

Bob Pennington and the Trotskyist archipelago

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

II

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

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

The ideological systems were synthetic and arbitrary, and forever

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

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

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

groups, variations of dogma notwithstanding.

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

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

VI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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