dockers. Those meetings would be almost inconceivable today. Of course we were not challenging for state power. But as against the small group of the earlier days — *Socialist Review* and IS — an organisation of some thousands had become, in itself, almost a sufficient justification for existence.

The return of a Labour government in 1974 was accompanied by an almost millennial expectation of breakthrough from Cliff and the IS majority.

This was odd coming from IS, an organisation which, whatever its flaws, was rooted

in a more sober realism than any other tendency — from the Trotskyist tradition — except perhaps the Shachtmanites and their socialist descendants in America. There was a ruthless rejection of schematic, millennial politics which were based on the imminence of the coming crisis.

The IS Opposition held the view that the Labour government of 1974 would not be a Kerensky type of government which workers would quickly overthrow — as the IS majority and leadership claimed. Even we, looking back on it, were over-optimistic. But against the leadership we were super-realistic.

As *Workers' Liberty* has already documented, the differences in perspectives were linked to differences about how to relate to the rank-and-file organisation. We felt that the building of rank-and-file organisations would have to be slower, measured in years rather than months. The business of working with people in the Communist Party and on the Labour left would have to be much more sustained.

The majority of the more experienced IS workers agreed with us — not that this should have been the end of the matter, but it did happen to be the case. And I think that what can be said in our favour is that we were sensing and expressing the beginnings of an unfavourable shift in the balance of class forces.

There was a mood-change in industry which the shop stewards in the IS Opposition felt on the shop floor. IS steelworkers did not believe that it would be easy to mobilise action to defend jobs at the beginning of the steel rationalisation process. What they were doing was picking up some of the deep-seated changes at the heart of the economy and in the composition of the class, which we have seen so dramatically in the past two decades.

The point here is not even that we more right than the majority. The point is that when they won the vote, they required the dismantling of all the links and associations that existed amongst the minority. They destroyed the minority and in so doing dealt a dreadful blow to the organisation's own democratic tradition.

After that point, when I concluded that democratic change was no longer possible inside IS, I left the organisation.

In fact this sort of intolerance had not always existed. We had had big arguments about Luxemburgism, Europe and democratic centralism in the '60s. But the defeated side was not driven out.

In IS at that time there were people who thought for themselves. In its heyday it was a kind of coalition of people from different intellectual backgrounds. Kidron differed from Cliff on some questions. Ajasdair MacIntyre, Peter Sedgwick, Nigel Harris and others were substantial figures.

*John Palmer is European Correspondent of the Guardian. He joined IS in December 1959 and left in 1975 to join the newly-formed Workers' League.

While I might have disagreed with Peter Sedgwick on particular issues, he said what he thought, and did not just go with the tide. And that is an attitude to respect.

We made right and wrong decisions during my time in IS, but the common feature was a tradition of militant internal debate that appears to have completely gone.

My conclusion is to reject "vanguardism" and to recognise that within socialist organisations differences must be allowed to survive long enough to find resolution according to their own time scale, by testing points of view in practice. This question is, in part, related to how we should understand "the Bolshevik tradition" in socialist organisation.

I agree with Sam Farber's basic argument in *Before Stalinism*. Farber avoids the two polarities — of either relapsing into Menshevism and denouncing the whole of the Bolshevik tradition as Stalinist from the start, or, on the other hand, creating an impassable wall between Stalinism and Bolshevism. The elements both of working-class self-emancipation and repressive, counter-revolutionary authoritarianism co-existed uneasily throughout the history of Bolshevism.

Incidentally, I agree with Jim Higgins about the merger of Workers' Fight with IS. Workers' Fight was, essentially, a sectarian entryist organisation. Looking back we had no alternative but to take action against

them and left sectarianism.

In saying that I am also aware of a contradiction. I accept that part of the acerbic way that Workers' Fight and the Left Faction were dealt with also reflected the extent to which we had all been infected with the deformed traditions of sectarian "Bolshevism."

Particularly in the 15 years after 1960, partly because IS was swamped by a huge youth intake, the organisation was in the process of turning into something new. During this period of Cliff's life there was an attempt to go beyond the Trotskyist tradition.

It failed. The subsequent period has formed a relapse into the most negative features of that tradition. The belief that the hour is coming, the chiliastic politics, which sustains people in difficult periods, is very intoxicating.

When I look at Britain today — the crisis, the collapse of Labourism — I am amazed that the SWP has not grown even bigger.

Its size contrasts very sharply with its intellectual passivity. Marxism has not come to terms with the end of the blue-collar working class, the rise of new social groups or the integration of economies across national borders. Marxism has not developed and so the attempt to change things — including the attempt to build a new radical, red/green left — has been theoretically confused.

The tempting thing is to reduce the degeneration in IS to the role of one Machiavellian individual — Cliff. But that would be wrong. All the points about Cliff's limitations, irresponsibility and opportunism have been made. But this is actually only one side of the creative energy that allowed him to build what must be recognised as a militant, fighting socialist organisation, as well as allowing him to exploit a guru role. The positive side of the matter is that Cliff was actually able to develop Marxism.

It would be more tempting to reduce everything to the acolytes whom he has surrounded himself with — who turn left and then right, with precious little concern for facts, simply to suit convenience. But even that is only a small part of the story.

Why did the IS Opposition lose? Yes, we had 40% of the membership and perhaps we could have had 60%. One important explanation, I think, is unflattering to ourselves: in order to win we would have had to fight full-time for months — perhaps a year. Neither Jim Higgins or myself were prepared to do that — and perhaps that puts a question mark over our own leadership.

We thought Duncan Hallas would fulfil that role, and when Cliff won Hallas over, that was a big blow.

At heart, the IS Opposition never fully or consistently worked out the longer-term strategic implications of our own politics. ■

The Orange Order and its Catholic counterparts

Another Day

RIOTING HAS ceased in Belfast, but cases of intimidation of workers by Orange hooligans are still occurring. In the shipyards and docks Catholic workers are still being driven out.

Non-Catholic clergy are making strenuous efforts to restrain such intimidation. They visit areas where intimidation occurs and seek to restore tolerance.

In the South the pogroms have also ceased. Labour and other bodies have passed strong protest resolutions.

Three hundred families burn out and from 500 to 700 workers deprived of employment — those are the nett results of the Belfast pogroms. Rioting has ceased and the courts are busy trying cases arising out of the disturbances. Sentences are lenient and may be further reduced if there is no renewal of trouble.

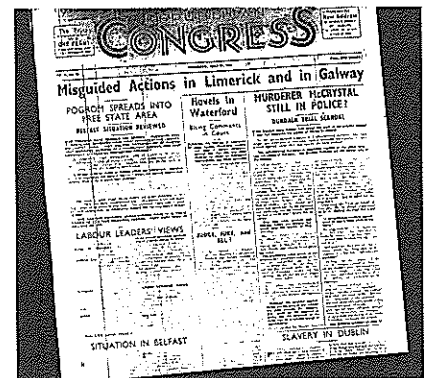
Dockers who are Catholics have lost their jobs. Every Catholic out of 400 in the Shipyards, has lost his job. The Unions are taking up the matter with the Shipping Companies.

Strong resolutions of protest against pogroms, North and South, have been passed by various Labour bodies.

The National Executive of the Irish Trade Union Congress "deprecate in the strongest terms the attacks on life and property recently witnessed throughout the country engendered by sectarian bitterness and animosity; point out that these sectarian feuds by perpetuating the memories of past dissensions weaken and divide the power of the working class; call on all trade unionists to close up the ranks and end these dissensions by the promotion of friendly and fraternal relations, substituting co-operation and charitable toleration in the cause of Labour, instead of hatred in the interest of exploitation and reaction."

Similar resolutions were passed by many labour bodies. The EC of the Irish National Union of Woodworkers requests, in addition, that:

"Any acts or reprisals on the religious minority in the Twenty-Six Counties should meet with the greatest condemnation from the organised trade union movement in the country, even to the point of taking organisational measures against any member or Union taking part in such activities."



Now that the rioting is over, the bigots on both sides are trying to exploit the situation. In a letter to the public press (July 30), Mr. Francis O'Reilly, Knights of Columbanus leader, attacks Protestants for their responsibility for the pogrom.

The Knights of Columbanus, of which Mr. O'Reilly is a leader, are the Catholic counterpart of the Masonic Order. If Orangemen victimise Catholics, they can point to the Knights of Columbanus as a body that victimises Protestants. (Surely Mr. O'Reilly has not forgotten the case of Mr. Bradshaw of Sligo.)

A return to peace is hampered, not helped, by the interference of those who thrive on sectarian differences.

From Republican Congress, [the paper of the Stalinist-influenced segment of the Republican movement] 3 August 1935.

