

The RSL (Militant) in the 1960s - a study in passivity

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It has not been given to many organisations belonging to one or other strand of the Trotskyist tradition to have the chance to play a major role in largescale class struggle. The organisation known variously as the Revolutionary Socialist League, Militant, and, now, the Socialist Party, had such a chance in Liverpool in the 1980s. Indeed, at the time of the 1984 miners' strike it perhaps had an opportunity to bring into the battle forces that might have made the difference between a victory for the miners and the whole labour movement against the Thatcher government, and what actually happened unqualified victory for the Tories and the ruling class, and all that has in consequence afflicted the labour movement since. Militant proved unworthy of that opportunity. It did not rise to the occasion, but led by Derek Hatton, a sad character from an oldtime farce who had wandered onto the wrong stage it sank into burlesque parochialism and an altogether astonishing incomprehension of, if not deliberate indifference to, the overall class struggle. It was the selfreferring and self obsessive solipsism of the sect dead to the world around it other than on its own terms.

The most malicious of satirists could not have invented what happened in Liverpool. Despite their, so to speak, posthumously brave talk about "The City That Dared to Fight", Liverpool under Militant leadership did not fight not even there was ample indication that the labour movement would fight, and when the miners were already fighting Thatcher's mounted and militarised police. Militant's leaders in Liverpool, intent on preserving their organisation, made a shortterm deal with the Tories and left the miners in the lurch. Since 1985, Militant, like the working class and the broader left, has had to live in a world shaped by the miners' defeat and the Tory victory. Militant too has paid a heavy price.

There are other reasons for Militant's subsequent disintegration, but that sectarian refusal in 1984 to be guided by "the logic of class struggle" is central. Of the "other reasons", the collapse of European Stalinism is foremost. It shattered the "perspectives for world revolution" which Ted Grant had spun for four and a half decades around the survival of Stalinism in Russia, its expansion into East and Central Europe, and its replication in Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, etc. The Labour Party's ban on Militant and the closing down of the Labour Party Young Socialists created organisational difficulties that Militant was politically not in a good state to face. It had been heavily dependent on the structures of the official labour movement, especially the LPYS, which it controlled for 18 years. It had threaded itself into the trelliswork of those structures, not only organisationally but also emotionally and intellectually. Disintegration has followed.

The organisation's spinner of ideologies, Ted Grant, was expelled and formed a separate group (Socialist Appeal) in 1992. The majority veered from Militant's old political certainties towards something very close to the identikit Mandeliste, kitschTrotskyist left. The organisation continues to decline and disintegrate.

One of three things: those Militant people who took seriously its claims for what it was and for what it would do will stand back, subject Militant's history and distinctive ideas to the necessary critical reevaluation in the light of events and of the Trotskyism of Trotsky, and help regroup the left. Or they will continue, politically directionless, with routine activity in unions and campaigns. Or they will give up, as many seem to have done.

For those who want to reevaluate and rebuild a healthy revolutionary socialist movement, it is necessary, first and foremost, to understand what was wrong with Militant and with much of postTrotsky Trotskyism. For people who spent years in the organisation, that can be a painful job. Serious Marxists will nonetheless face up to it. The contents of these booklets and a number of collections of shorter documents on Ireland, Liverpool, racism are designed to help in that task.

The 3 booklets, of which this is number 1, consist in the main of two large documents, separated in their writing by two decades, in which were analysed key aspects of Militant's politics. The first was written in June and July 1966 by members of the RSL (mainly by the present writer, with irreplaceable collaboration from Rachel Lever and help from Phil Semp).

The 1966 document was an attempt by quite young people to come to terms with what seemed to us to be the bankruptcy and political collapse of Trotskyism in Britain. Rachel Lever and Phil Semp were 22, with three years in Trotskyist politics; I was 24, with seven, plus an earlier inherited "mother's milk" Irish republican background, and a short period as an incipiently Trotskyist Young Communist.

Much that has happened in the decades between then and now might have gone very differently but for that comprehensive Trotskyist political collapse into incoherence, sectism and radical incapacity to be what it set out to be. Revolutionaries now must come to terms with that history.

It was not just Militant. "Trotskyism" of one sort or another began to grow in the mid 1960s, and spectacularly after 1968, but to us it seemed that it had suffered a political collapse that could not but make the organisations a political nullity or worse, a source of political confusion and destruction. The main Trotskyist group in Britain, judged by numbers, resources, energy, or vitality, was Gerry Healy's SLL. It had degenerated into a destructive and disruptive ultraleft sect, which was also heavily bureaucratised. It would become a very great deal worse, and then again worse, and wind up selling itself for money as an agency for publicity and spying (on dissident Arabs and prominent Jews in Britain) to Libya, Iraq and other Arab regimes. Compared to what it would become, the SLL in the mid 1960s must seem a relatively healthy organisation, albeit sectarian and bureaucratic. We were at one with the leaders of the RSL in seeing the SLL as highly destructive. But by 1966 it seemed to us that the politics of Militant, from its belief in the possibility of peaceful revolution to its passive, contemplative Marxist, waiting on events, were only a bizarre mirrorimage inversion of the ultraleft voluntarism of the main Trotskyist group. (The other "Trotskyist" organisation, Labour Worker/IS, was a very loose group, explicitly non-Leninist, which shared the passivity of Militant but was beginning to develop a strong syndicalist strain that at least had the merit of trying to attach itself to the industrial militancy then very widespread.)

In this introduction I confine myself largely to personal reminiscences of the Trotskyist movement in Britain 30-odd years ago.

1. The first sighting

I first caught sight of the RSL the British section of the Fourth International led by the International Secretariat of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel (ISFI) on the Easter Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) march in 1960. "Caught sight of" is the proper expression, for the RSL was not easily located in the labour movement.

On the annual march, we would start from a point near the nuclear research centre at Aldermaston, and march to London, growing in numbers day by day until we got to Trafalgar Square at around midday on Easter Monday. At the end of the 1960 march over 100,000 people crowded into Trafalgar Square. The next year it was 150,000.

In 1960 was the third such march. The original idea in 1958 had been to march from London on Aldermaston, but that was changed. The Easter marches became tremendous popular festivals of many sorts of people concerned at the threat of nuclear weapons. People had not yet got used to the existence of such weapons Britain had fairly recently acquired them and US bases in Britain were seen to make Britain a "nuclear aircraft carrier", sure to be annihilated in the event of war with the USSR.

Religious bodies like the Quakers and others, political pressure groups, trade unions, Labour Party and Communist Party branches, all would send marchers carrying their banners. Family groups, with small children on shoulders or in prams and push chairs, were very common. It was a sort of antinuclear festival. In a halfway decently led labour movement, or one possessing an adequate rank and file organisation, we might have such festivals now in defence of the welfare state. There would be many bands playing tunes like "When the Saints Come Marching In" and jazzy versions of the Red Flag spread out amongst the immense and evergrowing column moving on London. We would, intermittently, sing special antinuclear songs "If I Had a Hammer", or "Can't you hear the H Bombs Thunder?" (Echo like the crack of doom/As they rend the earth asunder/Fallout makes the earth a tomb/Men and women stand together/Do not heed the men of war/Make your minds up now or never/Ban the bomb for evermore).

Overnight for three nights people would lie in sleeping bags, jam-packed in tents, coop halls, schools, church halls, sometimes town halls. Inevitably it was an annual bazaar for political literature sellers, who would range up and down selling, "making contacts" and organising. The revolutionary left renewed itself in this movement and in the LPYS.

At Easter 1960, I was 18 and a Trotskyist. I was at the end of a process of moving from Deutscher to Trotsky on questions like the USSR, but still a member of the Young Communist League. I was, after much hesitation, in the process of joining Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League. It had a very bad reputation for a repressive, violent and undemocratic internal regime. But it was, I thought, the nearest thing to a Trotskyist party in Britain. On the march I sold the Daily Worker "for cover" I would continue to work inside the YCL for eight or nine months after joining the SLL.(1)

The left press in those days was very "thin" and lacklustre. The SLL had a small weekly, The Newsletter, not quite A4

size, usually 8 pages, and occasionally 6. Pictures, which required expensive blocks, were very rare. Feature length articles were few and it was mainly short reports a day's work for a halfway competent journalist. The SLL had a more impressive magazine, Labour Review. From January 1957 it had been bimonthly, but by 1960 it was quarterly (2).

Then there was the monthly press. The SPGB's Socialist Standard, published since 1904, made timeless "Marxist" essentially moralpreaching propaganda against capitalism. Socialist Review, the paper of the Cliffite group (now SWP), had gone fortnightly for a couple of years after 1956 when the Russian slaughter in Hungary, following on Stalin's successor Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin as a paranoid mass murderer led to the exodus of thousands from the CP and turned some hundreds of them towards follow in the wake of the SLL in much of its politics (Black the Bomb, etc.) but it was a good paper, with articles of some substance.

It was always characteristic of the group that, though it carried the slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow" (of Shachtmanite origin) under its masthead, its statecapitalist analysis of Russia led to few practical conclusions. Socialist Review too had more than a little of the chameleonism that characterised so much of postTrotsky Trotskyism. It was loath to offend the pervasive Stalinist tinge in the British left which reached way beyond the circles of the CP. In the Labour left there was a strong psychology of pacifist accommodation to Stalinism "Better Red than Dead" and of Deutscherism. It had failed thoroughly in the competition with the Healyites for exCPers, essentially, I think, because the Healy group was a far more serious, more active and better organised group, and had the advantage of winning over the two best known exCPers, Peter Fryer, and, perhaps more importantly, Brian Behan, a building worker and ex-member of the CP's Executive Committee.

Socialist Review had begun to pick up odds and sods usually transiently - from the SLL when that organisation's internal regime led to protracted crisis and a scattering of forces.

And then there was Socialist Fight, the RSL's paper. The issue I bought at Easter 1960 was 12 foolscap duplicated pages, with some such pageone headline as "Internationalism: the only road". That sort of timeless general propaganda statement was pretty frequent on Socialist Fight's and later Militant's front pages in the 1960s. It made an impression not too far from that of the SPGB "Dead Men Walking", or very tired people ambling anyway, with not much to say about current events. SF had been a printed four page monthly from 1958, neatly put together, but the RSL, newly established in late 1956 or early 1957 as the British section of the ISFI, began to fall apart into its component parts in 1959. Broadly the division was between those primarily loyal to "the International" whose approach included the idea of organising the Labour left, and the group around Ted Grant and the brothers Jimmy, Arthur and Brian Deane, which had existed continuously since the final breakup of the RCP in 1949 and made rather timeless, passive propaganda. In the early 1950s, the DeaneGrant group had published an intermittent magazine of 16 or 20 small pages (the size of a Penguin book) called The International Socialist. They had for a published Socialist Current. (3)

The "International" quickly produced a small bi-monthly Workers' International Review to appeal to people breaking with the CP, but the magazine Labour Review, which the Healyites put out from January 1957, was much bigger, and impressively endowed. Moreover, the Healyites, though not numerous were a vigorous organisation that did things they were responsible for the motion on unilateral disarmament at the 1957 Labour Party conference that led Aneurin Bevan to break with his Labour left supporters on the question of nuclear weapons. Decisive, perhaps, was the fact that the Healyites used with the dissident CPers the same approach of adapting to the audience that they had used in the Labour Party. Labour Review, written mainly by recent CPers, adopted the tone and manner of insiders. Where retrospectively endorsing Trotskyist history, it did it in the tone and manner of people discovering it. Many exCPers a couple of hundred, perhaps joined Healy. Not many joined Grant. The most important of those who did was Pat Jordan, a recent CP fulltimer in Nottingham who, with Ken Coates, had first been part of a fusion with SR in 1957.

Soon an old, old pattern from the 1940s and the RCP developed once more in the RSL. In the RCP, Healy and Lawrence had organised a faction that took its line from the international leadership against the RCP leadership, against which the SWP-USA pursued a vendetta. The "International" was plainly right against the RCP leaders on the question of the Labour Party; and plainly wrong on other questions economic perspectives, and political prospects in Europe. On the question of defining the Russian satellite states in Eastern Europe, the International first directed loud derision and contempt at the RCP leaders, and then followed them in defining those regimes as deformed workers' states.

The "proInternational" group around Healy had some political merit. But there is at least one documented incident in which Healy, arguing one line at a meeting had it sprung on him that the international leadership had just changed their line and now shared the opinion of the RCP majority. Without turning a hair, Healy shrugged and said: "So we've got agreement!" (In 1964 the RSL triumphantly showed me the internal bulletins concerning this ancient incident, as if it had happened yesterday or the day before).

Now, within the RSL it was happening again: a group of International "loyalists" the equivalent of the Healy group in the 1940s emerged around Pat Jordan. They rejected Ted Grant's "economic perspective" of major capitalist economic breakdown very close ahead; and they also attracted people dissatisfied with the organisation's inefficiency (the secretary, Jimmy Deane, worked not for the organisation but as an electrician). Finally the seed of the future IMG hived off, initially to group themselves around the new International Socialism Journal, launched by Tony Cliff, Mike Kidron and a now long forgotten eminent academic Alasdair McIntyre who played a major role in that group 1967/68, supposedly as a broad enterprise. (4)

The RSL would at some point return to a four page monthly, but there was no superabundance of life or energy in the group. In late 1961 more or less all the smaller Marxist groups active in the Young Socialists (later called the LPYS) united to create a common youth paper, Young Guard, to compete with the Healy paper Keep Left.

The RSL had a small duplicated paper, Rally, based in their heartland, Liverpool. Socialist Review had a small printed paper, Rebel. Labour's Northern Voice, published by eclectic CPinfluenced lefts and pacifists, like the East Salford MP Frank Allaun, had a youth page edited by Paul Rose, who became an MP and is now a judge. There were Glasgow youth linked to another Trotskyist group led by the future MP Harry Selby, and some of the Nottingham group, the future IMG, derisively called the "NotTrots". All merged into Young Guard, named after the Belgian youth paper Jeune Garde. (There had recently been an all-out General Strike in Belgium.)

YG had the pluralistic character and sapontherise sense of burgeoning life that a genuine youth paper should have. In that it contrasted sharply with KL which was very much a rigid party paper. For what interests us, the RSL, the most notable thing is although the RSL's Keith Dickinson, who had published Rally, was Business Manager, their literary input was virtually nil. It was in practice an IS paper. Even where disputes arose over "defending" Cuba in the 1962 missile crisis, the "workers' state" and "defencist" lances were carried into the battle not by Militant but by the Selbyites and the NotTrots. I have no explanation for it; but the files of YG tell the story.

One of the few "mistakes" Peter Taaffe would later admit to was this period of politically dumb packcarrying for IS that seemed to be because the decision to do it had been other people's. A big part of the RSL's problem, I would later conclude, was the clique character of its central leadership. They hung together even when to observers they seemed to have hung themselves out to dry passively in the gentle winds.

Jimmy Deane was National Secretary, though extensive family financial commitments meant he worked. He had not a lot of time to devote to being National Secretary of the British Section of the Fourth International. The evidence suggests that he had been demoralised for a long time and was just "going through the motions". He had family roots in the movement going back over thirty years. For all of the RSL's central people, revolutionary politics was a parttime activity (Grant was a telephone operator). Deane ceased to be National Secretary sometime in 1964, perhaps, and simultaneously dropped out.

Pat Jordan once described to me a dispute at some national gathering a conference, I think at the time of a brief reunification in 1964 of the seeds of the IMG and the RSL. Jordan was no unbiased witness, but the story rings true, and there is objective evidence for it. At the gathering a discussion developed about the need to find some central executive officer usually called National Secretary if the momentum from the fusion were to be sustained. The only plausible candidate for National Secretary was Jordan, a competent enough man of business. But Jordan would be loyal to the newly united "Fourth International" (combining the PabloMandel current with some of those who had split with them in 1953 minus, notably, the British Healyites and the French Lambertists) not to the RSL majority or its leadership. They couldn't agree to that, even though they had no alternative candidate. So the whole discussion developed around a contrived nonsense argument that the group did not really need a National Secretary. Instead of arguing the truth which from their own narrow point of view, was even reasonable that they didn't want to give the dayto-day running of the organisation into Jordan's hands, Grant, Taaffe and then, one after the other, their supporters, argued passionately, according to Jordan that the group did not need a functioning national executive officer!

That was their way in politics: to rationalise and argue from themselves, their situation and their inadequacies. In any case, there would be no fulltime National Secretary, until Taaffe was moved down to London early in 1965, after the brief fusion had broken down. It had been a shotgun wedding, under the impetus of international unification. In December 1965, the RSL was reduced to sympathiser status and the International Group (the protoIMG) raised to the same status.

The Grantite RSL had always been something of an anomaly in the PabloMandel "International". There were very large streaks of Stalino-populism and neo-Bakuninist ideas in the views of Pablo and Mandel. They criticised the autonomous Stalinist revolutions China, Yugoslavia, North Vietnam, later Cuba a bit but accepted them as genuine proletarian

revolutions. Following that model, the "wretched of the earth" together with the Stalinist states had made, were making, and would make the proletarian revolution. Pablo and Mandel were not for a new workers' revolution ("political revolution") in Cuba, Vietnam, or China. The Grantites were in stark contrast, and could seem to someone like myself trapped within the common "workers' state" framework to be a great improvement.

They had a crude and bold "totalitarian economist" definition of a deformed workers' state. A nationalised economy made a workers' state, and that was that. They did not go in for mystification to make Maoist peasant armies qualify as workingclass revolutionary socialist organisations. They had a fully worked out twostages theory of Third World Stalinism. The Russian Mensheviks had had a scheme of first the bourgeois revolution, and then in the notnear future, after the capitalists had developed the economy and the working class, the proletarian revolution. Grant had a similar scheme, with Stalinism in place of the bourgeois revolution that is, with the statedeveloped, peopleenslaving economy of Stalinism in the place of the bourgeois epoch. For Trotsky, permanent revolution was uninterrupted unfolding of the revolution through the bourgeois stage to direct workers' power, the locomotive yoking the two revolutions being the leading role of the working class heading the peasantry in the fight for the "bourgeois" tasks (a republic, democracy, land reform, national liberation). For Grant all that was to be done by the working class in Trotsky's theory, and in fact was done by the Bolshevik-led workers in Russia in 1917/18 fell to the Stalinist and other bureaucraticmilitary formations. And at the end was not workers' power but the power of "proletarian Bonapartist" bureaucracy. The bourgeois "tasks" of democracy were never accomplished. Totalitarian Stalinist states replaced them. The Stalinist drive for development - paralleling capitalism replaced Marxist revolution. The Stalinists substituted for both the bourgeoisie and the working class.

Though it was nationalised economy that defined the workerenslaving bureaucracies as "proletarian", in fact Grant described them as developing an economic system all their own. Grant was a "bureaucratic collectivist" in everything but a mystifying verbiage (workers' state) and the firm conviction, partly rooted in a bowdlerised Trotsky, that these systems were the progressive next stage in history. He was the heir and must at some level have known it of the theories of Bruno Rizzi, who thought that the totalitarian systems, Stalinism and Fascism and Nazism, were all collectivising forces in history doing work the proletariat had failed to do, and therefore were progressive. Grant and Rizzi too, I think were heirs of the old Fabians in their 1930s dotage, the Webbs, and Bernard Shaw. The Webbs wrote a long, arid, lawyerly book lauding the "New Civilisation" in the USSR, and Shaw thought and proclaimed Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin to be all part of what others would call "the wave of the future".

As in 1946/8, when the RCP's position that the East European RussianStalinist occupied states were "deformed workers' states" horrified their comrades of the Fourth International and stimulated loathing and contempt in those who would eventually feel themselves forced to follow after them, so now also, in the 1960s, they represented too much of the truth about the Stalinist states, and exposed too crudely the underlying logic ("progressive bureaucratic collectivism") in the whole neoTrotskyist adaptation to Stalinism, to be other than very strange guests at the populist table of PabloMandel. In 1963, when that "International" recombined with some of those who, led by James P Cannon, had broken incoherently but in the direction of the consistent antiStalinist left, in 1953, it was around a scarcely critical adulation of the Castro revolution in Cuba. There was also an antagonism going back to the late 1930s between Grant and the SWP (USA), which neither forgave nor forgot. The RSL's days in its strange international affiliation were numbered.

It was during the RSL's period with the USFI that I first came across them seriously and started to seriously consider their politics. 2. Organising Cheetham YS, Peter Taaffe and Ceylon

I encountered Militant in mid 1964. I was very much at odds with the SLL, but had not made the definitive break I would make at the end of the year when they broke the apprentices' strike, for good "Third Period" bureaucratic ultraleft motives.

I was organising Cheetham YS, which met in "The Waterloo", a notoriously rough and violent Irish pub (though we never had any difficulties), at the corner of Elizabeth St and Hightown. YS branches organised or influenced by the SLL tended to be more social than political. The drive to "build" on any terms destroyed all political purpose other than the drive to create the similitude of substance. The formula was that you would invite youth off the street to a social to listen to records and dance if they wanted to. Then you would stop the music and someone would talk simple politics conditions at work, police violence on the street, racism for 20 minutes.

I(Racism was a real problem. We had a half-Indian comrade, Shanti very, very English; indeed I had to explain to her about British imperialism in India, but she looked Indian. Going around with her, I learned a little about racism close up the stony faces in pubs, the manifest disapproval, the twisted sexuality in much of it, sometimes the outright hostility. In the late 70s and 80s when it became fashionable on the Labour left to go on about anti-Irish racism it seemed to me false and contrived. AntiIrish "racism" was a long way in the past. If any of the antiIrish or antiCatholic prejudice I've

encountered is to be called racism, then we need another word for what black people experience).

In Cheetham YS we played records, but the balance was heavily tilted towards politics.

We had half a dozen or more members of a leftZionist youth group, Hashomer Hatzair I think, all young women, clever and politically minded high school students. We discussed more complicated questions, such as the state and socialist transformation, or, were the kibbutzim in Israel a road to socialism? I remember arguing that they were utopian socialist colony building. That was the extent of our dispute with the leftwing Zionists; the vicarious Arab chauvinism that still grips the left was far in the future.

One evening Tony Mulhearn of the RSL turned up. He was a recent exseaman, a printer on a luxury liner. He was over in Manchester from Liverpool on some printing course. He found himself in a nest of disaffected SLLers and ex-SLLers, but friendly relations were established. On our part it was curiosity as much as anything else. There was no RSL in Manchester. The group had no publication (they would start Militant a few months later, in October 1964). Mulhearn fixed up for my friend Rod Baker, who was more amiable than I was, to meet some Militant people from Liverpool, the heartland of the tendency. When Rod told me about it, I went along with him, to meet two or three Liverpudlians in a car, among them Peter Taaffe.

Peter was a civil service clerk in some Liverpool office where his work included paying the police. At the beginning of 1965 he would go to London to work at the RSL centre. Peter, in specs, was dressed in an "intellectual's" corduroy jacket; (a donkey jacket made my own sartorial statement!). As against the SLL, Militant projected itself as representing "theory", "perspectives", and political "sophistication". I don't know how we impressed Peter Taaffe, but he made a very bad impression on us. A staple of our YS agitation, when we went out with cometoourmeeting leaflets and gave them to every youth we met within a radius of our meeting place, was denunciation of police violence. Experience of casual police violence was, we found, very widespread, though officially this was the era of Dixon of Dock Green. Peter Taaffe was concerned to confront us ultralefts, and chose to do it by telling us, as one who knew from the inside, how pleasant many of the police he dealt with were when you really got to know them, as he did, paying out their wages.

I'd recently worked in a Wimpy Bar kitchen on Oxford Road, in the centre of Manchester, trading terrible pay for time in the Central Library. Quite a few police would pop in over the evening for a drink (the sergeant and the manageress were lovers). Very pleasant they could be, jolly and playful even. In a sidestreet onto which the kitchen opened there was a urinal under a railway bridge frequented by cottaging gays. (All homosexual activity was still illegal.) Some of the cops visiting the kitchen always thought it great sport to finish their break by going across to put a scare into gays ("watch this" ...). So I did know what lovely people relaxed and sportive cops could be! And I had had the experience of being slapped around in a police station when I was 18. What Taaffe conveyed was the idea that he was either naive or thick, or both, to build anything on his experience with offduty cops getting their wages and more than a little presumptuous to try to lay down the law politically to us on that basis.

Here, though I didn't know it yet, was Ted Grant's RSL encapsulated. Superficial observation, onesided perception, without sense, proportion, context, tradition, realistic perspective flaunted and displayed with the pride and over-valuation of the infant for its "product": bumptious banality and naively, puffed up with the visceral belief in its own omniscience and profundity, that is, in itself!

Taaffe, who was my age, perhaps a little younger, was, I assumed, a sheltered and limited, though selfimportant, young fellow: there were, could not but be, more real-minded, more sensible, cadres in this Trotskyist group. There were better educated people, certainly and people formed before the modern group, who were far bigger people, Pat Wall, for example but in fact Taaffe, when you got to know him, was, if anything, less rigid on the surface, anyway and less hidebound than many others.

Superficialities and halftruths, attached to the great evolutionary "perspective", were central to the RSL, especially later: parttruths that allowed accommodation to the existing labour movement. They always brought to my mind an ancient Irish poem, well known in James Clarence Mangan's translation, "The Woman of Three Cows". The poet admonishes her for much pride in her modest wealth by a series of remembered past greatnesses, long perished: "Well then, may you be proud, my woman of three cows!" And the RSL had not three, but only one!

The highlight of anyone's life as an RSL "contact" was a chance to hear Ted Grant speak, which he did frequently in Liverpool. Rod Baker and I were invited to come over. From the start I found the RSL members' attitude to Grant very odd. He was treated as both a holy idiot and a holy political genius. As the most casual of contacts I was told smutty "hehe" tales, and in the next breath that Grant was a very great Marxist (the booklist the RSL put out read: works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Plekhanov, and Grant!) The smutty tales left me with a bad taste on the level of human

behaviour, and made a very bad impression politically.

Grant was to speak in Liverpool on the recent decision of the biggest Trotskyist organisation in the world, the LSSP of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), to join a bourgeois coalition government. The LSSP, like the RSL, was part of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. This was a tragic event, the result of years of degeneration. For us young Trotskyists, it was deeply shocking and traumatic. Certainly for me it was: that "Trotskyists" could behave like old Social Democrats and Stalinists! I remember arguing, no doubt hysterically, that the whole Trotskyist movement should make a public declaration that we would one day shoot the traitors. Grant was in Liverpool to explain what had happened and why. I found it all deeply unsatisfying. Everything was explained as a mechanical reflex of material conditions, "the period".... Throughout the speech, again and again, Grant referred to all of the leaders in Ceylon the traitors, the trimmers, and even the leader of a 1953 proStalinist breakaway, Philip Goonawardene chummily, as one who knew them, by their first names. The chief traitors, Pereira and Goonawardene, were "M.N." and "Leslie". I think it was Ceylonese practice, this first name style. But it struck me as deeply inappropriate when discussing downright traitors, and symptomatic of political softness, woolliness, and lack of political rigour. 3. Breaking from the SLL

When I first made "contact" with the RSL in mid1964, I had not finally broken from the SLL. Expelled in September 1963, I'd remained an active supporter. Early on a Sunday morning in the first half of 1964, I met an SLL comrade, "Tiny", together with whom I was rounding up unemployed youth to go on a coach on an SLLorchestrated lobby of Parliament, to discuss details.

Blandly, he said I no longer remember how we got to it "We might even have you back in the branch". People were "in" and "out". When you met a comrade and spoke of an acquaintance one of you would ask "is he in or out?".

For some reason, Tiny's remark stung and I answered: "Perhaps I don't want to go back". I probably said more truth than I know about my feelings; but I had continued to behave as a member, one without rights, and I intended to go on doing that. Politically I did want to rejoin. That facile exchange with Tiny if it was that opened up a world of new experiences for me! Soon I found myself the target of sustained and active hostility.

Our Young Socialists branch was linked with others and there was much coming and going from branch to branch. And unexpectedly, I discovered on the night of our AGM that they'd secretly organised to remove me as branch secretary. I had been reclassified as an enemy and a renegade. The only explanation I could think up was the exchange with Tiny but you never know: maybe there had been divine intervention from London. Or maybe it was the new fulltime organiser Reg Perry. A postHungary, exCP bricklayer, he was a stiff, humourless fellow who had been London organiser. He belongs to a small band of prominent SLLers who, when they "broke", seemed to disappear off the face of the earth, going off covering their tracks to prevent themselves as being hounded and harassed (or maybe one day someone will dig up a pile of bones from under the stairs down which dissidents were routinely kicked at SLL headquarters in Clapham High Street!

I met him at some meeting and he started threatening me: "We know how to deal with people like you!" brandishing his fist close to my face. Their intervention into Cheetham YS branch halfwrecked it by electing a transient member of theirs secretary, someone who soon gave up. We had to rescue the branch; we included some, like Tommy Byrne, who retained membership in the SLL. We would have private meetings to try to regulate the conflict with the SLL the SLLers in the branch would have been expelled were this known.

The experience of the boneheaded, solipsistic and irrational sectarianism of the SLL was mindbroadening for me. I'd done such things, of course. A rightwinger had inconveniently been elected chair when we started the branch. He walked out in a huff one night, leaving the meeting chairless, when we rejected a proposal to ask the local Tories to debate with us what did we have to debate with the Tories? Debate with the Labour rightwing yes! and by the next meeting I'd organised the vote to throw him out as chair, glad of the chance. (5)

But that was in our good cause "against the right wing"; their behaviour towards me I thought was 'mad'. I was a very slow learner. I don't know if I could be said to be 'loyal' to the SLL by that stage but I was inhibited by the belief that this was the revolutionary party. I was forced to warn people against them in the reorganised branch they weren't going to catch me napping again but it was all restrained, and strictly defensive.

I had serious political differences with them by now. They had got a majority in the LPYS national committee and were plainly headed for an organisational break with the Labour Party. Pretending that the youth could be counterposed to the Labour Party, they went in for bombast and braggadocio. They drove for a break with the Labour Party on the eve of Labour coming to power, when all sorts of labour movement people could be and were radicalised by the experience of Labour in government. This policy made no sense to me, and I agreed with Labour Worker (IS) and Militant that it was

utterly destructive sectarianism. Yet I doubt very much that I would have fully broken from them on the Labour Party question: important though that was, it was a question of tactics and one did not turn hostile to the revolutionary party on such questions. I broke when they went in for third period Stalinist strikebreaking. I broke finally and fully.

The circumstances were as follows. Engineering apprentices, lads learning the trade for years on very low pay, began to organise. Wellattended, open organising meetings were held (I went to some of them and there was a great spirit of young people rousing themselves and learning) in Manchester and Liverpool and other places. They wanted better wages and conditions.

There had in the past been a number of such apprentices' movements. There had been a national apprentices' strike for some weeks four years earlier, and a similar one a decade before that. The '64 movement could have grown into a big national movement. A committee to organise and spread the movement was elected, involving YCL people, RSLers, and some SLLers. This committee decided to call a strike in the November of 1964. The SLL minority voted against this.

By now the SLL was in a white heat of 'revolutionary' ardour. They had the leadership of the LPYS and were in process of breaking from the Labour Party. They had a right to lead "the youth" and "stinking Pabloites" RSL/Militant, the "running dogs" of the YCL Stalinists could not be allowed to stand in their way. The SLL said the decision to call a strike in November was "premature" more preparation was needed. How much of this was honest judgement and how much an attempt to discredit the "Pabloites and counterrevolutionary Stalinists" I can't judge from this distance. For what it is worth, I thought they were right: it was premature and even adventurist. But the decision to strike had been taken and the minority had either to make the best of it, and if it was a mistake to work at limiting the damage or disrupt the movement

The SLL the "leadership" of the YS and therefore of "the youth" split the apprentices' committee, and set up one of their own. They denounced the decision to work for a strike in November and set out to stop it happening. This was strike breaking? No! The Pabloites and Stalinists were deliberately trying to abort and wreck the movement. They had to be stopped! The apprentices movement had, if necessary, to be killed, in order to save it from the Stalinists and Pabloites.

The SLL committee set a date for their own apprentices' strike three or four months from November and counterposed that to the November strike call. On the morning of the November strike, when some apprentices came out in response to the call of the Apprentices' Committee, the SLL went around the industrial estate in Trafford Park, Salford, giving out leaflets telling apprentices not to strike and telling them to wait for the "real" strike in a few months' time.

It was straightforward strikebreaking third period Stalinist stuff from the "Third Period" of the Communist International (1929/34/5: when the socialists were declared the main enemy and their activities actively sabotaged).

The confusion such activities caused could not but have swayed wavering apprentices. Whether the decision to strike was "premature" or not, the SLL helped make sure that the strike was a failure. It was straightforward strike breaking. Two YCLers I know they later became Birchite relatively sane Maoists were subjected to mild physical violence by SLLers in a lather of selfrighteousness against the "counterrevolutionary Stalinists" except that the "counter-revolutionary Stalinists" were trying to organise a necessary strike and the "revolutionaries" were strike breakers! The apprentices' movement was aborted. Months later, on the date set for the SLL strike, nothing happened.

This grotesque experience wiped out what was left of my allegiance to the SLL and brought all my political dissatisfactions to clear judgement that this organisation was an entirely negative force. If I had not come to that conclusion earlier it was because I distrusted myself and the strong feelings I had: one had to be "objective". Strike breaking in the class struggle, deliberately aborting this promising movement of young engineering workers, put an end to my doubts and selfdistrust. Everything became clear. In fact, the organisation would continue to degenerate.

As the SLL was deliberately breaking the YS from the Labour Party (their "history" of the affair, that they were victims of the Labour Party bureaucracy, is essentially untrue: they deliberately provoked most of the individual expulsions). I went along to the Manchester YS committee (the "federation" of YS branches) with a resolution ritualistically condemning the Labour Party leaders, but, in mild, halfcoded language, condemning the SLL too. The YS was being torn apart and that scheduled "federation" meeting did not happen. I never moved the resolution I intended as the formal break with the SLL.

Illness took me out for two or three months. When I came back everything had changed. 4. What next?

I was in and out of hospital for operations at the end of 1964 and in early 1965, when the Healyites were pulling out of the Labour Party Young Socialists, gutting it. By the time I was active again, where once there had been a bustling

Labour youth movement, now everything was changed and quiet. I broke with the SLL finally and forever in November 1964. Giving up on the SLL, which seemed to me to be reenacting a parody of Third Period Stalinism, left me politically disoriented and more than a little depressed and demoralised.

The US bombing of Vietnam had just started, and I went on a Communist Partyorganised protest march in the centre of Manchester, where I met a lot of old comrades, people with whom I had remained personally friendly or halffriendly through bitter political conflict. Afterwards, for perhaps a day, I mulled over the idea of rejoining the CP to see what I could do for Trotskyist politics there. The CP had a big proletarian base in Manchester, and that was one of the considerations. In 1960, for example, the CP had 1200 members in Manchester, and a few hundred in the Young Communist League; the only Trotskyist organisation in Manchester, the SLL, had, when I joined it early that year, about a dozen members.

Yet it was a fantastic idea: if I got in, then either I'd go in and be silent, or if I was not silent I would face very quick expulsion. I've always thought of the day or so in which I was attracted to that idea as the measure of my own political disorientation at that time. Yet it was not at all clear what else to do. Some of us revived the local YS, and an informal discussion group developed, made up of ex SLLers like Jimmy Shaw, John Parkinson and myself and people who were still on the fringes of the SLL, Tommy Byrne, Phil Semp... perhaps ten people in all. Phil Semp thought we would have to start a new organisation there was nothing else for it. He was 21, a student. Nothing daunted him. It daunted me! A couple of years older, I had had a proletarian schooling in what can and can't be done, and had a not overrobust notion of my own capacities. Psychologically I could not do what Phil thought necessary and what proved necessary until I was absolutely sure there was no other alternative except giving up revolutionary politics.

I argued that we should join the RSL/Militant and see what we could do there. I eventually did that on my own just before Easter 1965.

Now I saw Militant in a different light. Its blatant faults were now to be measured against the qualitative degeneration I saw in the SLL and I have never doubted that I saw truly, albeit belatedly. The RSL was a sorry organisation, but a sorry Trotskyist organisation. There was, I thought, no other.

Its very flabbiness offered the hope that it could be improved. I decided to join the RSL. Reestablishing contact with them, I joined some time before Easter 1965. There was, I need to stress, no question of "entryism" in the RSL. I was looking for a political organisation to join. If this was a decrepit one, one could hope to improve it.

In an old file I found a copy of a letter to an exSLL miner, trying to persuade him to do the same and explaining how I saw things. The copy is undated, but it was probably written in early 1966:

"This question of [antiunion] legislation will evoke hostility and even activity from all the left groups from Tribune through Labour Worker to the Stalinists: what they will do will be determined by what they are; as Trotskyists we agree that there are enormous inadequacies in all these groups from the point of view of organising a campaign that will genuinely take the movement, or a section of it, forward. Hence the vital need for some serious Trotskyist activity which is neither as passive as some Militant supporters are, or as wild and sectarian as the SLL.

"...In small political organisations such as the RSL and SLL I think there are two types, which are comparable to two biological species. The one, the SLL, is rigid, specialised and very definitely developed in such a way as to make it incapable of serious modification or adaptation to change other than disintegration. The RSL is much more flexible, less rigidly organised, and can be modified. The SLL in my opinion holds no hope of changing seriously though elements in it could be reorganised. The RSL can develop, though of course there is nothing inevitable about that. The statement on the SLL I think you'd agree with; on the RSL you should consider it."

I was wrong, but that is how I saw it even as late as early 1966, before the seamen's strike and Militant's role forced me to re-evaluate things in the light of the allregulating concern of Marxists the class struggle.

Phil Semp joined soon after I did; Jimmy Shaw and John Parkinson came to the threshold, but Ted Grant and Peter Taaffe spoiled their chances with the others. 5. The peaceful revolution

I learned to my astonishment that the RSL, this "Trotskyist" group, believed in peaceful revolution soon after I joined it, in the following way. I set up a public meeting for Ted Grant, a number of the exSLLers whom I knew attended.

Peter Taaffe, who was about 23, had become fulltime secretary of the RSL at the beginning of the year, and would travel around the country to chair Grant's meetings. Something to do establishing authority, I was given to understand. With

Taaffe in the chair, Grant gave a general socialist speech. Socialism was desirable and possible, and, moreover, if enough people wanted it, it could be peaceful... Now if my aunt had wheels she would be a bicycle (and if Grant had balls, or Taaffe brains, they would be Bolsheviks!)

It is possible to construct a scenario in which socialists intent on destroying the bourgeoisie as an exploiting class are allowed to get to a position to do it by the normal mechanism of bourgeois democracy. In reality the bourgeoisie would have intervened long before it got to that, with extraparliamentary actions. It is legitimate to provoke thought in politically unschooled people by pointing out that the Labour government in 1945 could have made peacefully the revolution which millions of people wanted it to make, though the seeming possibility is an optical illusion (if the Labour leaders had been in the least inclined to make such a revolution, the issue would have moved outside parliament long before the 1945 election). Grant was talking as to raw young socialists at the beginning of their education. I thought he had just mistaken his audience.

When one of the exHealyites, by no means a youngster, said aggressively what the few sentences above say, and said it at length, I expected that Grant would orient himself to the real audience and concede the point. No. He took a solid stand that the revolution would be peaceful, or could be if ultralefts did not mess things up. We did not convince any of the exHealyites to join the RSL. A couple whom I had pulled close (or I thought I had) pulled away. ..

Later, at a meeting of the Secretariat with Rachel Lever and myself, I forced the issue to pointblank answers. Yes or no, did the group believe that we should orient towards the likelihood of a peaceful revolution in Britain? Did they think that the peaceful achievement of a socialist revolution, the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, was likely, or possible?

Ted Grant, Ellis Hillman and Arthur Deane announced yes, they did think that. Peter Taaffe and Keith Dickinson said they were not sure but tended to think not. (6)

I had joined the RSL before I managed to take it in that Ted Grant and others believed that the transition to workers' power and socialism would be peaceful. It beggared belief. Yet I had indications of it. Ted Woolley was an old SLLer for whom I had great respect, an exclerk who went down Agecroft colliery for political reasons and had survived through the 1950s. I told him that I had joined the RSL. He was very hostile to them. "Do you know", he said, "that one of the Liverpool group, Laura Curtan, was a Justice of the Peace?" I didn't.

I asked Peter Taaffe if it was true. Yes it was, but she was now only a sympathiser. So it had been wrong to let a comrade be a Justice of the Peace, or to let a JP be a comrade? Not at all, he insisted, with the vehemence that was a stock RSL leadership response to any suggestion that they had ever been wrong. She had "won" the position of JP by her work in the labour movement, and it would have been wrong for the RSL to "deprive her of it."

How, I asked, could a revolutionary socialist take, why should she want to take, responsibility for administering the bourgeois law against young working class people, for example? Oh, that wasn't how it was at all. She was a socialist JP. When young people came up on charges before her, she would arrange to meet them afterwards and take them to the YS. Always? Always! That anyone could be satisfied with such a fairy story, or think I would be, provoked the suspicion that Taaffe was very thick. Or did he think I was? Rationalising and bluffing for the indefensible, how could he avoid sounding stupid? But anyway it was in the past. She was now only a sympathiser. (I believe she survived to be a strong opponent of the Hatton regime.)

Liverpool was the heartland of the group. A detailed account of what the branch was like politically in early 1966 will be found in part 1 of What We Are And What We Must Become. There was also a fairly wide network of sympathisers there, oldtimers like George McCartney and his wife, whose first name I forget. I spent some weekends there, going the rounds. Oddly enough, considering the knownothing boorishness of Militant in later years, it was all selfconsciously "intellectual", and rather pretensively so. The RSL prided itself on possessing a culture and a breadth of vision that the SLL lacked, and in being relaxed about it". A lot of time was spent chewing the cud into the morning hours of a Saturday night. I remember once, desperately tired and with some drink taken, I guess and wanting to go to sleep, sitting-in on a many-personed conversation about things cultural, including Shakespeare. George McCartney explained that King Lear was all about capitalism, the storm representing market forces, etc. Like any oldstyle labour movement autodidact, from King Lud onwards, I was interested he and had some acquaintance with Shakespeare, and probably thought there were "secrets" and hard and clear "class keys", and King Lear surely dealt with the destruction of old values. But all I got out of it was the sensation of pseudery and quackery. Ms McCartney put the cap on it that night. We got talking somehow about Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, and her accommodation (following Zinoviev) with Stalin after 1927. I expressed unhesitating condemnation. She said: "Ah, it's easy when you're young..." She "understood". Easy or hard, people in politics are defined by what they manage to do with or against the stream, whatever it costs them. For me, the comment summed up the whole soft spirit of the RSL and its environs.

Taaffe was characterised for me by his attitude to a mutual acquaintance, Ian Hawksey, an SLLer in Liverpool who had died at 21 in a car crash. Taaffe was about my age or a little younger, and had been politically active since 1961. I asked him how he had come to join the RSL, which did very little, rather than the main Trotskyist organisation, the SLL. One thing, he said, had decided him: the RSLers in Liverpool were, as people, so much nicer and more pleasant. He was talking about the past, and an earlier self, but not only about the past. "Niceness" was a major distinction now, too. This was both apolitical completely outside of the proper and most important considerations and, I thought, showed still a lack of serious purpose. Then we got to the poor young fellow, Ian Hawksey, an old SLL comrade of mine and an old opponent of Taaffe's in the YS.

Taaffe was still full of bile and hatred towards him! How, he asked rhetorically, did Ian come to be in the car in which he died? Because he had "a petty boorjwah" girlfriend, whose car it was, that's how! Aggression and hostility in operational politics I could understand. I was not lacking in that myself; indeed, I had too much of it, and a raw vehemence that projected more than I had. But hate and spite beyond the grave for another young Trotskyist, a poor fellow dead at 21, dismayed me. Mixed with softness and lauding of RSL "niceness" and denunciation of SLL indifference to personal diplomacy, it repelled me doubly.

6. Documents and books

Part of my political problem was that I was no longer sure of many things. The SLL had opposed the idea embraced by most Trotskyists that Cuba was a workers' state but did it with utterly incoherence. China was a workers' state, according to them... This contradiction left me unhappy on the whole question. I read what I could. I tried in vain, in 1963, in the SLL, to get hold of the discussion documents from the late 1940s. One of the attractions of the RSL was that they were keen to lend me the documents of the 1940s. As pioneers of the workers' state scheme for Eastern Europe, China, etc. that is, of the neoTrotskyist theory of the deformed workers' states, which was radically different from Trotsky's theory of the USSR - they were very proud and proprietorial. The documents "vindicated" them. I studied Tony Cliff's Russia, which was in the Manchester Central Library, making notes, "arguing" pro and con with it on paper, comparing Trotsky. I wanted to be convinced by Cliff, but I was not able to convince myself. For a while I found Ted Grant's theory plausible, and then not. Phil Semp fell for it completely, for a while. Rachel Lever had been weaned politically on it.

I spent the summer holiday in 1965 going through the archives at the RSL centre, sleeping on Keith Dickinson's floor. The archives included Internal Bulletins; letters from members of the 1940s Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and replies; old publications; Jimmy Deane's letters to his mother when he was in Paris on the executive of the Fourth International in the late 1940s. One consequence of this was that I developed knowledge and perhaps some understanding of the history of the Trotskyist movement in Britain. I thought I saw how the very passive and fatalistic RSL had developed out of the RCP. There was, I thought, a continuing thread of mechanical Marxism.

At that time very few of Trotsky's 1930s articles, and not many of his books and pamphlets, were in print. When Unwin published a small Essential Trotsky, including Lessons of October, in 1963, it was a big event for us. The wealth of literature available now was locked up in files of old newspapers. The only pamphlets by Trotsky in circulation were a few printed on very cheap paper in Ceylon. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s not much had been published in Britain. The SLL published Trotsky's Where is Britain Going? in 1960, and The Permanent Revolution in 1963. You got writings like Rosa Luxemburg's Reform or Revolution, if you were lucky enough, in an edition published on very thin paper in India in the 1940s. On the other hand, Manchester Central Library had a good collection of Trotsky, and I had worked through all of it when still in the Young Communist League and undecided about joining the only visible Trotskyist organisation, the Healy group.

Ted Grant would oracularly refer to such very important articles as Trotsky's The Third Period of the Comintern's Errors as relevant to the SLL as indeed they were but there was no idea of republishing such things. They were part of the priestly "secret knowledge".

The ten days or two weeks I spent in the RSL archives were well spent. I never felt comfortable in the RSL. Everything was too leisurely. They said I was impatient, meaning unwilling to await the ripening of events. I was and very impatient with them. I found their easy praise of each other, and the flattering appreciation one could get for trivial things very uncongenial and, soon, debased, cheap, worthless, and even worse. It registered with me as mockery or self mockery; and the knowledge that they didn't see that alienated me from them as from people speaking a language I could not understand. It seemed to me very soft and, "social democratic", minimising "consciousness" and the proper tough matteroffact relations of workingclass militants who share serious convictions and commitment and a common revolutionarycommunist ethos. I found their unwillingness to admit any responsibility for the state of the Trotskyist

movement the absolute predominance of the Healyites repulsive. I could have forgiven Grant his obvious incompetences; not his ridiculous mechanicalmaterialist smugness. It was all inevitable, all down to the period or to Cannon's misdeeds never Ted's fault. 7. The RSL leadership

The group leadership was structured as a National Committee of perhaps 15 from which was elected a Secretariat of five to be both a Political Committee and an administering executive. The NC met every two or three months. Every National Committee was an extended National Committee. That meant that every member of the organisation could attend and was encouraged to, with a customary right to speak. These were not National Committee meetings but what later became known as teachins: schools, lecturing sessions, educationals. Votes were rare, or the purely ceremonial endorsement of something, and purely NC votes rarer still. Dissent, except for us when that started, was nearly unknown. In practice "the NC" was only a sort of differential franchise held in reserve at the national aggregate meetings called "Extended National Committees".

This was the semblance of extreme democracy, but without the political preconditions for it neither equal citizenship nor, as we discovered, the right of free discussion. Dogma and dogma's priests ruled. A number of members of the "National Committee", that is of the people entrusted with a reserve vote, were people isolated from local groups people, that is, who could not build anything around themselves, but had been members a while and were both reliable and politically "sound" that is, true believers in Ted Grant as the Trotsky of our epoch, and therefore fit to play the role they played, that of senators.

There was a layer of younger people, about our age, like Roger and Julian Silverman, whose father was the Labour MP Julius Silverman, and others recruited at Sussex University. These were all acolytes, fervent believers in Grant's stuff on the colonial revolution and so forth.

They had chosen to join the RSL rather than the SLL for very specific reasons: it was a finepoint, precise selection; and like all small groups, a selection of psychological types, too. In terms of class background, all the prominent young recruits were bourgeois or pettybourgeois. The selection, I repeat, was on the basis of accepting a view of the future evolution of the world and the labour movement. "Below" this layer there were people who listened, convinced that they were in the presence of the prophet and the Keeper of the Knowledge, and that they did not have the equipment to judge for themselves. Militant presented them with two or three bare ideas, and convinced them that they understood Marxism. What Militant gave them was a labour movement routine and an organisation to build which they could see in a heroic and a historic light through Grant's evolutionist perspective.

It is difficult to convey the atmosphere in those meetings, then usually held in the upstairs room of the Lucas Arms in Kings Cross, London. It was what I imagine Sunday Schools to have been like (and there were socialist Sunday Schools early in the century), or what I remember of the atmosphere during religious instruction in Irish Catholic schools. There was a doctrine and a big coral reef of mystic pseudohistory; there were priests who knew it, teachers with derived authority to transmit it, and pupils who might ask questions or request more explanation but were not expected to reason about any of it. Ted knew.

Ted was the link with the Golden Age "the days of the RCP". At one of those Extended National Committee meetings, I heard Grant bracket himself with Lenin and Trotsky, not as a wry or humorous comment on the state we were in, but in deadly earnest. There was not the slightest intimation that anyone found this risible or even odd.

As late as their 1989 book, *The Unbroken Thread*, Militant were claiming: "It was Grant's analysis and understanding that maintained and developed the thread of ideas that had continued unbroken from Marx and Engels through Lenin and Trotsky... It is to one person alone that the credit must go for the maintenance and development of Marxist theory in this most difficult period", etc.

They were schooled to believe that. The atmosphere was such as to demand acceptance of it. Not the least of their problems with our document was its mockery and debunking of Grant's "Marxology" in it. The Infallible One was not only questioned on matters of "faith and morals", but denounced for forgetting or not knowing the ABCs. We were Old Believers, "backtobasics" Protestants, visavis Pope Ted and his altar boy Peter. The prophet was dressed in rags and tatters; but, as with Hans Christian Andersen's undersocialised child who rashly pointed out that the Emperor was naked, nobody could, get away with saying so.

The organisation was modest, what the group tried to do was very modest, its immediate expectations were very, very modest and its conception of itself, what it "really" was and would be and what its prophet was, would be and for decades had been, despite the conspiracies of Healy and Cannon and Sam Gordon against him all of that was gigantically, perhaps even borderline crazily, immodest. In due course, History, almost unaided, would raise the group

to the place in the world that it occupied already in its mind. The Labour Left would become dominant, and a bigger Militant would assume control in the stage after that. They would become the Labour Party. The scenario was, I guess, based on the experience of the Bevanites in the 1950s.

Political leadership, initiative and daytoday organising was in the hands of the Secretariat, which was not just both secretariat and Political Committee rolled into one, but also de facto the surrogate for the National Committee that wasn't a National Committee. The Secretariat was five people. Keith Dickinson had been around since 1957 and '58, and was very devoted, selfsacrificing, and genuinely modest. Peter Taaffe had been active since 1961. Then there were three "older" comrades. Ellis Hillman had been around from perhaps 1949. He wrote to Natalia. He had been expelled from the Socialist Review group (forerunner of the SWP) in about 1951 (for "poisonous gossip", according to Tony Cliff; and, whatever about that, Ellis was no mean gossip). For a while he was a British correspondent of Labor Action, paper of the US Independent Socialist League of Max Shachtman and Hal Draper, using, so he told me, the name Eugene Vaughn. He joined the Healy group in about 1955, and broke with them in early 1959 when they declared a public organisation, the Socialist Labour League, and were immediately banned by the Labour Party. Though a number of SLLers were expelled, Ellis managed to remain a London County Councillor. When he linked up with the RSL, I don't know. Ellis was likeable and had revolutionary convictions, but the idea that he was a functioning revolutionary was only a series of misunderstandings. As a revolutionary, Ellis was a London County Councillor that is, a labour movement routinist.

He would leave the group sometime in the late 1960s. In 1981 he was a Greater London Councillor and Deputy Leader of the Inner London Education Authority. I went to see him in his office at County Hall, with the defence in the libel case that Gerry Healy and Vanessa Redgrave had brought against John Bloxam and myself. It was our first contact in 15 years. He was amiable and helpful. He never referred to the RSL, and nor did I. He told me that of course he was still a Marxist. Getting up from behind the desk, he went to the side of the room, pushed back a big rack displaying Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority pamphlets and literature, and revealed, like a secret altar in a time of persecution, a bookshelf on which were volumes of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky (I didn't notice anything by the fifth great teacher, Grant...) See I'm still a Marxist! In fact he had been a functional rightwinger, or anyway a politically neutral techniciancouncillor, for many years. Soon afterwards he was deselected by the Bennite left in his constituency. Afterwards he could be encountered around the far left, including some of our meetings.

Like Ellis Hillman, Arthur Deane was about 40. He was the last one active of at least three brothers, son of Gertie Deane, an early'30s recruit to Trotskyism. His brother Jimmy had been secretary of the group until he dropped out, perhaps in 1964. The Liverpool group had been led by Brian Deane, who had also dropped out by my time. Arthur Deane was an amiable, obviously intelligent, and able man, utterly immersed in the routines of an appointed (nonelected) tradeunion official. The revolutionary organisation was a concern of low priority, a claim on some of his spare time, and probably as much a matter of family tradition the organisation had been known to SLLers in the early 1960s as "the Deane group" as active conviction and drive (which, in "this period", wasn't considered necessary anyway). He too, I believe, dropped out within a few years. 8. Grant, Trotsky and Bruno Rizzi's theory

Ted Grant was, I suppose, in his early 50s in 1966; he claimed to have been a Trotskyist since 1928, and maybe that was true. Certainly he had been a Trotskyist since the early '30s. By this time, he had got into the habit of using Marxism not to analyse the world, but to spin webs of ideological fantasy from it. At that he was very good. He cast an imaginary net over large parts of the world, the Stalinist states, and the Labour Party, and construed facts as parts of a continuing, unfolding, inexorable evolution to socialism. He was the Prospero of British Trotskyism. In fact he played the dancing elephant game. The elephant seems to move to the hand gestures of the trainer, whose power over the animal seems very great. It is an illusion. The animal, trained to stand on its hindlegs, moves to its own rhythm, and the trainer is adept only at moving his hands accordingly. Consciousness, agency "at this stage", anyway played no part.

The "autonomous movement of the productive forces", the spontaneous movement towards collectivism that Marxists see in capitalism, was for Ted Grant a spontaneous movement beyond capitalism. "History" was an important, albeit shadowy, activist, unwilling to wait on the working class and moving the productive forces "autonomously" towards the first stage workers' states. Any agency to hand would do. Grant's entire miasma was derived from the ascription of a class character intrinsic to nationalised property. Where Marxism including the Transitional Programme and The Revolution Betrayed gave primacy to political power, class power, in determining what class character a given nationalised property had, Grant cut off that consideration completely at least "for this stage". This was the reductio ad absurdum of a distortion of some strands of Trotsky's notalwayscoherent late 1930s attempts to grapple with the conundrum of Stalinism the evolution of a system where the initial workingclass political power imparted a class character to the first USSR nationalisation.

Grant's ideas had some roots in the dualism that Trotsky developed to account for the USSR's development after

1929-30. The working class, argued Trotsky, could take power only consciously; but in the USSR it could hold power once taken, even though politically expropriated. The criterion was nationalised property. For Trotsky this argument was rooted in a view of the legacy of the October Revolution. Then Stalinism created elsewhere as much as "remained" of the October Revolution in the USSR. Grant and others mimicked and parodied Trotsky. But Trotsky never subscribed to or gave credence to Grant's key notion a workingclass character that inhered in nationalised property per se. True, from 1936, Trotsky often, for the sake of argument, separated the question of whether the USSR's economy was progressive compared to capitalism from that of whether the USSR was a workers' state. He argued that the nationalised property in the USSR which developed the forces of production while the privateprofit economies were mostly paralysed by the great slump was progressive, workers' state or no workers' state. He also contended that the USSR was a degenerated workers' state. But he never fell to the flat conclusion that any state nationalising the bulk of industry must be a workers' state, no matter who ran the state and how.

Grant's skill was as an ideologist, able to reconcile seeming irreconcilables, essentially a priest. Stalinism was progressive, he said, but also, and inescapably, totalitarian slavery for the working class. He believed in a new workers' revolution against Stalinism while also fervently championing Stalinist states and fervently wishing for the creation of more Stalinist states.

The adherents of Grant could believe simultaneously that the Chinese revolution was made by a "proletarian Bonapartist" formation around Mao but it was nonetheless a workingclass revolution. They could simultaneously denounce the USSR as a slave state and hail its contribution to progress. They could see the British labour movement as run by bureaucrats and traitors, yet also as if there were no such thing as a class struggle, as if the bourgeoisie and even the bourgeois state were utterly enfeebled and could not defeat us and throw the movement back, as it actually would in the 1970s and '80s in the grip of a ripening socialist awareness that could not be derailed or led to defeat by those who controlled the movement.

Grant worked those ideological wonders by seeing a stageist development of Stalinism and in fact seeing Stalinism as a progressive stage akin to the bourgeois revolution in Menshevik and Stalinist views, for large parts of the world. You could be in Militant and in terms of your operational theory be all "unconscious" bureaucratic collectivist, seeing a new totalitarian class rule and able to describe its horrors, and simultaneously seeing the "bureaucratic collectivism" you described as progressive and, or therefore, workingclass. Grant was the outstanding heir of Bruno Rizzi (who believed that both Stalinism and fascism were aspects of a world drive to collectivism, and that they were both progressive).

As theory, Grant's doctrine was a sticky, congealed mess of incongruous ideas nothing was developed, analysed, described or named logically or truly. But if you did not think about it, you might find it satisfying: simultaneously antiStalinist and glorying in and cheering on the achievements of Stalinism; simultaneously critical of the labour movement's structures, sure you were building something better, and a citizen of a labour movement that was inexorably evolving your way. All you had to do was be in it, like a passenger on a train that was too slow, and stopped for long spells, but nonetheless travelling forward on set rails. It would get there could not but get there. In fact, though, false consciousness like this was simply rationalisation for accommodation to facts, entities, powers, to the labour movement as it actually was. The rest was fantasy and selfconsolation.

Grant, a bachelor, looked something like the actor Walter Matthau. He had a strong South African accent that would rise to a high tenor pitch and beyond in excitement or oratorical flights, and to a curiously parrotlike screampitch when he said of some group or position (as he often did) that it was "craazzy". Phil Semp could do a very funny imitation. Ted was likeable, too human, until he put on the robes of the High Priest. But when he twigged that you were critical or rejecting, he became petulant, childish and fretful, and was easily made hysterical, his voice breaking with it. You didn't love him any more...

A cult demands a cultist at the centre of it. His strength in politics, if mere blinkered, selfhypnotised perseverance is strength, was a passive aggression charged stubbornness and a boundless selflove, above and beyond the common call of responsible parenting of one's own best efforts. He had no doubt that he was the Trotsky of today, and the only fountain of Trotskyist truth. The Doctrine was fully elaborated and set out in letters of stone.

He was immensely proud of the RCP leadership's pioneering or semipioneering efforts in developing and extending the workers' state formula to the Stalinist states beyond the USSR, and of his own efforts alone since. He would stubbornly rehearse the same ideas in virtually every speech. In conversation, once you'd got to know him, you could, so to speak, press a button and wait for an entirely predictable response even word for word, phrase for, phrase, emphasis for emphasis. Before it was "infatuation with their own inadequacies", it was plain selfinfatuation.

Next door to the RSL office was a little Italian cafe with ledge seats against the wall behind tables and a continuous belt

of mirrors on every wall above the seats. It was hard to have an unbroken conversation with Ted in that cafe. His attention would stray to the mirrors where you could see yourself from all angles. He'd look at himself out of the side of his eyes, then straight, eyeball to eyeball with himself, so to speak, jut out his chin to get a clean jawline, pat his hair, unselfconsciously flirting with himself. He took a curator's care with his own body. Rachel Lever was at a school at the centre on a very hot summer's day, and the room slowly became suffused with a horrible smell, as of many sweaty socks and long unwashed feet. It turned out to be Ted's special diet cheese in his pocket. During two hours in a pub with me one night in Manchester, waiting for someone, he sat with the halfpint of bitter I'd bought as a stageprop in front of him never touched, improving the moment by repeatedly telling me how many destroyed brain cells each pint cost me. I wish I'd listened to him but it was an eccentric voice from far, far away. And yet it was Ted's attitudes, concerns, values that, filtered a bit through the more "with it" younger ones, came, by the extension outwards of Militant's internal cult regime into the "youth movement", to set the tone and norms of the Labour Party Young Socialists.

Grant didn't think. He had stopped thinking in the late 1940s, having gutted himself by accepting Bruno Rizzi's progressive bureaucratic collectivism disguised with Trotsky's verbiage and "workers' state" nametags. He looked for illustrations to fit a "position", "prediction", a thesis, adopted in the late 1940s. Since the factual basis of his position was a growing trend of economic statification, he found many illustrations, except that he radically misunderstood, misdefined and mislabelled them from a socialist, workingclass and Marxist point of view and had, as well, a completely undialectical conception of the question. His "perspective" was all extrapolation in straight lines from what was happening, with no account of countervailing and contrary forces, no breaks, no shifts in direction, no unforeseen syntheses. Capitalism was dying. 9. Grant's morality

One consequence of the learning by rote and by authority schoolroom quality of the internal life of Militant was that when they came to control the Labour Party Young Socialists (1969 to 1987), and extended it into the YS, it produced the strangest of youth movements one such as a malevolent imagination might invent to prove that socialism was inherently authoritarian and lifeinhibiting. At YS conferences you would see young people who appeared not of their own generation, but old before their time. Everything was terribly straitlaced and uptight. Legalise marijuana? Relate to the vast numbers of young people using it? Gay rights? You'd get debates in which young people would get up and spout, as the full fruit of Marxism, social views and morals like those of their more staid grandfathers or those you would expect from some evangelical religious sect. These youngsters were schoolroomed into the attitudes of an elderly South African and other uptight folk.

The level of argument was often imbecilic. Legalise marijuana? "Comrades, it will just lead to one more monopoly like the alcohol and tobacco monopolies!" So, we should campaign to ban tobacco? "The workers wouldn't understand". The youngsters who got up to speak had all been through the same school of oratory. The style and hand gestures. Many more spoke with Liverpool proletarian accents than came from working-class backgrounds or could possibly have come from Liverpool. Labour Party bureaucratic procedure was adopted, to give the platform a massive mechanical predominance. There was always a long summingup from the National Committee and an announced National Committee "recommendation" on how to vote.

YS youngsters were hegemonised and politically and socially arrested by the dominant faction, and never given a chance to develop. Quite a few of them would by temperament probably have been supporters of "the establishment" wherever they went. Sour grapes? Probably. Sour truth, nonetheless, I think. Tremendous possibilities were wasted to build a living, vibrant, thinking, rebellious youth movement, able to reach out to workingclass and disaffected middleclass youth, in the 1960s and '70s counterculture and elsewhere, and politically educate them.

This controlled "old" quality which Militant stamped on the YS was probably one reason why they were left undisturbed by the Labour Party for so long. It grew straight out of the RSL that we encountered in the mid 1960s. Of course it was a form of political child abuse. Sometimes it was political child poisoning. When Militant in the Liverpool council came into conflict with the local black community and its leaders, the youth were told at the YS summer camp that year, for example that the leaders were "pimps and gangsters", repeating the most vicious of the antiblack racist stereotypes of the 1950s and '60s. The youth were infected with an unthinking religious fanaticism against the rest of the left and miseducated about it. Inevitably, some of the "wisedup" leaders were cynical about the workingclass youth they manipulated and kept underdeveloped or backward. One of them ones boasted to a WL supporter at a YS camp that "they" the youth "would tear you to pieces if we let them off the leash". They didn't just reflect the existing workingclass level and try to work with it they embalmed the attitudes of backward workers and petty bourgeois of an earlier generation, and froze the youth in them. 10. Grant and Ellis Hillman

In late 1964, its centre was three rooms in Kings Cross, London, rented from the Independent Labour Party and run by a parttime worker, Keith Dickinson. Even when Taaffe joined Dickinson as a full-time secretary, early in 1965, the centre was still sluggish and feeble. It was characterised for me by the fact that you would always get circulars dated, "Date as

postmark".

Though there was already a trickle here and there of young people coming into the organisation from the Young Socialists, from which the Healyites had just split off a large section, the atmosphere was elderly lacklustre, tired, and deliberately and selfconsciously relaxed. They tended to spin rationalisations from what they were. All was for the best... After the manic, driven atmosphere of the SLL, this had its attractions. You could talk, raise political problems, go up the Pentonville Road for a leisurely curry with Ted, who was interested in politics more than organisational nuts and bolts. There would be endless talk about the past and "the days of the RCP", and lots and lots of stories about the unsuppressible villainies of Gerry Healy from his very first appearance in the Trotskyist movement. Ellis Hillman would tell you exactly what Gerry Healy had "on" prominent Healyites what he was blackmailing them with to keep them docile. X was homosexual, Y beat his wife, Z had a scandal in his past, refusing to marry someone he wanted to, and who was "in trouble", because he was dominated by a Jewish chauvinist mother, etc. It was fascinating!

Yet I found Grant, Hillman, and some of the others likeable, and for a while I thought Grant made some sort of sense about Russia (I had come to consider myself an agnostic on the all-defining question, was Russia a workers' state). What alienated me from them was a smugness about the past that at first I could scarcely register, still less comprehend. They had, of course, made a "mistake" here and there when they led the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s, but everything the revolutionary left entirely dominated by the Healyites, themselves marginalised had happened as a result of "the period", workingclass prosperity, and the machinations and intrigues of James P Cannon and of Sam Gordon, the representative in Britain of the Socialist Workers' Party of the USA.

In this world of ancient stories, current gossip, and freewheeling malice, you got the feeling of being in a parliament of mice obsessed with the big cat Healy. I was politically very hostile to Healy. Nonetheless I felt demeaned. 11. After Protz

Militant had been launched as a professionallooking eightpage paper in October 1964, with Peter Taaffe's name on the masthead, and Roger Protz as editor. After a few issues Protz left, and the paper became a very clumsily laidout, underedited, and amateurish four pager. Protz, a recent defector from Healy, moved on to the ISSWP, where he edited Socialist Worker for the five years before 1974.

Militant was four tabloid pages a month, and not quite regular either. The mystery was how an RSL "centre" that included Ted Grant, who had some experience of such work, could produce a paper quite so badly put together, so dull, so under edited and so lifeless. The first three or four issues, Protz's work, were goodlooking and lively. Then Militant hit the bottom of awfulness.

It improved a bit thereafter Julian Silverman was editing it, I think but it reflected the mind and spirit of the group. Its staple was endless repetition of slightly peculiar politics. For example, speaking the language of the broad labour movement, Militant advocated the "nationalisation" of virtually everything. Proper Marxist propaganda would have sought and found ways to raise the question of questions about nationalisation: whose state nationalises? Who has the political power which gives nationalisation its class character?

Not so Militant. Nationalisation was enough. All the odder was this because the workingclass experience with nationalised coal and rail had not been exactly socialist; nor, of course, could it have been, with statecapitalist nationalisation. In the late 1940s, before it collapsed, the RCP had begun to stress the demand for workers' control to differentiate socialist nationalisation from what the Labour government was doing. Socialist Review/IS continued this very onesidedly through the 1950s and '60s. You would get blindmenandtheelephant debates in the mid1960s YS between Militant people insisting that nationalisation was decisive and workers' control not essential, and IS people insisting that workers' control was the thing and nationalisation did not matter.

I don't know for sure how Militant got to that stage. There would seem to be an obvious connection with the root alldefining theory that so much nationalisation in the Stalinist states and others: Militant decided early in 1965 that the level of nationalisation in Syria (and later Burma) had reached the point where they were deformed workers' states amounted to a workers' state. But Militant believed in a "political" revolution in those states which implied that for socialism nationalisation was not enough. How could it be enough in Britain, under the bourgeois state? To this was added the belief of Ted Grant in a peaceful socialist transformation in Britain a peaceful revolution. The political confusion was as deadly as the dull and lifeless "nationalisation: the only road" propaganda that was the Militant staple.

I don't, even after so many years, feel that I fully understand how Militant got into this state, or how people calling themselves Trotskyists could settle for it. They were SPGBtype propagandists not for socialism, though they thought it was socialism, but for a sort of allembracing speededup Fabianism (that is, for state capitalism or bureaucratic

collectivism!) It was all the more mysterious in that there was a vast Marxist literature against this approach.

Maybe part of it can be explained as the product of Grant's inner need to have everything rationalised, theorised, tidily accounted for in a scheme and the comforting function that the literary products of such an inner need can have for people desirous of a socialist future but uncomfortably aware that what they are doing towards that future is dim and feeble. Thus, in the 1950s, for example, all the Trotskyists, and not just Grant's group, chose to duck the question of violent revolution. Within limits there was sense to this. They wanted to win support for their general objectives. The question of revolutionary violence was not immediate and could be dealt with in due course, in better circumstances. But Grant, unlike the rest, insisted that he was propounding "the full Marxist programme".

What We Are... reports him responding to criticisms of Militant as "overentrist" by asserting unnecessarily, self-destructively from a factional point of view that the paper would be exactly the same if the RSL were not in the Labour Party. Grant evidently could not live with the "gap" between modest daily agitation and semisecret revolutionary ambitions which all the other groups accepted as a necessary way of life. Nor could he find the proper dialectical relationship between agitation, propaganda and theory. Theory, propaganda and agitation all had to be squared into the same box. And because of Grant's timidity, they were squared into a box defined by the "agitation", instead of a converse choice which would have led to strident highpitch "hard" sectarianism.

And yet what the RSL advocated for Britain was part of a world view that was selfconsistent. The world was moving, evolving, towards socialism. The "subjective agency" the working class in Marxism for Militant could be any formation. Nationalisation defined a workers' state and gave its "class character" to Maoists and Ba'athist militarists. It was an ongoing process, registering qualitative advances in unexpected places such as Syria and Burma. This, said Ted Grant, was part of "the autonomous movement of the productive forces" towards collectivism, which was by definition, from the first stage, workingclass and developing to socialism, and could not ever be defined as anything else. This in fact led Militant to a twostages view of the immanent socialist revolution though this was not elaborated which in its first stage was, so far, Stalinist. Grant called it "proletarian Bonapartism", in fact describing new social formations, but putting a plus sign where Max Shachtman, for example, put a minus sign.

Grant was, I think, the most consistent among the neo-Trotskyists in applying what had been the theory of Bruno Rizzi (and, for example, the Fabian George Bernard Shaw) in the 1930s about a drive towards collectivism which, despite peculiar forms, was everywhere progressive. (For Shaw it was "the Spirit of the Age"). Inevitably this world view affected Militant's British politics. They were vulgar evolutionists. British capitalism and the British labour movement were evolving towards the socialist transformation of society. The job of Marxists was to be there on the labour movement train, telling people the real destination. This was an essentially Second Internationalist conception of politics. But come to think of it, that is unfair to the Second International. Their "evolutionism" was for a long time reasonable on the empirical evidence.

Fatalism can, of course, go hand in hand with enterprise and energy as well as lifelessness... Essentially, what Militant converted its people to was commitment to a certain view of the future to a conception of an evolution from now to the future. The labour movement was evolving: there was already vast evidence, great fruits of its evolution look at the Stalinist world! look at the British trade union conference resolutions for nationalisation, comrade! The idea of dialectical movement of possible defeat and regression played as little part in their vulgarevolutionists evolutionism as the idea that real evolution, real history, includes qualitative breaks, that is revolutions. Militant waited for the development of the "mass left wing" in the Labour Party. Even if this were a correct estimation, it scarcely followed that energetic minority activity now to build up forces was ruled out. That only followed when the "perspective" of the mass left wing was used for comfort and consolation to accompany labour movement routinism and a bit of revolutionary activity about nationalising the 250 monopolies. In fact there Noms even a strong element in Militant in the 1960s of people who believed they existed in the world before their proper time had come, comparable to the Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution... Yet, it added up to something like a coherent world view, or a pastiche of a coherent world view. I was more than a little startled at the Labour Party Young Socialists conference, in 1973 or 1974, encountering Militant again after a gap of some years, when it struck me that young people could be got to believe that it was the ultimate left-wing position to advocate "full" nationalisation what seemed to me to be passive, indifferent, or lukewarm to the class struggle, and therefore rightwing bletherskating combining it with lifeless routinist propaganda and that people who focused on "limited" things like strikes were nowhere near as "left". The psychology its familiar to anyone who has ever talked to an SPGBer. 12. The fight in the RSL

Rachel Lever was very much of the RSL, the first organisation she had joined. She once hit me in the face for making some dismissive or less than respectful comment about one of the RSL leaders! Phil Semp, who like me had been in the SLL, become for a time a full and enthusiastic convert to Grant's theories about Stalinism. As a finalyear sociology student at Leeds University, he wrote essays which seemed to me, though I didn't agree with them, to be more lucid

expositions of Grant's ideas than anything available from the RSL. All three of us came to find the group's lifelessness, routinism, and platonic optimism unconvincing as we found personally intolerable.

They said of me in reply that I was "impatient". I surely was. Trouble was, I couldn't buy into the thinking that allowed them to be patient and, I would have said, politically somnolent. Just as the present was an inevitable consequence of an unalterable past, so also the future prosperity of the tendency was mechanically assured when conditions were right so loll" as you believed in the perspective.

In late 1965, when the Labour government started to signal that it intended to bring the state heavily into wage bargaining, against the workers, in the form of a statutory incomes policy, Rachel Lever and I proposed that the group take the initiative in working to create an activist campaign in the labour movement against this first modern (and, ill retrospect, very modest) attempt to shackle the trade unions in Britain. No chance! Such initiatives were unnecessary. The "perspective" would in the ripening of time be its own midwife. The subsequent story is told in what is now the appendix to the 1966 document.

We made proposals for activities, and initiated some. Finally, we felt obliged to try to understand what was wrong politically. What We Are And What We Must Become was the result.

I started to write a critical analysis of the great shibboleths of the group such as "perspectives" and "the socialist consciousness of the British labour movement". I didn't get very far. It required a great deal of reading and rereading and thinking it through. Endless "reading around" the subject quickly displaced the goal of showing in writing what was wrong with the RSL's perspectives and their politics. I knew what I disliked and what made no sense to me and what contradicted much that I was sure about for example, I was sure that the idea of a peaceful revolution, as a real possibility and not just a theoretical toy, was idiocy. I had had the disputes about this, about what Marx believed and so on, already in the Young Communist League, six years earlier. But to sum it all up was daunting work. I lacked the selfconfidence and, after the stimulus of the conflict over the impending antiunion legislation died down, the impetus and drive necessary.

I finally tackled the job in earnest, and with a will, in response to another experience of the political nature of the RSL its performance in the sea strike of 1966. That was an important class struggle, and one of the preludes to the July 1966 statutory incomes policy. Prime Minister Harold Wilson made a witchhunting attack on the strikers as "politically motivated men". There were major political dimensions to this strike the role of the bourgeois state, the nature of the Labour government, etc.

A Marxist paper that failed to explain that, and to orient as much of the working class as it could reach towards conflict with the Labour government and the labour bureaucracy, was a very poor thing. Throughout the strike Militant confined itself to the case for the seafarers' demands on a sympathetictradeunionist level. Only when the strike was over was some effort made, in response to our criticisms, to fill a few gaps.

When we raised the matter at an Extended National Committee, we were given lectures about "the period, comrade", "the group's perspectives", and the popularity of the newlyelected Labour government. Most memorably, Roger Silverman, Ted Grant's most devoted disciple, told the meeting in an excitement of rationalising that it didn't matter much what the paper said, because, after all, its main function was to act as a "calling card" to give us the chance to talk to workers. I took this "loyalist" idiocy as evidence that in some part of his mind he could see the point. I discovered that people held together against criticism here as in the SLL except that here it was not a brutal regime and self hypnotism with militant slogans that shaped the group, but a soft regime full of excuses for itself and for everyone who was docile towards it, and selfhypnosis by sleepy mantras and principled reasons for not getting excited. The authentic atmosphere of the group then is to be found in the detailed account of a discussion in the Liverpool branch on incomes policy and antiunion legislation.

After that, from mid June, I worked at sorting it out politically in my head and in discussion with Rachel Lever and Phil Semp, and, with the help of Rachel Lever, at putting it into more or less readable shape and onto stencils, so that when the holidays started in August I could go to London and get the discussion started.

Rachel Lever and I went to London on 1 August 1966, the first day of my twoweek annual holiday, and straight from Euston to the RSL office at Kings Cross, in order to duplicate the document, as previously arranged. We showed a paper copy of What We Are And What We Must Become to Keith Dickinson, who expressed surprise that it was quite so long (but he had expected a long document).

We proceeded to discuss practical details. We had only the one paper copy of the document, made by putting carbon and

paper behind the stencils as they were cut on the typewriter, and we left it with Keith Dickinson who was to see to paper, ink, etc. and went for something to eat. When we came back, everything was changed. Keith Dickinson, Peter Taaffe, and later Ted Grant looked at the contents of the document. Thereafter we were given the run-around. They had decided to stop us producing and circulating the document. The ridiculous details will be found in the documents appended to the main 1966 text.

The succession of evasions and excuses they made seemed to us as if designed to satirise themselves. Possibly they were subconsciously a form of selfassertion: stubborn and impregnable selflove was a strong thing with them! They were indeed, as I wrote, using words of Lenin's, "infatuated with their own inadequacies". They even tried to confiscate the only paper copy of the document we had. (We had not left the stencils in the office). They refused to give it back to us. It was in a locked filing cabinet: and we had to resort to subterfuge to get it back.

After wasting some days being messed around, we went one evening and sought out Peter Taaffe in the office and engaged him in political discussion. I pretended to be, and Rachel Lever genuinely was, upset at their attitude and comments such as that the document was all about "the warts on Peter Taaffe's face". We engaged him in a discussion, earnestly and "sincerely". I projected uncertainty and contrition and said I couldn't remember some of the things he said were in the document. "That can't be right, Peter. Where exactly is it?" Peter got carried away with himself and undertook to "prove" it. He unlocked the filing cabinet and took out the document... He started thumbing it to find the passage: the only things he'd marked were the comments about his behaviour. I said, "Let me see". He handed me the document, open where he'd marked it. I dropped the mask and said I was taking the document back. He didn't attempt to stop me.

For over two months we were refused the right to circulate the document, though it was supposedly a "pre-conference period" (in fact, the conference would be postponed). Finally, we left the group in October 1966 after a day of headbanging at an Extended National Committee in the Lucas Arms pub in Grays Inn Road, London.

I can recall exactly the point at which I decided to leave the RSL and to propose to my collaborators that we should all leave. Peter Taaffe made a speech in which he justified the suppression of the document by the fiveperson Secretariat (which was the only functioning committee: National Committee meetings were rare, and usually Extended National Committees, open to all). There was no dissent from the sizeable proportion of the members present. That did not surprise me: Taaffe and his friends had succeeded in branding us as people influenced by or possibly "agents" of the Healy organisation, the Socialist Labour League. What startled me, and decided me not to stay in the organisation, was the particular justification that the RSL members accepted from Peter Taaffe for some particular bit of clumsy bureaucratic blocking by the centre. "This is exactly how it is done in the broad labour movement. It is perfectly democratic".

In the bureaucratised, routinised, ideafunfriendly "broad labour movement"? I aspired to something better. On the second day of the Extended National Committee, I made a formal statement, and we left.

For decades, cheap reproduction of texts was done by poor leftists by way of Gestetner and Roneo duplicators, which could produce some hundreds of copies of what you had typed or "cut" on a wax stencil which went round an inked drum and reproduced the typewritten letters on paper fed through the machine. The first Workers' Fight (1967-8) was duplicated. The dispute about the circulation in the RSL, of What We Are And What We Must Become was determined by the technology, and may be difficult to understand for people used to the modern availability of cheap photocopying.

We made other arrangements to produce our document. Ernie Tate, the representative in London of the Mandeliste United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI), had his own fish to fry, and said we could produce the document in Nottingham at the office of "The Week" (later IMG), which was a sympathising section of the USFI. Rachel Lever and I spent a day in Nottingham running off 100 copies.

In so far as the ideas in the document had influence outside the ranks of what is now Workers' Liberty, it was among members of the Labour Worker or the International Socialism group (now SWP, then an unstable and mixed group).

The experience of being messed around seeking access to the RSL duplicator determined us to buy a duplicator, which we soon did. We had learned that power grew out of the barrel of a duplicator! First we bought a very old machine which I, staggering under the weight, carried on my shoulder from Islington on the tube to Ealing, where we were staying, and then humped back to Manchester only to find it didn't work! Then we bought a reconditioned Roneo for the then very large sum of £60. 13. Looking to Cannon

The idea of joining IS (the later SWP) was at that stage not even something we would consider. We were locked into a

mindset which saw the political world as "Trotskyists" and others. The RSL were Trotskyists, albeit very bad ones. IS was not Trotskyist. We had a postTrotsky Cannonite definition of "Trotskyism". "Trotskyists" were those who adhered to the "orthodox" neoTrotskyist line on the Stalinist states, the "colonial revolution", etc. That line seemed, on the basis of Trotsky's last writings known to us In Defence of Marxism to be the continuation of Trotsky's politics. The others were backsliders, people who had buckled and reneged under pressure in IS's case, in the Korean war.

Despite my long agonising about the theory of the Stalinist states, I don't think I ever questioned the neo-Trotskyist political conclusions. So long as one adhered militantly to the idea that in all the Stalinist states a new workingclass revolution (a "political revolution") was the programme of Trotskyism, such questioning seemed unnecessary. My understanding was that in any clash between "defence of the workers' state" and workingclass interests, we would put defence second. That was my understanding of the dispute on whether or not to call for the withdrawal of the Russian army during the Berlin uprising of 1953, which was a major issue in the Cannon-versusPablo split of 1953.

Trotsky's authority was immense, and Cannon's interpretation of the neoTrotskyist formulas in 1953 satisfied my antiStalinism. It was not Stalinism we "defended", but the possibility of going from what the Stalinists had created to a higher order. Defeat by capitalism would destroy that possibility. Trotsky's uncoupling, after 1936, of the idea that the nationalised economy is progressive from the question of whether it is or is not a workers' state, was central to it, as it is to all "orthodox" neoTrotskyism. So was the fact of a world that was split into two blocs, one anti-capitalist albeit not our anticapitalism and selfproclaimedly "communist", and one capitalist. Capitalism and imperialism were the enemy. The Russian empire was somehow not imperialist, because it was not capitalist. With the Stalinists, though we would have to overthrow them, we had an anticapitalist programme in common. Unfortunately the Stalinists did not always fight for that programme. We believe that they had not wanted to in China and look at France and Italy after the war, where powerful Stalinist parties had helped to reconstruct capitalist power.

In that way we answered the "raison d'être question" that troubled Trotskyists: what was our role given that the Stalinists had made anticapitalist revolutions, and in places were still making them? Grant's stageism seemed to give a satisfying political answer. For Grant was both 300% for the Stalinist, and other collectivist, revolutions and, "at the next stage", for political revolution. He scorned the typical self-deluding that made Mandelites and others pixillated partisans of Tito, Mao, Castro.

As against the RSL and the SLL, IS were in a different league. Without wanting to minimise the importance in my head of the religious fear of sin and heresy against nonsensical dogmas to which the feelings and fidelities appropriate to the basic socialist goal had become attached, the decisive thing that counted against IS for me was its anti-Leninism, its explicit scorn for the idea of building combat party.

Perhaps 18 months later, I would become very self-critical about this, and see our attitude here as having been stupid religiosity and that helped shape our futile interaction with IS, with which we fused in OctoberNovember 1968. At the beginning of August 1966, joining IS even to organise around our Trotskyist politics was still unthinkable. What then? We either gave up or we started a new Trotskyist group, necessarily a very small and weak one. Giving up was unthinkable. We had to publish an "organ" of some sort. I remember drawing confidence, and the possibility of developing substance, from doing entirely talentfree designs of possible covers and pages, and enjoying it.

But I was as daunted as I had been when Phil Semp had suggested that we start a separate organisation, 18 months earlier. Rachel Lever, typically, was full of courage and militancy. She had had a very bad time learning the faults of Militant and being disabused of her illusions in, and affection for, them. Nine months earlier, as I've already said, her response to a slighting remark I'd made about one of the RSL leaders had been to hit me! Now our experience before and after 1 August had completed her education, and she was clear and sure. I saw no politically acceptable alternative, but I wasn't sure of anything, especially myself, except that giving up, desertion, was unthinkable. We needed a "manual". Six years or so earlier I had borrowed James P Cannon's History of American Trotskyism and The Struggle for a Proletarian Party from Ted Knight in the Manchester SLL. These were the manuals! So Rachel Lever and I searched for and eventually found a copy of the early 1940s edition of History of American Trotskyism - there was no other to buy in London. Here was the manual, the "knowhow", The Prince, for those who wanted to know what to do and how. It was, too, though as with all such material the "copy" develops features from the beginning distinct from the original. You modify, you interpret. Circumstances are not, or not quite, the same. You emphasise different aspects. In our case we were directed by our experience in the existing British Trotskyist groups to emphasise democracy and permissiveness, where in fact after 1940 that was not the emphasis of Cannon's SWPUSA. 14. The RSL and the USFI

What about the other political tendency, the one which became the IMG, and whose major residue today is Socialist Outlook? As far as I can now reconstruct it, one of the things that decided me to join Militant was that it was the British section of the USFI, the nearest thing to a Trotskyist international. One could draw some comfort and reassurance from

that, though I was something more than sceptical and sour about the USFI. In large part this was still the SLL influence; the point is that a lot of the SLL's criticisms were true, though they themselves were incoherent, subjective, arbitrary, unstable and irrational a few months later, the SLL would go Maoist for a year! I had no doubt the SLL was incoherent. If China was any sort of workers' state, then Cuba had to be one too. (The SLL said it was capitalist not statecapitalist, just capitalist) .

I was repelled by the USFI's uncritical adulation of Castro, and by their history of being "lawyers" for various Stalinists. Looking back on it, I too was soft on Cuba, then: but to me it was selfevident, axiomatic, that a state that lacked "direct" working class rule, however free from many of the typical horrors of Stalinism it seemed to be, needed a workingclass "political revolution". I was not sure how much resistance to it the Castroites would mount, but if we didn't advocate that, and try to organise for it, then we were foreshortening Trotskyism by its workingclass head.

The Grantites too had no doubt about all that. Castro was and would be a Stalinist. They were highly critical of the USFI, and educated the new recruits in distrust of it. They made much of the old ISFI (Pablo-Mandel) segment of the USFI not believing China needed a political revolution, and I more than agreed with them on that. In fact they were on their way out of the USFI. When the RSL's break with the USFI came in December 1965, nobody in the RSL, as far as I know, backed the USFI.

In 1964 the "new start" that produced Militant had been triggered by a fusion of the RSL and the other British USFI supporters, the International Group (later IMG, then Socialist Outlook and various other fragments). The core of the International Group were Ken Coates and Pat Jordan, who had come out of the Communist Party in 1956. They fused with Socialist Review/ IS in 1957. Some of them Ken Coates then joined the SLL for a while; then they declared for Pablo and Mandel, whose British section, since late 1956, was the RSL. The RSL went through a big crisis in 1959-61, and for a while ceased to be able to maintain the less than tabloid size fourpage Socialist Fight as a printed monthly. The man who had got it out, himself and Ted Grant working full time, John Fairhead, went over to Socialist Review. (He would be a pioneer British Posadist in 1962; go to the Tory Party and the Monday Club; and wind up in the National Front in the 1970s!)

Differences arose over Grant's "perspective" that major economic crisis was round the second next corner, and that there would be big class struggles in the metropolitan countries as opposed to the Third World. Grant though he shared a vulgar evolutionism with them was always somewhat at odds with the populist PabloMandel "Fourth International" of that time, and the International Group were more "loyal". They hived off in 1961 and, after helping to publish IS journal for a while and shedding their Posadists, a couple of years later they started The Week. This was a duplicated 12page "news service for socialists", edited by Ken Coates and Robin Blackburn, and published with an impressive list of MPs and wellknown people as sponsors below the masthead. This was the period when the USFI before turning violently ultraleft in 19678 was trying to have its people in the European social democracies present themselves as representing the broadleft politics that a broad left wing "would have" when it developed, like the witchdoctor dressing in green to encourage the spring. Where Grant wanted propaganda for the nationalisation of the monopolies, they wanted to organise the broad left around such questions as workers' control, and, where it didn't exist, to substitute for it. (There is always in such things a delicate balance between pioneering and substitution).

It was a perennial dispute: passive propaganda, or organise the left. Essentially the same difference of approach had been at the heart of the division of Healy from the RCP majority in the late 1940s.

Under pressure from the reunified "Fourth International", from September 1963, the International Group unwillingly fused with the RSL again for a few months. Partly by way of manipulation by Healyite agents (notably Ted Knight), but essentially because they wanted to anyway, they split off again early in 1965, before I joined the RSL. After December 1965, when the RSL was demoted to a sympathising section of the USFI, the International Group was promoted to the same status. Relations between the USFI and the RSL more or less ceased from then on. The USFI was represented by The Week and the International Group. To us, they seemed buried in their "left socialdemocratic" disguise: the mask was also the face. The International Group developed neither cadres, nor any presence for revolutionary, Marxist politics. Joining the International Group was as inconceivable to us as joining IS and we thought that USFI was simply not Trotskyist in its rejection of "political" revolution in China and other Stalinist states where autonomous Stalinists, not under Russian control, had made anticapitalist revolutions.

Out of the RSL, four of us, we at first intended to publish a small duplicated journal, perhaps bimonthly. In fact, for the next year we collaborated with an emigre Irish organisation, the Irish Workers' Group, to produce the magazine An Solas/Workers' Republic. This group had taken initial shape in 1964 as the Irish Communist Group. It was variegated group of Maoists, Trotskyists, and everything in the political spectrum in between, kept together by the "Irish" matrix. Not for long. In the summer of 1965, in the period when I was in London, it began to split apart. The Trotskyists had

had a sort of client relationship with the RSL. When the factionalism had almost reached the parting of the ways, I joined to help the Trotskyists against the Maoists. The split produced the Irish Communist Organisation (later the British and Irish Communist Organisation), and the IWG. The IWG was still a hotchpotch. Rachel Lever and I took over production of its magazine on the understanding that we would develop it into a more general Trotskyist publication which could also be used in the British labour movement. Which we did. We finally produced the first issue of *Workers' Fight* in October 1967. 15. Post-Trotsky Trotskyism

The core of *What We Are And What We Must Become* is a discussion of how revolutionary socialists relate to and interact with a large living, but bureaucratised and reformist, labour movement. How can they be of that movement but not submerged in it? How can they be with it at its existing broad level politically without letting themselves sink to that level? How can they relate to a labour movement where there is a broad "ceremonial" aureole of "socialist consciousness" that is not an adequate, scientific consciousness for example in understanding the class nature of the state and functions in the daytoday affairs of the movement as solace and uplift rather than as a guide to class struggle? These are enormous questions. If they have receded in importance it is thanks to what Mrs Thatcher did to the labour movement. Yet those events showed how far, alas, we were from being wrong in our, demolition of the theoretical basis of *Militant's* platonic optimism.

In the broader spectrum of post-Trotsky Trotskyism one can define two polar responses to the disappearance of the old large revolutionary socialist movement in the 1930s and '40s. The mainstream "orthodox" Trotskyists resolved "the crisis of working-class leadership" by postulating the creation of the Stalinist states as deformed working-class revolutions and seeing a prospect of other such revolutions (there were lots of qualifications and variables). In essence they solved the crisis of leadership and sustained their belief that this is the epoch of the socialist revolution by dispensing with the working class for now. The polar opposite (inverse) of that was the way in which Max Shachtman, after the dissolution of the Independent Socialist League in 1958, came to terms with the disappearance from world history, and for a prolonged period, of the old bigscale revolutionary workingclass movements. He fetishised the labour movement as it was, sought citizenship in it on the old terms that he once categorised scathingly in terms of timeserving, corruption, and bureaucratism. He dispensed with the notion of a conflict between the union bureaucracy and working class interests (the bureaucrats were, of course, it is true, sometimes politically ahead of the average worker). He either abandoned or entrusted to the future, in the ripening of time, the Leninist tasks which we spelled out in 1966 of fighting for political clarity and ideological demarcation, to eradicate bourgeois ideological influence in the working class and to group the revolutionaries together. In essence, or for the time being, he adopted an evolutionary idea of the labour movement, developing and growing with capitalist society.

In the case of the Shachtmanites, the corrosion they underwent was compounded by the participation of the trade unions and the Socialist Party in the foully corrupt and corrupting world of stultified American bourgeois democracy Tammany Hall bourgeois politics, with its huckstering, backscratching, and logrolling (tying disparate issues together to compound support). They encountered it at the moment they ceased to see it is central, the fundamental problem behind all sorts of other problems the limitations and failures of bourgeois democracy. They were right to try to integrate themselves into the existing labour movement. So too was *Militant*. But they drowned themselves in the movement.

Militant managed to combine both of these poles, sectarian and opportunist! It subscribed to a version of "official" Trotskyism that differed from its siblings and cousins by the broader range of possible locums for the working class in making a workingclass revolution which it admitted to its theoretical categories and summarised from the events it analysed. Where the group existed eventually not only Britain they also adopted something like the Shachtmanite alternative to Stalinism: worship the existing labour movement and see it in a vulgar evolutionary perspective. At the same time *Militant* maintained a stifling organisational structure, softened in our time by looseness and inefficiency but later hardening into Stalinoid forms. Their concepts of how to organise were shaped by Stalinist-model rigidity and sect psychology, tempered by inefficiency; when the "machine" became more efficient, the tempering went and the rigidity was predominant in practice as well as implicitly. 16. *Militant*, into the '70s

If you had asked me in October 1966 what chance the RSL/*Militant* had of serious growth, I would have answered, none. It seemed to have the power to take young people in and slow them down. It aged them years in a month, at the same time giving them the sustaining arrogance that came from the conviction that with a few key notions perspectives, permanent revolution, colonial revolution, the future mass left wing in the Labour Party they understood everything and could read the secret signs and codes and future itineraries of Dame History herself. If someone had convinced me that the RSL could grow, I would have answered that then its politics would ensure that it would not be growth for serious revolutionary politics. But I did not believe that it could grow.

Of course, people moving away from an organisation tend to diminish it, to see its faults and not its strengths, but even so that was not an unreasonable opinion. The series of events that allowed *Militant* to grow, were special, and some very

strange.

In the later 1960s came an explosion of the youth culture "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" and the "youth" revolt against the Vietnam war. There was a series of waves of syndicalist workingclass struggle effectively syndicalist, but without the broad perspectives and societytransforming hopes of the old syndicalists before World War 1. The Labour Party government raised up a wave of revolt against itself when it tried to bring in antiunion laws in 1969; when the Heath government elected in mid1970 put such laws on the status books, it stoked up tremendous mobilisation. When five dockers were jailed in July 1972, mass strikes and a TUC decision for a oneday general strike forced their release within days.

In this situation Militant was in a unique position. It controlled the Labour Party Young Socialists from 1969, and had been the dominant group in it for a year or two. Other Trotskyists had controlled the YS before the SLL in 19635 and a much bigger and more impressive YS. What was unique about Militant was that it found a way to coexist with the Labour Party bureaucracy, so that it would be allowed to keep control for 18 years!

It operated by concentrating on general, abstract, LabourPartystyle "socialist" propaganda. Socialism was bureaucratic nationalisation; Militant, unlike the Labour Party leaders, wanted a lot more of it. Militant focused on such constitutional placebos as an Enabling Act as the means of achieving mass nationalisation.

Probably the Labour leaders, who knew that all their predecessors had had trouble with Labour youth movements, thought that a Militantled youth movement, leftwing but docile, was the best it could hope for given the raging youth revolt all around it. Militant kept order! Militant "socialised" the youth.

Militant was uniquely tooled politically for this coexistence with the Labour bureaucracy. Their important tools here were precisely those characteristics of theirs we had found most antipathetic, not least their Fabianbureaucratic concept of "socialism".

In the early 1970s, the Labour Party regime loosened up greatly. The list of banned organisations was abolished. Life flowed back into the Constituency Labour Parties as the struggles with the Tory government exploded and reverberated. Militant had stability of routine, and key catchment points for recruiting young people. Since the YS was used very much for their needs, they even had an annual subsidy from the Labour Party! This finally included having a Militant member, Andy Bevan, as the Labour Party's salaried youth officer.

Militant threaded itself busily into the trellises of the labour movement's routines, avoiding conflicts. Its activity had much in common with the routinised and bureaucratised trade union work of the Communist Party after the 1940s. For Militant, the test of political virtue was not militancy, combativity, or efforts at democratic renewal of the trade unions or the Labour Party Militant was very slow to get involved in the Rank and File Mobilising Committee in 197980 but support for "socialist" resolutions about nationalising industry. The truth was that this sort of thing was both very commonplace in the labour movement and largely meaningless, since a very large swathe of those who paid lipservice to it didn't believe it, and nobody believed a Labour government would be affected by it. For those who thought it sufficient, the "resolutionary socialism" was pernicious.

Ah, Militant would say, we need a Labour government with socialist policies. How? More resolutions! In fact Militant's idea were a fantasy on sparepart surgery. The living part of Militant's "perspective" was the idea of an evolutionary ripening of the labour movement towards revolution. It was commitment to a vision of the future. Here and now building the RSL in the labour movement was preparing the transformation of that movement. Militant would grow big enough so that when Labour would slough off the Right, then, eventually, after a transitional stage of a labour movement dominated by 'centrists' vacillating socialists there would be a Militantdominated labour movement, which would "nationalise the top 200 monopolies" peacefully. This idea could make socialist sense of routine timeserving. It was a perspective patterned on the old Second International notion of building the labour movement slowly, avoiding disorder and disruption, while simultaneously capitalism ripened towards its own dissolution. Except that Militant would build its party within the Labour Party.

In fact Militant was a fullyfledged sect, but the idea of revolutionary activity independent of the existing labour movement was nonetheless no part of its conception of the world until catastrophic changes began to occur in its environment in the middle and late 1980s. These underlying ideas of Militant were confronted in our 1966 document. In the days of Militant's seeming triumphs, it was more difficult to see that were not wrong that it is now. This evolution in Britain would be an evolution within the "evolutionRevolution" that was going on in the world, where an alltransforming and unstoppable anticapitalist revolution was occurring. All in all, Militant's Ted Grant's ideas, though they were no use, and were indeed harmful, for the tasks of revolutionary Marxists, were tremendously educative

artefacts of political ideology in the sense of false consciousness. What they rationalised was a mindless routinism in the labour movement, to which they gave the delusion that it was something entirely other than what it was, and was pelted of something it could not be part of evolution/Revolution. They built an ambivalent confidence, courage and optimism in the comrades they educated by glorying in the alleged historical significance of the Stalinist expansion which they also denounced.

Militant had feared to risk taking Liverpool "over the top" with the miners in 1984 and chose instead to do a stopgap deal that gave the Tories time to clear with the miners, and Militant in Liverpool a year's grace. Following "the logic of the class struggle", that is, refusing to do deal with the Tories, would either have led to working class victory over Thatcher and that would have halted the Kinnockite drift in the Labour Party or it would have led to a breach between the Militant-controlled Merseyside District Labour Party and the Labour Party. That would have been the way to go out of the Labour Party! Labour Party consequences will have been in their calculations over Liverpool. The party that is growing up inside it to replace the Labour Party must be preserved! Syndicalism is no answer: politics, comrades!

Here, however, the "perspective" was self-destructing. First, Militant became very isolated in the Labour Party following the Liverpool fiasco. That created conditions for a successful purge the attempted purge since 19823 had so far done Militant more good than harm, bringing them immense publicity at the cost of a tiny handful of expulsions. Militant worsened matters by a rattled, self-frighteous response to the purge. They conducted no campaign against it within the labour movement not even the factionally limited campaign they had run in 19823 spurned other leftists who tried to run a "Labour Against the Witchhunt" drive, and instead responded exclusively by legal action. They let the LPYS be wound up without a fight.

Then they found an easier and more profitable channel for activity, in the anti-poll tax campaign. And finally they broke with the Labour Party on the pretext that Militant was not allowed by the Labour Party to have the parliamentary candidacy in Walton, Eric Heffer's old seat. It was hysterical and unbalanced. In terms of allowing the right wing to intensify the purge, it was an act of suicide. It reflected no qualitative change in the Labour Party: though the drift was plain, the qualitative constitutional changes we now confront were way in the future.

Subtlety and flexibility and walking a balanced walk were never Militant capacities. The necessary combination of independent work and some Labour Party work was, of course, especially difficult for people trained in the ideas above of an evolution and replacement surgery (Body Snatchers). In the 1990s Militant slowly tore itself to bits. Symbolic, but practically important too, was the separation of a minority around Grant from the organisation. Grant did not want the adventurist nonsense around the Walton byelection. Grant's power to shape ideological lenses that allow him to see what he wants to see and to construe as he wants to construe remained formidable. He wanted to repair the rents in the seamless fabric of his fantasies.

It was delusions about what they could achieve in Liverpool and by campaigns like the poll tax that made so many of the others reject Grant at this point but also probably an impulse towards political health and for facing reality. Without Grant's distinctive theories and fantasies, Militant's politics, and none too slowly, became those of an eclectic identikit kitsch/Trotskyist group. Central to the process of separation from Grant must have been the effect on Grant's political and theoretical credibility of the collapse of Stalinism.

That is the subject of volume 2 in this collection Militant's and Grant's theory of Stalinism. Militant supported Russia in "Russia's Vietnam war" of colonial conquest in Afghanistan. At Christmas 1979 the Russians took over the country and eight years followed of savage colonial war. An estimated one quarter of the Afghans were driven as refugees across the borders by Russian gunships spraying bombs and napalm. If Russia was a workers' state, then the revolution was being exported to Afghanistan, wasn't it? Ourselves, still nominally workers' statist, we found that we had to reprise the sort of discussions that had erupted on the eve of Trotsky's death in 1939/40 around the Russian invasions of Poland and Finland. We could see no sense in such an export of "revolution", at the cost of possibly millions of Afghan lives, if any sort of progressive revolution it was. And we could see no way of avoiding the conclusion that, workers' state or not, this was a display of Russian imperialism.

There were big minorities in the United Secretariat in the French LCR, for example who wanted to come out against the troops, though I'm not aware that any of them shared our conclusion about Russia as an imperialist power, whatever its "class character". Lutte Ouvrière, in France, came out against the troops. The rest of the orthodox, official Trotskyists divided into two groups. The majority said that they did not support the Russian troops going in but they were there now, and they would not call for their withdrawal, because unpleasant consequences would ensue. Anybody among them concerned with consistency and honesty, and reading back from their final position, that the Russians should stay and win their colonial war, would conclude that they should have supported the Russians going in and indeed called on the Russians to send troops in and denounced them a counterrevolutionary Stalinists if they dawdled.

The other group consisted of three internationally organised tendencies, the SWP-USA and its satellites, then part of the USFI, the international Spartacist tendency, and Militant with its international associates. Differing a little in what they said exactly, the three groupings had in common a positive and even enthusiastic support for the Russians. "Hail the Red Army!" intoned the Spartacists. The USSR "goes to the aid of the Afghan revolution", exulted the SWPUSA and its satellites. (This was too good to last, though. After some months they abandoned this position and criticised themselves for it. They had failed, so they told readers of their press, to read with the attention it deserved an important speech of Fidel Castro's. That would have put them right!)

Militant stumbled at first (see the document), but after a month came down against calling for withdrawal. They used the common formula (the troops are there, so we don't say go), but thereafter they were positive enthusiasts, and stuck to the proRussian position for years after their cothinkers (the Spartacists excepted) had abandoned it. 17. No weddings and Sam Gordon's funeral

At Golders Green crematorium one day in 1982, I watched as the "Trotskyist" crowd assembled legendary longgone figures; clan and clique chieftains; heretics, renegades, banditti, lunatics; political turncoats and political fadedcoats; active revolutionaries, and longretired, crestfallen, contrite or intimidated, revolutionary warriors of yesteryear; uncompromising militants, halfguilty or thickskinned, selfservers who had utilised the skills they acquired in revolutionary politics to get on in the bourgeois world you could not stop yourself being reminded of Mafia funerals you had seen in films like The Godfather.

Me, I found myself also remembering what happened in Bulgaria in 1923. The Communist Party, in an ultraleft phase, assassinated a prominent politician, and then when ministers, politicians, plutocrats and aristocrats assembled to honour their dead the CP blew up Sofia Cathedral, massacring the country's ruling elite. In the sequel, though, the biggest massacre was eventually wreaked on the communists and the labour movement, by the Bulgarian state.

The assembly at Golders Green crematorium was the funeral of Sam Gordon, an associate of Cannon and of Trotsky, and most of those who had played any role in Trotskyism in Britain in the previous 45 years were there to honour Sam with one notable exception.

A Jewish Pole, born in 1910, Sam was taken to the USA as a child and was a Trotskyist in his teens. In his early 20s he was for a while editor of the US Trotskyist paper, The Militant. He was in Germany a the Nazis drove towards power and the German labour movement crumbled. You will see Sam, outstandingly tall, stringy, and spectacled, in some of the wellknown pictures of Trotsky in the late 1930s with his American comrades in Mexico.

For a while, in the early 1940s, Sam was secretary of the rump Fourth International, based in New York. During the Second World War he, like a number of other US Trotskyists, became a merchant seaman so that he could travel between the Allied countries, making and maintaining contact with the Trotskyist groups. In that capacity he came to England in 1943. The British section of the Fourth International, recognised at the founding conference in 1938, called the RSL, was moribund, paralysed by faction fighting and incompetent leadership. By contrast, the Workers' International League (WIL), denounced by the 1938 conference for not fusing with the RSL, was a viable, energetic, and growing organisation.

Sam set out to unify the two organisations, bringing together prounity elements in both organisations, notably Gerry Healy in the WIL and John Lawrence in the RSL. The consequent fusion in mid 1944 created the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). In the political disputes that followed within the RCP about the Labour Party and the Russianoccupied territories in Eastern Europe, Sam was with James P Cannon, and actively involved with the HealyLawrence minority who opposed the RCP leadership of Jock Haston, Millie Lee, and Ted Grant.

Sam had to live in England because his British wife Mildred could not get the right to reside in the hysterically anticommunist USA. (She was a onetime member of the RCP, and became a Labour MP in the 1980s, on the silent left until the 1997 election). When the RCP collapsed in 1949, Sam worked with the Healy organisation, and he continued to do so until the early 1960s. In the 1970s he kept contact with all sorts of Trotskyists, and he would advise us on issues like the Labour Party.

The first time I ever went through the doors at the Palace of Westminster, it was at Sam's insistence. Late one night, in the mid1970s, the pubs shut before we were ready for them to do so. Sam saw a bus he knew, said "Come on!" to me, and jumped on to the platform. It took us to Westminster. Sam sent in a message to one of the MPs, a onetime Trotskyist and in his head still a Trotskyist. The MP who was, I think, a teetotaller came out, and at Sam's bidding took us in to one of the ever open House of Commons bars. In News from Nowhere William Morris predicted the Houses of Parliament

after socialism would be used to store manure. Sam had found a special use for it under capitalism.

An ultraloyalist to the SWPUSA, Sam disagreed with them on Israel, but did not fight on the question. He encouraged me to write against their support for the Russian troops in Afghanistan in 1980. Sam was an especially good, likeable, muchliked and muchrespected man, and his funeral, attended by so many people who had vast political differences with him, as with each other, left no doubt of it.

Jock Haston and his partner Millie Lee, people thirty years and more removed from revolutionary politics and against whom Sam had helped to organise the RCP opposition, were there. CLR James, a very tall, slim, goodlooking, greyinghaired old man of 80 was there, held erect when he moved to the podium by a man on either side holding his elbows because his legs no longer worked. Tony Cliff and Chanie Rosenberg of the SWP took their places in the crowd without fuss. Politically, they had had enormous differences with Sam for 35 years.

Gerry Healy with whom Sam had fallen out bitterly 20 years earlier small, pudgy, bald, with a noticeably pink gnome's dome sticking out of his topcoat like the head of an overproud paranoid tortoise, made a late entrance, surrounded by toughlooking bodyguards much bigger than himself, all swiveleyed and very alert, as if they feared that the great man would be attacked. While others sat, he stood, walled off inside his protective human knot, in but not of the ecumenical gathering, recognising no-one and greeting noone. Alan Thornett, who had been Eliza Doolittle to Gerry's Professor Higgins, looked hurt as Healy and his entourage swept past without acknowledging him; Martin Thomas looked disbelieving; John Bloxam was busy with the business of standing still.

It was the most comprehensive gathering of the Trotskyist and exTrotskyist clans in a third of a century, and a very big crowd in all. Most of those I recognised were long dead. It was to a considerable degree a gathering of political ghosts and politically dormant folk. And who was absent?

Which single Trotskyist group was conspicuously not represented? Ted Grant was absent. The only organisation not represented was the RSL/Militant. Singularly unrelenting spite and hate, with neither the will nor the capacity to make a distinction between the political and the personal that was the RSL and its leadership, unforgiving and unforgetting and measuring everything and everyone with infantilistic self centredness.

Sean Matgamna, February 1999

Notes

In CND's first years, the Communist party had opposed it as too 'extreme' for wanting a complete ban on nuclear weapons. They had denounced the Trotskyist opposition to conscription too, arguing to 'cut the call up' from two years to one! Easter 1960 was the point at which they jumped on the bandwagon, but the Daily Worker blithely talked as if the Party had been in from the beginning.

The SLL had indeed been in from the start. It had published a pamphlet in 1957, in the build up to the marches advocating 'Black the Bomb and the Bases' - trade unionists should refuse to work on or service nuclear bases. SLL member Vivienne Mendelson had moved a motion for unilateral nuclear disarmament at the 1957 labour Party conference. But the SLL, like the CP, had a pro-Russian foreign policy and soon - late 1960 - Gerry Healy would pronounce in the Tribune letters page, an explicit line of opposition to calls for Russian nuclear disarmament.

The ILP, rigidly sectarian to the Labour Party which it had helped to found, but from which it had disaffiliated in 1932, also had a weekly, Labour Leader. The ILP was a strange repository of every type of political sectarian in the political zoo, most of them, I suppose, elderly. Quite a few refugees from the collapse of 1949 of the old RCP had found refuge there. Some ILPers were 'Shachtmanites', the ILP had links in the 1950s with the Independent Socialist league of Max Shachtman and Hal Draper in the USA, and sometimes exchanged articles - and some were outright Stalinists. In 1956 their most prominent writer, the learned old muddlehead Frank A Ridley, had shamefully supported the Russian suppression of the Hungarian revolution on the quaint grounds that the issue in Hungary was 'The Red International' (Stalinism!) verses the 'Black International' (the Catholic church). Ridley was a life-long active secularist (the main room in the Secular Hall in Leicester is now named after him and something of a shrine to him). The idea that the Russian imperialist butchers were "Red" and the insurgent Hungarians who fought tanks with petrol bombs nearly agents of Catholic conspiracy was, in plain English, lunatic.

In the ILP, semi-Shachtmanites and Stalinists co-existed in a culture that was also 'Luxemburgist'. they published Luxemburg's criticism of the Bolsheviks in power - written in jail and never published by Luxemburg herself - as "Leninism verses Marxism", and a pamphlet on workers' control by the Council Communist Anton Pannokeok. In fact the Stalin strain aside, the culture of the ILP in the 1950s was pretty much what would be the culture of the IS/SWP in the 1958-68. The IS took over wholesale after 1958, just as after 1968, and especially after 1971, they began to appropriate much of the sectarian culture of the SLL. The ILP withered to nothing and in the 1970s rejoined the Labour

Party, renaming itself "Independent Labour Publications" in order to keep its initials. It was a quirky far-right of the broad Labour left of the '70s and '80s. In 1960 the ILP press, like the ILP itself, was like a field under flood water, still visible but dead.

The British section of the Pablo-Mandel "International" was then a group around John Lawrence and Hilda Lane which had split from the Healy organisation when the International split in 1953. They had quickly gravitated towards the CP, becoming a CP-oriented group in the Labour Party, (Lawrence was leader of St Pancras Borough Council), and then most of them openly joined the CP. So the ISFI had no section, and only a few British supporters. They were reduced to advertising in Tribune in an attempt to regroup supporters. They began to publish a duplicated journal, Fourth International. The French Trotskyist, Pierre Frank, who had been interned in Britain during the war and had served as an anti-RCP leadership expert in the post-war polemics, began to write a series of articles in FI on the history of British Trotskyism - bitterly critical of the whole Haston-Grant tendency and of the RCP.

The series came to an abrupt end, unfinished. The Deane-Grant group were to be recognised as the nucleus of a new British section! At that point the late Sam Levy and four or five others split off, taking Socialist Current with them. They would continue to publish it for 20 years, recruiting two, maybe three, people in all that time.

Some of them - Theo Melville and John Fairhead - became Posadists, followers of Juan Posadas and perhaps the strangest variant of post-1951 neo-Trotskyism, with its positive advocacy of nuclear war against the West by the USSR and its claims that flying saucers showed the existence of socialist civilisations on faraway planets. Politically, Posadism was a product of the Pablo-Mandel International; organisationally, in Britain, it was a split from the IS/SWP current. John Fairhead was probably a member of the SR group, and certainly a very frequent writer for SR.

They did the same sort of thing to us. Cheetham was mainly a right-wing party with a millionaire, Harold Lever, as MP and a strong Catholic Action group allied to him. At the GMC - I was a delegate - after we removed the YS branch Chair, the LP official in charge of youth, a man in his 50s with a clipped, military-style moustache called Arthur Johnson, was in attendance and launched a fierce full-scale diatribe against Trots, and me in particular. I had no warning, nor had anyone except the party officers known Johnson was coming. We had enough support to buffer us from the assault and no action was taken. In truth, though we liked to present the "right wing" as "witchhunters" and could work ourselves up into a state of paranoia over "security" the LP was pretty liberal. Harold Wilson, a Bevanite of the 1950s, had become leader of the party after the sudden death of Hugh Gaitskell. The party was going through the early stages of a liberalisation which would last a quarter of a century.

Seen from our time, looking back across a long period in which neo-Trotskyism, in Britain and elsewhere, has - since the late 1960s - been characterised by more or less rampant ultra-leftism, the 'peaceful revolution' idea of the RSL Secretariat in the mid-60s must seem odd, unique, a product of mutant politics.

But from the late-'40s to the late 1960s all the British Trotskyist groups were very much hegemonised by the experience of the labour government of 1945-51. Not only had it created the Welfare State, but had nationalised whole swathes of British industry. An observer like Max Shachtman thought in principle this could go on to expropriating British capitalism. It seemed all part of the "spirit of the epoch", a British manifestation of the "impatience of history" that led Stalinists to create many "workers' states". In the late 1940s the RCP focused working class concerns on criticism of the lack of workers' control in the nationalised industries. By the 1950s the idea of revolution was more or less absent from the Trotskyist press. In its place were, variously, calls for a Labour government that would continue and nationalise the rest of industry and (from some) for workers' control. The Socialist Review group programme, repeated in every issue of SR, called for nationalisation and workers' control by a Labour government.

In 1957 they fused with a small group of ex-CPers in Nottingham around Ken Coates and Pat Jordan, the people who would later found the IMG. As a result of that fusion the "programme" was rewritten to include the statement that nationalisation and workers' control could only be achieved by a high level of working-class mobilisation.

It was a vast improvement. yet the formula was the exact wording that the CP had in 1951 substituted for the old Leninist politics of smashing the bourgeois state, when it adopted its parliamentary road to socialism in Britain! As far as I know, no Trotskyist criticism of the British Road to Socialism from that angle was produced in 1951, though the Healyite paper, Socialist Outlook, carried an article by Tom Braddock criticising the British Road for sectarianism towards the LP. There is a sort of exception. Nye Bevan, the leader of the very powerful Labour left after he resigned from the government in 1951 in protest against the imposition of a charge (one shilling, or five pence), for NHS prescriptions - Bevan published a book, In Place of Fear. The tiny and then rarely appearing magazine of the Healy group, Labour Review appeared in pamphlet edition by Gerry Healy critical of Bevan. Following Trotsky in Where is Britain Going? it recalled the revolutionary struggles of the past, like Cromwell's, in refutation of Bevan's exclusive reliance on parliament. It was diplomatic, but it did point towards the need for revolution. My guess is that this pamphlet was written by the US SWPer George Novak and/or possibly Sam Gordon. Even this polemic was deeply tainted by the idea of some intrinsic 'class character' of nationalisation per se.

The ideas of Grant and his friends in 1965-6 were less peculiar than they might seem now...