

South Africa: the case for a workers' party

In its response to the struggles in South Africa, Socialist Action has aligned itself more or less totally with the African National Congress (ANC), ignoring, or dismissing as sectarian, groups to its left like black consciousness and the non-racial trade unions. Tom Rigby examines Socialist Action's policy and the theories constructed to justify it.

SOCIALIST Action's long march away from working-class politics passed another milestone recently with the publication of an article by 'Dick Carter' (John Ross) on 'Revolution in South Africa' (1 November 1985).

The article is the most elaborate attempt so far by Socialist Action to theorise its political line on South Africa. It gives no facts, information or detail about what's going on in South Africa. Instead, it argues entirely by abstract logic. It says:

- The 'axis' of the revolution in South Africa is the democratic question.

- All political forces in the liberation movement are to be judged by their attitude to the democratic tasks of the revolution — i.e. redistribution of land; free trade unions; one person, one vote; an end to the apartheid system.

- Judged from this point of view, Socialist Action says that the new emerging black workers' movement in South Africa is not as politically advanced or developed as the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). (The UDF is a broad cross-class alliance of some 650 affiliated groups: it identifies with the tradition of the ANC, its Congress Alliance, and its leader Nelson Mandela, but also includes religious leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Alan Boesak).

- As a result "In this fight for democracy Marxists seek unity in action with the revolutionary nationalist organisations in South Africa such as the ANC".

The struggle for democracy is to be carried through by the implementation of the ANC's programme, the Freedom Charter. But "these democratic tasks can only be carried through by transferring political power into the hands of the working class".

Leadership

Underlying this analysis is a conception of the ANC as part of an emerging 'new world leadership'. The other components of this group, says Socialist Action, are the NUM leadership in Britain, the leadership of Sinn Fein in Ireland, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Cuban ruling elite around Fidel Castro.

In fact the article is a contrived and scholastic attempt to give a Trotskyist gloss to a position argued more frankly by the US associate of Socialist Action, the Socialist Workers' Party (USA) and its paper 'Militant'.

The recent SWP conference — according to 'Militant' — ended with the delegates chanting 'ANC! ANC! ANC!' The SWP's



FOSATU women's group

position on South Africa is to support the ANC 100% and uncritically and to ignore all the other forces in the South African liberation movement — black consciousness groups like Azapo, semi-Trotskyist groups like the Cape Action League, the independent trade unions, etc.

In the first place this falsifies reality. Though the ANC is probably the strongest single political influence in the liberation movement, other influences are sizeable, and the trade unions are probably the biggest organised force of the movement. In the second place the SWP's position represents, to a considerable degree, an alignment with the right wing of the liberation movement against the wing that wants a socialist revolution.

Socialist Action has the same line, only decked out with more pompous theory.

Ross's argument consists of a nominally Trotskyist framework and a Stalinist political content.

Take one of Socialist Action's central contentions: that the new non-racial independent trade unions are less politically advanced than the ANC/UDF. The unions are not one homogeneous force. A real genuine living movement of hundreds of thousands of workers cannot be. There are competing and very different strands within the unions. But the mainstream, as represented by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), is not at all less politically developed than the ANC/UDF.

At the 1982 FOSATU congress, for example, general secretary Joe Foster rejected social democracy and Stalinism as models of working-class politics.

"In the capitalist economies these working class movements have power and organisation yet politically the working class is still subject to policies and practices that are clearly against their interests". And "as the struggle of Solidarity shows, even the fact that a country is said to be socialist does not guarantee that workers control their own destiny. Solidarity was not struggling

to restore capitalism in Poland, its struggle was to establish more democratic worker control over their socialist society".

He pointed out that the real world is not just one of apartheid and anti-apartheid, but of capital and labour.

"Behind the scenes of the great battle between the apartheid regime and its popular opponents the capitalist economy has flourished and capital emerges now as a powerful and different force. In the economy capital and labour are the major forces, yet politically the struggle is being fought elsewhere".

Moreover, from a working-class point of view the ANC's politics are alien. In particular: "To the major Western powers it has to appear as anti-racism but not as anti-capitalist. For the socialist East it has to be at least neutral in the super-power struggle and certainly it could not appear to offer a serious socialist alternative to that of those countries as the response to Solidarity illustrates. These factors must seriously affect its relationship to workers".

Nationalism

Foster also referred to the general experience of Third World nationalism.

"All the great and successful popular movements have had as their aim the overthrow of oppressive — most often colonial — regimes. But these movements cannot and have not themselves been able to deal with the particular and fundamental problem of workers. Their task is to remove regimes that are regarded as illegitimate and unacceptable by the majority. It is, therefore, essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters".

Some trade unionists have gone further. For instance, Moses Mayekiso, secretary of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (a FOSATU affiliate) in the Transvaal:

"At present the FOSATU shop stewards' councils, and also MAWU, are discussing the political set-up. We are looking at the crisis and the solutions to the crisis. The general feeling is that the workers must have their own party and their own freedom charter..."

"The Charter [the Freedom Charter of the ANC] is a capitalist document. We need a workers' charter that will say clearly who will control the farms, presently owned by the capitalists, who will control the factories, the mines and so on. There must be a change of the whole society. Through the shop steward councils people are opposed to this idea that there will be two stages towards liberation: that we must clean up capitalism first, then socialism. It's a waste of time, a waste of energy and a waste of people's blood..."

On the questions of Stalinism, the independent role of the working class, workers' control, and democracy, the unions are very advanced indeed.

Politics

Anyway, even if the unions were political miles behind the ANC, revolutionary Marxists could not prefer the ANC to the real living, growing, workers' movement.

The working class as it actually exists and organises is our starting point. History is made by class struggle, not by the interplay of abstract concepts. The attitude of Marxists to cross-class nationalist organisations can never, even at its most sympathetic, be the same as to the workers. The ABC of Marxist politics is the self-liberation of the working class.

The ANC is an organisation which deserves our full solidarity in its fight against apartheid. It is not in any meaningful sense a workers' organisation. At the core of the ANC is a hardened Stalinist group, the South African Communist Party, who have a political perspective of a two-stage revolution — first 'democratic', then afterwards a class struggle for socialism. Around this core have been attached various liberal and democratic figures. Since it went underground in the early '60s, the ANC has been dependent on the material aid of Stalinist governments. Its magazine, for example, is printed in East Germany.

So the ANC cannot be judged just by what it writes on paper. And in terms of the actual aspirations of the black working class for democracy and workers' control, the programme of the ANC does not go very far at all.

From the angle of democracy the Charter has been criticised for 'liberalism' and in particular by the black consciousness movement for defining the oppressed blacks according to apartheid's categories of Coloured, Asian, and African. In relation to women's demands the Charter is very limited. Women in the new independent unions have won more in terms of maternity leave and benefits than is mentioned in the Freedom Charter.

The 'second stage' of the South African CP's 'two stage' strategy is much worse: it is 'socialism' on the model of the USSR. No advanced democracy there.

Actually, as might be expected from a Stalinist organisation, the ANC is very ultimatum and bureaucratic about the struggle for democracy. Rather than taking its cue from the actual mobilisations of workers and peasants over democratic issues, it uses those issues to reinforce the strength, prestige, and bargaining position of its

apparatus.

From the early 1960s until recently, the ANC's politics centred round guerilla armed actions, divorced from the working class. Today its slogans are 'make South Africa ungovernable' and 'no education before liberation'. It does not seek to help the masses formulate and win specific democratic gains, but rather to increase the disorder that harasses the regime.

It has no immediate democratic demands for those — half the African population — who live in the bantustans. It says, rightly, that the bantustans should be reintegrated into South Africa, and leaves it at that.

It has no specific campaigns for democratic rights for women. In the black townships, it supports the campaign to destroy the local councils that collaborate with the regime, but proposes no positive alternative — only 'ungovernability'. FOSATU leaders like Alec Erwin, by contrast, have proposed the building of democratic, accountable structures in the townships to lead struggles on issues like rents, fares, civil rights and so on.

The ANC's attitude to the democratic struggle for legal rights for trade unions has throughout been negative. Seeking to preserve for the exiled SACTU the position of sole representative of South African non-racial trade unionism (though SACTU organises no workers in South Africa), the ANC claimed that legal trade unions were impossible in 'fascist' South Africa. When the non-racial trade unions won semi-legal status, the ANC denounced them as economic and reformist. As Charlie van Gelderen has documented in 'International' no.1, the ANC is still slandering the unions today. It still opposes direct links between South African and British trade unionists.

The ANC's demands reduce to 'End Apartheid' and 'Free Nelson Mandela'. Neither is quite what it seems. 'End Apartheid' means 'hand over to, or at least negotiate with, the ANC'. 'Free Mandela' is in the first place a sectarian slogan: groups like Azapo have argued rightly that the slogan should be 'free all political prisoners'. And the ANC also insists that it will not accept the freeing of Mandela unless it is without conditions and other ANC prisoners are also released. The aim, in other words, is not so much to free Mandela as to highlight Mandela and the ANC as symbols of opposition to apartheid.

Support

True, the ANC has tremendous support among the black people of South Africa, support won by its status as a symbol (recognised by governments) of opposition to apartheid, and by the courage of its militants like Nelson Mandela. But, despite the heroism, the ANC is not a good leadership of the struggle for democracy. And with its general world-view it could not be. The struggle for democracy in South Africa is intertwined with the class struggle of the black workers and peasants. The fight for democracy needs a leadership dedicated to the maximum independent mobilisation of those workers and peasants.

To advocate a workers' party counterposed to the ANC is not, as Ross would have it, a 'sectarian' counterposition of socialism to democracy. The struggle for democracy itself calls for a workers' party.

Even from a democratic point of view, let alone a socialist, the ANC's programme and its strategy are not advanced but deeply flawed.

The mode of operation of the UDF is one that many worker militants are deeply suspicious of. It is an organisation with no formal democratic structures. Actions are

called without any consultation with the constituent bodies. The unions feel that they are being treated as a stage army by the middle-class leaders of the UDF. An example was the march on Pollsmoor Prison earlier this year. Called without consultation with the unions, badly stewarded and poorly organised, the march never left its starting point. Meanwhile the 'organisers' went by car to the prison. This points to the basic problem: though the UDF can mobilise thousands under its auspices, it is not trusted by large numbers of trade union militants who have a deep and profound commitment to democracy and rank-and-file control in the workers' movement.

Combine

The SWP-US (and its co-thinkers in Britain) are relatively consistent: they couple their alignment to the Stalinist ANC with a rejection of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Ross, however, tries to combine the same practical conclusions with a formal acceptance of Trotsky's theory. So while saying "The solution of the democratic tasks of the South African revolution, which are its axis of development, can only be solved by the dictatorship of the proletariat" Socialist Action — apart from mangling the English language — ends up advocating a political perspective which means subordinating the working class to the programme of bourgeois democracy in a struggle led by a Stalinist political formation.

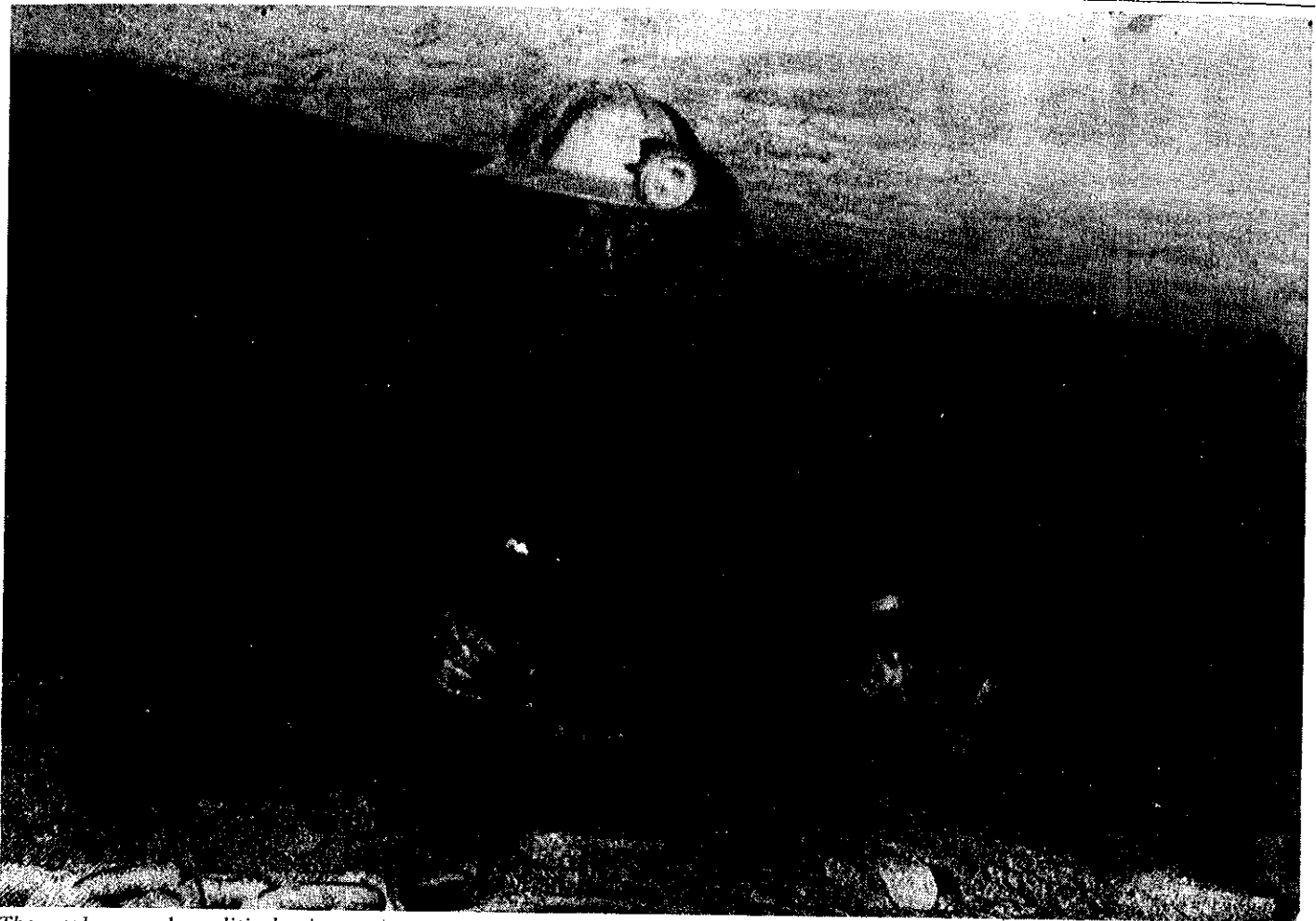
Now Trotsky's theory in its bare essentials is this: In a 'backward' or 'underdeveloped' capitalist society, one where elements of modern industry are combined with pre-capitalist political and social relations (feudalism on the land, colonial overlordship, medieval-type autocracy), the revolution against these pre-capitalist relations can be led by the working class and thus combined with a socialist revolution. In Russia the working class could lead the anti-Tsarist democratic revolution and therefore merge it with a socialist revolution; in South Africa the black working class can lead the anti-apartheid democratic revolution and make it part of a single movement together with a struggle for workers' power.

This perspective does not mean ignoring democratic issues. On the contrary: in Russia the main demands of the Bolsheviks and of Trotsky were land to the peasants, and of Trotsky were land to the peasants, the Constituent Assembly, the eight-hour day. Trotsky explained it like this: "As a primary step, the workers must be armed with [a] democratic programme. On the basis of the revolutionary democratic programme, it is necessary to oppose the workers to the 'national' bourgeoisie. Then, at a certain stage in the mobilisation of the masses under the slogans of revolutionary democracy, soviets can and should arise..."

The workers' movement must actively champion democratic demands, whilst integrating the fight for such demands into the tempo and logic of the class struggle. So class issues and democratic issues would be intertwined. Nevertheless working-class power — the rule of soviets (workers' councils) and public ownership of industry — would be necessary for victory.

In Ross's emphasis on democratic demands and the need for working-class power, he appears to be using the same ideas as Trotsky. But not so.

Trotsky posed no direct mechanical relation between democracy and socialism. He argued that democratic demands and direct working-class demands would interweave in a complex and changing way. The 'axis', to use Ross's word, of this relationship was not the struggle for democracy in abstraction



The workers need a political voice

but the living class struggle of the workers.

As Trotsky put it in 'Lessons of October': "Only on that condition [*breaking from defensism*] could the proletariat at the next stage become the axis around which the toiling masses of the village would group themselves".

Trotsky saw the *workers* as the axis. The pioneer Russian Marxist George Plekhanov expressed the same basic idea when he wrote that the Marxist — as against the populist — "is convinced that not the workers are necessary for the revolution, but the revolution for the workers".

Trotsky saw democratic issues as central, and argued therefore for a workers' party to take the initiative on those issues. Ross sees democratic issues as central, and argues therefore for workers' initiative to be subordinated to a Stalinist-bourgeois alliance.

The experience of the black workers' movement in recent years has refuted all scholastic conceptions of the relationship of democracy to class struggle.

The non-racial unions have fought for the most limited demands while not compromising their revolutionary aims. They have co-operated with broad cross-class organisations like the United Democratic Front on many issues while retaining working-class independence.

The relationship between the different aspects of struggle is, similar to what Rosa Luxemburg observed in the mass strike movement in Russia in 1905.

But the movement, on the whole, does not proceed from the economic to the political struggle, nor even the reverse. Every great political mass action, after it has attained its political highest point, breaks up into a mass of economic strikes. And that applies not only to each of the great mass strikes, but also the revolution as a whole.

"With the spreading, clarifying and involution of the political struggle, the economic struggle not only does not recede, but extends, organises and becomes involved in equal measure. Between the two there is the most complete reciprocal action.

"Every new onset and every fresh victory of the political struggle is transformed into a powerful impetus for the economic struggle... And conversely...

"Cause and effect here continually change places; and thus the economic and the political factor in the period of the mass strike, now widely removed, completely separated or even mutually exclusive, as the theoretical plan would have them, merely form the two interlacing sides of the proletarian class struggle in Russia. And *their unity* is precisely the mass strike".

Imprint

But if experience of struggle provides the basis for an answer to the strategic problems, it does not automatically spell that answer out and imprint it on people's minds. It does not automatically sweep away false answers, misconceptions, and the influence of middle-class politicians on the working class. Still less does it spontaneously provide solutions to all the tactical problems that arise.

To do all that requires a workers' political party with a vigorous internal life.

The non-racial trade unions, especially FOSATU, have been trying to develop working class politics. But trade unions, by their very structure, cannot substitute for political parties.

The best way forward would be a workers' party based on the trade unions. In

form it could be similar to the British Labour Party, which was founded as a federation of trade unions and socialist groups and later developed an individual membership structure in addition. It should be much more democratic than the British Labour Party, and could be so, given that the non-racial unions in South Africa do not have encrusted bureaucracies like the British unions already had to a considerable extent in 1900.

They have concentrated on building up strong rank-and-file organisation, shop stewards' structures and direct worker involvement. Strict accountability of leaders — who have to obtain mandates from their members for all that they do — has helped prevent the leaders from being coopted by industrial conciliation bureaucracy.

Full-time union officials are paid similar rates to the workers they represent.

Politically such a workers' party could be very different from the British Labour Party, developing a programme for working-class revolution rather than stodgy tinkering with the system. How successfully it did that would of course depend on the work of organised socialists and Marxists within the party. Already-existing semi-Trotskyist groups in South Africa, like the Cape Action League, could play a fructifying role here.

There are many difficulties with this project of a workers' party based on the trade unions, and consequently many South African trade unionists sympathetic to the general idea feel that now is not the time for it.

Those objections need to be discussed carefully. But Socialist Action is a different case. It has put itself on the wrong side of the central political divide in the South African liberation movement.

The USFI today

The whole history of the current now organised as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) has been one of repeated political accommodation to Stalinist or nationalist forces leading big struggles. Since 1979 the USFI's US associate, the Socialist Workers' Party, has taken this method further, identifying 100% with the Cuban government. Clive Bradley surveys this turn and the response to it of the USFI majority led by Ernest Mandel.

IN 1983, a group of oppositionists — broadly in support of the Mandel tendency — were expelled from the SWP and set themselves up as a new group, 'Socialist Action'. Their founding statement gives some indication of current state of the SWP.

"Immediately after the party convention in 1981, with no possibility for anyone who disagreed to reply, Jack Barnes, the SWP's central leader, announced that he no longer accepted the idea of fighting for a directly socialist revolution in underdeveloped countries. [Then in an article in 1983] Barnes insisted that 'our movement must discard permanent revolution'."

They go on to look at the political results of what they consider to be "a serious adaptation to Stalinist ideology".

On Poland: "In 1981 it was clear that the SWP did not want to be too prominent in support of the Polish workers — this might embarrass the party in its relationship with [Cuba and Nicaragua]... The SWP rejected demonstrations of any kind, refused to participate in virtually all meetings of the Left to support Solidarnosc..."

"... Its official position is for 'political revolution'... [But] shortly after the beginning of 1982, this concept... virtually disappeared from 'The Militant'... In its place ambiguous formulas appeared that could be interpreted as calling merely for the reform of the Polish CP"

On Iran: "... the SWP's press refused for many months to defend any victims of repression... Universally known facts about torture of every variety of dissenter in Iranian prisons, military assaults on the Kurdish national minority areas... none of this could be found in 'The Militant'."

They got on: "You could not tell what was going on in places like Iran, Poland, Afghanistan, North Korea, Vietnam or Ethiopia from reading the manipulated accounts in 'The Militant'." And — though Socialist Action, because of their own politics, do not say this — for sure you cannot tell what's going on in Cuba or Nicaragua from the glowing reports in 'The Militant'.

The SWP's 1979 turn

The current phase of the SWP's politics began quite abruptly in 1979, after the death of their veteran theorist Joseph Hansen. But its roots can be traced back further.

In the early 1960s the SWP — as against their Healyite detractors — recognised that a revolution had taken place in Cuba, and that capitalism had been overthrown. But they went further. They played down the



Poland: the workers' struggles of 1980-1

elements of bureaucratic control in Cuba, and played up all the revolutionary internationalist and anti-bureaucratic aspects of Castroism — all this to the extent that they blurred over the fact that the Cuban government was controlled by a tiny handful of people (with popular support, but no real popular control), and that the working class had no independent political voice. They abandoned any project of building a Trotskyist organisation in Cuba: the Castroite leadership 'team', given further evolution and good advice, could become quite adequate.

What needs to be stressed, in the light of current disputes in the USFI, is that the SWP's analysis of Cuba was shared by the Mandelites. Even now, there is no fundamental programmatic dispute over Cuba in the USFI: the Mandelites no more call for independent working-class action and political revolution in Cuba than do the SWP.

From the late '60s to the late '70s, the SWP was more critical of Castroism than the Mandel faction. In particular the SWP opposed guerilla tactics in Latin America — often in a sectarian, almost parliamentarist, fashion.

In early 1979 the SWP published a speech by Jack Barnes on "20 years of the Cuban Revolution", enthusiastically dropping all criticism of Castro. For some months yet 'The Militant' continued to dismiss the Sandinistas' guerilla war against Somoza as futile, misguided, and petty-bourgeois. In July 1979 the Sandinistas triumphed — and 'The Militant' switched round 180°. From sour, negative rejection of the Sandinistas'

struggle, they turned to 101 per cent support of the Sandinista government and all its policies.

'The Militant' today makes very strange reading. The revolutions in Central America and the Caribbean dominate its pages, but in a curious way. There is extraordinarily little analysis, or even considered comment, on events in the region. There is much less coverage on El Salvador — where civil war rages — than on relatively stable Cuba. The bulk of the material consists of speeches, or articles hung around quotations, by Castro, or Ortega, or Bishop.

The SWP on Cuba

Its presentation has a tone, a mood, a feel that cannot easily be described. So here is an example. This is an extract from the second front page lead article of 'The Militant' of 25 January 1985.

"Tipitapa-Malacatoya, Nicaragua — In front of a huge sign reading 'July victory, people's victory, symbol of Cuba-Nicaragua friendship', a new sugar mill was inaugurated here January 11... The refinery is the largest in all of Central America and the largest single industrial plant in Nicaragua. It was built with extensive aid from Cuba.

"Present at the inauguration ceremonies was Cuban President Fidel Castro, who gave a two-and-a-half hour speech. He announced that Cuba is cancelling the \$73.8 million debt owed by Nicaragua..."

"... A speech was also delivered by Jaime

Wheelock [a Sandinista leader, who said]: 'Without the contribution of the Cuban revolution, it would have been totally impossible to build this refinery...'

The article goes on to take up the whole of page 9, which consists almost entirely of quotations from Castro's speech.

Both in style and in content, 'The Militant' is like a Cuban embassy news-sheet. The SWP has even set up a travel company to organise trips to Cuba and Nicaragua to 'see the revolution'.

The SWP consider the Sandinistas and — especially — the Cuban leadership to be Marxist. A resolution submitted to the USFI World Congress comments that:

"There is a political convergence between our world current and other revolutionists in the Americas, in the first place the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba, who are charting a course in practice that leads to re-establishing continuity with the internationalist programme and strategy of the Communist International in Lenin's time".

Ethiopia, Poland, Iran

This claim has implications, of course, for how the SWP views the world. A case can be made that Cuban foreign policy in *Central America* is in the direction of aiding rather than crushing revolutions. But beyond Central America it is a different story — Cuba actively backs the Ethiopian dictatorship against the Eritrean people fighting for self-determination; Cuba backed Jaruzelski's crushing of Solidarnosc. (Two facts which alone ridicule the title of an SWP publication, 'Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy, 1975-80'). And even in Central America the argument is dubious: in Mexico, where there is a powerful workers' movement, Cuba has a warm attitude to the ruling party, the PRI.

This is a crucial point. Even where Castro aids revolutionary struggles, he does so from his own viewpoint, with his own aims. And that viewpoint, those aims, are not those of independent working-class action. Castro's whole conception of revolution and of socialism is different from ours.

At the peak of Cuban involvement in revolutionary struggles internationally, in the mid to late '60s, their concern was with the Third World and that alone. Castroism is a form of radical Third-Worldist populism: it rejects the very idea of working-class revolutionary action in the advanced capitalist countries. And in the so-called non-aligned movement, Cuba allies with thoroughly bourgeois and often dictatorial Third World governments. In the Third World, too, their perspective is not that of working-class self-liberation.

Of course, the SWP have had to try to cope with Castro's line on Poland. This, they admit, is a mistake — but a mistake committed by a revolutionary... Fine revolutionaries these, you may think, whose 'mistakes' consist of supporting counter-revolutionary violence against the class.

But such matters are of no importance. On the contrary, the Cubans "have set an example of proletarian internationalism in action", and have cleverly "refused to allow a wedge to be driven between Cuba and the Soviet and East European workers' states". Such a wedge — criticism of Jaruzelski? — is undesirable because of "the decisive role of economic and military aid to the Cuban revolution from the Soviet Union". In other words, the SWP has so lost its political bearings that it consciously covers up for the Cuban leadership, and justifies Cuba's political alignment with Moscow.

The SWP has completely collapsed independent working-class politics into a crude view of international power-politics 'blocs' or 'camps' — one that does indeed marry with Castroism very neatly. In the SWP's world there is only 'Imperialism' and 'The Revolution' fighting it out. Socialists must choose their camp.

This leads them to reactionary political conclusions.

"Should workers be 'neutral' in the war between Iraq and Iran?" 'The Militant' asks (18 May 1984). They answer emphatically no.

"We view this war — and all wars today — from the standpoint of the international fight against imperialism and the struggle to advance the world socialist revolution. [The Iranian revolution] strengthened the world working class. The Iraqi invasion... helped serve the interests of US imperialism... An Iranian victory in the war would be an inspiration for all those fighting imperialist oppression in the Mideast".

And what about Iranian oppositionists fighting the Khomeini regime? Certainly, 'The Militant' admits, there has been a clampdown on the left; the regime is bourgeois; and it is not as anti-imperialist as Nicaragua.

"In 1981, the regime took advantage of a terrorist campaign against the revolution — led by a petty-bourgeois radical group called the Mujahedeen — to carry out sweeping arrests and executions... [but the working class] refused to defend the Mujahedeen because they correctly saw its assassination campaign as aiding the imperialists and monarchists".

The SWP criticises government attacks on the left, on the working class, and on the national minorities. But there is no question of siding with opposition to Khomeini. It is all in the context of 'defence of the Iranian revolution'.

"The workers are in a stronger position to fight for their interests today — under the Islamic Republic — than they were under the Shah... Under conditions where the Iranian masses are not ready to replace the current regime with a workers' and peasants' government... overthrow of Khomeini can only be in the interests of imperialism".

In real terms, therefore, the SWP is against any opposition to the Khomeini regime. How is a workers' and peasants' government to be formed if not by socialists agitating? And to put forward even elementary democratic demands in present-day Iran would put militants in very sharp conflict with Khomeini.

The SWP's whole perspective is permeated with the 'campist' idea that 'the Iranian revolution' advances the interests of the masses regardless of what it — i.e. the Iranian state — does to them.

Workerism

The SWP have inevitably been led into support of the brutal regime of the Derg in Ethiopia (which is fully supported by Cuba). Reports of the Ethiopian famine in 'The Militant' say the Derg is not to blame at all; and they do not mention even the existence of Eritrea and Tigre, never mind the bitter wars of liberation taking place there against the Derg.

The SWP's international turn has gone hand in hand with some odd turns in their domestic orientation.

In 1978 they embarked upon a 'turn to industry' — that is, an attempt to send most of their organisation into industrial jobs. So far, so good. Others in the USFI objected that the turn to industry was how-

ever being seen as a 'cure-all'. That is an understatement. For the SWP the turn to industry is positively magical.

"... the concrete working-class outlook we gained by being based in industry oriented us to respond as a proletarian internationalist party to the revolutionary advances being registered by workers and exploited rural producers in the Americas" ('New International' vol.2 no.1, p.27).

So the adaptation to Castroism is justified via a workerism no less crude for being metaphysical. The SWP has become more proletarian and the Cuban revolution has become more proletarian; ergo, their paths converge.

The Mandelites and the SWP

Simultaneously the party programme has been amended. 'For a workers' government' has been replaced by 'For a workers' and farmers' government'. This in the US where the percentage of the labour force in agriculture (i.e. wage-labourers as well as the SWP's 'working farmers') is only 2%. It would be as rational to call for a 'workers' and small shopkeepers' government — probably more so.

SWP articles on the current — very real — agricultural crisis in the US sing hymns of praise to Cuban achievements to be adopted as a model — as if the two countries were remotely comparable.

Perhaps the sickest quirk of the SWP's turn in US politics is its attitude to the Jews. When during the presidential election Jesse Jackson referred to New York as 'Hymie-town', the SWP jumped to his defence.

SWP presidential candidate Mel Mason spelled it out:

"I strongly condemn the racist slander campaign against Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam... In spite of Jackson's retraction of the remark, he, and all Blacks, were smeared as anti-semites..."

"As to Farrakhan's comments on Hitler... Farrakhan said that some Jews 'call me Hitler'. Answering them Farrakhan said that Hitler was 'a great man' who 'rose Germany up from nothing'..."

"Farrakhan, however, went on to say that since he is 'rising his people up from nothing' there might be some superficial likeness between himself and Hitler, but otherwise 'don't compare me with your wicked killers'." ('The Militant', 27 April 1984).

It is clear, then, that the SWP today is a very long way indeed from revolutionary Marxism. Why is a party so hostile to Trotskyism part of a movement calling itself the Fourth International? And why does that 'Fourth International' tolerate them?

On some important issues, the Mandelites majority have stuck to a form of Marxist orthodoxy. They have stood by the theory of permanent revolution, for example. They — or at least their better sections, like the French, the West German or the Swedish — are recognisably trying to relate a body of ideas derived from historic Trotskyism to the actual events of today. The SWP, by contrast, appears to have lost any connection with historic Trotskyism and with large parts of reality; it is more like one of the Maoist groups of the early '70s, with Havana substituted for Peking, than even a decayed form of Trotskyism. The SWP is an isolated sect, internally a bureaucratic cult, which must appear bizarre to most US leftists. The Mandelite organisations are, as a rule, less degenerate.

Yet the Mandelite version of Marxist 'orthodoxy' is fatally coloured by the very

'campism' they seek to criticise.

Permanent revolution is not, for the Mandelites, a strategy, but a process. Maoists, Castroists, Sandinistas, are *compelled* by the 'historical process' to carry out the socialist revolution.

This notion leads the Mandelites into big theoretical difficulties.

Michel Lowy, a leading Mandelite theoretician, has produced a detailed theoretical exposition of their views on permanent revolution, entitled 'The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development'. Lowy confronts the theoretical problem — that capitalism has been overthrown by forces other than the working class led by genuine Marxist parties — in such a way as to define it out of existence rhetorically. Did these revolutions (Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam), Lowy asks, occur "under the leadership of the proletariat... and more precisely under the direction of a proletarian (communist) party"? (p.107). He answers yes. 'Communist' party equals proletarian party equals proletariat. The real problem — that the Chinese revolution, for example, was carried out by a peasant army — is thus not confronted but avoided.

"The parties", Lowy claims, "were the *political* and *programmatic* expression of the proletariat, by virtue of their adherence to the historic interests of the working class (abolition of capitalism, etc.)... the parties' *ideologies* were proletarian and the membership and periphery were systematically educated to accept the values and world view of the international working-class movement" (pp.214-5, emphasis in original).

For a Trotskyist to conclude that Stalinist parties, like the Vietnamese, which massacred the Trotskyists in 1946-7, or the Chinese, which suppressed all independent working-class activity on its entry into the cities, were politically, programmatically and ideologically proletarian is to retreat into mysticism. If this is how to defend 'orthodoxy', then better be revisionist!

The Mandelites on Nicaragua

A view of permanent revolution such as this is no real answer to the SWP. It indicates that the Mandelites lack the theoretical tools seriously to challenge the SWP.

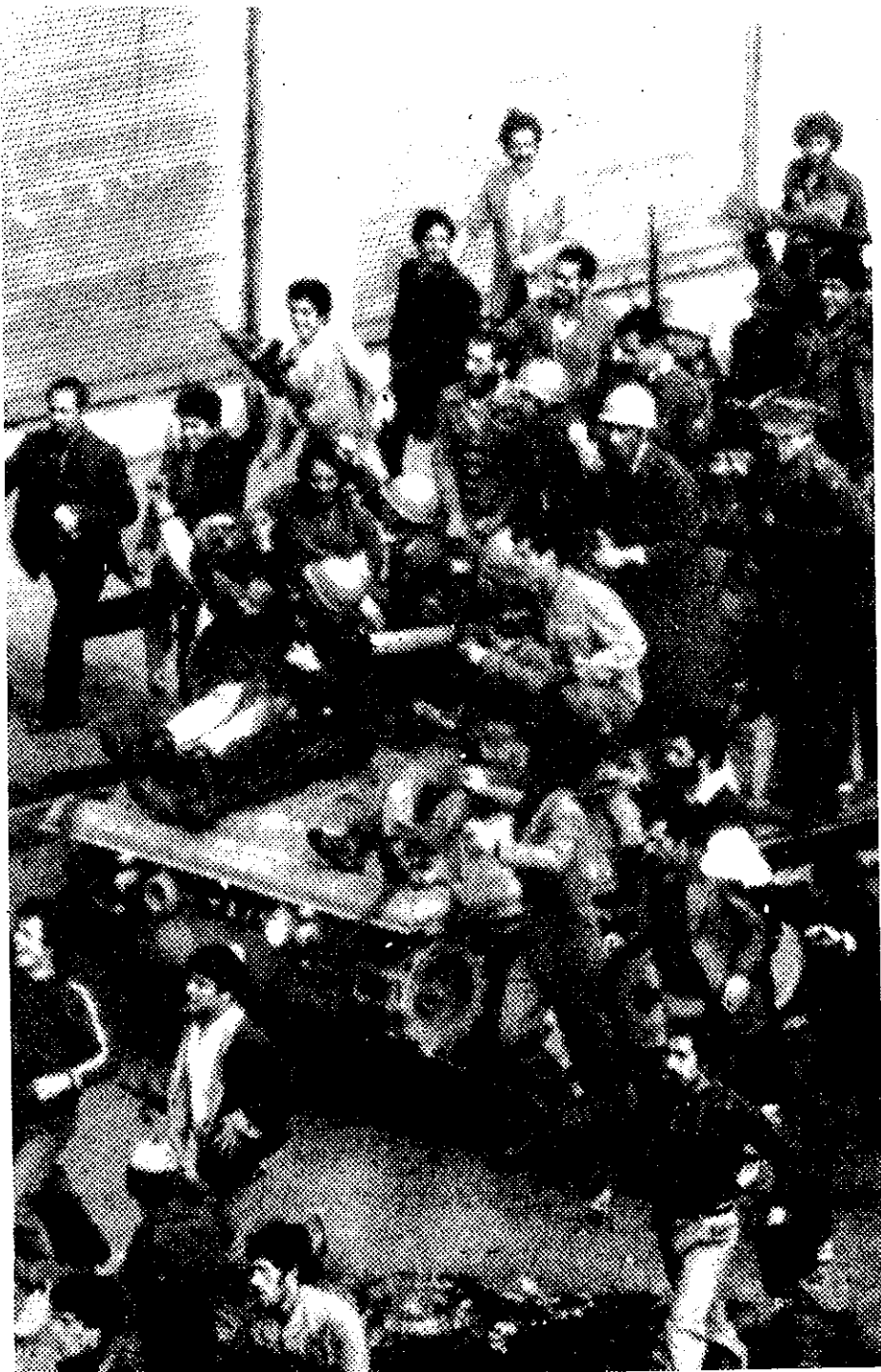
On Cuba, their differences are essentially to do with *assessment*: the Mandelites are slightly more critical. On Nicaragua, the Mandelites are if anything *less* critical: the debate at the 1985 USFI World Congress apparently focused on whether Cuba or Nicaragua is the real socialist model.

Daniel Bensaid, a leader of the Mandel current, spoke revealingly in an interview in 'International Viewpoint' (17 June 1985):

"... the Nicaraguan revolution represents a challenge for us. It is a revolution made by others, and at the beginning we understood it badly..."

"Did the Sandinistas lead their revolution in spite of themselves, despite their policy of alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie, despite their conception of economic transition?... Today... we recognise that the Sandinistas won *thanks* to their policy and not 'in spite of it'... The proletariat can have different allies at different times in the revolutionary process". (Emphasis added).

So the USFI have learned from the Nicaraguan revolution that... alliances with the bourgeoisie work! It is the same basic problem as with Cuba two decades ago: a failure to look towards an independent working-class perspective, combined in this case with bewilderment at their own irrele-



Khomeini supporters on a tank in Teheran

vance. Bensaid also, incidentally, discusses the SWP's abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution as an understandable reaction to dogmatic sectarianism...

Salah Jaber's theory

What it amounts to is a chronic inability to deal with reality without suffering gross illusions in 'revolutionists of action'. But it has to be *theorised*. And it has to be theor-

ised in counterposition to the SWP's revisions. Lebanese Mandelite Salah Jaber has performed the task.

In a long article in 'Quatrieme Internationale', 'Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', Jaber spells out what now seems to be common ground among the USFI majority. Paraphrasing Engels, he writes:

"Of late, the philistine Eurocommunist has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the

Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at Nicaragua. That is the dictatorship of the proletariat" (November 1984, p.114).

Jaber surveys working-class history since the Paris Commune in a polemic directed against the SWP. His essential point is that the class character of the state is determined by the 'armed bodies of men'.

"The destruction of the armed forces of the bourgeoisie by the armed forces of the workers marks the birth of a workers' state" (p.63).

Whether or not the state carries out nationalisations is, he argues, completely irrelevant. And by these criteria Nicaragua has been a workers' state — not a 'workers' and farmers' government', as the SWP would have it — from the moment that the Sandinistas took power.

Previous USFI positions are, Jaber states, absurd. The SWP's notion that China, for example, became a workers' state around 1955 — after the final wave of nationalisations — is a theoretical confusion. There was a workers' state in China from 1931 when the Maoists established a regional government in Kiangsi.

On Cuba, Jaber is yet more forthright.

"A movement of the masses as proletarian, if not more, than those of the Paris Commune, endowed with an ideology at least as radical as that of the Commune, which totally destroyed the bourgeois army, to the gain of a rebel Army, as proletarian if not more so than the Federation de la Garde Nationale, what is that? A 'government of workers and peasants'? A 'dual power sui generis'? No, comrades: it is the dictatorship of the proletariat" (p.101). Moreover, "In this sense... Fidel better understands the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state than... Mandel [or] the SWP".

Squaring the circles

Jaber confuses a number of issues. His main argument, that nationalisations do not determine the class nature of the state, and that the old state apparatus — specifically the 'armed bodies of men' — must be smashed, is obviously true. But the notion that 'relations of production' have nothing to do with it is ridiculous.

A new state apparatus, installed by a revolutionary army, can be transformed into a refurbished bourgeois state. Only if we give full political trust to the Sandinistas could we say that their military victory immediately defined a workers' state.

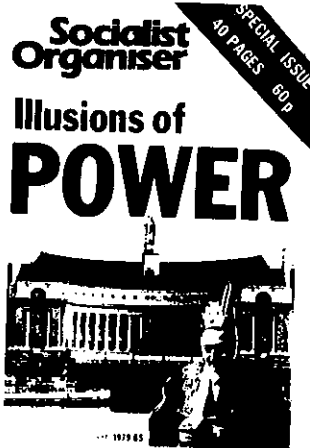
To square the circles of his theory, Jaber must eventually resort to the same fiction as Lowy: that the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. Communist Parties were politically workers' parties.

On some issues the Mandelites have quite sharp political disagreements with the SWP — notably Poland and Iran. But they are by no means uniformly clearer on basic tasks of independent working-class action.

In the South Atlantic war, the USFI majority shared the approach that viewed Argentina's war as 'a just national liberation struggle' — although one of the USFI groups in Argentina, Nuevo Curso, argued that the war was reactionary on both sides.

The Mandelites share with the SWP a political tradition and world view. The SWP have drawn out its logic more fully: but the Mandelites do not represent a real Marxist alternative.

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