

The "IS-SWP tradition" 2

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.

activity was derived from Cliff's intuition on how best he could add to the membership. As Kidron said at one time: "Cliff is a peasant, a very talented peasant, but a peasant." The internal regime was extremely tolerant. The only person I recall we expelled was Sid Bidwell and that was for advocating street quotas for Asian immigrants in Southall. Part of this liberal spirit I think was a reaction to the draconian regime that Healy had run and also because a liberal face to the group made it most attractive to the Labour Party, CND, and Labour Party Young Socialist people who were the focus of recruitment.

Of course, in many ways a lax attitude to organisation and discipline is ideal for someone like Cliff, who can do more or less what he fancies. Certainly there was a fair amount of that going on, and it was a powerful reason why some of us supported the move to democratic centralism in the late 1960s, so that, we thought, we could submit Cliff to some collective responsibility.

There is some kind of notion that the organisation was consciously Luxemburgist in its libertarian phase. This seems to be a confusion. Luxemburg and Jogiches were not libertarian in party matters and the prevailing view in the SRG was that in the Luxemburg-Lenin disputes, Lenin had the better of the arguments. I recall writing a review of Nettl's book on Luxemburg, which came to just those conclusions and I am sure that this would have been discussed with Cliff.

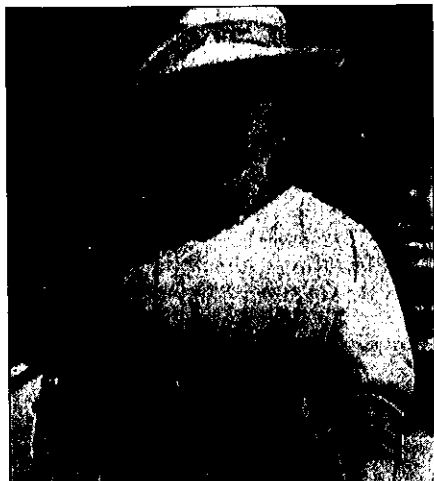
State capitalism was the theory that was the most consistent part of IS theory. Like all those theories — workers' state and bureaucratic collectivism — its main use is to argue against the others and it is best left to internal bulletin hobbyists. It did play a role, however, and for those who reasonably felt that Stalinism was an abomination, state capitalism was an attractive theory. Regardless of the theory's overall validity, it certainly enshrined the workers, their condition and their relationship to others in society, as the centre of any serious Marxist analysis. This factor, together with a similar emphasis in Luxemburg, was important in setting a long-term agenda dedicated to recruiting workers into the group as a prelude to forming the party. This, I think, is what people talk about when they refer to the IS tradition. The attitude differed from the orthodox Fourth Internationalists, who whatever they said, saw the FI as the Party, small but impeccably formed, that just needed to get bigger through fusion, entrism and campaigning. In this sense, the IS group was in transition but it was not centrist (that is, oscillating between reform and revolution) as *Workers' Fight* charged.

Work in the Labour Party Young Socialists and among students brought recruits who formed the basis for an organisation

The end of the "Rank and File"

By Jim Higgins*

SOME TIME in 1959 I attended an aggregate meeting of the Socialist Review Group (SRG). The atmosphere was relaxed and easy-going and Cliff, if excitable, appeared modest and had a sense of humour. I recall



Red Rosa: the IS were not really "Luxemburgists"

that his main exhortation at the time was: "The comrades have got to start pulling their socks." I liked this and the atmosphere, so I joined. I was a member for the next sixteen years and the National Secretary from 1971 to 1973. In 1975 I was expelled. By this time modesty was at a premium and the only humour of the gallows variety.

In 1959 the membership was measured in tens, certainly less than 100. There were a very few industrial workers. Most notable was Geoff Carlsson, ex Revolutionary Communist Party and a convenor at an engineering works, ENV. Another was Karl Dunbar. I suppose I was part of the leadership of the group for most of my membership. In the beginning this was because with so few people to do anything, anyone who turned up and showed willing could take on any task he looked halfway able to perform.

The IS's politics were essentially Cliff's version of state capitalism and Kidron's "permanent arms economy." Day-to-day

*Jim Higgins was National Secretary of the IS (SWP) in 1971-3



Saltley Gates 1974. The SWP betrayed the industrial militants it recruited in the 1970s.

that could contemplate modest attempts to approach workers on strike and in various union disputes. At the same time we began to develop our ideas about the experience of the Minority Movement in the 1920s. The idea of the rank and file movement as the bridge to the party was an attractive one. At this time there were 250,000 engineering shop stewards and many thousands more lay trade union bodies. There is no space to detail all the reasons why the development of the Rank and File Movement was considered appropriate, suffice it to say that there was a general agreement at all levels in the International Socialists, not least in the mind of Tony Cliff, that this was the perspective.

Despite this agreement on a course that must inevitably involve a long haul, Cliff could not always suppress his "peasant" instinct. One such was the unity campaign of 1968. The hope was to acquire the Revolutionary Socialist League [forerunner of the Militant] or the International Marxist Group, or at least a large lump of their cadre, and in the event we got Workers' Fight. The mechanics of this "fusion" was that Cliff met Sean Matgamna in a back room somewhere and the job was done. Nobody in IS, not the EC nor the National Committee, knew anything about it until we woke one day to find we had acquired a fully fledged tendency, all geared up for an extended faction fight. Sean must have thought it was Christmas. Three years later an augmented WF was defused to seek fresh fields to conquer. If there had been a proper pre-fusion discussion, it probably would not have happened and certainly there would have been a running-in period significantly shorter than three years. Certainly, part of the subsequently illiberal regime in IS was due to the desire not to suffer another long and debilitating faction fight.

The early 1970s were years of increasing militancy. My personal view was that this new wave was of particular importance. For the first time since the war there seemed to be the chance that militancy might go beyond trade demands. It was a period when we might be able to build something significant, along the lines of our rank and file perspective. Cliff agreed

that there was something new taking place.

We resolved to prepare for a conference to set up a rank and file movement in November 1973. It is worth saying that at this time IS had some 3,000 members, nearly half of them manual workers. The group produced a number of rank and file papers, with a combined circulation of 30,000. There were operational Rank and File Groups in the teachers, miners, engineering, post office unions and in the T&GWU, ASTMS and TASS and others I cannot recall off-hand. Modest though these achievements were they were better than anything we had before. Not only that, there was the responsibility that, if Rank and File organisation was not developed, then the Communist Party would play its traditional role of delivering the rank and file into the hands of the trade union leadership.

*"The shop stewards
and trade unionists
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IS then had:

- A working-class base.
- A framework of rank and file activity.
- A number of Rank and File publications.
- A duty to supplant the CP.
- A rising tide of working-class militancy.

That was the plus side of the equation. On the other side we had Cliff.

Cliff was convinced by two northern organisers that that they could not get anyone to the proposed Rank and File Conference. These were Roger Rosewell (at the time a particular favourite of Cliff: when last heard of this loathsome creature was adviser to Lady Porter) and John Charlton (there is nothing interesting to say about

him, absolutely nothing). But they did think they could get coachloads of the young and enthusiastic to a rally.

At the next meeting of the IS Executive Committee, Cliff proposed replacing the conference with a rally. After the vote Cliff and one of his satraps, I think Harman, were in a minority of two. Cliff immediately demanded three months' leave of absence so that he could go off to Nigel Harris's cottage to finish volume one of his book on Lenin. Duncan Hallas, who was deputy National Secretary, and I knew what this meant. Cliff would spend three months organising a counter coup and in the course of it run up such a phone bill as to ruin Nigel Harris. We proposed to the National Committee that we should hold the rally and the Rank and File Conference. We would prove the validity of the differing views in life.

Both the rally and the Conference were a success in terms of attendance, but in the long term neither worked. Cliff was now seized with the notion that mature shop stewards and lay trade union officials were bent, rotted by years of reformism. Those people we had for years sought to influence and recruit were rejected in favour of the young and traditionless. Free from all taint of reformism they would take on the shop stewardships and the role of the leadership. For them we needed rallies and excitement and stunts. Recruitment became the be-all and end-all of activity. More organisers were appointed and league tables published showing who made the most members each month. Funnily enough, a more significant table would have been, how many remained members at the end of the following month, because the answer was not many.

This cult of the young worker obviously required further changes. A day-to-day leadership of mature adults, with experience in the movement and in the trade unions, were not suitable for this new field of endeavour. The EC was recast. Such elements as Duncan Hallas, Nigel Harris, and Roger Protz etc. were removed to be replaced with ace recruiters from the provinces. Roger Kline, Roger Rosewell, John Charlton were among those who turned up occasionally to fulfil this new activist leadership role. Cliff, as the man who thought up this idiocy, was a fixture.

I remained for a while as National Secretary, until I became tired of meetings starting half an hour late so that Cliff and his young leaders could caucus and make all the decisions that were then presented to me at the formal session. Such childish destructive behaviour was absurd and I resigned, taking up a job on *Socialist Worker*.

Together with Duncan Hallas, Roger Protz (editor of *Socialist Worker*), Granville Williams, John Palmer and others we formed an IS Opposition. From the point of view of continuing employment this was an error, but not one I regret. Not too much time passed before Cliff and Harman had sufficiently wound up two of the journalists on *Socialist Worker*, Paul Foot and Laurie Flynn, neither of whom were noted for

intestinal fortitude or political independence, to press for the sacking of myself and Roger Protz. As the EC had initiated the move, they did not waste too much time in debate before acceding to this request.

The opposition debated the questions with Cliff at a number of regional aggregates and were hopeful of getting a substantial number of delegacies to the conference. These hopes came to nothing when the constitution was illegally changed making it impossible for us to achieve any more than a handful of delegacies.

As part of the same ultra-leftism, a group of some 20 AUEW members were expelled in Birmingham. Their crime was twofold: support for the IS Opposition platform and disagreement with the running of an IS candidate in an AUEW election (I think for President). As experienced trade unionists of some service and standing they had worked in the broad left and the question of the candidate to support had been agreed long before IS thought to run its own man. Finding themselves unable to renege on

commitments freely made, they were all expelled. The whole episode provides an object lesson that Cliff's famously intuitive nose and some energetic young organisers, are really no substitute for knowledge of the working-class movement. But then as Stan Newens wrote in the last issue of *Workers' Liberty*, "Cliff never really understood the British labour movement." Actually I would go further than Stan, I do not think he understands the workers anywhere, he has met hardly any. His oft repeated dedication to the working class is in practice making much of those who happened to agree with him at any given time and then dropping them with a sickening thud as soon as they disagree.

The IS Opposition was expelled and all in all some 250 people left with them.

The years since then do not seem to have changed the nature of the group, except that it is now allegedly a party and it is somewhat further from success than it was 20 years ago. Do I blame Cliff for most of this? Well actually I do. ☹



Gerry Healy. Cliff's recruits in the '50s and '60s thought that his group was the antithesis of Healy's thuggishness and toy-town Bolshevism.

me up before a meeting of the national committee for taking his daughter to a football match. Arguing that no one who was 'a serious socialist' could even think about going to football matches, he was ridiculed by other members of the 'leadership'. And the younger socialists in the Group were, in fact, very proud that Cliff could not boss us about as Gerry Healy bossed and bullied his members. Moreover, on perhaps the only occasion when I won the vote against Cliff and Kidron, the so-called 'ultra-left tendency' to which I belonged persuaded the Group to participate in the first Aldermaston march against the Bomb.

I was already quite well-known in the Labour Party and Labour League of Youth (LLOY) in Scotland, anyway, and worked in the LLOY and in the NCLC without any sense of being an 'outsider', though I was one of the few non-Jews among the London membership of the Socialist Review group. The Holocaust still figured very largely in our discussions; and in those years Cliff and Kidron were anti-Leninist and very critical of the whole Bolshevik heritage.

Differentiating himself from Gerry Healy, Isaac Deutscher, Bolshevism, 'state socialism', and 'orthodox Trotskyism', Cliff surprised me in those years by being very sympathetic towards University education. Although Cliff and Kidron took their state capitalist analysis of Russia and Eastern Europe very seriously, most of the members including myself found Shachtman's concept of bureaucratic collectivism a more convincing explanation of what had gone wrong with the Russian revolution of 1917. What kept the Group together and allowed the young members to recruit new members was the emphasis on libertarian Marxism in the concrete shape of workers' control, workers' democracy and the egalitarianism seen in Paris Commune of 1871 and in the early stages of the Russian revolution.

Cliff, Kidron and the small group of relatives around him in the leadership made it clear again and again that they simply wanted to keep the Group together. Keep-

Socialist Review and libertarian Marxism

James D Young*

WHEN I WAS a twenty-four year old student at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1955, I met and formed a friendship with Michael Kidron, the editor of *Socialist Review*. As a student who opted to specialise in British working-class history, I had eight years of socialist activity as an unskilled industrial worker behind me. Indeed, I was elected as the secretary of the Trades and Labour Council in my home town of Grangemouth when I was an inexperienced nineteen year old youngster. Although I came into the labour movement as 'a man of independent mind' my parents and grandfather had identified with the Independent Labour Party and later on the Labour Party. To understand why I was always critically supportive of the Trotskyist tradition from 1955 onwards, I never felt myself to be an 'outsider'. 'Entry work' and 'entrism' always seemed to be an expression of a mentality utterly alien to me.

During my penultimate term at Ruskin in the spring of 1955, when I was chairing a public meeting of the Oxford University branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain, John Gollan, assistant editor of the *Daily Worker*, denounced Kidron as a 'Trotskyist.' I simply had not heard of Leon Trotsky or 'Trotskyism' at that time; but when I defended Kidron's right to free speech inside the labour movement, he

must have known that I was a potential recruit. (Incidentally, the only book by Trotsky in the Ruskin library was his *History of the Russian Revolution*; and it made a big impact on my thinking). Meanwhile Kidron told me about Tony Cliff and gave me a copy of Cliff's book *Stalinist Russia: A State Capitalist Analysis*. Having read Leon Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed* by then, Kidron never removed all of my doubts about Cliff's analysis of the class nature of modern Russia. But I joined the Socialist Review group towards the end of 1955, and I began to write for the paper before settling in London for a few years. I returned to Scotland in the autumn of 1962.

Until my last two years in London, when I worked as the publishing manager of the *New Statesman*, I was employed by the Oxford University Press. Already a part-time lecturer for the National Council of Labour Colleges, I soon met and formed close friendships with Seymour and Donna Pappert, David Prynne and other members of the Young Socialist section of the Socialist Review group. What struck me about Trotskyism and the Trotskyist groups in Britain at that time was their utter cultural alienation from everything 'British' or Scottish or Irish.

Contemplating those years now, it strikes me as odd that on the one occasion when I raised the question of us doing more systematic work within the NCLC, Cliff said that those of us who thought we had time to work for the NCLC could do so as individuals. At the same time, Cliff tried to pull

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ing the Group together seemed to be more important than doctrinal questions including state capitalism, though Cliff and Kidron in the revulsion against 'Leninist excesses' in crushing Parliamentary institutions and trade union democracy in Russia in the very early 1920s and the Holocaust, seemed to have an emotional need for a Biblical Ark. At the same time, they fostered the idea of socialism through Parliamentary politics and contact with Labour MPs.

At a time when Ygael Gluckstein/Cliff had produced *Mao's China* and *Stalin's Satellites in Eastern Europe* and right wing Social Democracy in Europe was in the ascendancy, Cliff in particular was very pessimistic about 'the future of socialism.' Even the attempt to resurrect Rosa Luxemburg as a figure of anti-state socialism was an expression of despair, not optimism. The survival of the group for the day when the revolution would surely come in 'the next or the next again century' was very important. It was an expression of the cultural traditions that Cliff and Kidron had inherited elsewhere.

Already repelled by Stalinist immoralism, I saw the same anti-socialist-humanist phenomena in the Socialist Review group. Distorting Kant's view of the 'crooked timber' of existing humanity by conceiving of working people as history's instruments or the 'imperfect human material' to be manipulated, used and, if need be, discarded by the 'superior' vanguard Party, members of the Group were also seen in this light. Although I was already half-aware of this at the time, I and others persevered because we had a much more optimistic perspective.

In defence of the Socialist Review group in those years, I was given space to express my own views. Against the orthodoxy of the time, I wrote about such Scottish socialist novelists as James Barke, Grassie Gibbon as well as the Scottish national question from a Marxist standpoint. Moreover, although Seymour and Donna Papert, David Prynne, myself and others were hostile to the

then potential Parliamentarians in our ranks with their thinly disguised racist views, we studied hard, sought inspiration in the writings of the young Marx etc., etc.

Again we worked with men and women in Gerry Healy's group and when the Socialist Labour League (SLL) was formed we worked with their younger members who remained in the Labour League of Youth. Contributing to the *Labour Review* under the fine editorship of the admirable Peter Fryer before and after the SLL was formed, we had all been inspired by the workers' councils thrown up by the Hungarian revolution. Seymour was our link with Cornelius Castoriadis's *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group in Paris and we spent considerable time in correspondence and sharing ideas with members of that group. Bessie Dunayevskaya visited me in London and I wrote one of the first British reviews of Raya's *Marxism and Freedom*.

It was a heady time; but we learned the hard way that democratic, class-struggle socialism must be a do-it-yourself movement, anyway. What strikes me as so depressing about almost all the 'Marxist' groups in 1995 is that they are stuck in various emotional and time warps. They seem to be incapable of asking such simple and important questions as: "where did Marxism come from?" Of course, everyone who allows the 'superior' vanguard group/Party to do his/her thinking for them will predictably respond, according to Kautsky/Lenin, by saying 'out of the heads of the bourgeois intellectuals.'

But until young people entering the gigantic class struggles of the next century are made familiar with Antonio Labriola's observation that Marxism itself was 'born in the soul of the oppressed' socialism will not escape from the trap of a delayed totalitarian-1984-ism. As I have battled during the last five years against cancer and heart disease to complete my history of *Socialist Martyrs*, I have become increasingly grateful to some of the 'cultural capital' that I acquired during those fruitful years in the

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Socialist Review group. I am also grateful that I had come out of a tradition of Scottish radicalism that is much older — and more disaffected and *carnaptious* — than the Marxism I still regard as potentially liberating. And in contrast to Eric J Hobsbawm, who depicts 'the short twentieth century' between 1914 and 1991 as an "age of extremes" I think it has been an age of One-Sided Class Warfare against the Poor.

In helping to keep the idea of resistance to injustice and inequality alive during the second half of the decade of the 1950s, those of us on the Left of the Socialist Review group made a modest contribution to socialist ideas. They remain relevant in 1995 and I for one still subscribe to the noble idea expressed by Bernard Rosenberg in his article 'Marxism: Criticism and/or Action':

"The weapon of criticism is undoubtedly inadequate. Who on that account would choose to surrender it?" ☐

A rebellion of trade unionists

By Mike McGrath*

I JOINED THE International Socialists in 1966 and left the SWP in 1982.

In 1966 there were about 300 of us in a very lively, activist organisation.

I had been an anarchist before 66 and I saw IS distinguishing itself from the Communist Party and that tradition in the USSR. I also liked its orientation to the trade union rank and file.

By 1966 they had already had some discussion about involvement in the Labour Party's youth section. And earlier in the 1960s they had been more involved.

I suppose IS just drifted out, in that well known empirical way. Certainly no one

ever said to me: "you really should join the Labour Party".

In 1966 IS was not a highly centralised group. It was federalist. Nevertheless, that is not to say there was not a group of people running the organisation — perhaps in a more covert, rather than overt, way. Perhaps they even had more power over the organisation than under a clear, democratic-centralist structure.

Although the organisation was not particularly democratic, before the major factional fighting of the early 1970s there was not actually much conflict, and the actual nature of the regime was not exposed. Without conflict the issue is not actually very prominent and the matter is

submerged beneath how to build, how to extend our influence.

Steve Jeffries and myself were involved in the "Micro Faction" of the late '60s, which raised the centralised-decentralised organisation issue. But this was a small matter and the issue only blew up properly in the 1970s.

It is true that the Trotskyist Tendency was expelled in late 1971, but that group was regarded as very much a group of outsiders. I voted to get rid of this Tendency as a group which was "not reformable". The older, consensual group united

*Mike McGrath was an active IS-SWP trade unionist in the 1970s, and secretary of the "Faction for Revolutionary Democracy".

against what was perceived as an outside threat. With hindsight the consensual group was, itself, developing tensions.

The original faction which opposed the leadership's proposals on democratic centralism in the early '70s was a very significant opposition, Jim Higgins, Granville Williams, Roger Protz and a large number of second ranking cadres — like me (at the time I was branch secretary of the large Stoke Newington branch).

There was a fundamental dispute and as a result of our defeat a number of people were expelled for persisting in what was called "overt factionalising". A lot of others just left IS.

At the next conference there was a re-run of the previous year's argument. We set up FRED, the Faction for Revolutionary Democracy, with 130 or 140 signatories. Mainly, by this time, those involved were second ranking people — myself, Mike Heym and Ross Pritchard. We were not so much opposed to the leadership itself, just the way the organisation was restructuring. Some of the issues were detail — the size of the National Committee, the power of the Central Committee, the introduction of election from District Committees as distinct from branches — and the fundamental question had already been fought out, and decided, in the previous year.

We had quite a bit of backing, but only got two delegates to conference.

We got absolutely obliterated — completely wiped out. By this time most of the key oppositionists had left IS — one way or another.

In retrospect it was just a last gasp.

Much of the opposition came from people like me who were active in the unions, building up rank and file organisations. In that year I instigated a paper called *Redder Tape* in the civil service.

There was a certain "syndicalist" element running through our opposition. We were bound up in rank and file groups in the unions and, day-to-day, we fought the Stalinists and the bureaucrats and we did not like the new democratic centralism in our organisation, IS. I was working so hard in the union it was difficult to compete with a full-time leadership who had time on their

Some key dates

1944-9: Almost all British Trotskyists are united in one group, the RCP.

Among its main leaders is Ted Grant. Gerry Healy leads a minority who favour working in the Labour Party. Tony Cliff argues that the USSR is "state capitalist" (the others believe it is a "degenerated workers' state").

1949: The RCP, isolated and dwindling, disbands. Grant and Cliff join the Labour Party and have to submit to Healy's leadership. Healy soon expels them.

1950: Cliff and his co-thinkers — expelled by Healy for failing to side with North Korea in the Korean war — form the Socialist Review Group.

This group is at first "orthodox Trotskyist" except in its "state-capitalist" analysis of the USSR, but over time it becomes opposed to Leninist organisation and develops other distinctive views (e.g. that Trotskyist "transitional demands" are irrelevant, and that imperialism is ended).

Early 1960s: The Socialist Review Group (which now renames itself International Socialism) revives (after decline to about 20 members in the late 1950s) through work in Labour's youth movement and the nuclear disarmament campaign.

Healy's group (now called SLL) is still, however, much stronger.

Late 1960s: As thousands of students and

youth are radicalised, the SLL spirals off into ultra-sectarian madness.

IS grows rapidly (to nearly 1,000 in 1968, maybe 2,000 in 1971-2, and 4,000 by 1974). It drifts out of the Labour Party; its paper, *Labour Worker*, is renamed *Socialist Worker* in 1968.

1968: Cliff pushes through a "return to Leninism" and centralised organisation.

1971: IS expels the *Workers' Fight* tendency with which it had fused in 1968 (a forerunner of the AWL), and tightens up its previously liberal regime.

1973: Another minority expelled: the "Right Opposition", which will develop into today's RCP and RCG.

1975: IS in crisis because its expectations of mass growth if it "steers to the left" in response to the Labour government fall flat.

Two more minorities expelled: the "Left Faction" (which joins with *Workers' Fight*; part of it then splits off again to form *Workers' Power*), and the "IS Opposition" (which includes a large part of IS's old leadership; it soon disintegrates, but some of its leaders are active today around *Red Pepper*).

1977: IS renames itself the "Socialist Workers Party." Around this time, too, it develops the thesis of the "downturn" in class struggle which serves to rationalise its sectarian tactics.

hands. The fact they had more time than us was actually a major source of their power.

IS then moved on to gimmick-style politics in the mid-70s with the Right To Work Campaign. This was very much forced upon us. It was the sort of front politics that we spent our lives in the unions confronting.

For an oppositionist I was still comparatively influential. A few of us had bases in the unions and they did not really want to kick us out. I suppose if we had been very awkward they would have got rid of us. But we were no longer an organised threat, so they had us on board and threw us a few crumbs. We ran Central London District at the time.

Later I was the only person on the National Council to oppose declaring the

Socialist Workers Party. I appeared to be the only person on that body who could see what was going to happen. They actually developed the delusion that the SWP was a Party in the European Marxist — Leninist — sense. They came to believe that the party was genuinely representative of the advanced workers. It manifestly was not! The "Party" tried to substitute itself for the class.

One of the political consequences of that delusion was an ossifying of the organisation, internally.

I was going to say that the declaration of the SWP was an important decision — but perhaps it was not so important. After all the basic decision had already been made earlier in the '70s. Declaring the SWP just took the process further and was one of the false political consequences of the previous fight.

In the early '80s the rank-and-file union organisations and *Redder Tape* were shut down. And so was *Women's Voice*. They went through a lunatic period where they said that to be a shop steward was to be corrupt.

But by this time there was no internal disension of significance, just isolated individuals. Why did I stay until 1982? If you want to be political there is not a lot of choice. I have never been an Orthodox Trotskyist, buying the *Transitional Programme* and the workers' states theory. The Communist Party is out of the question. I would only join the Labour Party if there was a serious entryist movement.

Then there is the wilderness, so I stayed as long as I could. ☐

The experience of the left

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