

The formation of the SWP

By Sean Matgamna

The formation of the SWP

“Standing resolutely on the side of the proletariat, the socialists do everything in their power to facilitate and hasten its victory. But what exactly can they do in this case?”

“A necessary condition for the victory of the proletariat is its recognition of its own position, its relations with its exploiters, its historic role and its socio-political tasks.

“For this reason the socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness.

“The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause: everything that slows it down as harmful” Plekhanov, *The Tasks of the Social Democrats in the Famine*.

“Tactics contradict principles” Tony Cliff (quoted by Ian Birchall, *International Socialism* no.127)

We are now in the middle of a capitalist crisis whose equal has not been seen for decades. And yet the left is ineffective. It is divided into a number of competing and usually hostile organisations, the biggest of which is the SWP.

Where do those divisions come from? We can identify a series of junctures where forces have been scattered.

At the end of the 1940s, the RCP, which had for a while united all the Trotskyist tendencies in Britain apart from one small group, broke up. Out of that came the Cliff group (today the SWP), the Grant group (today the Socialist Party), and the Healy organisation (which collapsed in 1985). That division set the pattern for the whole of the 1950s. There were occasionally other small groups, but the three main groups were shaped by the break-up of the RCP.

A second scattering came from the sectarian self-destruct

Imperialism

In the early and mid 60s, one of IS's dogmas was the belief that imperialism had ended. Michael Kidron wrote an article in 1962 with a smart-alec title, “Imperialism, highest stage but one”, referring to Lenin's pamphlet, “Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism”.

There were still colonial wars going on, and would be, in Portuguese Africa for example, until the mid-1970s; but in essence it was true that the old *colonial* imperialism was vanishing.

The group had until then been anti-imperialist even to a fault, for example in ignoring the question of the Stalinist regime that would result from China repossessing Taiwan and Hong Kong. But on the whole it had a good record. Now it was the group that believed that imperialism no longer existed.

On this too they were following someone else, in this case John Strachey, who had been a leading Stalinist in the 1930s and a Labour minister in the 1940s, and wrote a book called *The End of Imperialism* in 1957.

It is strange that the same group should evolve into the super-anti-imperialism which characterises it now and has characterised it since 1987 — where they are so much “anti-imperialist” that they don't care who they ally with, blatant reactionaries or regional imperialists, as long as they are in conflict with the USA.

In 1987 they suddenly discovered that the Americans were on the side of the Iraqis in the Iran-Iraq war, a terrible war for regional domination with trench battles like the First World War and poison gas and vast casualties, a war that had been going since 1980. That hadn't been news to anyone since 1980, because at that point the US saw Iran as its main enemy in the region.

The SWP swung to siding with Iran, and its “anti-imperialism” became utterly measureless. Very quickly the SWP's “anti-imperialism” became so one-sided that they didn't differentiate from the people they were siding with. For the last decade or more we've had the terrible example of the SWP's alignment with political Islam.

If you go back in a time machine to 1950, for certain a group with the political method of the SWP now would have lined up with North Korea because it was fighting the big imperial power, the USA.

Lindsey German and John Rees split off in 2011 to form Counterfire. The splintering will probably continue

tion of the SLL in the 1960s. Most of the activists scattered by the SLL disappeared from organised revolutionary politics, but one of the products of that scattering was Workers' Fight, which then became the Trotskyist Tendency, and today the AWL.

The next big scattering came with the tightening-up of the regime in IS, from say 1971 to 1975. In 1971, Workers' Fight (the Trotskyist Tendency), which had fused with IS in 1968, was expelled.

The Right Opposition, which called itself the Revolutionary Opposition, was expelled in 1973; and then split into a number of groups, the most important of which remaining is the RCG and the best known of which was the RCP (now Spiked Online).

The “IS Opposition” which was expelled from IS in late 1975 had about 200 members, including many of the leading cadre of the previous period. They formed the Workers' League, and one could have expected them to do well. In fact they fell apart quickly. They biodegraded; some of them went off to bourgeois careers, and the leading journalist in the group, Roger Protz, who had edited *Socialist Worker* from 1968, became the well-paid champion of real ale.

A “Left Faction” had taken form in 1972, heavily under the influence of Workers' Fight. They were expelled in 1975 and immediately fused with Workers' Fight. Various differences then led to the splitting-off of a little more than half of the Left Faction people who had fused. After many mutations they became the Workers' Power and Permanent Revolution groups of today.

There has been a new period of scattering more recently; and it is continuing. The crisis of the SWP has already produced Counterfire (John Rees and Lindsey German) and the International Socialist Group (Chris Bambery), and it seems unlikely the process of the SWP shedding splinters has ended.

Some of the differences that have contributed to the splintering, and then become consolidated, are of real importance. They can't be wished away or skated over. Realistically today we cannot hope for a full unification of all the left groups, though in general terms that would be desirable. We can unite the groups in action on specific questions, and seek dialogue where there are serious differences.

One of the consequences of the sectist nature of the SWP and of the SLL before it has been the atrophy of any real discussion on the left. There was discussion in the 1950s and 60s. But that habit of dialogue has broken down. The spirit of Zinoviev has come to rule among the British left-wing groups — raucous heresy-hunting and demonisation.

We need unity in action where we agree, and real dialogue about our differences. That needs a transformation of the culture of the left.

Fully to overcome entrenched divisions — divisions which have their own autonomy because they are bound up with party leaders, party machines, petrified dogmas — takes some tremendous event like the Russian Revolution which sidelines those divisions because it presents everyone with new perspectives, new ideas, new tasks.

Even then, the unification in Britain, for example, is incomplete. The formation of the old Communist Party (1920-1) brought together the British Socialist Party (which had been the SDF); the De Leonites, who were in some respects sectarian but in others had been the clearest of the socialists in the previous period; a group around Sylvia Pankhurst originating in an attempt to relate the suffragette movement

to the working class in East London; and others.

Even then the leadership of the De Leonites never joined the Communist Party. Sylvia Pankhurst was soon expelled. But the main bulk of the organisations stayed.

There is no magic formula that will bring about unity at will. But we can consciously create a culture where real dialogue is possible, and a will to find unity in common areas of activity.

And we can foster a culture of democracy. Splits may happen anyway, however good the movement's democracy. But splits are absolutely inevitable given a culture where the majority rules absolutely and the minority must not only observe unity in action — which was Lenin's conception — but also be silent and publicly pretend to agree with politics they do not really agree with and may detest. This conception of “democratic centralism” is an engine of dispersal. It comes from Stalinism. It was not Lenin's conception. He wrote in 1906:

“Criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Programme must be quite free, not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism... cannot be prohibited. The Party's political action must be united. No calls that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at public meetings, or at Party members, or in the Party press”.

We need a cultural transformation. And that is one of the reasons why the AWL publishes material from the past dealing with these questions, for example material from the Workers' Party of the USA in the 1940s, which was very active in the class struggle but nevertheless maintained a democracy which allowed for real discussion.

This is a fundamental practical question. If we'd had that transformation, if the forces of the left were at all adequate, then we might have won the miners' strike in 1984-5. In fact the SWP was sectarian and aloof for the first six months of it. The Militant (today the SP) was immersed in its own manoeuvring to preserve its base in Liverpool council. Instead of mobilising the working class in Liverpool alongside the miners, it made a deal with the Tories for short-term financial expedients to rescue Liverpool council which secured nothing for longer than a year.

Either the revolutionary party is a movement such as Marx and Lenin and Trotsky described, regulated by the logic of the class struggle, or it is something that sees its own organisational needs as central. During the miners' strike, and with tremendously bad consequences, the SP did see its own organisational needs as central.

Yes, indeed, we need to build a party “machine”. But the machine is only of use if it is attuned to the working class and its struggles. We have to educate the working class — about the nature of capitalism, the history of capitalism, the history of the revolutionary movement. We have to learn the lessons of the errors which destroyed previous revolutionary organisations or made them inadequate. That can only be done by building a party which is a “machine”, but is also democratic and governed by the logic of the class struggle and the imperative to discover and tell the truth.

If the groupings within the SWP now had a culture in which they could take it for granted that differences emerge, even when all sides are arguing in good faith, then they could have had a real dialogue. On each issue there would then be a majority which decided what the group did; but the structure of the SWP, the fact that it has a culture hostile to any real debate, has decreed a situation where it seems certain that the SWP will scatter a lot more activists.

Seven Periods

We can periodise IS, and the Socialist Review group which came before it, in the following fashion.

- From 1948 to their expulsion in 1950, as an ideological trickle inside the majority “orthodox Trotskyist” group, the RCP

- From 1950 to 1953. In 1953 the group goes through a crisis and then reorganises with a simplified but regular paper

- From late 1953 to 1957. By this time the SR group is solidly immersed in the Labour Party. In the first years, after the collapse of the RCP in August 1949, it had been much more “sectarian”, though it was in the Labour Party

- A period of transition which ends about 1960, with an apparent crisis and loss of members in 1959

- The supposedly “Luxemburgist” period, from 1960 to 1968. The group grew sizeably, first in line with a general

The formation of the SWP

Socialist Review's record on Korea was not quite as the conventional history portrays it

growth of all the revolutionary groups inside the new Labour Party youth movement. After 1965-6 it drifted away from the Labour Party and then grew quickly thanks to the tumult of 1968 and the descent into suicidal sectarianism of what had been the most visible revolutionary group, Gerry Healy's SLL (later WRP)

- 1968 to 1971: the reintroduction of so-called "Leninism". The creation of a formal structure and machine with an array of full-time organisers. After 1970, a rush for recruitment based on the fact that industrial struggles against the Tory government are opening up new chances to recruit trade-unionists. An increasing impatience with democratic procedures or theoretical scruples which may inhibit the implementation of hunches or improvisations which bring advantage and growth. This culminates with IS's shift of line on Europe, and the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency (forerunner of AWL) in 1971.

- From December 1971 to 1975-6 the regime is finally tightened. After 1975-6, the IS's (from January 1977 the SWP's) operation is more and more an aping of Healy. It is interesting to trace the various subsequent ups and downs and zigzags, but the group is fully-formed by that stage.

The IS group, forerunner of the SWP, and before it the Socialist Review group, was something of a personality cult round Tony Cliff. Not just Cliff, but Cliff and his family: his wife, Chanie Rosenberg, his brother-in-law, Michael Kidron, and at one stage, I believe, another sister of Chanie and Kidron, were operating in a group which at the end of the 1950s had about 20 members.

Despite the myths and the appearances, SR was in substance an "orthodox Trotskyist" tendency with quirks. The quirk throughout the 1950s was that it considered Russia to be state-capitalist. The break in the pattern covers most of the 1960s, when it declared itself Luxemburgist, counterposing an imaginary Luxemburg to Lenin, or, in fact, to an imaginary Lenin. And then in 1968 Cliff reimposed "Leninism", which, for him, meant stuff he had learned in his formative period.

Korea

The Socialist Review group started with the expulsion in 1950 of some people from the main "orthodox Trotskyist" organisation, forerunner of the SLL, which was then called The Club. They were purged ostensibly because of their line on Korea. They rejected the support for North Korea which was to be the position of the Fourth International. In reality, they grouped people around them who were simply hostile to the authoritarian Healy regime in The Club.

I've been told by Ken Tarbuck, who was for a while secretary of the Socialist Review group, that there were 60 or 70 people at SR's first meeting. Nothing like that number were consolidated. You can make some guess at their numbers from their publications.

"Socialist Review" began in November 1950 as a stencil-duplicated magazine. In all, between November 1950 and April 1952, when the first printed SR appeared, seven duplicated numbers were published.

One of the myths in the very mythologised SWP-IS history was that there was first the theoretical period, then the propaganda period; and when they had sorted out their propaganda and educated a cadre, they started doing things. It's moonshine.

State capitalism played very little part in the public expression of the early SR group. Oddly, the early SR group also published very little about Korea.

SR no.1 had nothing on Korea except a mention in a single introductory paragraph to a general background article on US-USSR rivalry. "The war in Korea serves the great Powers as a rehearsal for their intended struggle for the redivision of the globe. The fate of the Korean people is a grave warning to all humanity what sufferings the march of aggressive imperialist Powers will entail. To understand the real aims of the Powers and how they affect the interests of the international working class is a prime duty of every Socialist". Cliff, as a journalist, always tended to write background papers: the political conclusions were left vague and could vary enormously.

Socialist Review no.2 reprinted an article from a SRI Lankan Trotskyist as its line on Korea. In December 1952 SR came out with an article, its first substantial comment on Korea in two and a half years, with the chief demand: "The complete withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea". It called for "A united Korean nation to be allowed to decide its own fate in its own way, as it is entitled to do" and "All foreign powers who have had troops in Korea to pay whatever Government the Korean people create, a sum equal in value to their military expenses in the campaign, the money to be raised by a capital levy".

This meant that the Chinese troops and the US and allied troops under the UN banner should quit. That would leave what you had in 1950, when the North Korean army cut like the proverbial knife through butter into the south. It was a serious reorientation towards support for the North. The implication was plainly: let the Stalinists win.

Thus the story, long sustained by the Healy organisation, and believed by us for many years, that SR refused any defence to Korea on the grounds that the Korean war was a proxy war between the US and the USSR, is more a myth than historical truth.

Reassessing the issues today, however, it *was* a proxy war.

If you look at North Korea today, which is in its third generation of hereditary Stalinist monarchs, with the people half-starving, it seems very ironic indeed that Korea was a cause of so many ructions in the Trotskyist movement, and that failure to side with North Korea could seem so damnable at the time and for decades after.

In 1950, all the Trotskyists had been very hostile to Stalinism in Korea. The main Trotskyist group, the SWP-USA, did not come out with support for North Korea until about six weeks after the war started. Then it did it by a bit of mental juggling. The SWP-USA knew it was Stalinism that was being spread. They didn't like Stalinism. They didn't want Stalinism.

They believed that Russia was a degenerated workers' state, and ergo, if Russia replicated its structure, as it had in much of Eastern Europe, the result had to be some sort of workers' states. However, the SWP-USA did not arrive at that conclusion firmly until the end of the 1940s. It was very unhappy about the invasion of South Korea by the North.

It solved the problem this way: James P Cannon wrote an open letter to the President and Congress of the United States in which he identified what was going on in Korea as "the

The myth of the golden age

The history of the British Trotskyist movement has largely been written from the viewpoint of the majority of the RCP (the main Trotskyist group in the 1940s). There is a myth of a golden age of the RCP. But it is a myth.

The RCP collapsed in 1949. Its central leader, Jock Haston, quickly evolved to the right, and was involved in the right wing of the ETU for much of its subsequent life.

The minority of the RCP, which was led by Gerry Healy, has had a very bad press. In some ways it is a deservedly bad press. But it is misleading to read the Healyism of the 1970s and 80s backwards into history.

The Healyites were confused, politically very confused indeed. But, for example, they refused to follow the RCP leaders in their position that the East European states were deformed workers' states. They didn't have an alternative, and eventually they followed Cannon into accepting the "deformed workers' state" formula. But they were better than the others.

The only Trotskyist group in the world to support the final totalitarian Stalinist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 was the RCP.

Throughout the late 1940s the Healyites advocated involvement in the Labour Party. From 1945 that made very good sense indeed, and the sectarianism of the RCP majority was no golden age.

The Healyites' regime was always pretty authoritarian, but it did not become the full-scale horror which IS and SWP emulated until the late 1950s or early 1960s. And the Healyites did things. They organised the left. They related to the broad labour movement.

The horror story is told that when the RCP collapsed, and its remnant went into a fusion with the Healy group which had separated from the RCP in 1947 and gone into the Labour Party, publishing a monthly paper, Healy got the leadership although his supporters were a minority, and used the leadership to purge the majority. It is true, and it is a horrible story.

But it had been established in the middle 40s that they could not agree on what to do in the Labour Party. The majority had come into the Labour Party after the RCP collapsed, but their basic attitude had not changed. They remained sectarians, making propaganda in an alien environment rather than trying to organise the left.

For the Healyites to accept rule over their Labour Party work by the old RCP sectarians because they were a majority was never reasonable. I don't know whether Healy and Pablo had it in mind to fuse and then smash the old majority, but in reality there was no possibility that the call for unity could have answered any of the practical questions about activity in the Labour Party. The Healyites were right to think that the old RCP majority would ruin their work in the Labour Party if they got a chance.

The golden age of the RCP is a myth, and one to which IS and the SWP used to subscribe.

The formation of the SWP

Korean revolution", reducing Stalinism to a mere detail.

Although SR had its theory that Russia was state-capitalist, its evolution on Korea was in fact not very different from the SWP-USA's. But it took two and a half years, not six weeks, to catch up.

The SR Group 1950-5

One way of getting a picture of the early SR group is through an archaeological survey of its publications. The first seven issues were stencil-duplicated magazines of between 26 and 42 pages. Those first issues were a "magazine" rather than a "paper". SR described itself on the first cover as "Live writing on the left", but in fact much of it was heavy, research-paper-type articles, statistics-dense and turgid. The dominant conception evidently was that Marxism was primarily an understanding of the economic background to politics.

In April-May 1952, SR went into print, 12 quarto-size pages (smaller than A4), with quite small print. In that printed 12-page format eight issues were produced, between April 1952 and October 1953.

In 1953 the group had some sort of crisis. A number of the founding members left the group. That included Don Hallas, or as he later called himself Duncan Hallas, who after a 15-year "sabbatical" came back to the organisation in 1968. Only two issues came out between December 1952 and October 1953. Readers were offered no explanation for the break.

From October 1953 SR was more or less stabilised as a monthly. Michael Kidron, Cliff's brother-in-law, who, I guess, had just come from South Africa, became editor. SR

was now a smaller size — eight pages of bigger type. It read more like a youth paper — a rather turgid youth paper, but it was all very elementary. Kidron had a long series of articles on the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International, but on a very simplistic level.

There certainly was no propaganda for the group's special view on Russia in SR, and the group did not have a printed version of Cliff's 1948 document on Russia until 1955. SR retained this format until December 1956, when it was substantially expanded.

This was a very small group, which, after the mysterious crisis in 1953, was then re-stabilised on a much lower level of publication.

Within that framework, there were bizarre episodes. In June 1953 there was a working-class uprising in East Germany. It was the major example before the Hungarian revolution of open working-class conflict with the Stalinist states. The orthodox Trotskyists split, in part over a difference of opinion about whether they, defending Russia as they did, should demand the Russian army withdraw from Germany. Healy and the British group went with Cannon and the SWP-USA, arguing, against Michel Pablo, that they should call for withdrawal of Russian troops.

For six months SR said nothing at all about the events in East Germany! Its paper did not appear very often in 1953, but this was the sort of major event that should energise anybody to make a special effort. The first comment on East Germany in SR was in December 1953, and then it was a reprint from C L R James's group. I don't know how to explain that, but it shows that the picture of the early SR as a group focused on sharpening its understanding of Stalinism and its critique of "orthodox" Trotskyism is almost entirely a myth.

Was the SR group of that time "Third Camp"-ist? Yes, im-

PLICITLY. But it was not at all identified publicly as "Third Camp"-ist. It did not use the term until 1955, when the slogan "For the Third Camp!" appeared in three issues of SR (August, September, October 1955), and then disappeared again. The prominent self-proclaimed "Third Camp" socialist group in Britain then was the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had separated from the Labour Party, which it had helped found, in 1932, and was still a fairly sizeable presence in the early 1950s.

Another myth is that SR had links with the Shachtman organisation in the USA (the ISL) from the beginning. That is not at all clear from SR's publications.

In the early issues of SR there was a heavy reliance on reprints, often reprints from the ISL-USA paper *Labor Action*. There was one advertisement in SR for *Labor Action*. There is no other evidence of any collusion.

The ISL's chief and most visible links in Britain at that time were with the ILP. The ILP was "Third Camp"-ist. Confusedly so: as an organisation, it was a hotch-potch, with many different tendencies. But the ILP paper *Socialist Leader* was quite a big paper, with a circulation much bigger than the ILP's declining membership.

As far as the files of SR tell us, closer links between SR and the ISL were not established until 1956.

SR and state capitalism

What role was played for SR by the theory of state capitalism, which is said to have been the lodestone of the tendency, the magic talisman which protected them from the mistakes that other Trotskyists made? Very little.

The Trotskyist Tendency 1968-71

The Trotskyist Tendency came from Workers' Fight, forerunner of AWL, a small group perhaps ten strong when it merged with IS in December 1968. We merged on the basis that we could continue to argue inside the group for what we considered to be authentic Trotskyism while cooperating in practical work.

We entered as an ideological tendency, not a faction. Our distinctiveness was in our general political approach and tradition, not in this or that conflict with the leadership on immediate questions. We remained a tendency all the way through, even though at the end we were forced formally to declare ourselves a faction by the new rules adopted in 1970 and enforced in 1971.

We argued for what we thought was the Trotskyist method in politics — clear demarcation, scrupulous accounting, discussion based on education and commitment — all of which we counterposed to IS's old looseness and to its new "Leninism", which we thought was only administrative centralisation.

Our platform stated: "Our conception of method in politics is the essential link between our various positions... We take seriously the Bolshevik method of attempting to work out each question theoretically and of being actively guided by Marxist analysis, which is then re-clarified on the basis of activity. Blundering empiricism such as characterised IS on Ireland and in general is as alien to revolutionary politics as is the aloof refusal of an SLL to look the actual facts of reality in the face".

On some questions, our interaction with IS was a sort of criss-crossing. We came from a "Cannonite" background (after James P Cannon, the leading figure in "orthodox" Trotskyism after Trotsky's death) and would be impelled by the sharp hostility to Stalinism which we learned from that background into questioning stock "orthodox" ideas about the Stalinist states being "degenerated and deformed workers' states".

IS was moving from a background in which it had, although only erratically, spoken of a working-class "Third Camp" counterposed to both capitalism and Stalinism, towards adopting the political technique of the Healyite SLL.

In 1968 we believed that the Trotskyist Fourth International movement was fundamentally correct, despite immense weaknesses. We believed its tradition had been correct on issues like attitudes to the colonial revolution and to the Korean war.

We suffered from a contradiction. We were extremely anti-Stalinist — more so than many people in IS, including

many of the "libertarians" — and at the same time we were ardent supporters of anti-imperialist struggles even when Stalinists were the alternative to the imperialists, as in Vietnam. In the late 1960s, we — like IS, and the Mandelites and the SLL too — expressed our position on Vietnam as "Victory to the NLF!" This was a matter of differentiating us from the Communist Party, which called for negotiations; but the attitude contained a fundamental political flaw of identifying with and championing a particular political tendency which in fact we knew represented police-state control over the Vietnamese working-class.

We had to learn, and we learned very slowly. But, despite the formal clash between us calling the USSR a degenerated workers' state and the IS leadership calling it state-capitalist, never in the whole period of our fusion with IS was there any actual political clash on attitudes to the Stalinist states in current politics. We had a common set of conclusions.

At the start we were quite successful, comparatively speaking. We won over a number of the cadre in the Manchester branch of about 50 members, which we quickly came to dominate. We recruited a number of members of the IS National Committee not elected as Trotskyist Tendency people.

But soon we were easily ostracised. The Trotskyist Tendency was unpopular because we were seen as being associated with the Healy organisation. A lot of the old IS people had been "libertarians". We became scapegoats for their animosity towards the centralisation that Cliff was introducing.

In the middle of 1969, the IS leadership adopted a policy towards us which we called ghettoisation. In Manchester and Teesside, the only two areas where we had any numbers, they split each branch into an "our" branch and a "their" branch, and we were thereafter treated as the unwanted children.

It was a partial split or even expulsion, because the central IS resources were then directed to the "loyalist" branches in Manchester and Teesside. It was also a throwback against the federalism which Cliff had said he was discarding the year before.

We published internal pamphlets, for example a collection of Trotsky's writings on the Russian state. We also tried to be constructive in IS.

For example, we proposed a motion in the first half of 1969 that IS start a rank-and-file movement in the unions. The proposal was backed not just by us, but also by Colin Barker, the leading Cliffite in the Manchester branch. It was

met on the National Committee by something close to howling down.

Our motive for the proposal was not just a rank-and-file movement would be a good thing in industry; it was that we wanted IS to start to differentiate between contacts, sympathisers, and educated members. An auxiliary organisation would assist that. For some reason Jim Higgins claims to have originated this idea of a rank-and-file movement, which was eventually put into practice by IS in 1973, but he forgets all about the Trotskyist Tendency.

We took up big political questions as they arose; or rather we became embroiled in a big political fight on Ireland, for example, in 1969.

Another battle we had was on breakaway unions. In 1954-5, perhaps seeing it as an example of their industrial union policy, the SR group had very vehemently backed an attempt to set up a breakaway dockers' union, around an old union, the NASD, by people who had left the TGWU, which was highly bureaucratized.

The Healyites were centrally involved in the breakaway. The Communist Party and the other Trotskyists were against it.

The dockers inside the TGWU had reached the end of the line with the bureaucracy, which was capable of strikebreaking. The TGWU had 50% representation on the Dock Labour Boards which were the formal employers of dockers after 1948, and it sometimes used its position to get rid of militant dockers.

Then, after 1968, it became an article of faith for IS to be against all such breakaways. In 1970 there was an attempt to form a breakaway union, a misguided one in my view, by Pilkington Glass workers in St Helen's. In panic the IS National Committee passed a resolution that they were against all breakaway unions.

But if you have a rank and file movement, and it becomes large and strong, there has to be a point where if necessary you'd split the union. Otherwise you are telling the union bureaucrats, in advance, that you will always surrender to them if they up the stakes and threaten to split the union.

What struck me about the 1970 argument was how silent the people who'd been in the group in the 1950s were: Kidron, Cliff, and so on. It was a typical example of lack of political accounting and consistency.

The decisive political fight would be on Europe, in 1971.

The formation of the SWP

After 1955 they had a book, and no doubt they sold it. But in practice the theory played very little role in SR.

SR of August-September 1951 reprinted an important article from the ISL magazine *New International* on the Chinese revolution by the Chinese Trotskyist leader Wang, and accompanied it by a gauche quarrelsome little editorial note taking Wang to task for using “bureaucratic collectivism” and “state capitalism” interchangeably. There was very little other than that sectarian defence of the shibboleth, and the phrase, of course, “Russian state capitalism”.

Perhaps SR was wary of talking too much about state capitalism because they had to work in a milieu where the idea would have been very unpopular. One of the pieces of literary-archaeological evidence is a review of Cliff’s 1955 book in *Socialist Review* of August 1955 by Peter Morgan, who was an SR member in Birmingham and had been a founding member. Morgan was anxious to persuade the reader that SR were not right-wingers in the sense of the theory implying the historic necessity of Stalinist counter-revolution. He was concerned to reply to the “orthodox” Trotskyists, and to refute the argument that if it is true that the outcome of the October Revolution was state capitalism, then the task of winning socialism is a hopeless and utopian project.

One of the things that it is hard for people today to believe is that the SR group appeared, within the left, to be “right-wing”. It was denounced by John Gollan, the future general secretary of the Communist Party, as very right-wing. That was a matter of the standards the CP applied to everything: SR was “right-wing” because it was hostile to Russia. But the orthodox Trotskyists regarded SR as right-wing too. That was true when I joined the Healy organisation at the end of the 1950s. We said that they justified Stalinism. They gave Stalinism a certain historic legitimacy, as a lawful and necessary phase in economic development. The orthodox Trotskyists said it wasn’t lawful; it was a usurpation of the working-class revolution of 1917.

The “deformed workers’ state” version of orthodox Trotskyism implied support of Russia against invasion by the West. That idea had been in Trotsky; but it became something different among the orthodox Trotskyists after a long ferment from about 1948. The orthodox Trotskyists tended to become critical (though often extremely critical) supporters of and propagandists on behalf of the foreign policy of Russia, which they called a “degenerated workers’ state” and the other Stalinist states, which they called “deformed workers’ states”.

Despite the “state capitalism”, usually the Cliffites were not any different. Korea had been a major difference, but only for two years. In the 1950s dispute between Mao’s China and Taiwan, Cliff and company simply asserted that the offshore islands were China’s by right. For anyone interested in socialism, a fundamental consideration must be the regime the Stalinists would impose. Not even the Chiang Kai Shek dictatorship was as repressive as Mao. SR said that Hong Kong was simply China’s. In Hong Kong there was a very severe regime, and you’d have legal problems organising trade unions, but you could do it.

In 1958, China started shelling some offshore islands which it claimed. That is now widely considered to be one of the points at which World War Three might have erupted. SR (October 1958) declared: “US imperialism has as much right to occupy [Taiwan] — through its quisling, Chiang Kai Shek — as Nazi Germany had to occupy the Channel islands. The British labour movement must make absolutely clear its relentless opposition to US aggression against China...” (There was no US attack on China: the “aggression” was US aid to Taiwan).

Cliff on Russia and China

SR in the early 1950s insisted on the inevitability of World War Three, and in a peculiar way.

World War Three was inevitable because Russia needed to invade Western Europe to get the capital equipment that it lacked. That idea was a generalisation based on the Russian dismantling of East European and East German industry at the end of World War Two. SR considered World War Three imminent and inevitable long after the orthodox Trotskyists — who had had the idea of inevitable World War Three central to their thinking in, say, 1951 — had changed their as-

essment.

Cliff published a number of academic-type books up to the middle 1960s. He had bad luck, you might say, with all his books. He would make a series of bad inductions, one-sided extrapolations from given facts like the early-1950s extrapolation that Russia had to invade Western Europe and dismantle industry there as it had done in Eastern Europe, often publishing his conclusions just before the trend changed and made his extrapolations false.

The first was his study, written inside the RCP in 1948, on Russia. Like much of his stuff, it is a mine of facts, and therefore valuable. It came out too late for the Fourth International congress in mid-1948. It was also saturated with the idea that the USSR was growing economically at a vast speed, sharply contrasting with anything possible in the West — oddly, more saturated with that idea than “orthodox” Trotskyist assessments of the USSR at that time. Events would soon prove otherwise.

Cliff then published an academically-rooted book called *Stalin’s Satellites in Eastern Europe* — just on the eve of the changes that took place after Stalin’s death. In 1957 Cliff published another study under the name Ygael Gluckstein, called *Mao’s China*. That appeared just on the eve of a full-scale transformation in China, when the remaining capitalists were bought out and then the Great Leap Forward started in 1958. Cliff was always unlucky in the timing of his publications!

A reviewer of *Stalin’s Satellites*, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 28 March 1952, described it thus: “Beneath us lies a forest of facts, with only the tree tops gently swaying under the gentle gusts of Mr Gluckstein’s analysis”. That’s true of Cliff’s approach in general.

Cliff’s line on Russia was stated in definite terms; but there was quite a marked distinction between 1948 version of the text and the 1955 version, which I assume was edited by Kidron. In 1948 there was a great deal of “dialectics” and formula-mongering which was pruned in the 1955 version.

In any case, there Cliff had a theory of state capitalism as the most advanced form of capitalism. He cited what Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* about the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie to describe the Stalinists as making tremendous progress. How did that state capitalism come to exist? Cliff argues that it emerged as a result of the degeneration of the Russian revolution, and it could not have come any other way, since there was no state-capitalist class to overthrow the Russian bourgeoisie; only the workers’ revolution could do that.

What did that say about states where there had been a revolution led by Stalinist peasant parties, like China? Cliff could not define China as state-capitalist according to his model for Russia. He did however keep to the designation. It was only used in passing; the book was mostly a forest of facts. He quoted Karl Wittfogel, who had a theory about Stalinism being the re-emergence of a sort of hydraulic society; and he seemed to cite the Chinese tradition of state intervention; but there was no theory of state capitalism in the book, not one that fitted both Russia and China.

That book, published in 1957, might have been expected to have some impact on the CPers who were rethinking after Khrushchev denounced Stalin early in 1956 and then acted like Stalin in suppressing the Hungarian revolution at the end of 1956. There is no evidence that it did.

Cliff’s bad luck about timing remained true in 1964, when he published a much expanded version of his 1955 book on Russia — effectively, the 1955 book plus a new book attached to it. He published it just on the eve of Khrushchev’s fall (in October 1964), and the partial restalinisation.

SR in that period never had anything by or about Rosa Luxemburg. In April 1951 the Birmingham SR group published, as a duplicated pamphlet, Luxemburg’s “Socialism and the Churches”, which was an explanation on socialism and Christianity. I don’t know why they did that. It was a freak, though Luxemburg’s text was certainly worth reprinting.

1956

SR were orthodox Trotskyists in almost all respects. They would follow the lead of the Healyites on many though not all issues.

In February 1956, Stalin’s successor Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a crazy mass murderer, saying many of the things that Trotskyists of various hues had been saying for a long time. The Stalinist movement throughout the world had a quasi-religious character. At the heart of it was Stalin. To

How the SWP grew

IS grew in the mid and late 1960s as a very amorphous revolutionary tendency. Its main paper in the early 1960s, *Young Guard*, was more anarchistic than anything else. But the group which had dominated the revolutionary left for the previous period, Gerry Healy’s SLL, obliged the IS by becoming increasingly mad and suicidally sectarian, for example boycotting the big demonstrations against the Vietnam war in the late 60s.

Despite the caricature Marxist idea that material reality decides everything, there is also a cultural reality, which has an autonomy. The previous political cultures in a working class, social-democratic, Stalinist, or other, have an autonomy.

The culture does not change easily. In fact the culture on the revolutionary left didn’t change much, because the IS group adopted much of the culture of the previous SLL, as sea-creatures crawl into shells. As the SLL declined in the 1970s, its culture was taken over by the IS group.

That autonomy of culture is in fact what Trotsky summed up in the idea of “the crisis of leadership”, or it’s a facet of the same thing. Workers tend to stick with the organisation that educated them or first brought them into political life, and new activists tend to take their political culture from the main body of established activists which they first find. That is true within the revolutionary left, too.

Not many people survived politically from the wreckage of the SLL, and possibly not many will survive from the crisis of the SWP.

But IS grew from the mid 1960s through the early 1970s. It had resources. It raised quite a lot of money because it had quite a lot of well-off members.

In 1971 SWP (then called IS) had 115 branches, with an average of maybe 20 active members per branch. Today the SWP has 93 branches, and a branch is considered thriving if its attendance is in double figures. The SWP’s growth, or lack of it, since the early 1970s gives little basis for boasting.

Despite its exaggerated claims, the SWP has maybe a thousand active members, and another thousand or so people who pay dues and occasionally attend SWP mobilisations.

The SWP seems more prominent on the left today because the groups which in the early 1970s were bigger than it (the Communist Party and Healy’s Workers’ Revolutionary Party), and those which then were smaller but visibly in the same league (the IMG and Militant), have imploded or collapsed. The Militant (continued as the SP) has revived a little since its low point of the 1990s, but those other groups exist today only as small splinters.

The SWP today, also, has built up a large income (it has quite a few old-timers who no longer do much activity but have well-paid jobs), and so can finance several dozen full-time organisers, whose activity makes up much of the profile of the SWP.

The SWP has had ups as well as downs since the early 1970s. Its status as the most visible group on the left has enabled it to recruit, over the years, many talented activists. However, that it has avoided implosion since the early 1970s is no vindication of its political twists and turns.

And it holds good only until larger political tumult either throws the SWP into crisis, or creates a radicalisation lively enough to give raw material for other groups to outstrip the lead which political inertia gives to the SWP, or both.

“Orthodox” Trotskyism

Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty are Trotskyist. But we have argued that “orthodox Trotskyism” from the 1940s became warped by traits and syndromes alien to the spirit, though sometimes not to the letter, of the ideas of Trotsky and the Bolshevik rearguard. More light and instruction can be found in the tradition of the “Third Camp” Trotskyists such as Max Shachtman and Hal Draper.

To describe the SWP (IS, SR) as “orthodox Trotskyist with quirks” seems puzzling. The core idea of “orthodox Trotskyism” was that the USSR, despite become the world’s second big power, remained a “degenerated workers’ state”, and the Stalinist states from Poland to North Korea were “deformed workers’ states”. The SWP (IS, SR) called them “state capitalists”.

Two things explain the puzzle. The most characteristic quirk of the SWP (IS, SR) has been its readiness to sideline theory of any sort in favour of hunches, improvisations, and borrowings from elsewhere. So, for example, for most of the 1960s IS sidelined the idea of a combative, centralised party in favour of borrowings from the ILP.

Second, Cliff’s distinctive version of “state capitalism” (there are and have been many others) was one which presented Russian state capitalism as the most extremely advanced species of capitalism — “the highest stage which capitalism can ever reach... speed of the development of the productive forces... far outstripping what youthful capitalism experienced, and the very opposite of what capitalism in decay and stagnation experiences”.

The difference is not great between that and seeing the Stalinist states as a “most backward” form of workers’ state (as in the particular strand of “orthodox” Trotskyism in which Cliff was formed, the RCP majority of Ted Grant). In any case, despite the difference of label, the SWP (IS, SR) attitude to the Stalinist states has often been little different from that of some strands of “orthodox” Trotskyism. The main body of this supplement discusses the case of China and Korea. In his book *Trotskyism* Alex Callinicos retrospectively aligns the SWP with Cannon and the “orthodox”, not with Shachtman and Draper, in the split of 1940 over Russia and Finland.

In the introduction to the book *The Fate of the Russian Revolution, volume 1*, I sketched the characteristics of “orthodox” Trotskyism in four points. All four apply to the SWP (IS, SR) with small modifications.

“1) Marx and Engels made socialism “scientific” by converting it from a moral scheme, counterposed to capitalism, into a logical, although revolutionary, dialectical development from material preconditions created by capitalism. In neo-Trotskyism (that is, mainstream revolutionary socialism, for a whole era) a pre-Marxist sectarian rejection of capitalism on a world scale, and an identification with Stalinist states as a progressive alternative (because they were anti-capitalist), had replaced this idea of the relationship of capitalism to socialism.

“The idea that capitalism (and even on some levels imperialism) is progressive was excised from Marxism. So was the idea that to reject and negate the progressive work of capitalism (technology, bourgeois civilisation, the creation of the working class) is sectarian and backward-looking. Marxists reverted to the spirit of those who in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to go backwards from industrialism and of those against whom Lenin polemicised for their “petty-bourgeois” desire to unscramble imperialist concentrations of industry back to an earlier stage of capitalism...”

“Even reactionary alternatives to capitalism, and not Stalinist ones alone, were seen as progressive, even though they destroyed the fruits of world civilisation since the Renaissance. World history was seen teleologically as a process with an outcome — world socialism — mechanically fixed in advance, irrespective of what living women and men did or failed to do”.

“2) The patently false notion that capitalism had reached its historic end was used in the spirit of utopian socialists who felt they had discovered ‘the last word’...”

[According to SWP myth, IS distinguished itself by more realism about capitalist stabilisation than the “orthodox” Trotskyists. In the 1940s the RCP majority, though “orthodox”, was somewhat more realistic about economic

Tony Cliff: not as heterodox as he claimed

prospects than the rest of the “orthodox”; no special credit accrues to Cliff for going with the majority. Pretty much all Trotskyists recognised the facts of capitalist stabilisation in the 1950s and 60s. SR depicted World War Three as imminent and almost-inevitable for longer than the others. IS shines only by contrast with one particular “orthodox” Trotskyist group, the Healyite SLL, which in the 60s, spiralling off into sectarian ruin, went in for manic crisis-mongering. And it does not shine bright. IS’s alternative was not sober and accurate, but a claim that capitalism had become stable for a long time to come, made most confidently just on the eve of the break-up of the high days of the 1950s and 60s. Since the early 1970s, SWP has been dedicated to permanent crisis talk.]

“3) The idea that the proletarian revolution is made by the proletariat and cannot be made for them had been displaced by the idea of a locum acting to create, if not socialism, then the first decisive step towards socialism — the creation of a ‘workers’ state’... Democracy was a desirable extra. It could be done without in the “workers’ revolution”, at least in the first and immediate stage. The idea of socialist revolution was detached from Marx’s notion of the organised, self-aware working class as the force that could make it, and reduced to millenarianism, the hope for a superhuman agent of liberation. Marxists became millenarians scanning the horizon for the revolutionary agency.

[With the SWP (IS, SR) this trait has come to the fore only recently, with their adoption of political Islam as the force which will make the first (“anti-imperialist”) stage of the revolution. The SWP praise the resultant states, like Iran, as better than the common run of states; that they abstain from naming them “deformed workers’ states” is only small relief.]

“4) Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto saw the development of the organised, conscious communist political party as integrally interlinked with the self-development of the whole working class. The communists would ‘represent the future of the movement in the movement of the present’. This was replaced by the notion of a ‘party’ self-defined by the possession of an esoteric doctrine and revelation...”

“Having once discovered that truth, their job was primarily to gain enough forces, anyhow, to present themselves as ‘the leadership’ to the elemental working-class revolt guaranteed by the decay of capitalism...”

strike at Stalin was something like a Muslim leader today denouncing Muhammad as a child molester.

The British Communist Party had always been more easy-going than some of the other parties. Physical attacks on Trotskyists were very rare, unlike in France for example. The British CP had about 35,000 members. It went into a ferment of discussion, and that ferment became a riot after the Russians suppressed the Hungarian revolution in late 1956.

SR was well placed. It had a publication — small and not very impressive, but nonetheless a publication. The Healyites’ Socialist Outlook had been banned by the Labour Party in July 1954, and had ceased publication in October 1954. The Healyites thereafter had nothing but a few issues of a tiny magazine. They circulated the SWP-USA’s *The Militant*, but that could have been of only limited service. They were part of the Labour left, and they had occasional articles in *Tribune*: for example after Stalin was denounced by Khrushchev, the central leader of the Labour left, Aneurin Bevan, had a big article in *Tribune*, and Gerry Healy had a smaller piece in the same centre pages. But the Healyites had no publication to compete with *Socialist Review*.

SR tried to respond to the opening. Cliff wrote a pamphlet directed at the CPers. It was mostly telling them stuff that was no longer news to them, but it enabled SR to recruit a few CPers in 1957.

The Healyites, however, made far more impact. They were the biggest group, and they were the nearest thing in the Trotskyist world to a real organisation in terms of membership and being able to take initiatives. They did things. For example, they called broad conferences which lots of CP types would have attended. They were known. They were seen as a force in the labour movement. And they had a plausible explanation for Russia. The “Cliff-justifies-Stalinism” argument against “state capitalism” was more effective than people today might think.

The personnel of the SR group would probably have affected the way they were perceived, too. Cliff was an Israeli intellectual, very “foreign” in that more insular Britain. Kidron, who came from Israel via South Africa, had a marked English upper-class accent. SR must have looked like a small, strange, quirky, middle-class group.

The Healyites were working-class in composition; they were dynamic; Healy, believe it or not, could be quite charming. He won over two of the most prominent dissident CPers: Peter Fryer, the *Daily Worker* correspondent in Hungary, whose true report had been suppressed; and Brian Behan, a leading industrial militant. Called to speak from the floor at a gathering of ex-CPers in April 1957 at Wortley Hall, in Yorkshire, Healy began his speech by saying: “This is a time for reading books, not for burning them”. He presented himself, truly, as someone who had been expelled from the Communist Party in the 1930s for opposing the Moscow Trials. It was effective.

And, to repeat, the Healyites did things. They had roots in the Labour Party, which helped make them attractive to CPers looking for another home. They recruited hundreds of people in 1956-7, including some people who had been prominent in the CP.

The Healyites presented themselves as in the historical continuity with the Third International and the Russian Revolution. They had radical criticism of Russia, in fact a call for a new workers’ revolution which for technical reasons they called a “political revolution”; but in a sense they demanded less from the ex-CPers.

There was another group, the forerunners of today’s Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal, around Ted Grant and the Deane brothers, Brian, Jimmy, and Arthur. But that was in a dreadful state. It published a very small magazine very occasionally. Some of them had been the majority leaders of the RCP, but now they did very little. Grant and his friends had been expelled formally from the Fourth International in 1951. Then suddenly, in 1957, they became the official British section of the main “Fourth International”, that is, of the Pablo, soft-on-Stalinism faction of the Fourth International. But it did them little good. They made very little impact.

SR and ISL

At the end of 1956 SR put out one issue of a publication jointly with Max Shachtman’s Independent Socialist League (ISL) in the USA. One version of it was published in the USA, and another in Britain. It was the beginning of a new start. At one blow it more than doubled the size of the paper.



Cliff's text on Stalinist Russia, first published in June 1948, played a smaller role than myth would have us believe.

There was only one such issue, but thereafter *SR* kept the same format and began to expand. For the first time *SR* had a somewhat impressive publication. In 1956, however, another of *SR*'s strange mishaps occurred. Eastern Europe went into ferment. Stalinists who had been purged in the early 1950s re-emerged as leaders, Nagy in Hungary, Gomulka in Poland. There was real fear of the Russians losing control.

In mid-1956 a rash of workers' councils spread across Poland. I don't think you can describe those councils as full soviets, but they were a tremendous step towards them. The Polish workers were barely kept under control by the Stalinists who had been in disfavour, around Gomulka. The Russian leaders made an emergency visit to Warsaw on the basis of which they would decide whether to invade or not; but Gomulka convinced them that he could dismantle the movement, and he did, though Poland had a far more liberal regime thereafter.

At the same time in Hungary Nagy became prime minister. In November 1956 he announced Hungary would withdraw from the military alliance led by the USSR, the Warsaw Pact. The Russians responded by invading Hungary. They met fierce resistance. Then the Russians seemed to withdraw. Some of the Russian troops had become disaffected. Then a new wave of Russian troops came in and fought their way to control. The workers struck and contested control of the factories with the Russians. It was one of the great events of the history of the working-class movement.

SR's mishap was that in November 1956 it went to press with a front page headline and article about the fighting in... Poland! There was no fighting in Poland...

But in 1956, as I've said, after *SR* had raised the "Third Camp" as a prominent slogan for the first time in 1955, *SR* established or re-established some working relations with the "Shachtmanites", the ISL in the USA. The ISL's relations with the ILP had become very strained indeed when the ILP justified the Labour Party's expulsion of the Healy paper. *SR*-*ISL* would run to 1958, when the ISL merged into the Socialist Party in the USA.

In September 1955 there was a conference in London of "Third Camp" socialist groups — a big conference, which also incidentally included the Ba'th party, then very different from what it would become when it fused with elements of the military took power in Syria and Iraq.

There was a quickening of life in *SR*. As we have seen, it reacted comparatively energetically to the Communist Party crisis. Shachtman got his passport back in the mid 1950s and he may have visited England and Ireland. But it's hard to see much ISL influence on *SR*. In his 1948 text, Cliff had taken things wholesale from Shachtman, but without acknowledgement, and while abusing the giver and compressing what he had taken into a theory of state capitalism which,

considered in the context of the many state-capitalist theories about Russia, is very odd indeed.

In *Labor Action* in January 1956 Hal Draper reviewed Cliff's 1955 book, in a distinctly patronising fashion. He said it was an extremely valuable book for its facts — which it was — and that the theory was "virtually identical" with bureaucratic collectivism; Russia was "labelled a hyphenated-capitalism [i.e. 'bureaucratic state capitalism'] only as a matter of terminological taste". In a way that was a rather contemptuous dismissal. A couple of months later Draper reviewed another book giving facts on Russia, which he praised unqualifiedly, in effect saying it was better than Cliff's. But the interesting thing is that neither Cliff nor anyone from *SR* (authors of the angry little footnote on Wang a few years earlier) responded.

Bernard Dix, who was a trade union official and ended up as a Welsh nationalist, may at some point have served as a link between the ISL and *SR*. He wrote articles for the Healyite *Socialist Outlook* and for the ISL's *Labor Action*. He disappeared from the British left press at the time the Labour Party banned *Socialist Outlook* in 1954, but continued to write in *Labor Action* until 1958. He may have had some involvement in *SR*, but briefly.

SR in the Labour left, late 1950s

From the beginning of 1957 *SR* had an 8-page tabloid, well laid-out and good-looking despite having no illustrations. It was far more attractive than it had been. *SR* claimed they had doubled the circulation.

One of *SR*'s peculiarities within the left then is that they made no claim to a heritage, to being Trotskyists. There was nothing about the history of the Trotskyists, or of Bolshevism, in their publications. At that point they did not even mention Luxemburg.

SR did have an article in January 1957 by Cliff on Plekhanov, in which he cited Plekhanov's idea ("Socialism and the Political Struggle") that a revolutionary socialist coup in Russia would end up adopting "the ideals of patriarchal and authoritarian communism, only modifying those ideals so that national production is managed not by the Peruvian 'sons of the sun' and their officials but by a socialist caste". It was a way of opening up the whole historical background, but without answering any of the questions, and without identifying *SR* as Trotskyists.

What *SR* did do was engage with a part of the Labour left, with the right wing of what would become New Left Review, John Hughes and others. They conducted debates with them on issues like incomes policy, which some Labour leftists at that time advocated.

SR had a fashion of presenting articles as "forum" or "discussion" when they really weren't, but it did get some interaction. There was life in the paper. Some members of the group wrote a letter, which was published, saying that it was just a digest of the *Financial Times*, but that was unfair. In fact, throughout 1957 *SR* was a more impressive paper than the Healyite *Newsletter* (which started in May 1957 as Peter Fryer's *Newsletter*).

SR went biweekly in 1958. There was energy in it. It was on a relatively high level, not so much Marxist high theory as written for people with formal education. It related to industrial struggles, too, in a way that was indistinguishable from the Healyites.

SR expanded its membership, but that was very relative. In 1958, according to Cliff, they had about 20 members.

In 1957, according to the myth, Cliff discovered the "permanent arms economy". That is not just myth, but ten times myth. The idea of the "permanent arms economy" was commonplace. There was even a big special feature in the big-circulation magazine *Newsweek* about it. It's typical of the group to be dishonest about this and claim the idea of the "permanent arms economy" for their own when in fact it was everybody's.

What Cliff discovered in 1957 was not the idea of a "permanent arms economy", but the idea that it would work indefinitely to stabilise and consolidate capitalism. The practical implication was that there were very few revolutionary possibilities, and *SR* worked in the Labour Party without much idea of ever doing anything else.

One of the latter-day myths is that *SR* was never in the Labour Party really, that they only joined for the audience.

That may have been true at the beginning, when they collapsed into the Labour Party in 1949, like the Grantites, and operated there very much as outsiders (though they were always seriously involved in the Labour League of Youth). But by the mid 1950s *SR* was expressing its programme, the list of demands which it printed in every issue, as a programme for the Labour Party.

That was more than just a pedagogic adaptation. The mid-50s programme was introduced by the statement: "The *Socialist Review* believes that... a Labour Government must be brought to power on the basis of the following programme".

Tellingly, it took the adherence to *SR* of a group of ex-Communist Party people to get this modified (in June 1957) to: "Only the mass mobilisation of the working class in the industrial and political arena can lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of Socialism. The *Socialist Review* believes that a really consistent Labour Government must be brought to power on the basis of the following programme..."

That was a distinct improvement — achieved by introducing into the *SR* platform a formula about mass mobilisation from the Communist Party's evasive programme of 1951, The British Road to Socialism!

You could see from 1957 a winding-down from the origins of the group. The recruits did not become more than a trickle until the beginning of the 1960s, but the whole focus of the publication changed towards debate and dialogue with a section of the Labour left. *SR* did not stress any Trotskyist background at all.

SR and peace campaigning

In the late 1950s people were becoming concerned with the threat of nuclear war. The Healyites picked up the demand "Black the bomb, black the bases" very early on, and soon afterwards so did *SR*. "Black", of course, meant "don't work on", "boycott", "shun".

From 1957 it became the shibboleth of *SR*. *SR* had always been for workers' control, continuing the emphasis which the RCP in its last period had put on that idea in order to distinguish itself from the Labour government's nationalisations. Now *SR* raised the call for workers' control of the nuclear arms industry. For what? They would continue to produce nuclear bombs under workers' control? It was a piece of demagogic nonsense, which made no sense except that it could appeal to intellectuals who wanted a proletarian orientation.

In the 1960s, "workers' control" would become for *SR*/*IS* a general synonym for workers' power and socialism.

By 1959-60 *SR* had a massive focus on the peace movement. *SR* hadn't abandoned the view that World War Three was imminent until well after the orthodox Trotskyists had abandoned it. *SR* held to that view even after Khrushchev's thaw and even after the Geneva talks of April-July 1954.

SR's focus on peace campaigning gave it some base in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when it started to flourish (about 1958 to 63). In my experience CND never had much of an active membership, but the SWP's story is that *SR* recruited from CND youth.

The turn to "Luxemburgism"

By the late mid-1950s the Healyites had transformed themselves. They always had an authoritarian regime, but that varied from time to time. When there were cadres who could stand up to Healy, and in the 1950s there were, it was not quite the monstrous thing it became. And it loosened up in 1957 to help recruit the ex-Stalinists. Lots of CPers were joining the Healy organisation from 1957, and that made it attractive to people in *SR*.

In 1958 the 20-strong *SR* group voted by a majority to approach the Healyites for fusion. Cliff's account of it, to me

to page 9

1971 and Europe

In a nutshell, the story of IS's transformation and the emergence of the neo-Healyite SWP out of it is the story of how a very loose group, with a family cult at the centre, grew, centralised itself, and developed a "machine" with the once seemingly benign cult figure in control.

Here there is a danger of scapegoating Cliff and presenting a Bad King Cliff account of the history. Cliff was only part of it.

Jim Higgins's book *More Years For The Locust* (a sort of history of IS/SWP) is an example. For people like Higgins the "Bagehot Question" arises. Walter Bagehot, the Victorian political economist and analyst of the British constitution, asked the question concerning the then reclusive Queen and her playboy son, the future Edward VII: How does it come about that "a retired widow and her unemployed son" can play the pivotal role in the legal structures of the British constitution?

How could Cliff achieve such power in the organisation that in the 1960s prided itself on its democracy and freedom from Gerry Healy-style dictatorship, and which had members who were not self-evidently devoid of the will and capacity for independent thought?

A central part of the answer is that the group was always a family cult with Cliff and Cliff's family at the centre of the larger political family. People like Higgins were first and foremost cultists in this system. The growth of the "democratic centralist" IS machine after November 1968 only changed its modus operandi.

Cliff was central to this system and Cliff's ideas and Cliff's "whim of iron" (as Higgins puts it) were central, but they depended for their effects on others. You cannot have a cult unless the person at the centre is himself a cultist — is not uncomfortable in a cult, or vulnerable to corrosive irony and self-disparagement. But however solipsistic the cultist, he is not, in fact, the sole inhabitant of the world or of the cult: he needs other cultists.

Higgins and his friends were cultists. That is why they proved helpless to stop Cliff when it came to their own purging. True love disrobes and disarms, and sometimes, as in Higgins' book, is left to mourn uncomprehendingly in a sad old age.

One way of examining this issue and of presenting a portrait of the group as it was in reality, is to look at the dispute in IS on the attitude to the European Union (then called Common Market) which Britain was due to join on 1 January 1972. This triggered the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency.

Initially, in the 1960s, all the Trotskyist groups had refused to join the Communist Party and the mainstream Labour left in opposing the European Union. We said that European working class unity was decisive: "In or out, the class fight goes on!" Then, one by one, in their characteristic ways, the Trotskyist groups jumped on the anti-EU bandwagon.

IS was the last to do so, and at that point it could only do it blatantly and shamelessly, with its opportunist motives undisguised. As late as the Easter 1971 conference the group majority voted against the politics of the anti-EU campaign. There had long been a small minority against the IS policy — it included John Palmer and the group's leading libertarian, Peter Sedgwick.

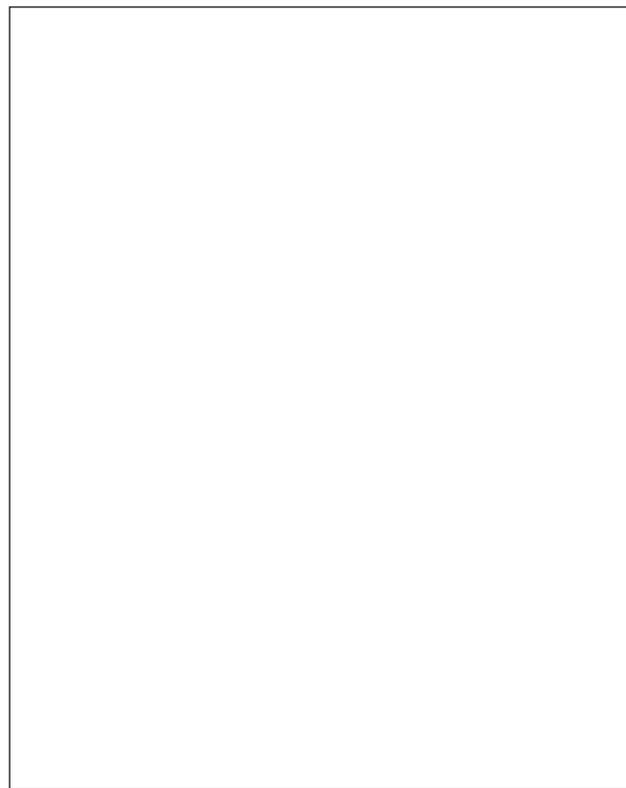
Two months after the Easter 1971 conference, Tony Cliff and Chris Harman turned up at the IS National Committee with a small but lethal document covering two sides of A4, which, essentially, said: all the arguments used against joining the anti-EU campaign remain valid. But it had now become a battle between left and right in the labour movement. In such a battle we are "never neutral".

IS should still propose amendments in unions advocating "in or out, the fight goes on". But when they were defeated, IS should vote with the left.

Within weeks, and without any further formal decision by IS, that "fallback position" had become the effective IS policy. The old line disappeared. In a short time, IS was amongst the least inhibited of the left-wing anti-EU campaigners.

In that National Committee discussion, Cliff said, and when challenged repeated: "Tactics contradict principles."

But how — if politics aspires to be more than disjointed, episodic, unconnected, raw responses to events, or responses ostensibly to events but with an eye to something else entirely — could IS "side" with the Stalinist and Stalinist-tinted



The IS (SWP) line before June 1971: in or out of the Common Market was a battle between bosses' factions

Labour and trade-union left on this? As IS had argued for many years, they were at best insular and stupidly nationalist and at worst unashamed chauvinists. And the CP line was unmistakably a mere reflex of USSR opposition to bourgeois moves towards European unity.

Well, wrote Cliff and Harman, we could repeat the old IS policy in union discussions, then "vote with the left" — that is, with the chauvinists and little Englanders — thus repudiating what we had said in discussion!

The aspiration to retain contact with workers and with "the left" is no contemptible one. But politics is politics. To argue as vehemently as the differences required against the Communist Party and Labour-left chauvinists, and then vote with them — that was to invite and deserve ridicule. It would show that you had no confidence in your own politics, and put you in the role of fawning pup to those you allowed to determine your vote. It was impossible nonsense.

The issue split the cadre of the Cliff tendency right down the middle. Even Paul Foot, high priest of the Cliff cultists, initially opposed Cliff. So did Jim Higgins, Ian Birchall, and a lot of others; a majority of the usually vocal people on the National Committee, in fact. Some of them went so far as to publish critical Internal Bulletin articles.

But what was to be done about it? Either, accept with conscience-salving protests, that the National Committee majority — it was not a big majority, either — could overturn the conference vote and bow down before the chauvinist tide. Or, refuse to accept that this was a proper way to go about things. The only recourse then against the National Committee majority was a special conference. The constitution allowed for a special conference if 23 branches — one-fifth of the total — called for it.

The Trotskyist Tendency decided to campaign for a special conference. The solid citizens of the group, such as Higgins, did not. Why not? After all, it was no small matter, this bowing down before the chauvinist wave in a political world where not only chauvinism but its even uglier brother racism was a feature of even the militant sections of the labour movement. In 1968 London dockers had struck in support of Tory racist Enoch Powell.

Yet the Higginses of the group, who could almost certainly have got a majority against bowing down to the nationalists, had no intention of making a fight of it. Consciences salved by protests, they were going along with Cliff!

Why? Habit and deference were, I think, part of it. Paul Foot, who had opposed Cliff on the National Committee, quickly came to heel and published an Internal Bulletin arti-

cle to recant. He entitled it, appropriately, "Confession". The jokiness could not disguise the fact that that is exactly what it was. The others did not "confess"; but they acquiesced.

They believed, from habit and experience, that Cliff's instinct or, as the expression went, Cliff's "nose" for these things was better than their own. They wanted the advantages the change of line would bring (and nobody disputed it would make things easier in the unions).

They did not want to rock the IS boat or antagonise Cliff. They knew the group was volatile. They saw themselves as an elite, special people. The whole old pre-1968 IS system of deference and division of labour allowed them to combine the satisfaction of saying no to Cliff with the joys and advantages of having their political virtue forced. To put it very politely, theirs was easy virtue.

We got the support of 23 branches, but we did not get a special conference — not on the European Union question.

The new-minted national secretary, Duncan Hallas, said that notification from one of the 23 branches of support for a special conference had arrived a day late. It was not to be counted. He was ruling it out of order. The matter was now settled. The secretary of the 23rd branch said he'd posted it on time. Probably Hallas was lying, but in any case such rigid interpretation of an arbitrary committee-decreed deadline was, as far as I know, something new in the group. A typical piece of labour bureaucrat's chicanery was now the leaders' recourse against the threat of having to face the membership.

The leadership knew they would most likely lose at a special conference. And our co-thinkers on the political question in dispute, like Higgins, knew that at a special conference they would either have to knuckle under like Foot and betray their own politics, or else fight Cliff. They would do neither.

That evasion was a textbook example of what the Trotskyist Tendency, after Trotsky, meant by saying IS was a "centrist" organisation.

Jim Higgins, Ian Birchall, and others wrote, and in some meetings spoke, as if they thought the question of Europe was very important. But they acted, or rather did not act, as if it did not matter that the organisation had buckled before the nationalist wave.

They did this even though they were allowed little acclimatisation time. They were given little or nothing to save their faces. Within a few weeks of the NC vote, Duncan Hallas, the supple-spined new National Secretary — who was himself a very recently born-again anti-European — was making strident anti-EU propaganda in *Socialist Worker*.

Things would get worse, but by the time the last date for supporting a special conference or protesting against the bureaucratic cheating of the 23 branches fell due, no-one could fail to see the enormity of what had happened and the extent of the falling off from the politics proclaimed in the very name of the group. Yet, even then, the drive for a special conference remained exclusively the project of the Trotskyist Tendency and some allies here and there.

The group was supposedly run under the democratic and centralised constitution of 1968. In fact, it dealt with the change of line on Europe in the manner of the old pre-1968 extended family around Cliff — decisions being made by "nose" and whim, people disagreeing but "knowing their place" and Cliff's prerogatives.

To stop the formal rules being used to subvert and cut across this old, cosy way of doing things, to stop the members from "intervening", or rather to stop the Trotskyist Tendency from organising the members to intervene, the IS leaders had to work outside the 1968 constitution. They had to lay down tight rules to restrict the effort to appeal to the members and, then, even within their own new-made rules, to cheat.

I think the Cliff group would have lost at a special conference — and their behaviour suggest they thought that too. That, according to their calculations, would have been seriously damaging to the group's prospects in the unions.

Cliff and his allies on one side, and the old ISers like Higgins on the other, looked at each other like lovers becalmed and emotionally exhausted after a fight and with the knowledge that they have come close to a serious rupture neither wanted. The first thing they did was to turn with great combined fury on the Trotskyist Tendency. Our co-thinkers on the defining and detonating political question in dispute

Figures like Ian Birchall and Jim Higgins wrote against the change of line on Europe, but wouldn't fight it

turned on us with at least as much fury as those whose opportunist hands we had tried to tie. It was time to settle accounts with the Trotskyist Tendency! Its existence was intolerable.

Yet, good or bad, villain or Bolshevik, the Trotskyist Tendency was not in itself their problem. Democracy was. Any system that tied down and limited Cliff or his machine — or that might tie them down and impose restraints on them — was. The 4 December 1971 conference set the stamp of a one-faction sect on IS, formally ruling out anything other than ephemeral opposition.

The first issue of a new series of Workers' Fight, which came out on 14 January 1972, commented:

"Stripping away the hysteria and the exaggerations which dominated the internal struggle leading up to the 4 December conference, the IS leadership's explanation for the expulsion move was that the Trotskyist Tendency called IS centrist (e.g. vacillating between reformism and revolutionary politics, being revolutionary in words but reneging in the crunch) and that this was intolerable.

"But this explains nothing. We never characterised IS otherwise, either before the 1968 fusion or after. We said clearly when we joined that we thought IS would only be changed as a result of a serious internal struggle.

"The IS leaders have created — often through good and useful work — a large-ish organisation, most of whose members are young and politically inexperienced, and consequently there is an absence of a serious and stable political basis for their political domination of the group. They rely increasingly on demagogic manipulation of the members, and on a bureaucratic machine which has qualitatively changed and worsened the internal life of the IS group.

"With increasing reliance for their control on a machine and on demagoguery, real democracy becomes a threat. Or rather, the existence of an organised tendency whose politics challenge the machine is a threat.

"Politically, the expulsion indicates a qualitatively bureaucratic hardening of IS. Now the leadership openly proclaims its right, when faced with an opposition tendency, which has fundamental political differences, to resort to pre-emptive expulsions, even when such a tendency is a disciplined part of the organisation. Thus they claim and proclaim their right to sterilise the organisation politically.

"The expulsion had the trappings of democracy, and no liberal could object. But Leninist democracy has nothing in common with the bare, empty forms, filled by the demagoguery and witch-hunting and machine manipulation with which the IS leadership filled such forms.

"The expulsion of Workers' Fight is a disruptive and sectarian blow to left unity. Instead of practical concentration on the constructive work we can do, and have done, together with the majority of IS, and the creation of a Bolshevik internal democracy, we have one more split on the left.

"The real tragedy, though, is that the opportunities for the revolutionary left which existed in 1968 should have led only to the consolidation of a tightly controlled left-centrist sect, which is most certainly what IS now is."

1966: last days of IS's orientation to the Labour Party

from page 7

around 1968, was that only he and Chanie Rosenberg voted against. In reality the Healyites didn't want them, and it was very easy to provoke a failure of any attempt to fuse. SR lost two of its prominent people to the Healyites, Seymour Papert and Donna Papert. The need to compete with the Healyites generated a series of responses in SR which would amount to a break, for a decade, in their "orthodox Trotskyism". SR became "Luxemburgist".

That was done blatantly in response to the Healyites. The Healyites were the Trotskyists, the Bolsheviks, and so on. Cliff had been very careful not to identify with Trotskyism and Bolshevism in the period of CP ferment, which was still going on. Now SR hinted that they were not Leninists.

At the same time SR made a shift to deeper involvement in the Labour Party, and a focus on dialogue with the ex-CP intellectuals in the Labour Party. SR would eventually recruit from the Healy organisation the "Stamford Faction" of ex-CPers, Peter Cadogan, Ken Coates, Jim Higgins, and so on, in 1960.

In 1959, after what had been a vigorous period of effort, SR went into another crisis. The paper didn't appear for months. It seems that a layer of people like the future Labour MP Stan Newens dropped out, considering that the broader Labour left group Victory For Socialism was doing what they wanted to do. VFS had existed for a while, but it was becoming more active. It seems also that SR lost a lot of their own verve, because the effort of the previous period had produced small results.

SR restarted on a stable basis at the beginning of 1960. And Cliff published his small book on Luxemburg. It was a serious academic study, but Michael Kidron, reviewing it in SR, pointed out that a lot of it wasn't Luxemburg; it was Cliff weaving stuff into Luxemburg. From then on SR proclaimed itself "Luxemburgist".

SR/IS became "libertarian". In 1968 they used to boast that there had never been more than four expulsions from their organisation — Ellis Hillman, for gossip; Sid Bidwell, for racism; Peter Cadogan, for giving out information to the Daily Mail about a Marxist neurosurgeon, Christopher Palas; and one other.

However, we found that the real anarcho-syndicalists in Manchester bitterly hated the IS libertarians, because they weren't very libertarian. They were what you might call "Oedipal libertarians" — "you can't tell me what to do". In our experience after 1968, most of the IS libertarians were authoritarians once there was any real political clash. The exception was Manchester, where we became friendly with the IS libertarians.

Peter Sedgwick, who was held to be the leading IS libertarian, resigned from the IS National Committee in 1970 in protest at the new rules which would later help to expel us. Then at the expulsion conference in December 1971 he backed our expulsion. He started his speech with a crude

"psychoanalysis", saying that we felt better in a faction than we would as individuals. Even if that was absolutely scientific psychoanalysis, it had nothing to do with the politics at stake. That episode strengthened me a great deal. I remember feeling reassured that I had misunderstood the nature of the IS group.

From the Labour orientation to the shop stewards

One of the things difficult to grasp looking back from 2013 is just how dominant the Labour Party was in the labour movement in the 1950s, and how much it hegemonised the revolutionary groups.

Labour had carried through major reforms in the 1940s. The Cliffites, the Healyites, and a lot of other people took it as granted in 1951 that the election victory of the Tories would be followed immediately by a full-scale assault on the welfare state and the measures of the Labour government. It didn't happen. The Tories even expanded social housing, and the counter-offensive would not really come until Thatcher in the 1980s. But through the 1950s the Labour Party and the Bevanite left had big meetings. A lot of the Trotskyists saw the future in terms of a new Labour government which their ideas would dominate: Labour up to 1951 had carried through some elements of socialism, and a new Labour government could continue that work.

Labour's general election defeat in 1959, with the Tory leader Harold Macmillan using slogans like "You never had it so good", and the Labour leaders' subsequent attempt to swing Labour to the right, had a tremendous shaking-up effect on the left, including Socialist Review. SR had to reorient. It had become very immersed indeed. There was an atmosphere of crisis in SR in 1959-60.

SR was still very much in the Labour Party. In 1963, John Palmer, as a representative of the group in the Labour youth movement, the YS, declared: "The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce those frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. One thing must be made clear above all. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement".

But over the 1960s SR's orientation changed. In 1965-6 they would redefine themselves as being in the Labour Party only to look for an audience.

to page 11

The SWP and Israel

Cliff first appeared in the international Trotskyist press in 1938-9 as "L Rock": the rock would grow into a cliff. He contributed to a discussion on Palestine in the American Trotskyist publication New International. He was obviously a young man trying to think things through. It was an inconclusive discussion, but in 1938-9 he was in favour of the right of Jewish migration. He would criticise himself on that much later, in an interview in the SWP magazine in 1987.

In late 1944 Cliff wrote an open letter, published in the RCP journal Workers' International News, to the delegates at the Labour Party conference held in December 1944. The open letter set out to blacken as much as possible, in the eyes of the conference delegates, the Jewish population of Palestine.

It was not signed, but you can tell it was Cliff. Cliff would later on recycle chunks from it in his other writings. The conference had a motion, which it would pass, supporting a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and the open letter was aimed at dissuading the delegates from supporting it.

Since the outbreak of World War Two the British had been placating Arab opinion by limiting Jewish migration into Palestine. In practice during the war there was a sizeable movement of Jews finding any way they could into Palestine, and there was open conflict between some of the Zionists — right-wing Zionists, in fact — and the British authorities over that.

The Palestinian Arab leader of the 1930s, Husseini, had been in Bosnia during the war, trying to raise a Muslim army to fight for Hitler. The British were doing what they could to placate the Arabs.

In 1944 the full extent of the Holocaust was not known, but that there had been mass killings of Jews was known. The British army would liberate Belsen early in 1945, and the whole thing would become public, but even before that much was generally known.

For Cliff to write what he wrote, making the Jewish population of Palestine look as bad as possible, and for the RCP to publish it in the midst of the European Holocaust, seems to me to show political disorientation. Cliff was now against the right of Jewish migration into Palestine.

In the mid-1940s he wrote a series of articles which were later put together as a pamphlet in a number of languages, *The Middle East at the Crossroads*. It was a strange pamphlet, full of background facts about oil production and so on, but with few political conclusions. As ever, Cliff wrote background papers and left the political conclusions to be worked out in a separate process.

Cliff came to England in September 1946 and became a member of the majority of the British Trotskyist organisation, the RCP, led by Jock Haston, Ted Grant, and others.

From 1948 to 1967, there is simply nothing about Israel in Cliff's publications. Nothing at all. In the mid-50s one of the big points causing scandal around the Communist Parties was that it came out that there had been anti-semitism in Russia. All the Trotskyists denounced the anti-semitism.

There was an article in Socialist Review written, I guess, by Michael Kidron, which makes the obvious points against the anti-semitism in Stalinist Eastern Europe. But there was nothing in SR's publications about Israel.

Other people were paying attention: for example, there was an article by Ellis Hillman on Israel in the Healyite magazine Labour Review of May-June 1957. But from SR and IS there was nothing until the 1967 war, in which Cliff came out for full-scale defeat of Israel. So, I should say, did Workers' Fight come out against Israel.

We didn't understand that defeat would mean destruction for Israel. You would think that Cliff would understand that. On the other hand, he might have been indulging in demagoguery knowing that American backing for Israel, though it wasn't what it is now, would stop things going as far as destruction of Israel.

Cliff published a pamphlet in 1967, *The Struggle in the Middle East*, which repeats some of the stuff from the 1940s. In his speeches at that time, he certainly repeated some of the horror stories from the open letter of 1944.

In 1967 Cliff was still sufficiently constrained by the background and tradition of Trotskyist politics to warn that "an

anti-Israeli campaign quite easily degenerates into a 'jihad'." (he took it for granted that would be a bad thing, and not, as for the SWP today, a good thing!). He stated his solution in terms which implied, if unclearly, the same rights of national self-determination for the Israeli Jews as for the Kurds: "a socialist republic, with full rights for Jews, Kurds and all national minorities".

After 1967 Israel became a colonial power in the West Bank and Gaza. Naturally socialists opposed it. Nevertheless, the question arose: what is our policy for the Middle East?

Up to the late 1960s the Palestinian Liberation Organisation was dominated by Egypt. Its leader was a man called Ahmed Shukeiri. He used to call for "driving the Jews into the sea". As far as I know, no socialist in Britain condoned that, though there was very little discussion about the issue.

In 1969 the PLO changed its policy from Shukeiri's clear statement to demanding a "secular, democratic state for Jews and Arabs" over all pre-1948 Palestine. In fact that was a bit of political repackaging. You couldn't get such a state without Israel's agreement, and nothing but physical conquest would make Israel, or what was left of it, agree. In practice it was the same policy as Shukeiri, dressed up differently.

However, it fooled people, including me, because of our hostility to what Israel was doing in the occupied territories. We wanted to believe that the conflict could be resolved by merging the two nations into a single state. We did not want to face up to the sharp choice: did our support for the Palestinians mean that we were willing to see Israel overrun and destroyed?

I think if that choice had been posed plainly to us, we would have answered no. But the "secular democratic state" formula seemed to answer all the problems: to give Jews rights in a secular democratic state satisfying the Palestinians.

IS adopted the secular democratic state, too, and publicised the Palestinian struggle. From about 1969 or 1970 it gave explicit support to the Palestinian guerrillas. IS made propaganda against Israel in the spirit of Cliff's 1944 open letter.

Over the years Israel was more and more demonised in the IS/SWP press. Of course, there was a colonial war in the occupied territories in which the Israelis were the villains and it was right to side with the Palestinians. Complications arose because the Palestinians and Arab nationalists generally wanted the whole of Palestine.

In 1947 the United Nations had decided on two states, Palestinian and Israeli. In the war that followed the Arab invasion of Israel in 1948 the borders were shifted, and the supposed Palestinian state was carved up, a little bit going to Israel, a little bit to Egypt, and most of it to Jordan. The "two states" idea was half forgotten.

In the early 1970s some people started to argue for a two-states settlement. I think the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine originated it. It made sense because the secular democratic state was impossible of realisation, and meant pushing back any redress for the Palestinians to so-called Greek Kalends. The insistence on the "secular democratic state" formula was fundamentally hostile to any solution that would give the Palestinians a liveable situation. It meant seeing them as "anti-imperialist" cannon fodder, or as symbols, or as Islamic heroes if you were from that background.

In 1988 the PLO changed its position and began to call for two states. That was an important turning point. All sorts of questions were left unanswered, but the idea of two states presented the possibility of an early measure of liberation for the Palestinians combined with allowing the Israeli-Jewish nation to continue.

By this stage the majority of the Israeli Jewish population were not immigrants. They were the children or grandchildren of immigrants. The idea that they had no collective rights was in conflict with any socialist outlook. In national conflicts, socialists never side with one nation unrestrictedly and totally, or become chauvinists of that nation: we advocate self-determination for both nations. Unless you believe that there is such a thing in history as a bad people, that is

what you have to do.

And Israel was the product of the debauch of mass murder which overtook the Jews in the 1930s and 40s. The Zionist idea, the idea of a Jewish state, won the Jewish majority quite late in the day. It was Polish anti-semitism in the 1920s and above all the terrible deeds of the Nazis that made so many Jews decide to flee to Palestine. The USA had stopped its open borders policy in 1921-4, so that was not an option for many of them.

To see the resultant conflict between Palestinians and Jews as entirely the fault of the Jews is nonsensical. It betrays a bias which means that you don't really think about the issues. You demonise the Jews. You become a species of anti-semitite.

When we say that, SWPers tend to respond that we are calling them racists. No, we are not calling them racists. There are many anti-semitisms in history. A doctrine which at its centre wants to destroy the Jewish state and will support any force to conquer Israel, even Saddam Hussein in his time, is hostile not only to Israel but to the vast majority of Jews across the world into whose post-Holocaust consciousness Israel has been built by events.

I never heard of anyone on the left who was a Holocaust denier; but then, as there are different sorts of anti-semitism, so also there are different sorts of denial. The attitude of the SWP is to acknowledge that all the terrible things of the Holocaust happened, but then to proceed as if they happened and they had no weight in the subsequent story. It's not denial, but it's minimisation.

The SWP got caught in this mindset, and has been driven on by righteous and just indignation against Israel's misdeed, until its policy has become identical with the most chauvinist Arabs or Islamists.

For ourselves, we began to rethink the question in the late 1970s, and we concluded in 1986 that "two states" was the only democratic solution and also the only solution possible in the short or medium term. From that point onwards we have vigorously opposed those whose policy amounts to the call for the destruction of the Jewish state or the forcible incorporation of its people into an Arab state.

The SWP changed its approach on the issue radically around 1986-7, at the time of its general "anti-imperialist" turn signalled by its switch to backing Iran in the Iraq-Iraq war. Around that time it produced its pamphlet, written by John Rose, which on the cover depicts Israel as a mad dog.

The SWP had until 1987 opposed taking sides in the Iran-Iraq war. They had opposed siding with Argentina in the Falklands war of 1982. But the practice of effectively siding with the designated "anti-imperialists" on their own terms had taken root, and there was a long-standing antagonism to Israel to build on, a real personal hostility on the part of Cliff, certainly. A search for "anti-imperialist" forces to support gathered momentum in its politics.

That was part of the process leading the SWP into the Respect adventure of 2004-7, in which they accepted as their own what they took to be the politics of the oppressed Muslim populations in Britain. That attitude is not Marxist politics, especially when the leading figures from the oppressed group, the Islamists, are part of an aggressive and extremely rich world-wide reactionary movement.

It has been one of the most terrible things in the history of the SR-IS-SWP organisation. They have demonised AWL as unresponsive to the Palestinians, but when in the Socialist Alliance of 2001-3 we moved that the Alliance support Israeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, the SWP voted it down. They wanted to stick with the Arab and Islamic chauvinist position which demands the destruction of Israel even at the cost of opposing immediate redress for the Palestinians.

When Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by the Islamic Republic in Iran, all sensible socialists backed him and his right to publish. The SWP did too. In recent years, SWP writers from Lindsey German to Alex Callinicos have revised their position to the point where they suggest they were wrong to take that stand, and that they would take the opposite stand in any similar case in future.

The formation of the SWP

In 1958 the ISL in the USA stopped publishing its paper and its magazine when it fused with the Socialist Party. Around the same time the SR group published a big duplicated magazine called International Socialism. In advance they spelled out a number of things that they would do in that issue which in the event they didn't do: one of them was a project which eventually became Cliff's Luxemburg book.

There was only one issue of that magazine. Then in 1960 the group began publishing a printed International Socialism magazine. At first it was not an SR group publication. The editorial board involved young ILP, the group that became Solidarity (followers of Cornelius Castoriadis), the ex-SLL Stamford faction, the British Pablo-Mandelites, and even an incipient British Posadist, Theo Melville. It was quite an impressive magazine, with real discussion.

The first few issues dealt with matters that were of concern to the Trotskyist movement. It was a "sectarian" paper in the best sense of the world. There was some discussion with an ex-leader of the Healyite youth who had defected. But it was a hotch-potch. It included people who, if they would define themselves, were anarchists, and it included people who were Labour Party but dissatisfied. If you had to assess it overall, it was anarchist, with strange admixtures including Labourism.

But through the 1960s SR/IS grew in the Labour Party Young Socialists. In 1955 the Labour League of Youth had not been abolished, but all its national structures had been dismantled. That was reversed in 1959. The Labour Party Young Socialists was launched, and immediately became a battlefield for the Trotskyist groups.

SR started a youth paper, Young Guard, in 1961, to compete with Keep Left, the Healyite youth paper which had been published continuously since 1950. SR was allied in Young Guard with the Grant group, but dominated it politically. Socialist Review continued to appear until 1962, though now in a very small format, and then for a while they had little but Young Guard and the magazine. The group also got involved in campaigns like the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and housing campaigns. It started a paper called Industrial Worker in 1961, which was just news of the factories, but that wasn't very satisfactory, so the group changed it to Labour Worker and made it a more general paper.

The IS magazine changed character when the SR group took it over fully in 1963. It became a very dull social-science-faculty magazine. But it was only in IS magazine of spring

How was it in 1971?

The Merlin's Cave pub, off Farringdon Road, London, November 1971. Big meeting, with Duncan Hallas, then IS (SWP) National Secretary, debating Sean Matgamna of the Trotskyist Tendency.

It is part of the build-up to the special conference at which the Trotskyist Tendency is to be "de-fused" — uncouth people say "expelled".

The Trotskyist Tendency is a tiny proportion of the meeting. The chair is Roger Protz, who makes a debating point each and every time he calls for a speaker opposed to the "de-fusion" of the Trotskyist Tendency: "If there is one."

Summations. Duncan Hallas, new-minted National Secretary of IS, is a thin-skinned, insecure bully. He is easily rattled. He has been showing signs of increasing anger at each show of opposition from the floor. He has a bitter hatred of the Trotskyist Tendency.

He is a powerful, emotional speaker, with an unpleasant schoolmasterish tendency to suggest that only an idiot would disagree with him. He is passionately convinced of his case; and also passionately resentful that the Trotskyist Tendency makes fun of his Old Bolshevik pretensions and has let him know they think him a spineless old poseur. Now, summing up, he rises to the occasion.

The Trotskyist Tendency has been a problem for three years. They have criticised people like himself and disrupted the group. Worse, they have made it difficult for people like him — real citizens of the IS group — to raise matters they might raise if the Trotskyist Tendency were not around.

They were sure to try to exploit any division. It wasn't as widely known as it should be, but he, Duncan, had disagreed with the group's attitude to the deployment of

**Labour's misspent
youth, 1959-87**

Seedbed of the left

The origins of today's far-left groups

A Workers' Liberty pamphlet
£1.50

IS, like the other Trotskyist groups of the time, grew sizeably from the Labour Party Young Socialists after 1966 (and until 1966-8, when it drifted out). Pamphlet: www.workersliberty.org/seedbed-left

1963 that Cliff squared his two theories of state capitalism (the one for Russia, and the one for China). He did it by way of arguing that the state was the only force that could raise sufficient capital to be able to function in the modern world.

Like the "permanent arms economy" idea, this idea of "Third World" statism was commonplace. For example, you will find in the SWP-USA magazine in 1954-5 in articles by Art Phillips, who I think was a member of the C L R James faction who stayed in the SWP when James quit, writing under the name David Miller. Other people like Joe Hansen also used the idea. Really the idea didn't cover Cliff's previous theory about Russia. It was a bit of factional line-squaring.

British troops in Northern Ireland in 1969 — which the Trotskyist Tendency had said amounted to IS supporting the troops — but what if he had spoken out? He'd have played into the hand of the "Matgamnaites".

What could he do? He had to remain silent and support the leadership though he thought IS seriously wrong on a very important question. (This is an appeal for support and understanding from non-Trotskyist Tendency people who had thought his role during the heated debates on Ireland two years earlier despicable).

Throwing out the Trotskyist Tendency would restore the rights of people like himself. They would be able to function more freely. Comradely discussion would come back to the group. By outlawing generalised opposition, IS democracy would — it was paradoxical but true — be enlarged and expanded.

Hands raised as if to embrace the whole meeting, passion distorting his face, his voice rising to a high, emotional pitch and volume, he appeals for support in throwing out the Trotskyist Tendency.

"Comrades! This has gone on too long. It has gone on year after year for three whole years! It should not go on any longer."

Hand-chopping the air in an unconscious mime: "Comrades: we must put an end to it now. Find a solution!" Large swathes of the meeting have by now begun to giggle uneasily, but he is too high to come down or notice that he has lost much of his audience. "Comrades, I say it again: there has GOT TO BE A FINAL SOLUTION!"

Most of the meeting is by now squirming, giggling or laughing in open derision. IS was still a living political organisation in November 1971.

Theory and practice

The peculiar relationship of theory and practice, or prattle to praxis, in IS was described thus in a document of the Trotskyist Tendency in mid 1971:

"IS has a pretty solid body of theory and is nearer than almost all the 'orthodox' Trotskyist groups to a 'party' in the sense of being a rounded 'whole' — however small, and however far from being able to play the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the class. The 'orthodox' groups are all to a far greater extent than IS mere factions that have failed to become anything wider.

"Yet I agree with [your] statement that IS has contempt for theory. Why? Because the IS theory is the possession of a handful of mandarins, who function as both a group mandarin and as a segment of normal academic Britain. What theory there is, is their theory: they are quite snobbish about it. For the non-initiated popularisations will do.

"This, of course, is inseparable from a manipulationist conception of the organisation. The members don't need to know the theories — the leaders can be relied upon — and demagogic and word-spinning phrasemongers like Cliff and Palmer can bridge the gap.

"It is in this sense that IS has contempt for theory — contempt for the Marxist conception of theory and its necessary relationship to the organisation as a leaven and tool of the whole group. 'Contempt' is not the best expression for it, though, is it?

"The priestly caste most certainly have contempt — for the uninitiated — but their theory is their special treasure, their badge of rank, their test for membership of the inner elite. There actually is such open caste snobbery in IS — as you know...

"The second sense of IS's 'contempt for theory' is in their use of theory, the function of theory, the relationship of theory to practice: there is no connection between the two for IS. Do you know that in last week's debate [on the European Union] at the National Committee Cliff said and repeated that principles and tactics contradict each other in real life!

"This is organically connected, of course, with their mandarinism... It is an esoteric knowledge — for if principles contradict tactics and practice, if theory is not a practical and necessary tool, if theory and practice are related only in the sense that theory sums up (in one way or another) past practice, perhaps vivified with a coat of impressionistic paint distilled from what's going on around at the time — but not in the sense that theory is the source of precepts to guide practice, to aid in the practical exploration of reality — why then, where is the incentive to spread theoretical knowledge?

"What is to prevent the polarisation of the organisation into the mandarins and the subjects of the demagogic manipulation of the mandarins and their lieutenants? What is to prevent the esoteric knowledge of the mandarins from being just one intellectual 'in-group's' defining characteristic, to be played with, juggled with, and to do all sorts of wonderful tricks with: after all, it is very rarely tested since it doesn't relate to reality...

"It is a question of the conscious method versus the clever juggling of people in the central IS leadership who are subjectively revolutionaries — but entirely bourgeois in their method of thinking and conception of politics. These people are very like the Lovestoneites..."

[Excerpt from a document by the present writer given limited internal circulation in Workers' Fight, 1971.]

Agitation and propaganda

On dozens of questions, over the years, the IS (SWP) leaders have developed the idea that they can say one thing in "agitation", and quite a different in "propaganda".

This same issue was central to the dispute between the Trotskyist Tendency and the IS (SWP) leadership in late 1969, when IS effectively supported the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland, was the question of what governs the "agitation" and "propaganda" of revolutionary socialists.

We argued as follows, in a pamphlet, *IS and Ireland*, published in December 1969.

A formula was worked out [by the IS leaders] whereby in slogans and headlines the British troops shouldn't be mentioned, but in the text we should "warn" about their future role. In subsequent arguments the headlines and slogans were labelled 'agitation', the small type was the "propaganda". We were told that one must "understand the difference between propaganda and agitation"...

Unless we have a clear conception that the reason for putting demands, for making agitation and propaganda, is directly to try to raise the level of consciousness, to show the necessary direction of the struggle, to sharpen that struggle so that the masses, or at least those of the vanguard that we reach, learn the best political lessons from it, we are hamstrung from the start, we are tied down to a reformist conception, to a stance of petitioning the powers that be, looking to their actions and decisions for alleviation, rather than to the direct action of the working class. If that were the case, we would never make a demand that wasn't likely to be immediately realised.

Moreover, if we do not see the various forms of "communication" (demands, slogans, agitation, propaganda, headlines and small print) as necessarily bound together by a single aim and programme, with the single purpose of raising consciousness (whether this be "purely" literary or whether it be linked with immediate action) then what is there to link them, to prevent them flying apart into contradictions and inconsistencies?

For revolutionaries, there can be no contradiction between the content of agitation, propaganda and theory. The difference is one of form, of style and technique, and of scale. The content and meaning does not differ according to whether action might or might not follow, or whether that action might be on mass scale or on a tiny scale. This is the essential meaning of the well-known definition of Plekhanov: "A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator present only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people"...

The point about the Plekhanov formulation is that the "single idea" put over in agitation is not just any old idea but a correct idea; not in antagonism to the larger complex of ideas that is propaganda, but flowing out of it, and again leading back to it...

The justification for having a different line for agitation and propaganda was... that agitation must lead to action, but propaganda is about the general, overall picture, about the future. Only propaganda is seen as educational. Martynov, the Russian "Economist", counterposed agitation leading to action to Plekhanov's propaganda and agitation, because he wanted to fight for reformism and to "free" his reformist tactics from a too rigorous connection with revolutionary Marxist propaganda and the agitation spun from it.... IS use the very same distinction, for the reason that they went to free themselves to react impressionistically with regard to the long term interests of the class. They wanted to free themselves from theory, programme and basic principles.

To say that agitation and propaganda are both essentially educational is not to say that they don't lead to action. It is to say that education and action must be integrated, must interact, that the most important and chief reason for anything to be said and done is that it educates the masses and raises their consciousness, preferably in action.

"Linking the fragments" mid and late 1960s

After the mid-1960s SR/IS drafted out of the Labour Party. They were still in the Young Socialists, and effectively they had control of the YS for a period after the Healyites absconded in 1964, though it was a very depleted YS. Militant did not yet have much presence. There would be at least one case of a YS branch joining IS en bloc.

Now IS started to develop a perspective based on industrial action. They published a book written by Cliff and Colin Barker, called "Incomes Policy, Legislation, and Shop Stewards", in 1966. It was sold to many contacts. It was heavily syndicalist.

It focused on rank-and-file workplace struggles, and more or less clearly suggested that linking-up and escalation of those workplace struggles was a sufficient strategy to achieve socialism.

There is a strange history to this question. The Healyites began to advocate a rank and file movement in 1957. It reflected their own base in the building industry. SR's riposte was a policy which they took, like much else, from the ILP: a proposal for creating industrial unions, breaking up the big conglomerate unions into industrial units. Whatever the merits of such a scheme, it had nothing to do with the central problem, which is that the trade unions have a well-paid bureaucracy and that bureaucracy has interests antagonistic to the needs of the rank and file. That bureaucracy exists in single-industry unions as well as in others.

The Healyites had a big industrial conference — big for the time — in late 1958, with 500 people the big majority of whom would have been real industrial militants. It created a stir in the bourgeois press. The Guardian became interested, and the Communist Party denounced the event right, left, and centre. There had been a big strike, for his role in which Brian Behan served six weeks in jail. Maybe the Healyites were a bit ultra-left. But the Cliffites responded not only by observing that but by publishing a vicious piece of quasi-witch-hunting.

SR followed the Healyites in many things. But not all. SR could often be very "soft". In 1958 there were racist riots in Notting Hill, in London. The Healyites raised the call for a trade-union-based workers' defence force. SR did not follow them on that! What they wanted was a Labour Party inquiry. SR were very careful not to stick their necks out, despite the ultra-left posturing.

Again, at the 22nd Congress of the ruling party in the USSR, in 1961, Khrushchev returned to his anti-Stalin theme, and gave a lot more detail. Cliff wrote an article on the 22nd Congress which was published in three variants — one in the US magazine *New Politics*, one in SR, and one in IS journal.

In the *New Politics* version, the longest of the three, he developed the perspective of "welfare-state" state capitalism in the USSR. "The program, in sum, is one of 'Welfare State Capitalism'." Cliff warned that "the transition from poor, aspiring state capitalism to mature 'welfare' state capitalism... will, at best, take decades... Communist Russia will probably never succeed in becoming a full fledged 'welfare' state capitalist society"; but he didn't question the direction of development, or see any reason why Khrushchev couldn't continue to make concessions until there would be in existence, under state-capitalist totalitarianism, a welfare system as there was in the West.

Another example was Michael Kidron's argument, when the Tories set up the National Economic Development Council in 1961-2 for three-way consultations between government, bosses, and unions on economic affairs, that it was "up to the Labour Movement's organisations to transfer their reformist activities to that administration and pay less single-minded attention to dying parliamentary institutions".

Of course, SR was always supportive of strikes. In the late 1950s SR had become strike-happy. There were lots and lots of articles calling for strikes in areas where they had no influence at all.

In the 1960s they began to talk about "the fragments". There was no viable overall movement, but only "fragments" of militancy, some of it in industry, some of it in other areas

like housing struggles. It was all malarkey. There was a powerful and cohesive labour movement. SR/IS were using political, heavily-subjective, and arbitrary demarcations to "define away" the broad labour movement in which the militant "fragments" were firmly embedded.

The SR/IS idea around 1965-6 was that the job was to link the fragments. Now, if there were disconnected fragments (though in fact they were linked through the existing labour movement), then the job of linking the fragments was that of creating a party, in all but name. IS would put the cap on that train of thinking in 1968, with its turn then towards organising a party.

1968: growth and demagoguery

In 1967-8 IS grew quickly because the Healy organisation was increasingly sectarian and increasingly bizarre. IS became a very disparate, chaotic organisation, and unbelievably demagogic in many ways. In April 1968 the Tory MP Enoch Powell made a vehement speech against immigration. The London dockers, who had been on a ten-week strike just recently, struck and marched supposedly in defence of Powell's right to free speech (he had been sacked from the Tory front bench), but in reality because they agreed with him. Cliff responded by talking about "the urgent threat of fascism".

That was nonsense, and I don't suppose Cliff believed it. But it was part of a "join IS" campaign. In 1968 IS also called suddenly for left unity, on a minimal four-point platform:

(1) Opposition to imperialism; for the victory of all genuine national liberation movements.

(2) Opposition to racism in all its forms and to controls on immigration.

(3) Opposition to state control of trade unions; support for all progressive strikes.

(4) Workers' control of society and industry as the only alternatives to fascism.

That too was blatantly demagogic. Who did they expect to unite with? The Militant group? The Healyites? They didn't in fact expect anybody. It was a come-on.

Workers' Fight had come into existence as a public organisation in October 1967. The editorial in the first issue of our magazine, which we then expanded and produced as a small pamphlet, was a call for Trotskyist regroupment. We believed, and we said, that the existing main organisations of Trotskyism were completely bankrupt, and we were calling for a regroupment of individual Trotskyists.

We didn't believe IS's talk about the urgent threat of fascism. But when they made their call for unity we responded, not because we believed their demagoguery, but because IS was a relatively loose organisation, comparatively speaking a democratic organisation, and we could continue doing within it the work we had been doing separately, such things as workplace bulletins and campaigning against the Vietnam war.

After 1970

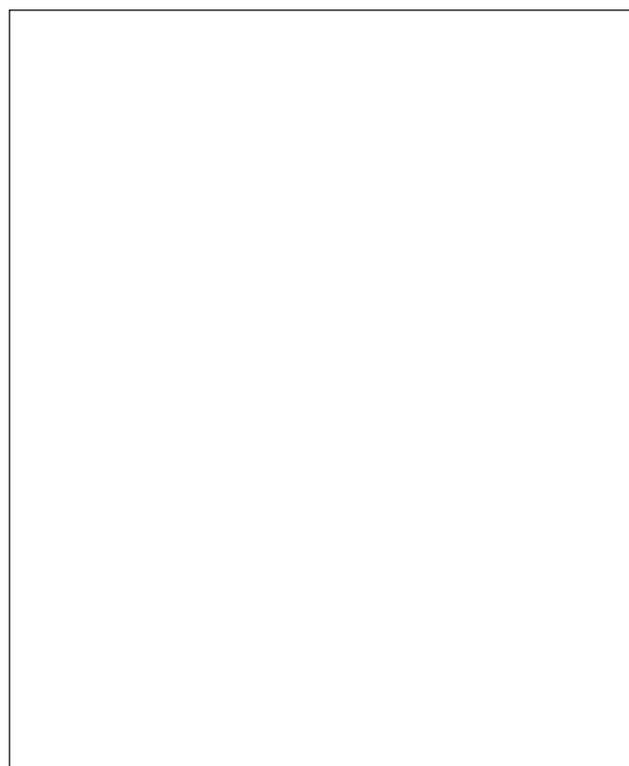
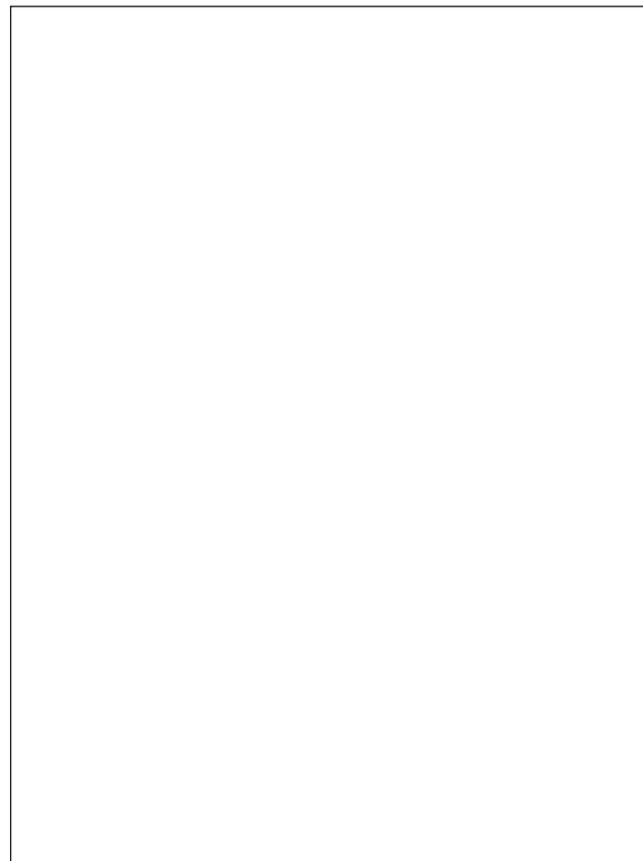
In 1970 the Tories unexpectedly won the general election. In IS in the run-up to the 1970 election there had been many different attitudes to the Labour Party. There were people who were against it in all conditions, and there were people who were very much for it.

Cliff's approach on that question illustrated IS's characteristic demagoguery at that period. A snapshot: IS conference at the Beaver Hall in central London, Easter 1969.

IS has over 1000 members, mostly young, politically raw, uneducated people, full of life and enthusiasm and impatient of political restraint. Ultra-left, in the in-your-guts sense in which young people should be instinctively ultra-left. All they need is experience, political education, tempering, and the benefit of the political wisdom of the older comrades. But what will they get?

There is a dispute in the group about what to say in the next general election. Can we really call for a Labour vote? For Wilson's Labour government? Everybody, even those who think we should vote for the labour movement's party,

The formation of the SWP



Workers' Fight started publishing in 1967 (above); called for a Trotskyist regroupment (left); as the Trotskyist Tendency in IS argued for the method of transitional demands (right).



hates the Labour Party. It is only nine or ten months since nine million French workers have staged a stupendous general strike and seized the factories. Things are heated and alarmingly confused at conference.

Cliff is called to speak and trots down the gangway to the lecture-room-style lowered stage in front. He grabs the microphone militantly, as if he's going to fight with it, body language exuding combativity and positively teenage impatience with political restraints.

"This", he said heatedly, "is an unnecessary discussion. We don't need it. You know why we don't need it? Because we won't take part in the blinking election when they call it. What'll we do? We'll call for a general strike, that's what we'll do! Not a general election, but a general strike!" Thunderous applause.

What happened when the election came? IS shouted: vote Labour.

The young people who needed calming down had been fed with amphetamines; those who needed political education, placated with political gibberish! But it "worked". Cliff knew how to handle them!

In 1970 we, the Trotskyist Tendency, were initially against a blanket vote for Labour: we said we should back only Labour candidates loyal to the unions on issues like the laws to restrain strikes which Labour had tried and failed to introduce in 1969. But I think by the time of the election only three of us still held that position: Andrew Hornung, Rachel Lever, and me. All of us in the Trotskyist Tendency wanted IS to stand a candidate in a selected constituency and make a national campaign around it.

There's no doubt that our opposition to a general Labour vote was a mixture of miscalculation on our part and sheer hatred of the Labour Party. We would have to learn better. The IS majority demagogically finessed its differences, dismissed the idea of an IS candidacy, and came out with a slogan, "Vote Labour without illusions".

Under the Tory government, IS began to see opportunities for growth in the rising class struggle. Quickly the group became "anti-Tories". Everything bad was "Tory this" or "Tory that". This anti-Toryism was a long tradition going back to the Healyites.

The leaders now began to tighten up the organisation. Cliff as a "Luxemburgist" opposing Lenin was obviously free of any obligation to give any account of himself in Leninist terms, i.e. terms of scrupulous ideological accounting. So was the Cliff who had "returned to Lenin" in 1968.

The motivation, even the proclaimed motivation, was not any new drive for political clarity and coherence, but a mixture of administrative arguments about the need for some centralisation to run a group which was now much bigger, and organisational arguments about the need for a party machine to "link the fragments".

Lenin was not a guide; Lenin was a demagogic flag for centralising the group. Cliff was as free from Lenin when he was a "Leninist" as when he had been an "anti-Leninist".

Later he would start to use Lenin as a Cliff palimpsest, as a way of justifying himself. Someone joked about the multi-volume biography of Lenin which Cliff would publish from 1975 that it was a biography of Tony Cliff by Lenin. It was an enterprise in collecting texts and facts from Lenin's life so that they would fit whatever Cliff wanted to do.

Fundamentally what happened after 1970 was that the leadership sensed new opportunities and wanted to get the group — which in 1968-9 had been very chaotic — into shape. There was nothing to be condemned in them wanting to get the group into shape. The question is how they did it.

The dispute on Europe 1971

By mid-1971 there was a lot of bad feeling between the Trotskyist Tendency and the IS leadership. We had disputed with them on Ireland and other issues. What triggered their move to expel us was the question of the Common Market (as the European Union was called at that time).

The campaign to expel us took the form of a "de-fusion" campaign. It was done that way because the members would not have been quiet about a purge if it had not been dressed up. The leadership called a special conference, and we had a very fruitful six weeks to campaign against the expulsion.

It was a very democratic six weeks in its forms. Though in practice it was unbalanced and subject to the most god-awful demagoguery, it did not seem obviously the end of a democratic regime. A lot of people voted for the expulsion who would not have voted for its implications.

When we pointed out the implications of confining the right opposition to episodic single issues, we were generally not believed. That was partly because among those supporting our expulsion were people who had been on the same side as us on the Common Market issue. The difference between them and us was that we had tried to requisition an IS special conference to stop Cliff changing the policy as he did.

The IS leadership carried the day at the conference, with 40% opposing them. About 35 of us refused to accept the ban on the faction. We had the option of going underground and pretending that our faction had dissolved, but we felt that doing that would simply dissipate our strength and miseducate people. So we went out of IS on 4 December 1971.

A few people who hadn't made their minds up then would

join us later. One member of the Trotskyist Tendency decided to stay in the IS. He said that the differences were not big enough to justify the separation. On one level that was true: the initiative for the separation did not come from us.

We set about organising the group in the way it hadn't been organised as a tendency in IS. A couple of comrades, Phil Semp and the late Dave Spencer, remortgaged their houses and we bought a printing press. We rented an office and set out to produce a fortnightly paper.

We were suddenly faced with responding directly to a rising class struggle, and it was very invigorating. There was a miners' strike in early 1972, which was victorious. The closing of Saltley Gates, which was decisive in that strike, was about the time we produced the first issue of our paper.

1972-5

1972 must have been invigorating for IS too. But Cliff had whims, he had sudden inspirations, and now he found himself curtailed by a formal constitution. He was surrounded by people who were followers of Cliff, but also had a tendency to think for themselves, people like Jim Higgins and Ian Birchall and a few others.

IS expelled another opposition, the "Right Opposition", early in 1973 (on which more below), but continued to grow. Socialist Worker, edited by Roger Protz, was a pretty good paper. There were things wrong with it politically, but as a journalistic enterprise it was pretty good.

In 1971 IS had created a new type of general secretary. The group had always had a secretary, but in the minimal sense: the person had always been a lightweight, with no independent political influence. Now Duncan Hallas became national secretary. Hallas was clever; he was well-educated politically; his problem was that he had no guts. He had for example agreed with us in the dispute on Ireland in August 1969, but kept quiet because he didn't want to clash with Cliff.

For whatever reason, Hallas couldn't do the job, and he was soon replaced by Jim Higgins, who also was well-educated, capable of independent judgement, and with a labour-movement background. Higgins was the man who purged the Right Opposition. But then he and Cliff began to fall out.

The process would culminate in nearly all the old cadre of IS as it had been in 1970 being expelled or quitting in late 1975. There were differences on trade-union orientation. Cliff, now plainly taking the SLL of the previous decade as his model, pushed for a turn towards "raw youth who wanted to rip the head off capitalism". Higgins wanted a more patient approach with established trade unionists. I think that the essence of it was that Cliff was learning from

Chronology

1940, April: the Trotskyist movement splits, in the USA and internationally, between those who “defend” the USSR invading Finland (led by James P Cannon) and those who reject such defence (led by Max Shachtman). Over the next decade this split between “orthodox” Trotskyists (Cannon and others) and “Third Camp” Trotskyists (Shachtman and others) will widen and consolidate.

1946, September: Tony Cliff comes to Britain, and joins the majority faction of the British Trotskyist movement (the RCP), led by Jock Haston and Ted Grant.

1947: The minority of the British Trotskyists, led by Gerry Healy, separate from the RCP majority in order to begin systematic work in the Labour Party around the paper Socialist Outlook. Cliff moves to Dublin (until 1951).

1948, June: Cliff publishes first version of “Russia: A Marxist Analysis”.

1949, August: The RCP collapses; its members join the Labour Party and are reunited with the Healy group there.

1950, June: Korean war starts.

1950, September: Supporters of Tony Cliff expelled from the British Trotskyist group in the Labour Party, led by Gerry Healy, and form their own “Socialist Review” (SR) group. 33 members.

1951, November: Labour loses election. Tories take office (until 1964). Big left movement (“Bevanism”) develops in the local Labour Parties.

1953: Crisis in SR group: paper appears only with big gaps.

1956, February: Khrushchev denounces Stalin. Over the next couple of years a big crisis develops in the British Communist Party. Meanwhile, from 1955 strike activity (mostly local, short, and unofficial) increases (average 2,069,000 striker-days per year 1945-54; 4,601,000 1955-59).

1957, January: Healyites launch much-expanded magazine, Labour Review. In May they launch a new paper, The Newsletter.

1958-60: SR group much eclipsed by Healyites; has crisis in **1959:** redefines itself as “Luxemburgist”.

1960: Labour Party relaunches Young Socialists; all the Trotskyist groups will grow with recruits from the YS; nuclear disarmament movement also flourishes.

1960, Easter: International Socialism magazine launched. Initially wide editorial board, way beyond SR. A single previous issue had appeared in 1958.

1961: Young Guard launched (paper for YS also including the future Militant but dominated by SR). SR also launches Industrial Worker, soon renamed Labour Worker.

1962: SR ceases publication; group takes the name IS.

1964, October: Labour returns to office (until 1970). After about 1968 disillusion with Labour will become angry and widespread. In 1964 Healyites pull out of Labour Party to launch their own youth movement (they had won the majority in the official YS). IS left with majority of YS.

1965-6: IS shifts to more detached attitude to Labour Party: between 1966 and 1968 it will drift out, bit by bit. By the end of 1965 IS has increased to 200 members, from a couple of dozen in late 1950s to 200. It shifts to an orientation to “linking the fragments” of (mostly industrial) militancy.

1966, August: Founding nucleus of what would become Workers’ Fight, and today the AWL, breaks from Militant group and publishes its document What We Are And What Must Become.

1968, May-June: Name of *Labour Worker* changed to *Socialist Worker* (and in September SW goes weekly). IS responds to anti-immigrant speech by Tory politician Enoch Powell by proclaiming “urgent threat of fascism” and calling for left unity on the basis of four points. IS is growing fast — maybe 1000 by the end of 1968.

1968, June: Cliff calls for democratic centralism.

1968, December: Workers’ Fight merges with IS.

1969, August (and after): sharp dispute between Workers’ Fight (Trotskyist Tendency) and IS leaders over IS leaders’ effective support for deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland

1971, June: IS switches from its previous line on Europe, “In or out, the fight goes on”, to “No to the Common Market”. The shift is first proposed as a tactical fallback (vote no if your internationalist resolution has been defeated in your union branch), but soon becomes IS policy; the old line disappears.

1971, December: IS expels (“de-fuses”) Workers’ Fight at a special conference.

1973, April: IS expels the “Right Opposition” on the following grounds: “The undeclared Right grouping within IS is fundamentally out of consonance with IS politics, programme, strategy and tactics... The NC therefore resolves to expel the main proponents...”

1973, summer: crisis in IS leadership — EC purged — Higgins and others in opposition.

1974, February: Tories fall, Labour government elected. SWP policy of “steering left” (ultra-militancy).

1974, March: IS organises first national Rank and File conference. Votes down amendment, moved by Workers’ Fight, for commitment against racism, for abortion rights, for expropriation.

1975, December: IS expels the IS Opposition (Jim Higgins, Stephen Marks, John Palmer, etc.) on grounds of refusing to dissolve their faction after conference. Many of IS’s manual trade unionists quit.

1976, December: IS proclaims the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP).

1977, August: Anti-fascist “Battle of Lewisham”

1977, November: SWP launches Anti-Nazi League (“alternative to street-fighting”)

1977, November: Third (and last) national Rank and File conference declares one-day general strike for 7 December in support of the fire-fighters, then on strike. Complete failure.

1978, April: Cliff starts arguing “downturn” thesis.

1979, May: Labour loses election, Thatcher takes power.

1979, November: SWP conference formally adopts “downturn” thesis.

1980: Rank and file left-wing rebellion explodes in the Labour Party. SWP aloof.

1984, April: Tony Cliff says that the miners’ strike, then in its fourth week and still on the up and up. “is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers’ Party have called the ‘downturn’ in the movement”.

1985, March: Student Jewish society banned at Sunderland Polytechnic because it will not disavow Zionism. SWP evasive but sympathetic to ban.

1986, October: SWP publishes pamphlet, “Israel: The Hijack State” (with cover pic of Israel as mad dog dragging along Uncle Sam).

1987, September: SWP switches line on Iran/Iraq war (raging since 1980) to support for Iran.

1988 June: SWP announces the end of the “downturn” and its replacement by the “new mood of anger”.

1992, October: SWP demands “General Strike Now / TUC must act” against new pit closures.

1993, July: SWP beats up AWL member Mark Sandell for leafletting at SWP summer event.

1997: SWP repositions itself as those who “hate the Tories but have doubts about Blair”.

2000 to 2003: SWP participates in London Socialist Alliance, then Socialist Alliance, with AWL and others.

2000, April: Tony Cliff dies.

2001: SWP expels ISO-USA from its international network.

2002, April: SWP signals full-scale turn towards Islamism by uncritically backing Muslim Association of Britain demonstration against Israel

2004, January, to 2007, September: SWP in Respect coalition with George Galloway, and then ejected by Galloway (who takes a few prominent SWPers with him). SWP leadership scapegoats John Rees for the fiasco.

2010, February: John Rees, Lindsey German and others quit SWP, form Counterfire.

2011, April: Chris Bambery quits SWP, forms ISG.

More on the SWP

The SWP crisis of 2013

workersliberty.org/node/20344: The SWP crisis of 2013: weblinks

workersliberty.org/node/20342: The SWP and “Leninism”: response to Alex Callinicos’s “Is Leninism finished?”

workersliberty.org/iso: Where will SWP opposition go? (comment on ISO-USA and Socialist Alternative)

The political record of SWP-IS

workersliberty.org/node/9394: The paradoxes of Tony Cliff, 1917-2000: a critical memoir, by Sean Matgamna

workersliberty.org/node/17352: “Si monumentum requiris, circumspice”: review by Paul Hampton of Ian Birchall’s biography of Tony Cliff

workersliberty.org/node/10010: The Northern Ireland crisis of 1968-9 and the left: a 12-part series including coverage of the iS (SWP)’s line

workersliberty.org/and-ireland-1969: IS and Ireland: 1969 Workers’ Fight pamphlet

workersliberty.org/is-1969: The politics of IS (SWP): a 1969 polemic on IS’s switch from concocted “Luxemburgism” to a “Leninism” redefined as administrative centralisation

The IS-SWP tradition: a Workers’ Liberty symposium

workersliberty.org/jeffreys: Steve Jefferys

workersliberty.org/node/16561: Ken Coates, Sheila Rowbotham, Stan Newens, the ISG

workersliberty.org/node/16545: Jim Higgins, James D Young, Mike McGrath

workersliberty.org/node/14419: John Palmer

workersliberty.org/node/13526: Pete Keenlyside

Also

workersliberty.org/node/16608: Alex Callinicos and the future of the SWP: Workers’ Liberty 3/33

workersliberty.org/swp: AWL versus SWP: educational and background texts

workersliberty.org/node/19062: “Neither plague nor cholera”: open letter to SWP about their call for a vote for the Muslim Brotherhood

The formation of the SWP

the Healyites (selectively, of course) to break from the broad labour movement and build IS as an organisation revolving on its own axis. That didn't happen in one day or all at once, and there was resistance to it even after 1975.

A whole swathe of the cadres — Higgins was the representative figure — had been members of IS in the 1960s when it was an organisation which got off on skitting at the Healyites, jeering at them, mocking them, very sceptical, "Luxemburgist". That heritage was inimical to what Cliff was now trying to do. You can't build a Healyite organisation, sustained by nerve, conviction, and intolerance, with the sort of cadres IS had had before 1968.

Cliff went through various manoeuvres, culminating in an exodus of the people around Higgins. They were expelled for refusing to dissolve their faction after the 1975 conference. It was an irony after their role in expelling us and the Right Opposition.

From that point on, IS was consolidated as a single-leader, rather cultist group, oriented to building its own organisation on any basis Cliff decided was usable. The group became highly centralised to the point that, some years down the track, an organiser could simply expel someone at will. The days when Cliff would boast that no more than four people had been expelled in the whole history of the group were no longer cited as a model!

The next great landmark came between April 1978 and 1980 when Cliff became convinced of the "downturn" and imposed that doctrine on the SWP. This "downturn" doctrine was a vastly premature giving up on the struggle. In this as in other things Cliff followed in the tracks of other people, in the first place of Eric Hobsbawm, who first put forward a similar thesis in March 1978.

The "downturn" period was, I think, the final nail in the process of making IS (from 1977, the SWP) a self-oriented sect. There had been a progression in the previous history of the group. They related to the Labour Party. Then they tried to relate to the rank-and-file industrial movement. They tried to relate to the shop stewards. They retreated and become more and more self-oriented. The shift comes to a sort of resting point in the declaration at the end of the 1970s that the labour movement had no more potential for struggle and nothing could be done except building the SWP.

In 1979, after Labour lost the election, a big upsurge began in the Labour Party, backed by some of the unions and even some of the union leaders. The phenomenon is known as "Bennism", though there was a lot more to it than that term would convey. The upsurge was really vibrant and alive at the beginning of the 1980s — and the SWP stood aloof. They coined an idiotic witticism to explain why they would not join the Labour left: if you want to push a wheelbarrow, you don't sit in it.

In the great miners' strike of 1984-5, Cliff would write: "The miners' strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called the 'downturn' in the movement" (Socialist Worker, 14 April 1984).

Week after week in the early months of the strike, when it was very buoyant, Socialist Worker would deplore its shortcomings and comment sadly that it was going ill. In June it saw it as almost lost. "The chance was lost to rejuvenate a strike which has been drifting towards a 'compromise' settlement".

Until October 1984, it deplored the miners' support groups set up by many trades councils and Labour Parties as "left-wing Oxfam". Throughout it ignored the calls for a general strike and for wider strike action by many people in the labour movement, and polemicalised against the idea of a general strike as only sectarian hot air.

Only after October 1984 did the SWP correct itself, and then only partly.

What happened to IS democracy?

There is no doubt that IS was loosely democratic up to the mid 1970s. What happened to that democracy? In 1970 there was a Commission on Factions. Its report denied that there could be such a thing as an ideological tendency: there could only be factions defined by short-term battles over short-term issues.

But the Trotskyist Tendency was a tendency. We were people from a different tradition who upheld what we thought

to be the basic and long-term ideas of that tradition; we were not a faction in the narrow sense of fighting over each day-to-day issue, or fighting for control. We didn't want to be.

So the Commission report proposed to wipe out the basis on which the Trotskyist Tendency existed. It was carried by the National Committee. That was the basic legislation under which the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency was carried through in 1971, and the drive by the leadership against IS democracy started.

Even then IS was quite democratic. We got 40% of the vote at the special conference called to expel us. A breakaway from our tendency, which developed into what became known as the Right Opposition, was placated into effectively condoning the expulsion by way of silence; without that we might possibly have defeated the leadership. It was still possible for members to contribute to an internal bulletin, and there were real debates.

But the conditions were changing rapidly. A machine of full-time organisers was being built up. We had no objection to that. We were in favour of the organisation having the resources and weight which full-time workers could give it. The problem was how, in what political culture, with what conception of what the organisation must do, that machine was being built up.

We wrote in the platform of the Trotskyist Tendency: "It is not a machine or hard 'professional' centre, as such, that is objectionable... but this machine, staffed by these specific people, with their specific attitudes, ideas, and record..."

The machine was built around the previously informal cultism of the old IS group, around Cliff. It saw its job as augmenting the organisation, using political ideas as instruments and selecting them by assessment of what would best attract attention and support; and it saw Cliff's hunches and instincts as the main instrument of that assessment.

Only a year and a bit after our expulsion, the Right Opposition was expelled, in early 1973. Workers' Fight had had two splits in a meeting in July 1971. One splinter dissipated quickly, but the other was in fact already a distinct tendency, which remained in IS after we were expelled. This was a grouping whose actual leader was Roy Tearse, who had been in the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s and out of politics since.

Cliff had a policy in 1968 of trying to resuscitate old members. He succeeded with Duncan Hallas, who was a very useful man from Cliff's point of view, and was undoubtedly talented; and he failed with Tearse. But he got Tearse roused up enough to show an interest and start developing a group of disciples.

This opposition tendency included a wide variety of people — David Yaffe, Tony Polan, Matthew Warburton, and others. They had learned from our fate, and they would not proclaim a faction. To take advantage of the still-liberal regime, they published pamphlets of their own on particular subjects. They seemed to have reached an agreement with the leadership on that. They published a pamphlet on the Common Market, another on the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in, another on racism. In practice they were a faction, or a tendency.

The new opposition called itself the Revolutionary Opposition, but was known by the IS leaders, and I think rightly, as the Right Opposition. They became quite numerous. The IS leaders, and anyone else with sense, could see that their claim not to be a faction was only pretence, but, oddly, quite a few people joined the opposition who really believed that it was not a faction.

They were right-wing because they had no confidence in the rank-and-file industrial militancy that was springing up all around them. They were very pessimistic. They said that the militants were running ahead of the masses, and that could be remedied only by first winning broad support for a worked-out Marxist perspective before there could be large working-class activity.

They were expelled in early 1973. About six people were expelled on the grounds that they had ideas "out of consonance with IS politics, programme, strategy and tactics". The implication of expelling us as IS did was that certain socialist ideas were not reconcilable with membership of the group, but here the IS leaders spelled it out very clearly: you could be expelled because the leadership found your political differences too extensive.

That would progress quickly to mean: any serious differences at all are too big! By 1992, prominent people were being expelled for criticising one of Cliff's strangest brainstormings: the call for a general strike to stop a new round of pit closures. The labour movement was in 1992 nowhere near mov-

In the first part of 1969, the Trotskyist Tendency (Workers' Fight) polemicalised against IS's vapid use of "Troops Out" as a slogan for a conflict in Northern Ireland in which the British troops played no central part. After August 1969, we polemicalised against IS's panicked switch into effective support for the deployment of the troops.

ing to a general strike; and the SWP had opposed the call for a general strike even at the high point of the 1984-5 miners' strike, when that call had some purchase in reality.

In 1973 about 80 people left IS to follow the named "Right Oppositionists" who had been expelled. Over the following years they scattered variously.

The secretary of the IS group then was Jim Higgins; but soon Higgins was in conflict with Cliff. A general conflict emerged, and probably the majority of the older IS cadre went into opposition. The headline issues were about trade-union activity, and especially a conflict involving the engineering fraction. One of the oddities was some of the engineers had been recruited to IS only after it had changed its line on Europe in 1971 to ingratiate itself more with established left-wing trade-unionists; now, only a few years later, they would leave the organisation.

In the abstract Cliff and the IS centre had some justice on their side. The trade-unionists should not decide the organisation's policy according to their trade-union concerns. On the other hand, any leadership with any sense will listen to and learn from its trade-unionists in the field.

In essence, it was a conflict between the old IS method of functioning and what Cliff was now trying to do, which was, whether he saw it that way himself or not, to replace the SLL by adopting the SLL's techniques and its central focus on "building the party" as the chief political answer.

A relatively protracted struggle followed in which great damage was done to the old democratic structures. The most rigid potential interpretation of the thinking in the report of the Commission on Factions was now pushed through. At the end of 1975 the leaders of what was called the "IS Opposition" were expelled, and many others left. From that point on, IS, and then SWP, had an increasingly dictatorial set of structures and an increasingly rigid machine. Within a few years, on the testimony of Steve Jefferys, a central full-timer, an SWP organiser could simply expel a member by decree. In the Healy organisation that power had been the prerogative of Healy; in Cliff's version it became the prerogative of any full-time organiser.

There were further shifts in structures, but the essence of it was that now Cliff was in full control of the organisation. A series of people became national secretaries who had never previously been vocal or prominent or distinctive politically.

Why did all this happen? Because democracy, to be effective and lasting, is not something loose and informal. It requires structure. In IS at its most democratic, things were

The formation of the SWP

loose and unstructured. To a large extent the leadership was not under the control of the members. The members could debate and pass resolutions, but the leadership would then decide what was done and how it was done. It was a bit like conditions in a trade union where members can dissent freely enough and pass resolutions, but the people who make the final decisions find ways not to be bound by those resolutions.

Once the group lost its “extended family” character, and a formal organisational structure was introduced, the alternatives were either that Cliff’s hunches and improvisations would often be thwarted, or that the structure be shaped to allow for a formal and regular enforcement of whatever came out of Cliff by way of the Central Committee, with little or no debate outside the CC. The SWP leaders chose the second course, and after 1971 imposed it as an ever-tightening noose around the neck of the organisation.

After the “downturn”

How did later political turns by the SWP, such as its lurch after 1987 towards supporting almost any force which came into conflict with the USA, happen?

It is beyond the scope of this supplement to analyse each and every turn. A fundamental fact, however, is that the drastic political turns were possible only because the regime was what it was. Cliff could do things like he did in 1992.

In that year the Tory government proposed to close 31 out of the remaining 50 coal mines left in the country. There was a great upsurge of indignation. Suddenly, the SWP, which had been talking about a downturn, printed thousands of posters and placards calling for a general strike. It became their slogan for a brief period when there were two big demonstrations, one on a Wednesday and another the following Sunday. The SWP expelled people for disagreeing with the turn. Such was the regime.

There was a loss of political consciousness, a wholesale conversion to a method of chasing hunches and inspirations which would attract (or it was hoped would attract) attention and support. Then after each turn the members would be told that only “sectarians” chewed over past differences, and it was time to lurch in another direction.

There was a depoliticisation, an erosion of political ideas beyond the level of asserting the need for socialism, and therefore the need to build “the party” and to deploy whatever ideas would help to build “the party”.

I never really liked the old IS people, as types. Their whole approach to politics was very limited. Someone like Jim Higgins can go on lamenting until his death many years later the fact that he left his job as a post office engineer to become national secretary of IS and was then booted out: that sums up a certain spirit, and it’s not a revolutionary spirit. But these people were relatively independent-minded and well-educated.

After the mid-1970s Cliff had got rid of nearly all of them. Mutatis mutandis, and keeping all things in proportion, it was a bit like Stalin’s purge of all the factions, including his own, in the mid 1930s. It left Cliff with national secretaries who had no independent political stature. There was a general decline of the political level.

The focus on “building the party”, and its use as a substitute for real political answers in the real world, inevitably produced a depoliticisation of the membership. The approach was a straight steal from the Healyites in the middle and late 1960s.

There was a progressive selection and reselection of membership and of second-rank leaders. A lot of people dropped out. Some old-stagers stayed and adapted. The young people were miseducated into the idea that “the party” as such is an answer to specific political questions and that the internal life of the party must be the peace of the graveyard.

The depoliticisation made all the changes possible. Cliff’s personal evolution you can only guess at. Until the middle 1960s he was heavily oriented to academic-type productions, while still being politically active. I think the last such production was the 1964 edition of the Russia book.

Cliff then abandoned all that and focused on politics. What then happened was shaped, I think, by Cliff’s background. He had the experience of the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s, when it was already seriously degenerated; and before that he had, I think, been linked to the Lovestone group.

Even the fetishism of “building the party” also comes, oddly, from the ILP. IS in the 1960s systematically took over all the stock-in-trade of the ILP, on issues like Luxemburgism

AWL has learned from the “Third Camp” tradition

and industrial unionism. And, though the ILP was a loose organisation, it had in its own way made a fetish of the party.

The ILP didn’t really care what your politics were, as long as you subscribed to “the party”, the ILP. IS and the SWP took over the same approach. It added the proviso that — as one local SWP organiser, recruiting a former member of AWL, put it — you could disagree on, say, the Middle East so long as you didn’t express your disagreement in SWP branch meetings and thus “confuse” other members.

At the end of the day, Cliff believed in some vague socialism, and then in himself — his own instinct and his own hunches, informed by the political culture he’d been formed in.

What is the revolutionary party?

Throughout, since the early 1970s, the SWP or IS leaders’ final reply to all criticism has been the need to “build the party”, and the assertion that the gambits, methods, and policies which they propose are necessary to “build the party”.

In the latest dispute, Alex Callinicos’s backstop response to oppositionists within the SWP has been not to explore the merits or demerits of their arguments, but to assert that the SWP’s methods are a distillation of forty years’ successful work to “build the party”, and that if the SWP adopted the opposition’s ideas then it would allegedly be “smaller and weaker”.

In revulsion against such arguments, some left-wing critics of the SWP, and probably some people within the SWP, come to deny outright the idea of building a revolutionary party, and to argue that the struggle for socialism does better with only loose coalitions and networks.

But what is a revolutionary party?

The best answer to the question, what is a revolutionary party?, is another question: what is a revolutionary party for? What does it do? The passage quoted at the start of this supplement, from Plekhanov, stated the guiding idea of the Bolshevik party: “the new Socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of class consciousness among the proletariat”.

If Plekhanov’s definition, and Lenin’s, and Trotsky’s, is correct, then many other things flow. The revolutionary socialists comment on events, propagandise, agitate. All that must be truthful, because otherwise the workers will not learn from it what reality is and how things function. It will not promote the growth of class consciousness.

The commentary, propaganda, and agitation cannot be manipulative, a matter of saying whatever will best attract attention or support. We must tell the truth. It is no accident that this thought was central to Trotsky’s summaries of principles in the 1930s, and it wasn’t only the Stalinists he was

addressing.

In order to do the work of promoting class consciousness, the revolutionary party has to be so organised that it is clear politically, and it learns from events. The whole party must be able to learn from experience and then spread the knowledge into the broader working class. It can’t do that if there is a structure inside the party like that of the Catholic Church, with a pope or a college of cardinals laying down the line and then using whatever arguments they can think of to back it up — yet the use of any argument to gain its current point is one of the dominant traits of the SWP.

The revolutionary party must be structured democratically, as the Bolshevik party was. Centralism is in action. Given unity in action, there can be as much discussion as necessary. Without discussion in the ranks — honest discussion, which allows more than one viewpoint — it is not possible to train an educated membership.

If “building the party” becomes the all-saving, all-explaining, all-defining idea in politics, then the membership becomes more or less depoliticised. To shout “build the party” as the answer to political questions now is only another way of saying: leave it until later.

The cry “build the revolutionary party” expresses a yearning for a condition of completeness — a condition where the working class is militant and socialistically conscious. It is a yearning for a general change in conditions which cannot be brought about at will, translated into something which can in theory be brought about at will, namely building the organisation.

But if the organisation is healthy, its role is to prepare the working class and educate the working class. You cannot do that with an organisation structured like the Catholic Church. That is not a revolutionary party, whatever size it has, and whatever implantation it has.

The early Christians believed that the second coming of Christ and a great transformation of our world would come soon. It didn’t happen. Then the yearning for the Kingdom of Heaven mutated into, or was substituted for by, building up the structure, the influence, the wealth of the Church, and its domination in every walk of life. Something similar has happened in the focus of the SWP and others on “building the revolutionary party”.

I don’t argue against the practical focus on building a revolutionary party in day-to-day work. That has to be central. I argue against the fetishisation of the idea of “building the party” as an answer to all political questions. It is a fetishisation because the building of a revolutionary party is only part of a broader process, and cannot be abstracted as an answer in and of itself to the problems or delays of that process.

If the party mistakes its function, if it has a wrong idea of its purpose, then it will not do what it might do to prepare the conditions in which a revolutionary party can lead the working class. The fetishisation of “building the party”, and the subordination to it of concern for truth and clarity, is not a harmless aberration. It is poisonous.

Suppose the SWP took power. For that to be even possible we would have to have tremendous transformations in the working class; but leave that aside. If a group like the SWP took power and functioned in the state as it has functioned for three decades in its own affairs, then we would have, at the very least, an authoritarian state, not any sort of democratic workers’ state.

The possibility of the SWP actually taking power is virtually nil. But if we got anywhere near that, the group would have to decide to impose its structures, as they are now, on society; or it would have to adapt to the needs of a democratic working-class movement struggling for revolution. And if it adapted, then the SWP (as it is) would begin to fall apart; it would not be able to do the things that the people who want a monolithic party want it to do.

In history there have been situations where the lack of a revolutionary party meant the destruction of tremendous working-class possibilities. But that fact does not justify ignoring the whole picture of which the party has to be part. Building a party, building an organisation that can intervene, is centrally important. But it is important within a cluster of other important considerations.

The party has no interests apart from the working class, as the Communist Manifesto says. The party is guided by the rhythm and logic of the class struggle, as the fundamental programme of the Fourth International says. And the party tells the truth, even very bitter truths.

Unless “building the party” is part of that necessary complex of ideas, then it is not a socialist party being built, but, however big it is, a cult and a sect.