

Turning round in the unions

By Martin Thomas

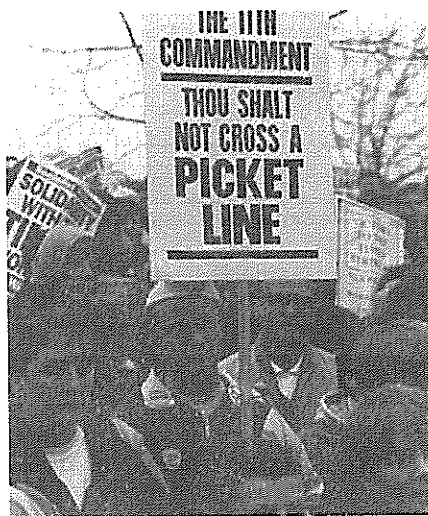
I THINK John McIlroy is right about many things ("Trade unions: is the tide turning?", *WL* 20). Union membership and strike figures tell us that we are "still on the retreat". "Qualitative change is unlikely this side of a general election".

Unlikely, not impossible. In hard fact, *Socialist Worker's* description of the present period as "volatile", a "transition to generalised struggle", tells us no more than the obvious: big struggles are not impossible, and at some future point will spread and burgeon. Politically, the description functions as an ideological construct to justify a "line": "it is all right for us to call for 'General Strike Now!' or 'March on Parliament, bring down the government!', even though all the statistics show working-class confidence is low, because, don't you know, the situation is *volatile*". "Or, even more to the point, "it is all right for us to call for 'General Strike Now', and at the same time organise only token one-day protests where we have union leadership responsibility, as in Sheffield UNISON, because, after all, things are *uneven* and *transitional*."

John McIlroy refers to the importance of "the wider political position" in an assessment, but leaves out, I think, a large part of that wider political position. Since the European Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis of September 1992, the Tories have been deeply discredited. Anger and disgust at the Tories — measured in local election, by-election, and opinion-poll results — is not the same as the confidence to take industrial action or become politically active. But it is important.

And to note this development is not just a matter of finding bits of cheer to exchange among ourselves: we can draw some conclusions for socialist activity now. Campaigns like the Welfare State Network can pick up on the new anger and disgust, shape it, and find forms of collective action which mobilise it. They can move without first having to budge the whole official labour-movement machine — which is still depressed, even in its activist layer — and help new activists to find a way into the labour movement.

The big recent struggles in Italy and France are also part of the situation. In those countries, the general problems blighting working-class struggle in Britain — long-term mass unemployment, domination of politics by the right-wing, weakening of trade-union organisation — are as bad as,



We need to struggle for positive rights for trade unionists

and in some respects worse than, in Britain.

This suggests that big upsurges in Britain are not impossible. It also, once again, gives some indications for what to do now. A major, possibly crucial, difference between Italy and France and Britain is trade-union laws. Their laws are still relatively liberal; ours outlaw all but a very narrow range of industrial action. A campaign for a Workers' Charter of positive trade-union rights is therefore a vital part of opening the way for an upsurge of struggle — which upsurge, we should remember, will certainly not come *automatically* on the election of a Labour government.

Filling the gap in Fife

By John P Mathieson

COMING FROM what could be called the autonomous republic of 'industrial Fife' I am out of touch with what the rest of the left (revolutionary and radical) is doing and *Workers' Liberty* looks as if it will fill that gap.

Fife's autonomy — of what does it consist?

Trotskyism in whatever form has not been able to take root. Militant came and went. The SWP have a few dedicated supporters but cannot muster enough persons to form a branch. The Socialist Party of Great Britain have a couple of supporters and they have a meeting every two or three years, spending quite a few pounds every time but making no converts.

You already know that we had a Communist Party MP, Willie Gallacher, still a name to be revered in the ex-mining areas.

And what of the CP or ex-CP now? In the Scottish local elections in Cowdenbeath, Alex Maxwell beat his Labour Party opponent who was the out-going education convenor. Alex is Democratic-Left.

In Lochar Ballingy, Willie Clark got well over a thousand votes to absolutely swamp his Labour Party opponent. Willie stands on

the Scottish Communist Party ticket.

Where else in the UK will you find a situation like that?

Your article on the SWP and Clause Four in the March issue of *Workers' Liberty* was very good and I am looking forward to even better issues.

Unfair to Revolutionary History

By Alan Johnson

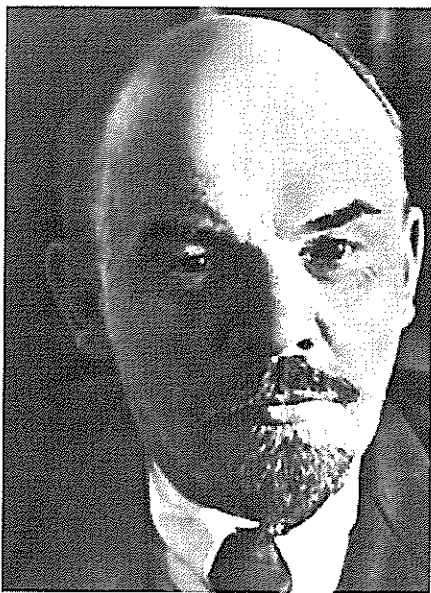
Sean Matgamna (*Workers' Liberty* No.19) is unfair to the *Journal Revolutionary History*. Sean lumps *Revolutionary History* together with various "Dead Trots Society" groups, alleging that: "All of them are more or less cut adrift from the disciplines, rhythms and concerns of the class struggle: their business is prattle and word processing, not practice." It is a shame no-one pointed this out to the comrades of *Revolutionary History* before they supplied bookstalls to our conferences, militants to run courses at our summer Ideas for Freedom event, on the history of our tradition, archives which a number of *Workers' Liberty* supporters have drawn on, (including you, Sean!) and a regular journal which I reviewed in *Socialist Organiser*, with no challenge, as "performing a great service to all Trotskyists".

Take the last issue of *Revolutionary History* — a series of hitherto unavailable writings of the revolutionary Marxist, Victor Serge, an appreciation of FA Ridley a pioneer British Trotskyist who died in 1994, and lengthy review sections covering books, conferences and archives. For supporters of *Workers' Liberty* the task in the period ahead is indeed, as Sean says, "to go to the working class and into the working-class movement to organise and reorganise it, and to plant the seeds of unfalsified socialism once more, especially amongst the youth". But in this work the resources provided by the militants of *Revolutionary History* are priceless, not some pseudo-academic distraction.

Another point. For someone thrown out of [Gerry Healy's] Socialist Labour League after a show trial, forced to quit Militant after Grant and Taaffe refused to circulate his views, and effectively expelled from the SWP for being a political threat to Cliff, it's surprising that Sean thinks that the members of groups like *Revolutionary History* leave Trotskyist organisations because they lack "a commitment, selflessness, discipline" etc.

Sean's basic argument is correct and

important: Marxism unattached to fighting the class struggle is arid. But to charge *Revolutionary History* with this is wrong.



Lenin tried to fight against bureaucracy

Democracy was possible in 1917

By Colin Foster

AL RICHARDSON overdoes it a bit in his response to Robin Blick (*WL* 20). To Blick's claim "that during the Russian Revolution Lenin's 'elitist and coercive "blood and iron" state socialism' triumphed over Martov's 'vision of a society that was both collectivist and democratic'," he replies that the option "both collectivist and democratic" was impossible in 1917 because of the harsh world context and the great backwardness of Russia. He does not, or seems not to, dispute Blick's description of the Bolshevik revolutionary regime as "elitist and coercive state socialism".

Maybe Al intended only to argue that gentle, piecemeal, moderate parliamentary progress was impossible in Russia in 1917, and "the choices were a military dictatorship or the Bolsheviks". If so, I agree.

But a regime "both collectivist and democratic", if not quite as Martov wished, was possible in 1917. It existed! The revolution created it. The Soviets of 1917-18 — councils of workers' and peasants' elected delegates, subject to recall — were a more responsive and flexible form of democracy than any parliament.

The Bolshevik regime was "coercive", of course. But it was not "state socialism" in the style of Fabian and other schemes for

Iranian socialists propose unity

REPRESENTATIVES OF nine political and regional groups who attended a meeting of 'Etehad Chap Kargari' (Workers' Left Unity) passed the following resolution on the 12 February 1995 in Germany:

The crisis engulfing the Iranian communist movement with its specific characteristics within the framework of an international crisis, has halted the formation and organisation of a genuinely radical socialist alternative in Iran. The objective in forming Workers' Left Unity (WLU) is to create the conditions that will help the formation and development of such a tendency and to pave the way for our joint efforts in the creation of a revolutionary party and to facilitate our future participation in any mobilisation of the working class. This political alliance believes in:

- the necessity for the overthrow of the capitalist Islamic Republic in Iran and the formation of a workers' state relying on the self-governing organs of workers and toilers.

- socialism as a force capable of expanding democracy in all political, social and economic spheres, abolition of exploitation, establishment of social ownership relying on the self-rule of producers and abolition of social classes.

- the inseparable characteristic of democracy and socialism and defence of all unconditional political freedoms, defending the right to universal voting, defending pluralism for all social strata.

- the struggle to organise workers on the basis of their class interests and on the basis of the confrontation between capital and labour. To help the independent mobilisation of the working class in economic, social, political and cultural issues.

- the struggle against patriarchy and male chauvinism, racial discrimination

"socialism from above". It made widespread nationalisations only from the autumn of 1918, and under pressure from below. After the emergency regime of the civil war (1918-21) had been unwound, as late as 1927 the platform of the Left Opposition noted that the state budget took a smaller proportion of national income than under Tsarism.

The Soviets were the very opposite of elitism. Then, during the civil war and after, the working class was dispersed, and soviet rule was replaced by Bolshevik party rule. For the Bolsheviks, this was an expedient to hold on until workers' revolutions in Europe came to their aid. But to the extent that the regime became elitist, it, so to speak, "negated itself", and at a certain point the "self-negation" turned into out-

and the battle to eradicate cultural, national, religious, sexual bias is an integral part of the struggle for socialism.

- in internationalism and adherence to its principles.

Although the above are sufficient to distinguish this alliance from other opposition forces claiming to support socialism, on their own they are inadequate for unification within a single political party. This alliance will follow a process of development and following a period of debate, discussion and practical co-operation, encouraging other ideological tendencies it will be able to clarify its positions further and pave the way for the formation of a single party within which the right to form factions and tendencies will be respected. Those participating in this alliance do not consider themselves as the only forces of this alliance and invite all groups and individuals who agree with the above points to join them maintaining their organisational/political independence. Such forces can form local independent, permanent branches which will form the base of this alliance. Such branches will expand the discussion on issues concerning the way out of the present crisis, tactical programmes and strategic issues necessary for creating the revolutionary party capable of leading the workers' socialist revolution, seeking further alliances in the democratic and socialist arena.

- Etehad Kargari Enghelabi Iran (Rahe Kargar) — Revolutionary Workers' Alliance Iran (Workers Path)
- Hezb Ranjbaran — Toilers' Party of Iran
- Daftarhaye Kargari — Workers' Socialist Bulletin
- Sazman Kargaran Enghelabi Iran (Rahe Kargar) — Organisation of Revolutionary Workers of Iran (Workers Path)
- Hasten Agahaliat — Minority Group
- Faalan Sazman Cherikhaye Fedayii Khalgh Iran — Activists of the Organisation of Iranian Peoples' Fedayin Guerrillas (abroad)
- Hamkaran Projeh Ijad Bulletin Bahshe socialisthayeh Enghelabi — The project for revolutionary socialist debate
- Some of the cadres from Fedayin Minority
- Independent activists of the left

right counter-revolution, under Stalin.

Al Richardson's presentation, perhaps inadvertently, fades out all the *political choices* which shaped the Bolshevik regime. And choices did shape it. It was not all mechanically determined by the material background.

What of Lenin's successful battles to unwind the coercive civil war economic regime, and to save the independence of the trade unions? Or his unsuccessful battle, jointly with Trotsky, in his last months of activity, against growing bureaucracy? Or the Left Opposition's later struggle against Stalin? Or the mistakes the Bolsheviks made? We should not use the benefit of hindsight to condemn the Bolsheviks for what they did in the maelstrom, but we should use it.