

The left and the July crisis (1972)

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On Friday 21 July 1972 five dockworkers, picketing a container depot in a dispute over job security, were jailed in Pentonville Prison, London, under the Industrial Relations Act which the Tory government of the day had finally brought into law - after big trade-union demonstrations against it - in August 1971. Within a few days, and despite the fact that many factories were on summer shutdowns, around 200,000 workers across the country struck in protest.

The TUC, under pressure, called a one-day general strike for Monday 31 July. At that point the Tory government buckled and found a legal device to release the five dockworkers.

The text below is that of a pamphlet published by the Workers' Fight group, forerunner of the AWL, after the July events, analysing the responses of the various left groups of the time.

The Communist Party then, despite decayed politics, had maybe 35,000 members, including many thousands of militant workplace trade-union activists. The International Socialists (IS) were the forerunners of today's SWP. The Socialist Labour League (SLL) was the biggest group to the left of the CP in 1972, though it had become increasingly sectarian and bizarre over the previous ten years. It changed its name to Workers' Revolutionary Party in 1973, and from 1976 came into financial dependence on the governments of Iraq, Libya, etc., before expelling its long-time leader Gerry Healy and imploding in 1985.

The International Marxist Group was the "Mandelite" group of the time, a forerunner of today's "Socialist Resistance", but at the time a youthful and energetic organisation.

The RSL was the Militant group, whose descendants today are the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal.

"An ideologist is worthy of the name only when he marches ahead of the spontaneous movement, points out the road, and when he is able ahead of all others to solve all the theoretical, political, tactical and organisational questions which the 'material elements' of the movement spontaneously encounter" — Lenin.

In the aftermath of the biggest political and industrial crisis which has erupted in Britain since 1926 the revolutionary left can only be judged by these high and exacting, but necessary, standards. Marxism as "embodied" in the Communist Party, and the small groups to the left of the Communist Party, is only of use to the working class if it can go beyond the spontaneous "gut" response of the class itself, if it has seen and prepared for the trends of events, can map out the necessary course of development and can work out slogans which focus the movement politically and organisationally, and take it forward.

The limited size and influence of all the groups does not for one moment diminish their political responsibilities. Small groups can, as Trotsky put it, shout only as loud as their voices, reaching limited circles and sections of the

class. Small size limits immediate direct influence; wrong or inadequate politics renders them, regardless of size, irrelevant or, worse, harmful. The more insignificant the group organisationally, the more worthless it is if its politics are not the most advanced in order to link up with the movement of the class and help to draw it forward.

A serious group would have prepared beforehand, having understood the possibilities in the situation, by explaining the implications of the Government attack and the need to smash the Industrial Relations Act.

As part of that preparation it was also important to clarify the nature of the general strike weapon - a vital task in Britain because the ghost of the 1926 General Strike has never been properly laid. In the crisis situation itself it was crucial to explain the need not only to free the Five but to go on to smash the Act, indicating the concrete steps needed at each stage to develop the movement. This Workers' Fight tried to do.

Let us look at the situation between [Friday] 21 and [Wednesday] 26 July of 1972, and at how the revolutionary organisations measured up to it.

THE CALL FOR A GENERAL STRIKE

The British labour movement has great industrial and trade union strength. Its organisations are strong, especially at rank and file level. There is a tremendous spirit of rank and file independence and self confidence and, something unseen at all in Britain for decades past, and never on such a wide scale since Chartist times - a spirit of defiance of the powers that be, a rejection of authority, an indignant realisation that the "law" is class law made up as it is needed, and a growing unwillingness to submit to the will of those who rule. There is a rapidly spreading willingness for solidarity action (witness the mass mobilisation in support of the miners) which testifies to the growing awareness of class-wide interests rather than mere trade and sectional interests which normally motivate even the most militant industrial actions.

The Government, impelled by an especially sharp economic crisis within a general world-wide capitalist slowdown, has launched a determined offensive to curb, decisively, the rank and file of the Unions. The Industrial Relations Act, designed to make maximum use of the trade union bureaucracy as trade union policemen for the State, is its major weapon in this.

Faced as it has been with the greatest explosion of wage struggles for decades, which has coalesced with mass working class opposition to and TUC non-recognition of the Industrial Relations Act, the Government is weak, for now. A considerable part of the Army is tied up in Ireland (though the maintenance and supply section, potential strike breakers, is still a very powerful presence in Britain). There are no specially trained police strike-breakers. Nor is there yet an Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (as there was in 1926). This weakness is not absolute, it is relative and temporary. A policy of preparing is being carried on by the Government, and the industrial battles and skirmishing over the National Industrial Relations Court [NIRC], if not generalised into a confrontation which smashes the Act, will help the Government to build up strength, rallying the middle class and perhaps sections of the working class ("the battle against inflation" etc.) around it. But nonetheless its weakness now is real.

WORKERS' FIGHT

WORKERS' FIGHT has argued for a general strike. A

victorious general strike is possible. It could smash the Act - and nothing less than full scale class mobilisation will smash the Act.

We put forward the idea of a general strike to focus, to lead forward and to give a political perspective to the necessary solidarity action which could arise and has arisen.

In the present situation, to argue against the slogan of a general strike on the grounds of the inadequacy of political leadership in the British labour movement is to renounce the use of the general strike slogan as an agitational weapon in building an alternative leadership. It is a demand that the class waits until "the leadership" prepares itself. But when the trade union strength and militancy of the movement runs way ahead of the level of clear political consciousness as a response to outrageous ruling class attacks and provocations - as undoubtedly it has done - it is not the job of revolutionaries to hold back the industrial thrust until (somehow) the requisite political consciousness develops. Rather, it is our job to seek to lead the working class forward in flexing its industrial strength so that political consciousness can be developed. The most favourable climate for the masses of the working class to understand the need for the socialist revolution, and for great numbers to achieve a scientific Marxist outlook, is the climate of mobilisation, action, struggle and confrontation.

The July situation allowed the posing of the general strike weapon not as an Armageddon, but as a weapon for a specific, immediately necessary end. However, what Trotsky wrote of sit-in strikes is all the more true of general strikes. The logic of the use of the weapon itself goes far beyond the possibly modest initial objectives: "Independent of the demands of the strikers, the temporary seizure of factories deals a blow to the idol, capitalist property. Every sit-down strike poses in a practical manner the question of who is boss of the factory: the capitalist or workers?"

A general strike paralyses the essential services of society: the question is at once raised of whether they are to be operated by scabs or taken under workers' control. Revolutionaries would argue for the defence, democratisation, and extension of the organs of workers' control, with the central demand of a workers' government - a government to be based on working-class organisations and to carry out working-class policies.

Against the revolutionary current, reformists would use various ploys, a crucial one being the "ballot box trap". Elections would be called and the workers advised that the issues were now open to democratic decision, that they should concentrate their efforts on returning a Labour Government pledged to repeal the Act (or even to "socialist policies"). In the situation of a general strike, with the question of direct working-class power being used in a concrete way, with normal channels of bourgeois parliamentary politics being by-passed by the logic of the movement, conventional abstractions about critical support for Labour would be inadequate. The point about the usual orientations on the part of revolutionaries (i.e. "for a Labour Government") is that they provide an opportunity for relating to questions of the general administration of society (not just sectional demands) in an immediate, agitational, concrete fashion. But in a situation of the growth of serious embryo organs of working class power, the Labour Party ceases to be the only or even the main way of relating to these questions. Revolutionaries would argue firmly against any demobilisation of the strike movement for the sake of elections, and against the subordination of workers'

council type organisations to the Labour Party machine.

But for small political groups to add their voices to a call for a general strike coming already from hundreds of thousands of workers, many of them acting to bring it into being, does not help much. A serious group would have prepared beforehand by explaining the implications of the Government attack and the need to smash the Act, rather than merely to free the five dockers.

"Smash the Act" was in fact not just any limited aim to motivate the general strike call, but the crucial one. For to call for a general strike to free the Five was to play the Grand Old Duke of York: to advocate a massive mobilisation and at the same time to prepare its extinction while still short of confronting the major objective task facing the movement. Whereas to call for a general strike to kick out the Tories was to endorse in advance the "ballot box trap" and facilitate a sell out by the Labour Party leaders.

This, therefore, was the course which Workers' Fight attempted to steer, though not without fault. We explained carefully in advance the various possible forms of General Strike, but the simple headline "General Strike" of our July 23 issue, unsupplemented by any additional slogan such as "Strike now" could have implied a "wait until the TUC calls a general strike" attitude. (The text of the article in that issue was, however, quite clear.) And there was one other major omission in that issue - the question of flying pickets to spread the strike was not raised forcefully enough. Both these points were, however, clear in our other papers ("The Hook", a dockers' paper), in leaflets etc.

How did the larger left groups measure up?

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The Communist Party did not actually call for a general strike: it did use a formula- "industrial action escalating to general strike proportions" until the Five were freed - which presumably meant that.

The call for a general strike is both a demand on the TUC and a call for direct rank and file action; the strike itself would determine the exact relation. Given this, the CP used its formula to avoid making any explicit demands on the trade union leaders, demands which might make its policy of peaceful co-existence with the trade-union lefts difficult.

The headline of the Saturday 22 July issue of the Morning Star actually just described the situation - "Dockers stop over arrests". Certainly there was no attempt to explain the difference between ordinary day to day militancy and the sort of action needed to confront the Government.

By putting the aim of the movement as just freeing the Five, and advocating a return to work after the release, the CP was arguing for a massive industrial mobilisation - to restore the status quo. Of course, they want the Act smashed; but now, on [Wednesday] 26th July, when we have a massive strike wave? No, that wasn't "realistic". Some other day, perhaps... When will it not be "some other day"?

Political perspectives? A "Labour government pledged to socialist policies" (or: "policies which open the way to socialist advance"!) was the CP line. This is a way of bringing "politics" into the struggle - as a misty reformist cure-all. It means we will free the Five... and rely on the Labour Party to smash the Act.

But many readers will expect wishy-washy reformist politics from the CP. More interesting was the fact that

the component parts of the CP policy were echoed by groups to its left: General Strike to Free the Five (International Socialists) and "Labour Government pledged to socialist policies" (Socialist Labour League).

THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

The I.S. couldn't bring itself to call for the general strike - even in the special issue of *Socialist Worker* brought out after the Five were jailed! By Monday [24 July] however, they had decided to tag along with the growing workers' movement. Posters appeared proclaiming "International Socialists say General Strike Will Free The Five".

Still no attempt to explain the general strike weapon, still no concerted effort to say much beyond "good on you lads, keep it up."

Then on Wednesday [26th], after the dockers were released, the general strike slogan was dropped. Or was it? A leading member of I.S., Duncan Hallas, speaking in Liverpool on Wednesday evening, said that the call for a general strike to smash the Act should be raised as "propaganda, not agitation".

Now he said this while arguing against a call of no demobilisation of the strike movement before the Act was smashed. So, in ordinary plain speech presumably he meant he was against a general strike to smash the Act - or at least, against doing anything to achieve it. Propaganda, for IS, apparently means to talk of "wouldn't it be nice if", unembarrassed by any close link with practical activity. Instead of agitation being the antennae of the propaganda message, its "loud-hailer", organically linked to it and all the time striving to increase the power of the agitational message to focus workers towards the more rounded out and explained propaganda - instead of this IS's agitation relates only to "what is happening". It is not the link between what is happening and what we want to see happening - that is, our revolutionary socialist programme.

I.S. do not understand that what is propaganda (many ideas communicated to a few people) in one situation, requiring patient and exhaustive explanation, persuasion and many-sided examination, can be grasped with dramatic speed in another and can be put forward "agitationally". Thus the action of the court in jailing the five dockers illuminated - perhaps only momentarily - the connections between the state, the courts and the ruling class, and the class itself began to move, in the only direction open to it, into action. I.S. does not understand this because it sees agitation and propaganda as essentially separate things and not a unified complex of ideas, with the difference being only one of technique rather than of content, and therefore that the class struggle demands rapid and constant reappraisal of the balance between the content of agitation and propaganda.

Thus I.S. raised the call for general strike for the first time in *Socialist Worker* in an issue headlined "Victory" later that week. They call for a general strike when everything has died down and it is a pious wish for the future. But not when it is a live issue.

I.S. had made no serious analysis of the situation the working class faced in relation to the Tory Government and the Industrial Relations Act. In the months building up to the Pentonville crisis, its approach was epitomised by one *Socialist Worker* headline: "Pay: use your muscle for more". With sit-ins, flying pickets, important demands for a shorter working week, a massive offensive to bind trade unions to the state, *Socialist Worker* tailed behind, putting the main stress on... higher wages!

There was no serious preparation. In areas like Manchester where the belated call for a general strike arrived only on the Wednesday afternoon, I.S. members were left bewildered, without a line, without a perspective for the movement around them.

True to type, IS went in for shallow "agitation" derived from no analysis, related to no perspective. IS has essentially an approach of social-democratic fishing in the stream of the movement with the goal of organisational self-promotion, in the spirit of petty speculation - a truly petty bourgeois attitude.

It tags along with the working class like an outsider trying to get in on a gang - willing to perform all sorts of service tasks, to praise "self-activity" ever so highly. But when the class starts moving this outsider recoils in surprise, fear, and confusion, unable to comprehend the potential of the self-activity he calls for, only to tag on afterwards, always a day late.

I.S. is trapped in its definitions of agitation and propaganda, definitions borrowed directly from the definition of Martynov which Lenin criticised in *What is to be Done?* Thus they define agitation as "calling the masses to certain concrete actions", "promising certain palpable results"; and propaganda as "the revolutionary elucidation of the whole of the present system or partial manifestations of it". Having got into this stance they then cannot escape from an oscillation between the light-minded adventurism of calling for a general strike without preparation, without explanation, without educating its members to use the call for a general strike seriously and to link it to immediate practical steps; and at the other pole, the conservatism of lagging behind the broadest advanced layers of the class during a rising tide of militancy. The organic links between agitation, propaganda and theory are broken.

THE SOCIALIST LABOUR LEAGUE

The S.L.L. has, more or less consistently called for a general strike. But the S.L.L. has a peculiar conception of what a general strike is: "The general strike must not be lifted until the General Election when a Labour Government pledged to socialist policies can be elected." (SLL *Daily Political Letter*, July 26th, 1972)

This is an amazing hotchpotch! A call for a general strike to get an election to put in a Labour Government limits the general strike in advance - closes, in advance, without a struggle, not by the arbitration of classes in conflict but by the preconceptions and the cold, flabby, a priori calculations in someone's head, the great chapter which such a mass working class movement opens up: closes it in a reformist way.

In an actual general strike situation only reactionaries, incorrigible reformists or crass muddle-heads would raise or support the call for a general election. The ballot box would be a snare for the working class, just as it was in France in 1968. In fact, demobilisation of the strike movement would probably be followed by defeat at the polls. A general strike which doesn't change the balance of forces in favour of the working class is doomed to present the existing power with the opportunity of changing the balance of forces in its own favour.

To ape the language of the S.L.L., its line was a capitulation in advance to the reformists in the labour movement. It made, simultaneously, a call for action with a revolutionary logic and a built in declaration that it is bound to be defeated and deflected from its natural goal.

The SLL's reformist conclusions on the general strike

follow directly from their use of the slogan "kick the Tories out" as an idealist fetish, the remedy for all problems from Bangladesh to decimal currency. Their argument is a strange mixture of ultra-leftism and reformism. They insist in ultra-left fashion, on raising the "question of power" directly and mechanically as an immediate mass slogan in every situation, without any concern for the specific contours of the development of the movement. But instead of raising the "question of power" in the form of "smash capitalism", thus making their ideas at least internally coherent, they raise it in a purely parliamentary form.

The S.L.L. is an organisation which never analyses its own mistakes or history, and has zig-zagged over the last 25 years from near capitulation to social democracy (Bevanism) to screaming ultra-leftism. Thus today it is an unprincipled alliance of contradictory tendencies, reformist and ultra-left. There are still massive "subterranean" areas of the social democratic confusion and muddled perspectives of the original Healy group of heavily social democratised "Trotskyists". These exist beneath the layer of ultra-leftism put down in the last decade. These various layers co-exist in the S.L.L. on a sub-political level, one on top of another like geological strata. Any earth tremors in society thus mix UP the elements into an incoherent and contradictory hodge-podge.

Believing (rightly) that the social-democratic stage in the development of the consciousness the British working class couldn't be simply skipped over, it has attempted to solve the problem by amalgamating the concepts of "putting Labour into government to expose it" with the tactic of the general strike. It thus misunderstood the tempo of development and ignored the titanic potential of the general strike, treating it as just another pressure point on the Tories - who are seen as one governing party. The League thus ignored how the tactic related or could relate to the state, to which both Labour and Tories have a common relationship.

The S.L.L. has a totally routinist, backward looking conception of the struggle against social democracy, grossly overemphasising the purely organisational aspect of it, being incapable of conceiving of the struggle against social-democratic consciousness as other than a Labour Party affair. They read developments off an old scenario, ignoring completely any concrete analysis of the experience of France 1968 or of the current state of working class consciousness.

The "Labour to Power with socialist policies" line actually cuts away at the most advanced aspects of that consciousness - the self reliance, the readiness to use industrial strength rather than wait for elections, the widespread realisation that Labour, although it may be supported against the Tories, is in no sense socialist.

The League attempts to relate to "politics" and avoid the sin of "syndicalism", not understanding that the general strike is not only political in the sense of implicitly challenging the state but also in transforming and transcending the routine forms of bourgeois-constructed political institutions, evoking with tremendous force the normally latent political activity of the working class. In that sense the general strike acts as a bridge. a hiatus suspending - paralysing - the old politics, holding out the possibility of new politics, the politics of the working class acting as a class for itself through workers' councils. The issue of old politics vs. new politics would be decided in the strike, in the course of the struggle.

They denounced those who raised the general strike,

slogan in an agitational way linked to the immediately felt needs of millions - "Free the Five", "Smash the Act" - as reformist. Here they misunderstand the relation between agitation and propaganda, the logic of slogans escalating as the struggle and the problems to be faced in action escalate. They saw it all through the spectacles of a necessary series of predetermined stages in a mechanical evolution of working-class social-democratic consciousness, and made a mockery of any talk of smashing the state by imprisoning their agitation within parliamentary perspectives.

THE INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP

The CP, IS, and the SLL shared an approach of good old-fashioned British reformism. Step up trade-union militancy - but don't argue for a qualitative transformation of that militancy. Put forward political alternatives - but as something for Parliament or for the misty future, not something to be aimed for by struggle here and now.

But meanwhile the International Marxist Group continued on its own private Bordigist binge. The mass strike movement found the IMG in a political shambles, unstable as mercury, immersed in a prodigious bulk of internal bulletins, lengthy analyses enabling it to state firmly that the mass strike movement was very improbable, proliferating strands of "new thinking", boldly elaborating "new" systems to supersede the "historical" Trotskyism today and scrapping them, as a neophyte schoolmaster wipes clean the blackboard, and starting all over again tomorrow; yesterday concocting a new slogan that magically solved the problem of reformism ("for a workers' government based on the trade unions") - today dropping it, perhaps realising that its concrete demystified meaning was "Labour to power", and placing "governmental slogans" in deep-freeze until discussion "in September".

Their conclusions so far had produced the idea that the "Party" does not make calls to action. It merely "presents" ideas in the voice of a sympathetic and by implication inactive "adviser". The idea that the party has an administrative function is a "Cannonite" heresy. Having no administrative function, the "party" does not structure, distinguish, organise the received ideas of the movement which it presents.

Not for this proud section of the "World Party of Socialist Revolution" which Trotsky founded in 1938 to fill the role Trotsky sketched out for that organisation: to ensure the continuity of the revolutionary movement, so that it would be the repository of the lessons of the past, the cogitative mechanism for understanding the present and simultaneously the administrative organ to mediate between the ideas and the mass labour movement, struggling to become the actual political, ideological, and organisational leadership of the movement in action. Not for them to "point out the road" of a general strike.

They were disqualified from doing so by their view that "... the working class has no need of anyone to make administrative 'calls to action' - strike on such and such a day, take this or that action or adopt this or that form of struggle" ("A Socialist Policy for the Unions", IMG Publication).

The function of the revolutionary movement is to "present ideas to the masses". That is, generalised socialist propaganda, neatly written out. Necessarily this is "passive propaganda", excluding the conception of a dynamic interaction between working class-action, socialist propaganda, and its subdivision into limited

demands including calls to action related to the immediate psychology of the masses and immediate action.

The IMG are trapped by a common way of dealing with the relation of "Party and Class": seeing it in terms of Party over here, vanguard, ideas, conscious, centralised, versus Class, over there, mass activity, not conscious, fragmented. Both Party and Class are seen as blancmange-type unities; and they are seen as separate and even counterposed. The fact that the Party is seen as separate from the class, not as a leading contingent indicates the petty-bourgeois nature of these conceptions in a very obvious and crude way.

But there are more subtle errors. Let us look at the implications of this conception of Party and Class.

Party meets Class. (It is seen in this way inevitably, since the terms of the discussion presuppose the Party as separated from the Class, rather than already in it, or among it.) What happens when Party meets Class? The Party attempts to mobilise the class - "calling the masses to certain concrete action" - and either simply fails to do so, ends up hysterically screeching demands at the class (as with the SLL) - or it adapts to the masses, ends up drifting to the right (the IS).

The IMG, to their credit, became conscious of the problems involved in "mobilising the masses". They chose an easy way out. Party Meets Class - and "presents a rounded conception of the totality of social relations" ... "so that the working class itself can respond to any changes occurring in the situation or produced by its own activity". As we see from the last passage (from the *Red Mole* "special supplement") the IMG have not understood the differentiation of the working class, the fact that it is not a simple blancmange; they talk only of "the class" acting, not of the differentiated sections of the class acting, interdependently but not identically.

Thus they cannot understand the relation between propaganda and agitation, the way the party can "blaze the trail" for a class call to action among an advanced minority today, and develop it as mass agitation tomorrow. "The mass is not homogeneous. It develops. It feels the pressure of events. It will accept tomorrow what it will not accept today. Our cadres will blaze the trail..." (Trotsky, *What is a Mass Paper?*).

These were the ideas of IMG's May conference, and were the general background to the IMG's performance. But it is enormously difficult to simply pin down the IMG's ideas. They change rapidly. Certainly some of the conclusions of the May ideas, such as the rejection of "calls to action", have been renounced, implicitly though not explicitly. But the conceptions that led to those conclusions remain uncriticised, and continued to inform IMG's practice during the jailing of the dockers.

The IMG refused to raise the call for a general strike. Some, unable to see slogans as steps in a dynamic development towards advanced goals, argued that a general strike to smash the Act was "too limiting". Others (in Manchester, for example) argued that "spread the strikes" was more concrete, more realistic. In doing so they missed the main point of the Lenin polemic against Martynov's "calls to action" definition of agitation - that same polemic which they had been misquoting profusely for months to prove that "calls to action" (such as general strikes ...) were "economistic" heresies.

Lenin's point against Martynov was precisely that made in the passage quoted at the beginning of this pamphlet. The "economist" Martynov, by separating calls to action

from the body of agitation and propaganda, limited them to calls pitched at the existing level of the movement — as he judged it. the economic level. Thus, while maintaining socialist propaganda as a sideline, he renounced any serious fight to change the level of the movement, to "point out the road" ahead.

The IMG, shocked by the mass strike movement into actually using "calls to action", did just the same - adapting their "call to action" to the existing (fragmented) level of the movement, renouncing the use of the general strike "call to action" to rally, focus, lead forward, "give a perspective to the movement".

This lapse into Martynovism was a natural result of their general propagandism.

The *Red Mole* Strike Specials had a fine list of calls to action from the textbooks. But: "It is not enough to be a revolutionary and an advocate of socialism in general. It is necessary to know at every moment how to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength to order to keep the whole chain in place and prepare to move on resolutely to the next link" (Lenin).

The IMG's programme was the Trotskyist programme deboned, filleted, destructured, and laid out on a platter as a "schema for revolution". They called for Councils of Action — but wrote of them as "uniting the representatives of the great mass of workers", to "draw in all the forces of the working class", and be "the local leadership of the strike". Thus, they skipped several "links" and effectively called for Soviets.

Having dropped the previously advocated "governmental" slogans— "For a Workers' Government based on the Trade Unions", then "a Workers' Government based on the struggle inside the trade unions for workers' control", and refusing to raise the general strike slogan, the IMG had no unifying agitational political demands at all: just the implied cell for "Soviets" and "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat". Thus the passive propagandist method collapses Trotskyism into Bordigism. The general strike call transcends normal politics, contains the potential of working-class politics. A "governmental" electoral—parliamentary slogan of any sort at least relates to the State. Having neither the one nor the other, the IMG did not relate to the question of the State or active working class politics at all except on the level of the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat"!

The Transitional Programme is a revolutionary programme, a programme for the smashing of capitalism. But it is also a programme in which "it is necessary to know at every moment how to find the particular link in the chain which must be grasped with all one's strength".

Bourgeois ideology dominates the working class not only through the deliberate machinations of the press, the television, the education system, but else, more fundamentally, through the fact that the immediate appearance of capitalist reality supports that ideology. The scientific perception necessary to strip sway that ideology is not attained by the mass of the working class under capitalism. Even in time of revolution, bourgeois ideology continues to have a hold at a fundamental, world-view level.

However, the logic of the class struggle organic to capitalism consistently points beyond capitalism. A strike questions the capitalists' right to control in the factory. A sit—in strike questions the capitalist's property rights. A general strike questions the whole capitalist running of society - necessarily. however limited the initial aims.

For the mass of the working class, the "logic of the historic process does indeed "come before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historical process". The whole point of the Transitional Programme approach is to forge a link between the objective tasks posed in the class struggle and the consciousness of the workers. To achieve this, the party puts forward demands to develop and channel the activity of the class, so that in and through that activity, in a continuous interaction with the agitation and propaganda of the party, the class learns politically.

This conception goes far beyond the IMG's "explaining a rounded conception ... so that the working class itself can respond...". The IMG propagandist conception postulates a "learn, then act" curriculum for the working class; it presupposes the existence of the working class as a conscious historical subject, responding consciously as a class. But when the class breaks the schedule and acts without working through the propagandist curriculum, then all the propagandist can do is offer a crash course to complete the curriculum. There is no ability to seize hold of the lessons of the activity, and develop those lessons in connection with the full programme and with "the next practical step".

Trotsky discussed quite concretely how the Transitional Programme must be used.

"Now we can present one (slogan) which is honest, part of our entire programme, not demagogic, but which corresponds totally to the situation... the sliding scale of wages and hours ... Naturally this is only one point. In the beginning this slogan is totally adequate for the situation. But the others can be added as the development proceeds. The bureaucrats will oppose it. Then if this slogan becomes popular with the masses, fascist tendencies will develop in opposition. We will say that we need to develop defence squads... It is the programme of socialism, but in a very popular and simple form" (*Discussions on the Transitional Programme*, in *Writings 1938-39*).

The Trotskyists do not raise "the political slogan" according to some tempo worked out a priori in their own heads; it is their responsibility to swivel the programme around, to permute and structure the demands, so that they relate to the tempo of the development of the workers' movement. Without this the whole idea of agitation is meaningless or unprincipled.

The point of an agitational slogan is that it relates to masses of people. It is comprehensible to them even though they don't have the Marxist "rounded political conception". It is expressed in popular concepts. What makes it also a weapon to break up and go beyond popular concepts is its connection with a whole complex of other demands - just as the sliding scale demand would lead to the demand for workers' militias (and from there, workers' control, workers' government...).

The IMG's conception of demands as a laid-out scheme rather than as an interlocking, ordered complex is inevitably propagandist. While it apparently uses the demands of the Transitional Programme, it actually subordinates the political substance of Trotskyism to Bordighist passive propaganda.

CONCLUSION

The origin of the Workers' Fight tendency was a conviction that the "British Trotskyist" groups, the SLL and the RSL, were sectarian and useless for revolutionary politics, reducing Trotskyism to an arid, often destructive and usually repellent dogma rather than a guide to

effective revolutionary action. The proto-IMG of those days — 1966 — followed a course of kow-towing to the labour bureaucracy and left reformists. IS did not even claim to be Trotskyist.

Since then the IMG has gone through a series of political turnabouts, and IS has "found a use" for Leninist forms. But the shambles on the left remains, and the rapid developments in the working class over the last few years make the task of reconstructing and regrouping the Trotskyist movement all the more urgent. "The struggle for the 'maturing' of the mass begins with a minority, with a 'sect', with a vanguard. There is not and cannot be any other road in history".

S. Matgamna, M. Thomas. October 1972.

APPENDIX

Resolution of Workers' Fight National Committee on "The Present Situation", 23 July 1972

1. We pose the aim of strike action as smashing the Act. We relate to the question of "kicking the Tories out" as follows:
2. If there is a real development of General Strike proportions, with at least embryonic dual power organs, then we demand a Workers' Government.
3. As long as there is only a partial strike development, the question of Workers' Government cannot be raised agitationally. We still raise "Kick the Tories out", but we have to recognise that in such a situation the alternative is Labour, and that therefore there is a danger of "Kick the Tories out" being used to demobilise the movement and channel it into parliamentarism. We cut across this by raising the question of workers' control, especially in relation to occupied factories.
4. We underplay the sectional, docks, aspect of the struggle and stress the class-wide issues of the Industrial Relations Act and unemployment. But we recognise that "generalisation" is not always good; it can actually mean more diffuseness, letting leaders off the hook. This would be the case with a "generalisation" from "smash the Act" to "kick the Tories out" as main slogan.
5. We advocate rent strikes in solidarity with the industrial struggle.
6. We advocate (in general) occupation of factories, and in case of print works, etc., operation of them in the workers' interests.
7. We argue for Trades Councils to transform themselves into Councils of Action - i.e. local strike committee, drawing in representatives from all sections in action against the Act (including tenants) and acting as organising centres. In areas where the Trades Council is completely intractable or semi-defunct, we argue for independent Councils of Action. In some areas, local Liaison Committee may be the appropriate bodies.
8. We advocate that the Councils of Action organise workers' defence groups, workers' propaganda, and the expansion of the strike.
9. The question of workers' defence groups must be motivated very carefully, using the question of mobile pickets (experience of miners, Hull dockers, Manchester building workers) and of security of occupied factories.
10. We advocate that Councils of Action take an initiative in organising the unemployed, sympathetic students, etc., and use at least the latter as ancillaries, i.e. distributing propaganda, organising meetings etc.

II. We advocate sponsorship by the National Port Shop Stewards Committee of at National Strike Committee, and in general national coordination of strike bodies.

12. We demand of local Labour Party bodies that they affiliate to Councils of Action. We demand of the Labour Party nationally that it support the strike movement, and pledge itself to complete smashing of the Act.

13. We approach other left-wing groups (IS, CP, SLL, IMG, RSL, etc) for a commitment to no demobilisation before the Act is smashed, and building Councils of Action, as above.

A correction: 1973-4

Over the next year or so, we became aware that our proper enthusiasm for the strike movements of the early 1970s and their potential had swung us towards a sort of fear of tackling questions to do with the Labour Party, parliament, and choices of government.

"The Left and the July Crisis" should be read together with the self-correction we made in a Workers' Fight Extended National Committee resolution, 19 August 1973. It was published, with an explanatory gloss, as a tiny pamphlet in March 1974.

Resolution

1. The present situation is one of relative downturn in the class struggle from the mass explosions of early 1972 to early 1973. The fighting ability and spirit of the working class has not, however, been broken, and any success for the government in holding down wages tends to stoke up militant action in the future. Our main task, however, is not to speculate about the possible variants of future militancy, including general strike, but to relate to the actual conditions here and now.

2. There is a relative, but not an absolute, contradiction between the general strike slogan and slogans relating to Parliament. The built-in dynamic of a general strike is to overflow and break through Parliamentary limits; in that situation of outflowing and breaking through, slogans for elections and for a Labour government are reactionary.

But to fear to raise slogans round Tories out/ Labour in *now* on the grounds of the *possible* reactionary effect of similar slogans in a *possible* development of a *possible* future general strike would be to stumble over the events of today by fixing our gaze on speculations about tomorrow.

3. We make propaganda for the general strike slogan - i.e. relatively complex, many-sided explanations of how it is possible, need for preparation, demands on TUC, etc. Right now it is not possible to use the general strike slogan as a single idea chiming immediately with the instinctive responses and felt needs of masses of workers, as "the answer" in the present situation.

4. Simultaneously we should take up the question of Tories out/ Labour in and utilise it as a weapon against reformism, by use of a rounded political programme and by directing specific demands against the Labour Party.

Tories out/ Labour in can be a focal point for a whole number of political campaigns, on various issues. It cannot, however, be made the centrepiece of our

agitation and propaganda, in the sense that general strike was last year.

5. We always stress the question of self-reliance; we never allow the parliamentary questions to stand higher than the direct action of our class.

6. Through our concentration on the general strike slogan, a definite ultra-leftism has developed in the group, a definite *fear* of dealing with the question of the Labour Party, and of focusing on Parliament and government. This must be resolutely combated, including day schools and educationals. We must carry out a resolute turn towards involvement in the official labour movement.

What the resolution meant

"Social Democracy does not distinguish itself through the magnanimity of its programmes and is in this respect constantly outstripped by Socialist Parties which are not tied by any scientific doctrine. These always have their pockets full of attractive gifts for everyone".

- Rosa Luxemburg

From May 1972, and particularly around the jailing of five dockers in July 1972, Workers' Fight raised the slogan of a General Strike to smash the Industrial Relations Act.

As the heat of the struggle declined partially, and as the Industrial Relations Act became less central in political and industrial life, the slogan naturally became less prominent.

In relation to Phase 2 [government-decreed wage controls], a measure necessarily affecting the working class in a more sectional way than the Industrial Relations Act, we did not pose General Strike as "the answer". Nevertheless, there was a *tendency* to present General Strike as a cure-all Armageddon - "The slogan of a General Strike - to get rid of the Industrial Relations Act, the Housing Finance Act, and any attempt at incomes policy - remains relevant" (Workers' Fight 18, 4 November 1972).

This tendency debased the General Strike slogan, implicitly downgraded practical activity there and then short of General Strike (including such activity as demands on the Labour Party), and glossed over poverty of *programme* (lack of advance beyond defensive aims) by covering it with a radical *tactic*.

The Extended NC resolved to correct that tendency.

In our *initial* reaction to Phase 3 [wage controls] we *over-corrected*. Stressing a programmatic approach, we underestimated the possibility of direct action smashing straight through the Tories' plans.

The November 1973 National Committee meeting took account of that. With the declaration of the three-day week [imposed on industry by government order because of coal shortages during the 1973-4 miners' strike], we counterposed a programme of demands round Work or Full Pay, including a call for a Labour government, and simultaneously declared: "If the Government dares to impose a wage freeze, the immediate answer must be a General Strike".

As the election campaign opened, we continued to advance programmatic demands, and to pose specific demands on the Labour Party. Advocating a Labour vote, we argued against any calls for stepping down industrial action, in line with point five of the Extended National Committee resolution.

The *political* offensive mounted by the Labour leaders in

the "social contract", attempting to strap down the working class, now requires a clear political, programmatic reply. Given unrestricted use of the word "should" it is of course easy to answer this or any other problem. The working class should have a General Strike - the Labour Government should carry out socialist policies.

For Marxists, with fewer attractive gifts in our pockets,

there is a real problem in avoiding both utopianism and tailism. To that problem we shall address ourselves.

15 March 1974
