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Introduction

The Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) declares itself to be the revolutionary party workers need to destroy capitalism. A pamphlet recounting the SWP's own history is called 'The smallest mass party in the world'; their slogan in the 1987 general election was 'Vote Labour — but build a fighting socialist alternative'.

But is it possible to build a mass revolutionary party simply by declaring the need for it? And what sort of party is the SWP now?

This pamphlet looks at several important issues, criticises the SWP and puts forward an alternative view. It looks at the lessons of the miners' strike, the question of Ireland, the Gulf War and the Israel/Palestine conflict. The focus is on the relationship between Marxists and the existing mass movement, with an article from 1985 on the SWP's sudden 'turn' to the Labour left, and another (from 1986) discussing the question of a workers' party in South Africa.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the SWP (then International Socialists) grew very rapidly, including among radicalising workers. They had considerable influence, and seemed to represent an open, undogmatic new force on the left. Yet today, the SWP is often experienced as a hectoring, simple-minded sect. How this transformation occurred is outside the scope of this pamphlet, but that it did so represents one more sad failure for British Marxism.

The theory of the 'downturn' has been the SWP's stock-in-trade for many years now. Its essential thrust is ultra-pessimism, especially on the industrial front. During the NHS dispute this year (1988), the SWP — once the most fervent advocates of independent rank and file organisation — opposed the formation of a national shop stewards' committee, on the grounds that it would be unable to do anything. They argued against any action organised independently of the union officials. They opposed action called for March 8. Then when CoHSE called a national day of action for March 14, many SWP members opposed it — although reasons varied from place to place.

The NHS was just one recent bizarre episode. This pamphlet tries to uncover the underlying problem in the SWP's politics. In addition to articles that first appeared in *Socialist Organiser*, some new material has been included here.

To the editorial board of *Militant*

Dear Comrades,

THE SHORT period since the end of the miners' strike has demonstrated beyond doubt that the rightward swing of the Labour Party is getting stronger.

Many on the left had thought that Neil Kinnock's disgraceful performance during the strike would hurt him and strengthen their position. It hasn't worked out like that.

Despite the disgust many militants undoubtedly have, the bulk of the Labour left has been drawn closer to Kinnock, just as Kinnock has moved more and more openly rightwards.

The rapid collapse of so many 'Labour left' councils on rates-capping is a striking demonstration. Kinnock's 'stay within the law' position is winning hands down. Ken Livingstone's Somerset in London set the pattern.

The compulsory re-selection process is going strongly in Kinnock's favour too. In the 70-odd re-elections to date only one sitting MP (excluding reselections) has been replaced—and that was Reg Eveson, replaced by Ken Livingstone. Kinnock was quick to congratulate the ex-'Red Ken'.

'I would be happy to work with him impartially. There is no problem there. I think Mr Livingstone has considerably enhanced his reputation in recent months when taking realistic stands on a number of issues...'

And, as you will know better than anyone, there has been a systematic line up of former 'lets' and the right wing to keep our candidates associated with *Militant*.

Then there is the increasing isolation of Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner on the Labour Party NEC. Former Bennites, like Blunkett, Meacher and Sawyer, are more and more supporting the Kinnock-Hattersley line. The vote on opposition to NATO—an ABC issue for socialists—is a case in point.

In the 'Campaign' group of MPs there is a growing trend towards reconciliation with the rightward moving *Tribune* group—see the notorious New Year *Tribune* editorial. In short, the real left in the Labour Party are increasingly out on a limb.

Of course, supporters of *Militant* have fought hard against these trends. But with less and less success. Why? The arguments of the rightward shifting ex-lets are pretty contemptible. They are a rehash of what their predecessors said in 1963-4 (leading to the election of the 1964-70 Wilson government), and 1973-4 (leading to the election of the 1974-9 Wilson-Callaghan government).

It is not these arguments that are persuasive in themselves. It is the situation in which they are put. Given the Thatcher government's policies and the defeat of the miners (although at immense cost to the bosses' class), a large and increasing number of workers are inclined to vote for the Kinnock Labour Party as 'the lesser evil'.

Notes are the main thing for the Labour leaders, and anything that rocks the electoral prospect—like socialist ideas—is out.

What should be the attitude of revolutionary socialists, of Marxists, towards these moves? Workers who abstained or voted SDP or even Tory in the last election are moving forwards when they consider voting Labour. But this also strengthens Kinnock.

The more the polls show Labour leads, the greater the pull on the Labour left towards 'unity'—a unity on Kinnock-Hattersley terms.

The obsession with elections, the illusion that another Labour government will be basically different from the Thatcher Tories in deeds (as opposed to words)—the rhetoric will certainly be different! all strengthen the right wing.

OUR ATTITUDE is clear. We are for a Labour government. Not because we believe it will be a government in the interests of workers—it won't—but precisely to test in practice again the reformist road.

We believe a future Labour government will not act in the interests of the working class. On the contrary, it will act like every previous Labour government—in the interests of the bosses' class.

And, since the crisis of British capitalism is deeper now than in the seventies, a new Labour government will be more vicious, and more reactionary, than the Wilson-Callaghan governments—the first since 1945 to succeed in cutting wages, while increasing unemployment and savaging the welfare state.

So what should revolutionaries do now? We all know from experience that previous Labour governments have produced demoralisation in the working class

as well as enlightenment for a minority.

We have had all manner of differences in the past, and will, no doubt, continue to do so. But all this pales before the tasks and opportunities we now face.

THE KEY question is whether a real and visible revolutionary alternative is available. Is not building such an alternative common ground between us? If it is, then we must get together to work out the best means of developing the revolutionary alternative now.

If it is not, the effect of the inevitable Labour sellouts will be as before. Just as Heath benefitted in 1970, and Thatcher in 1979, in the future it will be whatever right wing bourgeois leader emerges.

The real surge to the left in the Labour Party in 1979-81 is now far behind us. *Militant* supporters are, to our sorrow, very much on the defensive in the Labour Party. This is not a matter of 'optimism' or 'pessimism', but of facing the facts.

The danger that faces Marxists in the Labour Party at the moment is either to mute their criticism of the leadership or face increasing isolation.

The working class has the power to change society. The question is how to build the leadership in the class that can change that potential into a reality. The Labour Party is, and always has been, a conservative workers' party (Lenin called it a 'bourgeois party, although composed of workers').

We understand the arguments advanced by *Militant* supporters about the need to work in the Labour Party—although we have disagreed with them. But now, with the Tories on the offensive and the Labour Party galloping to the right, there is a new situation.

It is a situation not only fraught with danger for workers and socialists, but also ripe with opportunity for building an alternative revolutionary current in the working class. We and yourselves are the two biggest groupings on the left of the labour movement. We believe there is a basis for working together to build a viable socialist alternative. Do you agree?

Yours fraternally

Socialist Worker

The Labour Party

Clive Bradley, SO 235, July 1985

Socialist Worker's current appeal to Militant for a 'united organisation' shows quite clearly a lot of the problems with the SWP's basic politics.

The SWP says that the main problem with Militant is that it is in the Labour Party. The renewed witch-hunt poses for Socialist Worker the basic problem of the Labour Party very sharply. As last week's Socialist Worker (6 July) put it:

"Socialists in the Labour Party face a clear choice. Either stop rocking the boat, stop taking up 'fringe issues' and drop your principles, or get out".

And Socialist Worker concludes bluntly: **"socialists must be prepared to get out and build an independent, fighting socialist party."**

For Militant — which the SWP believes has grown because it appeared to offer hard, Marxist politics to the Labour left — that choice is posed particularly starkly. Since the only principled choice to make will result in expulsion, Socialist Worker concludes that Militant must join with them to build **"a real and visible revolutionary alternative"** (SW, May 11).

There is a flat logical contradiction in Socialist Worker's argument. Militant are being witch-hunted, and it is important to defend them. Yet at the same time, Militant — and by implication other serious socialists in the Labour Party — should voluntarily give up the fight against the witch-hunt because they have no chance of winning it.

Suppose that the only possible outcome of a serious fight against the witch-hunt is expulsion. The best way to guarantee that a left-wing force of some size is built as a result is to *fight*, not just give up. And the best contribution Socialist Worker could make to that fight, surely, would be to *join* it, to participate fully, to put their full weight behind it — to take the fight *into the Labour Party* itself, and not confine it to the unions.

Expulsions initiated by a Labour Party conference would then have to be fought through in the Constituency Labour Parties. Serious fighters against the witch-hunt would have to take up the issue there, too.

And the witch-hunt is hardly new. The first big assault on Militant

was in 1976. The first wave of expulsions was in 1983. At that time, the SWP just pontificated about the inevitability of such things. Only *now*, after five years of major battles by the Labour left, the split that created the SDP, the offensive of the Kinnockites and the development of the witch-hunt, are the SWP taking it seriously.

So what has changed? Why does Socialist Worker appeal to Militant now, while it didn't throughout 1982-3, when the witch-hunt was much more ferocious and hysterical — and the left wing resistance to it broader and bolder?

The simple answer is that the SWP has suddenly panicked at the discovery that — as a result of the witch-hunt — Militant is now the bigger of the two groups. Socialist Worker has realised that most good socialists are in or around the Labour Party, and has readjusted its sights. Apart from that, nothing has changed since 1982-3. So if Socialist Worker is right now, rationally the SWP should have been in the Labour Party in 1982-3 or even in 1976.

But then how would Socialist Worker deal with Militant's line on Ireland? On the police? On the possibility of a 'peaceful road to socialism'? Either the SWP would forget a lot of their present politics or they would find themselves in sharp conflict with Militant on every major political question. The common *terrain* would only highlight the issues of political programme.

Today Socialist Worker can declare with self-conscious naivety: **"Of course, in such a united organisation there would be differences of opinion on many matters, but they could be argued out democratically as we fought together against the Tories and the right wing inside the movement,"** (SW, June 28, 1985). But the SWP's insistence that this is a sincere and honest proposal is hard to swallow. It is plainly a catchpenny gimmick to try to recruit a few Militant supporters.

Underlying the whole business is something yet more basic to the SWP's idea of politics, and of Marxist organisation. The SWP has a fundamentally *organisational* conception of the revolutionary party: it is about 'linking militants together'; and it is defined crucially by its *organisational* independence. The basic way that they relate to Militant therefore is mainly by counterposing *organisational separation* from the Labour Party to membership of it, rather than arguing about what socialism is, and about socialist answers to living struggles. This is, in fact, characteristic of the main way the SWP takes on the Labour left as a whole.

For revolutionary Marxism — that is Bolshevism — *politics* come first. Organisational issues are secondary, and should be decided on the basis of maximum tactical flexibility.

A Marxist organisation is defined above all by its *political programme*, by independent working class politics, not just by where it chooses to fight for those politics.

For the SWP on the other hand, organisational questions come first and politics second. Organisational separation from the Labour Party

is proclaimed as the basic principle, and political issues are subordinated to the task of 'organising militants'.

So, for example, in August 1969 the SWP (then IS) dropped the call for Troops Out of Ireland for a while after the troops were deployed in the streets. In June 1971 it abandoned its internationalist position on the EEC — that it makes no difference to workers whether they are in a capitalist Britain or a capitalist 'Europe' — for the sake of joining in an anti-EEC campaign to 'win support'.

And so their arguments about the Labour Party are fundamentally apolitical, concentrating on the need to build an 'independent' party without clear definitions of what distinguishes Marxist *politics*. The difference between themselves and Labour is defined *primarily* in terms of *orientation*: where the SWP focuses on strikes and immediate struggles, Labour focuses exclusively on elections. 'The SWP looks after strikes. Labour looks after the rest'.

Socialist Worker argues that the basic problem with Labour is that its desire to win elections necessarily means abandoning any commitment to socialism in order to 'win the middle ground'. Trying to win elections necessarily cuts across an orientation towards direct action struggles, because the audience for socialist ideas is only ever the 'militant minority'. Serious socialists in the Labour Party, therefore, should orient towards this 'militant minority' *rather than* try to win elections.

"Once it is seen that politics arise from the everyday struggles in the workplaces, that it is here rather than in elections that workers begin to question the prevailing ideas of capitalism, then you can see that the road to socialism is quite different to that taken by the Labour Party." (September 29, 1984).

"Since the left were as committed to electoral politics as the right, they did not know how to argue back when the right said socialist policies had to be jettisoned so as to regain votes." (SW, June 29).

This is a very odd view of the basic problem with reformism — indeed of *what reformism is*.

The problem with the 'parliamentary road to socialism' is not the wish to win elections. It is the inevitability of violent ruling class *resistance* if an elected left government seriously tries to fight for its programme. The problem with Allende in Chile is not that he ran for election, but that he did not go on from election victory to move decisively against the old ruling class.

Do left policies lose votes for Labour? Sometimes they do — when the Labour leadership *sabotages* the election campaign by denouncing the Party's policies, and by engaging in a witch-hunt. If the Labour leaders say Labour's policy is ultra-left lunacy, no wonder voters agree.

The Labour left replies that we need a Labour leadership that will fight for Labour policies. A real *campaign* by Labour for socialist policies would gain votes. But the SWP accepts the basic terms of reference of the Labour *right* about how to win elections: that 'winning the middle ground' means 'being moderate'.

What's wrong with Labour is not that it tries to win votes. You have to win votes even to go on strike. You would have to win votes indeed — not a Parliamentary election perhaps, but votes all the same, in workers' councils, for example — to make a revolution.

And the basic fault of the Labour left is neither a failure to get involved in strikes, nor that it doesn't know how to answer the arguments about winning elections. It answers the vote-catching arguments rather better than the SWP does. Many ordinary Labour Party members do get involved in strikes — many, indeed, *run* them. The SWP know about Labour Party members' involvement in the miners' strike.

Of course, the Labour Party does function primarily as an electoral machine, and this is a serious problem with it. But electoral activity is not *necessarily* counterposed to working class action.

The Bolsheviks made great efforts to get representatives elected to the Duma — the parliament in Tsarist Russia. The Communist International, when it was still revolutionary, took electoral activity very seriously — not *just* to make propaganda, though that was central, but with the intention of winning elections.

The basic problem with Labour is much deeper. The Labour Party is controlled by a bureaucratic apparatus closely entwined with the trade union bureaucracy. And the central feature of this overall labour bureaucracy is its accommodation to, and dependence upon, the capitalist state. Labour *governments* have rested upon the capitalist state; and what has crucially distinguished them from Tory governments is the greater degree of collaboration between the state and the trade union bureaucracy that they have been able to organise. A future Labour government would draw much of its strength, as a government, from its ability to draw the trade union bureaucracy back into 'the corridors of power' from which they have more recently been so unceremoniously booted.

It is this relationship between the Labour bureaucracy and the state that makes Labour a reformist party, not the fact that it wants to win elections.

The question for revolutionary socialists, therefore, is this: how can we *break* the labour movement as a whole from its reliance on the state? Of course, as the SWP argues a focus on direct working class struggles, and a fight to give those struggles direction, is irreplaceable for socialists. Any Marxist organisation worthy of the name sees those struggles as the central arena of its work. But *just* to build an organisation that promotes those struggles is not an answer to the problem of a labour movement fundamentally compromised with the capitalist state.

Merely to put the argument — "socialists need a Party quite different to the Labour Party" (SW, September 29) begs the question. We need a reality quite different to the present one. Yet we have to start from present day reality. The Labour Party *exists*; it is enormously powerful; it structures, shapes and profoundly affects and limits the class struggle; and a real alternative to Labourism cannot be

built just by putting out an appeal for it.

The Labour Party is not just a band of vote-fetishists cut off and separate from the labour movement as a whole. Organisationally it has intimate connections to the trade unions. And the reformism of the Labour Party is no more than one aspect of the overtly political reformism of the *whole labour movement*.

Where the Labour Party expresses the political concerns of reformism, the trade unions express its economic concerns. Labourism is trade unionism extended into the 'political' — i.e. Parliamentary — arena. It is the principle of trade unionism — bargaining within the system — applied to society as a whole.

The problem of Labourism is therefore not just a problem of the Labour Party — with its electoral focus — but a problem of the *overall politics of the entire labour movement*.

The deep-rooted reformism of the labour movement does have a profound effect on individual militants. Often they do move to the right, get sucked in, become bureaucratised. Leon Trotsky said: "The trade unions are a culture medium for opportunism." The Labour Party, too. But what's the answer? Splendid isolation, sectarian 'purity'? No: it is to *link* participation in the broad movement with the development of an organised tendency ideologically sharp enough to fight the pressures to accommodation; to integrate individual activists into that tendency rather than leaving them as individuals.

The SWP's perspective lacks a real strategy for working class power. Essentially, they can provide no *link* between 'small strikes now' and some 'big bang' Armageddon in the future. Logically, their strategy is just to build up an organisation through immediate struggles until the day...

Because that perspective involves simply *bypassing* the real limitations of the movement now, it is no real perspective at all.

In theory, an organisation of some size could be built purely out of direct struggles — strikes in particular. But unless it relates to the overall questions — how to change fundamentally the very nature of the working class movement — it will be fundamentally sterile, especially during big political upheavals.

The SWP completely underestimates the real hold of Labourism and therefore the importance of a political challenge to it. In 1971 they wrote:

"...the Labour Party is no longer a reformist party in the sense that it still was in the '50s and even the early '60s. It is committed to the modernisation of British capitalism in conditions which effectively exclude the possibility of serious reforms... This is the basic reason why it is objectively possible to build a revolutionary socialist party in the years ahead," (IS journal no. 48).

IS started to proclaim itself the organisational alternative to the Labour Party. And this was to be done on the basis of demands which "are reformist in form but transitional in content." (ibid).

The SWP has criticised this wrong assessment more recently, but failed to draw any conclusions. Despite the SWP's perspective, back

in the real world the actual political product of the mass struggles against Heath was the Labour government of 1974-9.

Just before the 1979 election that brought the Tories into office, Paul Foot commented in the Daily Mirror: 'For the next three weeks I shall be a very strong Labour supporter'. In practice, the SWP had nothing to say but 'vote Labour because the Tories are worse'. Socialist Organiser, on the other hand, organised an alternative election campaign to 'vote Labour and prepare to fight'; we tried to organise the left to *fight* the Labour leadership even through the course of the election and prepare for battles to come — whether against the Tories or Labour. Where the SWP focused exclusively on how bad the Tories would be, we focused also on sharp criticisms of Labour's record in office.

The SWP's apparently very left-wing and revolutionary attitude to elections — that they are a reformist business, to be shunned by true Marxists — ends up being quite right-wing in practice. They abandon whole spheres of politics to the Labour leaders. Marxists should be interested in elections — not because we think there is a Parliamentary road to socialism, but because elections are a major part of politics for the working class now. 'Build the revolutionary party' — or 'have lots of small strikes' — are no answer at all to the question in most workers' minds: what can we replace the Tories with?

The suggestion that the solution to the left's "inability to answer the arguments about losing votes" is to *ignore* the issue of government altogether (by joining the SWP) is absolutely idiotic. The labour movement is profoundly and rightly concerned about government. The task is to give the movement, and in the first place the left, an answer that *does address the question of government*. We say: don't back down, don't cave in to the right, keep fighting. And we fight for *our* programme, *our* political answers. Otherwise we let the Labour leaders off the hook.

Revolutionary politics cannot be just 'workers' struggles' versus 'elections'.

Industrial militancy is not in itself a political answer to anything. A *political* answer must deal with issues of the overall running of society — to point towards ways to defend workers' interests at a society-wide level, to begin to organise the working class to take power.

How do we fight unemployment? 'Organise, occupy, fight for the right to work' the SWP used to chant. Yes, but *how?* *Share out the work, establish workers' control over hours with no loss of pay.* How to fight declining living standards? Go on strike, says the SWP, for higher wages. Fine: but such sectional struggles need to be linked to an overall working class solution — *automatic wage rises in line with a workers' cost of living index.*

Marxists have to carry out a political struggle to convince workers of these solutions. Part of that struggle is demanding of the existing Labour leaders that they support struggles now; fighting them if they don't; and fighting for our overall political solutions throughout the labour movement.

The SWP's one-sidedness leads them to low-level concentration on 'basics' — workplace organisation — at the expense of giving general political answers. During the miners' strike for example, it led to ultra-pessimism, and a failure to argue for the necessary *class-wide* solidarity action.

Now they conclude that workplace militancy is off the agenda for a period, and that they can do nothing much but fish among the Labour left. But they prove as unable to assess the Labour left accurately as they were to assess the miners' struggle.

Last October, Socialist Worker put out 'an appeal to the organisations of the Labour left' to 'build united support' for the miners. They addressed it to the Editorial Boards of Tribune, Militant, Labour Herald and to the Labour Coordinating Committee. They proposed:

'1. Joint meetings of our editorial boards to discuss what can be done to build solidarity with the miners (such as) spreading the network of miners' support committees...collecting money...preparing for...solidarity action...

2) Joint meetings of our supporters...to discuss strengthening miners' support committees...

3) Joint meetings...to organise the collection of money...' (SW, October 2, 1984).

Very good — except that neither Tribune, Militant, Labour Herald nor LCC were visible as organised forces in the miners' support committees.

Most support committee activists were non-aligned Labour Party members. If the SWP had really wanted to address the main organised groups active in the committees they would have written to Socialist Organiser, Socialist Action and Labour Briefing. They didn't because it would not have suited their purposes of catchpenny opportunism.

The SWP can maintain itself only by denying that it is possible to be in the Labour Party for any period and to remain a serious socialist. But their own current tactic gives them the lie. How come there are any good socialists in the Labour Party for Socialist Worker to send open letters to? Why have they not had their brains rotted? After all, many of them have been in the Labour Party for many years. How come they are *worth* relating to? Perhaps being in the Labour Party doesn't *automatically* pull you to the right?

There is no reason at all why a Marxist organisation, with firm principles and clear heads, need be dragged to the right just by being in the Labour Party. It says something about the SWP that they have so little confidence in their own principles that they think (and probably correctly) this *would* happen to them.

The problem of Militant as it presents itself to the SWP is this: Militant have outdone them at their own game — sect-building. They have done so despite dreadful politics because they have at least taken the Labour Party seriously: they are in the right place. The task for socialists is to have the right politics in the right place. That is what Socialist Organiser tries to do.

Ireland and slogans

Paddy Dollard SO 299 January 1987

Chris Bambery's SWP-sponsored booklet *Ireland's Permanent Revolution* is a grim business.

He rehashes the traditional middle-class nationalist view of Irish history. Though he tries to lard this with a 'socialist' and working class slant on events, the 'socialism' is just tagged on.

Bambery — who races through Irish history, dealing in centuries! — shares what has long been the dominant approach on the left.

In common with Republicans, populist socialists, and Third-World romantics of the Socialist Action stripe, Bambery argues that the Irish national revolution has not been completed yet, and that only the working class can complete it, as part of the socialist revolution.

This is the cuckoo's egg approach to straightening out the relationship between Catholic nationalism and socialism in Irish politics. The socialist cuckoo's egg is discreetly placed in the nationalist nest, hopefully to be hatched out. It is by now a traditional approach; and all the socialist eggs hatched out in the nationalist nest have produced nationalists, not socialists.

Almost all the 'Trotskyist' groups which have tried that approach have become indistinguishable from the Catholic nationalists in current politics.

The problem in Ireland is not, at root, a national revolution uncompleted because British imperialism thwarted it. The root problem is the refusal of a compact section of the people on the island, one million strong and the big majority in north-east Ulster, to accept the same national identity as that of the majority.

Britain's brutal intervention, and the creation of an artificial Six



John Smith (Profile)

County state with a big Catholic minority — all that is superimposed on the basic problem, making it more intractable.

It is a dangerous illusion that it displaces or supersedes the basic Catholic-Protestant problem. The uproar among the Protestants at the Anglo-Irish agreement leaves no room for doubt about that.

This being so, you cannot understand Ireland in traditional nationalist terms, nor can you advance socialism in Ireland by claiming that the traditional nationalist goals can only be achieved by the socialist working class.

The Irish working class is chronically, murderously divided by the claims of competing communal and national identities. At the very least you need to have some proposals about how the two Irish communities can live together. Even after a socialist revolution you would probably still need that.

But who is going to make that socialist revolution if the division in the working class is not healed?

The SWP is now utterly incoherent on Ireland, sailing under two thin slogans: 'critically for the IRA' and 'socialism is the only answer'.

As an example of SWP confusion and mindless slogan-mongering take the front page of Socialist Worker last April, after the alarming Orange day of action against the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The headline said, very boldly: 'Troops Out'. But way down at the bottom of the article a small condition, or at any rate a pious wish, was attached to the demand in the headline: Britain should disarm the Protestants before it goes, said Socialist Worker.

Now of course this idea — essentially that Britain should do the job of subduing and conquering the Protestants for the Republicans — is utterly fantastic. For Britain to try it would involve the British army in the sort of systematic house-to-house searches that half a million Catholics have known for 16 years — against one million Protestants. It would provoke a full-scale Orange rebellion.

The demand 'Disarm the Protestants' is necessarily an implied demand for many more British soldiers in Northern Ireland, for the indefinite future — not for Troops Out.

That's just one example of the SWP's incoherence. They live on uncoordinated slogans and irresponsible phrase-mongering, not on Marxist politics.

Chris Bambery's book codifies the confusion. In substance it panders to the populist ideas of the Republicans and much of our Third-Worldist left, while in form it goes through the motions of maintaining working class politics for Ireland. The profound Marxist theory of permanent revolution is reduced to an empty phrase.

Ireland's Permanent Revolution understands neither Permanent Revolution nor Ireland. Nor, for that matter, does it understand what working class politics in Ireland are and must be.

The case for a Workers' Party in South Africa

Clive Bradley, SO 281, August 1986

The idea that the trade unions should form a political party in competition with the existing bourgeois parties has a long Marxist pedigree. Engels raised it in connection with Britain, subsequently supporting the formation of the Independent Labour Party, and arguing for it in turn to fight for a trade union-based party.

In the 1930s, the American Trotskyists made a lot of propaganda for a Labour Party, and the American Trotskyists continued to do so after World War 2.

The essential idea is simple: the workers' organisations should break with their existing reliance upon, or alliance with, the bourgeois parties (Liberals in Britain, Democrats in the USA). They should strike out an independent path. It is worth quoting Trotsky at some length.

"The question of the labor party has never been a question of prin-

ciple for revolutionary Marxists...before the crisis of 1929, and...until the appearance of the CIO, we could have hoped that the revolutionary, that is, the Bolshevik party would develop in the United States parallel to the radicalisation of the working class...Under those conditions it would have been absurd to occupy oneself with abstract propaganda (for a) 'labor party'."

But:

"The situation since that time, however, has radically changed... The powerfully developing trade unions, under the conditions of a deepening crisis of capitalism, will project themselves all the more irresistibly upon the road of political struggle and thus upon the road of crystallisation into a labor party". ("The Problem of the Labor Party", in Discussions on the Transitional Programme, Pathfinder Press, p.107).

The crucial factor that put the Labour Party question on the agenda was the development of CIO *industrial unionism*, in the context of a major 'decline of American capitalism'. Some of Trotsky's comments are useful:

"Are we in favour of the creation of a reformist labor party? No. Are we in favour of a policy which can give to the trade unions the possibility to put its weight upon the balance of forces? Yes.

"It can become a reformist party — it depends upon the development. Here the question of program comes in...

"...I would not say that the labor party is a revolutionary party, but that we will do everything to make it possible. At every meeting I would say: I am a representative of the SWP. I consider it is the only revolutionary party. But I am not a sectarian. You are now trying to create a big workers' party. I will help you, but I propose that you consider a program for this party...

"...we must be part of the movement..."

Engels' comments are equally instructive:

"The great thing is to get the working class to move *as a class*; that once obtained, they will soon find the right direction, and all those who resist...will be left out in the cold with small sects of their own."

(Marx/Engels, Selected Correspondence, Moscow 1975, p.376).

The point here is not textual authority; it is to establish the basic framework and political method of the classical Marxists. To be 'part of the movement'; to assist the development of the working class from the point of view of its most advanced ideological current; to help the working class learn, rather than make lectures to it: this, we think, is the essence of their approach.

The idea of a workers' party in South Africa is not one we would advocate at all times. It depends upon 'concrete circumstances'. What are these?

*A significant layer of the working class has begun to discuss a new, independent politics that is a major departure from the populist-Stalinist traditions of the past. The idea of a workers' party has come from sections of the workers themselves — it is an issue up for discus-

sion.

*This layer of workers is the product of one of the most important developments of industrial trade unionism anywhere in the world.

*Its political development is the product of a lived experience of class struggle — looked at with great freshness and creativity.

*As yet, the tendencies towards bureaucratisation of this movement are not very far advanced. On the contrary, the unions have developed democratic practices that are consciously seen as prefigurations of future society.

*Alien class forces and ideological movements — i.e. the populist/Stalinists — are hell-bent upon controlling and neutralising this movement as a whole.

The dominant culture of the independent unions has been distinctly syndicalist. This was only viable so long as a) they were regarded with indifference by the populists; b) the general political struggle was at a low ebb. Since 1984, neither of these conditions has held. The populists are desperate to derail the development of an alternative political pole: and the rise of the mass movement has been enormous.

Moreover, the rise in the movement has given greater political weight to the populists, which in turn gives them greater weight in the unions.

In these conditions either the nascent working-class politics that have developed are drawn out, given a coherent programme, and the socialists in the workers' movement actively combat alien class ideologies; or the populists will be victorious.

The workers' party theme codifies the development of working class politics very sharply. It proposes a *political* rather than narrowly trade-union objective to the socialist militants in the unions (and more generally), and provides an important opening through which revolutionaries can make propaganda — or even direct proposals — for a coherent Marxist programme.

It takes *actual developments* within the workers' movement as its point of departure, and connects with them. Rather than abstractly counterposing a 'revolutionary party' to the emerging political movement, it seizes on those real developments in the class and takes them a step further.

What are the alternatives? Alex Callinicos of the Socialist Workers' Party and others have put great stress on the need to build a Marxist nucleus — a small propaganda group. We absolutely agree on the priority of this, and I will discuss it further below. But what will the nucleus say? What will it argue for?

One possibility is for the small Marxist group (and by small I mean anything less than several tens of thousands) to concentrate on Marxist propaganda in various forms: education, discussion, and promotion of major Marxist ideas (permanent revolution, for example), propaganda for socialism. This would combine with an intervention into the unions, workplace and community struggles, etc.

This perspective for the building of a revolutionary party would seem to be simply one of one-by-one recruitment. Gradually the party

could grow out of the various struggles until it takes on mass proportions.

One particular problem with this perspective strikes us as central. If the populist/Stalinists dominate the political struggle and dominate the trade unions, this will be a setback for any future Marxist movement.

In other words, a challenge to the populists *now* — i.e. the development of a serious political alternative — will radically determine the possibilities for a Marxist party in the future. And the formation of a Marxist nucleus with a perspective of one-by-one growth is no challenge to the populists now.

In fact this perspective is based upon an acceptance that 'for *now*', the populists/Stalinists *will* dominate the workers' movement. 'Our day will come...', but for *now* alien class forces will ideologically dominate the workers' movement.

It is, of course, possible to argue for the trade unions to engage in political action without forming a political party. A case can be made for this in terms of avoiding an unnecessary provocation of the Stalinists. As a tactical issue that is of course very important. As an alternative perspective to that of a party, it is not a good one.

The unions can 'engage in political action' at all sorts of levels. But a serious involvement in the political struggles requires not just participation, but leadership — and that requires a strategy and a programme.

The more coherent the political strategy, the more effective the workers' political intervention, the more inexorable the logic of forming a party to embody that programme and strategy.

The workers' party idea follows from all this. The alternatives of Callinicos and others amount to an acquiescence in populist domination of the movement in the present, in the name of 'building a revolutionary party' in the future. The alternatives, in other words, give the populists a free run.

The formation and building of a Marxist nucleus is nevertheless a priority. Indeed, without that the slogan of a workers' party has no revolutionary content whatever. If we don't always follow the references to a workers' party with a call for a revolutionary organisation, that's because we don't think you have to say everything all at once. And it makes little sense to appeal to the broad spectrum of trade unionists to form a select Marxist nucleus! 'A workers' party provided there is a revolutionary nucleus' is not a very good slogan.

Assuming that the Marxists are in a minority, then their job will be to organise within the party, win it to a Marxist programme, and thereby win a majority. (This, of course, does not rule out all sorts of possibilities — splits, expulsions, etc., etc.)

Callinicos objects that a party based on the unions would by definition not be revolutionary, as it would include all different layers of the class, whereas the revolutionary party includes only the most class-conscious. This completely misses the point. Of course the revolutionary party, in the sense of the Marxist organisation, is demarcated

ideologically from the rest of the movement. It is principally an ideologically selected group: a collective body attempting scientifically to understand the world, the better to know how to change it.

In that sense, a party based on the trade unions cannot, by definition, be a 'revolutionary party' even with a Marxist programme. In terms of formal definitions, therefore, Callinicos is right. The 'revolutionary party', i.e. the Marxist party, properly understood, would be an *ideological* organised group within a trade union-based party even under conditions where it commanded a majority.

This issue does not to me seem very interesting. The point about building a Marxist party is to develop an ideological current. On the formalities of that there is no dispute between Callinicos and us.

There is, however, a great deal of political *substance* in dispute, and the differences over the workers' party idea express a good deal of what distinguishes us from the SWP. Our point of departure is that mass revolutionary parties will be built out of actual living developments in the workers' movement, or they will not be built at all. They cannot be called into being by self-proclamation. ('We are the revolutionary party...').

Developments within the workers' movements, outside of major upheavals, tend to be excruciatingly slow. But Marxists cannot *bypass* those real developments by an effort of will. Our task is to seize on actual developments and be 'part of the movement' to participate in the workers' own experiences, and to help them remake their own movement.

That does not mean (after the style of the Mandel tendency) looking about for the latest flagship of the 'world revolutionary process' and jumping aboard, leaving Marxist politics somewhere in transit. We try to build ourselves as a hard, distinct, ideological core — but as *part* of the labour movement, rather than counterposed to it (or, in Britain, counterposed to its political wing, the Labour Party).

An important spoke in the Comintern's programmatic wheel was the idea of the united front. This relates to the workers' party discussion. Should revolutionaries make proposals for action to the workers' movement *as a whole*? Should we set objectives for the movement as a whole? We think categorically, yes we should. The workers' party would be precisely this: an objective for the movement *as a whole*. It seems to us that it is only by this approach that revolutionary politics can be made relevant to the working class.

To conclude: there are, of course, technical objections to the idea of a workers' party — principally that it would be illegal (an objection with particular force since the declaration of the State of Emergency). I don't want to minimise the importance of this issue. Of course it would be stupid to invite repression, either on socialists or on the unions in general.

The essential question is the programmatic one, though. Is the workers' party a necessary next step for the movement? If it is, propaganda should be made for it. Tactical considerations about how to form it, when and where are vitally important, but secondary.



The miners' strike

John Bloxam and Colin Foster review 'The Great Strike' by Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons (published by Socialist Worker, £3.95).

SO 225, April 1985

Somehow this book manages to make the great story of the miners' strike rather flat and dull.

For them it runs something like this. The miners fought hard. However, "the dead hand of officialdom" (p.92) had a very high degree of control. So by late May or early June the battle had turned decisively in the Tories' favour. Orgreave "marked the turning point of the strike, just as Saltley Gates had in 1972. This time, however, the ruling class won".

The miners slogged on for another nine months, but eventually they crumbled. All is not lost, however. Trade union strength can be rebuilt as long as militants concentrate on "small but concrete issues" (p.229).

The problem is "the belief of militant trade unionists that by electing left-wing officials they can avoid future betrayals" (p.241) and that "many of those active in the strike will be drawn towards the Labour Party" (p.249). In these ways militants can be pulled into the

bureaucracy and into Parliament.

Therefore a revolutionary party is needed — the SWP — which will keep militants focused on the “small but concrete issues”. Out of the struggle on those issues, some day, somehow, will come workers’ councils, capable of replacing the capitalist system.

The book does give a competent narrative. On some points it is very interesting: the description of how the first flying pickets to Notts were organised despite attempts by the Yorkshire leadership to restrain them; of how the Yorkshire leadership, again, dragged its feet over Orgreave; or of how the CP-oriented ‘soft left’ finished off the strike in February 1985.

But it communicates very little of the living experience of the strike. Page 252 does mention that: “The experience of the strike transformed...men and women” — but you would not have guessed that from the previous 251 pages.

When miners are quoted, it is always to discuss the details of clashes with the police or how pickets were organised. The women of the mining communities are quoted very sparsely; in fact, apart from one sentence in the introduction, the role of women in the struggle is not mentioned at all outside 4½ sketchy pages (pp.178-183).

The notion that real working class politics is about fighting hard at workplace level on small issues had possessed the SWP before the strike, and it made them unable to assess it or appreciate it properly. By early April 1984 Socialist Worker was saying that the miners’ strike was almost a lost cause — “an extreme example of what we in the SWP have called the ‘downturn’ of the movement”.

In early June, again, they were crying woe. “The chance was lost to rejuvenate a strike which has been drifting towards a ‘compromise’ settlement”.

Then at the end of January 1985 while the majority of miners were still locked in epic battle with the NCB and the government, they ran a two-page feature which assumed the strike was already lost and asked “who is to blame?”

The book is less than honest about examining such errors, or acknowledging aspects of the struggle which refuted the SWP’s stereotype ideas.

It applauds the miners’ support committees — “a great movement of solidarity” — but does not mention that the SWP dismissed these committees as “left-wing Oxfam” until October. It mentions the Labour left’s role in that movement, but claims, quite untruly (p.250) that even the ‘hard’ Labour left refused to challenge Kinnoch or criticise the TUC. It says something basic about the politics of the SWP that it tells downright lies to back up its campaign to stop militant miners joining or staying in the Labour Party.

Trying to dissuade miners and activists from joining the Labour Party, the book claims that “even the most radical and militant Labour Party member” believes in the parliamentary road to socialism (untrue: SO supporters and, in fact, many others don’t). It also claims that parliamentary activity and workers’ struggles cannot

be combined.

In fact Marxists ever since Marx, without seeing parliament as the vehicle for socialism, have tried to use the parliamentary platform to assist workers' struggles. Dennis Skinner did it pretty well during the miners' strike.

But the SWP's drive to define away everything that falls outside the ambit of what they see as real working class politics — local economic struggle — also affects their assessment of the NUM leadership.

Dennis Skinner argued that a national strike would never have taken off without brave and competent leadership from the national NUM officials. Probably he was right. Callinicos and Simons, while devoting most space to (mostly justified) criticisms of the NUM area officials, pay tribute to Arthur Scargill's "determination, courage and tactical skill".

But here there is a problem for the SWP. If Arthur Scargill had been a member of the SWP, then they would have withdrawn him from the election for NUM president! (The last time they had anyone put up for a national union position — in USDAW a few years ago — they withdrew him after he got the Broad Left nomination, on the grounds that rank and file activity was not sufficient to justify running for positions).

Yet Scargill's leadership did make a difference. More and better Scargills in the TUC leadership, or even just in the NUM leadership, could have made the difference between defeat and victory.

Despite the SWP's philosophy about this being an epoch of "building sectional strength" on "small but concrete issues", the miners' strike was a general class confrontation on a big and fairly abstract issue — jobs, communities, livelihoods versus capitalist economics.

The SWP did not have a policy for the labour movement in this confrontation. At best they had a policy for a small minority — join the SWP; if you are a miner, organise more picketing; if you are not a miner, organise collections.

The major turning point of the strike (in our view) passes almost without comment in the book: the month between the seizure of the South Wales NUM funds and the TUC Congress.

Miners' leaders called for a general strike. Ron Todd of the TGWU mumbled about a 'big bang'. The NUM put a motion to the TUC for "industrial action involving all unions"; FTAT called for a one-day general strike. But the TUC leaders escaped without committing themselves solidly at all.

All this drama passes almost without comment in the book, as if it were all a matter of course. No wonder: at the time the SWP's searching for the "small and concrete" reached almost farcical levels. In response to the seizure of the miners' funds their main proposal was: "The trade union leaders...should now launch a campaign to make sure the two Read firms (small haulage companies which had brought the court case) are completely blacked."

Likewise, in discussing perspectives after the strike, Callinicos and

Simons have proposals for "the small minority of workers who are at present convinced of the need for revolutionary socialism" — i.e. join the SWP — but none for broader sections of the working class. Despite making comparisons at length with 1926, they do not mention the Minority Movement, the cross-union rank-and-file militants' network that existed in the 1920s.

Chris Harman summed up the whole philosophy in *Socialist Worker* last November, arguing against the call for a general strike.

"We have at this point to stress demands that enable the militant minority to win over the majority in the workplaces to active solidarity (for example, support committees, collections, twinning), rather than those which assume the base already exists for such solidarity (for example calls for general strikes)..."

Calls for a general strike — like contests for union leadership, like parliamentary activity, like Labour Party activity in general — are presented as *alternatives* to nuts-and-bolts workplace activity, rather than complementary to it and the means of generalising, integrating and developing workplace activity into working class politics. And the result is to leave the SWP without general political answers (except — very like Militant, in fact — on the most abstract level of the need for socialist revolution).

Time and again Callinicos and Simons say that the mistake in 1984-5 was not to adopt rank-and-file based tactics of 1972. But this is at best quarter-true.

More centralised organisation was imposed on the miners by the facts of the situation: the length of the strike, the scale of the police operation, the depressing effect of the slump on solidarity. The same facts imposed on the miners a greater need for official support from other unions.

Those facts cannot be evaded by one million repetitions of the words "rank and file". The only answer is to fight to change the policy, structure and leadership of the unions.

And not just of the unions, for the story of 1972 did not end with the Wilberforce Report. Within two years the wage gains had been etched away and the miners were on strike again. They won again. Indeed, they pushed the Heath government into an election that it lost.

The miners routed the Tories. And then, as the fruits of their victory, they got a Labour government which curbed wages, executed IMF-imposed cuts, imposed the area incentive schemes on the NUM, presided over rising unemployment and paved the way for Thatcher.

In 1984-5 there was a large element of victory in defeat; and in 1972-4 there was a large element of defeat in victory. Full victory will require not only good workplace organisation but also better organisation and awareness on the political front.

That is why the fight inside the Labour Party is so important. By abstaining from that fight, and by adopting a sort of politics which leaves a great vacuum between the "small and concrete" immediate issues and the ultimate goal of socialism, the SWP has given itself tunnel vision.

The Gulf War

Clive Bradley

In 1988 the SWP had suddenly become very 'anti-imperialist'. It had become a loud cheerleader for what it sees as progressive or revolutionary nationalisms.

It still talks of socialism and class struggle, but now these are proposed as merely the best means to secure the greater nationalist end. It fiercely supports Iran in the Gulf War. It insists fanatically that it is not even worth thinking about an appeal to the Israeli working class, that Israel must be destroyed, and that a 'two-state' solution in Palestine is worthless even as an interim measure.

The war, which began in September 1980, is between two reactionary governments. The Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein — a brutal one-party state notorious for its barbaric treatment of the non-Arab Kurdish minority — hoped to score a quick victory over the Iranian 'Islamic Republic' and secure regional authority for itself. This it failed to do, but in the absence of victory, continuation of the war at least provided a basis on which to whip up patriotism against the 'Persian enemy' and stem the tide of opposition.

For the deeply reactionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini the war served a similar function: a permanent backdrop for stirring up nationalist emotions; a permanent cudgel with which to beat his own 'unpatriotic' opposition.

It has been a war fought with the most terrible methods: poison gas used by Iraq against Iran; 'human waves' of helpless sacrificial soldiers used by Iran; the bombings of cities; and so on. If the justice of a war can be judged from its methods, the Gulf War has been one of the most unjust.

Much of the left that initially supported Iran — whose regime, however reactionary, was the product of one of the most immense popular revolutions in history, in 1979 — had sobered up after a couple of years or so. Those that hadn't — like the American Socialist Workers' Party — argued for support for Iran on the grounds of 'anti-imperialism': Iran represented the rising tide of the world revolution whose progressive core was reflected in US imperialism's unbridled hostility; Iraq was merely imperialism's proxy. In such a view, nothing exists but 'imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism' in various terrestrial manifestations.

More recently, events in the Gulf have seen many sections of the left who did sober up — and even some who were never drunk in the first place — fall in behind Iran, forsaking their earlier understanding. For

the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), support for Iran is now dictated by the policy of the US, and in particular by the presence in the Gulf of US ships and the beginnings of direct military conflict.

For the SWP this means it is a whole new ball game. A US (and other imperialist) military presence, plus clear imperialist support for one side — Iraq — dictated support for Iran, meaning the advocacy of Iranian military victory. To fail to advocate Iranian military victory is to allow an imperialist victory by default. If you don't want an imperialist victory — a major set-back for anti-imperialists in every part of the world, you must want Iran to win.

This whole approach is a long way from the Marxist policy. It is not a *political* approach at all; it starts out not from what is politically right and wrong, but from military considerations: it stands the Marxist policy on its head.

What would the pro-Iran policy mean *politically* in the Gulf War? In other words, how would its advocates argue? What would they say?

Iranian socialists, according to this policy, would say to Iraqi workers and peasants at the front: Because your government is supported by the US; because there are American ships in the Gulf; because the victory of your government and the US would be a "blow to anti-imperialists across the world"; because of these things we no longer appeal to you to join with us so that together we can overthrow both Saddam and Khomeini; as of now, our war — that is, Khomeini's war which we have opposed for the last seven years — is justified. As of now, therefore, this is a war worth dying for; and, of course, a war worth killing for. As of now, we will support *this* war against Iraq.

And what should Iraqi socialists say? Because the Iranian war is 'anti-imperialist', they are justified in fighting it — in dying, and in killing us for it. No longer should the workers and oppressed join together to overthrow Saddam and Khomeini — just Saddam.

What reason are Iranian and Iraqi socialists supposed to give for this positive support for Iran? Purely that Iran is 'against' imperialism. There is no positive reason at all.

There is no issue of national liberation. There are oppressed nations involved, notable the Kurds, who form an oppressed minority in both Iran and Iraq. Their interest is clearly in fighting against the 'imperialism' of both Teheran and Baghdad. There is no cause of democracy and progress served by Iran's war — any more than Iraq's. There is no reason, therefore, to support Iran, and a consistent Marxist policy should be for the withdrawal of US and other ships (and a campaign in the US and elsewhere to get them to withdraw); and continued opposition to both sides in the Gulf War.

The SWP do provide a second line of argument, by way of a peculiar analogy with the Spanish Civil War — according to which, socialists give 'military' but not 'political' support to Khomeini until such time as they are in a 'military' position strong enough to overthrow him.

But what was happening in Spain in 1936-39? A fascist insurrection

tried to overthrow the bourgeois-democratic Popular Front government. In resistance, a massive revolutionary movement mobilised to try to crush the fascists — a movement that at times came close to working class power.

For Marxists this posed a concrete political question. The revolutionary movement — which included mass organisations of anarchists and semi-Trotskyists — was politically immature, and continued to support the Popular Front. The question was how to take the movement beyond the Popular Front. To have deduced from the bourgeois character of the Popular Front that there was no difference between it and fascism would have been sectarian stupidity. Rather, the workers' militias (which, of course actually existed, unlike in Iran today) should fight on the side of the Republic; the Marxists should try to build up the independent strength of the workers until they could overthrow the Popular Front as well as defeat fascism — indeed as a prerequisite for it.

To compare the ensconced counter-revolutionary government of Khomeini with the Spanish Republic in 1936 is very, very odd. (That there was some apparent similarity in 1980, with the revolution still — it was imagined — recent and alive gave some rational content to pro-Iran positions in the early period of the war. Similar situations to Spain are not hard to imagine; but Iran in 1988 is not one of them).

The abstract, apolitical fantasy that 'imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism' are the only actors in contemporary history leads to reactionary conclusions. Real life Iraqi workers and peasants simply disappear: their obliteration, first in theory and then, presumably, in military fact, is justified, because they are in the 'imperialist camp'. No doubt the SWP's theoreticians imagine that if you scratch an Iraqi soldier, you find an American marine.

Socialists should not justify Iran's war. A victory for Iran would not be a victory for 'anti-imperialism', except in so far as 'anti-imperialism' is a concept so devoid of meaning that it can include Ayatollah Khomeini. Iranian socialists should continue to argue against the war; Iraqi socialists likewise. Socialists in Britain and the US should campaign against imperialist involvement, for withdrawal of fleets and flotillas — but on the basis of political honesty, and internationalism. For in fact the 'pro-Iran' lobby, like the British SWP, in the name of 'anti-imperialism' have justified a form of social chauvinism no less anti-socialist than the betrayal of August 1914. To coin a phrase, they are the 'social anti-imperialists' of the 'eighties.

Marxism and war

Wars have drawn lines of division between socialists ever since the Second International destroyed itself through support for World War I. It might be supposed that the revolutionary Marxist attitude to war



was sorted out once and for all as a result of that great trauma — Lenin spelt out the basic approach, and all subsequent revolutionary Marxists have aspired to base themselves on Lenin's tradition. Yet wars in recent years have shown that it is not so clear.

Marxists have identified different kinds of war: they have not taken a purely pacifist position, opposing wars in general. *Some* wars Marxists oppose; others they support. Put simply, Marxists oppose predatory, expansionist wars serving big-power interests, and support wars for democratic or other progressive objectives.

War is the continuation of politics by other means, in Clausewitz's phrase much quoted by Marxists. Marxists are not fetishists or moralists about means. Our attitude to a war depends on the politics which it 'continues by another means'. Revolutionary civil wars — uprisings by oppressed classes — Marxists, of course, support. Wars of national liberation Marxists also support. And Marxists would support wars that formed part of a wider, international revolutionary upsurge the cause of which they helped advance — a revolutionary government going to the aid of a revolution elsewhere (although Marxists have opposed 'revolution by conquest').

Marxists oppose *imperialist* wars — wars fought by and between imperial powers whose objective is to protect or extend their imperial interests — their colonies, their spheres of influence, their profits. Such wars have no democratic content: they are wars to conquer and enslave other peoples, to enrich the powers that be and preserve the status quo.

What does 'opposing' and 'supporting' wars mean.? In World War One, Lenin formulated a policy known as 'revolutionary defeatism', the basic idea of which is extremely simple. The workers should not support the war, workers' parties should refuse to vote in parliaments for war credits, and they should seize upon the social crisis that existed to make a revolution. The important thing was to build a revolutionary movement — to build up the strength, confidence and political independence of the workers regardless of the military consequences of their actions. If working class action led to the military defeat of their government, so be it: the workers had no interest in victory, and a defeat in the context of a rising revolutionary movement was inconsequential. Such defeats would be the defeats of an old social and political order engulfed by socialist revolution.

To be opposed to the war on one side was not to support the other. The idea that victory would be for the ruling class, not the workers, and that a powerful workers' movement was more important than the military fortunes of war, applied on *all sides* in the imperialist conflict (and ultimately, of course, its effectiveness depended upon the policy being put into practice on all sides). There could be nuances — in tactical application, or assessment of likely effects of victory of any particular side. Lenin's approach was more subtle than is often supposed. But that was the general idea.

In a war between an imperialist power and a colony fighting for national freedom, the policy was just as clear. Socialists should say: get

out of the colony, allow it the right to independence, hand over power to the national liberation movement; in the meantime, socialists would support the *military victory* of the national liberation movement.

In a colony fighting for freedom, the workers should support the national liberation struggle — whilst maintaining their independence from other class forces. In such a case, socialists would be for 'defencism' — for the defence (or achievement) of national independence, for the defence of the war's objectives.

'Defencism' and 'defeatism' sum up the Marxist attitude to different types of war. 'Defencism' is another way of saying 'support for the war'; 'defeatism' another way of saying 'opposition'.

Yet what is fundamentally at stake in this distinction is not a military question. Lenin was fond of reiterating the dictum that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means'; what are fundamental are the politics. And politics, for us is not a matter of offering advice to bourgeois or bureaucratic governments, or practising vicarious great-power realpolitik. Politics is about educating and mobilising the working class. For Marxists the issue of 'defencism' or 'defeatism' is to do with a *political argument* from which military considerations follow. It is to do with what Marxists *say* about the issues involved in the war.

To 'support' a war is to justify and advocate the war's objectives. We are in favour of colonies winning freedom; we are in favour of wars to win that freedom. We are in favour of the oppressed classes throwing off the yoke of oppression and doing so through revolutionary means. We are opposed to the imperial expansion of powerful bureaucratic military states, to wars that maintain the colonies in semi-slavery, or seek to enslave new colonies, or wars to enrich the already gorged bourgeoisie of the imperialist countries. This is what Lenin's policy was about: what do socialists say *politically*; what do they do according to the political issues?

In an inter-imperialist conflict, socialists should say to the combatant soldiers of both sides: This is futile; we are being sent to the slaughter by our rulers for *their* interests; instead of fighting each other we should join together to fight our rulers. Who cares which of the rulers win or lose? We should overthrow the lot of them: they should *all* lose.

To the troops of a colonial power sent to fight an anti-colonial movement, socialists should say: These people are *right* to want national independence, and we have no business holding them in subjection. On the contrary, we should support their struggle, because a defeat of our ruling class will help us in our own struggles.

Fundamentally, in all these cases, it is a question of the argument, the rights and wrongs. But for many Marxists today, all that has changed: it is no longer a question of politics — it is a question of international power-play, speculation about what might happen if one or other alleged 'bloc' in the world wins a given battle. Politics has been sacrificed to the great Hegelian duel between 'imperialism' and 'anti-imperialism'. The Iran-Iraq war is a classic example.

The SWP and 'the party'

What the SWP says today about Iran and Palestine flies in the face of its basic theory and political tradition. The SWP's forerunner, the Socialist Review group, started out in 1950 on the basis of refusing to support North Korea against US imperialism as other would-be Trotskyists did. In the '50s and '60s, one of its chief political badges as a tendency was its opposition to 'Third Worldism', which often went as far as downright disdain for Third World struggles. It has continued the same attitude into the '80s, though (without explanation) developing quite different theories to underpin it: see Nigel Harris's recent book, 'The End of the Third World'.

In 1982 the SWP was one of very few would-be Trotskyist groups who (like us) rejected the 'anti-imperialist' line of supporting Argentina in the South Atlantic war, and instead explained that Argentina's role in the war was imperialistic like Britain's, though on a different scale. In 1980 the SWP opposed both sides in the Iran/Iraq war, though the recentness of Iran's 1979 revolution made many would-be Trotskyists back Iran. On Palestine/Israel the SWP's current line has a longer history; but even there the insistence on the immovably reactionary nature of the Israeli working class is new, and in 1967 the SWP (then IS) favoured self-determination for the Israeli Jews within a socialist federation of the Middle East.

What's going on? For the SWP, what it expounds as theory has always been one thing, what it uses as day-to-day practical politics another. As Tony Cliff once put it (in an argument over the SWP/IS's shift to opposing British entry into the EEC, in 1971), "Tactics and principles contradict each other".

Often the SWP "line" is put together in the same sort of way that bourgeois parties package their "message". The first requirement is that the line sounds good and suits organisational needs. Squaring it theoretically is a job for scribblers to mop up afterwards. The same method employed in the SWP's changes of attitude on the Labour Party and on 'Militant' has also been used in international politics.

At present the SWP wants to sell itself as the hardest of the 'hard left'. It addresses itself to Labour leftists and tells them that the SWP fights for the same causes as them, but with a hard, pure party, and without the hassle of face-to-face battle with the right wing and soft left in the Constituency Labour Parties. To appear very 'anti-imperialist' suits this sales line. It also serves SWP factional purposes in the student movement, where they have been resoundingly outflanked by Socialist Students in NOLS (in which SO is active) and where Israel/Palestine is a big issue.

'Building the party' for the SWP, is first and foremost building an organisational machine. Politics come second.

Socialist Organiser stands for workers' liberty, East and West. We aim to help organise the left wing in the Labour Party and trade unions to fight to replace capitalism with working class socialism.

WHERE WE STAND

We want public ownership of the major enterprises and a planned economy under workers' control. We want democracy much fuller than the present Westminster system — a workers' democracy, with elected representatives recallable at any time, and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges.

Socialism can never be built in one country alone. The workers in every country have more in common with workers in other countries than with their own capitalist or Stalinist rulers. We support national liberation struggles and workers' struggles world-wide, including the struggle of workers and oppressed nationalities in the Stalinist states against their own anti-socialist bureaucracies.

We stand:

For full equality for women, and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. For a mass working class based women's movement.

Against racism, and against deportations and all immigration controls.

For equality for lesbians and gays.

For a united and free Ireland with some federal system to protect the rights of the Protestant minority.

For left unity in action; clarity in debate and discussion.

For a labour movement accessible to the most oppressed, accountable to its rank and file, and militant against capitalism.

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