The "IS-SWP tradition" 3

The experience of the left

THE SWP is, despite everything, the biggest self-styled revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain today. More than that: there are a lot of ex-members of the SWP (called IS before 1977) around.

It is now what the Healy organisation was in the late 50s and through the 60s — "a machine for maiming militants."

Politically, it has assumed the traditional role of anarchism. It is a movement of incoherent militant protest living politically from moment to moment, with no strategy and not much in the way of stable politics. It has one goal only — to "build the party": the party conceived as a fetish outside of politics and history, cut off from the real working class and its movement.

As an organisation it is a rigidly authoritarian variant of the Stalinist model of a party. It is organised around a pope, Tony Cliff, who has the power to loose, bind and eject. In terms of the organisation of its intellectual life it is pre-bourgeois, in fact medieval.

Like the Healy organisation before it, the SWP leaves most of its ex-members politically bewildered and disoriented.

To help traumatised ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers its history, we publish the symposium that follows. There will be other contributions in subsequent issues. We invite contributions. The discussion is completely free. Should representatives of the SWP wish to participate, they will be welcome.

Some of those who participate in this symposium have moved a long way from the politics they had in the IS-SWP, and from the politics of *Workers' Liberty* now. Nonetheless, at the end of this discussion we — and the thinking left in general — will be better equipped to formulate the lessons of the IS-SWP experience.

When IS turned to the workers

By Vic Collard*

I WAS a member of IS between about 1969 or '70 and 1975. Before and during that period, I was an active member of the AEU, a shop steward at Lucas and on the Birmingham East (AEU) District Committee. So when I joined the organisation I came from a background of some experience within the trade union movement.

Prior to joining IS my political sympathies lay with the Labour Party, but I had also come into contact with the Communist Party through the AEU Broad Left — which was dominated by the CP. I'd been to some CP meetings and worked with them quite closely within the union. The reason why I never joined them may seem frivolous but bear in mind that I was in my twenties at the time: they struck me as an utterly humourless bunch of people. Some of them were great people but the party itself was repressive and sectarian and utterly humourless. And, of course, I had some difficulty with their slavish support for the Soviet Union and the East European states and things like their openly chauvinist line on the Common Market. But, to be honest, those weren't the things that stopped me joining: the main reason was their lack of any humour — or, indeed, humanity.

At this time, also, the CP were turning their backs on factory branches and jettisoning a working-class-based strategy in favour of an electoral strategy — a disastrous mistake, in my view.

That experience of the CP is important in understanding why the IS was so attractive to people like me. IS was the only other left group that seemed to be taking the trade union struggle seriously but they were in stark contrast to the CP in almost every respect.

I came across IS because of productivity bargaining. A work colleague of mine, Jeff Johnson, was very concerned about productivity bargaining and its impact on shop-floor power and organisation. Jeff and I saw productivity bargaining as a fundamental shift of power from the shop-floor to management. But we didn't know how to fight it. So we did a bit of digging — asking everyone, making enquiries everywhere. As a result we went to a meeting at which Bert Ramelson [the CP's industrial organiser] was speaking. One of us asked a question about productivity bargaining and Ramelson had no answer. We got nowhere. Immediately after the meeting, we happened to bump into Arthur Harper, the convenor of Leyland Tractors and Transmissions plant, and with him was Roger Rosewell, who I knew by reputation as a trade union negotiator. So we retired to a pub and had a chat. I said how disappointed we'd been with Ramelson, and Rosewell said: "I've done some work on productivity bargaining." That's how it all started for me.

Jeff and I joined IS — we were the only shop stewards in the organisation in Birmingham at that time. One result was that IS produced the book *The Employers' Offensive: Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them*. That was very successful. We were flogging it round the union branches and the factories and people snapped it up. The left in general had no strategy for dealing with productivity deals: there was the simplistic approach of having nothing to do with them, which wasn't a viable option, or — more dangerously — trying to price them out. Once you started talking about the price, you were on a slippery slope. So this was a book that outlined a real strategy: how to negotiate, how to withdraw the teeth, etc. It provided practical advice. So that's how I initially became involved with IS.

But, also, I wanted more general political debate and discussion — something that had been noticeably absent in the CP as far as I had observed. In this respect as well IS was very, very impressive. For the first time I met people I could actually talk to about ideas. As a result I began to articulate and rationalise my thoughts. I'd been groping towards an alternative vision of how society should operate — trying to envisage something different from capitalism that would be workable. I'd read Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Ideology of an Industrial Society* which gave me an inkling of a way forward. But I was half-baked. In IS I began to see things much more clearly. It was a fantastic experience, I learned an enormous amount. It keeps me sane today.

After two or three years the organisation began to attract a significant number of workers. In one year in the early '70s IS doubled its membership and I would say that the calibre of people we were attracting was pretty high: it wasn't just young workers but also experienced shop stewards and people with deep roots in the trade union movement. These people had a lot to offer and in that respect the class character of the organisation began to change. It was all very exciting.

Then, around 1973, things began to go off the rails. I got the distinct impression that the leadership became impatient. I remember thinking: what Cliff and Co. don't seem to understand is that the reason we're doing so well is because of the very long, hard and patient work we're doing. All of a sudden, things had to move fast. I thought: for God's sake, the leadership are going to destroy all the work that we've put in. If you want the honest truth, I think the reason was that the revolutionary left in Britain was (and is) dominated by vanguardists (like *Workers' Liberty*, for example). I'd really believed that IS was something different. For instance, Cliff's book [*The Employers' Offensive*] was written after he'd travelled around the country talking and listening to shop stewards. Cliff was listening then: but he

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