

# Before '68: the Left, Activism and Social Movements in the Long 1960s: two contributions

## 1. Militancy and Solidarity on the docks in the 1960s

## 2. The life and times of Bob Pennington

# Militancy and solidarity on the docks in the 1960s

By Sean Matgamna

Nothing will ever efface for me the memory of my first real strike - on the Salford docks - the first time I saw my class acting as a surging, uncontrolled force breaking the banks of routine capitalist industrial life and, for a while, pitting itself against those who control our lives.

Docks strikes were quick and frequent then, in the mid-'60s. Dockers fought back; they stood together. Lord Devlin's Commission of Enquiry into conditions in the ports reported that to get a strike going in Liverpool often all that was needed was somebody running down the quays shouting "everybody out." Dockers would stop, to see who was in dispute, who needed support, what it was all about. That was essentially a true picture. It was not only true of Liverpool. And there was nothing senseless or mindless about it.

Imagine the scene on Salford docks. The Manchester Ship Canal, a deep, wide, wide man-made waterway linking Manchester to the sea, 30 miles away; ships tied up along the quays as far as the eye can see; towering cranes forming an endlessly stretching picket, lining the edge of the water. Just behind the cranes, railway tracks and wagons being loaded or unloaded; behind the rail lines, a roadway with lorries moving and parked, loading and unloading; at the far side of the road, multi-storied warehouses stretching as far as the eye can see in a parallel line to the ships. Cranes dip delicately into the hatch-uncovered ships, lifting, or depositing heavy loads, moving from ship to warehouse and back again, high above the road and the rail line. Plying wrought steel hooks formed like question marks crossed at right angles on the base by a wooden handle, dockers move bags and crates, direct the movement on slings of long bars of steel, or motor cars, load and unload railway wagons; a barge here and there is being loaded in the water on the other side of a ship.

Into this hive of hard alienated work the call for a stoppage comes and explodes like a slow-motion bomb, changing everything.

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Paul Le Blanc

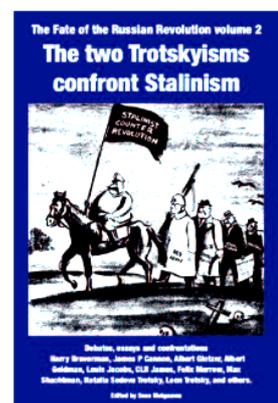
"It can be argued that at least some Trotskyists, the 'heterodox', have something to offer in outlining ways in which the left can be both opposed to capitalism and democrats, above all in the way in which they confronted a much stronger 'socialist' power that had dispensed with all pretensions to democracy. That in facing up to this 'bad news', the 1940s dissidents offered signposts for the future. For that reason alone Matgamna's case should be taken extremely seriously."

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First there is the news that there is a strike, that some men have stopped work. Word spreads. Nobody knows exactly why, or what the issue is. What is known is that those dockers who do know, the men involved, think action is necessary, and that they have stopped work. This is done often, but everybody knows, despite idiotic witch-hunt stories in the press, it is not done lightly. The men who have come out know why and they need support. They are entitled to support! You know they would support you. The place to find out what it is about and whether they deserve support is at the mass meeting on "the croft" — waste ground — outside one of the dock gates. Let's go there! I no longer remember the issue, but I will never forget the sight of it, the first time I saw it and took part in it. Word spreads; dockers see others stopping, suddenly, in the middle of the working day; they too stop and come out on to the roadway. Men in battered, ragged old clothes and headgear, stained by age and chemical dust. A few men wearing company-issue blue overalls: they have been on some especially dirty cargo — blacking or asbestos — which saturates your clothes, skin and hair because bags always burst. Dock-hooks are slung over the curve of shoulders or hooked in belts or lapels. Men trickle out from the warehouses; others who have climbed up out of deep ships' holds far below the water line, come down the gangplank in Indian file out of the ships. Crane drivers climb stiffly down the tall iron ladders from their cabins in the sky. Some men in the throng are far better dressed than dockers — checkers/tally clerks. Before long there is a great teeming, wide, growing stream of men on the roadway — 2,000 dockers work in this port — talking, laughing, gesticulating, cheerful at the excitement, the break in the monotony, the respite. Eisenstein in bright sunlight, and no fear of Cossacks, or of the mounted police Prime Minister Thatcher would send against miners in the 80s.

That first time, it reminded me of the great crowds of people coming out from 12 o'clock Mass in our west of Ireland town. Quite a few other Salford dockers had also been in such processions in such towns. Here solidarity was God! Walking in that great mass of workers asserting themselves, you got an inkling of the human strength that powered the port and the whole economy. You felt the reality and the potential of these minds and hands without which nothing moved — the muscles and the brains of thinking, reflecting human beings trapped in wage slavery who had come to know — most of them only partly to know — their collective power. and who already felt and acted according to the high ethic of solidarity which socialists who work to cultivate it know to be the seed of a new and better civilisation. When action becomes necessary, solidarity effaces personal rivalries and conflicts, job-jealousies, old pub brawls, politics, religion, race (in Manchester, unlike London, there were black dockers). Class predominates.

When the human trickles and rivers had emptied themselves out of warehouses and ships, bringing the whole enormous port complex whose life blood they were to a dead stop, and assembled on the croft. the meeting would begin. The issue would be carefully and didactically spelled out to upwards of 1,500 men by Joe Barry or Joe Hackett, the unpaid officials of the minority union in the port, the NASD (the so-called Blue Union: their union card was blue, that of the TGWU, the big union, white). The Blue Union Committee doubled as an unofficial rank and file committee. Both checkers, Barry and Hackett were the real leaders in the port, not the despised full-time officials of the T&G, to which most dockers belonged. These two, who would stand as spectators at the back of the croft, were known contemptuously as "Houdini" (after the American escapologist) and "The Gas Man" because they would come from negotiating the price for unloading a difficult cargo — to take a terrible example, though we did not then know how terrible, asbestos when a lot of bags had burst in a ship's hold — and shout down the hatch to men covered in chemicals, or whatever, either that they could do nothing — "Me-Hands-Are-Tied", thus Houdini — or had got a measly shilling extra, a bob for the gas meter — "The Gas Man". Officially, they were the only people empowered to negotiate, but the Blue leaders had tacit recognition and went. as they would boast, sotto voce — and with a pride that told you what they were — "up the back stairs", where the White union officials went in the front door. Compared to the T&G full-time officials, who were the dregs of humanity, the Blue leaders were real trade unionists; but they were time-servers, Barry at least was a Catholic Action man, and by the '60s they too were part of the port establishment, albeit unofficially.

On the croft, after Barry or Hackett had explained what it was about, anybody who had anything to say would then have a chance to say it. You could get up and disagree, and argue your case. Sometimes things would get rowdy — on one occasion, very rowdy, just short of violence, when Barry launched a savage witch-hunt to protect himself and his friends from criticism and the danger of being outflanked by denouncing young Trotskyist militants as "politically motivated" "home wreckers", men intent on "smashing the port and the industry"; but it was taken for granted by everybody that our group had the right to reply and

Barry vacated his little step ladder so I could get up on it to speak. (Not very well as I recall it; but we got a third of the votes — even though Barry and Hackett had threatened to resign — for a motion to add two Trotskyists and an old militant, John Magennis, who worked with us, to the Committee.) This was rough and volatile, communication was often bad and things sometimes got confused, but it was nevertheless real democracy. Everything was put to the vote. or could be after a light. If satisfaction for the grievance was not forthcoming we would usually vote to stay out. But satisfaction was as a rule quickly to be had.

In serious disputes we would normally use the tactic of the rotating one-day strike. One week the dockers would strike for a day and the cranemen and checkers would turn up for work that was not there, thus qualifying for payment before going home again; the next week the crane drivers would strike, the week after that, the checkers, then again the dockers; and so on until the Ship Canal Company crumpled.

Despite two unions in the port, some non-unionists and three distinct classes of workers, our efforts were easily coordinated.

When you consider where dockers "came from", a few decades earlier, the culture of militancy and solidarity they developed, a small vignette of which I have tried to sketch here, is all the more remarkable.

## II

For centuries docking was casual, irregular work because ships came and went. There was little continuity. Men would be hired and fired as needed. Anybody could go on the docks. It was a buyers' market in labour, and those who did the hiring were all-powerful. Gangs of often hungry men, with hungry families, would crowd around them jostling — and sometimes fighting — each other for their favour, and a few hours' work. Docker was murderously pitted against docker. Then the dockers began to organise.

In 1889, led by Marxist socialists such as Tom Mann and John Burns, both of them skilled engineers, not dockers, and with Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor helping out, London dockers struck and organised themselves in a union — then a new sort of union — for the "unskilled." The union was thrown up out of a volcanic eruption of revolt and militancy. It survived to civilise and educate the dockers to the ideal of working-class solidarity. They had to fight early struggles on such questions as stopping the then prevalent practice of paying dockers their wages in pubs, where they would be tempted to drink their wages, to the detriment of their children and the benefit of the publican (and the foreman, who'd get a cut from the landlord). Over decades the working-class weapon of solidarity — serving as both ideal, socialism its developed form, and weapon of struggle — allowed workers to win serious improvements. Dockers began to exert a little bit of control over their own working lives. In the days when great armies of men laboured to hump and haul cargoes in and out of Britain, dockers had perhaps the greatest power of any group of workers. Organised, they learned to use it.

After World War 2, the Labour government, rejecting demands for nationalisation, nevertheless created the National Dock Labour Scheme and its "Board", the NDLB — an agency which would employ registered dockers and hire them out to employers.

The NDLB paid a (very low) guaranteed fall-back wage, which dockers would get if they failed to find work after turning up twice a day, morning and dinner time. The NDLB was staffed 50% by employers' representatives and 50% by the TGWU. The NDLB embodied big gains for dockers, but it also meant putting officials of a very bureaucratised union, which should have represented the men, in charge of them as both employer and disciplinarian. It led to union officials organising strike breaking and to threats from union leaders to sack dockers "making trouble" in the union. (The whole Manchester Branch Committee was hauled up before TGWU Secretary Arthur Deakin, who threatened to have all of them sacked if they didn't do what he, their union's General Secretary, told them to!) All differences kept in mind, this system was a little bit of Stalinism rooted inside the British capitalist system. Ultimately it led in 1954 to the breaking away from the union of 16,000 dockers of the northern ports.

Nevertheless, there was a wonderful flowering of working-class self-assertiveness and self-control within the NDLB system. It was a time of full employment, and by way of countless short local strikes dockers gained a great deal of real control of their — still very hard, underpaid and dangerous — working lives. Dockers not prone to idealising their lot would talk about "the freedom of the docks." To take perhaps the most extreme example, there was a "custom and practice" system known in Liverpool as the *welt* and in Glasgow as spelling under which only half a gang would work at any time. It meant working half a shift! In Manchester, where

we had no welt, they would when it suited them "shanghai" temporarily redundant dockers and bus us for night work to Liverpool — where we worked four hours and spent the other four reading or playing cards, yarning or napping, or whatever, while the second half of the gang did their stint! But you cannot have socialism — or even what dockers had — indefinitely in one industry The technical basis of docking was changing. A system was growing up of moving goods through ports in giant containers packed in one factory, rolled on and off ships, and unpacked in another, Everything had to change in the docks.

Who would gain the benefit of the new technology, dockers or employers? For example, would work, on the basis of the new technology, be divided up, or would tens of thousands of docking jobs be destroyed? These questions were decided in the struggle around the reorganisation of the ports — "decasualisation" — in 1967, and in subsidiary battles in the 70s.

Sweetened by desirable things like regular employment, decasualisation was fundamentally about the employers clawing back all the elements of workers' control dockers had won, so that they would be able to carry through the revolution in port technology — containerisation — under their control, in their own way and for their own benefit, Dockers resisted, but in a confused and disorganised way. Dockers had no unofficial national structures; they did not then even have shop stewards. The leaders of both White and Blue docks unions backed "Devlin." So the bosses succeeded in ramming the changes through amidst confusion and resentment, though not without long strikes in London and Liverpool and a week long strike in Manchester.

Because of wretched leadership, the dockers, once the most powerful and militant group of workers in Britain, lost. The NDLB was abolished in 1989.

### III

To become a committed socialist in times like these, when the working class is disoriented and cowed, you have to make an imaginative leap from the working class around you to the working class as it will be when it fulfils the hopes and expectations of Marxist socialists. Today, it is difficult to resist the commonsensical cynical view that workers will never rise up and remake society. that we are by nature incapable of it, that Marxist socialists are chasing a will o' the wisp.

The proper answer to such pernicious nonsense lies not alone in hope for the future, in discerning the seeds of that future in working-class activities in the present. but in remembering the past — and learning from it: for there was nothing inevitable about the defeat of Britain's dockers, or of what, at their best. they stood for.

There are important lessons for the labour movement today in the story of how some of the most degraded. atomised. exploited and initially backward workers pulled themselves up out of misery and degradation to create a splendid culture of class and human solidarity. Certain material conditions — insecurity and so on — allowed that solidarity to develop. But it would not have developed without the example, the leadership, and the patient propaganda of socialists. Left to themselves conditions in the ports for a very long time bred savage individualistic competition. not solidarity amongst dockers. The socialists made the difference.

just as the degraded dockers in their time rose up. so the victims of today's dog-eat-dog anti-solidarist culture will rise up. Those who keep alive the memory of the past and spread it will speed that day.

It is in the nature of the class struggle to ebb and flow; of the working class to be repeatedly made and remade by the never- ceasing changes in capitalist production and technology. The working class. as the story of the dockers shows, pays dearly for missed chances and for defeats.

Until it takes control of society, the working class movement — aided by socialists who try to be its memory — is forced again and again to resurrect, remake and redefine itself. The job of socialists is to help it do that, and. learning from the past, help avoid defeat in the next round.

[Workers' Liberty 21, May 1995]

# Timmo, The Gas Man and Houdini

The death of Tim O'Leary, long-time docks secretary of the TGWU, last month, set me thinking about the terrible injustice Britain's full-time trade union officials have in the Thatcher years, and about the way they are now misrepresented in Thatcherite social History? "Just current politics read backwards". That definition of History, by a Stalinist professor, is, I suppose, the same as Bonaparte's: "History is a tale agreed upon".

One of the "tales agreed upon" during Thatcher's decade is the Tale of the Militant Trade Union Bosses and How They Were Cut Down to Size by Herself.

An irresponsible brotherhood of bigger and smaller Arthur Scargills, they were, the pre-Thatcher trade union bureaucracy, according to the tale the Tories and their press have agreed upon.

In fact, this is a thoroughly Stalinist rewriting of history. It is "current politics read backwards". Thatcherite politics.

During the entire great prolonged 20-25 year cycle of working class militancy, for most of the time official strikes were very much the exception to the rule. The trade union leaders were the bitter enemies of strikes and militancy.

They fed press witch-hunts against strikers, they made scabbing deals behind the backs of their members. They were much hated, indeed. The banked-up hatred felt by many trade unionists against their own officials probably helped the Tories push through anti-union legislation in the early 1980s.

During the years of the great working class militancy and trade union struggles, the trade union officials helped the employers control the rank and file – sometimes by strikebreaking.

They did the same thing in the mid-'70s when they were the power behind Harold Wilson's Labour government. They helped demobilise and destroy working class militancy.

When the Tories came to power in 1979 the labour movement was still very strong. If the trade union leaders had organised resistance to the Tory offensive Thatcher immediately launched. Thatcher could have been driven from office like Tory Prime Minister, Edward Heath had been. They crawled on their bellies instead: and the working class has paid dearly for it.

But the British bosses are an ungrateful class!

All the trade union leaders' work for "moderation" and "compromise" had not been enough. Thatcher was out to break, cripple and shackle the The trade unions. So trade union officials found themselves playing in Tory propaganda the role of militants and firebrands they had rarely, if ever, played in real life.

Respectable and tame time-serving men and women were targeted and denounced—blamed for the deeds of the rank and file they and others like them had spent much of their lives fighting to stop. Piled up with shame and blame, they were, like the scapegoat in the bible, driven away into the wilderness, out of their cherished 'corridors of power'. There they languish to this day, the target of abuse and contempt from those they served so long and so well.

When TUC general secretary Norman Willis dropped on his knees before Princess Diana, it was probably from sheer frustration at going so long without someone to crawl to! He was desperate for a fix.

The life of Tim O'Leary, who died on 15 February, at the age of 81, could be cited to prove the absurdity of the "story" about recent working class history the Tories and the media now peddle.

A full-time union official in 1935, at the age of 25, O'Leary was Docks Secretary of the TGWU from 1956 to 1975. The dockers were the most militant workers in Britain through almost all that period.

With one exception (in 1970) all the hundreds of dock strikes were unofficial strikes. O'Leary's job was to stop strikes—and break them when he couldn't stop them.

He was hated, and with great bitterness, by "his own" rank and file. His chance of being elected to the job would have been nil. But though he was, "in for life"—or until his retirement, in the mid-'70s.

The TGWU docks officials were a notorious bunch. Conditions would vary from ship to ship and from cargo to cargo, and rates for jobs would continually have to be negotiated. One of the two T&G officials in Manchester in 's the 1960s was nicknamed "the gas man". He would come from negotiating to the gangway and shout down to the dockers—covered in, for a terrible example, asbestos, when flimsy sacks had broken open, thickening the air with dust ~ "The best I can do, lads — it's a shilling extra." A measly shilling. A 'Bob', was what you'd put in the gas meter. Thus, "the Gas Man"!

His mate, even more spineless, and pretty dim too, was known as "Houdini" after the famous American escapologist Harry Houdini. He'd come to the gangway with a similar sort of offer, and in response to protests shrug and cry: "Nothing I can do, lads. Me hands are tied! Me hands are tied!" Thus Houdini.

The "Gas Man" was secretary and ran the office. His route to the job included getting up at a mass meeting and defending the practice of working during rain: "I can't see anything wrong with working in the rain—provided you have a good coat."

Thus could an aspirant T&G official hope to win his spurs in the eyes of those who could give him the job.

Dockers would say of someone obviously "on the make" that he wanted eilber to be foremen or a union official. Similar trades.

O'Leary was king of such creatures—and they were more typical than untypical of the full-time union official across industry.

They helped prepare the working class defeats inflicted by the Tories. The ruling class should be grateful to them. But Thatcher wanted their scalps. And now the ruling class hatred of militant trade unionism is focused on the officials who spent so much of their working lives fighting the trade union militants.

The ghost of Tim O'Leary has reason to be angry with those who now misrepresent him and his like as firebrands and militants. So have we.

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# The life and times of Bob Pennington

By Patrick Avaakum

**B**OB Pennington's last home, I'm told, was a spike hostel; he died recently, alone in Brighton on a park bench. 70 years old, Bob Pennington had been an active revolutionary socialist for 40 years. In those years Pennington wrote many good articles and pamphlets. He recruited many people to class-struggle politics and helped educate them in politics. He took part in and sometimes organised working-class battles in industry, inside the labour movement, and on the streets against racists, fascists and police.



After Khrushchev's savage repression of the 1956 Hungarian revolution many CPers joined the Trotskyists

At one time or another he was a prominent figure in most of the larger organisations of Trotskyists.

His political life was in many ways an epitome of the post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement. Even the circumstance of his end, dying amidst outcasts and booze-solaced, socially-isolated people, was redolent of much of the recent fate of that movement.

The best way to commemorate Bob Pennington and to accord him the respect which is his due is critically to evaluate his political life. I knew Bob Pennington quite well at one time, brought into contact with him about 1970 by a busily ecumenical friend, Peter Graham\*, with whom Pennington had much in common, not least waywardness and Lothario-ism.

The first three decades of Pennington's Trotskyism were years when, objectively, it was possible that the Trotskyists might have created a sizeable, stable, non-sectarian, intellectually self-regenerating movement; and, doing that, we might have ensured a better outcome from the protracted class struggles of the 1950s, '60s and '70s — the struggles which ended, in historic fact, with the victory of the Thatcherites. Instead we have a cluster of mainly sterile sects. What can Bob Pennington's life tell us about the reasons for that? What can his experience tell us about what we ourselves must do in the future?

## II

**B**OB Pennington left the Communist Party and joined the British Trotskyist movement in 1951. That was the year of the so-called Third World Congress of the Fourth International. In reality this was the first congress of a new hybrid movement. It continued to call itself the Fourth International, but its governing ideas and postures were radically at variance with those of Trotsky and the Fourth International he had founded in the '30s. This Fourth International was politically more distant from Trotsky's Fourth International than Trotsky's had been from the first "Fourth International" — the one set up in 1921 by the sectarian "council

Communists", such as Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek and Sylvia Pankhurst.

The organisation, still claiming continuity with Trotsky, and religiously using Trotsky's words as a sacredotal language — but with different meanings, values and perspectives attached to them — was reconstituted on a new political basis. Incorporated into this new "Trotskyism" was much that belonged properly to the political heritage of the so-called "Brandlerites", the soft-on-Stalinism Right-Communist opposition of the 1930s. Against Trotsky they denied

that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a distinct social formation, and rejected his call for a new — "political" — revolution to overthrow it. Trotsky had been their bitter critic and enemy and they his.

Maintaining Trotsky's programme for a new ('political') working class revolution in the Soviet Union, the New Trotskyists advocated mere reform for Stalinist China, Yugoslavia and, later, Vietnam and Cuba. Their politics were incoherent and inevitably produced chronic instability. 1951 was the year in which Trotsky's widow, Natalia, felt obliged, after a long internal struggle, to break publicly with the new "Fourth International" because of its "critical support" for the Soviet bloc. Tendencies which had agreed with Natalia on Stalinism had been forced out of the International. The "Fourth International" Pennington entered in 1951 was deep in a crisis of political identity and perspectives from which it would never emerge.

At the core of the positions of "New Trotskyism" codified at the 1951 congress was an acceptance of international Stalinism — which had recently taken control of new areas amounting to a sixth of the Earth, and containing hundreds of millions of people — as the motor-force, and first stage of a rapidly-unfolding progressive world revolution. The neo-Trotskyists did still criticise Stalinism, and propound a programme for working-class "political" revolution, or drastic reform, in the Stalinist states. But despite their faults those states were, they said, "in transition to socialism". Those "degenerated and deformed" societies were the actually-existing "first stage" of the socialist revolution. Despite everything, they were the progressive alternative to capitalism and imperialism.

Trotsky had defined the bureaucratically collectivised property of the USSR as only "potentially progressive" — it depended on whether or not the working class could overthrow the bureaucracy — but, to the New Trotskyists, nationalised property created by Stalin's armies or Mao Zedong's totalitarian state was both progressive and entirely working class.

The Stalinist regimes behaved like the most brutal imperialism; Trotsky had already in 1939 pointed out the elements of imperialism

\* See *Workers' Liberty* 36.

in the USSR's foreign policy; but somehow to the neo-Trotskyists this was not imperialism. "Imperialism" gradually became not a term to describe policy or actions by states but a synonym for advanced capitalism. Over decades some of the New Trotskyists would come to embrace a millenarian "anti-imperialism" that was no more than a hopeless Third World utopian hostility to the modern world.

Thus Trotsky's old policy of defence of the Soviet Union, which he coupled with unsparing hostility to the Stalinist regime, and with a historical perspective in which USSR Stalinism was seen as a regime of degeneracy and decline that could not long survive, was turned into its opposite: "critical but unconditional" defence of Stalinist imperialism and "unconditional" support for its expansion. It was "the revolution", in all its unexpected complexities. The Stalinist states were defined in an opposite way to Trotsky's definition of the USSR, as a regime of crisis — and if it was not that, Trotsky had said, it was a new form of class society — they were societies "in transition to socialism". This gutted "Trotskyism", into which had been interpolated politics and perspectives that Trotsky had spurned with contempt as incompatible with elementary Marxism, became an ideology colouring up reality to sustain the pipe-dream that the world was moving rapidly towards socialism, and hysterical fantasies that the Stalinists "for now" were blazing humanity's trail to the classless society. The neo-Trotskyists, despite their best intentions, despite their sincere criticisms of Stalinism and active opposition to it, were on all major questions of world politics satellites of the Stalinist world system. Their entire conception of the world generated in them a compulsion to be such satellites and committed them to the view that to be anything else was to betray the socialist revolution.

They had come a very long way from Trotsky. The typical soul-searching debates of this current in the '50s concerned their own *raison d'être*: in face of the new Stalinist revolutions, like the Chinese and the Yugoslav, was there a role for Trotskyism, even their radically recast variant of it? Many said no, and either joined the Stalinists or left politics. (One of them is a respected left wing MP). The others were driven to ridiculous positions: for example, though China was socially and politically identical to the USSR, really, some of them said, it was not Stalinist: Mao Zedong was the legatee of Trotsky, not Stalin!

And yet, apart from the Shachtman group in the USA, which was 'bio-degrading' into social-democracy, and a few minuscule

and as a rule passive groups such as *Socialist Review* in Britain, this was almost all that was left of the old revolutionary socialism and communism after the prolonged and multifarious depredations of Stalinism and fascism, followed by post-war capitalist prosperity. And in their own way the neo-Trotskyists propagated socialist ideas; they circulated Trotsky's books; they criticised Stalinism, albeit inadequately, from a democratic working-class point of view; and they prosecuted the working class struggle. They represented the old inextinguishable socialist hope for something better than capitalism and Stalinism.

In 1953 James P Cannon and his British co-thinkers, of whom Pennington was one, would recoil against some of "1951 Trotskyism". But these belatedly "orthodox-Trotskyist" Cannonites never abandoned the premises of the 1951 Congress and its basic conclusions about Stalinism. Rejecting too-blatant accommodation to the Stalinists, they continued to reason, not coherently, within that 1951 neo-Trotskyist framework. Apart

from a brief lurch, Pennington's political life would be spent within the current shaped by the ideas of 1951 and the partial and incoherent "orthodox Trotskyist" reactions against them.

The Trotskyist organisation Pennington joined in 1951 was led by Gerry Healy. It worked in the Labour Party, in the Labour League of Youth, and in the trade unions, around a newspaper called *Socialist Outlook*. It had a notoriously stifling and authoritarian Stalinist-type regime, but it was despite everything a serious organisation, able to build support in the working class for broadly revolutionary socialist ideas.

Pennington played an important part in one of the key episodes of the class struggle in which the Healy group was significant: the secession of 16,000 dockers in Hull, Liverpool and Manchester from the autocratic TGWU and the attempt to make the little London stevedores' union, the NASD, into a replacement democratic national dockers' union. For some years before 1957, Pennington worked as a full-time NASD organiser in Liverpool and was thus an organiser of major strikes.

### III

**I**N February 1956 Nikita Khrushchev, the first reforming Stalinist Tsar, denounced his predecessor Stalin as a paranoid mass murderer. Then Khrushchev himself savagely repressed the Hungarian revolution. As a result the British Communist Party, which then had about 40,000 members, was thrown into turmoil. There was open and relatively free discussion for the first time in decades. Many CPers were emboldened to read the arch-heretic Trotsky; many left the CP; some hundreds joined the Trotskyists.

Very, very little of Trotsky was by this date in print. Decades of weeding-out by Catholic-Actionists and by Stalinists — numerous in the Labour Party, and thus on local councils too — had made books like Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and *Revolution Betrayed* uncommon even in public libraries. So the

old books and pamphlets circulated from hand to hand until they fell apart. The Healy group did not have a publication worth speaking of when this crisis broke (their paper had been banned by the Labour Party in 1954). Accepting the ban in order to stay with the large left-wing Bevanite movement in the Labour Party, they sold *Tribune*, the Labour left paper. They were able to recruit ex-CPers because of their dedication and hard-nosed persistence and because they represented a force, however weak, in the labour movement. They

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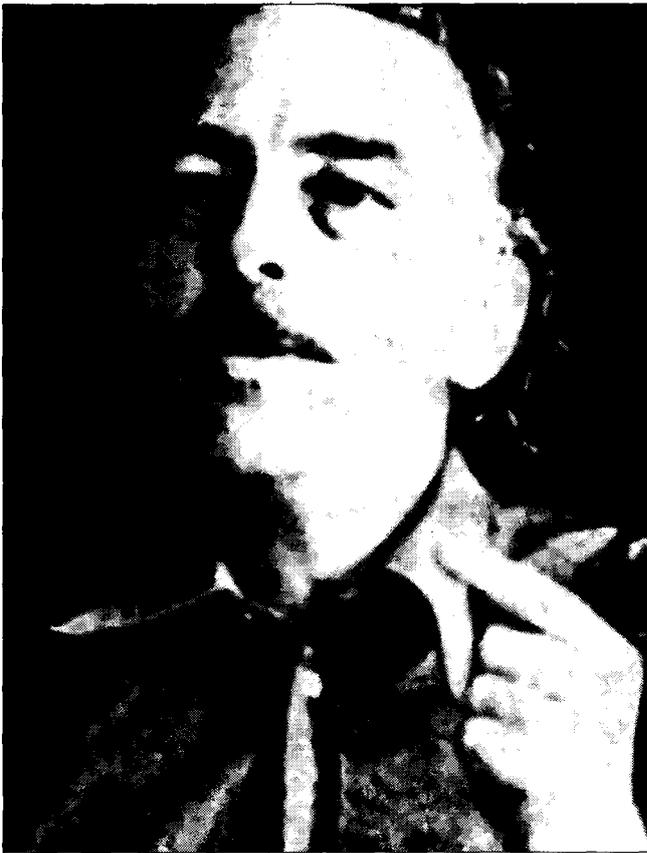
**"Up on the mobile 'soap box' platform at a street meeting, Pennington, wearing a loud yellow rollneck jumper, wags a finger scornfully at a fascist-minded heckler in the crowd, and tells him, in practical, down-to-earth, North-of-England tones: 'Why don't you catch on to yourself? You'll never get anywhere in Britain with that rubbish!'"**

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systematically visited or otherwise accosted every CP dissident they got to hear of. As one of them, Bill Hunter, later put it, didactically: when you got someone's address, you went to knock on the door even if all you said was "Balls!"

By January 1957 the group was able to start an impressive bimonthly journal, *Labour Review*, and by May a tiny weekly, *The Newsletter* — in size the equivalent of eight pages of *Workers' Liberty* and sometimes on a bad week, half that. Pennington, who had been an effective worker with dissident CPers in the north-west, was brought to London from Liverpool to help consolidate and expand the newly enlarged and better endowed organisation. Soon he was in the thick of activity against the Mosley fascists in Notting Hill, where in 1958 anti-West-Indian race riots had broken out.

An older comrade once gave me the following description of Pennington in action at Notting Hill. Up on the mobile "soap box" platform at a street meeting, Pennington, wearing a loud yellow



Bob Pennington speaking at the meeting in the Conway Hall to protest at the police raid on *Workers' Fight* (a forerunner of *Workers' Liberty*) in September 1973.

rollneck jumper, wags a finger scornfully at a fascist-minded heckler in the crowd, and tells him, in practical, down-to-earth, North-of-England tones: "Why don't you catch on to yourself? You'll never get anywhere in Britain with that rubbish!" What had impressed and at first startled my informant was Pennington's matter-of-fact, non-doctrinaire, mock-matey approach, the appeal to the common sense of even a fascist.

The Healy group then might have laid the basis for a mass Trotskyist movement. It was rooted in both the Labour Party and the trade unions — in 1958 it could get 500 working class militants to a rank and file national conference. It had a chance no subsequent group has had. It failed because it was seriously diseased, having neither a realistic assessment of the state of capitalism (then at the height of the long post-war boom) nor the internal democracy that would have allowed it to develop one by way of free discussion. They held out vastly unrealistic perspectives of imminent major capitalist crisis, big revolutionary struggles — and immediate large-scale growth for the organisation. In February 1959 the Healy group, privately known for a decade as "The Club", publicly relaunched itself as the Socialist Labour League, and was immediately proscribed by the Labour Party. From mid-1959 the disoriented, tightly 'bossed' group went into a protracted crisis. A series of prominent individuals — almost all the prominent ex-CPers — and small groups left, usually with acrimony, and more than once after violent confrontations with Healy or his supporters.

#### IV

THROUGHOUT this period of growth and then disintegration — though the group was not reduced to anything near its pre-'56 size and would soon begin to recruit large numbers of young people in the Labour Party Young Socialists — Pennington functioned as Healy's hatchet-man. Then, without much warning, a month or so after Brian Behan, the group Chairman, last of the

prominent ex-CPers, had been expelled, Healy-style, on the eve of the 1960 group conference, Pennington and a small group, led by the neuro-surgeon Christopher Pallas, suddenly broke with the organisation and came out as supporters of the politics of the French "ultra-state-capitalist" (as we used to say) current led by Cornelius Castoriades (who was variously known as Pierre Chaulieu or Paul Cardan). This tendency was virtually anarchist.

On the fringes of Healy's comparatively large neo-Trotskyist organisation there was then a cluster of small, hybrid groups and "independent" individuals, ultra-left and anti-Bolshevik in varying degrees. The *Socialist Review* group, forerunner of the SWP, was one. In autumn 1960 *International Socialism* was launched as a printed journal, controlled by *Socialist Review* though pretendedly separate and involving other groups, including the Pallas group, now called *Solidarity*. Pennington became joint editor, with Michael Kidron. Around this magazine the future SWP would group. It was at that stage — despite what some contributors to *Workers' Liberty* have said in these pages — explicitly anti-Leninist.

Pennington did not stay long. He said later that he found the way IS was run — as a Cliff-Kidron family concern — intolerable. He drifted away from *Solidarity* too. Drowning in a sour, carping, obsessive concern with their Trotskyist past, *Solidarity* had a quirky, sniping-from-the-sidelines, conception of politics. They were utterly sterile. Pennington soon realised it, and cut loose. This, as far as I know, was the only time Pennington radically re-examined the foundations of "post '51 Trotskyism". The experiment with *Solidarity* drove him back towards mainstream neo-Trotskyism, and he joined the Revolutionary Socialist League (Militant) in 1963 or '64. The RSL was then the British section of the international current led by Ernest Mandel, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Long moribund, they began to recruit a smattering of disillusioned SLLers and youth from the Labour Party Young Socialists. They fused with a separate group of USFI supporters, the future IMG.

They were the object of a sustained campaign of bitter animosity from the Healyites, not all of it baseless or just factionalism. A grouping appeared in the Militant echoing the SLL denunciations of Militant. Though it made some just criticisms of Militant, it was effectively working for the SLL, which was now becoming increasingly bizarre, sectarian and destructive. The group's organisers were Ted Knight — who would play an important role on the left in the early '80s as "Red Ted", leader of Lambeth Council — and... Bob Pennington. Knight knowingly worked for Healy. Considering how blatant it all was, it is hard to believe that Pennington was a dupe, but the alternative, that he knowingly worked for Healy, is simply impossible.

Knight and Pennington and the Healyite press campaign succeeded in splitting the newly-fused Militant-IMG group apart. The future IMG had been reluctant participants anyway. Knight and Pennington went with the IMG. Pennington had found his last resting place in politics.

Knight — who had been immersed in the Healy cult from his teens and emotionally and intellectually was incapable of making a decisive break from it — continued to work for Healy. That was known, but proof was another matter. Knight and Pennington were eventually suspended by the IMG.\*

Pennington — supporting the USFI but kept outside its ranks — was now in political limbo.

● The second part of this appreciation of Bob Pennington will appear in the next issue of *Workers' Liberty*.

\* Knight seems then to have genuinely drifted away from the SLL orbit. He would return to it around 1980, having become leader of Lambeth's Labour council, and — in tandem with Ken Livingstone of the Greater London Council — play the role of an especially malignant and cynical 'fake left' in local government.

# Bob Pennington and the Trotskyist archipelago

Part 2 of The Life and Times of Bob Pennington by Patrick Avaakum

**I**N the late '60s everything was changing on the left. Mass demonstrations against the Vietnam war, mass student radicalisation, the great French general strike of May-June 1968, and, in Britain, against a background of disappointment with Labour in office, sustained rank-and-file workers' industrial militancy — all combined to generate euphoria and semi-anarchist ultra-leftism among wide layers of mainly middle-class youth.

At the beginning of this radicalisation, the IMG, to which Bob Pennington, though excluded from membership, felt he owed allegiance because of its connection with the "Fourth International" (United Secretariat of the Fourth International), was small and lacked anything like an educated cadre. Some of its members — Pat Jordan, Tariq Ali — became central to the big anti-Vietnam war movement. Reflecting every middle-class ultra-left fashion and behaving like a tendency with no political baggage to guide or inhibit what it said or did, the group began to recruit newly radicalised youth. Soon it split, shedding a large and disparate "right-wing" element of its older membership, people who wanted the old primary orientation to the labour movement.

It is difficult today to conjure up the world of the IMG at the turn of the most momentous decade in British labour history since the 1920s. It has vanished like an animal species subjected to catastrophic climatic change. Most of the tendency's surviving members, chastened and largely doing routine labour movement work, are probably supporters of *Socialist Outlook*; its leadership after 1972 and some of the members are now in *Socialist Action*.

Fleeting itself exuberantly in the flood-tide of a world revolution which included Mao Zedong, the Stalinist Vietnamese, the Black Panthers, the IRA, Che Guevara, Korea's dynastic Stalinist dictator Kim Il Sung, and comrade Tom Cobbley and all, the group was wildly ultra-left.

The IMG had the backing and the emotional appeal of "The International" — the USFI — and the reflected intellectual and academic prestige of Ernest Mandel. It grew very quickly. The speculations and fantasies were heady, the chanting on demos exhilarating and the 'highs' were just great. man. With any luck you could even do an academic thesis on some aspect of revolutionary politics. Noisy and pretentious and very revolutionary it was, and good fun for a while before you "settled down"; but serious politics it was not, still less working-class politics.

They were for the working class, but their first concerns were often narrowly and foolishly studentist. The IMG was "in" with the world revolution, they *were* the "Fourth International", and so they did not have to bother too much about the lesser teams in the world league, like the working class in Britain, where they happened to live and could hope to influence events!\*

The IMG used the idea of the "Fourth International" to fortify their current, and frequently changing, politics and as a stabilising baseline outside of politics — a fetish. Essentially it was a substitute for politics. Never mind the politics, we are the International! "Internationalism" is the central question, comrade! The same approach in the 1930s would have made a principle of being in the Stalinist Communist International, because — never mind the politics! — it was the "real international".

This was sub-political, but it did give the IMG some organisational stability. The idea that this weak international tendency (the USFI), which specialised in mimicry of and chameleon adaptation to alien political currents, was in any real sense "The Fourth International" expressed wishes

\* We, the fore-runners of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, expelled from the IS-SWP in December 1971, and sharing (though rapidly losing) some illusions that the USFI could meaningfully be considered the continuation of Trotsky's Fourth International, agreed to their proposal that we fuse with them — on condition that the new group would immediately start to produce a worker-oriented weekly paper. This was seven months before July 1972, when Britain came to the verge of a general strike. The class struggle was bubbling up around us. They dismissed our concerns! One of the negotiators, a young middle-class man with a couple of years in politics and the manners of the boss's son talking to dim proles about high finance, gave us a smugly proprietorial little lecture on the "world revolution" and "internationalism", emphasising the relative unimportance of Britain in "the world revolution". He placed it sixth or seventh in a list at the top of which was Bolivia (or was it Argentina?). Britain and the British working class our first concern? How small-minded and parochial could people who called themselves Trotskyist get?



rather than the reality, but for Pennington, by the late 1960s, this half-imaginary 'International'-above-politics had become the central part of his political outlook; it was a lodestar that led him into some strange political places.

## II

**B**UT Pennington was still kept outside their door. Grand-master of factional gambits, he now applied an old expelled-entrism policy to the IMG: he set to influence people to join who would then fight to get him in.† Eventually Pennington got back into the IMG. Because the IMG lacked an educated cadre, it soon sagged into a discussion group for self-consciously intellectual but, unfortunately, clueless, middle-class youth. The sensible part of that generation of revolutionary-minded students

went to the IS-SWP, which had a serious working-class (though economic) orientation and some sense of reality.

Soon an IMG opposition group emerged, led by Pennington and his protégé, John Ross. Initially the Ross-Pennington grouping argued for necessary things, like a working-class orientation. Here Pennington's persona as an experienced militant of the working class and of the older revolutionary movement was an irreplaceable part of the faction's political capital.

But this faction — temporarily deprived of Pennington's collaboration as we shall see — developed absurd ideas. They argued that a Marxist organisation should never make "calls to action" on the working class. Instead socialists should just explain "a rounded conception" of the overall struggle — that is, confine themselves to outside-the-struggle general propaganda. Graphically expressing the psychology of a small middle-class group with no presence in the labour movement, they thus theorised, magnified and helped perpetuate their own impotence.

In a grown-up organisation, people cutting their teeth with such notions would be given a booklist and maybe a tutor, and told to go learn the ABCs. Here they soon rallied a majority of the organisation against the lacklustre old leadership — never more than a USFI "branch manager" leadership — around Pat Jordan and Bob Purdie. Just as Britain went towards the biggest political crisis in decades, the IMG went seriously daffy.

The Tory government admitted British passport-holding Asians expelled from Uganda, and there was a vicious racist backlash. Militant workers struck and marched in protest, alongside fascists. Stark tragedy? No problem, said the IMG: this was a "big chance for the left" to put the argument against racism on a *fully socialist* rather than merely liberal basis.††. When a general strike against anti-union laws became a real possibility, the IMG said that calling for a general strike was merely "administrative", not political, not worthy of Marxists... And so on. This was "the Fourth International" in Britain at the highest point of class struggle since the 1926 General Strike!

## III

**W**HEN the IMG was at its most bizarre, someone wrote on the lavatory wall of the pub in Pentonville Road most used by the group: "Come back Pennington, they've all gone mad!" Where was Pennington? He was in jail, for embezzlement. He had what he called a working-class attitude to things that "fell off the backs of lorries" — fiddles, extras, baksheesh. How far back in his life that went, I don't know. But such attitudes were endemic in the docks, up to and including serious gang-

† His most notable success was a perennially confused young man, John Ross by name, who had been sent into Oxford IS (SWP) to do exploratory entry work for a Maoist group (the CPBML) and decided to stay.

†† The fortnightly paper *Workers' Fight* applied "the IMG method" to other situations in history: "Asians: big chance for left". That is how they greet the wave of racialism and the biggest mobilisation of fascism for ages! For devotees of this kind of thinking, however, we offer the following quiz: In the first section below are a number of catastrophes and misfortunes; in the second are a number of 'big chances'. Your job is to match them up. 1. the ten plagues; the purge of the Bolshevik old guard by Stalin; the black death; Hitler comes to power; the fall of the Roman Empire; fascism victorious in Germany. 2. "Our turn next; big chance for budding historians of imperial history; big chance for critics of Thaelmann; big chance for new leadership; big chance for young doctors; big chance for rat-catchers. In case you're not sure how to play the game, we'll start you off with a real one (actually the slogan of the ultra-left German Communist Party at one time): 'Hitler comes to power — our turn next'."

sterism. For enterprising dockers, the choice was normally posed, to be a militant or to fight a secret, possibly lucrative, war of private redistribution. Some did both. Pennington — who had been the subject of strong criticism in the Liverpool SLL for his docks associations — did both. As a result he was out of it at the crucial turning-point for his organisation, and the working class.

Timeless Ten-Commandments moralism is, I think, not in place here. It is natural for robbed and exploited workers to take back what they can. Why not? Such wild forms of working class resistance to exploitation are inseparable from class society. In the files of the first British Marxist journal, *Justice*, are to be found discussions between pioneers like Jim Connell — who wrote 'The Red Flag' — and Theodore Rothstein on the attitude Marxists should take to such things, and to petty casual sabotage: there was even a name for it: "ca'canny". The issue is a political, not mainly a moral one: socialists propose collective action for general working class betterment, not private guerrilla war on the exploiters; and pilfering renders militants liable — as Pennington discovered at the most awkward political moment — to repression by the bourgeois state.

In July 1972, a quarter of a million workers struck spontaneously against the jailing of five dock workers' pickets, and the TUC felt obliged to set a date for a one-day general strike. After five days of vast crowds besieging Pentonville jail, where the five were held, the Tories capitulated and let the dockers out. During this great working-class revolt the no-calls-to-action-IMG was all at sea. They wound up suggesting a bewildering menu of slogans and demands. Afterwards, the old no-calls-to-action nonsense was badly discredited and soon abandoned, and they went into sharp crisis. The group dissolved into unprincipled gang warfare that would — the subgroups held together by the Fourth International — last a dozen years, until the organisation finally splintered.

The Rossites, the enemies of all "calls to action", now made "calls to action" with the gabbled speed of a pattering race course bookie. They unceremoniously took over the central slogan of the old leading group — Jordan-Purdie, now in opposition — "General Strike to Kick the Tories Out", and went characteristically mad with it. General Strike was the answer to everything. When the Tories called a General Election in February 1974, the IMG called on workers not to vote separately but to strike and march to the polls as a class. When the Tories lost the February 1974 election and Prime Minister Heath spent a few hours trying to form a coalition with the Liberals, the IMG rushed out a special issue of their paper with the headline "General Strike to finish them off!" And so on, and so on: noisy, silly, childish...

Pennington, out of jail, was again part of the leadership of the Ross group. They would keep control of the organisation through a long and bewildering series of political quick-changes, contortions and volte-faces. I like to think he was a voice for balance and sanity in their councils.

The IMG's zigzags included one of the most bizarre episodes in their history — "Socialist Unity", a conglomerate of the IMG, smaller groups like Big Flame, and unaffiliated individuals. Socialist Unity put up ten candidates, standing against Labour\*, in the 1979 election. In principle there was nothing wrong in that, but in the circumstances — the Thatcherite Tories were on the offensive that led to a radical reshaping of British politics and society and of the British labour movement too — it was as sectarian as it was shortsighted. Pennington was the National Organiser of Socialist Unity.\*\*

They did ignominiously at the polls. The IMG had to radically correct and reorient themselves when the Labour Left went on the offensive after June 1979. Big things like that were, in any case, always only little things to the IMG.

The IMG's ultra-left euphoria was now long gone. In its place, in the '80s, was depression and organisational haemorrhaging. The ever-warring factions had stayed in one organisation only because they could jointly make a common religion of "the International": the family that prays together stays together, so to speak. When "The International" split, the IMG began to scatter into a number of organisations. Pennington's erstwhile faction became *Socialist Action*, which today is a small group whose members work at burrowing into positions of borrowed "power" and influence as factotums for MPs and the like. Its politics are now more kitsch-Stalinist than kitsch-Trotskyist. Pennington, at the end, sided with the section of the IMG that became *Socialist Outlook*, but, old, tired, and probably sickened, he dropped out at about the time of the group's fragmenting in 1985.

Not long after that, the collapse of the Stalinist USSR brought to a bru-

tal end the illusions of those who had mistaken Stalinism for a "deformed" but viable and improvable first elaboration of socialism. Pennington's political life had spanned the whole period of a neo-Trotskyism that was always an epiphenomenon of Stalinism

## IV

**I**N all the years of Bob Pennington's activity, the working class had been through a great cycle of industrial militancy. In February 1974 it had brought down a Tory government and installed one more to its liking.

Large numbers had embraced varieties of "Trotskyism". Sizeable organisations were built — but each one reproduced and parodied some previous bad working-class experience, as if to mock Trotsky's charge to such groups to be "the memory of the class"<sup>†</sup>. The result is an archipelago of sects.

What, objectively, might have been achieved by revolutionary socialists in mass working-class politics during Pennington's political lifetime? In 25 years and more of working-class confidence, combativity, and sometimes spectacular industrial militancy, a stable, united organisation of Marxists could have been built — an organisation capable of providing the broad labour movement with basic socialist and Marxist education, of propagating a socialist working-class interpretation of current events, and of organising militants in day-to-day struggle. It could have oriented to and integrated into the existing political and industrial labour movement, learning from the CP of the mid-'20s, which gained large labour movement influence despite right-wing hostility. It could have grown steadily to become a force in day-to-day working-class affairs. Building a rank-and-file movement in the unions, it could have offset the time-serving and treachery of the trade union bureaucrats who have brought the labour movement to its present pass.

What if such a sane, stable, internally democratic revolutionary organisation of some tens of thousands had existed in the struggles of the early 1970s? Then everything might have been different. The alternative to the Tories we drove from office in 1974 would probably still have been Harold Wilson's Labour Party, but it would not have been able after 1974 to demobilise the working class as it did. Subjected to the criticism of the Marxists and the opposition of a Marxist influenced labour movement it might possibly have been Britain's Kerensky government — the bridge to socialist revolution. The working class could conceivably have taken power. But if not that, then, at the very least, objective conditions existed for a large Marxist organisation to become a stable force in British politics.

Why did we not achieve that? The main Trotskyist groups — the SLL/WRP, Militant, IS/SWP and the IMG — were politically incoherent and often self-isolating. They proved simply unfit to use the opportunities which opened up before them. Most of them wrapped their basic revolutionary socialist ideas in dogmas that too often defied reason and sense. Key ideas — about Stalinism and the "unfolding world revolution" for example — were or became articles of unthinking faith that could not be reasoned about, questioned or more than cursorily discussed. An orthodoxy that often depended on special meanings for words like imperialism — the Russian Empire, even after its immense post-1944 expansion, was not an Empire, but the World Revolution, for now — and whose tenets frequently flew in the face of observed reality, could only be maintained on the basis of Authority. That fact, aside from all accidental things like Gerry Healy's personality — or, for that matter, the personality of Tony Cliff, who rejected many of the dogmas of official Trotskyism<sup>††</sup> — bred in most of the Trotskyist groups brutal authoritarian regimes of crisis, modelled essentially on early Stalinism; and as western Stalinist parties loosened up after the '50s, these regimes were often worse than the regimes in contemporary Stalinist organisations, being truly "machines for maiming militants". All questions of politics aside, this alone made them organically incapable of integrating into the broad real labour movement. The typical neo-Trotskyist press was monofactional, "homogenised", and usually sterile.

The ideological systems were synthetic and arbitrary, and forever

<sup>†</sup> Militant, for example, re-lived the Second International experience of making an all-regulating, self-sufficient purpose out of the building up, maintenance and preservation of a party apparatus. During the dozen years they controlled the Labour Party Young Socialists, they were financially subsidised by the Labour Party! When eventually they came to control the council in Liverpool, they evaded a conflict with the Tories that could have brought serious and maybe decisive aid to the striking miners in 1984/5 because of the risks it entailed to their machine, only — like their German Social-Democratic prototype — to have that apparatus smashed later, after the miners had been defeated.

<sup>††</sup> Of course the "workers' state" dogma and the culture that grew up around it does not explain the "state-capitalist" SWP, which long ago broke with it, but the neo-Trotskyist culture does — the culture which the Cliff group systematically embraced when, after '68, it decided to "build a party". Ever afterwards it acted as if deliberately copying the once "successful" Healyites, and as if it did not know the end of that political story.

\* In fact, on a tepid left-reformist programme.

\*\* The essential drive of Socialist Unity came from factional competition with the IS-SWP. The overall contours of class politics were lost sight of.

threatening to disintegrate into their components. For example, Militant could glory in the achievements of the USSR's "socialism in one country", consider it a matter of principle in all circumstances to back Stalinism against capitalist forces, believe Stalinist expansion was a triumph for The Revolution, and at one and the same time denounce the system as totalitarian, and advocate a new "political" revolution in the Stalinist states. This was "dialectics", comrade!

Such a radically incoherent mixture could not long survive open discussion, and therefore, since discussion tended to dissolve organisations conceived as revealed-truth one-faction "parties", discussion even of issues that, rationally assessed, did not threaten basic socialist commitment and conviction, became intolerable. Such sects could *only* hold together on the basis of Authority. And thus a system grew up in which popes, cardinals, archbishops and high priests ruled sects that were as sealed off from each other and, in some cases, from the world around them, as islands are by the ocean.

Today there is almost no intra-left discussion, and often members of one group will believe that the inhabitants of the nearest atoll indulge in diabolical practices, or believe the political equivalent of the idea that they wear their heads tucked under their arms.

## V

**I**T WAS not simply that wrong views about the class nature of the USSR inevitably led to Gerry Healy's regime and its horrors — they did not — but that the culture, including the organisational culture, that grew up around the self-contradictory dogmas and the love-hate ambivalence of the relationship to Stalinism was, ultimately, all-embracing and all-infecting. Wrong views and self-contradictory dogmas and the frantic work to protect them combined with authoritarian papal regimes to create a self-corrupting and self-corroding culture. The "official Trotskyist" movement became hag-ridden with fear and religiosity. Because this culture was not conducive to rational politics, it worked murderously against Marxism itself in the politics of the "Marxist" groups.\*

Solving political and ideological problems by erecting a Papal authority for the leaders involved for the groups a relapse to a pre-bourgeois outlook on the world. It required the abandonment by the individual members of many of the progressive mental habits of post-Renaissance bourgeois civilisation — reasoning about the world from facts, for example — whose products include Marxism itself. But there could be no stable view of a world for which the dogmas had again and again to be squared with an unaccommodating reality and where real discussion tended to dissolve the groups artificial certainties — and the groups. The cadres were trained not so much on Marxist basics as on Jesuitical interpretations and reinterpretations of the world.\* The organisational example of "successful" Stalinism acted to make all this more intractable.

Yet, the rational and open discussion which was inimical to the entire mode of existence of these groups was irreplaceable if they were to be able to rectify their own policies and analyses and learn from their own collective experience. That is, if they were to be healthy organisations, interacting fruitfully with the world around them and with the working class. Without that they were also incapable of avoiding disruption and splits at each point of divergent opinion — and divergence of opinion in response to events is unavoidable in any living movement. So, the groups multiplied. Enlightenment did not.

The result was, instead of the steady growth of a healthy revolutionary organisation, oriented to and linked with the labour movement, the creation of an archipelago of authoritarian and therefore endlessly fissiparous sects, incapable of long-term balanced integration with the broad labour movement.

In Bob Pennington's political life, the key organisation here was the Healy group, which was able to organise the beginnings of a promising rank and file movement as early as 1958. Its "regime" and its intellectual sterility destroyed it. By the 1970s it was spiralling deep into lunacy on its way to rendering mercenary political services to Arab dictators.

The two other "big" organisations only grew when the SLL faltered, close to the peak of the class movement in the early 1970s. The IS-SWP was a group, initially loose and "liberal", around an extended political family (Gluckstein—Rosenberg—Kidron); acquiring an authoritarian "Leninist" regime to serve the "thinkers", it soon reproduced all the faults of the other

groups, variations of dogma notwithstanding.

There was never any possibility that the IMG could play the role that needed to be played. Because the IMG lacked an authoritative centre there was a deluge, indeed, a debauch of discussion there, but that did not allow the group to escape the sectarian trap: the permanent sub-groups were internally ultra-centralised for the conduct of factional war and each political item immediately assuming a gang-war significance, identity and rigidity. That made real discussion very difficult. This was not an alternative to the neo-Trotskyist sectarian culture but a variant of it. And fundamental they shared the in-built basic neo-Trotskyist political culture, with its double-talk and double-think; not infrequently they had an intensity of fantasy and compulsory optimism about 'the new rise in the world revolution', or whatever, that was all their own and not elsewhere to be attained without the aid of chemicals. Ourselves — the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and its predecessors — we were a very small group, created in response to the crisis of the older movement, but stifled by their predominance. Nor were we always free of all the faults of the bigger neo-Trotskyist groups.

Thus, it was Bob Pennington's tragic fate to live a long political life in a cluster of revolutionary movements still politically, intellectually, morally and organisationally disoriented by Trotskyism's historic defeat at the hands of Stalinism. In Trotsky's time Stalinism had marginalised Trotskyism, and, after Trotsky's death, finally, in the sense described above, politically hegemonised the "official Trotskyists". In Britain during Pennington's political life, neo-Trotskyism failed the test of the class struggle as much because of its own decrepitude as for any reason of overwhelming objective difficulty.

## VI

**A**ND what of Pennington, the man? Early in life Bob Pennington learned to understand the class nature of our society, and the place of his own class as the slave class within it. He spent the rest of his life at war with that system. To the end on the park bench in Brighton, he never made peace with it.

I last saw Pennington in the mid-'80s in an Islington pub where we met at lunchtime to discuss some aspect of the libel case the Hcalyites had brought against *Socialist Organiser*. He was very helpful.

Still, at 60, a slim, elegant, well-groomed figure of a man — though one side of his moustache was white and from a distance invisible — he would at mid-day only drink slimline tonic, patting his stomach and grinning, ruefully determined: those days, at his age... He had to watch his weight... His priorities, so I understand, would change.

Pennington was one of those people with an undisturbable self-respect and an ingrained roguish self-regard whom it was impossible to dislike for long, even when you detested what he was doing or were convinced that he was talking out of the wrong orifice. One of his attractive qualities was that, despite the occasional spivving, which had a great deal to do with pride and wild "resistance" to capitalism, he was not conventionally self-regarding at all. Had he concerned himself with it, he could probably have secured an altogether more prosperous old age than that of the "spike" and the park bench.

Pennington had good gut class instincts but that is rarely enough. He tended to work with partners, and took much of his politics from his successive partners, himself. I guess, perplexed by the difficulties and problems of a movement in protracted political crisis. He had an air of workaday scepticism balanced by a "but let's get on with it" practical-man posture and concerns. This attitude begged questions he worked hard to avoid. Latterly he held on to "the FI" — which was in reality not Trotsky's "Fourth" and not much of an International either — as to a political St. Christopher medal. Yet Bob Pennington was a determined basic cadre of the movement that kept disrupting around him. He was unable to help reshape it for the better. That was his personal tragedy.

He went from one group to another, tried one thing after another. Again and again he got up on his feet and worked once more to find the right road. He never did; but he never gave up, until overwhelmed by old age and decrepitude and, I guess, disgust and revulsion. That is the side of Pennington we can respect and admire.

He was a good man to have a drink with or exchange badinage with — and formidable in a polemical rough-house!

If by understanding why "Trotskyism" failed in Pennington's time, and what to do about it, we can learn how to rebuild a healthy movement to fight for the things Pennington spent his life fighting for, then his effort will not have been wasted. Serious socialists have a great deal to learn from Bob Pennington's stubborn, persevering loyalty to his class and its greatest achievement *so far*, the aspiration to win socialism — that is, to liberate humankind from the age-old shackles of class society.

\* For example, solve the following conundrum: nationalised and collectivised property makes China a workers' state. The Chinese Stalinist party which created it was essentially peasant in composition. How can it be shown — as it must be, because only a workers' party could do what has been done — to have "really" been a workers' party?