The experience of the left

The "IS-SWP" tradition

Introduction to the symposium

By Sean Matgamna*

THE OFFICIAL membership figures of the SWP — 9,000 — are very inflated. Moreover, "membership" is a loose category for the SWP, as a supporter of this magazine with a humorous bent proved on one of the big miners' demos two years ago when he managed to pick up no less than 6 SWP membership cards in under an hour! The SWP itself counts 300 branches and reckons on 5 to 6 active members per branch — a total of 1,500 to 2,000 active members.

Nevertheless, the SWP is, despite everything, the biggest self-styled revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain today. More than that: like a wild combine harvester out of control, it has over the years left a large number of former members sprawling like trussed wheat on the ground over which it has zig-zagged. There are a lot of ex-IS-SWP people around.

In this respect 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. Its highest value on paper is *militancy*. In fact much of its militancy and ultra-leftism are things of rhetoric only. In practice it is sometimes right-wing in the trade unions and even in the National Union of Students. 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.

Everything it says and does politically seems to be calculated in exactly the same way — though for different goals — as the Labour Party leaders calculate what they say: "What will sell." 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. Some seek in recoil to move back to the politics of an earlier, supposedly better, period of the group's history. Most (sometimes they are the same people) continue to see Cliff as Lenin, only now they denounce "Lenin".

One reason for this, and a big one, is that they understand neither the group's dynamic, nor its real history — that is, how it came to be the thing against which they recoil. The real history of the organisation is not accessible to them; at best they know the official histories produced by such as Ian Birchall — a mix of hagiography, mythology and lies of (at best) omission.

Such people have been taught to believe, for example, that the theory of state capitalism allowed the Cliff group uniquely to maintain an orientation to the working class in the '50s and '60s. In fact all the Trotskyist groups had such an orientation, with the exception after '68 of the IMG. What distinguished the Cliff group (certainly in the '60s) was its paucity of working-class members and its riches — in more senses than one — in the possession of upper middle-class people.

To help traumatised ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers the real history of what has, numerically, become the most important organisation on the revolutionary left, we publish the symposium that follows. There will be other contributions in subsequent issues. We invite contributions. We hope a broad dialogue develops. It should go without saying, but doesn't, so I will say it here, that the discussion is completely free. Should representatives of the SWP wish to participate, they will be welcome.

Those who would dismiss the concerns of this symposium as "sectarian" or "navel-gazing" radically miss the point, I think. We publish *Workers' Liberty* because we want to arm the working class in the class struggle and because we want to build a revolutionary socialist organisation — a movement that succeeds in being all that the SWP proclaims it is and fails resoundingly to be. The *experience* of the work of trying to build the Marxist movement is a great part of the capital we have for that work in the future. That experience needs to be honestly recorded, and assessed, in order that it can be learned from.

The notion that a magazine like *Workers' Liberty* should pretend to be above such concerns is really the idea that "magazines" deal with generalities, and with theory, but not with the practical experience of the revolutionaries. In contrast to the SWP our methods are open discussion, but the building of a Marxist movement is our *central* concern too — a healthy movement integrated with the working class and its organisations. Therefore the record of the practical experience of Marxists in attempting it is of fundamental concern to us.

Those who participate in this symposium hold not one but many standpoints. Some 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.

* The author was a member of the National Committee of the IS from November 1968 to December 1971.

Tony Cliff: the central leader of the International Socialists, and today's SWP

For documentation about the day to day politics of the SWP in the trade unions and student movement, and on political issues like the call two years ago for a general strike see the pamphlets: *The Fake Ultra-Left, A Tragedy of the Left: Socialist Worker and its splits* and *Is the SWP an alternative?*

How can you talk about a "tradition" or a "trend"?

By Ken Coates MEP*

I LEFT the Communist Party in 1953. John Christie was on trial for the Rillington Place murders and the Party's paper, the *Daily Worker*, was campaigning on the point that convictions should not be based solely on confessions. Timothy Evans had been previously hanged for these murders on the basis of a confession.

But at the show trials in Eastern Europe leading Communists had been executed on the basis of their own confessions. I think the trial at the time was Slansky in Czechoslovakia.

I looked into the matter and read the evidence of previous, similar trials — like the Rajk trial.

I thought that all this was quite wrong. I raised the issue and then left the Communist Party.

Khrushchev's reconciliation with Tito in 1955 was quite a blow to the story about the trials — which had been based on Tito being an agent of the Nazis and the Americans. Communist Party members who had known that I had raised questions about the trials began to visit me.

I knew something was badly wrong and I began to study in detail the evidence given in the show trials in Russia.

Anyway, by 1956 there was quite a circle of us in Nottingham. When Khrushchev made his secret speech, which was leaked in the *Observer*, I thought it was a very good thing. I thought that there was going to be a renewal. So I contacted the Communist Party's District Secretary — who was as miserable as sin about the speech! — and rejoined.

We then had a debate which very quickly led to my expulsion. The issue was an appeal for socialist unity, written by GDH Cole, which appeared in the *Daily Worker*. Cole's conditions for unity included the idea that those who had been vilified should receive their due honour. That would have meant the rehabilitation of a lot of executed people.

I got up a response from Nottingham Communists. The two people who signed the letter with me, representing quite a number of other people, were John Daniels and George Granger. Daniels was the senior among us.

The letter I drafted to the *Daily Worker* said that we agreed with Cole's proposals and that we planned to respond by establishing a group in the Communist Party called "Victory for Socialism by Democratising the Communist Party." They were ever so pleased with that!

We circulated the letter to the rest of the left press and to prominent socialists. There was an embargo on publication which was broken in a sensational manner. The *Daily Express* leaked the letter and splashed a story across the front page.

John Daniels found the whole of the press in his front garden. Being an irascible chap he shouted at them and threw water at them through a window. The whole event gave the Party an opportunity to hold an inquiry and expel us.

I attended the hearing. As it happened I was carrying the three volumes of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* which I had just got out of the library. That did not please the District Secretary either!

Then I wandered about looking for a home. I joined the Labour Party and I also talked to the various groups who were beginning to take an interest in Communists and ex-Communists.

I talked to Gerry Healy and was very unimpressed. John Daniels was more impressed with Healy and eventually threw in his lot with that group, becoming editor of Healy's *Labour Review*.

Healy came across as a very dishonest fellow. He sat down with a group of us in order to explain the show trials. Well, I'd read about the trials and knew that Healy did not know what he was talking about. That was fair enough — there is no reason

* Ken Coates was on the first editorial board of the *International Socialism* journal.

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.

Glossary

Slansky: Rudolf Slansky, secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, was hanged in December 1952 after being convicted as a "Trotskyite, Titoite, Zionist traitor, in the service of American imperialism."

Rajk: Laszlo Rajk, a leader of the Hungarian CP, was hanged as a "Titoite" and "secret agent" in 1949.

Tito: leader of the Yugoslav CP. In conflict with the USSR, 1948-55.

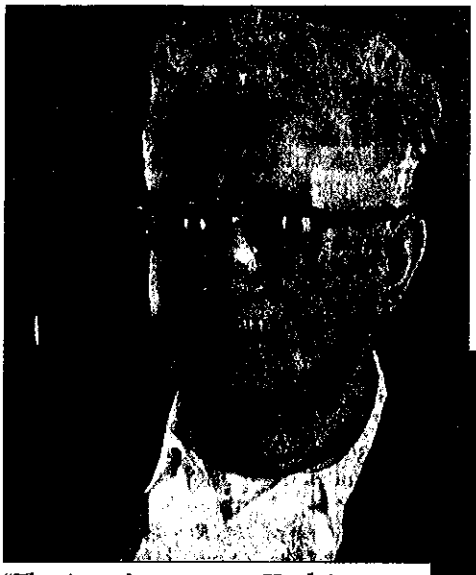
Healy: leader of what was the biggest Trotskyist group in Britain between 1949 and the early 1970s. It was called the Socialist Labour League (from 1959) and then Workers' Revolutionary Party (from 1973). From the late 1970s it became dependent on money from Libya, Iraq, etc; in 1985 it collapsed and scattered.

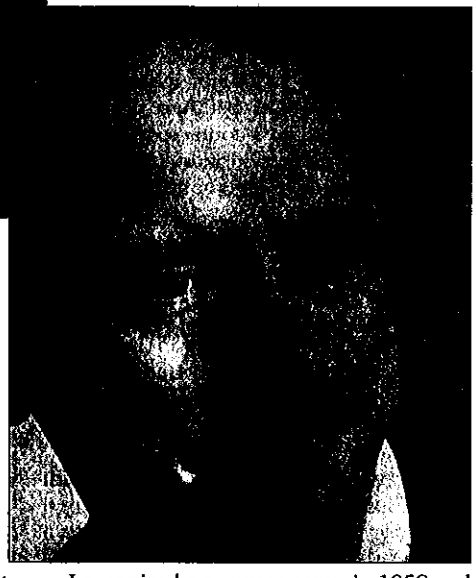
"Luxemburgism": Rosa Luxemburg, the founding leader of the German Communist Party in 1918, had criticised Lenin's views on organisation as over-centralist in 1904. In the 1960s Tony Cliff built on this criticism an allegedly "Luxemburgist" (as against "Leninist") idea of organisation.

Powell's speech: Enoch Powell, then a leading Tory, made a speech in 1968 denouncing black immigration and predicting "rivers of blood."

Ho Chi Minh: leader of the Vietnamese Stalinists from the 1940s to his death in 1969.

Roger Rosewell: one-time industrial organiser of IS, now a leading Tory propagandist.





"The Americans wrote Healy's polemics — at least those that were longer than two paragraphs. A lot of Cliff's ideas came from Shachtman."
Pictured top: James P Cannon; right: Max Shachtman

for him to have known all the detail. But what Healy did not know, he made up. Utterly mendacious!

Pat Jordan was around. He went down to London and met Ted Grant and Tony Cliff.

Cliff was busy being opportunist. He published a pamphlet — in 1957, I think — called *Why we left the Communist Party*. It was all Cliff's own work but Pat got a lot of signatures of ex-Party members from Nottingham for it.

We were not very impressed by the exercise and it was probably counterproductive. It addressed preconceptions we were supposed to have rather than looking at matters that actually concerned us.

There were 10,000 people in our shoes who were struggling with a wide range of dilemmas. It would have been much better to have interviewed us — but that was not how any of the groups operated, they all worked in a very didactic way. They were all really rather narrow and had less political experience than we did. It was necessary to be able to listen — something none of the groups were able to do.

Cliff was nicer and more scholarly than Healy and one of the attractive things about his organisation was its apparent openness. I think it was true, however, that at its core was an extended family group around Cliff.

At that time Cliff was obsessed with a dialogue with the rightward edge of what he considered possible — that meant Henry Collins, an Oxford tutor. For a long time Collins was the main non-inner circle person who contributed to Cliff's publications.

We set up a Socialist Forum and I became a leading light in the Labour student organisation, NALSO.

I organised a summer camp in 1958 and again in 1959. Everyone came along, together with *New Left Review*, and from these events the Cliff and Healy groups got student bases. People from Oxford and Cambridge were there in some numbers and all the organisations made some recruits. From Oxford and Cambridge the groups diffused outwards through the university system.

"Cliff found that Luxemburgism was convenient. It was something he could hold up to those being expelled elsewhere, which promised a comfortable home."

The culture was very arid. What the Cliff and Healy organisations brought to the British working-class movement was brought in from outside. They did not generate useful ideas themselves, but what they did do was import a culture from the American left — from Shachtman and Cannon. In this respect the British groups had a sort of technical function.

The Americans wrote Healy's polemics — at least those that were longer than two paragraphs. A lot of Cliff's ideas came from Shachtman. "Neither Washington nor Moscow" came from the Shachtman paper, *Labor Action*, which their group circulated.

Understand that both sets of Americans were very much better educated, very much more interested in ideas than the British. They had a political culture and intellectual rigour wholly lacking among the British.

Among all the groups Cliff, I suppose, was the only real original. He was very scholastic and never really impressed me. He stood out only because all the rest were so poor.

I ended up falling out with them after I had been asked to sit on the editorial board of the Socialist Review Group's journal. The publication began by declaring itself to be open to other views. It was agreed that the board would have common responsibility for editorial matters. They printed an editorial which I had not seen, so I withdrew very early on. I was not prepared to participate on that basis.

I was never a member of the Socialist Review Group — I did not agree with the idea of revolutionary transformation. I thought we were living in a different age.

They were all very pleasant people — certainly better than Healy's zombies — but if it is said they had an orientation to the working class, that is just nonsense! When I first met them there were fewer than 30 members and they did not have an orientation to anything. For them the working class was represented by Stan Newens. They could not relate to the concerns of the working class except in the most economistic way.

It is true that "Luxemburgism" on the question of organisation was bandied about for a while. Cliff went through a phase. Of course it was all rubbish and not a little bizarre. The other organisations were all being very "Leninist", meaning that they were being very unkind to each other. There were lots of expulsions and draconian internal regimes — and there was nothing Leninist about it, it was just plain, straightforwardly, thuggish.

Cliff found that Luxemburgism was convenient. It was something he could hold up to those being expelled elsewhere, which promised a comfortable home. So Cliff wrote a little book about Rosa Luxemburg. And, subsequently, when they had a "Leninist" revolution in International Socialists — fortunately for me a long time after I had gone — that was all forgotten.

Everything was a flag of convenience, everything was about managing the organisation. The credit which is due to them is for persistence. Yes, full marks for persistence!

I do not take seriously anything Cliff writes. While we are on the subject it is worth noting that Cliff is the world's greatest unrecognised plagiarist. He copies out loads of stuff!

I do not mind being plagiarised. In fact it is quite flattering. But I do object to being plagiarised and simultaneously being denounced as a class traitor.

One of Cliff's books — from the late 60s, about Incomes Policy — contains vast chunks taken from a small-circulation inter-

nal publication of the Institute for Workers' Control, which Tony Topham and I had written. These very large sections were taken out verbatim and unacknowledged. At the same time I was being denounced!

I thought that this was rather like wanting to have your cake and eat it, so I wrote what I thought was quite an amusing letter to Cliff. It certainly seemed to get under his skin and brought an abject Cliff up to Nottingham, grovelling, begging that we should not print it.

He said that the plagiarism was not his fault, and that a committee had written the book, and that the copying-out had been done by Colin Barker, an acolyte from Manchester.

Apparently it was all Barker's fault.

I do not mind my revisionism being denounced, that is splendid. It is the duplicity that bothers me. If I am good enough to copy out, I am good enough to acknowledge.

However, this was a small matter and I did withdraw the letter in deference to Cliff's non-existent reputation. However I think this event does tell a great deal about Cliff's scholarship.

Cliff did write one very carefully constructed clause in his next book to the effect that he had sometimes profited from the advice of people with whom he disagreed. It was as near as Cliff could ever get to a rectification.

How can you talk about a "tradition" or a "trend" in these circumstances? I would not dignify it by using these words. It is much narrower than that.

***Women's Voice*, women's magazine of the Socialist Workers' Party. The WV groups were shut down in December 1981, and the magazine soon after.**

Tony Cliff's socialism contained two potentials

By Sheila Rowbotham*

I JOINED International Socialists after Enoch Powell's speech in 1968. The Powell speech brought it home to me that I needed to be part of an organisation and Tony Cliff was appealing for people to join on a very broad basis, in opposition to the far right.

Although I never considered myself a Trotskyist I was a member of IS for 18 months.

I was always uneasy in IS and in the end I resigned — although I was about to be expelled. I publicly criticised a speech Chris Harman had made at the memorial meeting for Ho Chi Minh. I thought that IS should have put its criticisms of Ho Chi Minh more forcefully while he was still alive and said so as a signatory in a letter to the paper *Black Dwarf*.

IS was quite fluid when I joined and was in the process of tightening up by 1970. It was as if it had inherited the atmosphere of the more libertarian socialism of the Independent Labour Party and grafted Trotskyism on to this.

But it seems that Tony Cliff's socialism contained two potentials. There was a wing of the organisation which Peter Sedgwick represented, and which I gravitated to, which was libertarian. We were not anarchists — we knew the need for organisation and the importance of disciplined work.

But, then, at the centre the group was very much controlled personally through Tony Cliff and the people around him. It was almost run on a family basis, with Cliff as a father figure. That core group was where the power was.

The thing that made a lot of sense to me was the idea of emphasising what the workers were saying and actually listening to what people said at the level of grassroots organisation. IS understood that theory and ideas came from what the workers did — rather than simply what the Party said.

That balance is always difficult.

The emotional experience of Powell's speech must have had an effect on Tony Cliff and made him anxious to have a tighter structure to organise what were very green, raw young members.

What I did not understand was that if it was alright to listen to workers, why not women in the women's movement?

"Cliff had something against feminism. He was really, unnecessarily, hostile. It could have been incorporated quite naturally into the IS framework."

When we had the first Women's Liberation conference in 1970, I had just left IS. But lots of the women involved were either in IS, or had partners who were in IS.

These women often could not get to IS meetings because their husbands were going and they were babysitting.

There were lots of people in IS who were just broadly radical and who were not hostile to feminism. On the contrary, they thought it was quite good.

But there was a clash at the conference between the American feminist Barbara Winslow and Tony Cliff. He argued that the only issue was exploitation and she replied that not everything came down directly to economics.

Val Clarke, the secretary of IS in the days when that was just a simple secretarial position, was interested. She was accused by Roger Rosewell — always the villain — of being a whore, a sociologist and a middle-class woman. She denied the latter two charges.

Cliff had something against feminism — something against it which I never fully understood. He was really, unnecessarily, hostile. It certainly could have been incorporated quite naturally into the IS framework.

At the start a lot of IS women were involved. There was a North London IS Women's Group. Selma James was close to the organisation at that time and spoke at their meetings. There was an awareness of the issue of race and the American experience and the issue of autonomy.

There were a lot of women who remained very loyal to IS and struggled within the organisation. They worked on *Women's Voice*, which at certain times was really a very good paper. It really did contain the voice of working-class women in a way in which *Spare Rib* only did sporadically. It was a great pity when *Women's Voice* was closed down. By all accounts the centre of their organisation behaved abominably. The women who had been loyal, a long time after I had gone, were devastated.

All the extra non-Party, front organisations were shut down, including the rank-and-file trade union groups. *Women's Voice* was one of the casualties.

* Sheila Rowbotham was a member of the IS from 1968-70. She is an independent socialist-feminist, author of many books.

In defence of the International Socialist tradition

By the International Socialist Group*

IN ITS 15 September 1994 issue, *Socialist Organiser* published edited extracts from a discussion document written by a group of ex-members of the SWP — the International Socialist Group (ISG) — analysing the anti-democratic regime of the SWP. The ISG welcomes this opportunity to outline our interpretation of the International Socialist tradition. We will try to explain why we defend this tradition against more "orthodox" varieties of Trotskyism whilst opposing the bureaucratic centralist reading of Lenin which has distorted the political culture of the SWP to the extent we no longer feel the party adequately represents the IS tradition.

Trotsky's heritage

TROTSKY'S STRUGGLE against the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR and his defence of the traditions of the 1917 revolution, were the single most important factor during the 1920s and '30s keeping alive the essence of Marxism as the theory and practice of working-class self-emancipation. Stalinism marks a complete break with the classical Marxist conception described by Hal Draper as "socialism from below". This conception insists that socialism can only be achieved through the revolutionary collective action of the working class, and that the working class can only exercise and maintain socialist control of society through democratic mass organisation — the workers' council. Further, this tradition recognises the international nature of the capitalist system and therefore maintains — against the Stalinist idea of "socialism in one country" — that the socialist revolution can only be completed when it becomes international.

Trotsky's writings of this period — *The Revolution Betrayed, The History of the Russian Revolution*, his works on the rise of fascism — are amongst the most important documents of Marxist analysis. They both defend a vision of socialism and also offer essential lessons in the strategy and tactics of revolutionary politics. In this sense, Trotsky's heritage is almost entirely positive. However, a combination of weaknesses in areas of Trotsky's analysis and the tendency of most of his followers to treat his works as Biblical texts, containing answers to all possible questions, has led to the degeneration of the orthodox Trotskyist tradition to the extent that it is largely incapable of understanding the contemporary world, and is thus utterly isolated from the working-class movement. It is for this reason that the ISG believes that the theoretical work of the International Socialist tradition — begun with Cliff's groundbreaking work on the theory of state capitalism and developed and extended by the Socialist Review Group, the International Socialists and then the SWP — is essential to continuing the task begun by Trotsky of developing classical Marxism in response to changing conditions.

The origins of the crisis of post-war Trotskyism can be found in Trotsky's depiction of Stalin's USSR as a "degenerated workers' state," in which the working class still exercised economic power through socialist property relations (the suppression of the internal market by the workings of the centralised plan), but had been expropriated politically by the bureaucracy. Trotsky's conclusion, at least after 1933, was that a new revolution was necessary — not a social revolution as 1917 had been but a political revolution against the bureaucratic "caste".

The theory of the degenerated workers' state was undoubtedly an advance on the various ultra-left and anarchist theories that had concluded that Stalinism was the inevitable result of Bolshevik politics. And it is easy to see why Trotsky was unwilling to draw the conclusion that all the gains of the 1917 revolution had been lost and that the bureaucracy — far from being what he called a "gendarme appearing in the process of distribution" — was in fact central to the process of production itself, in reality holding economic, as well as political, power. It is also important to recognise that Trotsky was analysing an entirely new set of circumstances — the degeneration of the world's first workers' state — and a set of circumstances that had not, unsurprisingly, been envisaged by any of the leaders of the October revolution.

However, the weakness of the theory became apparent after World War II when Stalinism reproduced itself across Eastern Europe in circumstances very different from 1917. The "people's democracies" of Eastern Europe exhibited all the economic and political structures of Stalin's USSR without ever going through the process of working-class revolution. The overwhelming majority of Trotskyists concluded that these regimes, too, were forms of workers' state, albeit deformed. The result of this was that the historic link between classical Marxism and the idea of socialism as working-class self-emancipation was broken. If forms of socialism could be brought to the working class by a combination of Russian tanks and local Stalinist parties, very little was left of the idea of "socialism from below."

The logic of this position became apparent in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua and other successful nationalist movements against imperialism. One by one, Trotskyists identified these regimes as deformed workers' states. Not only could Russian tanks bring socialism, but so, it appeared, could petit-bourgeois nationalist movements influenced by Stalinist and Maoist politics. Trotskyists could claim allegiance to Marx's insistence that the "emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself" but they no longer had a theory which held this to in fact be the case.

It is certainly true that correct theory does not automatically lead to correct practice; however, incorrect theories only produce correct practice by accident. It is impossible to have a consistent and principled orientation on working-class struggle without a theory which puts this struggle at the centre of its explanation of the world.

Tony Cliff began to recognise this dilemma in 1948, when he wrote the article that was later developed for his book *State Capitalism in Russia* (1955). Cliff takes from Trotsky three central notions: the centrality of the working class, opposition to the bureaucracy, and the impossibility of socialism in one country. He goes on to argue, however, that it is impossible to consistently maintain this revolutionary core of Trotskyism without rejecting Trotsky's theory of the degenerated workers' state. He concludes that the Soviet Union and the "people's democracies" are, in fact, examples of bureaucratic state capitalism.

There is insufficient space here to go into the detail of Cliff's theory and the arguments it has generated since. Central to the argument, however, is the denial of the orthodox Trotskyist identification of state ownership with socialism. As Cliff wrote in 1948: "From the form of property alone — whether private, institutional or state property — abstracted from the relations of production, it is impossible to define the class character of a social system." Or, as he put it much more directly in a 1967 speech on "Revolutionary Traditions": "...if it is true that the working class is the agent of socialist revolution then the form of property is a bloody stupid criterion

* The ISG is a group of people who were expelled from or left the SWP in 1994. Contact: 19 Sanford Terrace, London N16 7LH.

for deciding whether a state is a workers' state or not... we came to the conclusion that workers' control is the decisive thing in evaluating a workers' state... Once you abolish the element of workers' control you abolish the essence of the workers' state."

Cliff argues that the internal regime of the USSR could not be understood in isolation from its position in world capitalism. As Trotsky wrote in *The Permanent Revolution*, "Marxism takes its starting point from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market..." Despite the suppression of the internal free market, the Soviet economy was forced to follow the logic of capitalism — competitive accumulation — through its need to compete militarily with the West. The rapid industrialisation this necessitated was achieved at the price of the separation of the working class from the organs which claimed to operate in their interests. Soviet "planning" was in fact an instance of the bureaucratic command economy measures that were a feature of the Western capitalist economies in, for example, the Second World War.

Cliff's analysis allowed him to predict — against the mainstream of Trotskyists argument at this time — that far from superseding the contradictions of capitalism, the USSR would eventually exhibit these contradictions in a sharp form — economic crisis, working class resistance, and nationalist revolt. Events since he wrote his book have confirmed this analysis in all its essentials.

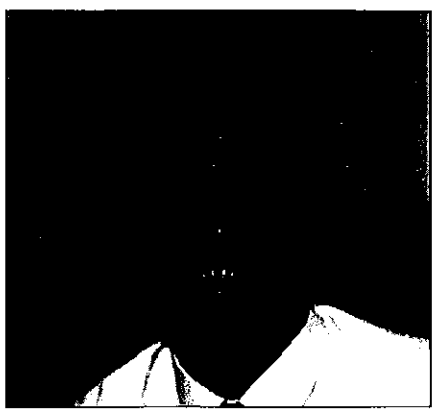
This analysis was later extended — through the theory of deflected permanent revolution — to explain the class character of regimes like those of China, Cuba and Vietnam. The strength of the theory was that it allowed Marxists to support nationalist revolutions against imperialism without collapsing into uncritical admiration of the various flavours of third world Stalinism.

It should be clear that this method puts the working class at the centre of its analysis as a matter of fact rather than incantation. This is why the IS tradition is, in the opinion of the ISG, the only tradition which has begun to develop the tools needed for understanding contemporary world economy and politics.

A few conclusions

THIS ARTICLE is no more than a sketch of some of the issues that the ISG sees as fundamental to Marxist politics. We would not want to claim that the IS tradition has answered all questions, and we certainly do not believe that the SWP's version of Leninism enables it to carry through its analysis with any consistency. In fact, we feel that the militarised political culture of the SWP stands in direct opposition to its proclaimed commitment to working class self-emancipation. We also recognise the need to re-establish a tradition of non-sectarian debate on the left and welcome contributions to that debate.

Cliff never really understood the British labour movement



By Stan Newens MEP*

I JOINED the Socialist Review Group in 1952 and drifted out about 1960.

I was a left-wing socialist who believed that social ownership and democratic control should be extended. I believed in international socialism.

I was utterly repelled by the Stalinist show trials in Eastern Europe. That put me off the Communist Party. When I was approached by an organisation which was left-wing and clearly opposed to Stalinism, I was attracted.

The other organisations in the Trotskyist movement believed that the Stalinist states were degenerated workers' states which should be defended against imperialism. I did not think their ideas held up — what existed in Russia was not any sort of workers' state.

I wanted to take a clear stand against this sort of thing, while continuing to oppose American imperialism. These issues were sharply posed during the Korean war. I concluded that neither side could be supported. The idea expressed in "Neither Washington nor Moscow but international socialism" was quite correct and important.

I joined Cliff's organisation. I thought that his analysis was quite inspired. Although I would modify my ideas on a number of matters, I still think that the work Cliff did was very useful.

"Neither Washington nor Moscow" came from the Americans — from Shachtman's organisation. For a while I was even business manager for the Shachtman paper, *Labor Action*. We had a good relationship with Shachtman's people. For example, when Hal Draper came over I met him and was very impressed.

The Socialist Review Group was clearly orientated to the working class. In 1952, as a student, I went down to Fords in Dagenham which was out on strike, to do work around the dispute. SRG members like Geoff Carlson had important positions in industry — he was a steward and then convenor at the ENV factory at Willesden.

Nevertheless the SRG was a sectarian organisation — like *Socialist Organiser* and all similar organisations it was concerned to build itself around a single political line and placed this project above the general work in the labour movement.

The SRG was a Leninist, democratic centralist organisation. I do not accept this now, and I did not do so at the time. It is a method of organisation which is totally opposed to democracy. Within the SRG there were a number of people who shared this view. Bernard Dix, who became a leading member of NUPE, was one such person and we took a much more Labour-orientated approach. In my opinion Cliff never really understood the British labour movement — his background was working in conditions of semi-legality, completely different conditions to those which we faced.

I had joined the Labour Party in 1949. There I worked with all sorts of people and thought it was particularly important to unite with others in a non-sectarian way.

Cliff had a powerful personality and denounced my "revisionism."

I wanted to maximise our role in the Labour Party and draw people in the Labour left together.

Suddenly we got a letter from the Hendon branch of the SRG, which denounced me and others for our attitude to broader work. Bernstein was bandied about. The letter was signed by a couple of young bus conductors — and it was quite clear that Cliff was using them to attack us. They were nice young men, but they did not know who Bernstein was.

Cliff was always concerned with the internal organisation, rather than broader work, which was for other people.

I was friendly with Roy Tearse, the old industrial organiser for the RCP. He was contemptuous of Healy and Cliff. Tearse had got out of the RCP to go and work in the Labour Party, and Tearse influenced me. In 1959 I joined Victory for Socialism. It seemed to me that Victory for Socialism had the possibility of a much broader, non-sectarian alternative to the SRG, and from then I drifted away. In my view the SRG has developed and moved away from — and then out of — the Labour Party. This is utterly *not* what is required in Britain. It is based on ideas Lenin developed in Tsarist Russia in conditions of illegality.

* Stan Newens was a member of the Socialist Review Group for eight years before 1960. He is now a Labour MEP.