

The Trotskyist Tendency and IS A funny tale agreed upon?

By Sean Matgamna

LET us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the looniness of Trots — of the left in general, but of Trots in particular. Let us tell tales that are funny ha-ha and tales that are funny-peculiar. Tell how some were born mad, some became mad and some had madness foisted on them.

Editor's doppelganger: No! No! This won't do. It's no good! Pre-tentious — Pseudsville! This is the age of the soundbite, the 30 second attention span and the comedy workshop. You must entertain!

Make a joke of it. Keep a curled upper lip.

These days, you've got to be funny or nobody will pay attention. Wear motley! There's humour in everything if you know how to find it.

Oh, like that guy who said he'd write the history of England so that it was as unputdownable as a novel. Something like that? "La Comédie Gauche"? The left as a perpetual burlesque? The theatre of the politically grotesque? The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Sanity as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at the Central Committee? Six Generals in Search of an Army? Clearing Up After Godot?

All our world's a joke, and all the men and women in it merely clowns and comic creatures. That sort of thing? Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be a licensed buffoon in IS was very heaven? Make 'em laugh!

Doppelganger: Yes, even the serpent in the garden of Eden was an amusing little guy, if you look at him from the right angle. He talked to Eve in a funny Israeli accent — did you know that? Charming and disarming it was. She laughed, and was lost! Make 'em laugh!

Use plenty of make-up. Paint a smile even over rage. The primacy of the pleasure principle! Don't let anything come out straight from the guts, unfiltered and unrefined! Aggression and stale malice are best served flippant and in a sauce of humour! And don't waste your time doing research or trouble your peace of mind taking a fresh look. So long as it *sounds* plausible, and is funny, that's enough.

Jokers of the world unite — you have nothing to lose but your brains, you have a guffaw to win...?

I don't see why you can't see,

I said, with winning charm;

I can't see why you can't see,

He lied — so I broke his arm! That sort of thing?

Doppelganger: Yes, but better. History? Never mind history! What is history but a funny story agreed upon? Just current politics read backwards — the malleable prequel to the sequel, to the all-defining *now*. Mental agility, *story*-lining, humour, that's what matters!

And the facts?

Doppelganger: Facts? Stories! Tell them funny stories. Be a Marxist, not an empiricist! Facts perplex. Human interest, not

hard, abstract stuff. Groucho was *never* into facts!

Laugh and the world laughs with you! Cry and nobody will join your Party. Or worse: the wrong sort of people will. It's a question of *finding* the funny side of things. The pleasure principle rules — OK? The left is full of funny stories. Think of all the revolutionary socialists in the 20th century who died laughing. Master the dialectic, transmute tragedy into comedy. Make 'em laugh!

Yeats in reverse, eh? A terrible humour is born-eo?

Doppelganger: Donald O'Connor! My dad said, be in politics, son. But be a comical one — Make 'em laugh! Make 'em laugh!

To take arms against a sea of troubles and by joking pretend they aren't there. Laugh yourself into complacency and precocious political senility?

Doppelganger: Parody is a low form of wit. What are you going to do next? Prove Marx a prophet by quoting what he wrote about the autodidact's propensity to indulge in clumsy displays of erudition? Stories! Learn from Jim Higgins. Tell funny stories! Get on with it!

Yes — alright! Hello, hello, you lovely people! This is Archie Rice-Higgins, your purveyor of funny stories from the Music Hall of the Left. I say, I say, I say...

Roll up, roll up, gentlemen and ladies, the supply of funny stories about revolutionary politics and groups is endless. We have a splendid supply tonight. You'd like to hear a political ear-trumpet joke? We cater for all levels of humour here! Did you hear the one about the deaf lad and the paranoiac? No? That's the best of the lot! As funny as tin-titus, that one is — but we serve a balanced and well-designed menu in this music hall, and the really good ones are best held back for later.

I say, I say, I say: you'd like something light now, eh?

Well, there was this endearing, little blighter sometimes called Cliff, who looked and sounded like a cross between Dr Ruth, the TV sexologist and one-time Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. Very funny accent this little bleeder had too. One Saturday afternoon, he was telling the National Committee of his organisation, the International Socialists, about the tremendous level of contemporary class struggle sweeping through the land of the "Yetis". The Yeti is, of course, the "abominable snowman", the mythical giant the Americans call Big Foot. "The Yetis, Cliff?" "Yes" — impatiently — "the Yetis". Cliff had discovered a land populated by Big-Foot Bolshie Yetis? Mouths open in amazed disbelief. He thought it was the effect of his revelations and warmed up. The British press had been woefully silent, but comrade Andreas had told him about the waves of Yeti strikes and factory occupations. The Yetis were showing the way for all of Europe's workers!

By now giggles were breaking out here and there, but he didn't notice. Magnificent Yetis! All of Europe — as Rosa Luxemburg once said of another country — would soon have to learn to "speak Yeti", he could tell them that! "Yetis, Cliff?" "Yes. Yes, Yetis! You know — Y-E-T-I-S — I-talians! Yetis!" "Oh, you mean 'I-tis'!" The entire meeting burst into laughter, and a warm burst of affection swept over Dr Ruth, they just

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loved him.

I've heard versions of this story which have Cliff jumping on a table at this point and dancing an exultant Cossack jig for the IS National Committee, but — take my word for it — that's embellishment. I didn't see that. But maybe I missed it, distressed and worried by the sight of Jim Higgins, at the height of his glory, chairing the NC, cross-eyed with love and mirth, guffawing so loudly and violently that I feared he might swallow his dental plate. Yetis! It-is!

Yes, ladies and gents, I say, I say, I say... Did you hear the one about the vegetarian who fell among Healyites? As the Manchester branch meeting was breaking up one Sunday evening, it came out, somehow, that one of the comrades was a vegetarian. Bill Hunter, the Lancashire organiser, immediately reconvened the branch meeting to discuss this serious deviation from the social norms we revolutionary socialists had to comply with or risk "losing contact" with "ordinary workers". Bill, a decent man, 25 years a Marxist, decided to "raise the theoretical level" of the discussion.

"Sean", he said, the rest of the bemused branch listening keenly, "Have you read *Anti-Dühring*? Now, in that book Engels explains that it was the *meat-eaters* who developed the brain." "Therefore", I interrupted, with the flippancy, though not the wit, that unmistakably indicated an incipient Shachtmanism: "My brain will shrink if I don't eat meat?"

Those were the days! When Marxism was an all-encompassing world outlook and an Orthodox Marxist system of dietary rules could be elaborated from *The Books*, if only one knew how to read them!

I say, I say, I say — those were the days! Another time, at the IS NC, a becalmed, dull Saturday afternoon meeting and people trying to liven it up by offering each other practical tips. The Liverpool organiser, a sincere and humourless young man, has the answer to branch building: comrades should remember the power of slogans and catchy ideas. Remember *One Big Union* — OBU? Every IS member must be instructed to get a Big Old Bag, and stuff it with IS literature, and told never to go anywhere without it: "Everywhere, throughout the length and breadth of the labour movement, the IS member must be identified by always having his Old Bag along: the good IS member must aim to get himself known in the labour movement as *The Man With The Bag*! The Man With The Bag, I say, comrades!" By now, general hilarity, which he could not understand.

Yes, gents and ladies, those blue remembered jokes from the days of our youth, when politics was fun and IS was modest — Pecksniffian, but modest and fun-ny with it.

I say, I say, I say: That funny little loveable little bleeder Cliff — the things he used to say and do! The strokes I saw him pull — a proper left-wing Jeffrey Archer, that endearing little Dr Ruth fellow was.

IS conference at the Beaver Hall. Easter 1969. IS have over 1,000 members. Mostly young, politically raw, uneducated kids, full of life and enthusiasm and impatient of political restraint. Ultra-left — in the in-your-guts sense in which young people *should* instinctively be ultra-left. All they needed was experience, political education, tempering, and the benefit of the political wisdom of the older comrades. There is a dispute in the group about what we will say in the next general election. Can we *really* call for a Labour vote? For Wilson's Labour government? Everybody, even those who think we should vote for the labour movement's party, hates the Labour Party. It is only 9 or 10 months since nine million French workers have staged a stupendous general strike and seized the factories. Things are heated and alarmingly confused at conference.

Cliff is called to speak and trots down the gangway to the lecture room style lowered stage in front. He grabs the microphone militantly, as if he's going to fight with it, body language exuding combativity and positively teenage impatience with political restraints.

"This", he said heatedly, "is an unnecessary discussion. We don't need it. You know why we don't need it? Because we won't take part in the blinking election when they call it. What'll we do? We'll call for a general strike, that's what we'll do! Not a general election, but a gen-

eral strike!" Thunderous applause.

What happened when the election came? IS shouted: vote Labour.

The young people who needed calming down had been fed with amphetamines; those who needed political education, placated with political gibberish! But it 'worked'. Cliff knew how to handle them! Dr Ruth could "put it over"!

Doppelganger: A demagogue?

You need a stronger word: how about *demagob*?

YES, I say, I say, ladies, gentlemen, comrades, the supply of such stories is endless. There are people who devote their political lives to collecting them. You could fill a book just with stories about IS alone. You want more? We're running out of time. Just two more, then.

Duncan Hallas — now there's a fun-ny guy, and talented too. Disappeared he did, old Duncan, ran off for 15 lean years and then came back in the prosperity of '68 to play the IS group's no-nonsense old Bolshevik, as if he'd been a revolutionary all his life.

Merlin's Cave, London, November 1971. Big meeting, with Duncan debating Sean Matgamna of the Trotskyist Tendency.

It is part of the build-up to the special conference at which the Trotskyist Tendency is to be "defused" — uncouth people say "expelled". That was one of the funniest things in IS's fun-filled history.

The Trotskyist Tendency had organised a rank and file campaign for a special conference to stop the NC jumping on the chauvinist, anti-EC bandwagon two months after IS conference by a massive majority condemned such politics. Now they were getting a special conference all to themselves! Fun-ny!

The Trotskyist Tendency is a tiny proportion of the meeting. The chair is Roger Protz, who makes a debating point each and every time he calls for a speaker opposed to the "defusion" of the Trotskyist Tendency: "If there is one."

Summations — Duncan, new-minted National Secretary of IS, is a thin-skinned, insecure bully who wouldn't be able to cut it without the machine — or, come to think of it, *with* the machine: he was to be a very short-lived National Secretary — is easily rattled. He has been showing signs of increasing anger at each show of opposition from the floor. He has a bitter hatred of the Trotskyist Tendency and the contempt any decent IS old Bolshevik would have for such scum. He is a powerful, emotional speaker, with an unpleasant schoolmasterish tendency to suggest that only an idiot would disagree with him. He is passionately convinced of his case; and also passionately resentful that the Trotskyist Tendency makes fun of his Old Bolshevik pretensions and has let him know they think him a spineless old poseur. Now, summing up, he rises to the occasion.

The Trotskyist Tendency has been a problem for three years. They have criticised people like himself and disrupted the group. Worse, they have made it difficult for people like him — real citizens of the IS group — to raise matters they might raise if the Trotskyist Tendency were not around. They were sure to try to exploit any division. It wasn't as widely known as it should be, but he, Duncan, had disagreed with the group's attitude to the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland in 1969 — which the Trotskyist Tendency had said amounted to IS supporting the troops — but what if he had spoken out? He'd have played into the hand of the "Matgamnaites". What could he do? He had to remain silent and support the leadership though he thought them seriously wrong on a very important question (this was an appeal for support and understanding from non-Trotskyist Tendency people who had thought his role during the heated debates on Ireland two years earlier despicable). By throwing out the Trotskyist Tendency, the rights of people like himself would be restored. They would be able to function more freely. Comradely discussion would come back to the group. By outlawing generalised opposition, IS democracy would — it was paradoxical but true — be enlarged and expanded.

Hands raised as if to embrace the whole meeting, passion distorting his face, his voice rising to a high, emotional scream, he appeals for support in throwing out the Trotskyist Tendency.

"Comrades! This has gone on too long. It has gone on year after year for three whole years! It should not go on any longer." Hand-chopping the air in an unconscious mime: "Comrades: we must put an end to it now. Find a solution!" Large swathes of the meeting have by now begun to giggle uneasily, but he is too high to come down or notice that he has lost most of his audience. "Comrades, I say it again: there has *GOT TO BE A FINAL SOLUTION!*" Most of the meeting is by now squirming, giggling or laughing in open derision. IS was still a living political organisation in November 1971.

Doppelganger: That was boring! Too much detail, too much political explanation!

Sorry! But observing the disciplines of comedy is at least as difficult as obeying the discipline of the soundbite political culture; and it has something of the same distorting effect. Politics tends to get in the way of comedy. To compress political history into funny stories one has to be ruthless with encumbering truth. I haven't quite got the hang of it yet. Sorry! I'll make up for it with a really funny story — one of the the most hilariously funny political stories I know.

I say, I say, I say, ladies and gentlemen... Did you hear the one about the leading group of the old ISniks, the nearest thing to pigtailed mandarins you'll ever find in left-wing politics, who purged the Trotskyist Tendency, the right opposition and every opposition, real or imaginary, that so much as twitched? They set up a mindless, depoliticised machine for the group. They felt themselves masters of the organisation — a stable band of congenial souls and sworn chums grouped forever around this funny little, loveable Dr. Ruth guy with the much-appreciated genius for ideology-free organisational twists and turns and creative, opportunist zig-zags?

One fine day, Dr Ruth started snarling and frothing at the mouth and, with a mad look in his eye, a hatchet in one hand and a volume of Lenin in the other, screaming "greed is good, solipsism is better — Lenin lives: le parti, c'est moi!", slaughtered them all — all the princes of the House of Ygael who would not kiss his feet and his backside ardently or frequently enough. Dr Ruth's victims had lovingly honed his axe and hand-tooled and hand-carved witty comic doodles all over the axe-handle for him. Nothing so funny as that had happened since Louis XVI of France, when still king had advised them to put an oblique blade on the newly invented guillotine to get a better cut. More than two decades later, some of the bodies still twitch, and ghosts and banshees still howl at night — especially when painful anniversaries fall — about broken faith, abused trust, unrequited love, bitter disappointment, cruel betrayal, lost hope and status brutally stripped away, like the gold braid off a dishonoured sergeant major's tunic.

I say, I say, ladies and gentlemen, you could write a book. Yes, you could, and Jim Higgins finally has. Bile and malice served in saccharin sauce, aggression giving itself airs because it wears a fixed idiot grin, and humour that is too often inappropriate and dependent on utter disregard for such old-fashioned notions as "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" is an acquired taste; Higgins' work is not by any standards a good or a useful book.*

The problem with Jim Higgins — who was a leader of IS, and for a year or so, Duncan Hallas's successor as its National Secretary — and his account of the early IS is that Higgins doesn't know the difference between the arts of the comedian and raconteur and the arts of the historian or politician. Invariably, at the expense of politics and real

history, he goes for the rounded story, the piquant paradox and pseudo-paradox, the glinting bit of happenstance and the 'comic' stereotype. Never mind what is true. And why should his valuable time be wasted on research, or his complacency disturbed by a re-examination of events, of his own prejudices or his own role in what he recounts? God forbid that fact, balance or tale-cluttering nuance should be allowed to get in the way of a good story or a well-sounding phrase.

This is one reason why his "history" is patchy, uneven, unreliable and worthless as either record or interpretation of the early IS, the most promising organisation of the late '60s and early '70s. The only serious purpose of this book* is self-justification and score-settling. Higgins has had nearly 20 years out of politics in which to reflect, re-examine and reconsider, and, perhaps, draw a balance sheet useful to others. Instead, he has produced the apologia of an uncomprehending ghost still obsessively trying to understand how he could have been "offed" so unceremoniously and discarded so contemptuously. He had thought better of himself! The factional nerves still twitch, but he has learned little and seems to have spent the 20 years polishing 'funny' stories and burying the memory of uncomfortable ones. He knows that the "history" he recounts is part of a stark tragedy, the defeat of the working class and of the left in the 70s, 80s and 90s, and the transformation of a once promising organisation of socialists into a closed, self-aggrandising, irresponsible and essentially stupid little sect (and, though it is big in comparison with Workers' Liberty, the SWP is still only a *little* sect).

He knows that he has to account for the strange fact that Dr Ruth

with remarkable ease saw off — and sawed off — a sizeable chunk of the old IS, and most of the old leadership, the great men manqués, like Higgins himself. It still hurts; under the clown mask the bitterness and sense of loss and of lost love and betrayal still choke him. He does not account for any of it. Instead, he concocts alibis for himself and erects something not too far from a "Bad King Cliff" account of the fate of IS.

That accounts for much, but only King Cliff — or Good King Gerry Healy — have absolute power. But where did they get it from?

Higgins is, first of all, a comedian, an entertainer. Mock-"historian" Higgins presents the tragedy of IS as a parade of tired jokes and ludicrous old factional slanders. He casually repeats the old factional lies about the Trotskyist Tendency, some of them the grotesque opposite of the truth — on Ireland, for example. Perhaps he has no choice, because he simply doesn't understand what happened either to IS or to himself.

The present article and two others that will follow is not a review.† *More Years For The Locust* is not a serious historical work; but it is a useful starting point and sounding board for an account of the experience of the Trotskyist Tendency of IS, and a reassessment of IS's evolution, and I will refer to Higgins's book from time to time. Providing entertainment is not my prime concern: telling the truth about the things Jim Higgins reduces to 'music-hall' comedian's patter, and about other things, is. It is best told in the first person, in terms of my own experience.

I WAS in IS from November 1968 to 4 December 1971. I represented the Trotskyist Tendency on the National Committee for those three years and was a participant in the things I will discuss. I saw, judged and reacted to IS in '68 and after, as a Leninist, and in retrospect I see its evolution as a negative illustration of the assessments of IS made by the Trotskyist Tendency in the light of the Lenin-Trotsky conception of a revolutionary party.

* *More Years For The Locust*, published recently by the International Socialist Group.

† See page 51.

The "Trotskyist Tendency" was a grouping in IS which took shape around a nucleus of eight members of the Workers' Fight group which fused with IS just before the November 1968 conference — when a "new IS", centralised and "Leninist", was proclaimed. It was expelled — "defused" — at a special conference in 1971. That special conference was the decisive turning point in the processes that transformed IS into what it is, a kitsch-Trotskyist sect with doctrinal quirks. It took a year or so for all the implications to fall into place. The "big event" in Higgins' life, the split in the old IS cadre three or four years later, was a split in the group whose open, undisguised, factional dictatorship was established in 1971-2. A formal ban of "generalised" opposition made IS into a one-faction sect. It was an important staging post on the road chosen in 1971, but no more than that. 4 December 1971 was the watershed.

Workers' Fight/the Trotskyist Tendency and IS — now there was a hilarious story, and hilariously does Higgins tell it. Take as a representative example of his method and of his reliability, this general account of the "Trotskyist Tendency of IS". I choose to examine it for reasons that will not mystify the reader too much.

I quote from Jim Higgins.

"Workers' Fight was a tiny group with a handful of members in Manchester and a scattering in a couple of other places. They had been expelled from Healy's group, but there is nothing wrong with that, so had Cliff and, come to think of it, so had I. The story goes that Sean, who is hard of hearing, was forced, by Healy, to remove his hearing aid at the expulsion hearing, for fear it might be one of those Dick Tracy, two way radio, deaf aids. As if to prove that this expulsion was not a fluke, Sean and his comrades joined the RSL, only to find that they were up for expulsion once more. They let Sean keep his deaf aid, but they expelled him just the same. Now here he was signing up for IS. [...] The admission of Workers' Fight was essentially to acquire an ally in the move to democratic centralism and to help Colin Barker in Manchester, where the majority of the branch leaned to libertarianism. In the event it helped neither of these objectives but Matgamna was able to help himself to a few members."*

Since we are all comedians now, let us examine Higgins' story and thereby also examine Higgins as "historian" and the value of his book as 'history'. Gerry Healy paranoia stories are the equivalent of mother-in-law jokes for the left-wing vaudeville performer; deaf man jokes, even in the good old pre PC days, were rarer, left by the less discerning left-wing comedian to the *Dandy* and the *Beano* alongside Desperate Jim, Korky the Sectarian, Biffo the Faction Fighter. There is an element of truth in the story of Gerry Healy and my hearing-aid, though Higgins radically misunderstands what was going on, reducing it to Gerry Healy paranoia stereotypes. We are, let us remember, still in the land of the tellers of funny and not-so-funny stories.

I was tried and expelled from the SLL in September 1963. I received a letter in mid week from Gerry Healy, the group's National Secretary, summoning me to appear the following Friday, two or three days later, before a committee of four people, set up by the group's Executive Committee to hear and try the charges against me. I was, the letter told me, being charged under a clause in the constitution which Healy's letter duly quoted in full, according to which disciplinary action should be taken against anyone who committed acts "contrary to the interests of the League and the working class". While quoting in full the constitutional clause under which I was to be tried, Healy's letter contained not one word about *what* I was supposed to have done, or failed to do, that was "contrary to the interests of the League and the working class" He never would elucidate; he couldn't.

A feeble attempt had been set in train to mount an accusation that I'd stolen group money; the centre denied I'd sent in money — in bank

notes; I had no receipt — for papers sold: but nobody in the branch who knew me, would for a moment entertain the idea that I had the attitude to the group such a miserable action would imply. Healy abandoned it, and "went to trial" without any charges at all!

I was to be hit on the head with the statue book itself, not with specific allegations about how I'd breached it. There were no charges, no allegations — and therefore no possible defence.

There had been tensions and conflicts and there was a lot of dissatisfaction in the branch. I was to be the chopping block, made an example of to intimidate the others. That was how things were done in the League. I'd seen it happen, and the first time I'd witnessed it, at the 1961 conference, I had been thrown into a serious crisis of confidence in myself and everything else for shame that I'd sat through it without protesting. I understood what was happening, but I was not prepared to play my allotted part in the sado-masochistic ritual of accusation, confession and self-denigration typical of the SLL. The hard core of the Healy group was a selection of people able, eager or willing to play a part in such rituals.

I loathed that system, the relationships within it, the brutality that kept it dynamic and self-sustaining. For a long time after I'd first seen it in rather mild operation at the 1961 conference I'd had great difficulty forcing myself to stay in the organisation. But this was, I believed, the revolutionary organisation. And I? How much of my repulsion was a disguised excuse for my own political and organisational inadequacies? There was no alternative to the SLL that I could see. What could be done now for revolutionary socialism had to be done here. The alternative was to desert the cause of socialism as it actually was in my real world. The revolutionary who pits himself against the immense power

of capitalism and yet cannot conceive that there are things more important than himself, his feelings, perceptions, experience, or even his continued existence, is a contradiction in terms... Classic dilemmas. Generations of CPers had faced them; generations of SLLers did too.

Between the ages of 15 and 18, I had made a long and tortuous journey to Trotskyism on my own from a deeply

felt Catholicism entwined symbiotically with a sense of national identity which had structured the way I saw the world. This meant that I had a political axis of my own, distinct from my relationship to the League and, reading the books of the movement, enough independence to judge the League according to the politics and tradition it claimed as its own. In short, I had a political 'hinterland'.

I had read and re-read Trotsky on Stalinism and the destruction of the Bolshevik Party, and I did not pretend to myself that the practices of the Healy regime were 'Trotskyism'. It was known that I loathed the Healy system and, from his own point of view, there was therefore no incongruity in Healy — who must over the years have developed an

* There is more in a similar vein including a culling of phrases, all reason and explanation cut away, from an introduction I wrote in 1970 to a Trotskyist Tendency collection of articles by Trotsky on the class character of the USSR. By way of a comment on how easily Cliff could have dealt with the disjointed phrases he quotes, Higgins even pretends that this is a representative sample of the 3,000 word introductory article and of what we said on this question! It is important that the reader grasps that for us it was never the decisive difference. In immediate practical politics, there were *never* any differences on attitudes to Stalinism or on a working class anti-Stalinist programme for the workers and oppressed nations in the Stalinist states. I will discuss this separately and establish exactly what the differences were. Understandably, he does not quote any of the things we said about what would happen to the organisation, and which the IS opposition group (Jim Higgins *et al*) would belatedly echo. But I will, in due course.

He rewrites history on many points. For example, the first attempt to get the group to orientate towards the goal of creating a rank and file trade union movement was made by the Trotskyist Tendency through the Manchester branch and proposed at the National Committee by Colin Barker and myself. The idea was part of the platform of the Trotskyist Tendency. But Higgins is not interested in the actual history of the group. I will deal separately with specific questions such as Ireland, and the semi-expulsion of Trotskyist Tendency branches in 1969.

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instinct about people in relation to his system, about who could be reshaped and who could not — picking on me.

On the other hand, I believed in the League and what I thought it represented politically. I had spent nearly four of my 22 years in it. On one level, unpleasant though I find the idea, I even believed in Healy. I was a devoted SLLer — the victims in these rituals always were — and would remain an active supporter of the League for 14 months after these events.

I had tried to anticipate the charges that were not made by making a list of all possible faults, real and imaginary or concocted out of malice, that could be laid against me; and I tried to avoid disruption of sales of the weekly paper, *The Newsletter*, for which I was responsible by double checking in advance that pub-sales, with the new issue of the paper, would go ahead as planned: and then I went to the Crown and Anchor pub, where our branch met, to be tried by the leaders of the revolutionary organisation for unspecified “actions harmful to the League and the working class.”

I bought a bottle of porter and, glass in hand, went upstairs. People normally took drinks to branch meetings; if I was exceptional it was in that I was still very much the adolescent ascetic, and rarely drank at all. I entered the meeting room and found the members of the court — Gerry Healy, Cliff Slaughter, Jack Gale and Jimmy Rand — already present, together with a good part of the branch, including most of the people I thought I’d organised to do the regular Friday night pub sale with the new paper that evening. Healy and Slaughter had thought the political education the comrades would receive from the events they would witness more important than routine branch work.

Eventually, almost the whole branch would be in attendance, sitting at one end of the room, slightly back from the big table around which the ‘court’ and I sat, like the audience in an American courtroom scene in a movie. When I appeared at the door, Healy, who was a tiny pudgy man with an enormous, high-coloured, disproportionately — or so it seemed — large head, with very sparse hair that looked like it had been drawn by an eyebrow pencil on his scalp, and tiny, always sore-looking eyes. He looked like a bad-tempered gnome some joking bad fairy had imprisoned incongruously in a lounge suit. He bristled — and he was very good at bristling — and pointed to the glass in my hand. He said: “Take that out of this room! We will not have drink in our meetings!”

I took it for what it was, a first bit of softening up and replied that people normally took drink into meetings. I forget what he said, but I went back downstairs. That mild but alerting taste of the intimidatory stuff, followed by a respite, was unintentionally helpful to me.

As the chair, Jimmy Rand called the meeting to order. I placed the body of my National Health-issue hearing-aid on the table in front of me — in a pocket it tended to pick up every rustle of clothes and magnify the noise, and I found it normally unusable — and went to put the earpiece in my ear. Healy and everyone else in the room had seen me do this before. Partially deaf, and having tinnitus — permanent noise that increases and becomes even more obtrusive with higher levels of stress or tension — I sometimes could not follow what was going on in a meeting of any size. I’d taken to using this machine, cumbersome and useless though it usually was, for most of my needs, so that I could better follow the ebb and flow of discussion in a meeting.

Now, as I uncoiled the cord and raised the earpiece towards my head, Healy leaned forward, staring intently at me. “What is *that*?” he said very sternly. “Is that a tape recorder you have there?”

Certainly Healy had seen it before: being a sensitive fellow, he had made a joke about it from the platform of a meeting in Liverpool a couple of months earlier.

Alerted and stiffened by the earlier incident, I said: “You know very well what it is. I refuse to pretend that this is a serious question. But if you want to examine it, go ahead — here”, and I held out the cream-coloured, oblong body of the little machine to him, sitting exactly across the table from me. He refused to take it, face and enormous bald head getting extremely red and angry looking, jiggling slightly with

fighting-cock energy on his seat, eyes and manner threatening.

“No! I want you to *answer* me: is it a tape recorder? We are entitled to ask such questions and have them answered.” I again refused to treat it as a serious question: “This is just bullying”. But, I repeated, that he could examine it if he liked. This exchange went on, back and forth, for a while, five minutes, perhaps ten, with Healy’s voice rising like his colour and his manner increasingly angry and suggestive of a man about to jump at me. He would glare at me with a fixed, angry stare and clenched little mouth in a very red face; and sometimes he would look histrionically at the audience down the room at the edge of the table as if to say — there, see what I have to put up with. I remember my friend Malcolm, very big and somewhat overweight, a Country and Western singer before he took up politics, who was able to dramatise and project and thus function as a Young Socialists youth leader in a way I could never hope to; in private he was far more critical than I was, and much less political about it. As a response to this meeting, he would go out of politics for a long time within a few weeks. He sat there silently wringing his hands, with a handkerchief clamped between them, afraid of being next in line for a psychological roughing-up and possibly afraid I would say something to “implicate” him.

Finally, I gave in. Trying to make my voice convey a continued denial that I took the question seriously, I said, enunciating with as much deliberate contempt as I could muster: “No, it is *not* a tape recorder.” He said something in acknowledgement; possibly “Thank you”. Evidently, he felt he had made his point. He made no attempt to examine the hearing-aid, which I then put in my ear. It had had nothing to do with “security” — or Healy’s ‘paranoia’. It was an exercise in intimidation and a demonstration of power and the “rights of the leadership” to the rest of the meeting, and a relegation of me to the status of suspicious outsider; no longer one of ‘us’.

Now the chair called on Prosecutor Healy to make the case against me. He delivered a strong, very heated and very angry, generalised diatribe — I was a critic by nature, resentful of authority, as they had seen already that evening, always suspicious of the leadership, and — I remember the phrase distinctly — therefore a “running sore” in the branch. I was “still fighting” my father. And so on. When Healy had finished, the Chair called on me to reply; everything was seemingly very democratic. So, formally, was the SLL constitution under which, or rather with which, I was charged.

These sorts of events were no revelation to me; I believed one had to be objective and impersonal about such things and that my experience could not be the measure of the League, still less of the purposes for which it existed.

I had no intention of ‘breaking’ with the organisation, even though I was not prepared to grovel or let myself be broken politically or play any of the set roles in the sado-masochistic ceremonies and rituals. Shaken by the force of the verbal assault — Healy was very good at what he did — I found it hard to reply to the general abuse, character assassination and condemnation; there had been no specific charges of any sort, nothing on the list I’d made, very little to catch hold of for a reply. And, of course, some of it was psychologically true. I knew better than Healy that I was still “fighting my father” — or rather, what Michael Bakunin had called the “God-father-state nexus”. But it had little direct bearing on the SLL or my relationship to it.

I was a boy trying to grow up, trying to bring what I found in myself into alignment with what I wanted to do in the world. I had subordinated my instinctive need to fight the “God-father-state-nexus” to Marxist political reason. If I had not been governed by belief in the need for a “revolutionary party” and seen membership in the SLL as the necessary way to work for socialism, then I’d have acted on my first instinct after the 1961 conference and ‘run’.

I MUMBLED a very brief and ineffective but unapologetic reply, whose content I no longer recall. Then, according to the preordained ritual, other members of the ‘court’ and one or two of their partisans in the branch had a go at me, repeating and amplifying what Healy

had said. That would have happened, even if I had not been “defiant”. It was as much a part of the ceremony as the altar boy’s responses to the priest at the Mass. Only the tone would have varied.

In the course of this, recovering from the effects of Healy’s expert psychological working over, it occurred to me how I could best put the point to the “audience” — that the problem was not fundamentally one of my attitude but of the way the League leadership routinely behaved: the meeting so far was itself a very good illustration of it! So I put my hand up and in due course was called by the chair.

I cited the meeting so far, and the “trial” without charges, let alone notification in advance of the charges, to explain my ‘reserve’ — it had, all told, been not a great deal more politically developed than that — and revulsion against the “with-brutality-if-at-all-possible” practices and principles of the League leadership towards the membership. I’d said only a few sentences, enough to let Healy get my drift and register that I was still defiant and refusing to play my allotted role of penitent and self-accuser — and that I was trying to hit back at him. This was not the plan at all, not behaviour he wanted the assembled branch to see someone “get away with”, thus learning the wrong lesson.

Healy leaned forward, face very red again and eyes glaring fixedly and fiercely, and started to pound the table with his fist. “Stop! Stop right there! *I’m not going to allow you* to continue.” His banging and shouting made it impossible for me to continue, so I turned to Jimmy Rand, presiding as chair at the narrow end of the table, to my left, and appealed to him to protect my right to speak. If he had done that, he would himself have immediately become the target for Healy and for everyone else in the meeting who did not want to be a target. It was a narrow set of choices in the League! If he wanted to avoid that, he had to obey Healy. He refused to back me and instead made a memorable speech about ‘dialectical chairmanship’ — he didn’t use the phrase — denouncing ‘formal democracy’.

“We”, he said, were “Marxists, not formal democrats.” Dialecticians. We “allow our leadership to make whatever points they think necessary.” He repeated Healy’s phrase that he would not allow me to continue. He then, having silenced me, called on Healy to speak. Healy delivered more abuse, ending with an order to me, backed by the chair, that I must “now leave the meeting” so “we can talk to our people”.

I should have insisted that I had equal rights as a branch member and refused to leave. Perhaps physical intimidation — there was a strong atmosphere of latent, only just held back violence — was part of the reason, but I did not. It did not occur to me until long after. One of the things the League did to you was to more or less completely destroy the idea that you had any such a thing as personal rights vis-à-vis “the movement”. It was one of the ways the spirit of devotion and selflessness necessary to our common enterprise was abused — and in vast numbers of people passing through Healy’s “machine for maiming militants” ultimately destroyed and, not infrequently, turned into its own grotesque petit-bourgeois opposite.

I went down to the pub and, for the first time in my life, bought whiskey, and drank it, movie-style, in one gulp! On one level I felt relief. That mystified me, because I had no intention of “breaking”, and didn’t for over a year. I was not, I believed — and I was right to believe it — the measure of the revolutionary organisation, or Gerry Healy the measure of Trotskyism.

There is more to the story. I had no sense — despite Healy’s diatribe — of being politically or personally in the wrong, or that it was my political duty to accept their views without consent of my own reason, or to abandon my own ideas of right and wrong, and let them obliterate the hard-won sense of my own integrity. Healy was almost right: I *was* still fighting — the priests, but not anachronistically! With some accuracy, he might have called me a Protestant: but that would have carried an implied characterisation of what *he* was.

Politically, I was caught in murderous contradictions — believing in Healy’s ‘Church’ while claiming a right, denial of which was fundamental to Healy’s system, to form my own judgements. I *understood*

very little, but I saw the SLL regime in the light of Trotsky’s manifold condemnations of the Stalinist Party and Communist International regimes.

I went to the branch meeting on the following Monday evening, still in a mood of moral and political righteousness, intending to fight back. I arrived early and found Healy, Slaughter and two or three branch members present. Healy and Slaughter were visibly surprised to see me and went into a huddle, heads close together. When they came out of it, Healy shouted across the room to me: “Do you know you’ve been expelled?” I said in reply: “How could I have been expelled? Who expelled me?” He replied that the Organisation Committee had met over the weekend and expelled me. Almost certainly, he was lying. Healy didn’t need committees, except as camouflage. I can’t remember whether or not I thought that then. I did, I think. He shouted across to me again: “If you want to continue working with the League, you must from now on do as I tell you. I’m telling you to leave the meeting — immediately.” I did.

Though there was probably an element of physical intimidation in it, the fundamental thing was that I was politically still “League”. I had every intention of remaining with the League politically and did. I learned later that when he proposed that the branch expel me Healy cited as one reason my “contemptuous attitude” in not turning up for this important meeting! No-one who had seen me — they included my friend who’d been wringing his hands — said a word to contradict him. A few days later I met one of the comrades — Ralph, who had a lurching limping walk, having been disabled in a car-crash, and as he came towards me he assailed me in his loud, hectoring, friendly, Welsh voice: “So, why didn’t you come to the branch meeting then, and put your case?” I told him I had. Without pausing for breath he said: “Well, Healy was right. Of course, he was right...”*

HIGGINS the comedian reduced the story as he heard it to the Gerry Healy paranoia stereotype, the mother-in-law joke amalgamated with a *Dandy* ear-trumpet joke. Why shouldn’t he? That’s how his mind works. The comedian has his values!

The rest of what I quoted from Higgins is no more solidly based. The original nucleus of *Workers’ Fight* were Rachel Lever, Phil Semp and myself. I was expelled from the SLL alone and broke politically with it 14 months later on my own. Phil Semp, a student at Leeds University, where his tutor was Cliff Slaughter, was involved in my expulsion — to be precise, he was one of a number of raw young people pulled into the Manchester branch to ensure Healy and Slaughter had a majority in the branch to expel me! After I broke with the SLL politically, Phil and I were both in Cheetham Young Socialists and had remained personally friendly — what had happened in the SLL was “not personal” and it was a matter of political pride not to take it personally. A few weeks after my expulsion I’d had to pick up the pieces of the youth work when Malcolm, the lad wringing his handkerchief at my ‘trial’, went back on the country and western circuit. I eventually got Phil Semp to agree with me. Neither Phil Semp nor I encountered Rachel Lever for a year after my political break from the SLL. None of us were expelled from Militant, either as a collective — we became a grouping in the Militant — or individually. We resigned.

If his treatment of the topics in the quote above is typical of Jim Higgins’ level of truth, accuracy and trustworthiness, then he plainly is not to be taken seriously.

Literary seriousness has many levels that interlace in several ways — the level of accurate recreation as truthfully as possible of the writer’s subjective experience; the level of honestly chronicling facts and events as the writer witnessed them, felt them, took part in them or can reconstruct them. The level of unsparingly truthful recreation — and in the history of political struggle this is a major test — of the true portrait of your opponents: truth like justice is indivisible. If it is not dispensed equally to those you despise as well as to yourself and your friends it does not count at all.†

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LEFT



Tony Cliff

In a nutshell, the story of IS's transformation and the emergence of the neo-Healyite SWP out of it is the story of how a very loose group with a family cult at the centre, grew, centralised itself, developed a 'machine' with the once seemingly benign cult figure in control of it and made independent by it.

In discussing the history of IS — Jim Higgins' book is an example of it — there is a danger of scapegoating Cliff. For people like Higgins the "Bageshot Question" arises. Walter Bageshot, the Victorian political economist and analyst of the British constitution, asked the question concerning the then reclusive Queen and her playboy son, the future Edward VII: How does it come about that "a retired widow and her unemployed son" can play the pivotal role in the legal structures of the British constitution? How could "Dr Ruth" achieve such power in the organisation that prided itself — to a considerable extent hypocritically, but that is another story — on its "democracy" and freedom from Gerry Healy-style dictatorship, and which had members who were not

self-evidently devoid of the will and capacity for independent thought?

A central part of the answer is that the group was always a family cult with Cliff and Cliff's family at the centre of the larger political family. People like Higgins were *first and foremost* cultists in this system. The growth of the "Democratic Centralist" IS machine after November 1968 only changed its *modus operandi*. Cliff was central to this system and Cliff's ideas and Cliff's "whim of iron" (as Higgins puts it) was central, but it depended for its effects on others. You cannot have a cult unless the person at the centre is himself a cultist, is not uncomfortable in it, or vulnerable to corrosive irony and self-disparagement. The cultist needs an infant's level of solipsistic iron-clad egomania, something close to the borders of pathology or — Gerry Healy at the end illustrates it — way beyond its borders. Yes. But however solipsistic the cultist, he is not, in fact, the sole inhabitant of the world or of the cult: the successful cultist needs cultists.

Higgins and his friends were cultists, that is why they proved helpless to stop Cliff when it came to their own purging. True love disrobes and disarms, and sometimes, as in Higgins' book, is left to mourn incomprehendingly, in a sad old age.

ONE way of examining this issue and of presenting a portrait of the group as it was in reality, is to look at the dispute in IS on the attitude to the European Community which Britain was due to join on 1 January 1972. This triggered both the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency and the final organisational entrenchment and open dictatorship of the Cliff group by the ban on more than ephemeral and limited dissent decreed at that conference, (with almost 40% voting against the decision).

That was one of the most remarkable things I ever witnessed in politics. Some background is necessary for an understanding of it. Initially, all the Trotskyist groups refused to join the CP and Tribune Labour left in opposing the European Community. We said that European working class unity was decisive: "In or out, the class fight goes on!" Then, one by one, in their characteristic ways, they jumped on the anti-EC bandwagon. IS was the last to do so, and it could at that point not do it other than blatantly and shamelessly, with its opportunist motives undis-

* So much of this story Higgins will undoubtedly have heard from me — ex-SLLers tend to swap tales like ex-soldiers comparing campaign medals or wounds. To my mind, however, the most interesting and instructive point of it was a sequel 11 years later. The chair of Healy's "court hearing", Jimmy Rand, was part of a big political family which broke with the CP over Hungary and a number of them were for years in the SLL. They all broke in the mid-'60s.

One of Jimmy Rand's brothers joined *Workers' Fight*. One evening, John Bloxam and I were in his house in Liverpool and, somehow, Jimmy Rand learned we were there and came round. Originally a bricklayer by trade, he had since gone to college and now lectured in English. He had moved a long way to the right and some of our comrades spoke of him as "almost" a "witch-hunter". I don't know if he was. His first words as he entered the room where: "Where's your hearing-aid?" Half-jeeringly, self-vindicating — no joke. Yet he *could not* have believed Healy at the time, that there was anything 'suspicious' about my hearing aid. He could not but have known perfectly well what was happening. In the circumstances, no-one but a crank could have seen it as a "security" issue — and Jimmy was no crank. The point at issue was one of Healy's rights and authority. Rand had behaved very badly as chair almost certainly — to judge by everything I ever saw of him, he was a thoughtful, decent fellow — against his own natural instincts. For peace of mind he had to rationalise. Healy controlled many League people thus: by making them complicit in his behaviour... That to me is the most interesting thing about this story. It was about intimidation and 'processing' members of the branch, not about 'security' and Gerry Healy paranoia.

In the more relaxed discussion that followed, Rand still thought Gerry Healy was Lenin — only now he didn't like Lenin. He summed up the Healyites for me, referring to bad experience of his own: 'Do you know what they are? They're bullies!' I'd guessed.

† Quite the most priceless bit of self-portraiture by Higgins is contained in this picture he paints of Andrew Hornung.

"Andrew Hornung, a strange young man who seemed to rather fancy himself in the role of tribune of the opposition. There was a certain theatricality about him that was quite endearing. On occasion he affected a flowing cloak and a silver topped cane, perhaps he thought they made him look Byronic. In fact it did, but after the fever took its deadly toll at Missaloughi. Hornung was the author of one of the more scabrous documents of the Trotskyist Tendency, called *Centrist Current*."

Now, I never saw Andrew with either cane or cloak. When I first caught sight of him in '67 or '68, he was noticeable for, then rare, shoulder-length hair, black and wavy, and an intricately shaped and cultivated beard and moustache. Maybe, having grown tired of Byron, he was going through his Jesus or his Dürer period. Students are, or used to be, like that. Next time I encountered him, at the IS conference in November 1968, he was a lot less pretty, having lost all his upper front teeth to a policeman's fist on an anti-Vietnam war demo. He had also been expelled from the University for being the organiser of a protest on the same issue which involved him in a face-to-face confrontation with a government minister, Patrick Gordon-Walker. In those days of mass student radicalism, very few "revolutionary" students took things as far as courting expulsion. Andrew then "colonised" himself for a while into an engineering factory.

The reader will by now have formulated a question: can Higgins and I be dealing with the same man? Yes, we are. He was serious, earnest and willing to incur inconvenience and personal loss for his politics. He tried to win me over to one of the IS semi-libertarian groups, the so-called Micro-faction, at the November '68 conference by arguing that Rosa Luxemburg had not "overestimated spontaneity" but "underrated it". I listened, but was perhaps too dumb to make sense of it. I met him by accident in a Manchester street early one evening and, after a ten or 12 hour discussion, by sunrise had persuaded him to join the Trotskyist Tendency!

He remained a member of the Tendency for 17 or 18 years. Active, responsible and often self-sacrificing — as a travelling organiser, for example, in the early '70s, living on next to nothing. In the late '70s he edited the weekly paper, *Workers' Action*, in tandem with Rachel Lever, a job performed with minimal resources which required that he work on it overnight once a week and then go into paid work (teaching at a Tech) without any sleep.

Now, it so happened that he and I did not for many years "get on". The group was not a clique, but a political formation, so it did not stop us working together.

He finally drifted away from politics into family life in 1986, having survived Jim Higgins in politics by six or seven years.

For sheer curmudgeonly injustice and presumption, characterising the person whose political life I've described, on the basis of a bit of student posturing in his early 20s, the prelude to two decades of serious political activity, is surely in a class of its own. An unpleasant self-characterising is there too in Higgins' few lines of quotation from a polemical pamphlet — *Centrist Current* — Andrew Hornung wrote early in '69 against a peculiar and peculiarly snooty Cliffite pseudo-faction calling itself "Marxist Current". The few lines from the final "peroration" which Higgins quotes are as unrepresentative of the pamphlet as a whole as the image of Andrew as a student playing Byron or Wilde or whoever, is untypical. It is over 30 pages, close on 20,000 words, long. It deals with many aspects of IS's work, theory and history, and with the then typical economic IS error of confusing sociology with politics, as seen by the Trotskyist Tendency.

Even in his little quote, Higgins misrepresents: for what he quotes from the final summing up is followed immediately by a long quotation from Trotsky's well-known letter to the SWP/USA urging "turn to the working class". I take full political responsibility for that pamphlet, and for its account of IS.

Hornung was effortlessly witty and on a good day he could be very funny. Maybe it's just a case of one comedian needing to bad-mouth a better one.

guised. As late as the Easter '71 conference the group voted wotj a big majority against the politics of the anti-EC campaign. There had long been a small minority against the group policy on the European Community — it included, ironically enough, John Palmer and the group's leading libertarian, the late Peter Sedgwick.

Two months after the Easter '71 conference, Tony Cliff and Chris Harman turned up at the NC with a small but lethal document covering two sides of A4, which, essentially, said: all the arguments we've used against joining the anti-EC campaign remain valid; but this has now become a battle between left and right in the labour movement, and in such a battle we are 'never neutral': we should side with the 'left' or we will be isolated. In that NC discussion, Cliff said, and when challenged repeated: "Tactics contradict principles."

But how, so long as politics aspires to be more than disjointed, episodic, unconnected, raw responses to events, or an ostensible 'response' to one event but with an eye to something else entirely, could IS 'side' with the Stalinist and Stalinist tinted Labour and trade union left on a political question on which they were mind-bogglingly insular and stupidly nationalist at best and at worst unashamed chauvinists? An issue, moreover, on which the CP line was unmistakably a mere reflex of USSR opposition to bourgeois moves towards European unity. Well, wrote Cliff and Harman, what we can do is repeat the group politics in any trade union branch discussion, then "*vote with the left*" — that is, with the chauvinists and little Englanders, thus repudiating what we had said in discussion!

Now, the aspiration to retain contact with workers and with "the left" is no contemptible one. But politics is politics and to argue as vehemently as the differences required against the CP/Tribune chauvinists and then vote with them — that was to invite and deserve ridicule. It would show that you had no confidence in your own politics, and put you in the role of fawning pup to those you allowed to determine your vote. It was impossible nonsense. In fact, a trick. Once the decision that we would vote in labour movement meetings against our own political line was carried at the NC it became necessary to justify it. Within a few weeks, *Socialist Worker* was making anti-European unity propaganda; in a short time, IS was amongst the least inhibited of the left-wing anti-EC campaigners.

If it's funny stories you want — there is a funny story for you: within weeks a massive conference majority on a subject that had been discussed for years, is turned on its head. But the really funny part of that very funny story is what the opposition to the change did and did not do.

The issue split the cadre of the Cliff tendency right down the middle. Even Paul Foot, high priest of the Cliff cultists, initially opposed Cliff. So did Higgins and a lot of others; a majority of the usually vocal people on the NC, in fact. Some of them went so far as to publish critical Internal Bulletin articles. But, what was to be *done* about it? *Either*, accept with conscience-salving protests, that the NC majority — it was not a big majority — could overturn the conference vote and bow down before the chauvinist tide — and it was chauvinism and there was a tidal wave of it, and what IS did within weeks of the Cliff-Harman document was haul down the banner of international socialism in face of it. *Or*, refuse to accept that this was a proper way to go about things. The only recourse then against the NC majority was a special conference. The constitution allowed for a special conference, if a certain proportion — in numerical terms, 23 branches then — of the group called for it.

Eventually, the Trotskyist Tendency decided to do that. The solid citizens of the group, such as Higgins, did not do it. Why not? After all, it was no small matter, this bowing down before the chauvinist wave in a political world where not only chauvinism but its even uglier brother racism was a feature of even the militant sections of the labour movement — London dockers had struck in support of Tory racist Enoch Powell — and the fascist National Front was a serious and growing force.

The Trotskyist Tendency watched with astonishment as it became clear that the Higginses of the group who could almost certainly have got a majority against bowing down to the nationalists, had no intention

of making a fight of it — that, consciences salved with protests, they were just going to go along with Cliff! Why? Habit and deference were, I think, part of it. For all their pretensions at independence they were and had been the core group of a cult. Paul Foot, opposing Cliff on the NC, quickly came to heel and published an Internal Bulletin article recanting, called, appropriately, "Confession". The jokiness could not disguise the fact that that is exactly what it was. The others did not 'confess'; but they acquiesced.

They believed, from habit and experience, that Cliff's instinct or, as the expression went, Cliff's 'nose' for these things was better than their own; they wanted the advantages the change of line would — nobody disputed it — bring and to avoid the possible costs of remaining internationalists; and they did not want to rock the IS boat or antagonise Cliff. They knew the group was volatile. They saw themselves as an elite, special people. The whole old pre-'68 IS system of custom, practice, deference, division of labour, allowed them to combine the satisfaction of saying no to Cliff with the joys and advantages of having their political virtue forced. To put it very politely, theirs was easy virtue.

The Trotskyist Tendency decided that it could not peacefully accept the nationalist turn, and mounted a campaign for a special conference. We saw this latest astonishing leap — nothing less than a cynical playing with chauvinism! — as emblematic of fundamental things we said were wrong with the organisation's politics, methods and tradition. The rules for calling a special conference were not as tight as the Executive Committee would have found convenient, so an arbitrary date was set by which the requisite percentage — 23 branches — of the group would have to declare for a special conference, or the initiative would lapse. Putting a final date on it was not in itself unreasonable; the way it was used was scandalous.

We got the support of 23 branches, but we did not get a special conference — not on the European Community question.

The new-minted national secretary, Duncan Hallas, said that notification from one of the 23 branches of support for a special conference had arrived a day late. It was not to be counted. He was ruling it out of order. The matter was now settled. The secretary of the 23rd branch said he'd posted it on time. Probably Hallas was lying, but in any case such rigid interpretations of an arbitrary committee-decreed date rule was, as far as I know, something new in the group. Thus a typical piece of labour bureaucrat's chicanery was their recourse against the threat of having to face the membership. Perhaps some of them — Duncan Hallas, maybe — saw it as part of "proletarianising" IS!

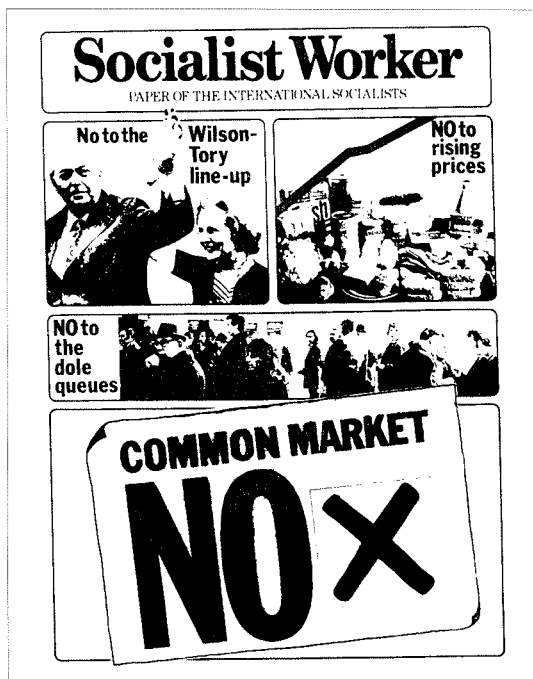
The leadership knew they would most likely lose at a special conference. And our co-thinkers on the political question in dispute, like Higgins, knew that at a special conference they would either knuckle under à la Foot and betray their own politics or else *fight* Cliff. They would do neither.

The Trotskyist Tendency's co-thinkers on the issue had refused to either take the lead in the special conference campaign or to back us. Nor did any of them protest at the secretary's blatant and certain chicanery and the way the members who had voted overwhelmingly at the recent conference against the group's new line on the European Community were cheated of their rights and the group denied the chance to wash itself clean of the nationalist mud.

That sort of behaviour is a textbook example of what the Trotskyist Tendency, after Trotsky, meant by saying IS was a "centrist" organisation.

The Higginses and the Birchalls *wrote* and I'd heard them speak as if they thought it was very important; but they *acted*, or rather did not act, these once-proud "Luxemburgists" — Luxemburgists! — as if it did not matter that the organisation had buckled before the nationalist wave. Nor was it that they were mollified until it was too late by a show of restraint and decorum by the new-hatched anti-Europeans. There was no time for that. The commitment to vote against our own politics ruled that out. It was just too absurd: the *politics* had to be got into some sort of sensible alignment with the vote — and quickly. The politics had to be changed. And they were — very quickly and with no more "autho-

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tant anti-EC *propaganda* in *Socialist Worker*. The minority on the NC, who almost certainly represented a big majority of the group when the line was changed, were allowed little acclimatisation time and given little or nothing to save their faces. Things would get worse, but by the time the last date for supporting a special conference or protesting against the bureaucratic cheating of the 23 branches fell due, no-one with a political IQ higher than 50 could fail to see the enormity of what had happened and the extent of the falling off from the politics proclaimed in the very name of the group. Yet, even then, the drive for a special conference remained exclusively the project of the Trotskyist Tendency and some allies here and there.

What the European Community affair showed was that either the group would be genuinely democratic — or become a typical kitsch-Trotskyist bureaucratic sect. A lot of the older people thought that they could go back to the good old pre-'68 IS circle days. But the group *couldn't* go back.

The group was supposedly run under the democratic and centralised constitution of 1968. *In fact*, it dealt with the change of line on Europe in the manner of the old pre-'68 Cliff-family circle group — 'nose', whim, forcing it through, people disagreeing but 'knowing their place' and Cliff's prerogatives. To do this, to stop the formal rules being used to subvert and cut across this old, cosy, circle-cult way of doing things, to stop the members from 'intervening' or, rather, to stop the Trotskyist Tendency from organising the members to intervene, they had to work outside the '68 constitution — they had to lay down tight rules to restrict the effort to appeal to the members and, then, even within their own new-made rules, to cheat. The nominal democracy had come into sharp and dangerous contradiction with the actuality of the group, the group leadership, and the cultist way in which the group had continued to be led after '68 within the democratic façade.

It was not only internal group concerns; it was the class struggle and their conception of their responsibility to it. Not only could the Cliff group have lost at a special conference — and I think they would certainly have lost; the evidence of their behaviour suggest they thought that too — but the effect on the external work of the group, according to their calculations, would have been seriously damaging to the group's prospects: they had, in their own organisational concerns and calculations good *reasons* for jumping into the nationalist camp.

Cliff and his allies on one side and the old ISers like Higgins on the other, looked at each other like lovers becalmed and emotionally exhausted after a fight and with the knowledge that they have come close to a serious rupture neither wanted. The first thing they did was to turn with great combined fury on the Trotskyist Tendency; our co-thinkers

risation" than the absurd and dishonest NC decision.

Within a few weeks of the NC vote, Duncan Hallas, the suppleness new National Secretary — who was himself a very recently born-again anti-European — was making bla-

on the defining and detonating political question in dispute, with at least as much fury as those whose opportunist hands we had tried to tie. It was time to settle accounts with the Trotskyist Tendency!

Its existence was intolerable. Yet that was a misunderstanding insofar as it grew out of the European Community dispute — and that was its starting point and the origin of the Grand Coalition to throw the Trotskyist Tendency out. Good or bad, villain or Bolshevik, the Trotskyist Tendency was not in itself their problem. Democracy was. Any system that tied down and limited Cliff or his machine — or that might tie them down and impose restraints on them — was. The 4 December 1971 conference set the stamp of a one-faction sect on IS, formally ruling out anything other than ephemeral opposition.

The first issue of a new series of *Workers' Fight*, which came out on 14 January 1972, commented:

"Why we were expelled from IS:

"Stripping away the hysteria and the exaggerations which dominated the internal struggle leading up to the December 4th Conference, the IS leadership's explanation for the expulsion move was that the Trotskyist Tendency called IS centrist (e.g. vacillating between reformism and revolutionary politics, being revolutionary in words but reneging in the crunch) and that this was intolerable.

"But this explains nothing. We never characterised IS otherwise, either before the 1968 fusion or after. We said clearly when we joined that we thought IS would only be changed as a result of a serious internal struggle.

"The IS leaders have created — often through good and useful work — a largish organisation, most of whose members are young and politically inexperienced, and consequently there is an absence of a serious and stable political basis for their political domination of the Group. They rely increasingly on demagogic manipulation of the members, and on a bureaucratic machine which has qualitatively changed and worsened the internal life of the IS Group.

"With increasing reliance for their control on a machine and on demagoguery, real democracy becomes a threat. Or rather, the existence of an organised Tendency whose politics challenge the machine is a threat.

"Politically, the expulsion indicates a qualitatively bureaucratic hardening of IS. Now the leadership openly proclaims its right, when faced with an opposition tendency, which has fundamental political differences, to resort to pre-emptive expulsions, even when such a tendency is a disciplined part of the organisation. Thus they claim and proclaim their right to sterilise the organisation politically.

"The expulsion had the trappings of democracy, and no liberal could object. But Leninist democracy has nothing in common with the bare, empty forms, filled by the demagoguery and witch-hunting and machine manipulation with which the IS leadership filled such forms.

"The expulsion of *Workers' Fight* is a disruptive and sectarian blow to left unity. Instead of practical concentration on the constructive work we can do, and have done, together with the majority of IS, and the creation of a Bolshevik internal democracy, we have one more split on the left.

"The real tragedy, though, is that the opportunities for the revolutionary left which existed in 1968 should have led only to the consolidation of a tightly controlled left-centrist sect, which is most certainly what IS now is."

● *A Workers' Liberty clippings book containing contributions to our series on the "IS/SWP 'tradition'" is available price £1 plus 38p postage from the Workers' Liberty address. Contributors include: John Palmer, Hilary Wainwright, Ken Coates MEP.*