

HISTORY OF THE BRITISH
TROTSKYIST MOVEMENT.

Oct./44

Introduction.

With the expulsion of Trotsky from the Soviet Union in 1929 a minute section within the C.P.G.B. formed themselves into a Left Opposition as part of the International Left Opposition under the direction of Trotsky. These, a loose collection of individuals who were unable to get down to any real programme of activity, amongst these were HENRY SARA (now S. London Organiser for N.C.L.C.), HARRY WICKS and REG GROVES. WICKS and WESTON, both later in the Revolutionary Socialist League, had seen Trotsky as early as 1924 and afterwards maintained correspondence. Following a call from Trotsky for a turn into the "centrist" organisations of the Labour Party and the I.L.P. these opposition elements between 1932/36 either left or were expelled from the C.P.

It is important to note that the Trotskyist movement to-day did not proceed from this source but developed from a trend which came over from S.Africa.

It is not possible to trace all the groupings, the majority being of an ad-hoc nature adopting the most revolutionary sounding names. Many came, went, split and re-formed continually through antagonisms, and fierce hostility between groups which has been characteristic of the British and indeed all Trotskyist movements. Thus no details can be given of the Chelsea Action Group, Socialist Left Federation or even a current Glasgow WORKERS REVOLUTIONARY LEAGUE (organ "SOLIDARITY" issued bi-monthly) and many others. This historical section will only trace the main groups and developments, which led to the formation of the present Revolutionary Communist Party (see Appendix I.)

Position in 1936.

By this time three groupings had evolved: -

a) Marxist League. Leading people were F.A. RIDLEY (now regarded as the I.L.P. theoretician. Ridley had previously met Trotsky. Later broke with him declaring bitterly that 'Trotsky had stolen his ideas'), HARRY WICKS and HUGO DEWAR. Organ "Red Flag".

b) Marxist Group. Led by C.L.R. JAMES. Organ "FIGHT". James had come over with the West Indies cricket team. Was "Times" cricketing expert. Said to have been drawn into the movement from reading Trotsky's works lent by S.S. Silverman M.P. Regarded by J.R. Campbell in "Soviet Policy and its critics" as the foremost British Trotskyist theoretician, James in 1937 wrote "World Revolution" published by Secker & Warburg. Later he went to America and split off from the main body into obscurity.

c) Militant Group. Leading people were D.D. HARBER, STARKEY JACKSON, JACK WARMAN, VAN GELBERN, MARGARET JOHNS, ROBINSON. Organ "MILITANT". Apart from London, groups and contacts were in Leeds, Glasgow, Liverpool, Coventry and Nottingham. The Glasgow grouping had published a joint document with the Anarchists. Notes on some of these leaders are of interest. HARBER and JACKSON were continually at loggerheads. HARBER owned houses in Brighton, studied in the British Museum picturing himself as another Lenin - a pose typical of many Trotskyist leaders. At the outbreak of war he returned to Brighton, terrified of being called up - managing even up to the present to keep out of the war - and an Insurance Agent's business. Now on the Central Committee of the Revolutionary Communist Party and Editor of the present "MILITANT". JACKSON, a criminal element, lived later in Nottingham. Served jail sentence for opening gasmeters when gas-collector. Ex-C.P. had been to the Soviet Union in 1927 with the Y.C.L. delegation. During the war went into the Army and reported killed. MARGARET JOHNS was on the District Committee of the Shop Assistants Union, London Trades Council and London Labour Party. She was directly approached by Herbert Morrison and used against what he considered were Communist elements (Shaffren the Stepney Labour Party Secretary used to approach

Trotskyists in Stepney for the same purpose). Cohabited with ROBINSON and was Editor of "MILITANT". Her house at 7 Southwark St. was a regular meeting place for the Trotskyists. This group used to send certain of its members to interview Trotsky - COLLINS did so in 1936.

The Militant Gp. had a few people in the I.L.P. led by Arthur Ballard now owner of the Socialist Book Centre, Strand W.C.I. Nevertheless its main sphere of activity and penetration was in the Labour Party where it called itself the MILITANT LABOUR LEAGUE. M.L.L. perspective was formulated on the basis of the following main propositions:

1. That the mass of the Working class were entering a period of transition from reformism to revolution.
2. That this would find its main expression in the Labour Party as the mass workers party.
3. That it was necessary for the Trotskyists to take hold of the rising discontent with reformism and canalise it into revolutionary channels.

They saw as its chief danger the policy of the C.P. with its Popular Front campaign which itself threatened to take hold of disillusioned Labourites. An additional factor was the dissolution of the Socialist League led by Sir Stafford Cripps which the rebel Labour Party members with no means of organising their opposition to Transport House.

The Militant Group sought to develop the M.L.L. into a broad left wing movement within the Labour Party which retain sufficient flexibility to enable it to obtain official recognition from Transport House. At the same time they could use it as a recruiting ground for the Trotskyist organisation proper.

They placed great hopes on the recruitment of Labour League of Youth members to the M.L.L. and formed a youth M.L.L. with its own paper the "Youth Militant" for this purpose. This was a 16 page duplicated paper published sporadically and distributed entirely within the L.L.Y. The "Militant" was published monthly and never reached a circulation of more than 3000 mainly on the basis of door to door canvasses. It was constantly in debt with the printers and the name of the publisher was changed many times, the paper being taken to different printers.

As a consequence of the M.L.L. perspective the Militant Group made no attempt to penetrate into either the C.P. or the I.L.P.

During the 1936 period the C.P. Popular Front policy produced a ferment within the ranks of the I.L.P. The Revolutionary Policy Committee led by Allen and Gaster entered the C.P. Other sections augmented the Trotskyists disgusted with the 'bankruptcy' of the I.L.P. leadership.

Now the Workers International League arose.

During the same period RALPH LEE from South Africa got into the leadership of the Militant which was now 60 strong. His dictatorial 'bossy' manner exacerbated personal differences to the point which made another of the innumerable splits inevitable. The final straw came when an Gubern also from S.Africa received a report that Lee had absconded with funds from metal trade unions in S.Africa.

In 1937 Lee pulled 20 members out of the Militant Group to form the Workers International League (W.I.L.) which was at first only confined to the Paddington area and later possessed a strong group in St. Pancras. Leading people R. LEE, GERRY HEALY (ex-Paddington Y.C.L.), JOHN HATCH now M.L.P. Industrial and Political Organiser, JOCK HASTON and TED GRANT (also from S.Africa)

W.I.L. composed of younger elements had an aggressive policy which contrasted with the sectarian methods of previous groupings. From the first I.L. set itself towards building a mass party. Since the disruptive role these Trotskyists was to meet with considerable success an examination of their early policy merits careful attention as it gives a key to understanding the reason for this success:-

- 1) W.I.L. had ample funds from the beginning provided by Lee. his wife Millie (Mildred) Lee had a good job as a hat designer and also contributed liberally. Immediately had a Printing press and received loads of free literature from America.
- 2) Broke with the Militant Group's policy of merely being a Left Wing in the Labour Party. Placing its emphasis on:
 - a) open propaganda work
 - b) work inside industrial working class bodies.
- 3) Opposed Militant Group policy of not wanting to work as a fraction within other organisations. W.I.L. adopted this method as a favourite one for recruiting. Thus went into the C.P., Y.C.L., N.U.W.M., I.L.P., Anarchist Federation and No-Conscription League. In this connexion saw the Y.C.L. as a particularly field.
- 4) Its penetration into the I.L.P. had a double motive i.e. to grab the most able elements and to split the I.L.P. so that the bulk of the membership would break away from the leadership and enter into the ranks of the Trotskyists. In a short space of time W.I.L. swelled up the London I.L.P. Guild of Youth comprising 90 members. Fenner Brockway's comments are illuminating, "The I.L.P. Guild of Youth after being almost destroyed in turn by the Communists and Trotskyists, is now building well on a clear-cut revolutionary policy". (P.246 "Workers Front". Secker and Warburg, 1938)
- 5) Policy of deliberate poaching. Sent leading people up and down the country Shanghaiing them into the W.I.L. Raiding parties annually sent to I.L.P. Conferences for this purpose (to other Trotskyist groups)
- 6) W.I.L. was the first Trotskyist organisation to circulate internally a profusion of theoretical documents and went in for printed pamphlets (including translations of Trotsky's articles) in a bigger way than had previously been attempted.

Organ, "Youth for Socialism". Also sold the American "Socialist Appeal" which it received in large quantities. W.I.L. did not publish its own "Socialist Appeal" until 1940 when war conditions prevented the sending over of the U.S. paper. At first monthly, the S.A. from 1943 onwards appeared fortnightly. Andrew Scott (Paton) Editor in 1940 when he wrote nearly all of the articles.

The only case of a breakaway from W.I.L. was the Leninist League "British Affiliate of the Provisional International Contact Commission for the building of the NEW COMMUNIST (FOURTH) INTERNATIONAL". This is a Glasgow 'left Trotskyist!' outfit of insignificant importance. The breakaway was led by a Central Committee member McGRATH now owner of Peoples Book Service, Noel St. W.I.

Politically the line of the Workers League was a crude form of leftism calculated to appeal - as the Fascists - to the most backward elements thus the tone of the "Socialist Appeal" was, and is, strident and sensational. While the mass of its membership was not even working class it phrasemongered with the most hallowed Socialist sentiments to capture unwary workers. It distorted the Popular Front policy to appear as if it was making a deal with the capitalists at the expense of the workers. "Socialism now!" as the magic solution to sidetrack the main issue of support for Spain and for a Peace Front when the maximum number of allies were required to stem fascism and war. Always hysterically and violently anti Stalin and anti Communist Party (nevertheless leading members had a sneaking envy of the C.P. and often attempted to model their tactics and organisation on it).

Formation of the Revolutionary Socialist League (R.S.L.)

This took place in March 1938 as a merger between the Marxist League and Marxist Group. Both had been in favour of open work but against work in other organisations such as the I.L.P., C.P., or Labour Party. Leading people of R.S.L. were JAMES, DEWAR, WICKS, AJIT ROY, SARA, HILDA LANE and WOOD (married to one of Fenner Brockway's daughters). Organ "Workers Front" Editor JAMES.

In January 1939 a further fusion took place. This time between the R.S.L. and the Militant Group. The new organisation being called for a period the (united) R.S.L. Leading people JAMES, JACKSON, HARBER, WOOD (Secretary). Organ remained "Workers Fight". There were groups in Cardiff and Swansea in addition to the others. The M.G. people still hid themselves as the Militant Labour League inside the Labour Party and did not attain recognition by Transport House. In fact were expelled at the 1940 Bournemouth Labour Party Conference (Official report P.27)

For the Labour League of Youth Conference in March 1939 the Militant Group printed 800 copies of "Youth Militant" but few reached the branches. At this Conference the Trotskyists had 16 out of 120 delegates. The Conference of the M.L.L. was held at the beginning of 1939 in the I.L.P. Hall Bedford Rd. Clapham North with an attendance of 60-70 delegates. The total M.L.L. membership never reached more than 200 nationally.

Revolutionary Socialist Party.

Set up early in 1938 was an Edinburgh grouping which had originally followed a Syndicalist trend. Leading people were FRANK MAITLAND and TAIT. Publications were under the heading of "Tait Memorial". Tait's father had left some £200 for this purpose. R.S.P. had small groupings in Glasgow and Middlesborough. The Glasgow grouping linked up with the Glasgow Militant Group.

Effect of Fourth International Foundation Conference.

This took place Sept. 1938 in Switzerland. J.P. Cannon the U.S. Trotskyist leader came to England en route with the purpose of unifying the British groups. He proposed formal unity i.e. W.I.L. carry on in its own fashion while the other groups work in the Labour Party. W.I.L. stood out holding the view that before there could be unity there had to be a thorough 'principled' discussion of differences. The moguls of W.I.L. were feeling their strength and would agree to unity only at their own terms.

At the Foundation Conference HARBER, JAMES, MAITLAND as British delegates signed agreement with the F.I. on behalf of M.G., R.S.L., and R.S.P. respectively. W.I.L. was left out and the R.S.L. became recognised as the British Section of the Fourth International with full political, moral and material support from the F.I.

By 1941 W.I.L. claimed to have planted Trotskyism in Ireland and had swallowed up the R.S.P. (which now became the Edinburgh grouping of W.I.L. and the Revolutionary Workers League. The R.W.L. was a grouping which had broken away soon after the formation of the (united) R.S.L. They were a Highbury crowd, led by ex-C.P. member ARMSTRONG I. Bar, HILDA LANE and HILDA PRATT. Before merging with W.I.L. published "WORKERS FIGHT" for itself. A Southall group under the leadership of SID BIDWELL, prominent N.U.R. member, also broke away from the (united) R.S.L. and joined W.I.L. in early 1939.

In 1939 R. LEE returned to S. Africa leaving his wife MILLIE LEE to carry on and his brother HEATON LEE who became North East R.C.P. Organiser. H. LEE also a South African was recently jailed and ^{RELEASED} together with Haston and Tearce.

Revolutionary Communist Party.

Towards the end of 1943 the International Secretariat of the Fourth International sent an urgent call to Britain for unification. This call was not only in the form of letters from the I.S. (under the signature of MARK LORIS) TERENCE PHELAN, a journalist, who had articles published in the "FOURTH INTERNATIONAL" was sent over to see that fusion was effected. W.I.L. overtures to R.S.L. were now accepted. R.S.L. had by this time consisted of three factions i.e. Militant Group, Left Socialists in the Labour Party and the Trotskyist Opposition (T.O.). T.O. was originally a W.I.L. fraction within the R.S.L. Inside the W.I.L. opposition to unity developed. The revolt was led by Healey and joined by COOPER of the T.O. and argued - from their point of view correctly - that the W.I.L. leadership had retracted from the 1938 position of thrashing out differences before fusion. However the Healey minority were defeated.

Up to fusion W.I.L. regarded the period as one in which they were

building cadres for the coming revolutionary period when the masses would turn to them to lead the revolution.

On the basis of fusion the Revolutionary Communist Party set up on March 11-12th 1944 as the British Section of the F.I. At the Fusion Conference Phelan sent greetings from the I.S. and the American SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY. W.I.L. showed itself to be by far the most powerful trend by steamrolling through all its resolutions. How the name R.C.P. came to be adopted is of interest; the reason officially given in the April "Socialist Appeal" was that "it was necessary to rescue the name 'Communist Party' which had been sullied by the Stalinists". The actual fact is that the Joint Negotiating Committee which had been set up to settle such questions recommended the name of "Revolutionary Socialist League" use of "Party" being deemed 'unprincipled' and one the fused organisation could only aim to reach. However at a J.N.C. just before fusion Heston came down with the big stick and put forward "Revolutionary Communist Party". He said he had just come from Cornwall and found the Youth were being attracted to the Communist Party.

Even after fusion the W.I.L.ites remained dominant. Factions were disbanded and replaced by mixed groups. Within each group the ex-W.I.L. members seeking to control policy, and steps taken to absorb the remaining isolated Trotskyist groupings. Overtures were made to the old guard of HARRY WICKS and HUGO DEWAR (who had stayed in the Battersea I.L.P. as a Left Wing within the Independent Labour Party) and to FRANK MAITLAND who had gone into the Army, made a Corporal and discharged "for political reasons" (now active in the I.L.P.) DEWAR has become I.L.P. Parliamentary Candidate for N. Battersea and Reg GROVES Labour Party Candidate for Aylesbury. For this constituency Groves was delegate to the Birmingham "Victory for Socialism" Conference - his was the one speech singled out for praise by the "Daily Sketch" - Sept/44

Fusion has assured the Trotskyists in Britain of a single, unified and compact organisation. The Revolutionary Communist Party has 4-500 members and a sale of "Socialist Appeal" claimed to be as high as 20,000 also a theoretical ~~xxxxxx~~ monthly "Workers International News". In an inflammatory situation the R.C.P. with its leftist and socialist demagogic phrases is capable of great actual and potential danger to the working class viz. the Barrow Dispute and the Albion Strike which is still going on. There is no doubt that this consolidation has considerable strengthened them and that great vigilance is necessary in order to isolate and expose these pernicious elements.

APPENDIX I.

CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF MAIN TROTSKYIST GROUPS IN BRITAIN

LEFT OPPOSITION (IN C.P.G.B.)

