

Alliance for Workers' Liberty

A six-point study course

This course is designed as a short, high-intensity session to help AWL members and sympathisers to get a start in our politics.

- 1. Our socialism, against capitalism and Stalinism**
- 2. Why the working class?**
- 3. The revolutionary party**
- 4. Consistent democracy and equal rights for all nations**
- 5. Democracy, class struggle, reform and revolution**
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1. Our socialism, against capitalism and Stalinism

The Lies Against Socialism Answered

[Written in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR]

"But socialism is dead, darling!" That was one response on the street to the front page [of our paper] with the headline: "Stand up for socialism" And there were many similar responses, sad as well as gleeful.

For sure, if the Stalinist systems were any sort of socialism, then socialism is dead, and it deserves to be dead. It was rotten and stinking for decades before its recent outright collapse. But Stalinism was not socialism. It was the opposite of socialism.

Throughout our existence, AWL has championed the underground workers movements and the oppressed nationalities in the Stalinist states. We have waged war on the idea - held by many in the labour movement - that the Stalinist states were socialist in any sense or in any degree. It is the same idea being peddled now - but from the other side, not by confused would-be socialists, but by bourgeois propagandists who insist that Stalinism was socialism because they want to discredit socialism and bury it. If socialists hold their course then we will find the collapse of Stalinism and the discrediting of its bureaucratic falsifications of socialism has cleared the ground for a new flowering of unfalsified socialism. The AWL is one of the bearers of the seeds of this new growth of socialism. Fighting the lies that socialism and Stalinism are identical, and that Stalinism was the same thing as the Bolshevik Russian Revolution, we will hasten the new growth of unfalsified working class socialism.

The first thing now is to answer the lies of the bourgeoisie and of the ex-Stalinists.

The system now disintegrating in Eastern Europe was socialist.

No it wasn't! It was a system of extreme exploitation of the workers and peasants, run by a backward bureaucratic ruling class with a monopoly of power. It was that bureaucracy which decreed that socialism meant their state nationalising and controlling everything, not Marx, or for that matter Lenin. Far from representing the working class, the Stalinist systems were characterised above all by a savage repression of the working class, and relentless persecution of working class dissidents, especially workers who tried to organise independent trade unions.

The collapse of the planned economies in Eastern Europe means the eclipse of socialism.

Quite the opposite. It means the renewal of socialism. The disavowal of socialism by the Stalinists will help free socialism from the Stalinist, statist taint which poisoned much of the socialist and communist movement for six decades.

Socialism is a good idea - but it is not just a good idea! It is rooted in the class struggle of the working class. That struggle continues. The collapse of Stalinism has already opened up space for the workers, long suppressed, to begin to organise independently and think for themselves. They will formulate their own ideas.

Marxists do not believe that the dominance of socialist ideas among workers is inevitable. The hard truth is that there are great obstacles in the way of workers becoming socialists when they have lived all their lives under a Stalinist totalitarian system disguised as socialism. We see that now in Eastern Europe. In the ex-Stalinist states the working class looks to the West and to market economics for its solutions. It mirrors the way in which working class movements in the West have for decades mistakenly looked to the Stalinist East as a model of escape from the peculiar horrors of our own society.

Nevertheless the prospect in all the East European states is for an intensified class struggle. Many workers, faced with class conflicts, in the new conditions, will move towards a genuine working class world outlook. They will understand that the free market is no acceptable alternative to

Stalinism, just as Stalinism was never a genuine working class alternative to the free market.

The rebirth of a mass socialist movement, cleansed of Stalinism, is a certainty in these conditions. It is a hard road from now to then, and it may be a long and winding road, but there is no other road for workers who want to defend their class interests to take. Just as in recent years we have seen the inspiring development of such working class movements as South Africa's non-racial trade unions and the Brazilian Workers Party - and Solidarnosc too - in previously more or less fallow areas of class struggle, so we will see the emergence of new workers movements in the opened-up ex-Stalinist states.

Leninism bred Stalinism, and is discredited with it.

This is the central pillar of the edifice of lies now agreed on by bourgeois and ex-Stalinist alike. It is the biggest lie of all.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the workers to power. They fought ruthlessly against the bourgeoisie and the opponents of socialism. They smashed the walls of the Tsarist prison-house of nations. Far from substituting for the working class, the Bolshevik party, by its leadership and farsightedness, allowed the working class to reach and sustain a level of mass action hitherto unparalleled in history.

The Bolsheviks based themselves on a system of democratic working class councils (soviets). Their goal was working class democracy. They never believed that they could make socialism in backward Russia, only that the Russian working class could take power first. They believed they had a duty to maintain their bridgehead for workers revolution in the most difficult and arduous circumstances.

The Bolsheviks were fallible human beings, acting in conditions of great difficulty. Mistakes they may have made in the maelstrom of civil war and economic collapse are proper subjects for socialist discussion and debate. As their critic and comrade Rosa Luxemburg wrote in 1918, the Bolsheviks would have been the last to imagine that everything they did in their conditions was a perfect model of socialist action for everywhere at all times. But what the Bolsheviks never were was the root of the Stalinist counter-revolution, which amongst its other crimes, murdered most of those who were still alive in the mid-1930s.

When things began to go wrong the Bolsheviks stood their ground. The workers' risings were defeated in the West. Invasions and civil war wrecked the soviets. The Bolshevik party itself divided. One section took a path on which it ended up leading the bureaucratic counter-revolution. The surviving central leaders fought the counter-revolution on a programme of working class self-defence and of renewing the soviets. Those Bolsheviks (Trotskyists) went down to bloody defeat. Stalinism rose above the graves of Bolsheviks, just as it rose hideously above the murdered socialist hopes of the Russian and international working class. By the late-1930s Stalin had slaughtered the leading activists not only from the Trotskyist, but also from the Right Communist and even the Stalinist factions of the Bolshevik party of the 1920s.

Stalinism was not Bolshevism, any more than it was any kind of socialism. Trotsky, who was to die at the hands of Stalin's assassins put it well and truly when he said that a river of working class and socialist blood separated Stalinism from Bolshevism. The workers in Eastern Europe and the USSR will learn the truth about that now that the possibility of open debate and honest information has been opened up.

Capitalism is vindicated by the disintegration of "state socialism".

One of the most profound and heartfelt paeans of praise ever written about capitalism will be found in the Communist Manifesto, the founding document of the modern socialist movement. Capitalism gave a tremendous boost to human capacity to change and control our environment and thus created the objective possibility of humanity rising above its "pre-history" out of the social jungle into a classless socialist society.

Marxists criticise the waste and irrationality and savage inhumanity of capitalism, but at the same time see capitalism as the necessary forerunner of socialism.

Capitalism has not ceased to be irrational and inhuman, nor have market mechanisms ceased to be blind and wasteful just because of the Stalinist experiment in "state socialism". Wage slavery and exploitation have not ceased to be at the heart and root of capitalism. The possibility and even the inevitability remains of capitalism plunging once again into devastating slumps as in the 30s - and there are three million unemployed in Britain alone right now. Capitalism still presides over regular mass slaughters by hunger which are an indictment of any social system.

In the United States, the richest capitalist country in the world, thousands of people sleep on the streets, or get a living only through the drug trade. In the private-profit counterpart of Eastern Europe - Latin America - unemployment runs at 40% in the big cities, workers living standards have sometimes been halved since the debt crisis broke in 1982, cocaine gangsters rule huge areas, and malnutrition and even starvation are widespread. Capitalism is no alternative at all!

Stalinism was not an attempt to go beyond advanced capitalism on the basis of the achievements of advanced capitalism which has proved by its failure the hopelessness of all such attempts. It was an experience on the fringes of world capitalism, arising out of the defeat of a working class revolution, and stifling under its own contradictory bureaucratic regime.

Stalinism was part of the pre-history humankind must grow beyond. So is capitalism!

Socialism is discredited because only a free market economy can give a secure basis for democracy. Without it you get state control, and state control inevitably stifles democracy.

Marxists do not want any sort of bureaucratic state, neither that of a country like Britain, where the bureaucratic state works in tandem with the bourgeoisie, nor that of the Stalinist systems where the bureaucracy was the sole master of society's wealth.

We advocate a "semi-state" without a standing army, without an entrenched bureaucracy. The Bolsheviks wanted that, too. They could not create it because of the backwardness of the isolated USSR, but it would be entirely possible in a country like Britain, especially with modern technology.

The idea that only the market system of the West can be the basis for democracy is the idea that only wage slavery for the masses together with the phenomenal concentration of wealth - and therefore power - at the top of society can be the basis of democracy! It is a prize example of the crazy logic satirised by George Orwell according to which war is peace and lies are truth.

Even such democracy as we have in the West owes its existence to decades and centuries of struggle by the working class. Democracy in capitalism is limited, imperfect, and normally not very stable. Mass self-rule by the producers, dominated neither by a bureaucratic state monopoly nor by the economic rule of the multimillionaires and their officials, is a better form of democracy. It is socialist democracy.

The reason for the economic impasse of the Eastern Bloc is that centralised planning cannot work in a complex economy: therefore capitalism is the only possible system.

This argument too rests on the lie that Stalinism - the Stalinist command economy - was socialism. The attempt to have the state control everything served the Stalinists, not the working class. Marxists never believed that the working class could take power and simply abolish the market: in 1921 Lenin set the goal of Soviet government as that of occupying "the commanding heights of the economy".

Socialism, once the workers have taken power and abolished wage slavery by taking the major means of production from the capitalist class, would - probably for generations ahead - operate through a combination of planning and market mechanisms - within the broad framework of a flexible plan.

There is a vast difference between an economy where the basic strategic decisions are made by democratic planning - which is certainly possible - and one where they are made by the crazy gyrations of the Stock Exchange.

How quickly a workers' planned economy will be able to make its planning more comprehensive, and move towards replacing the market altogether, must be an open question. We do not know now how quickly computer technology will progress.

The Communist Parties have ditched Marxism and Communism, and they should know what they're talking about.

The Stalinist rulers in the USSR have created an ideology through which their interests and their immediate political concerns were expressed in stereotyped language derived from Marxism. Marxist analysis has been no part of that ideological process.

Communist Parties like the British CP danced like performing bears to that official "Marxism". In the high Stalinist period, Moscow could say on Monday that Britain and France were democratic powers justly opposing ravenous German fascism, on Tuesday the British and French warmongering imperialism were ganging up on peace-loving Germany, and on Wednesday that it was Anglo-French democracy against German fascism again - and the CPs would jump accordingly. (They did that between September 1939 and June 1941).

The CPs justified Stalin's terror and for decades lied systematically about the reality of the USSR. When told to, they collaborated with Nazis against socialists in German in 1931-33; coordinated Nazi-like campaigning against "Jewish Trotskyists" in Mexico in 1939-41 when Hitler and Stalin were friends, organised bloody counter-revolution against the workers in Republican Spain in 1937; and so on. The list is almost endless. Later, the CPs softened up, accommodated more to the societies they lived in, and for a couple of decades past they have occasionally criticised aspects of Stalinist rule. In practical politics, the West's biggest Communist Party, the Italian CP, has long been to the right of the British Labour Party. These political whores and charlatans can speak neither for socialism nor for Marxism. The best service they can render to socialists and Marxists is to distance themselves from us, the more formally and explicitly the better. The air around us will eventually be a lot cleaner for their departure. When the Italian ex-Communist Party decides to change its name, what is collapsing is not Bolshevism or Communism but the grotesque counterfeit of Marxism and socialism shaped and moulded by Stalin, and in part sustained by Stalinism's wealth and power.

The collapse of Communism vindicates the reformist "social democratic" model of socialism.

Social democracy defined itself historically not against Stalinism but against Bolshevism. And the social democrats were wrong at every point against Bolshevism.

They either supported their own bourgeoisie, even against the revolutionary communist workers, or temporised and hesitated and thus helped the bourgeoisie to win. It was the social democrats who rescued German capitalism in 1918 and thereby isolated the Russian Revolution. By betraying socialism or dithering in countries like Germany and Italy, the social democrats played the role of historic stepfather to Stalinism.

The Bolsheviks did not lead the workers to power believing socialism could be rooted in Russia; they led the Russian workers on ahead believing the European workers would follow. The socialist leaders in the West left them in the lurch, amidst the Russian backwardness where Stalinism was eventually to grow up. Whatever about this or that error made by the early Communist International, the international Bolshevik current was entirely right against reformist social democracy.

The reformists criticisms of Stalinism have often, of course, been correct. They have been right on the same questions bourgeois democrats have been right on. The disintegration of Stalinism cannot lead logically to the conclusion that reformist social-democracy is the answer - unless we also accept that Stalinism was socialism, and that its collapse

therefore shows us that capitalism is the best we can ever hope for.

Reformist social-democracy is not a different strategy for achieving socialism. Socialism is the replacement of wage-slavery and the capitalist system built on it by a different mainspring - free cooperative self-administering labour. What has that got to do with the achievements of social democratic reform? The fight for welfare-state reforms, and the defence of existing welfare state provision, is indeed necessary for socialists. But socialists cannot stop there. And very often today the reformists do not even defend the welfare state. The fight to defend welfare state provision is often a fight against reformists in power - as it was in Britain during the last three years of the 1974-79 Labour government. The socialism of the reformist social democrats is like the smile on Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

Since the 1920s, social-democratic parties have abandoned even a verbal commitment to fighting for a socialist system defined as something radically different from capitalism. They aspire at most to modifying capitalism, with a few welfare measures. In the 1980s, social-democratic leaders in France, Spain, Australia, New Zealand and Italy have become no better than pale-pink Thatcherites.

The only model of socialism restored to its proper shape and colour by the disintegration of Stalinism and the open disavowal of socialism by the Stalinists is the only model of socialism that ever deserved the name - the fight to organise the working class as a clear conscious force, a class for itself, to break bourgeois state power and abolish wage slavery and establish a comprehensive, democratic self-rule throughout society.

More reading: "Socialists answer the New Right", AWL pamphlet.

2. Why the working class?

"Why the working class?" [abridged], by the US socialist Hal Draper

Why do socialists believe there is a special connection between their own great goal of a new society and the interests of labour, this one segment of society? Is it because we "idealize" workers as being better, or more clever, or more honest, or more courageous, or more humanitarian, than non-workers? - Isn't it rather true that the workers have time and again followed reactionary courses and leaders and have by no means shown any invariable affinity for progressive causes? ... Aren't they filled with race prejudice ... sometimes even more so than the upper classes? If it is true that workers are "naturally" pro-socialist, why is it they have made such a mess of things, voting for reactionaries and fakers and supporting the status quo? ... And so on.

Most of this type of questioning is based on simple misunderstanding of the socialist viewpoint about the working class. Socialists do not "idealize" workers in any sense whatever.

Taking them man for man, as individuals, there is no reason to argue whether workers are "better" human beings than others because they are workers. This whole approach, whether pro or con, has nothing to do with the socialist conception.

To underline this in a different way: If we try to view social issues as merely conflicts between Good People and Bad People, then surely we must say that men who insist on starving others are Bad. The present minimum wage is surely a pittance; yet opposition even to this pittance was strong among employers, especially small employers, while virtually absent among workers. Is this a tendency of employers because they are Bad Men? On the contrary, these employers are just as likely to be kind fathers, generous friends, indulgent husbands, charity-givers - not the type to deliberately run over children in the street. They act one way as individual atoms in the social fabric; they act in quite another way as part of their class collectivity.

They explain this, when they do, by saying "Business is business". This is their way of distinguishing their individual and human thoughts and role from their role as a member of the business community - that is, of their class. In the latter case, the conditions of existence and interests of "business" make out of them a social force that has little resemblance to their individual psychologies.

Like every other class or group, the working class is more than the sum of its individual atoms.

Man for man, workers are not "naturally" more pro-socialist than anyone else. It is a question of what direction they are pushed in by the conditions of their existence as a class and by their interests as workers, just as with any other group.

This indeed is one reason why so often socialist ideas tend to be initiated in a systematic way not by ideologists from the working class but by men from the "educated classes," the bourgeoisie and intellectuals, men like Marx and Engels, for example, who were not proletarians themselves - although it should be noted that the impulsions to the systematization of such ideas were coming from the working masses' struggles and conditions, not from other sections of society. Individuals were led to align themselves with the working class. If they were drawn in this direction, it was because here was the dynamic social force which they recognized as the decisive one for putting flesh and blood on ideas.

When a working class is politically and socially undeveloped it is well-nigh inevitable that its members will be filled with all sorts of backward and even reactionary notions. For example, it has often been found in the U.S. that racial intolerance decreases with amount of education: college graduates are less prejudiced, etc. Now, in general, working-class children get less schooling than upper-class offspring. So according to this pattern, workers should be far more filled with racism than the middle class. It is instructive to see where this neat pattern does and does not hold.

It holds best where labour is most poorly organized as a class, and most recently organized, and where it is organized in the least class-conscious fashion. The South is not only a

cauldron of racism but a sinkhole of union-busting and open-shopism. Toward the other end of the scale, racism is combated - as nowhere in middle-class groups - in the more militant mass-production unions that sprang from the CIO upheaval, like the Auto Workers, not to speak of the socialist movement.

Here anti-racism is not a function of school education; it is a function of class education. In many a mass-production integrated [union], the organization is often more anti-racist than the sum of its members. That is, the dynamics of class needs push it more strongly against racism, which is divisive of the class, than do the individual opinions of its members.

What we have been emphasizing is that the socialist sees no special magic in the "worker" as an atomized individual. The special "advantage" of the working class springs from inherent drives of its class position in society, its ineradicable interests as a group, its conditions of life; and this "advantage" comes into play insofar as this class organizes itself (as it is inevitably driven to do) and transforms the thinking of its individual components in the course of class experiences...

All over the world organized working-class struggle is inextricably bound up with every effort toward freedom and human emancipation. Where the working class has been defeated, democracy and progress and humanity have been defeated too. Where the forces of freedom have fought, in Hungary 1956 as in capitalist Europe, it is the working-class forces that have been in the van.

There is no other sector of society of which this or anything like it can be said - not the middle class, not the intellectuals, not the "educated classes," not the students, not the "managers," not anyone else except the organized working class, for good or ill.

What is the "advantage" which the working class possesses, willy-nilly, by virtue of the terms of its own existence under capitalism? Here in outline form are the special characteristics inherent in a social class whose individual components are (remember) no better or worse than the rest.

(1) The conditions of life of the working class lead it to organize in the first place - and most solidly as a homogeneous movement. There is, of course, one other class which rivals the working class in this respect: the capitalists themselves, whose own class-consciousness and sense of class solidarity are ever-present models for the workers. Never has a predominantly agrarian population (farmers or peasants) been able to duplicate the organizational achievements of the working class. The difference is no reflection on the individual farmer. By terms of their life, they live in atomized groups which stress self-sufficiency, separateness, reliance on individual effort; they are not thrown together in crowds and subjected to simultaneous stresses in the heat of social struggles as are workers.

Workers are taught organization not by superior intelligence or outside agitators, but by the capitalists themselves. They are organized on the assembly lines, in the factory gangs, in shifts, in work teams, in the division of labour of capitalism itself. Capitalism cannot live without "organizing" its workers, teaching them the virtues of working together, therefore of solidarity.

It teaches discipline. It enforces centralization of effort. It hammers home every day the advantages of pooled work, and the subordination of individual self-interest to the needs of a group.

It does not teach this lesson equally to all workers: it is plainer for assembly-line workers in the mass-production industries than (say) for an office secretary who takes dictation from a personal boss, who works with a boss rather than with fellow workers. This is intended only as a simple example of the different degrees of "education" which capitalism's conditions grant to different kinds of workers. This fact links up also with the social views which arise among these different strata of workers - simply on the basis of this first point: class organization.

(2) The interests of workers as a solidarized group, organized by capitalism lead them to struggle. It must be emphasized that this often takes place quite apart from the conscious desires and wishes of the labour leaders themselves. Labour leaders, risen from the ranks of lowly workers and aspiring to

be accepted as respectable and responsible members of bourgeois society, often want to substitute pleasant and friendly conferences with management for any kind of conflict. Having freed themselves from the condition of existence to which the mass of workers are condemned, they tend to become "bourgeoisified"; they want to integrate into the ruling class, or at least find as respectable a niche there as a corporation lawyer.

And indeed they could do so (so many do!) if not for the fact that it is the working class that they are standing on in order to reach so high. For the working class needs representatives in order to oppose the bosses' interests; but the bosses accept the friendship of these labour leaders only insofar as they "behave." From below these bourgeoisified bureaucrats, there always arises the pressure of mass demands, the unslakable needs of the workers which cannot be wished away with fine talk about class collaboration, the aspirations steaming up from the depths of the class, demanding "delivery of the goods."

Some bureaucrats can continue their precarious balancing-act for substantial periods, in "normal" times of class quiet particularly, as everybody knows; but even the most conservative and most bourgeoisified union leader must to some extent satisfy the class needs of his constituent base, or else. This is in the worst case, of course, and there are not a few such "worst" cases in the society-corrupted labour bureaucracy... But whether timidly or militantly, consistently or hesitantly, competently or crudely, even the conservative union leader who does not "believe" in class struggle must be its instrument, to the extent that he functions as a labour leader at all.

(3) The direction of the workers' organized struggle inevitably tends to be counter to capitalism - or, more finely, this struggle always tends to go outside the framework of capitalist institutions and ideas. Steadily the labour movement's insistence on social responsibility for all aspects of life comes in conflict with the capitalist insistence on the rights of private property. For the essence of capitalist private-property relations is that this whole area of man's life - the economic sphere - is to be withdrawn from the rule of social responsibility, and is to be ruled by the unilateral power of capital as its birthright.

Capitalism has been forced into many compromises in this respect, as is well known - mainly this one, that (a) the state is accorded power to intervene as representative of "society," provided (b) that the associated capitalist class retain full control of this intervening state. (This is the process of "statification" under capitalism in a nutshell.) But whatever the compromises, the working-class movement can never be satisfied - not even the undeveloped union-conscious labour movement of this country.

More militant unions... have raised demands like trade-union intervention in the setting of prices or in peering over the capitalists books to check their profit. In periods of intense class struggle, sit-downers have taken over the factories without a qualm over the rights of private property. The tendency of the unions in politics is to support social controls all the way down the line - over offshore oil, natural gas, prices, health insurance, etc. - in the name of social responsibility versus private property. Insofar as this support of "statification" takes place without concomitant insistence on control by a socialized democracy, this is indeed a contribution to the bureaucratization of capitalism rather than its democratization. But given a socialist framework, it is this insistence on social responsibility versus private property which is the germ of the labour movement's inherent and ineradicable "creeping socialism."

The intuition of the reactionaries is not altogether baseless in this respect, though often exaggerated and viciously directed. Even Samuel Gompers used to argue that his simple slogan of "More!" for the labour movement was a more "revolutionary" slogan than the socialists'. At any rate, it is true that, insofar as labour consistently presses for "more" out of the economic pie even when this is incompatible with capitalist needs - insofar as labour presses for "more" social responsibility and less rule by private profit - insofar as labour presses in this direction without drawing back when the capitalists yell too violently - to this extent labour drives the logic of its own existence outside the bounds of the capitalist framework, and tends to explode it.

Of course, we socialists would maintain, and experience shows, that this does not happen except when the working-class movement grows up to adopting socialist leadership and program; but all we are stressing in the present connection is that the class conditions and needs and interests of the workers drive their organized movement, in the course of its struggle, right up against the bounds of the capitalist system.

This is not true of any other group in society - only of individuals from other classes, who may decide to throw in their lot with the working-class struggle. It is enlightening, for example, to study the type of political program commonly adopted by non-working-class parties which set out to express protest: radical peasant parties, or urban middle-class reform parties, or farmers parties in the U.S.

Peasant parties most typically stop well short of proposing the abolition of capitalism, confining themselves to proposals for improving their class's lot in ways compatible with the rule of private property; for the peasant is a very tenacious small private-property holder himself and does not easily see beyond this class limitation. In a different kind of case, as in the Nazi appeal to middle-class elements, a kind of pseudo-anti-capitalism may be patched up by directing slogans against bank capital as distinct from "good" productive capital; or, as in the case of Henry Wallace's program, supporting "progressive" capitalists against "reactionary" capitalists.

But what is noteworthy is this: only in the case of working-class parties, all over the world, does the program and goal of the movement turn fast or slow toward a basic assault on the fundamentals of the capitalist system itself...

(4) The conditions and interests of the working class not only push it toward organized struggle against capitalism, but impel it toward a courage and boldness and militancy which are well-nigh unique to it, at critical moments of struggle when these qualities are called for.

Now at first blush this may seem to be in contradiction with our earlier statements that workers are not necessarily personally "better" in any sense. Are we now saying that workers are braver and bolder, etc.? Only with the same qualifications previously explained. We are talking about their potentialities as an organized class - plus, perhaps, for many individuals whatever carryover takes place from organized behaviour to personal behaviour as a result of education in struggle and conditioning in life situations. But it is the class behaviour we are interested in.

Stereotypes may be bad, but class "stereotypes" contain more than a kernel of truth. Thus, there is the "Timid Professor." We have known many professors who were not at all personally timid: yet the sweeping stereotype contains a truth about the impact of academic life and its pressures upon the social psychology of professors.

In his *White Collar*, a study of the middle class in America, C. Wright Mills (a non-timid professor) drew a generalized picture of the new middle class which is relevant here. They are the "rearguarders," says Mills, waiting for someone else to move. As a group they have no cohesion, but are on sale to the highest bidder or the most likely winner. "They have no steady discontent or responsible struggle with the conditions of their lives. For discontent of this sort requires imagination, even a little vision; and responsible struggle requires leadership." As individuals with private positions (Mills continues) "they hesitate, confused and vacillating in their opinions, unfocused and discontinuous in their actions... they have no targets on which to focus their worry and distrust. They may be politically irritable, but they have no political passion. They are a chorus, too afraid to grumble, too hysterical in their applause." In the short run, he concludes, they follow the panicky way of prestige; in the long run they follow the ways of power. This scathing portrait is a picture of a social class, not an insult directed against middle-class individuals, just as we have been discussing the social potentialities of a class and not "idealizing" workers.

But surely, realizing the truth of this portrait, one can see why middle-class groups simply cannot work up the dynamic drive which is necessary before one can be "courageous and bold and militant." Take a simple model: A factory worker on a picket line can and often does abuse entering scabs and may even have to be restrained from physical attack; he is not constrained by notions of bourgeois respectability, even

though he may be quite "respectable" and "bourgeois" on normal occasions. He is, in fact, more alienated from class society, no matter how he thinks, or how he thinks he thinks. But now go along the scale of workers up (or down) toward more and more "respectable" employees to... college professors. And try to imagine them yelling at scabs on a picket line.

We use this example only as a handy and visualizable token of what is involved: the dynamism of the class in its organized struggle for "something better." History provides a better record - the record of the working class in far more crucial situations than mere strikes: records of the heights of valour and self-sacrifice that have been reached by unknown workers, not named heroes, in revolutionary struggles. But these things are not visualizable for the average American, who after all is himself the product of a society dominated by middle-class mediocrity.

(5) Finally, we are talking about the organized and militant anti-capitalist struggle of the only class which has the social power and weight to abolish the old order and build a new society. Whatever a historian may say about the role of force in revolutions, it is a Marxist principle that social revolutions are not made by bullets. This is a caricature of socialist revolution spread by certain types of policemen and certain types of professors. The Marxist socialist believes that when the working class, and its associated allies from other sections of the people, are in their massed majority ready for the abolition of capitalism, it is their social power which will determine the result in the last analysis.

The social power of the class depends not only on its numbers. It depends also on its homogeneity and organizability, as we have discussed - its striking power. It also depends on the indispensability of the services which it performs in keeping the society's work going.

No other class has its hands so closely on the basic work without which the system grinds to a halt. Not a wheel can turn without them. No other class can precipitate a social crisis by the deliberate decision of its organized cadres as in a large-scale strike. When the working class goes into battle, all of society is embroiled, for all depends on it. Every time the working class stirs, the rest of society quivers. Yet there is debate over its "special role."

After all of the above, there is still a deeper "why" to be asked, a question that goes behind all of the points we have made up to now. Within the confines of this article we can only point to it.

In the last analysis, the "rearguard" character of the middle classes, which Mills pointed to, reflects their political and social blind-alley. They cannot give society a lead because there is no social program which effectively corresponds to the special interests of the middle classes. From the conditions of their existence arises no pointer to a way out for all society.

In contrast, the working class, as the bottom layer of all classes, cannot even stir without pointing to a program, even when it itself rejects it: the abolition of capitalism, its class antagonist, and the assumption of social responsibility by the people democratically organized, regardless of private profit. At bottom, it is because the interests of the working class, implicit in its struggles, point a program for a basic transformation and reconstruction of society, that this class is pushed to take a vanguard role in every struggle for freedom and emancipation.

We need hardly spend much space affirming how cognizant we are of how often the working class and its interests have been deceived and betrayed by its enemies and false friends. The history of capitalism, from one point of view, is nothing but a history of continued duping of the working class. In fact, deception of the working class is one of the most important conditions for the maintenance of capitalism or any other exploitive system...

It is a downright irrelevancy in this connection for critics to tell us, as they do regularly, that because the working class has so long been deceived and betrayed, we must conclude that it is hopeless. We point out only this: It is the working class that it is crucial for reaction to deceive, not the middle classes or any of the "rearguarders."

The socialist revolution, once observed Rosa Luxemburg, is a war in which there are necessarily a continuous series of "defeats" followed by only one victory. Nothing can be

guaranteed, of course, except the honour and dignity of fighting for a new and better world, rather than the vileness of adapting one's mind and heart to a vile one. We guarantee to no one that the working class is predestined to "behave according to our blueprints" even if we sit by in interested passivity to see whether it carries out its "mission." We offer only a road of struggle and a choice of allies in the only war worth fighting, the battle for a socialist democracy against the rival world blocs of war and exploitation.

More reading: Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto.

3. The revolutionary party

Document adopted by an AWL conference in 1983

Section I

The working class is unique among all revolutionary classes in that it remains a class of wage slaves until, by seizing political power and the means of production, it makes the decisive step towards emancipating itself. Contrast the classic bourgeois experience. The bourgeoisie develops historically within feudalism and neo-feudalism as part of a division of labour within society which allows the bourgeoisie to own a segment of the means of production, and itself to be an exploiter, long before it takes political power in society. It thus builds up wealth, culture, systems of ideas to express its interests and view of the world. It, so to speak, ripens organically, and the taking of power, the sloughing off of the old system - even if accompanied by violence - represents the natural maturing and growth of a class already in possession of important means of production and a share of the surplus.

The working class remains an exploited class - in more developed capitalist countries, the basic exploited class - up to the death knell of bourgeois social and political rule. It does not accumulate leisure, wealth or its own distinct culture. Its natural condition as a raw social category is to be dominated by the ideas of the ruling class. Its own natural and spontaneous self-defence and bargaining within the capitalist system - trade unionism - binds it ideologically to the ruling class, to bargaining within the system and in times of crisis taking responsibility for it. Its natural tribunes and intellectuals are the trade union bureaucracy. On the face of it the proletariat might be doomed to go through history as a subordinate class. Marx and Engels themselves wrote: "The ruling ideology in every society is the ideology of the ruling class."

In fact the working class becomes a revolutionary class, conscious of its own historic class interests and possibilities in the following way, according to the views of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. A set of social theories is created and developed on the basis of bourgeois social science (economics, philosophy, history) which uncovers the necessary logic of the historic evolution of capitalism towards the completion of its organic tendency to become more and more social and monopolistic - by way of common ownership and the abolition of capitalism. The proletariat is located as the protagonist in this stage of history. Marx analysed and uncovered the modes of economic exploitation of the proletariat within the formal (and seemingly fundamental and real) equality of capitalist exchange relationships. In short, a segment of the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie comes over to the proletarian wage slaves.

The proletariat itself evolves as a class through the stage of primitive elemental revolt at being driven into the capitalist industrial hell-holes to the stage of organising itself in combinations to get fair wages, and then to the stage of banding itself together for political objectives. It develops various political traditions. In Britain the world's first mass working class movement grouped around the demand for the franchise, which meant, in the conditions then, the right to take power. In France a tradition of communist insurrection, involving sections of the proletariat, developed. It was rooted in the left wing of the great bourgeois revolution. A tradition, experience and theory of working class politics developed. Marx and Engels put a floor of a theory of the evolution of society (evolution including revolutions at turning points) under the once utopian aspirations of the early working class movements.

These developments in the course of the experience of the 1st, 2nd, and early 3rd International, produced the following solution to the problem posed by the peculiarities of the proletariat as a class. Instead of control of a portion of the means of production, the working class develops its own organisations. Within these organisations a struggle takes place between the ideas that represent the historic interests of the proletariat - Marxism - and the ideas of the bourgeoisie. This struggle occurs even where Marxists are the founders of the labour movement.

The working class is everywhere forced by its conditions under capitalism to struggle for the basics of life. This struggle tends to break down the power of the ideology of the ruling class. At its highest point, in times of tumult, it can escalate to mobilisations involving the class as a class, and to a spontaneous socialist consciousness capable of being linked through the work of a pre-organised and educated vanguard with a scientific strategy.

The revolutionary party is the protagonist in the work of struggling to emancipate the proletariat ideologically and to organise it for its own interests as a class for itself.

The revolutionary party has as its central task to achieve the political and organisational independence of the working class. It needs the organisational sinews of a body of socialists organised for combat - all the way from the struggle on a trade union level at the point of production through to organising an armed insurrection. But it is centrally, irreplaceably, and uniquely, the carrier of a system of ideas, a world outlook, a socialist programme, a method of analysing the world and society which serves the interests of the working class.

Only the conscious struggles of the living Marxists, reacting specifically and concretely, focusing and redefining Marxism, can make of Marxism a consistently revolutionary instrument for the working class, for separating out and maintaining scientific consciousness in the revolutionary working class. If there is no irreplaceable function of this type for the Leninist party, then there is no need for our party. Were it not for the ideological task of the revolutionary party of the working class, were it not for the peculiar problems of the proletariat in that respect, then the working class could be expected to improvise the necessary organisation for the seizure of power, as the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie have done. If all the proletariat needs is an organisation, then the tightly knit revolutionary organisations are just sects, premature and almost certainly irrelevant.

If what the proletariat needs is a machine, then it does not need to have its militants labouring for decades in advance of the maturation of the situation where it requires an uprising.

The consequences of this are that our party is in the first place and irreplaceably a selection of politically conscious militants committed to activity in the struggles for the party's goals. It must thus be selected on the basis of a minimum of political education and knowledge, and commitment.

If it is to be a party which is a living organisation in the class struggle, then it must try to integrate itself in all the areas of the class struggle. If it is to be a party whose deliberations correspond to experience in the struggles of the working class, then it has to be a party of activists - of people with a minimum of commitment to the struggle. That commitment, under the direct control of the party, must be a condition of participation in the party's deliberations - that is, of full membership.

It has to be a party of the proletariat but it is not identical to the proletariat: it must be capable of standing apart, against the proletariat and of struggling within it when the mass of the working class is under the influence or domination of the ruling class. Its proletarian political character depends in the first place on its programme and its historical relation to the proletariat; a proletarian character in the crude sociological sense is not sufficient and in some epochs may not be possible.

The proletarian party without a mass working class membership organised at the point of production and deploying the power which the working class potentially has at the point of production, is impotent; proletarian militancy at the point of production devoid of the historical programme of working class socialism and perspectives for achieving it, is sterile and ultimately impotent.

The party is the vanguard of the class - a selection of the most militant, educated, devoted persons in the working class and among its sympathisers and protagonists from other social strata. Within the party a similar unevenness in education, experience, commitment to that which characterises the relationship between the party as a whole and the class emerges between leading layers and the rest of the organisation. Certain organisational structures flow from this: the party, when it chooses to, cuts itself off from the class, though ultimately it is subject to the class and can

have no interests separate from it and can achieve none of its objectives without its activity. The National Committee and its subsidiaries within the party cut themselves off from the party where necessary to deliberate and discuss - though ultimately they must submit to the control of the party and can do nothing without it. There is a whole literature on these questions.

Section II

To favour a looser structure for the sake of being able to recruit workers is short sighted. Loose standards of discipline in a revolutionary organisation make it uninhabitable for workers.

A regime of hyper-activism and "permanent emergency", in the Healyite style, is equally destructive. But the answer is a regime where discipline and reliability are demanded and ensured on the basis of education and rational political perspectives.

Where there is no adequate education, and no system of generally enforced and understood norms, discipline becomes an arbitrary and subjective matter. Effort is wasted: arrangements miscarry, meetings are chaotic, some comrades are overworked trying to cope with the mess, others are under-utilised. Inefficiency leads to more waste of effort through recriminations. Such a regime is uninhabitable for most workers.

Section III

Youth work is a crucial area for recruitment. We cannot confine ourselves to the established activists. We must be constantly looking to new struggles and new activists coming from them.

This demands a disciplined organisation. Working class youth new to revolutionary politics, eager to learn, eager to get things done quickly, are the first to be repelled by a regime of bickering, routinism and muddling along. It requires a proper system of education of contacts and members: otherwise the energy of revolutionary youth can quickly spend itself in demoralisation.

Section IV

To recruit we need contact work - that is, intensive discussion and education work with contacts to convince them. Starting from a perhaps limited area of agreement on practical work or agreement with a AWL position, we have to work to convince contacts of what we are trying to do, and, on the basis of this, of the irreplaceability of the AWL and the need for them to join it and take up the responsibility of one of its militants to build it.

The devotion of the militant to the party is the product of such a conviction. Sects achieve it by way of a paranoid counterposition of themselves to the rest of the world and, in particular, to the rest of the labour movement and the left. It is achieved in a serious organisation by way of the education of the militants in a revolutionary outlook and psychology, and a devotion to the organisation as the embodiment of this; instead of the sticky substances of sectarianism you get rational devotion. This presupposes an educated cadre which collectively applies the standards of minimum activity, comradely relations in discussion etc.

Section V

Antonio Gramsci pointed out that the Catholic Church does not maintain its ideological unity by bringing the simple people up to the level of the intellectuals (the Church does not even set itself this task!), but by an iron discipline over the intellectuals so that they do not pass beyond certain limits of differentiation... "Marxism is antithetical to this Catholic position: Marxism does not seek to sustain the simple people in their primitive philosophy of common sense but, instead, lead them to a higher view of life. If it asserts the need for contact between the intellectuals and the simple people it does so, not in order to limit scientific activity and maintain unity at the low level of the masses but precisely in order to build an intellectual-moral bloc which makes politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses and not only of a few groups of intellectuals...(This) means working to produce cadres of intellectuals of a new type who arise directly from the masses though remaining in contact with them and becoming the stay of the corset."

Thus Marxists aim to build a party in which the division between workers and "intellectuals" is broken down by workers becoming "intellectuals" and by "intellectuals" from non-worker backgrounds being tied by party discipline to activity in the working class.

More reading: Workers' Liberty 52, special issue on left unity, which includes a short summary of the history of the AWL and the left, and further exposition of the role of a revolutionary organisation in the labour movement.

4. Consistent democracy and equal rights for all nations

Israel-Palestine as a key example of the Marxist approach to national conflicts, national rights, nationalism, and consistent democracy.

Marxism and the Jewish Question

“The socialist revolution is the only realistic solution of the Jewish question. If the Jewish workers and peasants asked for an independent state, good — but they didn’t get it under Great Britain. But if they want it, the proletariat will give it. We are not in favour, but only the victorious working class can give it to them.”

Leon Trotsky, 15 June 1940*

It is one of the ironies of politics. Trotskyism, in most of its post-Trotsky mutations, embraces an “anti-Zionism” that in practice is nothing less than a comprehensive hostility to most Jews alive; yet Trotskyism in Trotsky’s time and after was a movement in which people of Jewish origin played — and play — a massive part.

It is not right-wing myth, but plain truth, that Jews have always played a very large part in the socialist and communist movement. Lenin once commented on the splendid vanguard role of Jews in our movement. Karl Kautsky, ceremoniously addressing a small Yiddish socialist journal in Britain early in the 20th century, urged Jewish socialists to work at bringing overall socialist theory, revolutionary determination, and an internationalist outlook to the British labour movement — to be the leaven that they, indeed, often were. The role Jews played had nothing to do with innate Jewish characteristics, but with the historical and social experiences of the Jews.

In the first half of the 20th century, Jewish workers lived in a world that stigmatised, scapegoated and persecuted Jews. The pervasive Christian culture branded them in age-old sectarian terms as the accursed people, the God-killers who had rejected and then crucified Christ; the newer nationalist culture that increasingly gripped Europe’s sundered nations before and after the First World War branded them as “aliens”; its racist sub-culture depicted them as human vermin fit only for extirpation.

For decades the hounding and harring would continue, now abating, now rising to a crescendo, until it would attain the mad paroxysm of the Holocaust, in which six million Jews, two-thirds of European Jewry, were systematically slaughtered in factories specially designed for the mass extermination of human beings.

In these conditions many Jews had the dearly-paid-for privilege of being able to see capitalism whole, in all its raw cannibalistic savagery, without the layered masks of conventional civilisation. So, naturally, they came to make up a large part of the socialist army gathering its forces for an attempt to remake the world and create a civilisation in which there would no longer be class, or race, or national oppression.

But while some Jews became revolutionary socialists, other Jews became nationalists, committed to building up a Jewish nation in Palestine, where at the start of the 20th century resident Jews were still only a small community. Some nationalists — the most effective ones, in fact — were also socialists. Rivalry between “assimilationist” Jewish socialists and Zionists was often bitter, but the demonisation of Zionism that characterises much of modern Trotskyism was unknown. Zionists fought alongside the Red Army to defend the workers’ republic after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In Palestine, the tiny Communist Party emerged from the left-Zionist Poale Zion. Arguing for international socialist revolution as the road to salvation for the Jews, and against the Zionist project, the communists nevertheless had an approach very different from the latter-day pseudo-left demonisation of Zionism.

Should as many Jews as wanted to go there be allowed into Palestine? Of course they should, answered the Communist International and the Communist Party of Palestine, advocating Jewish-Arab unity within Palestine and opposition to British imperialism there.

The shift to modern left “anti-Zionism” emerged as part of the Stalinisation of the Communist International. When in 1929 Palestinian Arab chauvinists mounted widespread attacks on Jews — all the teachers and students at a religious college in Hebron, for example, were massacred — the Communist Party of Palestine at first called the attacks by their proper name, pogrom, as did the Russian and Comintern press. Then the international Stalinist leaders decided that it was an “anti-imperialist uprising”, and that became the Comintern “line”.

In fact, one of the Arabs’ mobilising slogans was “The British are with us” (Britain then ruled Palestine, and British forces had clashed with Jews). But this was the “Third Period” of Stalinism. Everything — even a pogrom — could be and was construed as evidence that revolution was imminent.

After 1930, a Comintern drive “Arabised” the heavily-Jewish CP. The leaders of the party had to be Arab, and the Jewish majority were thus second-class members. Breaking with the old Communist International policy, the CP became bitter enemies of Jewish immigration. German refugees from Hitler were met off the boat by German-speaking Jewish CPers with leaflets telling them to go back home.

By 1936, when a serious Arab movement began in Syria and Palestine, this time having some anti-imperialist content, but in Palestine being essentially a pogrom movement against Jewish civilians, the CP was an active part of the campaign. Jewish CPers were assigned to plant bombs among Jews. For example, as the American CPer Malech Epstein discovered when he visited Palestine, young Jewish CPers were assigned to blow up the headquarters of the Jewish trade union movement, the Histadrut.

Refusal to go with Stalinism on this question was one of the characteristics of Trotskyism while Trotsky lived. Trotskyists rejected the malignant fantasies of 1929 (for example, in an article by Max Shachtman in the US Militant, October 1929). Their comments on 1936 did not pretend that it was purely an anti-imperialist movement, or that there could be anything “progressive” about Arab-Muslim chauvinism against Palestinian Jews. After Epstein broke with the Stalinists, the Militant reported, as evidence of the degeneracy of Stalinism, his account of what he had seen in Palestine of the CP’s collaboration with Arab nationalists in terrorist attacks on Jews.

In this they reflected Trotsky himself. Throughout the 1930s Trotsky stood as the representative of the old attitude — support for Jewish rights, including the right to migrate to Palestine, while rejecting the Zionist project — and of sympathetic awareness that the world was closing in murderously on the Jews.

Born in October 1879, and murdered by a Stalinist agent in August 1940, Trotsky lived a life which almost exactly spanned the period from the beginning of systematic pogroms in Russia (1881) to the eve of the Holocaust. A Ukrainian Jew, he saw the westward migration of millions of Jews, stirred up by the Russian pogroms, across Europe and to the USA. He saw the growth of Jewish self-awareness in Europe in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.

Always an opponent of the Zionist movement, he warned in the ‘30s that Palestine could turn out to be a giant ghetto in which the Jews who had fled there might be trapped and massacred.

Yet it is plain from his writings in the 1930s that the experience of anti-semitism in the 20th century, not only in Nazi Germany and Poland, but also in the USSR under Stalin, radically changed Trotsky’s views.

By the end of his life he believed that the persecution of the Jews and the effect of that persecution on the consciousness of the Jewish people had made the creation of some sort of Jewish state an inescapable necessity. Rightly, he rejected the idea that the Palestine programme of the Zionists could provide an immediate refuge for Jews facing the Hitlerites. The only conceivable immediate solution was socialist revolution. But he viewed the demand for a separate Jewish state with growing sympathy. He asserted more than once that after a socialist revolution the Jews would have to have a state of their own if they still wanted it; and it is plain that he believed that they would.

II

In 1932-3, Trotsky discussed the "Jewish problem" with *Class Struggle*, an American Marxist publication. He was asked: "What is your attitude to Palestine as a possible Jewish 'homeland' and about a land for the Jews generally? Don't you believe that the anti-semitism of German fascism compels a different attitude to the Jewish question on the part of Communists?"

Trotsky replied: "I do not know whether Jewry will be built up again as a nation. However, there can be no doubt that the material conditions for the existence of Jewry as an independent nation could be brought about only by the proletarian revolution. There is no such thing on this planet as the idea that one has more claim to land than another.

"The establishment of a territorial base for Jewry in Palestine or any other country is conceivable only with the migration of large human masses. Only a triumphant socialism can take upon itself such tasks. It can be foreseen that it may take place either on the basis of a mutual understanding, or with the aid of a kind of international proletarian tribunal which should take up this question and solve it."

In the context of the debates of that time, Trotsky's statement "there is no such thing as the idea that one has more claim to land than another" was, I think, plain support for the old Communist International policy for the right of Jews to enter Palestine, in opposition to the new policy of the Comintern after 1929.

In a January 1937 interview, Trotsky explained: "During my youth I rather leaned towards the prognosis that the Jews of different countries would be assimilated and that the Jewish question would thus disappear in a quasi-automatic fashion.

"The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this perspective. Decaying capitalism has everywhere swung over to and exacerbated nationalism, one part of which is anti-semitism. The Jewish question has loomed largest in the most highly developed capitalist country of Europe, in Germany.

"On the other hand the Jews of different countries have created their press and developed the Yiddish language as an instrument adapted to modern culture. One must therefore reckon with the fact that the Jewish nation will maintain itself for an entire epoch to come.

"Now the nation cannot normally exist without a common territory. Zionism springs from this very idea. But the facts of every passing day demonstrate to us that Zionism is incapable of resolving the Jewish question. The conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine acquires a more and more tragic and more and more menacing character.

"I do not at all believe that the Jewish question can be resolved within the framework of rotting capitalism and under the control of British imperialism.

"And how, you ask me, can socialism solve this question? On this point I can but offer hypotheses.

"Once socialism has become master of our planet or at least of its most important sections, it will have unimaginable

resources in all domains. Human history has witnessed the epoch of great migrations on the basis of barbarism. Socialism will open the possibility of great migrations on the basis of the most developed technique and culture.

"It goes without saying that what is here involved is not compulsory displacements, that is, the creation of new ghettos for certain nationalities, but displacements freely consented to, or rather demanded by, certain nationalities or parts of nationalities.

"The dispersed Jews who would want to be reassembled in the same community will find a sufficiently extensive and rich spot under the sun. The same possibility will be opened for the Arabs, as for all other scattered nations."

In subsequent history, the tragic conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine would not be adjudicated by a benign proletarian socialist tribunal but by the United Nations which the victors of World War 2 set up. And it would be worked out by way of a series of Jewish-Arab wars.

In an article on anti-semitism in Stalin's USSR (22 February 1937) Trotsky developed his reappraisal of the Jewish question in the light of early 20th century experience. He speaks of a future socialist version of the Zionist "methods of solving the Jewish question", methods "which under decaying capitalism have a utopian and reactionary character".

"Are we not correct in saying that a world socialist federation would have to make possible the creation of a 'Birobidjan' [an equivalent of the official, though in fact token, autonomous Jewish republic within the USSR] for Jews who wish to have their own autonomous republic as the arena for their own culture?"

One of the most maliciously stupid ideas put into circulation by the Stalinists and adopted by post-Trotsky "Trotskyists" is that because Zionism proposed to create a Jewish nation-state it thereby "capitulated" to Nazi and other anti-semitism. If so, then evidently Trotsky too was guilty of this "capitulation".

Of course it is impossible to know in detail what Trotsky would have said once the Jewish state was established in 1948. It is plain however that there would have been no place in his thought for the anti-Zionist demonology and international conspiracy theories which dominate much of the left today.

Trotsky's very loose use of the term nation to describe the Jews of the world may perhaps be explained as an unconscious by-product of his acceptance of the need for a territorial solution to the problem of the people "without a land" — the very idea he had scoffed at and fought against for most of his life as a reactionary utopia. He still says it is a reactionary utopia and a mirage in its bourgeois Zionist form. But now he counterposes to it not assimilation but a socialist version of the Zionist territorial state-creating solution.

What, for Trotsky, makes the Zionist project utopian and reactionary? The methods which flow inescapably from pursuing that project under capitalism and British rule in Palestine. The unpostponable task, for Trotsky, is the overthrow of capitalism, not a project for a tranquil corner in which to gather in the Jews and build a nation. With tragic accuracy, he says that such a project cannot save the Jews in the time available. After the socialist revolution, however, the Jewish people will need and be entitled to "a Birobidjan" because it is no longer reasonable to look to assimilation alone as the solution, or to have anything other than a supportive sympathy for Jews who cannot believe in assimilation. Trotsky finishes the February 1937 article: "How could any Marxist, or even any consistent democrat, object to that?"

On the left, it was not Marxists and consistent democrats who developed the ideological objection to it, but Stalinists and, after Trotsky's death, those "Trotskyists" who from

incoherent anti-imperialist zeal absorbed Stalinistic politics on the question.

III

But the revolutionary workers were defeated time after time throughout the 1920s and 30s — in the USSR, Germany, Austria, France, Spain. The socialist revolution did not happen — not in time to save Europe's massacred Jews, to save the sixty million people who died in the Second World War, or to prevent Germany being pulverised and partitioned and having 13 million of its people driven out of Eastern Europe. Not in time to stop the atom-bombing of Japan, or the expansion of Stalinist totalitarianism to engulf ninety million people in Eastern Europe.

And history did not stop. The Zionists continued with their project and carved out the state of Israel in tragic conflict with the Palestinian Arabs.

The "reactionary utopian" solution to the Jewish question received an immense boost from the events of the world war. The need which Trotsky reluctantly came to realise for a Jewish national territory as part of the solution to the Jewish question was now felt with immense urgency by the majority of Jews. And it was made reality not in a benign socialist world after a workers' revolution, but in a world dominated by imperialism and Stalinism, realised by way of bitter communal and national conflict and within the framework of a Zionist-Kremlin, and then a Zionist-US, alliance.

The Jewish state was established in a world which was not socialist but still capitalist dog-eat-dog. In Palestine it was not mainly the Palestinian Jews who decreed that. In 1948, the territory allotted to the Jews by the United Nations was attacked by the armies of the surrounding Arab states, armies under the control of seconded officers of the British imperialist army. If the Jews had lost, they would have been massacred, driven out, or put back under the control of a Britain returning as "peacekeeper". The Jews won the 1948 war, and three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs fled or were driven out. About 600,000 Jews were driven out of Arab countries in following years, though they would be assimilated in Israel, not, like the Palestinian Arabs, allowed to languish in refugee camps and even legally forbidden to work by some Arab governments..

That is how things worked in a world still dominated by capitalism and Stalinism.

IV

On this, as on other questions, Trotsky's would-be followers did not after his death pursue his line of thought. In the 1940s, they were caught up in a world view akin to that of the Stalinism of the "Third Period" (1929-33) — the world socialist revolution was on the immediate agenda, and everything had to be interpreted as part of it. Among the forces seen as part of the great sweep of Revolution and anti-imperialism was rising Arab nationalism — the "Arab Revolution".

Trotskyists stated plainly in documents of the 1940s (by Tony Cliff, for example) that anything other than support for the "Arab Revolution" against the Jews of Palestine/Israel would make it impossible for them to "integrate" into that "sector of the world revolution". There was dissent.

Some French Trotskyists backed the Zionist guerrillas against Britain. The Shachtman group, the Workers Party USA, resisted the "Third Period" delusions, including the delusion that the expansion of Stalinism was a deformed variant of working-class revolution. They rejected the vicarious Arab chauvinism of the "orthodox Trotskyists".

The Mandel-Pablo core group of "orthodox Trotskyism" came out for rights for Jews within a Middle East federation.

But the overall drift was towards the operation of gross double standards as between Jews and Arabs, and a

comprehensive demonisation of Israel and of Zionism. As a rule, "Trotskyists" were vicarious Arab nationalists.*

In the 1940s the "orthodox Trotskyists" were not entirely uninhibited in their "Arabism". They did not back the Arabs in the 1948 war. For 19 years after 1948 the Trotskyist attitude generally included a de facto acceptance of Israel. For most of them that changed after the Six Day War of June 1967. After the Six Day War Israel became an often very brutal colonial power ruling a large Arab population in the West Bank and Gaza. It was the time of the great movement against the Vietnam war and imperialism. Most of the "orthodox Trotskyists" drifted towards a root-and-branch "anti-Zionism" — that is towards the politics of post-1929 Stalinism on this question.

And worse. Now anti-Zionism meant not advocacy of Jewish-Arab working-class unity and opposition to the Zionist project of a Jewish state, but support for the destruction of the existing Jewish state in the name of Arab or Palestinian "liberation". It meant siding with murderous, repressive Arab states against Israel. The "Trotskyist" movement had moved a long way from what it had been even in the 1940s. As someone once observed of religious denominations: sects change their doctrines more readily than their names.

"Zionism" — meaning anything other than support for the destruction of Israel — came to carry the same odium as "racism" and "fascism". Israel ("Zionism") came to be seen as the arch-representative of imperialism. Real history was faded out. "Anti-Zionism" was used as a bludgeon to intimidate and stigmatise and prevent thought about the issue.

V

The horrors of Nazism had driven the great majority of surviving Jews behind the Zionist project. And in response to the establishment of Israel views came to be established on the pseudo-left which pictured the Zionists as powerful conspirators pulling strings in the era of Hitler, and sharing in responsibility for the Holocaust. The idea of a Zionist-Nazi conspiracy originated in the Soviet Union in Stalin's last years, but in the 1970s acceptance of it came to be a hallmark of most of those who thought they were disciples of Trotsky.

You cannot get a more crazy version of the "world Jewish conspiracy" propounded by the old anti-semites than the one which sees "the Zionists" manipulating for their own ends the Holocaust, that is, manipulating Hitler and the Nazis even as they killed six million Jews. A clear and logical version of these ideas would have to characterise Hitler as a blind tool of the "Jewish conspiracy". Yet such ideas, half-hidden but implicit, are articles of faith in wide layers of the Trotskyist left. They are expounded in erudite, albeit crazy, books by Lenni Brenner and in the original version of Jim Allen's play *Perdition* (the book version has been bowdlerised).

The German socialist leader August Bebel once memorably defined left-wing anti-semitism as "the socialism of idiots". Much of the Trotskyist movement has fallen into an anti-Zionism which is "the anti-imperialism of idiots". In fact, into anti-semitism. Its stance is not, of course, racist, but it means comprehensive hostility to most Jews alive, in whose post-Holocaust Jewish identity Israel has a central place.

All of this has nothing to do with Trotsky's politics, or with his developing position on the question. It is "the Trotskyism of idiots"! Bits and pieces of Trotskyist politics are deployed one-sidedly and used in the service of vicarious Arab chauvinism.

VI

Internationalism is essential to socialism. It goes without saying that socialists are against Israeli nationalism, and that we condemn Jewish chauvinism and all its manifestations. But Israeli nationalism and Jewish chauvinism do not exist in

a vacuum. They are part of a network of interlocking nationalisms, chauvinisms and national antagonisms. They are confronted by Arab and Muslim chauvinism which has taken as its goal the destruction of the Israeli state and nation. Any fair account of Israeli nationalism would therefore put it in its framework. The demurrals and condemnations would take account of the counter-nationalisms and condemn them also.

Yet the typical post-Trotsky Trotskyist's conclusion, from sometimes justified complaints about Israeli nationalism and chauvinism, is that the Israeli Jewish nation itself does not have a right to exist. No such conclusions are made from the facts of Arab or Palestinian — or any other — nationalism or chauvinism.

The "internationalism" is unequal because the condemnation of Israel is absolute and mortal, while condemnation of Arab chauvinism when it is forthcoming at all is only a moral stricture, and a series of admonitions. Support for Arab (or Palestinian) rights is not made conditional on them not being nationalists or chauvinists. They are the legitimate nation. The Jewish is the illegitimate nation. One lot of nationalists have positive rights; the other, only the right to surrender and submit to the nationalism and religious chauvinism of others.

For a long time, the PLO's old commitment to a "secular democratic Palestine" was used as a mechanism for disguising the double standards involved here. The Trotskyists accepted the disguise of one of the competing nationalisms.

For, in fact, the call for a "secular democratic Palestine" was a disguised and mystified version of the demand for an Arab Palestine — an Arab state in which Jews would have religious but not national rights; and its prerequisite was that the Israeli nation and the Israeli state should disarm and surrender to their enemies.

It was in fact inconceivable that they would do that. Therefore? Therefore it was reasonable for the Arab states to enforce it in the only way possible — by conquering Israel. The reasonable proposal with its promise of a just solution in practice became a rationale for supporting someone like Saddam Hussein in the attempt to conquer Israel.

For those Marxists who went along with this, internationalism became a vehicle for expressing an Arab-nationalist ultimatum against the Israeli Jews: be "internationalist", accept being a religious minority in an Arab Palestine, dismantle your national state, or deserve to be conquered!

That is not working-class internationalism, but pseudo-internationalism in the service of nationalism. A mystified political programme which implied the bloody subjugation or destruction of an entire nation, dressed up and presented in terms of anti-nationalism and anti-racism: such is the measure of the political decay of post-Trotsky Trotskyism!

And for what reason were Israeli Jews to be denied the rights of a nation? Because, as a national minority in Palestine in the 1940s, they fought and won, rather than bowing down to Arab nationalism, which would have subjugated them and driven them out if it could. No Trotskyist supports the collective mass "return" of the 13 million Germans driven out of Eastern Europe after World War Two.

The only Trotsky-consistent programme for the Israel/Palestine conflict is one that advocates Jewish-Arab working-class unity, defending both Israel's right to exist and the right of the Palestinian Arabs to have an independent state in the area where they are the majority — two states for the two peoples.

The writings of Trotsky are a blast of clean air through the swamps of hysteria, ultra-left fantasy, vicarious Arab chauvinism — and, I think, elements of age-old anti-semitism, recycled as "anti-Zionism" — into which much of post-Trotsky Trotskyism has disintegrated on this question.

More reading: the rest of the AWL "Two Nations, Two States" pamphlet; the AWL pamphlet, "A Workers' Guide to Ireland".

5. Democracy, class struggle, reform and revolution

What is class struggle? How are reforms won? Can socialism come through Parliament? Can the workers make a revolution? How?

Pamphlet: Socialism and Democracy

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The following articles on democracy, revolution, socialism and Stalinism were written by John O'Mahony in 1982 as a reply to a series of articles in the *Observer* by Michael Foot, then leader of the Labour Party.

Much was different in British politics then. The leaders of the Labour Party still promised to advance us towards socialism, saying only that their cautious parliamentary method was better than the militancy of the "extra-parliamentary left".

They still felt an obligation to debate politically with the activist left, instead of relying on Tory anti-union laws and authoritarian reworkings of Labour Party structure to repress us, as Blair does. Foot himself some years later, after he had retired from the Labour Party leadership, would debate the issues face-to-face with John O'Mahony in an AWL-organised public meeting at Conway Hall, London.

In 1982 there was an active Marxist-influenced left inside the Labour Party, only just starting to recede from its high tide in 1981. The Labour Party's debates and structures have shrivelled drastically since then, and most of those leftists, the AWL among them, now devote most of their efforts to activity outside them.

But the essentials of the debate are still relevant. Some of it - the reply to Foot's attempt to damn revolutionary socialism by equating it with Stalinism - is even more relevant now, in the aftermath of the collapse and radical discrediting of Stalinism - than it was in 1982.

Introduction

The cry "For Parliamentary Democracy: the Trotskyists are the enemy of democracy" is - perhaps predictably - the political standard under which Labour's right and soft left are trying to rally forces for a counter-offensive against the serious left.

The direct target is the revolutionary left. But the main target is the much bigger serious reformist left. The slippery Neil Kinnock, eager to preserve a "left" appearance for himself, has focused on this issue. The obvious intention is to confuse and divide the left which, when united, secured the victories of Brighton and Blackpool and which, if it can restore its unity, can still stop and beat back the present right-wing offensive.

Here, as when he sabotaged Tony Benn's campaign for deputy leader, Kinnock does the direct work of the right. Today, the Labour right has the union leaderships and the help of the media, but it is very weak among the rank and file of the Labour Party. Eighty-three per cent of the Labour Party's individual membership vote went to Benn for deputy leader. So the possibility of carrying through a purge of the Labour Party which will not gut it and immobilise it as an electoral force for years ahead depends on splitting the left.

The right want to isolate and drive out the Marxists, selectively purge the fighting reformist left, and intimidate the rest of the left. The attitude to democracy and parliament is the wedge which (they hope) will not only separate off the Marxists, but also inhibit and intimidate all those who want to struggle now against the Tory government in industry and on the streets.

Michael Foot could talk just one year ago of raising an extraparliamentary "storm of opposition to the government", and now some of the union leaders are talking - only talking - of industrial resistance to Tebbit's anti-union laws. But, says

Michael Foot, there are limits. Parliament must rule - even on the bones of the labour movement. That is what the right wing want to say and what they want to get the labour movement to accept!

This Tory government acts towards many millions of its own people like an alien and hostile occupying power, and does not scruple to devastate British society and inflict poverty, unemployment, want and deprivation on our own people. But this government, in Michael Foot's view, has impeccable democratic credentials.

Foot, in histrionic mood, might well express his politics now by shouting across the floor of the House of Commons to Prime Minister Thatcher: "I disagree with everything you are doing, but I'll defend to the death your democratic right to do it!" Thatcher has a big majority in parliament, won in an election that was as fair and democratic as any election in Britain. But is the Thatcher government a democratic government?

Yes, according to the standards and norms of democracy in Britain (which is typical of bourgeois democracies). No, if by democracy is meant the best possible approximation to direct self-rule, or a system even minimally responsive to the interests of the electorate (and we are here talking, remember, about the most vital interests of whole communities and of an entire generation of young people). Thatcher does not have a mandate - and Michael Foot should not say that she has - to do what she has done to the youth, to whole industries and communities. Nobody voted for that: Thatcher would - to go by the polls and by-elections - have been dismissed within a year of election if the electorate had any mechanism by which to dismiss her. No mechanism exists.

It is 150 years since the British labour movement emblazoned on its banner the demand for annual parliaments. With annual parliaments what has happened in Britain in the last two years could have been stopped in June 1980. Yet those on the right of the labour movement who insist (I think rightly) that a socialist government should be willing to accept its own dismissal by a majority of the electorate are content that Thatcher should be free to play tyrant for five years.

Foot and his friends have forgotten the whole working class notion of developing and deepening the existing democratic structure. A strong case can be made out that Thatcher's government is the opposite of a democratic government - according to the conception of democracy it claims to base itself on.

One could, as we shall see, justify even armed insurrection against this government according to the principles of classical bourgeois democracy!

In the *Observer* of Sunday 10 January 1982, Michael Foot published the first part of his reply to the entire current of opinion among the rank and file of the Labour Party and trade unions which wants to challenge the Tories now, using extra-parliamentary direct action where necessary. He addresses those who reject, downgrade or are impatient with legalism and parliamentarism.

The mask of the Inquisition master Torquemada raised like a visor above his face, Michael Foot mounts the rostrum of the *Observer* to preach a sermon on democracy to his loyal supporters, and to the heretics. It is more civilised than witch-burning: we will have to see whether it is instead of bonfires, or part of the preparation for them. Enough is said in part one of Foot's article to establish Foot's basic ideas and his alternative to what he defines as Marxism. He deserves a reply.

Chapter 1: Is direct action against an elected capitalist government undemocratic?

Marxists are democrats

The first thing that needs to be said about democracy is that they are lying about the Marxists and about our attitude to democracy. Those Liberals who "entered" the Labour Party long ago and made their careers as servants of the ruling class there, and those soft "lefts" like Kinnock who seem to believe in the divine right of the Liberals to rule the Labour Party, all lie through their teeth when they say that the revolutionary left is not concerned with democracy or is opposed to democracy, or will not defend democracy and fight for it.

The basic truth of the socialist labour movement and of unfalsified Marxism concerning the relationship of socialism to democracy, is this: whoever is not a democrat is not a socialist - nor a communist in the sense that Marx and Engels and Lenin and Trotsky understood the word and the goal. As long ago as 1848, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote: "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy." (The Manifesto of the Communist Party.)

Marxist socialists are democrats because we look to the working class and only to the working class to realise its own self-rule in socialism. The working class needs democracy for the same reason as it needs things like trade unions and political parties - because, unlike the bourgeoisie, it does not own major private property, and it can own the means of production and rule in society and in the state only collectively. It can know its own mind, assess its own experience, set its own goals and adjust them, and take care of all its own affairs, only collectively, and therefore only democratically.

This is true for the working class as a force fighting within capitalist society, and struggling to transcend it. It is true for the working class as the ruler of society, administering a planned economy.

Trotsky compared the function of democracy for the labour movement within capitalism and after it has overthrown it, to the function of oxygen for an animal. In both cases it is irreplaceable.

There are many qualifications (as we shall see) but that is the basic truth about democracy for socialists. When the right and the soft left say that the issue is "Parliamentary Democracy", they give it to be understood that the left are against democracy. They invoke the horrors of Stalinism against us as if this were the work of the left (who were the first victims of Stalinism!). They are engaging in a fraud.

For its effect, the right-wing's accusation depends on ignorance of what some socialists propose by way of reform of parliamentary democracy, or of what other socialists would replace it by - workers' councils. It depends on an absolute identification of "parliamentary democracy" with democratic rights, with liberty, and on the acceptance of Parliament as the opposite of tyranny and totalitarianism and the only alternative to them. It depends on the acceptance of what now exists as "the best in the best possible of all democratic worlds". And they do that now with all the more edgy insistence because the reality the Labour Movement lives with in Britain is that Parliament is being used to legitimate the naked class war directed at us by the Tory Government.

It is a thoroughly dishonest exercise in intellectual card-sharpening, dependent on the mental equivalent of sleight of hand. They define democracy in terms of only one of its historic forms, and try thereby to rule out of court those who would advocate either a different form of democracy or a more or less radical development of democracy on the basis of the existing parliamentary system.

The decline of parliamentary democracy

In fact, the existing British system has had many different historical stages of growth and development. We have not known a steady perfecting of parliamentary democracy to an

ideal present condition. On the contrary, the decline of the direct controlling power of the elected chamber, the House of Commons, has been going on for over 100 years in parallel to the extensions of the franchise after 1867, the ruling class has systematically created parallel levers of power, diminishing parliament. Real power has shifted from parliament to the cabinet, and then to the prime minister, backed by the unelected permanent bureaucracy.

The cry that parliamentary democracy is in danger is a truly ridiculous weapon to find in the hands of Labour parliamentarians who - like Michael Foot, for example - have for years and decades, in government and out, allowed themselves to function as so many mere parliamentary gargoyles, decorating and camouflaging the structure of unelected bureaucratic and military power which has grown to dominance within the facade of Britain's ancient parliamentary system.

Those who say we are the enemies of democracy have themselves surrendered many of the ancient rights of parliament to the civil service and the military. Many of them bear direct personal responsibility for the diminishing of parliamentary democracy, and for the consequent growth of political cynicism.

And now they discover that parliamentary democracy is in danger - in danger from their critics and opponents in the labour movement!

Tony Benn has done tremendous work to bring to the attention of the labour movement the reality that now clothes itself in the traditional garb of the British parliamentary democratic system. He brings from his recent experiences as a government minister examples of the realities lurking behind the democratic facade, vindicating what revolutionary Marxists have said for many decades.

The permanent civil service to an enormous extent determines policy and ensures its continuity whatever government is in power: Benn once received a civil service brief marked, "For the new Minister, if not Mr Benn". Prime ministerial patronage ensures that Parliament's role as a scrutineer of government is undercut and atrophied.

Real control of the armed forces - whose subordination to parliament at the end of the 17th century was the decisive final act in securing parliamentary rule in England - is therefore less and less exercised by parliament.

The former Chief of the General Staff, Lord Carver, has publicly admitted that in February 1974, when the last Labour government was returned amidst massive industrial struggles, senior army officers discussed "intervention"! In a debate with Pat Arrowsmith Carver confirmed that the army officers had discussed a coup in February 1974. "Fairly senior officers were ill-advised enough to make suggestions that perhaps, if things got terribly bad, the army would have to do something about it." The top brass put a stop to it - but the top brass of the Chilean armed forces who were represented in Salvador Allende's cabinet didn't stop the fascistic coup of 1973 which pulverised the Chilean labour movement. They organised it.

In Britain the "fairly senior officers" of 1974 are now probably "senior" or close to it. Five months before the events Lord Carver referred to, the Times had commented on the Chile coup in this alarming fashion: "Whether or not the armed forces were right to do what they have done, the circumstances were such that a reasonable military man could in good faith have thought it his constitutional duty to intervene." (Times, 13 September 1973).

The testimony of a labour Minister

Tony Benn, 11 years a member of Labour governments in the '60s and '70s, governments supposedly in control of Britain, has recently summed up the state of British democracy. These are some of his conclusions:

"Despite all that is said about democracy and our traditional freedoms, the people of Britain have much less control over their destiny than they are led to believe...and a great deal less than they had a generation ago. In short, the powers which control our lives and our futures have become progressively more concentrated, more centralised, more internationalised, more secretive and less accountable.

"The democracy of which we boast is becoming a decorous facade behind which those who have power exercise it for their own advantage and to the detriment of the public welfare."

Benn is especially concerned with the loss of British autonomy to the IMF and the EU. But the following has nothing directly to do with Britain's position in the world:

"A hereditary House of Lords, topped up by the pliable recipients of prime ministerial patronage, still has great power to delay or obstruct the policies adopted by an elected House of Commons. It also has an unfettered veto, in law, to protect itself from abolition.

"The Crown still retains an unfettered legal authority to dismiss an elected government, dissolve an elected House of Commons, and precipitate a general election at any time it chooses. To do so it need only call upon its prerogative powers as used by the Governor General of Australia when the Labour government of Gough Whitlam was dismissed...

"All cabinet ministers derive their executive authority, in its legal sense, not from election as leaders of the majority party in the Commons, but as members of Her Majesty's Government, formed by the prime minister at the Crown's invitation...But the courts and the armed forces swear allegiance to the Crown and not to the elected government."

Though Benn's writings are of great value in opening the eyes of the broad labour movement to the realities behind the parliamentary facade none of this is very startling to Marxists. For example, Trotsky wrote this in *Where is Britain Going?* in 1925:

"'The royal power', declare the Labour Party leaders, 'does not interfere' with the country's progress...The royal power is weak because the instrument of bourgeois rule is the bourgeois parliament, and because the bourgeoisie does not need any special activities outside of parliament. But in case of need, the bourgeoisie will make use of the royal power as a concentration of all non-parliamentary, i.e. real forces, aimed against the working class."

Tony Benn asks what would happen "if a government elected by a clear majority on a mandate of reform were to introduce legislation to complete the process of democratic advance". This: "The Lords veto, the prerogative of the crown to dismiss and dissolve, and the loyalties of the courts and the services to adjudicate upon legitimacy and to enforce those judgements might all be used to defend the status quo against a parliamentary majority elected to transform it."

Writing not long before Denning ruled the electors of London incompetent to vote for the higher rates and cheap public transport policy on which the Labour majority on the GLC campaigned and won the election, Benn felt obliged to add: "This may seem far-fetched, but at least these forces opposed to democratic reforms could argue that they were operating in accordance with the letter of the constitution, even though in no sense with its spirit...The British constitution reserves all its ultimate safeguards for the non-elected elite.

"The democratic rights of the people can, in a crisis, be adjudicated to be illegal, thus legitimising the military in extinguishing them" (from *'Britain as a Colony'*, in *Arguments for Democracy*, 1981).

It is the measure of the soft left, like Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock, though no more than you would expect from the Labour right, that just at this point they discover that it is the

serious left which threatens the future of parliamentary democracy in Britain!

Who defends democracy?

It is the ruling class who threaten the democracy we have now. Under the influence of profound social crisis, the British political system will begin to display its undemocratic side as, and to the degree that, the ruling class begins to have need for extra democratic safeguards.

Read what Ian Gilmour, a former chair of the Tory party, says: "Conservatives do not worship democracy. For them majority rule is a device...Majorities do not always see where their best interests lie and then act upon that understanding. For Conservatives, therefore, democracy is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

"In Dr Hayek's words, democracy 'is not an ultimate or absolute value and must be judged by what it will achieve'. And if it is leading to an end that is undesirable or inconsistent with itself, then there is a theoretical case for ending it. 'Numbers in a state', said Burke, 'are always of consideration, but they are not the whole consideration'. In practice no alternative to majority rule exists, though it has to be used in conjunction with other devices."

Listen to the brutal truth expressed by Bonar Law, Tory leader during a Tory/landlord revolt against a Liberal government (and later a prime minister): "There are things stronger than parliamentary majorities".

On the eve of World War 1, sections of the British ruling class and the army, and the entire Tory party, raised a storm of revolt against the Liberal government's decision to give Ireland Home Rule. There was an officers' revolt in the British army in Ireland. They armed and drilled a large - orange - private army (with German guns). They succeeded. They forced the Liberal government to abandon its plan to solve Ireland's British problem by way of an all-Ireland Home Rule parliament. Eventually, partition and all that has flowed from it came as a result of this Tory revolt.

Under the pressure of the social crisis, British parliamentary democracy can and probably will enter a downward spiral of decline - especially when the working class and the labour movement begin to recover from the effects of the slump and start to fight back.

The reckless distortion and savage misrepresentation of the left by the establishment media which is poisoning the political climate in Britain now, that is itself a small token of how willing the ruling class is to use the big stick when necessary.

A "democratically" entrenched Tory government is now legally devastating the working class and constitutionally trying to beat down the labour movement. The issue is whether to fight the Tories or let them destroy much of what the labour movement has won.

When the Parliamentary Labour Party denies the labour movement's right to fight back against the Tories in the name of the divine Right of Parliament and when, against the labour movement, the PLP claims for itself the status, respect and prerogatives of the once-sovereign parliament of the UK, then what was said of another historical parody can justly be said of them.

The PLP is turning into the ghost of British parliamentary democracy. It is attempting to crown itself irremovable sovereign lord of the labour movement, perched atop the near-ruins of the decrepit parliamentary system - a system which it can neither replace, regenerate, reform nor (if it comes to it) defend against the assault of the ruling class.

Chapter 2: The appeal to history

Foot's safe good causes

Foot invokes the saints of British radicalism (even the suffragettes - who were, technically, small-scale terrorists and mostly not at all radical except on votes for women). He justifies their extraparliamentary actions and claims their tradition for himself.

But today it is different, he says - because then, either parliament was not available to the people at all, or the radicals were fighting for a sectional interest shut out from parliament's all-transforming portals.

Wat Tyler (who led the Peasants' Revolt 600 years ago) "had no representative to whom he could put his case". Did Oliver Cromwell knock parliament about a bit? By Cromwell parliament was "first saved...and then shut down when it proved obstreperous". Foot considers that there were good democratic grounds for Cromwell's action because "the men of Cromwell's armies... did represent a much larger total of the British people of their century than the parliament" which Cromwell shut down.

So Foot can set it all to democratic rights in his head by an arithmetical computation three and a quarter centuries later; and Cromwell was a good democrat even against parliament!

As to the first mass workers' party, the Chartists of the 1830s and '40s: "Their declared aim was to establish a parliament which they could trust, not one they wished to bypass. Extra-parliamentary action was important since they had no voice inside; actually to win the voice inside was the aim.", So Foot approves of their extra-parliamentary activities too.

In fact, the Chartists wanted a lot more than a voice. They wanted power to subordinate society to their own interests. Then the vote was power, parliament really did have the power; that is why the ruling class would have had civil war rather than working class suffrage. If the Chartists' formal demands now seem moderate, it is because something seemingly like some of them has been realised - without the radical purpose the Chartists pursued by way of these demands being realised. But in their time the Chartists were like the "moderates" in James Connolly's song - "We only want the earth".

Foot is wrong - factually and politically - to imply that the Chartists won even the formal goals for which "they were right" to fight outside parliament. They demanded annual parliaments. Where would Mrs Thatcher be now if that elementary precondition of a healthy democracy had been won then? Logically, if he thinks the Chartists were right to fight for annual parliaments, Foot should favour struggle now to bring down the Tory government!

The suffragettes wrecked property, attacked parliament, raised fires and planted small bombs. But Foot argues that they were justified "precisely because they too were denied the right to speak and act inside parliament. "

"It is an irony," says Foot, "that they should now be paraded as the opponents of parliamentary methods."

But surely not as big an irony as that they should be presented - because their aim was to get the parliamentary vote - as exponents of parliamentary methods!

In fact they were characterised above all by rejection of parliamentary methods: they hive off from the numerous mere suffragists who favoured parliamentary methods, and from a large lobby of MPs which fought for women's suffrage year in and year out around Private Members' Bills (like the almost perennial anti-abortion lobby private members' bills now).

Far from "lacking a voice" in parliament, in fact they got a majority in the House of Commons at least once, only to be frustrated by the House of Lords veto. But that veto had been curbed by the time of the wildest suffragette activities. Still, Foot says, it was permissible to the suffragettes to act

as they did from impatience with parliament, and, before 1911, because of frustration with the House of Lords' entrenched power.

Then what about the working class now? Thatcher's Tories are destroying jobs and communities; they will not be restored quickly, if ever. The trade unions are being put in a legal straitjacket. Why do we not have the same right of impatience with parliament and the parliamentary processes? Why, in addition, do we not have the right of extra-parliamentary activity for self-defence?

After the ruling against London Transport, do we not have as good grounds for impatience with the House of Lords as the suffragettes did? If and when the undemocratic legal reserve powers of the British state are used, why should we not treat legality as the suffragettes (with Foot's approval) did?

There is no reason why we should not. Foot's invocation of the now safe (because past) causes celebres of his radical tradition implies, justifies and recommends not his politics, but ours!

Of all his historical examples, Foot says, in effect: "Of course, to achieve such results [a voice in parliament] it was necessary to take action outside parliament, and with every justice". The message is necessarily that those were bad days, and now we have a perfect democratic machine (even if not quite what the Chartists fought for).

But this is simply not true: the depredations of the minority Thatcher government are the glaring, painful proof of it!

When Michael Foot talked last year of raising a storm of protest against the government, and led a great march through Liverpool, he was rather feebly carrying on the real traditions of those struggles; when he cants against extra-parliamentary action he is betraying them. He invokes limited, ancient, and now respectable radical causes, all the better to attack those who actually stand now in the living continuity of those causes. Foot invokes all these old radical causes, but in fact his attitude to parliament now resembles nothing so strongly as the attitude of the Anglican Tories in the reign of James II! Committed to the idea of the divine right of kings and the sinfulness of resistance to a legitimate king, they confronted the Catholic king's machinations to destroy their church and restore Catholicism. They found it impossible to agree with James, naturally, but also impossible to resist him; to resist would have been a very great sin. Their policy, too, might have been shouted across the House of Lords by some purple-clad ancestor of Foot's: "I disagree bitterly with what you are doing, but I'll defend to the death your right to do it!" When others kicked James off the throne and made the 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688, these people still stood by King James and his divine Stuart right to rule! Passively, it is true: they would not do anything for James. But they never did anything against him. Consistent in their boneheaded dogmatism, they retained their sterile loyalty to James even when he was gone, and faced persecution, in the fashion of those days, at the hands of James' conquerors.

They, Michael Foot - useless alike to James and his enemies - are your political ancestors; Cromwell and the others you claim as your own are really ours! They believed in the people's right of resistance to tyrants, social or political; they were fighters, not canting priests paralysed by superstition and a doctrine that the entrenched powers had a divine right even to be tyrannical.

For Foot now it is not the divine right of kings but the divine right of parliament and the compelling legitimacy it confers even on a naked class war government like Thatcher's.

Foot claims Marx and Trotsky

Foot is ambitious: he wants to decorate the right-wing Labour float in the democratic carnival with the heads of Marx, Engels and Trotsky.

Marx and Engels envisaged, says Foot, that in England there might be a peaceful transition to socialism. He quotes Engels (selectively) to this effect. This is less than serious. Marx and Engels did talk about the possibility of peaceful socialist transformation in Britain, the USA and perhaps (Marx said he didn't know enough about its institutions to be sure) Holland. Why? Because in those states the bureaucratic/military system was not a major force. And is that still true in Britain today? Read Tony Benn's account of the realities of rule in Britain today!

Trotsky and Lenin, says Foot, only "thought perhaps that other parliaments might be as futile or obstructive for their purposes as the Russian Dumb". They made the mistake of thinking the British parliament was "fashioned in the same mould" as the Dumb! This assertion means only that Foot has not read, for example, Trotsky's detailed analysis of British politics, *Where is Britain Going?*.

Trotsky, says Foot, "would never have been guilty of the infantile, querulous condemnations of parliament and parliamentary action which some of his self-styled followers adopt...Trotsky, the foremost literary genius brought forth by the Soviet Revolution, would surely have disowned with one sweep of his pen the whole breed of modern Trotskyists" (because of our sins of literary style?).

It is quite true that some of those calling themselves Trotskyists have many of the traits of anarchism, and sometimes come close to rejecting parliamentary action. The attitude of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) to the Labour Party, for example, is a necessary by-product of its attitude to parliamentary action - one of dismissal, and the pretence that it is irrelevant. (But they do believe in democracy - workers' democracy, through workers' councils).

Effectively the SWP rejects political action - except for general socialist propaganda, work to "build the party", and promises of what they may do sometime in the future, counterposed to the realities of the labour movement now. Marx polemicised against the sort of "political indifference" the SWP represents when he encountered it in its brave and open early anarchist form. So did Trotsky. But there aren't any SWP-ers in the Labour Party!

Foot is trying to tar Labour Party activists with this brush, not because they share the SWP's anti-political traits, but on the contrary because, unlike the SWP, they are politically active within the broad labour movement, and have shaken up the political structures of the labour movement.

He drags this in to cover his own tracks, and as a means to separate himself from the present-day radicals and revolutionaries whose traditions he invokes, tries to appropriate, and seems to genuinely respect.

He concedes that "it is not possible or desirable that the socialist acceptance of parliamentary institutions should be automatic or uncritical or unqualified". But Foot himself does accept these institutions without other than historical qualification, and accepts confinement to them not just automatically but by deep reflex and ingrained dogmatic conviction.

Here Foot's radical conscience pays historical tribute to his current vices: "the Labour Party needs to use parliament more ambitiously and more deliberately than ever before". Yes! Even the quasi-syndicalists of the SWP would agree with that. So why does Labour Party leader Foot continue to collaborate with Thatcher? Why not take up Tony Benn's call for "disengagement", i.e. boycott of the Tory structures? That would not be enough, but it would be something.

But in fact Foot raised this idea because he needs to have an apparent alternative to offer to the indicated use of trade union power now to stop Thatcher: "the dominant need is to turn the nation's mind to parliamentary action". He insists that "trade union power cannot save us, particularly since at such a perilous time the trade unions are compelled to conduct defensive, rear-guard battles."

Trade unions as trade unions cannot offer an overall framework for socialist transformation, unless they become a great deal more than trade unions. But they can resist, fight back, make it impossible for the government to govern. They could even bring down the government.

What does Foot think of the events in 1972 - one of the great, historic victories of the labour movement - when a wave of spontaneous political strikes forced the TUC to call a one-day general strike for a political purpose and, before the strike date set, forced the government to release the five dockers who had quite legally been jailed according to an Act of Parliament democratically passed, stamped and signed in accordance with the best of all possible parliamentary democratic constitutions?

A petition to parliament should have been organised? Good democrats, socialists as well as others, should have denounced the workers whose actions forced open the gates of Pentonville jail for the five dockers? Direct action against the democratically elected government's democratically decided law released those dockers: the lack of direct action (partly because people relied on the Labour government) was probably decisive in keeping the three Shrewsbury building pickets in jail (in Des Warren's case, for three years).

Foot's fear of the stormtroopers

Why does the once socialist Michael Foot need this rigmarole? Because he is afraid of the alternative - all-out struggle against Thatcher. He knows that Britain's democracy is skin deep. He knows what might have happened in Britain in the mid-'70s, when army officers plotted a military coup.

Jack Jones, Michael Foot's trade union alter ego during the last Labour government, has publicly explained the right turn of the trade union leaders and the government in July 1975 in terms of the terrible dangers facing Britain - including the danger of a military coup.

Michael Foot knows that the danger of the ruling class using its reserve powers or the armed forces, or both, against a properly elected democratic government is a very real one when they feel threatened. His solution to this problem is to say: don't threaten them!

Rhetorically, he offers the following advice to "those self-styled revolutionaries who speak today too readily of the resort to illegal methods or to street battles"; "those who think socialism is to be won there should at least train to become soldiers or policemen - to face the stormtroopers". And what if the coming of the storm-troopers does not flow from working class direct action on the streets, but from a left wing victory in a general election? What if the storm-troopers are likely to be sent as the result of a radical electoral victory like that of Salvador Allende in Chile, who was overthrown and murdered by the army in September 1973? Perhaps the same conclusion would follow, and not only rhetorically.

Serious socialists who try to function as the memory of the working class, learning from history, have long known that these conclusions do follow. A serious working class leader, faced with the facts of history and with the personal experience of the British armed forces' reaction to labour militancy and the election of a Labour government in 1974, would reach Foot's conclusion above not rhetorically but in deadly earnest. He or she would campaign for the disbandment of the armed forces and the creation of a workers' militia.

But, like all the right and the soft left, Foot prefers to lie to himself and to the labour movement about the present condition of British democracy. Why? Because Foot is mesmerised by the democratic forms and facades of parliamentary democracy. He forgets that democracy is democracy only if it allows the people to actually govern themselves in their own interests. So mesmerised that he

does not notice that we do not have such a democratic system. So mesmerised that, even though he knows that if the working class were to try to use parliament against the interests of the ruling class then the "storm-troopers" would be unleashed, all he can do with that knowledge is turn it into rhetoric against working class action now, trying to convince us of his own belief that democracy is most secure when the ruling class and its storm-troopers are armed to the teeth, and the labour movement disarmed.

The right to rule

This is the crux of it: for Foot, radical direct action is now superseded by parliament. The labour movement must bow down to parliament. A government which can command a parliamentary majority may do anything it likes to the labour movement - and Foot will be the first to shout his denunciations at those who resist and tell the labour movement it should rebel; and that in reality it will be acting when it rebels according to the great traditions of British radicalism, which created our now half-moribund democratic parliamentary system.

With this attitude Foot betrays even the pre-socialist radical tradition which he does - as far as I can judge - sincerely revere.

The great bourgeois revolutions, born of struggle against oppressive systems and tyrants, wrote into their constitutions the right of revolt. The American Declaration of Independence of 1776, for example, states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

"That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness...

"...when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security".

According to this, it could be argued that it is such sustained tyranny and oppression for Thatcher to do what is being done now - and cannot be undone easily - that it justifies even an armed revolt against the Tory government!

The labour movement has every right to struggle outside of parliament against this government - according to the idea of democracy in which in the last analysis parliament has power and authority. If the constitution does not oblige Thatcher to let the electorate throw her out, why should the electorate be bound by such a manifestly inadequate constitution? Why should the labour movement listen to Foot telling us that we must submit and that it is a crime against democracy to resist?

The classical bourgeois theory of parliamentary democracy not only recognised this right of resistance, but proclaimed it as itself one of the basic principles of democratic government. The truth is that the Labour right and Foot do not stand for either the spirit or letter of parliamentary democracy as understood by those like the American revolutionaries; for them it was a real, practical, living set of principles to govern the behaviour of their class in its time of vigour and progress.

By parliamentary democracy Foot and his friends mean the shell and the forms. Theirs is the conservative and timid constitutionalism that would have sustained the status quo of Charles 1, the unreformed parliament before 1832, or the

exclusively middle class House of Commons before 1867, which excluded the mass of men and women from the suffrage.

It happens that theirs is the constitutionalism of a formally advanced bourgeois democracy. Their political ancestors did not win it: ours did!

They do not stand in the true line of those who cranked that parliamentary democracy forward by way of revolution (the 1640s, 1688-9) and successive reforms. They counterpose the partly ossified, reshaped and neutralised, and now inadequate, results of past revolutions and mass struggles to the present living labour movement with its needs and struggles - the struggles to deepen democracy, to defend the labour movement: the struggle for a different, socialist system.

Michael Foot and all his political brothers and sisters worship not the once-radiant face of bourgeois democracy, but its historic backside. Its face belongs to us.

Chapter 3: The scarecrow of Stalinism

Can the tiger be skinned claw by claw?

In part 2 of his written oration on parliamentary democracy and those whom he denounces as its enemies (Observer, January 17 1982), Michael Foot attempts to answer the challenge he had posed to himself in part one.

There, he ended by promising to undertake the difficult task of replying to those whose rejection of the idea that there can be a peaceful parliamentary road to socialism in Britain was expressed in RH Tawney's brilliant image which Foot quoted thus: "Onions can be eaten leaf by leaf, but you cannot skin a live tiger paw by paw... If the Labour Party is to tackle its job with some hope of success, it must mobilise behind it a body of conviction as resolute and informed as the opposition in front of it."

Foot commented: "In other words, Tawney recognised the existence of the class struggle and the mighty convulsions required to secure its exorcism.", But nobody with even a slight awareness of the facts of history or of present-day Britain would now deny the existence of the class struggle!

Even Ramsey McDonald, the right-wing Labour prime minister, and the renegade who went over to the Tories and became their captive figurehead prime minister in the anti-working class "National Government" in 1931, recognised the class struggle. He used to boast that while of course he recognised the class struggle, he - unlike the revolutionaries - deplored it and regarded it as something to be moved away from, abandoned, outgrown, patched up; it was not something the left should fight as if they meant to win it.

Serious socialists regard the class struggle as something to be fought in a spirit that takes account of the realities of class society and the facts of history. It will only be exorcised after it has been won by the working class, after the spectre of socialism has become solid social fact. A thousand terrible victories by the ruling classes will not exorcise it, because they cannot abolish class society: only the working class can.

The idea that the class struggle can "be exorcised" by the labour movement agreeing to limit itself, by a historic self-denying ordinance, to certain methods of struggle, is an absurd idea that directly serves the ruling-class side in the inevitable struggle. The class struggle is ineradicable and it will last as long as class society lasts. The idea that, in the interests of "democracy", the workers should not seriously fight the class struggle is an ideological weapon of the ruling class to help tie the hands of its working class opponents. The bourgeoisie fights the class struggle all the time!

He may not know it, but Foot's article is a weapon of the bourgeoisie fighting the battle of ideas inside the labour movement.

What is distinctive about Tawney's image is not the bare recognition of the fact of class struggle, but the rejection of the possibility that it can be resolved peacefully, that the ruling class will peacefully allow itself to be divested of its wealth or of the power to defend that wealth. The ruling class does indeed have tiger's claws, and it will use them when it needs to. The ruling class is "armed to the teeth", and, as Foot in passing recognises in part one, it does dispose of storm troopers.

It is the measure of Michael Foot's politics now that he finds Tawney's comment noteworthy for its mere recognition of the fact of class struggle, and that, astonishingly, he so misreads Tawney as to think that is the point he is making.

In fact, Foot never actually gets round to directly discussing, still less refuting, the point that makes Tawney's image arresting and central to the dispute between reformists and revolutionaries: however peaceful and legal we are, the ruling class will not let us win socialism peacefully, and we can only get our heads clawed off if we approach the matter with naive trust in the myths of parliamentary democracy.

As an advertisement for part 2, Foot in part I had said: "After all we should have learned something from half a century [since Tawney] of such tumult and terror in human affairs. And part of what we have learnt, or should have learnt, adds up to a direct refutation of apocalyptic Marxism, or, if you wish, a justification, in quite a different sense from the old one, of [the Fabian slogan of] the inevitability of gradualness. Throughout those years, several different rivers of experience merge into the same torrent", which he promised to "explore".

In fact the gist of his reply in part 2 is that he rejects the idea of socialism as something radically different from capitalism. He does not argue that in fact you can skin the tiger paw by paw. We can, he implies, escape the tiger's violence if we give up all thought of skinning it! It is the goal of socialism Foot thereby rejects, not "apocalyptic Marxism" as he says. For Foot now, there is to be no socialist transformation, no socialism as something distinct from capitalism - only civilised, decent Labour government, concerned with ameliorations and reforms while helping the bourgeoisie run capitalism. And the goal of returning and then sustaining such a Labour government now displaces all other goals.

His discussion of peaceful or non-peaceful roads to socialism is thus purely academic, because, essentially, he resolves the dilemma he has posed for himself, quoting Tawney, by abandoning the goal of socialist transformation.

And in fact there is only one stream to Michael Foot's "torrent", and that is the experience of Stalinist totalitarianism. In the nature of things, Foot can not examine the other great mid-20th century stream of working class experience, that of the supine reformists whose weaknesses helped generate both Stalinism and fascism.

Revolution is Stalinism

His way of "replying" to what Tawney said about the tiger is to quote Tawney 20 years later, in the 1950s, writing thus: "The truth is that a conception of socialism which views it as power, on which all else depends, is not, to speak with moderation, according to light.

"The question is not merely whether the state owns and controls the means of production. It is also who owns and controls the state. It is not certain, though it is probable, that socialism can in England be achieved by the methods proper to democracy. It is certain that it cannot be achieved by any other."

Foot adds emphasis to the last sentence. Tawney and his politics is a subject in itself. The use Foot makes of him is astonishing! According to Foot, when Tawney invoked the tiger which will not voluntarily be skinned, he was writing "before he and most others had examined the full nature of Soviet totalitarianism". And somehow the fact of Stalinist

totalitarianism qualifies that - essentially irrefutable - image of the tiger who will not be skinned peacefully and renders it obsolete.

Only if the goal of skinning the capitalist tiger is abandoned - because of Stalinism! - does Tawney's image become obsolete! Tawney uses the general term "by the methods of democracy" where Foot gives it the most narrow reading to mean "exclusively by the methods of parliamentary legality".

Foot presumes Tawney meant "peaceful methods" (though whether only peaceful methods are democratic is in fact open to argument, as we have seen). But in any case Tawney (as quoted) argued only that such methods would probably be sufficient, not that they would certainly be so. He left the alternative open, where Foot closes it completely, thereby disavowing in advance the right of the labour movement to self-defence against the organs of state repression, which in Foot's best of all possible democracies remain in the hands exclusively of the ruling class.

The question Tawney poses: "who owns the state?" is indeed at the heart of socialism. It defines the difference between socialism and state collectivism. Foot's implication that mass democratic action outside parliament would somehow place the state outside the control of the people is, truly, a bizarre one! Bizarre, too, is Foot's use of Tawney's reflections on Stalinism - the untrammelled power of the totalitarian state bureaucracy over all of society including the working class - to justify his policy of leaving all power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and its "stormtroopers", and not daring to fight to resist Thatcher's government for fear of them.

Foot does three impermissible things here. First, he equates Stalinism with a form of socialism, accepting the preposterous self-justification of the Stalinist ruling class as a force embodying and struggling for a form of socialism. Unfortunately its methods are bad (Foot argues) and destroy a (presumably) acceptable socialist end.

Foot links and identifies the totalitarian system that has now existed in the USSR for over 50 years (and which has been replicated in many other countries) with the workers' revolution of 1917. He locates the root of totalitarianism in the Original Sin committed in 1917 by the Russian workers when they used violence to take power.

Thus he equates any violence by the labour movement - implicitly even defensive violence - with the germ of totalitarianism. Thus only "the methods of democracy", by sleight of hand identified as those of the decrepit British parliamentary system now (even including its blatantly undemocratic secondary rules) are permissible.

The third impermissible step in Foot's polemic is the pretence that his references to Stalinism have anything to do with what he is in dispute with the serious Labour Party left about now. No, they do not!

By "the methods proper to democracy" or by totalitarian methods, meaning working class direct action methods: that is Foot's way of posing the alternatives. But it is ahistorical, illogical, and for the immediate issue beside the point. The issue which remains to be argued is whether the "methods proper to democracy" should or can exclude extra-parliamentary actions to stop the Tories now, or violent self-defence against ruling-class violence, or violent revolutionary action by a working class majority to deprive the ruling class and its state of the means of threatening or using violence against the labour movement. They are the issue. Stalinist totalitarianism is something else again.

The Stalinist counter-revolution

The argument about ends and means, says Foot truly, "did mount to a new point of intensity, once the world began to recognise the nature and accompaniments of the Soviet dictatorship".

Those overthrown in the Russian Revolution had denounced the force used to overthrow them, records Foot. "Much more serious and persistent and devastating were the socialist criticisms directed to the same end - George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, and Ignazio Silone. With this self-chosen political genealogy, Foot firmly places himself in the ranks of those who in the '30s and '40s abandoned socialism for, at best, liberal reformism, in response to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

"Every means tends to become an end", he quotes the one-time pre-Stalinist communist Silone. "Machines which ought to be man's instruments enslave him, the state enslaves society, the bureaucracy enslaves the state, the church enslaves religion, parliament enslaves democracy, institutions enslave justice, academics enslave art, the army enslaves the nation, the party enslaves the cause, the dictatorship of the proletariat enslaves socialism".

"Parliament enslaves democracy", would serve well as an epitaph for Foot himself. For the rest, Silone is talking about Stalinism. As a communist of the heroic period who broke with the Communist International in 1929, as it was becoming something qualitatively different from the revolutionary organisation set up by Lenin and Trotsky, Silone knew something about the differences between Stalinism and Bolshevism.

What is centrally wrong with all Foot's arguments here is indeed the identification of Stalinism and Bolshevism. Foot insists on the ridiculous and false identification of the workers' revolution of 1917 with the totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy over the working class which was established in a bloody civil war against the workers and peasants of the USSR after 1928 (a civil war in which only one side, the bureaucracy, was armed and organised). Bolshevism in 1917 was a political tradition in the Russian labour movement which concentrated in itself the self-liberating energy of the revolutionary workers, and led them to take and consolidate state power in most of the former Tsar's empire.

The Russian workers armed themselves, and used force to disarm or destroy those who were in arms against them. They were organised in a democratic network of workers' councils elected in factories and districts and linked together across Russia. Elections were frequent and delegates were easily recallable.

It was a far more flexible representative, responsive system, controllable by the masses, than any parliament such as the existing British one can ever be.

This system was intended to do without permanent state bureaucrats (and for a while it succeeded). The armed forces which made the revolution were the Red Guard - a workers' militia, which was essentially more or less identical with formations like the flying picket squads of miners, builders or steel workers which we have known in Britain over the last decade - except that they were armed, that they disarmed the bourgeoisie and its agents and supporters, and that they themselves became the state power.

That was the Russian workers' revolution. 65 years later, it is a proper subject for critical minded socialists whether everything done by the armed workers and by the workers' party led by Lenin and Trotsky was well done, and whether anything they did contributed to the rise of Stalin later on. But to identify the 1917 revolution with Stalinism is preposterous!

It was the opposite of totalitarianism: mass, armed working class (and initially peasant) democracy. They would rightly have replied in Trotsky's words to the notion that "methods proper to democracy" meant excluding armed self-defence or offensive action against the armed forces of the ruling class: "The reformists systematically implant in the minds of the workers the notion that the sacredness of democracy is best guaranteed when the bourgeoisie is armed to the teeth and the workers are unarmed. "

Not only were they the opposite of totalitarianism, in the sense given to the word by Hitler and Stalin, they were in the existing conditions of Russia in 1917 and offer the only alternative to bloody ruling-class dictatorship. If the vacillating middle of the road government of Kerensky had not given way to the workers' power it would have given way to the armed reaction, based on sections of the army. The pioneering fascist-style counter-revolutionary movement would have emerged in Russia, not, as happened (when the Italian workers failed in 1919-20 to take power) in Italy.

The real roots of Stalinism

Foot says that Stalinist "apologists have never been able to explain how the enormities of Stalinism happened - or what guarantee there can be that they should never develop again."

No. Of course not. But others - Leon Trotsky, for example - have explained it, in rational historical and sociological terms; and also in terms of the basic ideas of Marxism and of those Marxists - the Bolsheviks - who proclaimed, even when leading the Russian workers to the taking of state power in 1917, that Russia was not ripe for socialism.

Where did Stalinism come from? Stalinism was a counter-revolution (on the basis of maintaining the state-owned property forms established by the revolution, developed and extended) by a distinct social formation which emerged in the '20s - a bureaucracy rooted initially in the state created for self-defence in the civil war and the wars against the 14 capitalist states which intervened in Russia.

In the course of the struggle for survival in the three years after the revolution, the working class itself was dispersed and partly destroyed as a social formation, so great was the disruption caused by counterrevolutionary violence and invasion.

More: Russia in 1917 was too backward for socialism. The Russian labour movement expected that the workers of Germany and France would soon follow where they had led, and that a European socialist federation would emerge, at the heart of which would be the advanced countries whose material development and culture were on a level sufficiently high to make an advanced post-capitalist socialist society possible. But instead of joining the Russian working class in a push for socialism, the main leaders of the labour movement sustained capitalism. In Germany they did not scruple to shoot down the revolutionary workers to make Germany safe for capitalism (no more than government minister Michael Foot scrupled to use the armed power of the British state to keep Des Warren in jail for three of the last Labour government's five years in office).

Stalinist totalitarianism, with its terror and unrestrained violence, its lies and its wiping out of many of the fruits of the entire epoch of capitalist civilisation' was the system that emerged when the bureaucracy that clustered around the state in backward, isolated and ruined Russia threw off the constraints which survived from the revolutionary period and made itself master of society. The totalitarian system is the system of their unbridled rule over society and over the working class.

It used the most terrible and savage violence to destroy the power of the workers and to wipe out the Russian labour movement - and the revolutionaries too. It used the power thus established and consolidated to exercise an immense totalitarian dominance in society.

The facts about that bloody Stalinist counter-revolution, which included the public trial in person or in absentia (Trotsky) of nearly all the leaders of the revolution, are very well known by now. The river of blood that marks off Stalinism from Bolshevism is by now so well charted that even Foot's beloved Tribune, which fellow-travelled with the Stalinists until as late as 1939, long ago became aware of it.

What sense therefore can there be in pretending that murderer and victim, Cain and Abel, Bolshevik workers' revolution and Stalinist bureaucratic counter-revolution are identical? In terms of historical fact, what sense is there in pretending that the workers' revolution of 1917, one of the great liberating events in history, directly freeing the workers, peasants and oppressed nationalities of the vast Tsarist empire, is the selfsame thing as the vile counter-revolutionary system that was erected on the political grave of that revolution, and on the graves of countless Russian workers and peasants?

There is no sense to it, nor logic, nor rational evaluation of the facts of the anti-working class counter-revolution by way of which, and out of which, the Stalinist system emerged and displaced the workers' democracy of 1917. Foot's notion that the violence of the workers' militia in 1917 is the root of the Stalinist totalitarian system is at root a religious notion (appropriate accompaniment to his fetishism of the existing form of parliamentary democracy in Britain!).

The taboo is violated and everything thereafter is contaminated, cursed, doomed. The Russian workers - not to speak of the Poles and others - today are still paying for the sins of their revolutionary mothers and fathers and grandparents 65 years ago! And Foot says he is an atheist, believe it or not!

Even if it could plausibly be argued that certain institutions set up by the revolution in the terrible struggle for survival in civil war and the war against the 14 intervening states contributed to the degeneration of the revolution and the emergence of Stalinism, it would only follow from this that certain mistakes were made, not that the revolution was itself a mistake. It would not follow that democratic mass working class action to take power and disarm the ruling class necessarily leads to totalitarianism.

The truth is the very opposite. If the Russian workers had an armed militia system now, totalitarianism would not survive a week in the USSR. If the Polish strike pickets who guarded the gates in Gdansk during the great strike of August 1980, carrying pick-axe handles, had gone on to organise an armed workers' militia then Jaruzelski's martial law in December 1981 would have been impossible. If the British trade union movement had an armed militia now, then Britain would be a much safer place for democracy than in fact it is.

Or would armed resistance by the Polish or USSR workers, even against Stalinism, also be a breach of the taboos of Foot's pacifist god? The conclusion from Stalinism, says Foot, is "the necessity of establishing some truly independent parliamentary institutions". This, he says, is the course Solidarnosc would have wished to follow in Poland. Yes! In August 1980, the most democratic parliament ever to meet in Poland lived and functioned for a month in Gdansk.

It was not a parliament like the one bound by the five year rule which sustains Mrs Thatcher. It was a workers' council, a sort of "soviet", composed of factory delegates from the entire region, who reported back to their electors and could easily be replaced. It was counterposed to the bureaucratic state apparatus, and incompatible with it and with the bureaucrats served by it. Such a system of intense democratic self-rule is always and everywhere incompatible with the rule of a stable bureaucratic state machine behind the scenes. That is why, though it was a parliament it belonged to the type of the 1917 workers' councils, and not to the type of Michael Foot's revered institution.

Just as he invokes the dead, safe, radical causes of the past, and falsely appropriates them for use against those who stand in their living continuity, Foot misuses the Polish experience. For that tremendously democratic "parliament" in Gdansk could only have been developed and consolidated as a revolutionary movement. It could live only if it could find the force to disarm the Polish state and successfully raise the cry of national revolt against Russian overlordship in Poland (and the rest of Eastern Europe: only a movement spreading

across Eastern Europe could hope to defy and defeat the Russian state).

Instead, the workers' movement, the unchallengeable power in Poland in August 1980, decided to bow to the fact of Russia's overlordship of Poland. and the consequent rule of the Polish Stalinist bureaucracy. It transformed itself into a "trade union" - though in fact Solidarnosc was always much more. And the forces of Stalinist reaction gathered strength for the blow they struck last December, when martial law was declared.

What would Foot have advocated in Poland? Reliance on the Sejm (the official parliament - which showed some life, in fact)? A long, moderately conducted war of attrition - perhaps for decades - to make the Sejm "a real parliament"? There is more than one way to "sacrifice generations", Michael Foot! I repeat: the only guarantee against counterrevolution in Poland would have been an armed working class which overthrew the bureaucracy and secured Polish independence. The road to democracy in Eastern Europe and the USSR - surely even Michael Foot will have to agree - is the road of armed revolt.

The only sure guarantee against capitalist or Stalinist counter-revolution's active, self-controlling mass democracy in real control - without a reserve military force which is the iron hand in the parliamentary glove, and which the ruling class (or ruling bureaucracy) can use to strike down the masses and their democracy.

Chapter 4: Superstition or struggle?

The workers against Stalinism

The search for the original sin of Bolshevism has exercised tired and demoralised socialists for at least 50 years. Like characters in an ancient Greek drama, they seek the explanation for the Stalinist plague in some violated taboo.

Was not the sin in the way the Bolshevik Party organised itself? That has always been a popular explanation, and shows signs of life now among some tired ex-radicals in the Labour Party and on its fringes. For Foot, the great sin was revolutionary violence.

The diagnosis of what exactly was Bolshevism's original sin may vary, but the very notion that there was an original sin, a single flaw which contaminated everything else, has led most of its devotees away from rational socialist politics and effectively to the conclusion that the great sin of the Russian workers was to dare to take power at all.

This is Foot's conclusions, as it must be the conclusion of anyone who accepts bourgeois democracy as the culmination of historical progress.

In fact, of course, Foot's method of argument is incompatible with serious historical analysis; reducing the question to one of broken taboos, it leads straight to a superstitious approach to politics, and away from a rational account of what went wrong - and what must now be done to put it right.

Inevitably, it leads to irrationality in current politics too. Foot's compulsion now to submit to Thatcher in the name of high democratic principle is as irrational as anything you will find on the hysteria-prone "revolutionary" left! For if you think, even subconsciously, in terms of broken taboos and look for some original sin committed by the revolutionary working class to explain Stalinist totalitarianism, then you must tread carefully! You don't know where the hidden taboos, curses and voodooos may be lying in wait for you!

"Democracy" is seen outside of history and imagined to be miraculously raised above the struggle of classes in history. (So too for Michael Foot is totalitarianism, as we will see.) For the future there is a terror of blundering into worse than we have now. For the present, the existing, hollowed-out British bourgeois democracy is fetishised into a decadent set of

constitutional rules, forms and regulations which must be treated with reverent superstition.

Socialism as a distinct system to replace capitalism is, according to this view, an "apocalyptic" dream: and you will probably end up in the nightmare of the Stalinist gulag if you dare to strike out from the rules and constraints of the existing British parliamentary system.

Even when that system allows the sustained and savage tyranny against millions of people which the Thatcher government is legally inflicting, the working class must still submit, lest worse things follow from a resistance that overflows the hallowed constitutional channels of the sacred system. For no earthly power has the right to suborn an anointed British prime minister until her full five years are up!

In Britain now, the conclusion from the idea that the working class cannot take state power, and should not try, has to be this: the last class with the historic right to fight for and take power was the bourgeoisie - back in the 17th century. Why the curse against perpetrators of revolutionary violence has not jinxed the British system this last 300 years, Foot forgets to explain to us.

He will not be able to explain it to himself either: one does not reason with one's fetish! You chant the mantra and contemplate the holy relics, touch wood, be glad it still works, and move on, spitting contemptuous curses at the unbelievers and threats at the heretics.

In the 1930s the effete bourgeois liberals and their radical understudies repelled the rebel youth who were being ground down by the capitalist crisis. Some went over to fascism. Those who thought they were choosing communism found Stalinist totalitarianism acceptable in part because of revulsion against Foot-style worship of passivity cloaked in commitment to formal democracy.

The disintegration of society seemed to show the impotence and irrelevance of democracy. Democracy had either to be renewed and continued as a weapon of socialists fighting to re-make society or sink into discredit along with capitalism.

There is a fine scene in one of Luis Bunuel's films. A woman sits in a chair, and a man, a fetishist, crouches in front of her, fondling her leg, putting it against his face, kissing it. His sexuality is expressed in this way because in his subconscious the fetish has taken on all the meaning that other people find in a partner's body. The man is experiencing his ecstasy, locked into a private world - and the woman finds it impossible to suppress a big bored yawn. The symbolic links in the man's subconscious, rooted in childhood memories and associations (and childish misapprehensions) mean that her leg has the power to trigger his emotions. But they can't mean anything to her. They exist only in his private world.

That is how the legalistic concerns of Michael Foot's political ancestors appeared to the radical youth in the '30s. And today the Parliamentary Labour Party are not active, creative, improvising fighters of a living democracy but tired worshippers of an ancient fetish to which they will willingly sacrifice the living stream of youth - because they have forgotten what the struggle for democracy was all about in the first place!

They do not notice how badly their beloved parliament has fallen into disrepair, how deficient it all now is as a living democracy. They are unable even to face up to the questions about British democracy posed to honest democrats by what the minority-based Thatcher government is now using parliament to legally do to this "generation".

They are obsessed with their own symbols and reminiscences of the infancy of parliamentary democracy. The labour movement has its own concerns. In the here and now, the PLP fails to speak to more and more workers about the things that concern them.

That is why the Labour Party is in crisis. In the present condition of Britain, either democracy will be linked with an effective programme of socialist transformation, or democracy will be radically undermined and discredited.

Foot is an elitist, not a democrat

Foot's view of Stalinism is all of a piece with his views and perspectives for Britain, and his self-avowed Fabian politics. Foot - in 1982! - does not understand that Stalinist totalitarianism is the rule of a distinct social formation. Neither does he understand that the British parliamentary system is a shield and an instrument for the rule of a distinct social class. There is no more blatant example of Foot's class blindness for British politics than his inability to understand who rules in the USSR - the fact that totalitarianism arises because a minority rules over the vast oppressed majority (and therefore, Comrade Foot, it follows that totalitarianism is simply inconceivable as the instrument of a self-ruling working class majority).

The truth is, Foot himself has an elitist conception of "socialism" - a civilised Fabian elitism which he contrasts with Stalinism, and Thatcherism, but elitism, nonetheless.

Condemning Stalinism's sacrifice of generations, he insists on the need "to let them establish for themselves what may be the nature and scale of the sacrifice". But this shows he has missed the point. In a socialist democracy no elite would "let" the people decide matters: no-one else but the people could decide.

And when Foot contrasts his view of socialism to trade union direct action, the elitism is again clear: "Increasingly as the years passed, he [Aneurin Bevan] placed his confidence in collectivist, social power, to be wielded by the central state, acting through parliament, with all the devices, chances and protections of open debate which he knew so well how to exploit on behalf of...his people and his party."

But overwhelming social power always remains directly in the hands of the bourgeoisie who own factories, banks, newspapers and TV stations. The social power wielded by the central state is now in the hands of Thatcher - who got a minority of the votes cast in 1979 - and who is using that power, Jacobin fashion, to strike terrible blows at the working class and at the organised labour movement. Backed by the social power of the bourgeoisie, Thatcher is using the central state power to conduct naked, open, vindictive class warfare.

And Foot is using these arguments now to dissuade the labour movement from taking direct action to defend itself. Only the elite and the elite institutions - crowned by parliament - have the right of initiative. The working class does not have even the right of resistance to tyranny. When Foot accuses us of being anti-democratic, he takes his own elitist and bureaucratic - and parliamentarian - concept of socialism and accuses the Marxists of wanting to realise it too rapidly, too brutally and too completely.

When the Fabian looks at Stalinism, he is looking at himself in a distorting mirror - or rather in a different historical dimension. The Fabians recognise in Stalinism a development in a barren climate of their own "socialism". Most now recoil in horror, though others, like the Webbs in the 1930s, embraced Stalinism for its family likeness to themselves. The statist "socialisms" of Fabians and Stalinists are cousins if not twins. Both rest on the rule of an elite over the masses (in Britain, with a five-year release mechanism).

Marxists oppose state socialism

The Marxist programme - of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky - has always, from the 1880s at least, stood in sharp contrast to the state socialism to which both the Fabians and their monstrous cousin, Stalinism, belong on the level of ideas. Marxism proposes socialisation of the means of production to be achieved by the working class and to be administered by and for that class. As a precondition for the healthy

development of the socialist society, there is to be no state in the old sense.

The workers' state is not Stalinist collectivism, a tyrannical all-controlling state which is the instrument of the bureaucracy against the people and especially against the working class. Nor is it any version of the existing state collectivism of the Fabians, writ large or modified. Socialist transformation by the working class will only be possible if it is linked to an expansion of liberty: "every cook shall govern", as Lenin put it. When the supposedly anti-democratic Marxists advocate something other than parliamentary democracy, this expansion of liberty is what they advocate.

The present type of parliamentary democracy is organically tied to the old historical form of state power - rule of society by minorities, typically through bureaucracies. Socialism needs the destruction of that form of state power. If the bureaucratic form of state power were fused with control of the wealth-producing activities of society, then it could, even in a relatively rich society like Britain, lead to corruption, inefficiency, and abuse of power, perhaps even to a bureaucratic dictatorship. So Foot, Kinnock, etc. are right to beware of themselves and their socialism! But they should not attribute it to us.

In the view of Marxists, such a qualitative expansion of democracy in the running of society lies at the other side of a socialist revolution which overthrows capitalism (and, in the Stalinist states, the bureaucracy). But that revolution is in turn inconceivable except as the culmination of a great explosion of working class democracy and of struggles to defend, expand and deepen democracy.

Workers' socialist revolution would undoubtedly present itself to the ruling class and its hangers-on as highly authoritarian, but to the mass of the people as a great expansion of democratic self-rule. This paradox merely expresses the fact that our society is divided into two antagonistic classes, one of which must go down so that the other can rise.

In sum, then, Foot's difference with unfalsified Marxism over democracy is that he is himself a mere bourgeois democrat and an elitist, who counterposes the limited accomplishments of bourgeois democracy to the necessary future development of democracy which the working class must achieve if it is itself ever to rule directly in society. More: he has abandoned the notion of developing and deepening democracy, and maybe never understood the revolutionary Marxist goal of developing democracy beyond the present system into social and economic self-rule and self-administration.

There are two distinct but interwoven strands in the attitudes the labour movement has taken to parliamentary democracy. The first was and is ardent championing of parliamentary democracy and democratic liberties. In varying alliances with sections of the middle class, early labour movements fought to extend the suffrage and enlarge the power of parliament - often by revolutionary means.

The first mass political labour movement, Chartism, took shape around demands for the reshaping of the existing parliamentary system so as to admit the working class to the suffrage and make it possible for workers to be MPs. In Britain, as late as 1917, the Workers' Socialist Federation, led by Sylvia Pankhurst (emerging out of the Workers' Suffrage Federation, which in turn came out of the left wing of the suffragette movement in the East End) based themselves on an extremely radical programme of democratic reform, attempting to graft on to the British parliament features of the workers' council system that had just emerged in Russia.

In 1934 Trotsky suggested a united front with reformist workers in France for a similar programme.

"As long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it

with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie.

However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to 'democratic' socialism that they be faithful to their ideas, that they draw inspiration from the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic but of the Convention of 1793. Down with the Senate, which is elected by limited suffrage, and which renders the power of universal suffrage a mere illusion! Down with the presidency of the republic, which serves as a hidden point of concentration for the forces of militarism and reaction!

A single assembly must combine the legislative and executive powers. Members would be elected for two years, by universal suffrage at eighteen years of age, with no discrimination of sex or nationality. Deputies would be elected on the basis of local assemblies, constantly revocable by their constituents, and would receive the salary of a skilled worker. This is the only measure that would lead the masses forward instead of pushing them backward. A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers' power.

We want to attain our objective not by armed conflicts between the various groups of toilers, but by real workers' democracy, by propaganda and loyal criticism, by the voluntary regrouping of the great majority of the proletariat under the flag of true communism. Workers adhering to democratic socialism must further understand that it is not enough to defend democracy; democracy must be regained.

The moving of the political centre of gravity from parliament towards the cabinet, from the cabinet towards the oligarchy of finance capital, generals, police, is an accomplished fact. Neither the present parliament nor the new elections can change this.

We can defend the whole sorry remains of democracy, and especially we can enlarge the democratic arena for the activity of the masses, only by annihilating the armed fascist forces that, on 6 February 1934, started moving the axis of the state and are still doing so. "

Soviets 1917

The second strand has consisted of a drive to create new, different, specifically working class organs of democracy - either by converting old forms to the purpose, or by establishing completely new ones.

The Paris Commune in 1871 was an example of the taking over of old forms - the Paris City council! The creation of new forms began in St Petersburg, Russia, in 1905, when striking workers who did not have political rights elected their own local parliament or council of workers' deputies - the "soviet".

After the overthrow of Tsarism in February 1917, a vast network of such soviets developed, pyramids of city, district, and all-Russian gatherings. In their own way, from the ground up, the soviets realised such old working class demands as direct control of the legislature - delegates could be recalled and replaced, easily and repeatedly.

The soviet network showed itself to be a uniquely flexible and responsive system of democratic self-organisation and, increasingly, of self-rule by the Russian masses. Whereas even the most democratic parliamentary system was tied to the bourgeois military/bureaucratic structure, the soviets were radically counterposed to the surviving Tsarist military/bureaucratic state.

In 1917 the Congress of Soviets (with the Bolshevik Party as its driving force) seized state power. Thereafter the drive to reform and develop the existing parliaments gave place, for millions of revolutionary workers throughout the world, to a commitment to soviets as the highest form of democracy. Everywhere on earth, revolutionary-minded people

recognised the soviet as the working class form of democracy.

Commitment to soviets became a central part of the programme of revolutionary socialism.

"Soviet" meant, then, workers' councils within which there would be a plurality of "soviet" parties. Nobody in the communist movement - advocated the idea that soviets would be ruling organs of state, in a one-party system. Through most of the civil war in Russia and the wars of intervention, non-Bolshevik parties loyal to the workers' state - J. Martov's Menshevik Internationalists, for example - were legally active in the soviets.

When, in March 1921, at the end of the civil war, the Bolsheviks banned all other Soviet parties, it was a temporary measure, not the norm of working class rule. Not long after the Stalinists seized control: one party rule became the norm. Inevitably this Russian reality confused many communists as to exactly what soviet rule would be.

The result was to banish concern with democracy and to falsify the very language and concepts in which both the old pre-world war socialist movement, and the early communist movement, had understood democracy. In consequence, "communism" had, partly through confusion and incoherence, arising out of anti-social-democratic polemic, an anti-democratic bias, even before full-blown Stalinism.

After the full-scale Stalinist counter-revolution in the late '20s, the one-party system was proclaimed as the true working class democracy, universally applicable. The basic programmatic norms of revolutionary socialism were being pulped and destroyed. Democratic ideals and goals that had been central to radical thought since the French Revolution or even since the English revolutions of the 17th century, were replaced - though the old democratic labels were still used - by realities which concentrated in themselves the statism and authoritarianism which different embodiments of the left had been fighting for hundreds of years! Mystification and confusion inevitably followed.

Meanwhile, in the hands of the right wing of the international labour movement, the commitment to perfecting the democratic institutions of capitalist society became a commitment to the bourgeoisie against the revolutionary workers and their soviets. In German the 1918 revolution created a bourgeois democratic regime, realising most of the "democratic" demands of the old revolutionary workers' movement, but as part of a landlord-bourgeois counter-revolution against the workers, the right wing socialists allied with the Junkers against the revolutionary workers!

This prostitution by the right wing socialists of the old socialist ideals of enlarging democracy convinced revolutionary workers that only soviet democracy could serve socialist ends. It also softened them up to receive the Stalinist revelations that all the old talk of democracy meant nothing but bourgeois lies. It helped ease them into acceptance of the one-party Stalinist totalitarian state as the true proletarian democracy.

In the mid-'30s the Stalinists dropped soviets from their programme and, pursuing alliances with the right of the labour movements and with liberals to serve Russian foreign policy interests, became hypocritical worshippers of the existing parliaments. At the same time they pushed the debilitating lie that Stalinist totalitarianism was a form of "workers" democracy. This senseless assertion became an article of faith for two generations of revolutionary workers.

The basic idea that socialists must continue to struggle for human liberty and freedom was expunged from the programme of "communism". "Democracy" - like "socialism" - became a cynical catch-cry, shot through with double-think about the "democracy" of the society where the Stalinist bureaucrats ruled.

Trotsky noted the corrupting effect of this on the labour movement itself when he commented on the Norwegian Labour Party: "I soon had occasion to become convinced, by experience, that the old bourgeois functionaries sometimes have a broader viewpoint and a more profound sense of dignity than Messrs "Socialist" Ministers..."

How the question of soviets is posed now

In the class struggle, however, despite both reformists and Stalinists, embattled workers throw up soviet-type structures. Since 1917, soviets - workers' councils elected from factories and districts - have been thrown up in a large number of countries in conditions of large-scale working class struggle. From Austria, Germany and Hungary in 1918, and Hungary again in 1956, through to Gdansk in 1980, soviets have emerged as flexible forms of working class democratic self-organisation - factory committees generalised to the whole of society.

The historical experience of soviets as a form of social rule is, of course, limited. Even in the most advanced case, that of Russia, where soviets became the cellular structure of the new workers' state, the soviets had little time to evolve or develop and articulate institutions for the detailed running of society.

The bourgeoisie in countries like Britain has had centuries to evolve their parliaments and law courts and divisions of power. We had a single year! And the civil war and invading armies stifled the soviets. Stalin buried them.

As early as the end of 1918 the soviets in the USSR were being undermined as freely functioning democratic organs by the exigencies of civil war. They were shortly to be gutted of all real life. This process culminated in the ban on every party but the Bolsheviks in March 1921. Intended as a temporary civil war measure, it became fixed, as we have seen, as the norm of the Stalinist political counter-revolution.

Nevertheless it is clear:

- That these soviets, which have emerged in vastly different conditions and countries, are not accidental forms. At the very least they are valuable organs of working class self-organisation in struggle.

- In Russia before they were blasted by civil war, they were a form of democracy more flexible, adjustable and responsive than any other "parliamentary" system. And, for the sake of clarifying things in the British labour movement, it is important to be clear that soviets are a "parliamentary" system only with a more direct democracy, the right of recall, etc.

- Being independent of the existing bureaucratic/military system to which capitalist rule is tied, they are - to go by experience so far - the best form of organisation for a workers' movement that is seriously setting about transforming society against the will of the ruling class.

- That they are more appropriate than any other known form of democracy for the socialist rule of the working class, in so far as it involves a qualitative expansion of the direct exercise of democracy.

- That they can and will re-emerge at intensive levels of mass working class action, when the struggle overflows the channels of the existing system. We may have come close to it in Britain in 1972.

This is why workers, councils are a central part of the programme of revolutionary Marxism.

The word "soviet" has been utterly debased by association with the totalitarian bureaucracy of the USSR - which, as the sour old joke has it, contains four lies in its name: it is not a union, there are no soviets, it is not socialist, and it is not a republic. But Marxists remain committed to soviet democracy. We continue the old socialist commitment to

expanding democracy in a qualitative way. We explain the limits of existing democracy and the possibilities of a different democracy.

Is this Marxist commitment counterposed to the basic labour movement commitment to parliamentary democracy? Not at all. Socialism is not possible until the mass of workers want it and are prepared to realise it - neither is an extension of democracy beyond the level already attained. It is in the direct interests of the working class to defend the existing system against anti-democratic attacks. It is in our interest to extend it and better it (for example by making the next Labour prime minister subject to election by the labour movement, outside of parliament; by freeing the existing system from the dead grip of the parliamentary oligarchy of the PLP; and by ensuring that there is some relationship between what aspirant MPs and aspirant majority parties say they will do, and what they actually do). All this is the difference between good and bad circulation in the existing body politic.

Thus Marxists have much in common with people in the labour movement whose best notion of democracy is parliamentary democracy. We can agree to fight to rejuvenate the existing system; we could agree to defend it with guns against, for example, a military coup. Marxists can and do form such alliances with honest "non-soviet" democrats. The reason why we cannot and do not form such relations with the right wing and the soft left is not because we are not democrats, but because they are very bad democrats. They worship the miserably inadequate system that exists.

They have done more than any Marxist to educate sections of the labour movement about the limits of parliamentary democracy: they have even exaggerated those limits and made them far more narrow than they would be for a fighting labour movement intent on defending the working class interest. They have, in successive Labour governments, and especially since 1964, done more than anyone else to discredit parliamentary democracy and render cynical large sections of the labour movement. This cynicism has corroded not only democracy but the political consciousness of the labour movement. Marxists, while we tell the workers who listen to us that they should rely only on their own strength, see no advantage or gain for our politics in cynicism about politics, or even about the existing parliament.

While small groups can advance to a higher understanding by way of such disillusionment, the great mass of the labour movement is thrown back by it. The mass of the labour movement will advance to a better understanding of the limits of parliamentary democracy, not by pure disgust with the Labour right - that is a passive, politically limited response - but most likely by class struggle which includes attempts to use to the very maximum the existing institutions of the labour movement and of British bourgeois democracy.

Soviets in Britain?

How might soviets emerge in Britain? When you look concretely at how the existing British parliamentary system might be displaced by workers' councils, the difference between Marxist democrats and the burnt-out parliamentarians becomes clear. The difference between what we really stand for and the lies they tell about us become clear.

Propaganda by Marxists will not by itself win enough workers to support for workers' councils ("soviets") to threaten the parliamentary system. The relevant historical experience on which the proposal is based is too remote. Propaganda alone could not win the mass of workers away from commitment to the existing parliamentary system.

Even if it is partly eroded, belief in the parliamentary system is still very deep and powerful in the British people and the labour movement. And the system still has a lot of flexibility. Soviets have most often emerged in conditions where

parliamentary democracy did not exist, or was severely limited. The precondition for soviets in Britain to move from the realm of propaganda and accounts of history to the realm of practical working class politics would be - obviously - mass struggle, but also and centrally a major erosion of belief that parliament is an accessible democratic institution.

Councils of Action having many points in common with soviets came into existence in Britain in 1920. Something like an incipient soviet emerged in Durham during the 1926 General Strike. But even if a vast network of Councils of Action were now to emerge in a general strike, it is unlikely that they would starkly counterpose themselves to the existing system, as an alternative system of democratic rule - unless there were a serious erosion of belief in parliament as the democratic system. The use of parliamentary elections would be a major weapon of the ruling class and of the right with which to derail and demobilise any general strike movement. That is what they did in France in 1968.

How will such an erosion of belief in Westminster occur? Even if a large revolutionary Marxist party existed, it could not occur, I repeat, as a result of propaganda alone. It will only occur when the ruling class - in response to the exigencies of the struggle against the working class to keep or exert control - is forced to begin to abrogate its own system, to downgrade it, thereby, over time, robbing its processes of credibility.

Thus the existing system would have to be undermined from two sides - by growing self-confidence, self-organisation, and disillusionment with parliament among the working class, and by growing impatience or desperation among the ruling class.

This is what Marxists such as Trotsky teach us on this question. I have already quoted Trotsky's call to the social reformist workers of France to defend parliamentary democracy (1934). In the same vein he warned Marxists not to make a religion of soviets. This advice has one hundred times greater force today, when the experience of the initial liberating Russian soviets is so far back in history. "Soviets" now are, and can only be, a matter of propaganda: and the socialist who would counterpose such propaganda to the necessary working class struggle, which must include struggles around the existing parliamentary system, is a sectarian fool, incapable of learning either from life or from Trotsky's approach in France.

Now, if the Marxist expectation that the ruling class will not be bound by its own parliamentary rules is wrong, then very probably "soviets" will remain a matter of propaganda by Marxists who favour soviets as a different, better system of democracy. In that case, the right and the soft left, who now witch-hunt those who advocate a different form of democracy as enemies of democracy, have little to worry about.

They worry, in fact, because they are not quite naive liberals. Foot, in his Observer articles, talked of the danger of the "storm-troopers". He says that the left gains from the parliamentary niceties because the right has a tradition of fighting and the left does not. He knows the political facts of life, but he lacks the socialist seriousness to try to call new facts into being - like the fact of a working class militia, for example.

What do we do when the bourgeoisie does begin to disrupt democracy and attack it? The labour movement will fight back. We will not abandon bourgeois democracy or democratic rights. Soviets may well arise in defence of parliamentary democracy - as the only way to continue what was valuable in bourgeois democracy, when it is abandoned by the bourgeoisie as the class struggle escalates.

We will defend democratic rights tooth and nail, and with guns. Most of the right wing "professional democrats" won't. The German Social Democrats helped the Junker army to massacre revolutionary workers in 1919 under the banner of preserving parliamentary democracy: they meekly

surrendered it to Hitler in 1933. The Party leader in the Reichstag, Otto Wels, meekly offered his and his party's collaboration to Hitler, who didn't need it then.

So it is not our propaganda for a different sort of democracy, soviets, that worries the right, nor is it only that we lack respect for "Parliament". It is not even entirely a matter of grabbing a convenient demarcation line to serve an organisational purpose now. What is it then that worries them? What is the dividing line between them and us? The dividing line is extraparliamentary struggle now. Their main target is not Trotskyists making propaganda for soviets, it is the serious reformist left. They are using the witch-hunt against the allegedly anti-democratic Trotskyists as a means of frightening the less determined section of the left out of any will that Labour and the unions should fight the Tories now, using extraparliamentary action where appropriate.

The print union SOGAT is now proposing strike action in open, proud defiance of the Tory anti-union laws. Are the leaders of the Labour Party seriously proposing to rule out such action? Are they seriously proposing that the labour movement should allow itself to be crippled? Yes, they are! Their fire is directed now at those who want to fight back. They prefer to counterpose the existing parliamentary system to the needs of the living labour movement. They stand for an exaggeratedly slavish legalism - and against resistance to a government that is an outrage against the spirit of even bourgeois democracy.

Their rallying cry, "democracy", is a double lie because they will not fight back against Thatcher even to defend the democracy they now hide behind against the criticism of the Marxists. It is the "anti-democratic" Marxists who want to defend trade union rights and democracy against Thatcher, not the professional democrats!

We have heard Foot's canting, his denunciation of what he thinks is a certain form of socialism - though in fact he is dealing with Stalinism, the rule of a distinct social bureaucracy, and not with any form of socialism - in the now fashionable bourgeois-liberal formula which faults Stalinism for "sacrificing generations". But in Britain now, it is the socialists who reject Michael Foot's fetish of the existing forms of parliamentary democracy, or at least reject the rules that would sanctify Thatcher's work as the distillate of pure parliamentary democracy, who oppose the "sacrifice of generations".

It is Foot and his friends who are willing to sacrifice this generation of British young people! Unlike Foot, we can conceive of a different and better society, and we think the labour movement should fight for it. Politically prostrate, Foot can only hope for a new, tepid Labour government, to do things more humanely than Thatcher.

Foot is no longer even notionally a socialist: his programme now is not that of a socialist, but that of a liberal humanitarian administration of capitalism. He wants to soften the blows of British capitalism's decline, but no doubt will be willing again to obey the dictates of the IMF, and to make secret deals to sustain the state apparatus of potential violence against the working class. That is the grand conclusion from his great historical excursion into Stalinism - don't go for "remote ends" or a different system, go for a new middle-of-the-road or right wing Labour administration.

He is willing to bowdlerise the living historical process by abstracting from it the struggles of socialists for a socialist solution to the present convulsions of British capitalism. He talks of the "treason" of those on the left whom he says are now reconciled to defeat in the next election. But it is the witch-hunters who are willing to gut the party to make it safe for themselves to commit this treason. The left is not reconciled to electoral defeat.

There is another, and more deadly, sort of defeat, though - inner political defeatism such as Foot's which abandons the very goal of socialism and disguises this with a great show of commitment to electoral victory.

Foot's reasoning, and its conclusion of hopelessness, passivity, fetish worship and superstitious dread of action, offers nothing to the working class movement now, or to socialism, or to "democracy". Our great tragedy is that Foot and his friends are the incumbent leaders of the labour movement. Their passivity threatens us with disaster. It is a major factor now on Thatcher's side in the class struggle.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who was destroyed in a Mussolini jail, put it all very clearly long ago: "Reality is the result of the application of wills to the society of things...to put aside every voluntary effort and calculate only the intervention of other wills as an objective element in the general game is to mutilate reality itself. Only those who strongly want to do it identify the necessary element for the realisation of their will." (The Modern Prince, my emphasis). By their self-effacing passivity, their refusal to lead the labour movement in a fightback now, Foot and his friends mutilate reality. They help Thatcher and encourage her!

What do we need to do instead? Thatcher's drastic action for the ruling class needs to be met with drastic working class action in self-defence and in pursuit of our own interests. The labour movement needs to rouse itself into a campaign to bring down this undemocratic and anti-working class government!

The labour movement desperately needs a perspective of hope and a belief in the possibility of an alternative system. The labour movement needs to have its vague commitment to socialism honed sharp and clear; it needs to rededicate itself to the fight for a more representative, more flexible and more real democracy than this one.

Only the struggle for a workers' government which will base itself on the roused and active masses of the working class - that is, on mass workers' democracy - offers a road out of Britain's impasse. Only a labour movement which is willing and eager to use its strength in industry and on the streets to challenge the government, and to deny its claims to democratic validity, will be able to rally the forces to carve out that road.

6. How the AWL works

Introductory briefing for new members

Activists and sympathisers

An activist - or member - of the AWL is expected to:

- guarantee a minimum of activity and attendance at meetings;
- defend the organisation and basic politics of the AWL in the labour movement, accepting the democratic, collective discipline of the organisation in day-to-day political work;
- sell the AWL's publications;
- pay regular contributions to the organisation.

There is a six month period of 'candidate' membership for all activists, during which they are not entitled to a vote. During this period, before becoming full members, new activists go through a basic education course and establish a regular pattern of activity (this system is designed to protect the AWL's democracy, by ensuring that the people who have the deciding votes on our policy are those who are firmly committed to carrying them out and who know something of the political background to those decisions). If you want to help our work, but are not willing to become an AWL activist, you can become an AWL sympathiser. We ask sympathisers to pay us a regular financial contribution - as much or as little as you like. Only activists have a deciding vote in our political decisions (e.g. at our conference). Precise details of our decision-making and structures - including activists' rights to discuss and dissent - are outlined in the AWL constitution.

The obligations of activists

- The AWL and the broad workers' movement need politically educated activists. It is an AWL member's duty to read, participate in internal and external debates and discussions, and to attend AWL education courses and programmes. AWL democracy depends on an educated membership made up of individuals who are capable of independently assessing complex political questions. Studying Marxism must be a basic part of every activist's political work, and the AWL organises classes and schools to help.
- "The emancipation of the proletariat is not a labour of small account and of little people: only they who can keep their heart strong and their will as sharp as a sword when the general disillusionment is at its worst can be regarded as fighters for the working class or called revolutionaries." - Antonio Gramsci Slow-moving, bureaucratic, social-democratic organisations require - and depend on - a token level of commitment and activity from their members. A revolutionary group must be the opposite. To have the necessary political sharpness and strength required for the hard struggles ahead, we need a high level of activity and commitment from our activists.
- Our perspective is not an all-out six month dash from now to the revolution. We try to accommodate comrades' special interests and the practical difficulties our activists face in everyday life. However we ask that:
 - if you have agreed to carry out a job, you do it;
 - comrades are willing to participate in full national mobilisations where necessary (for particular demonstrations or events);
 - comrades attend our national meetings (conference and summer schools)
 - extra effort is put in when a major struggle takes place (a big strike or campaign).
- Activists' regular, routine, minimum obligations are:
 - regular attendance at your local AWL branch and fraction (see section on 'AWL fractions') and union meetings;
 - regular public AWL activity - i.e. specifically AWL activity, not just general labour movement or student movement work: literature sales or street stalls or contact visiting, etc.
 - regular sales of AWL literature at work, at meetings and to interested individuals. AWL members sell our magazine Workers' Liberty, books and pamphlets produced by the organisation, as well as our paper Solidarity. Sales money is remitted to the organisation;

- a regular financial commitment, dependant on income and circumstances;
- conscientious fulfilment of all obligations to the labour movement.
- The AWL expects activists to abide by majority decisions and the decisions of the appropriate elected committees and organisers. Comrades must be prepared to discuss all political activity in local AWL organisations and appropriate AWL fractions.
- Activists should consult the organisation about changes in job or residence, or when taking a job when leaving college. Our policy is that comrades should try to get work in areas - geographical and industrial - which are politically useful.

Education

We have a [basic education course](#) which includes short items to read on fundamental issues of Marxist politics. Your local group will organise a series of discussions to cover the basic reading course. Once you have completed this course part of your AWL work will be to help other new members educate themselves. It is indispensable, of course, that you read the books we publish, the magazine, and the paper Solidarity, and join in the discussions around these which are held in your AWL branch.

Recruitment

All revolutionary activity depends on convincing people of our ideas, and almost always face-to-face discussion is decisive in this. In every sphere, we seek out those who are interested in talking to us, and try to develop discussions, ensure they receive our literature regularly, and develop areas of co-operation in practical work. The rules are simple:

- listen to what people say; don't lecture;
- seek out the quiet people, too - the people who sit at the back of the meeting, or the less confident, or those who are "so-and-so's friend";
- be positive and assertive. Our politics are an urgent call to turn the world upside down. Propose them accordingly. Say what we think positively, and talk about our differences with other left groups in that context.

We aim to get regular, structured political meetings with those that are interested. Such meetings can begin with whatever a particular individual is interested in, and move on to more abstract ideas and general Marxist theory. We encourage people to read our material and the Marxist classics - by lending or selling literature to them - and then encourage them to discuss what they have read with us. The main point of such discussions is not so much to get people to do things, but rather to convince them of our ideas. Once someone has a minimal commitment you should ask for them to help our work, give money and promote our organisation.

Selling our publications

Selling publications is important financially. It is even more important politically. It is one of the two main ways we have of getting over our ideas (the other is by the main ways we have of getting across our ideas and making new contacts. If you feel nervous at first, do a sale alongside or with another comrade. Here are the rules for the various types of sale:

- **Street and college sales:** use a petition - when a passer-by signs, ask them to buy a paper. If they buy a paper, say a few words about the political work we are doing; ask them if they want to be kept informed. If they seem interested tell them about our next public meeting (you should have leaflets with you). Approach people as they pass (be polite); don't stand around silent and glum, or chatting to other AWLers. Your branch should have a stall (a portable paste table) on which magazines, leaflets and papers are placed in addition to holding papers.
- **Door-to-door sales:** The best times are early evening or Sunday morning. Take a note of who you sell to, and then go back with the next issue. Introduce yourself: "We are selling Solidarity and campaigning against privatisation (or whatever is on the front page). Would you like a copy? It is 80 pence, or 30 pence unwaged". If people are prepared to talk, discuss with them. Ask them if they want to be kept informed about our work.

- Sell at college or at work. If victimisation is a real threat at work, identify interested individuals and sell to them discreetly.
- Always have papers and magazines with you. You can sell to people with whom you strike up a conversation on a train or bus. At meetings, ask each person present to buy a copy. Don't stand in a corner, don't ignore right-wingers and members of other groups. Stay behind at the end of meetings or demonstrations, because often that is the best time to sell literature or strike up conversations.

Finance

We have no big financial backers and our organisation could not function without regular financial contributions from our members and sympathisers. The most reliable and time-saving method of paying subs and literature money is by standing order, monthly. (Download a form [here](#)). If a comrade does not have a bank account, payment is made in cash to the local branch treasurer. We ask comrades to guarantee a minimum number of paper and magazine sales and include this money in their standing order payments. The minimum number of papers and magazines comrades take is six of each, per issue (one for yourself and five to sell), although it should be possible, soon, for most comrades to sell more. The minimum monthly subs are: £2.50 unwaged; £5 students; £5 waged ([rising, dependent on income and circumstances](#)). Many branches make small local levies to pay for meeting rooms and other running expenses.

Internal schools

New activists are invited to an introductory school. This school deals with some basic ideas as well as practical matters of AWL organisation. In addition education schools are regularly held at local, regional and national levels.

Our meetings

Our basic meetings, local branch meetings, are held weekly. Local AWL public meetings are monthly. In addition:

- Our National Committee, elected at the conference, meets about every six weeks to take political decisions and guide the organisation. Occasionally we hold 'extended' NCs, at which all activists are invited to attend a special meeting to discuss some particular pressing issue. Activists can send resolutions to the NC.
- We have an Executive Committee, a London-based sub-committee of the NC, which meets weekly to guide the organisation between NC meetings.
- Discussion and the internet. We have policy which encourages all activists to get an internet address and sign up to the AWL's e-lists, including the [awl-announcements](#) information list, the [awl-debate](#) list, and the higher-volume [awl-chat](#) list. You can send messages to the debate and chat lists. Printed Discussion Bulletins, collating material from the debate list, are also produced from time to time. mailings by post. The AWL web site www.workersliberty.org carries both current political comment, access to the AWL e-lists, access to AWL circulars and Discussion Bulletins, and other resources.

AWL fractions

In addition to local branch structures and meetings the AWL operates through 'fractions' organised around areas of work. We have various trade union fractions, a student fraction and we operate 'fraction work' in the Labour Party (i.e. certain specific AWL members operate, carefully, in the Labour Party, where our organisation is banned and open membership can lead to expulsion). Fractions have their own convenors and meetings, organising our day-to-day work in their particular areas of responsibility. Ask the [AWL office](#) if you need contact details for your relevant fraction, or have any other questions about how the AWL works not covered by this briefing.