

Trotskyism or Chameleonism?



By Sean Matgamna

The dispute in the Irish Workers' Group was important in shaping - or mis-shaping - the available Irish left on the eve of the explosion of 1968-9 in Northern Ireland, when thousands of young people sought new revolutionary politics, and most ended up joining the Provisionals, a new version of old and indeed anachronistic militarist/Catholic-nationalist politics.

It was also important in shaping the tendency which is now AWL. Though many details of the 1967-8 dispute have of course receded into the distance, in our view many of the key questions of revolutionary Marxist politics and party-building came out clearly then, and what was written on those questions in 1967 could still stand as an exposition of the guiding ideas of AWL today.

The documents of the IWG have long been out of circulation, and scarcely available even in archives. We have for some time been republishing some of that material, bit by bit, on this website. This is the latest instalment. [Click here for other material from, or about, the IWG.](#)

The character of this document, the "up and at him" frontal assault, arose from the fact that an undeclared split had already occurred in the Group. It took the form of a refusal of the three-person Steering Committee to advance resources for the production of the magazine, Workers' Republic, responsibility for which the September Annual General Meeting had assigned to Sean Matgamna as responsible Editor and Rachel Lever as Business Manager.

They lived in Manchester. Letters remained unanswered. They were being cut off from the organisation. The Group Secretary since the AGM, Liam Boyle, defying the SC majority (namely, Gery Lawless and his wife, Ann Murphy), was willing to circulate a document explaining the "Manchester" position. It would be a "one-go only" opportunity. "Trotskyism or Chameleonism" was the result. It was mainly dictated and typed straight on to stencils, which made easy revision impossible.

It was not just a response to Lawless's split offensive. It attempted to summarise ideas expressed in a large number of letters over the previous year. "We" here usually means Rachel Lever and Sean Matgamna.

The document uses the jargon of the Cannon tendency of post-Trotsky Trotskyism. "Programme" here means the whole Lenin-Trotsky tradition and its goal of overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with working class rule and socialism.

"Homogenisation", here, does not mean monolithism. It means uniting the group around the basic politics of the Lenin-Trotsky tradition, as expressed in the basic documents of the first four Congresses of the Communist International and of the Trotskyism of Trotsky's time and (selectively) after it.

The text takes for granted that within that broad political unity there would be different opinions, with their different champions. The new IWG constitution of 1967 had affirmed the right of diverse political tendencies and factions to exist and to fight for their positions within the "homogeneous" organisation.

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At the AGM [\[1\]](#) the Group can be said to have formally come of age with the adoption of a detailed statement of principles in the form of [the Preamble to the new Constitution](#).

But a statement of principle is no more than a bundle of waste paper unless taken seriously as the guideline for action - unless it is implemented consistently and expressed in practice by people who take it seriously as the blueprint for all practical activity, and not as a mere decoration. I have been intending since the AGM [\[1\]](#) to write an article for the Internal Bulletin on the implications for our practical work of the new Constitution, and it was agreed at the AGM to continue this discussion on what kind of a Party we need.

The complete deterioration of collaboration between the Workers' Fight [\[2\]](#) comrades and what comrade Lawless [\[3\]](#) openly refers to as the "Lawless Clique", which functions as the leadership of the Group, makes the form of this article somewhat different from that envisaged. Nevertheless I will try to make it serve as the basis for a general discussion of some of the political problems facing the Group.

An open conflict with the group which knows itself as the Lawless Clique was anyway in the long run unavoidable if the organisation was to develop beyond its present embryo stage and actually go on to build that revolutionary party after the model of Lenin, Trotsky and Cannon

which its new [Preamble](#) calls for. In any case it is better for the discussion and for clear emergence of the real problems that the issues can be discussed sharply without the need for diplomacy - and in a situation where the Lawless Clique makes it very plain that the qualitative transformation of the IWG from its loose left centrist stage into a Trotskyist organisation can now only take place in sharp conflict with their practices, conceptions and methods. Good!

Now we can discuss the root problems of the Group and give them proper place as the central question. This organisation suffers from a disease, with which it has lived and which has stunted its growth and twisted its history into patterns of erratic political zigzags from semi-Maoism to its current formal Trotskyism: *the disease of unprincipled, anti-Bolshevik organisational, cliquist, personalised and prestige politics*.

The Trotskyist movement, which has experienced - and lived through - many diseases in its history has named this kind of politics after its most notorious practitioner, Martin Abern [\[4\]](#). For the IWG, its own variant of this old malaise carries the name of *Lawlessness*. It is time to bring the symptoms to the light of day and, most important, to establish once and for all in the minds of the newer members attracted to the IWG by the Trotskyist politics it has proclaimed over the last period, that the unprincipled anti-Marxist practices, conceptions and methods which through Lawless and his clique dominate the organisation, are fundamentally opposed to Trotskyism. They stand as a roadblock to the further development of this organisation as a healthy Bolshevik group.

I. Vacillation and inconsistency

The essential differences between the Lawless clique and us are epitomised in two related incidents, at the AGM [in mid-September 1967], and in the Che Guevara [London] branch [\[5\]](#) on Oct. 22nd. These depict the real attitudes of the Lawless clique and sum up their practical behaviour.

At the AGM the Preamble to the new Constitution was moved by myself and seconded by G.Lawless. This Preamble talked of the IWG as the nucleus of a Party of the Bolshevik sort, with all that implies, of the struggle for a political party with democratic centralism, clearly defined minorities, open internal discussion and the emphasis on sharp political clarity and consciousness.

A staggeringly brief period later, on Oct 22nd, the very same Lawless pooh poohed the whole idea of a politically homogeneous cadre organisation. He counterposed a centrist conception of a politically loose grouping, without sharp political homogeneity or clarity. It would embrace a permanent coexistence of a mixed bag of disparate elements - Trotskyists and conscious anti-Bolsheviks, social democrats, semi-Maoists and Republicans, State capitalists and Deutscherites [\[5a\]](#) - all held together on the basis of an Irish national organisation and orientation (logically excluding only Workers' Fight [\[2\]](#) from this national popular front).

To talk about "The Trotskyist Programme" as something to fight for immediately, to really take it seriously as a blueprint, with its demand for sharp clarification and political and organisational homogeneousness, was sectarian. Having seconded the Preamble calling for a Bolshevik nucleus, he now specifically said that as far as Ireland was concerned we were nearer the possibilities of the Emancipation of Labour Group [\[6\]](#).

[On any level this analogy is really silly because the Emancipation of Labour Group was a propaganda group - and what propagandists! Does Lawless think he is a Plekhanov? Anyway, it existed to fight for clarity, not to blur differences; and if it is indeed true that this is the possibility, then the IWG in its present form can have no justification at all - and the Lawless clique, which has never played any role in this field, even on an ABC level, would forfeit all claim to a political existence!]

No doubt Lawless' own private opinion lies with the Preamble. Subjectively he is a Trotskyist. He said kind things at the AGM about the Preamble - and it has a "place of honour" in the organisation with the "full" support of Lawless. Yes. But what is the Preamble for?

For a follower of Lenin or Trotsky it is the guideline, and the flag we fight under. It is the

purpose of our fight, inseparable from how we conduct that fight. But for Lawless it suffices for the Programme to be a decorative addendum. It is not a guide saying what should be done and what should not be done: the Preamble, once adopted, it suffices for Lawless not to implement it. Christ, no! It would place certain limits to manoeuvres, combinations and unprincipled political blurring of differences in the interests of peaceful coexistence. The Programme cannot be allowed to interfere with the building of an organisation!

What kind of organisation? An all-inclusive National organisation, which magically escapes from the problems of the revolutionary movement into the "fresh" territory of Ireland. For the "Trotskyist" Lawless and his supporters the principles and programme on the one hand and the organisation on the other hand exist in different dimensions, the one in the clouds and the other very much down to earth, sinking into the mud of deals, manoeuvres and dirty bourgeois type politics, modelled on the cynical puppet show depicted by Backbencher in the Irish Times. With his statements at the Che Guevara Branch Lawless made indecent haste to separate them publicly, and take his stand on this separation. But excuse me, Comrade "Trotskyist"! This exhibition of vacillation, and your whole conception of the relationship of the Programme and the practical organisation, is centrist, not Trotskyist. The organisation you propose is entirely centrist.

Lawless is all for the idea of a revolutionary party modelled on Bolshevism, as long as it is just an idea. His idea of just what is a revolutionary party remains that of a vacillating centrist and left social democrat. The difference between Lawless and us centres on what the politics we both proclaim must mean in practice. The incident [in the Che Guevara Branch on October 22nd] highlights the difference of approach. It has come to the fore again and again in the last year. It explains the political history of the Lawless clique, with its various changes of political clothing over the years, from semi-Maoism to semi-nationalism and now to semi-Trotskyism. Trotsky himself might well have been analysing the behaviour and history of the Lawless clique when he described the anatomy of a certain type of centrist.

"Theoretically, Centrism is amorphous and eclectic; so far as is possible it evades theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to 'revolutionary practice' over theory, *without understanding that only Marxist theory can impart revolutionary direction to practice*. In the sphere of ideology, Centrism leads a parasitic existence: it repeats against the revolutionary Marxists the old Menshevik arguments (Martov, Axelrod, Plekhanov) usually without suspecting this: on the other hand, its main arguments against the Right it usually borrows from the Marxists, that is first of all from the Bolshevik-Leninists, *dulling, however, the sharp edge of criticism, avoiding practical conclusions, thereby rendering their criticism meaningless*.

"A Centrist readily proclaims his hostility to reformism; but he does not mention Centrism; moreover, he considers the very definition of Centrism as unclear, arbitrary" etc.; in other words, Centrism does not like to be called by its own name.

"A Centrist, always uncertain of his position, and of his methods, views with hatred the revolutionary principle to state what is: he is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal manoeuvring and petty organisational diplomacy.

"A Centrist always remains in spiritual dependence on Rightist groupings, is inclined to cringe before those who are more moderate, to remain silent on their opportunist sins and to colour their actions before the workers.

"His shilly-shallying the Centrist frequently covers up by reference to the danger of 'sectarianism', by which he understands not abstract propagandist passivity of the Bordigist [7] type but an active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency, organisational completeness.

"A Centrist occupies a position between an opportunist and a Marxist, somewhat analogous to that which a petit bourgeois occupies between a capitalist and a proletarian: *he kowtows before the first and has contempt for the second.*

"On the international arena the Centrist distinguishes himself, if not by his blindness, then by

short-sightedness; he does not understand that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party; in the choice of his international allies the Centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country.

"A Centrist always swears readily by the policy of the United Front, emptying it of its revolutionary content and transforming it from a tactical method into a supreme principle. Under the pressure of circumstances the eclectic centrist may accept even the most extreme conclusions only to retreat from them afterward in practice. Having accepted the dictatorship of the proletariat he will leave a wide margin for opportunistic interpretations..." (Emphasis SM throughout) (Quote from An Solas/ Workers' Republic No.15/16, November 1966).

II. What kind of revolutionary party?

The dispute over the nature of the revolutionary working-class party that must be built is not new in the labour movement. More than 60 years ago it was the dividing line between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, which, beginning on nuances and apparently minor issues, evolved over the ensuing 15 years to the point where the disputants found themselves on different sides of the barricades during the proletarian revolution. The Party is the lever or the key which, as the instrument of a roused working class, opens the door out of class society. Differences on this question usually have far-reaching implications. Fortunately we can easily avail ourselves not only of living historical experience in discussing the issues - but we also the rich arsenal of Bolshevik Trotskyist theory on this central question.

During the recent dispute in the Group [19] the Lawless clique, grabbing for what looked like the best weapon against their opponents, went overboard for the literature of the 1939-40 dispute in the SWP [8], and in particular the writings of Cannon and Trotsky. As Lawless expressed it in a letter - "Because the faction fight in the Group at the moment is so much a mini-version of the SWP State Cap (sic) [9] affair in the 1940s I believe we should publish an advert for both The Struggle for a Proletarian Party and In Defence of Marxism". There you have an authentic picture of a man buying a rope to get himself hanged with! It fits no neck so well as his own!

He is the extant Abernite [4], the great practitioner in the IWG of organisational, unprincipled, stopgap opportunist politics, epitomising everything which Trotsky and Cannon stigmatised in 1940. The ideas and attitudes defended by Cannon with Trotsky's complete endorsement in The Struggle for a Proletarian Party [10] are, as we shall see, the best measuring rod and sharpest condemnation of everything which Gery Lawless stands for politically.

The Cannon school is a good one for our politics, the one at which the Healyites [15] learned all the good things they know and a great deal they've forgotten. Since this work has been so recently studied by many members of the Group, here we have a generally accepted arbiter in the disputed issues, and on the whole question of what kind of organisation we need to build.

Cannon, of course, had a lot to say on the programme and on people for whom it is a matter of indifference or merely a decoration which is not allowed to get in the way of opportunistic organisational agreements, unprincipled combinations and organisational horse-trading.

"Organisation questions and organisational methods are not independent of political lines, but subordinate to them. As a rule, the organisational methods flow from the political line. Indeed, the whole significance of organisation is to realise a political programme. In the final analysis there are no exceptions to this rule. It is not the organisation - the Party or group - which creates the programme; rather it is the programme that creates the organisation, or conquers and utilises an existing one". (p.16)

And a little further on - "Combinationism is the worst offence against the party because it cuts across the lines of political principle; it aims at an organisational decision which leaves the political and principled disputes unclarified and undecided. *Thus, insofar as the combinationist is successful, it hampers the education of the party and prevents a solution of the dispute on a principled basis.*

"Unprincipled combinationism is in every case the denotation of petty bourgeois politics. *It is*

the antithesis to the Marxist method of political struggle.

"Marxists always begin with the programme. They rally supporters around the programme and educate them in its meaning in the process of the struggle. *The political victories of the Marxists are always in the first place victories for their programme.* The organisational phase of the victory in every case, from the election of a definite slate of candidates in a party faction fight up to and including the seizure of power in an armed struggle, always has one and the same significance: to provide the means and the instrument for carrying out the, political programme. *Marxist politics is principled politics. This explains, among other things, the homogeneity of the Marxist formation, regardless of whether it is a faction in a party on a small scale, or a fully fledged and fully developed party directly facing the parties of the class enemy.* It is this homogeneity of the Marxist organisation which makes possible its firm discipline, its centralisation and its striking power.

"Petty bourgeois politics is always a hodgepodge. It never attains to a fully developed and consistent programme. Every petty bourgeois formation, whether faction or independent party, has this characteristic feature. *It fights at best for partial aims, and slurs over contradictions and differences within its ranks in order to preserve a formal unity.*

"Petty bourgeois groupings struggle, not in the name of great principles, but for organisational objectives. *To this end they almost invariably unite people of different views and tendencies, and subordinate the clarification of their differences to success in the organisational struggle.* This explains their lack of internal discipline, and their aversion to centralism which is incompatible with a heterogeneous political composition. This determines their tendency to fall apart in the course of a severe struggle, or soon after it, even though they may have gained a momentary organisational victory.

"Petty bourgeois politics is the politics of futility, of the debasement of theory, of the miseducation of the rank and file, of diversion from the primary and decisive questions - the questions of principle - to all sorts of considerations of a secondary order, including the struggle for organisational control..." (p.31-2) (Emphasis SM).

In a similar vein Trotsky wrote: "To those enamoured with 'concrete political questions' Lenin invariably explained that our politics is not of conjunctural but of principled character; that tactics are subordinate to strategy; that for us the primary concern of every political campaign is that it guide the workers from the particular questions to the general, that it teach them the nature of modern society and the character of its fundamental forces. The Mensheviks always felt the need urgently to slur over principled differences in their unstable conglomeration by means of evasions, whereas Lenin on the contrary posed principled questions point-blank" (In Defence of Marxism, p.80).

And - "The party of the proletariat is a party unlike all the rest. It is not at all based upon 'such concrete issues'. In its very foundation it is diametrically opposed to the parties of bourgeois horse traders and petty bourgeois rag patchers. Its task is the preparation of a social revolution aia the regeneration of mankind on new material and moral foundations. In order not to give way under the pressure of bourgeois public opinion and police repression, the proletarian revolutionist, a leader all the more, requires a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook. Only upon the basis of a unified Marxist conception is it possible to correctly approach concrete questions" (Op.cit., p.115).

In the Sept/Oct. [1967] issue of the International Socialist Review, Cannon has an article on the question of the vanguard party. Amongst other things, he has the following to say: "A political organisation capable of handling such colossal tasks cannot arise spontaneously or haphazardly; *it has to be continuously, consistently, and consciously built*" (Emphasis Cannon).

"It is not only foolish but fatal to take a lackadaisical towards party building or its problems. The bitter experiences of so many revolutionary opportunities aborted, mismanaged and ruined over the past half century by inadequate or treacherous leaderships has incontestably demonstrated that *nonchalance in this vital area is a sure formula for disorientation and defeat*". (My emphasis SM).

"Lenin's superb capacities as a revolutionary leader were best shown in his insistence upon the utmost consciousness in all aspects of party building from capital issues of theory and policy to the meticulous attention given to small details of daily work. *Other parties and kinds of parties are content to stumble and amble along, empirically dealing with problems as they arise in a makeshift manner.* Lenin introduced system and planning into the construction and activity of the revolutionary party en the road to power, not only into the economy such a party was later called upon to direct. He left as little as possible to chance and improvisation. Proceeding from a formulated appraisal of the given stage of the struggle, he singled out the main tasks at hand and sought to discover and devise the best ways and means of solving them in accord with the long-range goals of world socialism" (pp.25/26,ISR).

Organisational politics

The above is the Trotskyist position on the party, on what kind of a party we need, and on its essential theoretical basis, structure and build. Comrade Lawless and the Clique "accept" the need for "a party" as part of their formal "Trotskyism". But their conception of the party is the antithesis of every single principle laid down above. Lawless & Co. entirely reverse the process of laying down the foundations for a Bolshevik type party. They stand everything on its head.

We begin with the programme, and consciously try to build a certain type of democratic centralist party around it. In the case of the IWG, this process, under the political leadership of the Lawless Clique, has been reversed. All the difficulties and faults of the organisation - from political instability right through to the personal regime and antics of Lawless within it - have flowed from this topsy-turvy beginning. For the Lawlessites the organisation is everything, the first principle without qualification, and the politics secondary, inessential, a piece of foliage grafted onto it, but not allowed to influence overtly the mundane business of organisational arrangements.

Our politics demands that we begin with our programme and ideas and build an organisation around them, regarding organisational considerations as vital, but nonetheless deriving from and subordinate to the ideas. The organisational arrangements, including the splits, must be in line with the goal established by our politics, which means that the two cannot be antagonistic to each other. There is no, other way to create a revolutionary socialist party of the Lenin-Trotsky sort - in Ireland or anywhere else. The assemblance of people together, the production of papers, the growth of our influence and contacts, must be on the basis of and in the interests of our politics not at the cost of our principles.

To the Lawless clique organisational manoeuvres are the whole game, they are ends in themselves. He might very well paraphrase the old opportunist dictum of Bernstein - "The movement is everything; the end is nothing". But since Lawless sincerely believes he *is* the movement, he has to adjust this accordingly: "I, and my manoeuvres, and my political zig-zags, are everything..."

The Lawless clique hitherto has operated without precise ideology but perhaps with the perspective of grafting in "Trotskyism" later, This is not something that needs an effort to prove - the entire history of the Lawless clique, going back to the old ICG [\[11\]](#), shouts this aloud for all to hear. Their current fast and loose attitude to the Preamble and the people who have fought for it is merely the continuation of that history. Only interpreted in the light of this history can the present attitude to the Preamble and their current split perspective be seen in proper context. Let us examine the record of where the frantic chase after size, influence, "prestige", and numbers at any price and on any basis, has led the Lawless clique

III. The record: political chameleonism

At the present stage of our development and in the next period ahead we are only laying the foundations of the future revolutionary workers' party. Just the foundations. For a centrist basically indifferent to principles, the main thing is simply to cajole and bluff enough people together on any old basis, to make the appearance of substance, produce a paper, and so on: political line and clarity etc., are subordinated to this. That is Lawless's approach.

For a Trotskyist the foundation of the party and its cement, are the programme and ideas -

that is the purpose of the activity of recruitment, of literature that is produced. Numbers are not a matter of indifference, nor is influence, level of activity or circulation of papers. But in no sense can this be placed higher in consideration than the basic politics. For a Trotskyist such an organisational approach would not be just unprincipled but an absurdity, something that invalidates the whole purpose of the activity. Thus when directing material at Republican or Labourite channels we must make ourselves comprehensible as far as possible, but not in any way that invalidates our own politics.

The relationship of the Lawless clique and of Lawless himself to the ICG is a rare example of unprincipled politics. We can't choose the situation in which we work - it is objective, outside of us. Entry into other and alien groups is often necessary. On the face of it this justifies the old ICG arrangement.

But in such a situation of a tiny group, generally unclear but with a Maoist bias, Trotskyists would be concerned first and foremost with the programme, the ideas, the methods of Marxism. That would be the *raison d'être*, and the objective that of clarifying the group on the basis of ideas and programme in preparation for expansion. Did they do that?

On the contrary. Comrade Lawless in accordance with his prestige theory of politics, became editor of *An Solas* [2]. To fight in it for his nominal politics? Wrong again. *An Solas* was completely dominated by the Maoists and Maoist ideas including a quote from Stalin himself, albeit against "peaceful revolution", inserted by "The Editor" and presented in good faith.

No doubt Lawless could say that he wasn't responsible - as he usually does when things done in his name produce complaints rather than the desired prestige. But this only underlines the danger of a procedure where implications and nuances, and much else, depend on the political coloration of Lawless's current ghost. Was there an ideological struggle for Trotskyism within the Group? There is little evidence of it. The aggression came from the hard Maoists' attempt to impose their hard line, accompanied by an attack on Lawless in the only place where he is sensitive - his position. Arising from strains of a dispute provoked by Liam Dalton's [12] inability to abide Stalinist rubbish justifying their Second World War treacheries, which had appeared in *An Solas*, they removed Lawless from the editorship.

It was only then that he began to mend his Trotskyist fences. Then only did the political issues emerge - as usual, the politics for him derived from his organisational needs. Even in this the outcome was on a pattern of classic opportunism. Apparently on the insistence of Lawless the Trotskyists didn't push to a conclusion the discussion that finally emerged - even to, the extent of withdrawing the Trotskyist document Dalton had produced.

There were organisational considerations, you see, and some people who might not have been won on the basis of the Trotskyist programme. To the extent that this was so at all, the biggest factor contributing to it was the fact that throughout the whole relationship there had been no struggle for clarification or for Trotskyist ideas.

Let Lawless himself tell how he won the fight without the inconvenience of a struggle for political clarification: "In case you have forgotten we handed in our statement as a reason why the Group should not agree to BC [Brendan Clifford] [11] thesis, therefore no one was called upon to vote for ours. The idea was (and it worked) that the centre would side with us and isolate BC. When this happened BC left the meeting. While he (BC) was in Ireland we hotted up the war on PM/GG/etc., forcing them out before BC returned. BC returned from Ireland (where he found that the Irish members were staying with the Group) and tried to walk back in as if nothing had happened. We refused to allow this to happen - Gery. (I had read my Cannon)".

Of course he is a great reader of James P. Cannon. But since principled politics bores him, he tends to read certain sections with his eyes shut. For example, he missed: "... insofar as the combinationist struggle is successful, it hampers the education of the party and prevents a solution of the dispute on a principled basis". Or maybe he simply skipped the whole book, and read the appendix by Max Shachtman instead: this would explain why his conception of "Cannonism" is that of Cannon the cynical manoeuvrer depicted by Shachtman.

Eclecticism and nationalism

The succeeding phase of the Group's history after the departure of the hard Maoists was to show just how right Cannon's point was. The Group entered its extreme eclectic period, now guided by the Lawless clique.

It was a loose political coalition of all sorts of tendencies - with an incoherent political mishmash of platonic physical forcism (until quite recently they continued to equate this with being revolutionary!), Labourism, and Maoist hangovers, all at the same time. (See the early An Solas, Irish Workers' News, and the early Irish Militant [13]).

The Lawless clique themselves had picked up many Maoist/Stalinist ideas, which merged with the blatant Nationalism at that stage dominant in the Group. Due to the inconclusiveness of the political faction fight [11], they had not even succeeded in clarifying themselves (and Lawless can still be heard happily discussing serious questions in such terms as "Ireland's had her February Revolution", which is an implicit acceptance of the Stalinist version of the history of the Russian Revolution. And that the relations of production are "socialist" in the Stalinist states, etc.)

Except for Daltun's material there was nothing Trotskyist about the Group's publications at that time. An attempt to evaluate the situation from a consistent Trotskyist, or even a general Marxist, viewpoint was entirely absent.

At this stage Lawless himself was still primarily running after the Nationalists, and national rather than class criteria were the rule. Using as excuse the true proposition that the nationalism of an oppressed nation is not the same as that of an oppressor nation, the Lawless clique had adopted the coloration of the Nationalists - forgetting that in the concrete conditions a revolutionary working class party could only grow at the expense of the Nationalists and by sharp differentiation from their outlook and methods, which had been a major factor in heading off independent working class action for decades.

If a struggle for programme and clarity is the Trotskyist method, here we had our "Trotskyists" without a programme. Their Trotskyism was no more than a word, buried with hardly a trace in the interests of everyone happily living together organisationally - which from a principled point of view was entirely pointless. Militant and correct action such as on the [26 County] Anti Trade Union laws helped the Group to survive this, but in no way excused it and in no sense solved the problems which had been inherited from the earlier Maoist combination. Much of the material that appeared in IM was completely antagonistic to our politics.

The shift away from the Nationalists is something over a year old. This has not been consistent either, of course: there was not long ago the front page article "[Taking Whose Gun out of Politics](#)" [14], with its blatant IRA notions, completely opposed in its basic assumptions to Leninist political conceptions (there was also a smell about it of witch-hunting the Stalinists to the Nationalists!). The Labour Party situation began to look promising and the Group made a certain contact with the Labour Party environment. The Lawless clique, riding its well-oiled weathervane, turned with the wind. The more or less decisive turn away from the Nationalists, prompted by the opportunities in the Labour Party, was reinforced by the beginning of the hard Trotskyist phase of An Solas/ Workers' Republic, which attempted in its first issues to deal with the Nationalist hangover.

Lawless predictably claims that his methods of that period and now are vindicated by "success", that the Group has improved enormously over the last period and that he, like God the Father, has made "Trotskyists". This needs a little qualification. Insofar as the Group has made progress in clarifying itself, during the last year or so, away from Nationalism and the most glaring Maoist hangovers, then it has been against initial resistance from the Lawless clique, and on the initiative of the Workers' Fight grouping. I can't think of a single serious exception to this, as we responded constantly with arguments, letters, and articles on the National question in general and in particular such questions as the class nature of the Irish states, the Maoist and IRA conceptions on this and the Border, etc.

These provoked a sharp conflict with the Lawless clique. On the IRA, we published, in reply to

the Irish Militant article on the Gun in Politics, an article ([The Hillside Men](#)) to which Lawless contributed his memoirs of '56, and his name - "For the good of the Group".

The movement towards a Trotskyist democratic centralist constitution came entirely from us, as did the [Preamble](#) and statement of principles (the original draft, it must be recalled defined the aim of the Group simply to "work for the building of a revolutionary movement which will lead the working people in a struggle for National Unity and Independence in an All-Ireland Workers' Republic" and was to be amended, as an afterthought, to include the word "socialism"!.) Even the suggestion of an internal political life, in the form of the IB, did not come from the Lawless clique. They are not now willing to see it happen. All we are claiming here is that the attempt to work for clarity has been our concern. From the Lawless clique there has never been more than their notorious indifference, of which the record is ample evidence.

It is of course on a personal level a little distasteful to have to record our own efforts in this manner - but it is a question of political seriousness. It would be utterly unserious to let Lawless evade the issues we are raising by recalling political shifts towards a Trotskyist position various aspects of which have had to be pushed by us against initial resistance from themselves.

IV. The present orientation

Today the orientation is decidedly towards social democracy, and already here the Lawless clique exhibit in this field as well their chameleon nature and compulsive political mimicry. Evident already is the sheer blundering empirical organisational approach, which looks for gains by blunting politics. I.M. [\[13\]](#) displays a great deal of interest in the machinations of the various cliques in the Irish Labour Party. So entranced have they been with the movement to re-insert the Workers' Republic demand in the LP constitution, that they forget, even in the face of the current experience of the British working class with social democracy, to point out the parallel with the Clause IV fig-leaf [\[13a\]](#). Even in a historical book review on how the slogan was removed 30 years ago, Lawless forgot to mention the need to marry this slogan with a fighting transitional programme to realise it (even the bare mention of this in the W.R. version was not inserted by Lawless.)

Already the manoeuvring conceptions have been allowed to interfere with the Trotskyist publication of the Group, Workers' Republic, which Lawless sees as he has seen every paper, in terms of an eclectic "consensus" with a large franchise to include items for pleasing and fawning on people he wants to pander to, He sees the Trotskyist magazine as a means of keeping "our centrists" sweet, even at the expense of politics.

For example, this is the principled Trotskyist Comrade Lawless discussing the criteria for determining which articles to include: "I agree with your remarks re X's [\[13b\]](#) last article... X himself is a very well-read comrade who has had no experience of revolutionary politics. At the moment the Stalinists are trying to isolate our hard core from our centrists. This makes it most important that we don't annoy these comrades unnecessarily." We publish papers not just to put forward a political line, but also as a vehicle for buttering up people that we're afraid of approaching with our politics.

Shopkeeper

This shopkeeper's attitude to the magazine, an expression of political indifference, manifests itself in every sphere. When organisational arrangements are everything, then naturally one can shift and change the nuances to please the customer. I quote from a letter of Comrade Lawless (end of March 67):

"The bulk of our readers may live in England but when they buy Workers' Republic or IM they want news, comments etc. on Ireland. Understand this or you will understand nothing about the mind of the Irish (I don't like this fact but it's there). The letters from home all speak highly of WR but 90% approx (it more like 99%) say deal with Ireland (I don't like this fact but it's there). Ireland is 'in' in the British Left (we have made it so) and the British Left is on a higher level. They will buy if the method is good even if the subject is Ireland, it is new to

them."

Here we have a true revolutionary politician discussing the contents of the basic propaganda magazine of the organisation! Is he concerned with the question of whether the parochialism of which he makes himself spokesman is compatible with our politics? Or with the elementary proposition that it is entirely impossible to confine any revolutionary outlook merely to one country? Is he concerned with bringing to his Irish "market" knowledge or experience from the world labour movement? In fact does anything at all concern him other than pleasing the customer? But to be fair to the shopkeepers of this world, that approach in their case serves their purpose: in the case of a would-be revolutionary, it can do nothing but damage.

Polemics

Logically, the "revolutionary shopkeeper" must not only please the customer, but must be careful of not displeasing him "and is guided not by the interests of the class struggle, but by the petty and mean conception of offending nobody, repelling nobody, and scaring nobody - by the sage rule: live and let live..." (Lenin, quoted WR 19, p.19). We must be careful, according to Lawless' method, of whom we polemicise with.

This question has become an issue around Workers' Fight, where we allegedly are going to put the cat among the pigeons, or rather Lawless's friends of assorted feather on the British Left.

This is of course a political question, whether we could just live peacefully within national or organisational boundaries. (It is naturally important to avoid the nuttiness of a total diet of polemics à la B Clifford [11] - but here probably the chief defect is the content). With Lawless it is all part and parcel of the conception which regards political discussion, clarity, and principles as unmentionables which must be kept out of sight in case the "customer" might be put off, and not, certainly not, fought over or even raised. Unfortunately Lawless has found a certain support for this attitude within the Group.

But of course there have been polemics in WR, and almost every single polemical point made in the first WF [13c] was already made at various times in WR, in some cases more sharply.

Naturally this led to certain conflict with our shopkeeper. For example, when we wanted to publish an attack on the SLL [15] Lawless after some vacillation agreed to it. But that was before a few letters of protest arrived from the customers; then he changed his tune and bemoaned the inclusion of the offending piece. After the event he wrote:

"The main points were 1) we had more urgent tasks before us; 2) at this early stage we will aid the CP in their slanders - 'The Trots are forever fighting about this, that and another.. look, they are even fighting with one and other (sic)'; 3) I have received three protest enquiries whether there was a need to publish/ remarks that we are making recruiting harder in Dublin - where there are no Healyites [15]; 4) from the last there are so few SLL that few people have heard of them; 5) the need not to give the non-Marxists [in the IWG] any 'organisation questions' upon which to fight when the pre-AGM discussion opens, there is a danger that someone like Pat O'Donovan [15a] would use a call for a halt to attacks to gain support. We would win without worry, but sales in London would suffer - the lump always make their opinions known means of a sales strike" (6.3.67).

How's that for principled politics! Two points to remember: the attack on the Healyites was because of their assault on Comrade Tate [15] - with whom the principled Lawless expresses full political solidarity. As for the remarks about Comrade O'Donovan, on Oct. 22nd at the Che Guevara branch meeting [5], we had proof that Gery knows his man. O'Donovan launched an attack on Workers' Fight... because of its polemic with the other groups. And what did the principled Comrade Lawless do? He sat back and accepted gratefully the support of the "non-Marxist".

Result of the nationalist accommodation

This non-political, anti-theoretical petty shopkeeping mentality runs through the past two or three years' history; we are able to examine, in the case of the adaptation to the Nationalists, whether it pays even on its own terms. The "theory" of Lawless's method is first to win people

by blurring the issues, and then to educate them. But the danger for any small group such as ours is of being a helpless satellite of larger groups, a more or less critical hanger on.

The Group was led through a whole period of simply running madly after the Nationalists, trying, as Dalton [12] put it at the time, to pin itself to the Nationalist donkey as a Trotskyist tail. Yet despite the Lawless clique's mimicry of nationalism or rather, according to my case, because of it - they entirely failed to win and consolidate any sizeable group of Republicans, in a situation of disintegration of the mass Republican movement. Of course there was the added complication of the Group turning in other directions at the same time - but this was not the major fault.

An appeal to the Republicans on a Trotskyist working class programme would have given them an alternative to come to. But all they saw was a) an approach which said "we are the more effective nationalists" and b) all the signs in the same publications of the Labourite overtures. Even if the turn had been only in the one direction, it would not have won them, because it offered nothing new. The result was that at the AGM Comrade Lawless had to report that the Group had failed to make serious gains from the Republican ferment, had failed to win and consolidate even the contacts we had.

But even if we had won them, the lack of a cadre basis would have led to even more serious problems, a blown-up and one-sided version of the present problem of the Group's internal mish-mash: and we would have been unlikely to keep many. Back in March, I wrote to Lawless concerning this:

"You refer to the tactics you employed against Clifford as a model for changing the Group: but surely the issue is to change it politically - and this means that some polarisation is necessary. In a democratic organisation, why should not some of the members be allowed democratic faction rights by the Group in return for behaving as loyal members. Just to blur the political issues is going to clarify no one. Where An.P. [15b] comes in is that I understand there is a possibility of winning over some of the dissident IRA. But unless the organisation itself is clear and homogeneous then the entry of a sizeable group of these will be a great danger, what should be a great opportunity will become a threat. I think we agree that the organisation will most likely grow as a result of regroupment, fusions, splits - as in the formation of the SWP [8]: but to delay or hold back the crystallisation of the Group as a Bolshevik organisation limits the amount of initiative and manoeuvre we can take towards other groups with safety. The political homogenisation of the Group, even if it meant immediately a few losses, is the decisive thing for large-scale growth in the immediate or near future".

The striving after quantity at any price in the manner of Lawless, to the degree that energies have been diverted away from the essential first task of laying the foundations, undermines itself and has acted against the quantitative growth of the Group - not in the far-off "long run" but already in a matter of months. The healthy growth of the organisation as such depends on consolidating a politically homogeneous cadre force for the Group. All talk of a broad national coalition-type of group as envisaged by Lawless cuts across this necessary beginning in the construction of the Party (see Cannon's History of American Trotskyism).

The only possible preparation for interventions which can in turn lead to the development of real mass influence, is ideological preparation - not organisational cobbling at the expense of our politics, with contempt for our principles, and in actions directly contrary to the traditions of the Trotskyist movement. After all, our ideas and programme are not only the essential foundation of our work, but also of our claim to a future role.

Accommodation to Labour too?

The fruits of accommodation to Nationalism were... missed opportunities. The current orientation towards Labour, carried out in the chameleon spirit, is far more dangerous because we tend to think we are safe from acquiring a permanent social democratic character. But a glance at the English erstwhile Trotskyists around Grant [15c] shows just how easily, and how insidiously, this can happen.

The tactic of entry, quite valid in itself, depends on more, not less, clarity. It depends on the

exact opposite of Lawless' permanent method of empirical adaptation and mimicry. It depends on sharp awareness and differentiation of our programme and goal, our ideas and methods. With Lawless in the pilot's seat (i.e. while the organisation continues to oscillate mercurially because of the lack of a politically firm centre which knows how to orientate itself flexibly without losing its bearings, which knows how to undertake expansionary work by the Group without sacrificing the consolidation and education of the cadre - one which knows above all the first principle of revolutionary politics: be true to your politics), entry into the social-democracy is not unlikely to lead by a direct route to the self-annihilation of complete adaptation to the prevailing environment: this time never to return.

Issues of I.M. these days have read like a Labour Party news sheet, reporting on the activities of the various cliques on an agitational level and with little effort made to link it all up with our basic politics or even to raise transitional slogans. The occasional editorial only partly counter-balances this, though usually in a most abstract manner.

Again, on the Workers' Republic slogan, I.M. confines itself to either the slogan on the level at which it is raised by the Labour "lefts" or on the level of 'maximum programme' abstractions in editorials, largely divorced from the Trotskyist conception of how to attain workers' power. The myopic theoretician of entry, Comrade Lawless, was so unclear himself, so intent on adapting to the existing consciousness on the left, that he forgot to warn the enthusiasts of the Workers' Republic slogan about the need to insist on a fighting conception of what it means. Abstract depiction of the Workers' Republic merely compounds the adaptationist mistakes and once more tends towards incoherence.

Lawless plans a centrist wing of the IWG, i.e. a Labourite wing coming from the LP environment, one more element to be incorporated without clarity and sharpness; not to function as a minority in a democratic centralist context, on the basis of open internal discussion - but, as Lawless expressed it on Oct.22nd, as part of a loose coalition after the well-known model of the past history of the Group. (What can one say of Lawless's attempt to justify this by saying that "Bolshevism also had its centrists" - Zinoviev and Kamenev? To compare even the best in the Group with even Bolshevism's vacillators is just too flattering). If the typical opportunist deals with the centrists have as yet left few traces (except for one instance) on the Workers' Republic (such as dominate the old A.S.) then that has not been Lawless's fault.

V. The theory of Irish exceptionalism

Lawless justifies his conception of a centrist rather than a Bolshevik type organisation, and of blurred centrist politics rather than Marxist clarity, on the grounds that Ireland is fresh territory. This is just one of the many examples of the Lawless clique's usage of alleged Irish exceptionalism to justify any and every deviation from the traditions of Bolshevism and the methods of Marxism. They use the concept as just one great rationalisation for opportunism. Lawless has had some little success with this refurbished version of the Sacred Isle conception of Ireland, even among some serious comrades outside of his own clique.

Ireland is fresh territory, and therefore in Lawless' version differences inside the Marxist movement, and even the non-Marxist movement, in Britain can be brushed aside and reconciled in Ireland. Actually the very opposite is the case. Precisely because Ireland is relatively fresh territory (as far as our politics is concerned) there is all the greater need for sharpness - to learn from and to avoid repeating the mistakes of all the international experience of our movement, and thus to rise qualitatively higher, by transplanting the hard lessons learned to this fresh territory.

For a Bolshevik the relative freshness of Ireland represents an opportunity for exceptional clarity, whereas for the centrist it an excuse for sinking to the lowest common average. The freshness of Ireland increases our responsibilities, rather than decreasing them. Here we have the opportunity to really follow in the footsteps of the Bolsheviks, to some degree at least.

One of the greatest assets of Bolshevism was that the Russian Marxists began to seriously organise a revolutionary workers' party only after opportunism and its political expression,

revisionism, had made very serious inroads in the European movement. This asset was summed up in the implacable struggle for consciousness in all aspects of work on the part of Lenin, to which Cannon refers above. The Bolsheviks conducted unremitting, irreconcilable struggle right from the first days against all signs of opportunism in Russia, having studied the concrete, negative experience of western Europe. The possibilities for our politics in Ireland are good only on certain conditions. These are that a serious Leninist approach to the building of the Marxist party is applied. The line of least resistance attitude, represented by the Lawless clique, is almost certain to lead to the loss of what opportunities do exist.

Even if - a big if - a group dominated by the Lawless clique did succeed in becoming a material force on the basis of their conceptions, it would lead almost certainly to a disaster. A good recent example is of the majority of the LSSP in Ceylon [16], which in 1964 entered a bourgeois coalition government, thereby helping the bourgeois state to survive and strengthen itself at the expense of the working class. These people were, as far as Marxist knowledge in the abstract goes, on a much higher level than we are. Nonetheless they betrayed. Why? The process of accommodation and of ideological erosion leading up to this betrayal was of course complex. But the form this took in the consciousness of the renegades, according to Germain's Marxism v. Ultraleftism [17], was a theory of Ceylonese exceptionalism. Apparently they were "orthodox Trotskyists" in theory and for all the rest of the world - but they thought Ceylon was different. In the event it was the Ceylonese bourgeoisie which found out that these "Trotskyists" were different.

And exclusiveness

Inseparable from the Irish exceptionalism idea is an attitude of Irish exclusiveness, of being fundamentally different. At an earlier stage of the Group this led the Lawless clique to acceptance of certain Maoist attitudes about Ireland being a plain colony and the IRA being an "objectively revolutionary" local NLF (see early A.S.)

That approach fails to see the interrelationships of Ireland with other countries including Britain, it is responsible for the indifference to the conception of a political combined development. It sees Ireland and its revolutionary party as evolving largely on their own roots - even though starting out from exile. It is of course closely linked with the shopkeeper attitude in its expression by the Lawless clique: they are not only shopkeepers, but their trademark is "Irish Only".

In relation to W.R. Lawless has shown far more interest in the "Irish accent", the pretence that it was produced in Ireland, than in the politics. This went to the extreme of opposing use of "English examples" in articles, even in relation to the social democracy. The following comments related to the editorial on MacAonoghusa's expulsion; "We don't need English examples to demonstrate a point to our readers who are predominantly Irish" (late Jan. 67)

Apart from the comic side of this, it is also very serious politically. If one sees Ireland in isolation, then the lessons of Wilson can't be drawn until Corish [18] eventually attains the same exalted position. Not to seize the current opportunity of the English social democrat government's example, in a situation where the decisions of this government indirectly but very strongly affect Ireland, and of which a growing number of Irish workers are well aware - not to use this to hammer our own social democrats and draw advanced lessons for the Left, is to lose the opportunity of "going through the experience" by proxy and gaining a unique advantage in a political combined development. Not using English social democratic lessons, not being the vigorous propagandists in Ireland of this experience, amounts to prostration before Irish social democracy. Thus in this case the absence of an international outlook leads to prostration before the local opportunists.

In some respects, however, ignored by the Lawless clique, Ireland is exceptional, and that is that some of the differentiating ideas for revolutionary socialism have a quite different weight and significance in Ireland. For example the physical force parties and Irish history make such things in Ireland as talk of the overthrow of the state, even by socialists, far less of a decisive criterion for political identification of the speaker. That is why in fact the quotations from Trotsky's 1934 article above are especially apt for Ireland, because the background to Trotsky's

article was a general sharp radicalisation so that even social democrats, after the experience in Germany in '33 and Austria in '34, did not dare defend parliamentarianism. The key - practical conclusions from theoretical prerequisites. The same applies here, right down the line in relation to the party and everything else, and particularly where the Lawless clique are concerned.

Religion

Religion is a case of genuine Irish "exceptionalism", and the Lawless clique in this case show very marked reluctance to concern themselves with this genuine exceptionalism: their interest in imaginary exceptionalism and their lack of interest in the genuine exceptionalism have of course the same root, that the mythical case is used by them as a means to evade real problems, and the real one poses real problems. They are consistent only in evasion.

In Ireland religion is the thin end of the wedge for accommodation to the enemies of the working class. Its scope, significance and depth is truly exceptional, and it can be said to be in Ireland a gordian knot of most of the ' strands of ideological defence of the bourgeoisie elsewhere. If we are to build the conscious Leninist party then it will be in sharp struggle against religion.

There, can be no question of declaring this a private matter in relation to the party of the working class. We can certainly recruit religious workers who fight, but not in such numbers as to affect the chances of politically educating them away from superstition. There can be no party if the need for scientific consciousness is a matter of indifference. (And in this respect we can also learn from the Connolly experience of accommodation to bourgeois ideology which flows from the lack of an independent working-class world outlook. In Ireland the major grounds-clearing battle for that outlook is the battle against religion.)

Here too the Lawless clique drags its feet. IM has carried a number of articles on religion. These have been critical of the Church, all in an agitational, passing fashion. There has been no attempt to state the Marxist case on religion as such, however briefly. An attempt to do so in the form of a letter, using as its take-off point the use [in an article in Irish Militant] of the phrase "Marxists in the Catholic Church", was rejected by Lawless on the grounds that there had already been a number of articles on religion - and also a number of complaints.

This is not just the usual shopkeeping concern, and frankly it is not surprising that some of the needlessly offensive language in articles which drew no conclusions at all, should have called forth protests, even from anti-Catholics. If we take this record as a whole, we have a more curious spectacle. IM has dealt with religion, but not in a Marxist fashion. This borders on opportunism - if one deals with the subject it should be dealt with seriously. At the same time, the offensiveness of some of the articles borders on student-type semi-anarchist provocation. Altogether a curious combination: opportunism with flashes of ultra-leftism for spice - and determined rejection of any attempt at even an elementary statement on Marxism and religion. (The article attempting this in WR has of course nothing to do with Comrade Lawless, and in fact the comrade unaccountably "lost" the first draft "in the post". A case of divine intervention, Comrade Lawless?)

Here it is a question not so much of what has been done, but of what has not been done. Insofar as it has already been discussed, the Lawless clique say it is simply a question of how to fight religion. They shelter behind the relativeness of the Marxist attitude on how to fight it. (See WR article, No 19). Yet in a country and labour movement where the tradition of even the best has been one of accommodation to religion, they stress not this objective, overall danger, but the need to beware the empty, impotent student anger, quoting the examples which they allowed to appear in IM. No doubt we should beware of this "anarchism". But it is a very bad situation where there is so little political control, such a blundering procedure, that somehow it was precisely the Marxist statement that was missed out, in a number of articles on the subject.

Here; to put it frankly, it is a question of political confidence in the Lawless clique. On the basis of their chameleonism in general and their myopic stumbling so far on religion, I can see no

reason to have any confidence that they will struggle in the future for a principled approach to this question. In fact what is actually called for is the strongest distrust on the part of all members of the organisation on this question which is so vital for the development of the revolutionary party.

For the Lawless clique, Irish exceptionalism is a vast rationalisation for reconciling their opportunism with a verbal Trotskyism. All along the line Trotskyism comes into conflict with both opportunism and its rationalisation: and of this fact Lawless himself is not unaware. A suggestion when we were just pulling out of the Nationalist binge, to republish a rare article by Trotsky, on the National Question (from the early twenties), brought forth the following hasty reply - "The National Question: If you could send me that longer article by Trotsky on the National question for me to read before you do anything, because (in my opinion) the Old Man was often up shit creek (sic) on that question" (24.11.66).

Actually, he needn't have worried, because the article in question happened not to be the retribution he feared for his opportunism. (It was directed against ultra-leftists who tended to deny the need to take into account sympathetically the feelings of formally oppressed nations in the Soviet Union.) However, the guilty worry of Lawless that his "Trotskyism" may be proved counterfeit speaks for itself.

The comrade is, as we know already, the foremost living authority on not only the "Irish mind", but also on everything else Irish, including such things as how many duplicators exist in Dublin. Is he perhaps trying to convince everyone that he has never been away? And is it not rather strange that we hear so much more about the exceptional nature of the Irish political scene from Comrade Lawless than from any of the people who are actually working in the "exceptional" conditions?

I believe there is a strong case for saying that the whole form of the rationalisation springs from an exile mentality. It is only in the English pubs that Irishmen want to read only news from home, and only there that the "political" distinction of "Irish" has any even limited and passing usefulness. In Ireland it is of course no distinction at all to be Irish. There, only our politics can distinguish and differentiate us. It is only in the exile environment that Irish exceptionalism "works" to give the disparate elements in the Group some cohesion - given also Lawless' role of man-in-the-middle.

Once the Group moves back [to Ireland] completely, it will quickly disintegrate unless political clarification and homogeneousness has first been achieved or is seriously being fought for. All the more urgent is it here and now to have done with all talk of Irish exceptionalism and exclusiveness - and learn to examine the genuine concrete details of the situation, seeing Ireland not superstitiously but like Marxists - scientifically

VI. The internal "regime"

The so-called "Lawless regime" in the Group was the subject of [a dispute in the organisation recently \[19\]](#). Charges and counter charges were hurled wildly. For my part I supported Lawless as Secretary and took the stand towards Lawless that insofar as many of the charges against him were justified he should reform, and thereby make possible an honest political atmosphere inside the Group (this of course was highly naive, and I will have to return to this question). Nothing was clarified, Lawless emerged appearing vindicated.

That was only the latest in a whole series of such organisational storms. It is followed immediately by the current eruption of frantic factionalising against us by Lawless, manoeuvring, blowing up of petty organisational details, serious political questions reduced to the small change of whispered innuendo: these are the typical internal methods of Lawless and his clique.

In my two years' acquaintance with it the history of the organisation is one long succession of demoralising, destructive disputes on petty details and personal antagonism - all without clear political issue, all unresolved, unclarified, never related to basic politics. Like boils under a man's skin, it indicates some disorder of the bloodstream. This condition is not unconnected with the case I've been trying to make. This sort of thing is only possible in a loose

organisation - loose organisationally and loose politically.

As yet without an active political tradition against which to measure such personal factionalising, and without a politically educated public opinion to clarify the issues which are often implicit in such disputes if only by logical progression, the Group has never drawn political and organisational conclusions. It has found this fissiparousness as difficult to stamp out as a summer grass fire, because there are always small disputes, personal dislikes and grievances, prestigious people who inevitably lock horns - and without an established method, tradition and politics for a yardstick, without insisting on political clarity - and as its instrument, principled organisational relationships - at each stage of the Group's development, it will never be stamped out. Under a continuation of the Lawlessite blurring of issues, there is no escape from this.

The Lawless clique is well aware of the fact that it is the lack of clarity which creates the environment suitable for their manoeuvres and factionalising: thus they have yet another interest in preventing a real transition to the democratic centralist organisation embodied in the new constitution.

The chameleon at home - a petty bonaparte

Given a lack of homogeneousness, which is the product of chameleon opportunism, and given the uneasy co-existence of a variety of trend, opinions and tendencies in a geographically widely dispersed area without any internal discussion bulletin (to date) in which the various groupings can discuss directly with each other; given the determined activity of the Lawless clique to keep the various shades apart and in the dark about each other, or dampen down discussion of the differences, we get an ideal set of conditions for the perpetuation of the petty bonapartism of the Lawless clique, which is the internal reflection of the unprincipled politics discussed above. The arrangement since the AGM with the election of LB as secretary has only modified the more or less arbitrary control of the clique, which made sure it had an automatic majority on the Standing Committee, control of the Group finances and literature and a guaranteed 3 out of 7 votes at the NC.

Comrade Lawless is all things to all men, the friend and protector of the various groupings of opinion, the monopoliser of the channels of communication (even to the extent of forcing through the SC an unconstitutional decision to circulate the NC with the bare decisions, rather than the minutes, of the SC). He is not only the friend of each grouping in turn, but keeps them friendly and pliable with talk of the dangers from their opposite number in the Group: thus the Trotskyists are constantly warned to behave, to take his advice, for fear of "aggression" from the centrists - and no doubt vice versa. This is a conscious technique of internal balancing between different shadings and playing them off against each other. The key to this before the AGM was the various groupings' lack of contact with each other.

The examples here are of course legion, and I will take only one, which is a particularly exaggerated piece of Iago-ism. At the AGM Lawless was already covertly campaigning against us. And how did he choose to do this? Naturally by a whispering campaign. The whisper being that we were "disguised State Capitalists" [\[9\]](#). (Two weeks later we were to be "sectarians" - strange sectarians who disguise their own politics).

Arguing for the rights of the Belfast comrades, who are consciously and outspokenly, in the words of Comrade [Tony] McFarlane, non-Bolsheviks, and are incidentally state capitalists - arguing for these comrades' rights in the IWG (correctly, but I'm sure he didn't mean rights to open discussion) Lawless conducted a political witch-hunt against people with whom he had expressed no formal political disagreement - on the basis of lies or viciously disloyal misinterpretation.

And into whose ears did he whisper all about our state capitalism? Those of the Dublin comrades, who are anti-state capitalist and who on most other questions are in reality our nearest political co-thinkers. The object of this? To create divisions among the Trotskyists - with whom he himself proclaims agreement - and thus weaken the pressure for a serious turn after the AGM. There are so many unprincipled elements in this that it can be taken as a piece

of archetypal Lawlessness. We need only recall, to complete the picture, the extremely close cordiality and working relationship which Lawless personally still manages to keep up with the state capitalist organisation in Britain.

(And just for the record, one more twist: Lawless, who is friendly with the British state capitalists, protector of our own "non-Bolshevik" state capitalists and witch-hunter of those of us who are workers' statist but lay the sharp emphasis on the workers' struggle for proletarian democracy in these states - what is his own individual position on these questions? In at least one case, that of the East Berlin workers who rose against Stalinism in 1953, Lawless is of the opinion that the Trotskyist movement was wrong to demand the withdrawal of Russian troops (i.e. to actively side with the workers). Thus his interpretation of the workers' state designation is that of a left stalinist or Deutscherite! When I confronted him with this at the Che Guevara branch [5] in October, he did not even bother to try to deny it!)

Centralism vs. democratic centralism

Democratic centralism is based, as the Preamble tries to explain, on politics. It is the form of organisation of an active, conscious grouping, where all relationships are open, political and principled. Discipline is either the discipline of a majority which has clarified itself in the fullest way possible in any given circumstances, or else the discipline of a loyal minority which is conscious of having full rights to fight for its position. The authority vested in the officers of a democratic centralist organisation derives from this political clarity and continues to be based on it. The methods of those officers are political methods. Directives are given on the basis of the preceding clarification and subject to both the test of action and future critical examination. Such an approach is only possible in the sort of party talked of by Cannon above, at once the most effective in action and the most democratic and honest and collectively conscious in deliberation. It will not spring up of itself. It will be built. The conceptions and methods of the Lawless clique stand opposed to this sort of party, as we have seen.

If, however, Lawless opposes in practice a democratic centralist party - while proclaiming it in words as yet another flag of convenience - if he is not interested in either the democratic or the political aspects of democratic centralism (it is enough to recall that the first draft of the constitution which was originally circulated in April, has nothing to do with democratic centralism) then he is at least a firm believer in centralism.

Lawless and his friends are centralists - but it is a centralism outside and apart from Trotskyist politics, political clarification and political accounting for its activities. It can therefore be nothing more than a striving after a purely personalised centralism (formerly through the secretaryship, and now through the SC), divorced from the politics and principles for which Lawless has so little interest. Lawless merely invokes the phrase "democratic centralism" to camouflage this conception. But Bolshevik centralism is a function of the politics which are established and maintained consciously by the whole organisation: devoid of sharp political clarity which is the only possible basis for Bolshevik centralism, the centralism of the Lawless clique becomes a question of pure formalism, a set of rules, ranks, orders and reprisals. Actually it is a conception which owes more to the Nationalist movement than the Fourth International, being nothing but "commandism".

Centralism of this sort in a tiny organisation like ours without either a Bolshevik political basis or a bureaucratic machine (which is the only alternative basis for a centralism in action) is impossible: and at the same time the striving of the Lawless clique in pursuit of it is one of the main causes of all the senseless personal disputes that permanently disrupt and poison the organisation. In practice, in the person of Lawless, the only methods it leaves open to itself are manoeuvre, corrosive intrigue and the famous Bonaparte balancing act. And this petty Bonapartism is naturally a permanent regime of crisis. Since everything is personal we get the permanent split-phobia of the clique at the centre, and the arbitrary precipitating of disputes and splits in order to avoid... disputes and splits!

Subjectivism

Whatever the personality of Lawless, his political conceptions would leave no other sort of

behaviour open to him. But of course the personality is not irrelevant, and particularly in an organisation the size of the IWG. It is not exaggeration but understatement to say that in his personal behaviour: his subjectivism; suspicion sometimes bordering fully-developed paranoia; his fear of even the slightest stirring of independence in any sphere of the organisation; his neurotic inability to delegate authority; the vain, destructive drive to overcome his chronic insecurity by personally controlling every detail of the work - and then bemoaning the lack of trained people to do the jobs; the never-ending hate campaigns against individuals; the arbitrariness, rudeness, disloyalty and reckless employment of lies of varying transparency; the deep-seated contempt for the various groupings he manipulates and whatever group it may be that he terms the "lump" - going hand in-hand with the most cynical flattery; the complete personalisation of everything so that even when he is formally correct politically it is impossible to submit; his touchiness allied with his supreme disdain for the sensitivities of others; not to mention his unceasing screaming and bullying: - all this poisons, has poisoned and continues to poison the internal life of the organisation, and especially that section of it which is in most frequent contact with him. Far from being any sort of overstatement, I repeat that the above is probably a conservative estimate. It is certainly all known to everyone in the Che Guevara branch [5]. So much has Lawless, by sheer example, established his own disinterest in politics in the minds of some of the comrades in close contact, that they express it like this: "When someone else puts, a political position to you, you ask - is he right or is he wrong; when Lawless does the same thing, you think - what can he be up to now?"

All the same, to many people Lawless remains at least partly plausible part of the time. He is able to disguise himself, using first rate mimicry, in various suits of political clothing, giving him a certain respectability. But there is also the generally held belief that the Group needs his energies and organising abilities. And though this on the face of it would seem true, it is not so simple.

The energies are devoted largely to fashioning an organisation after the image of Lawless, not to building a principled organisation. This is most glaring when we examine the much-boasted case of the many contacts for whom "Lawless" is the IWG. These could be a useful asset - but not in themselves, and in fact they are counterposed by Lawless to a principled organisation. There is an equally boasted number of recruits supposed to have been made by Lawless: but when we get the position in perspective, we see that many more are driven away by Lawless. Within the Group, his subjectivism prevents delegation of authority and division of labour, which is the pre-requisite for an effective organisation even on an organisational level. So much of Lawless' abilities as an organiser are put into the service of keeping his own personal position and feeding his incipient paranoia that he can in no wise be regarded as even a good organiser even apart from politics. And he is also, as we shall see, capable of being destructive to the point of political vandalism, in pursuit of personal gains.

It is not always easy to distinguish whether his energy and dedication at any given moment is being put to positive use or is in the service of some dark scheme or another. The question overall boils down to one of balance. Even staunch defenders of Lawless dare go no further than the assertion that "on balance" Lawless's contribution is positive. But the cost of even the positive sides of Lawless, in terms of a distorted organisation such as I have been detailing, make it an uneconomic proposition.

I feel now that, even by the standards of the kind of organisation that he would want to build, his energy is far more destructive than constructive. The possibilities for expansion of what Liam Boyle has called "a one-man-dictatorial-band" are extremely limited.

Already almost the total energies of Lawless are devoted to minding everybody's business.. Take a few examples: the famous dispute at the AGM around the suggestion of having locally produced supplements for IM. This idea evoked almost implacable opposition, though he had to fight a rearguard action all down the line because the whole meeting knew that it would do both IM and the Group a lot of good to have these supplements. It was a routine, common sense suggestion, yet Lawless raised all the petty objections he could muster - all because he feared, anything that he couldn't personally supervise.

Another instance was when we reproduced as a pamphlet with minor updating additions the editorial on Vietnam from the last WR. This was done in a hurry for the Oct.22 demo [\[20\]](#), and though appearing under the name of WF, the source was acknowledged. We sent a number to the secretary [since September 1967, Liam Boyle] for the use of the Group - knowing that there could hardly be any political objections. But Lawless doesn't need political objections. He simply pushed a petty but typical resolution through the SC, that the Group should not sell the pamphlet. Is this not the behaviour of a man for whom non-political factional considerations override political ones?

Finally, and most ominously, there is the question of the next issue of WR, which Lawless is blatantly sabotaging. On a three-monthly basis, No.20 was due out by the middle of November. Much material is available, and has been ready and waiting for some weeks now. There had also been an earlier understanding that it should be, within our resources, a commemorative October Revolution issue, and the cover has been designed with this in mind.

Yet again using the SC, Lawless pushed through a resolution that no money be advanced for the production of this issue until "the editors" come to a decision about when it should come out! This of course has never happened before, the paper coming out at rather irregular intervals as soon as it was ready and produced. And how are the editors to decide? letters from me to the other two editors remain unanswered. Not the least odd thing about this situation is that of the three nominal editors Comrade Morrissey has had no connection whatsoever with any aspect of the preparation of the paper; and Comrade Lawless admitted that his own role was merely that of vetting, which in most cases (I can think of a couple of exceptions) has been nothing other than concern that it should have an Irish accent.

What we have here is blatantly disruptive, factional activity in the interests of their own clique and without submission of any of the disputed points to the Group. No doubt we will be hearing lurid tales of how the production of Workers' Fight has damaged WR! But it is Lawless and the clique which damages WR, and the reason they can do so is that they control the machinery and the finances, and above all that they regard themselves at liberty to employ any methods, however detrimental to the organisation. Perhaps this is because they regard themselves as the organisation. (They try to maintain that the delay is valid because some of the London supply of No.19 are still unsold. Of course they will remain unsold as long as the London Area Organiser, a recent recruit to the clique, "forgets" to bring them along on such salesworthy occasions as the Oct. 22nd Demonstration [\[20\]](#) . But, anyway, unsold WRs do not justify refusal to proceed with the next issue - the time-lag between laying out the resources and the appearance of the next issue would allow the remaining unsold copies of No19 to be sold - given an effort.)

There is also in this respect one more example, possibly even more scandalous, of irresponsible factionalism and use of threats to attempt to prevent the current use of the democratic discussion channels established at the AGM. However, since I know of this only by hearsay, I will not now expand on it further. [\[19a\]](#)

The Lawless clique and the Workers' Fight faction [\[2\]](#)

For our part, we have worked with the IWG, through the "mediation" of Lawless for more than a year. This has not been plain sailing, as some of the extracts we have included from letters indicate. In fact all the issues taken up in this document were raised time after time.

Our conception of the group was of a left centrist organism from a variety of backgrounds which was moving and could be aided along the road to a hardened Trotskyist position. On this basis we worked with the Group. We fought for our politics, and to a large extent we did so successfully, at least on a literary level. In contact with Lawless and with little direct contact with the Group, it seemed to us (as we were indeed given to believe) that the Lawless clique, referred to in the letters of Lawless as "the Trotskyists", were allies with whom it was possible to evolve peacefully, without principled differences, through comradely discussion. They said that they too were aiming towards an organisation based on the conceptions outlined by Cannon, and if they differed somewhat on emphasis, we put that down to a lack of appreciation of some points which could be clarified by discussion. We tended to see the

blurring and the blundering on political issues as simply a matter of ignorance - and in that there was some truth, because the centrism of the Lawless clique originates first and foremost in sheer ignorance of the politics they proclaim. (Unfortunately it does not stop there. The ignorance is buttressed and made self-righteous by indifference and perpetuated by catch-penny opportunism).

We did not begin until recently to appreciate that the face of the Lawless clique which we saw was one of a number of faces. Although some of the behaviour of Lawless himself and of the clique was visible to us, we did not appreciate the extent of it and above all we did not appreciate how soon it was to become a brake on the organisation. We did not understand, finally, that they deliberately aimed at a centrist morass, nor that they themselves were a major factor in perpetuating it; nor that when it would come to the point where the Group would overwhelmingly come down for a full Trotskyist position they would be the very people, while religiously nodding their heads, who would come out in opposition to any real practical change.

It was on the basis of these illusions that we supported Lawless in the recent faction fight, though we took also the rather naive attitude of attempting a reconciliation, putting the case for reform to Lawless, and for organisational seriousness to the opposition. We found, however, difficulty in orientating in that situation because the opponents of Lawless insisted on declaring their complete political solidarity with Lawless, meaning of course his declared politics. To us it seemed that the issues raised against Lawless were political, and could only be resolved by a political transformation of the Group. It still seemed possible that this could be achieved smoothly and more or less peacefully by continuing to work in favour of the positions that were reached formally at the AGM. We were wrong here.

It must also be admitted that we were just a little bit too ready to brush aside the protests of those for whom the unpleasant side of the Lawless clique was an immediate and pretty regular experience. A partial excuse here is our distance from Lawless, and the fact that our own direct experience was limited. This of course highlights the situation within the Group, whereby people furthest from Lawless geographically continue for a longer period to be impressed by him.

Why the "sudden" factionalising now? Why does the Lawless clique project an unclarified, unprincipled, purely organisational split? But of course - it is not really so sudden. The same differences have been simmering beneath the surface of the collaboration right from the very beginning, usually boiling up every time an issue of WR has been produced. Two things have changed, basically: first, we have become aware of the real situation in the Group, and thus less amenable to the Bonaparte games of Lawless, particularly as we became more aware there was a much healthier nucleus in the Group than the Lawless clique perfectly capable of taking over as a collective leadership on a genuinely Trotskyist basis.

On their side the very completion of the "Bolshevisation" on a literary level, which the Lawless clique accepted as they usually do because of external pressure (in this case the need for a fig-leaf before the Trotskyist movement internationally), made it no longer possible for them to shelter from a practical implementation behind any of their old excuses. The ripening of this situation was heralded by a number of sharp disputes around WR no.19 - and in fact dovetailing into the last dispute in the Group, where our final stand alarmed comrade Lawless.

These issues can only be resolved politically. If there are no principled differences with the written policy of the Group - and all its implications - then the split course was entirely unprincipled. If there are political differences then they must be brought out and fully discussed for the education of the whole Group (and if there are, why have they not been brought out before?). For our part we have here attempted to state our differences with the Lawless clique. Naturally we have no differences with the recently adopted Constitution.

7. Whither the IWG?

I began this article with a number of quotations, mainly from The Struggle for a Proletarian Party. It also contains a number of concrete examples of the effects of such unprincipled

organisational politics as those of the Lawless clique. I will not overstate the case by taking the most extreme and terrible example of this approach cited by Cannon - that of the original Stalin faction. The case of the Lovestone group will suffice.

"In the terminology of the Marxist movement, unprincipled cliques or groups which begin a struggle without a definite programme have been characterised as political bandits. A classic example of such a group, from its beginning to its miserable end in the backwaters of American radicalism, is the group known as Lovestoneites. This group, which took its name from the characterless adventurer who has been its leader, poisoned and corrupted the American Communist movement for many years by its unprincipled and unscrupulous factional struggles, which were carried on to serve personal aims and personal ambitions, or to satisfy personal grievances, The Lovestoneites were able and talented people, but they had no definite principles. They knew only that they wanted to control the party 'regime'. As with Abern, this question always occupied first place in their calculations; the 'political' programme of the moment was always adapted to their primary aim of solving the organisation question satisfactorily - that is, in their favour.

"They were wild-eyed radicals and ultra-leftists when Zinoviev was at the head of the Comintern. With the downfall of Zinoviev and the violent right swing of the Comintern under Bukharin, they became ardent Bukharinites as quickly and calmly as one changes his shirt. Due to an error in calculation, or a delay in information, they were behindhand in making the switch from Bukharin to Stalin and the frenzied leftism of the Third Period. To be sure they tried to make up for their oversight by proposing the expulsion of Bukharin at the Party Convention they controlled in 1929. But this last demonstration of *political flexibility in the service of rigid organisational aims* came too late. Their tardiness cost them their heads.

"Their politics was always determined for them by external pressure. At the time of their membership of the Communist Party it was the pressure of Moscow. With their formal expulsion from the Comintern a still weightier pressure began to bear down on them, and they gradually adapted themselves to it. Today this miserable and isolated clique, petty bourgeois to the core, is tossed about by bourgeois democratic public opinion like a feather in the breeze". (P.16. Emphasis mine).

On the basis of the politics of the Lawless Clique, particularly after the returns to Ireland, collapse into the Social Democracy or a relapse into left Nationalism is not at all excluded - without a sharp Bolshevik struggle a continuation of the Lawlessite centrist zig-zags is absolutely inevitable.

The time has come when the declared Programme and policy adopted by the Group at the AGM will be either put into practice or mummified for safe use in Lawless's showcase of baubles and decorations. The fight has already begun and I have here attempted to defend the programme in the manner of the programme - politically.

It is also clear that the fight against the conceptions and practices of the Lawless clique cannot be postponed any longer. It is a fact that in the history of the communist movement groups which at one stage play a positive or relatively positive role prove unable to change with the objectively changing needs of the development of the movement, and either become a fetter on the movement or fall by the wayside. In the case of the Lawless clique, it is clear that as the nucleus of developing Trotskyists grows daily more capable of taking over the various functions which Lawless has thus far monopolised, his energies grow daily more destructive. As the Group, and particularly the newer comrades, have moved towards serious acceptance of the nominal politics of the Lawless clique, the clique has been forced to come out openly against the practical implementation of "their own" politics, in typical centrist fashion. It is unprecedented, unprincipled and an intolerable situation where a political party is at the mercy of a clique which is in open 100% opposition to its democratically adopted politics. By unprecedented, I mean in the Trotskyist movement: such a situation is more than common in the parties of social democracy and Stalinism.

The immediate practical question is: Do we go on to consolidate the qualitative change in the organisation by taking the Constitution as the practical guide? Or do we mark time with more

Lawlessite manoeuvring and shilly-shallying, which will keep a few disparate elements today but at the cost of the opportunities of really serious growth which would be open to a homogeneous Trotskyist organisation? As I have said -the fight is already on. If it is not won for the Trotskyist constitution - then it will be won against it: the organisation will either advance or begin a drastic retreat.

Clearly the pre-AGM discussion was inadequate and what is needed now, more than anything else, is that the discussion begun in this article will not take place in a vacuum - without clear issue. We must pose the question sharply: for or against the Constitution adopted at the AGM? Either it must become the real guideline for our work, which means a sharp break with the Lawlessite methods and conceptions, or it should be honestly thrown out.

Any talk of implementing the Constitution without breaking the stranglehold of the Lawless Clique is utopian. Neither must Comrade Lawless be allowed to camouflage himself with his familiar - too familiar! - assurances that "the Group will one-day outgrow me". This is just a cynical ploy for disarming the suckers.

We must demand a recalled AGM to meet at some date in the new year, a date which will allow sufficient time for a thoroughgoing discussion. The Clique will no doubt respond to this call for a discussion and a recall AGM with the self-righteous demagogue's cry - "Get on with the real work of the Group". At the same time Lawless himself will put most if not all his energies into unprincipled factionalising, manoeuvring, whispering and poisoning the atmosphere.

This will only perpetuate the fundamental problems of the Group, if the Lawless Clique succeed. The key to any advance is not formal resolutions or even organisational rearrangements (though these must come and the sooner the better). First and foremost it is a question of political rearmament.

An end - once and for all - to unprincipled Lawlessite politics! If this is to be achieved the membership will have to contain the Clique, with its petty manoeuvres and the other activities we can expect from them in the next period. The discussion must be an open, democratic discussion with full access to all material for all the members. Comrades who hear "replies" and rumours via other channels should ask themselves why it is not in the IB - either for verification or refutation - and treat it with the necessary scepticism.

If we have political agreement issues which have been advanced as the decisive ones can be put in their proper perspective as organisational details and questions of national orientation in the complex condition of an exile organisation. These are not, despite the Lawless Clique, the decisive questions. Here too we can find no better model than that contained in the *Struggle For A Proletarian Party*: let us first clarify the political questions and then the organisational details will present us with no problems at all.

Notes, 2012

1. The Annual General Meeting of the Irish Workers' Group in September 1967.
2. Workers' Fight, An Solas, Workers' Republic. Workers' Fight was the proto-AWL nucleus as it then existed: Rachel Lever, Sean Matgamna and Phil Semp. (In "Trotskyism and Chameleonism", "we" usually means Rachel Lever and Sean Matgamna). They had joined the IWG, seeing chances for it to develop well. Within the IWG their main task was to produce the IWG magazine *An Solas* from no.15/16; it was later renamed *Workers' Republic*. From October 1967 they also produced a magazine, *Workers' Fight*, for use in the British labour movement.
3. Gery Lawless, secretary of the IWG, and main leader of the opposing side in the faction-fight for which this document was written.
4. Martin Abern was a leading figure in the US Trotskyist movement from the start to the 1940s. In the late 1930s he was charged by other leaders of the movement with maintaining a network of influence through gossip and cultivation of personal links. See [chapter 2 of James P Cannon's The Struggle for a Proletarian Party](#).

5. Che Guevara branch: i.e. the London branch. The IWG adopted an Irish tradition of naming branches after heroes rather than geographically. The IWG was mainly though not exclusively an exile organisation.

5a. Deutscherites: critical, liberal, Stalinists who looked to the Stalinist rulers to transform their systems into some sort of socialist democracy. After Isaac Deutscher.

6. Emancipation of Labour Group: the first Russian Marxist group, formed in 1883 by George Plekhanov and others. Operating from exile, in Geneva, its almost sole activity was polemic and propaganda.

7. Bordigist: followers of Amadeo Bordiga, the founding leader of the Italian Communist Party, who argued against all political united-front activity.

8. SWP: the Socialist Workers' Party of the USA, a Trotskyist organisation led by James P Cannon and (until 1940) by Max Shachtman, and formed in 1938 after the previous Trotskyist nucleus had first merged with another left-wing group, then entered the Socialist Party, winning over left-wing SPers before being forced out. The current SWP in Britain is no relation. An organisation with the name SWP still exists in the USA, but since 1979 has moved away from any sort of Trotskyism. The 1939-40 dispute in the SWP, culminating in a split in April 1940, was over attitudes to Stalin's invasions of Poland and Finland. Cannon (and Trotsky) argued that, while not supporting the invasions, Marxists should chiefly uphold the defence of the USSR, which they saw as defined as a "degenerated workers' state" by its nationalised property relations. Shachtman and his comrades, while at that stage not rejecting the "degenerated workers' state" tag, called for sharp opposition to the invasion. The political dispute was intertwined with organisational disputes. In 1967 the Workers' Fight people accepted that Cannon and Trotsky had been right in that fight. AWL today would have a different view (see [The Fate of the Russian Revolution](#)), though we still see much of value in Cannon's writings.

9. "SWP state-cap affair". Lawless was here presenting the SWP 1939-40 dispute as one between people arguing that the USSR was a "degenerated workers' state" and those arguing that it was "state capitalist". In fact no-one in the SWP argued that the USSR was "state capitalist". The majority of those who sided with Shachtman *later* came to argue that the Stalinist USSR was "bureaucratic collectivist". (A *minority* round C L R James and Raya Dunayevskaya in Shachtman's group came to argue that it was "state capitalist"; but that was after the split, not in the SWP). The misrepresentation here of the issues in 1939-40 is linked with the fact that in the IWG faction-fight Lawless accused his opponents of being "disguised state-capitalists", i.e. secret advocates of the view that the Stalinist USSR was state-capitalist.

10. *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*: a book written by Cannon after the 1939-40 dispute to expound his views on the organisational side of the dispute.

11. Faction fight, ICG, Brendan Clifford ("BC"). The ICG was the Irish Communist Group, a group including a range of activists to the left of the official Communist Party which existed between 1963-4 and 1965. The IWG came out of a faction-fight and split with the hard-core Maoists in August-September 1965. The hard-core Maoists, led by Brendan Clifford, took the name Irish Communist Organisation and, later, British and Irish Communist Organisation.

12. Liam Daltun was one of the leaders of the Trotskyist side in the IWG faction-right. He killed himself in January 1972.

13. Irish Militant, or IM: the paper of the IWG. Irish Workers' News: a weekly duplicated news sheet of four pages published by the Irish Communist Group and then the Irish Workers' Group. It was superseded by the printed monthly Irish Militant from February 1966.

13a. Clause IV: from 1918 to 1995, the British Labour Party constitution contained a Clause IV notionally committing it to collective ownership of the means of production, a socialistic fig-leaf for its pro-capitalist actual politics.

13b. "X's article": "X" was in fact Rayner Lysaght.

13c. "Polemical points" - i.e. against the existing Trotskyist groups in Britain. Workers' Fight no.1 came out in October 1967.

14. The lead article in Irish Militant of January 1967, *[Taking Whose Gun Out of Politics?](#)*, criticised the Republican movement's turn, at that time, towards constitutional politics, in a way that backhandedly endorsed the old IRA dogmas about military activity ("physical force") being the only revolutionary tactic.

15. SLL; Healyites; Tate. The SLL (Socialist Labour League), led by Gerry Healy, was the biggest ostensibly Trotskyist group in Britain at the time. It had a subsection in Northern Ireland. (It later changed its name to WRP, and, after much political degeneration, collapsed in 1985). The criticism of the SLL was over the physical assault by SLL members on Ernest Tate, a supporter of the "Mandelite" Fourth International, when Tate offered a pamphlet critical of the SLL for sale outside an SLL rally on 17 November 1966.

15a. Pat O'Donovan: a quasi-Stalinist member of the IWG.

15b An.P.: An Phoblacht, a duplicated monthly published from Cork by people who combined Mao-Stalinism with physical-force-on-principle Republicanism - precocious Stalinist Provos. They may have called themselves Saor Eire. This was not the Saor Eire Action Group which emerged soon after, though there may have been some overlap of membership.

15c Ted Grant was the leading writer of the "Militant" tendency, a notionally Trotskyist group within the British Labour Party which came to advocate such things as socialism implemented through a parliamentary "Enabling Act" passed by a future left-wing Labour government. The continuations today from that tendency are Socialist Appeal and the Socialist Party, which, under the leadership of Peter Taaffe, split from Grant in the early 1990s, arguing that no further life was possible within the Labour Party.

16. LSSP: Trotskyist organisation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), which was for a while the mass party of the working class in that country.

17. Germain: pen-name for Ernest Mandel.

18. Brendan Corish was the leader of the Irish Labour Party from 1960 to 1977. Harold Wilson was Labour prime minister in Britain 1964-70 and 1974-6.

19. In mid-1967, before the start of the faction fight in which this document was written, Eamonn McCann and Liam Daltun (in London) proposed removing Gery Lawless as IWG secretary and replacing him in the role by Sean Matgamna.

19a. This refers to a threat made by Lawless to Liam Boyle not to produce Irish Militant if Boyle distributed our document.

20. Big demonstration in London against the US war in Vietnam, on 22 October 1967.