

The class struggle is the decisive thing

Against the stream

By Sean Matgamna

"Is it necessary to recall that Marxism not only interprets the world but also teaches how to change it? The will is the motor force in the domain of knowledge too. The moment Marxism loses its will to transform in a revolutionary way political reality, at that moment it loses the ability to correctly understand political reality. A Marxist who, for one secondary consideration or another, does not draw his conclusions to the end betrays Marxism." Leon Trotsky

THE STATE OF THE world as we rush towards the 21st century testifies to the truth that socialism is not only a good idea, but a stark necessity for humankind. Yet, the ideas of socialism are everywhere under attack. They are at the nadir of influence and prestige. Socialism is reduced to a vague word. Most people haven't a clue what real socialism is about or what it would look like. Worse. The credibility of socialism is buried under the debris of Stalinism, that savage and malign pseudo-socialism. Many who accepted Stalinism at its own Big Lie evaluation, now say that Stalinism was "the socialism that failed". It is the conventional wisdom.

The reformist counterfeit of socialism is also in a bad way. In Britain, the best fruits of reform socialism, the Health Service and the Welfare State, are in ruins after 15 years of sustained Tory social war against the working class. The labour movement itself has been ravaged; it bears the scars and mutilations of a decade and a half of defeat, and of structural changes in industry forced through on the bosses' terms in conditions of working-class weakness and defeat.

And yet despite all that, the collapse of Stalinism has, objectively, opened the road for a mass rebirth of genuine socialism. How quickly it comes depends on us. What can we do?

Nothing is more obvious than that the duty of socialists — those who are worth anything — now is to go to the working class and into the working-class movement to organise and reorganise it, and to plant the seeds of unfalsified socialism once more, especially amongst the youth. Yet this work is scarcely being done.

The space that should be occupied by

serious Marxist socialists doing this work is filled instead by a raucous tribe of middle-class semi-anarchists impotently shouting about "revolution". A socialism that bases itself on the working class and on working-class immediate concerns and, while advocating revolutionary socialist politics and perspectives, avoids becoming a toy-town Bolshevik sect — that today is the property of only a minority of the socialists. Because that is so, great objective possibilities for socialist renewal are being let go by unfructified.

It is against this background that one observes a strange phenomenon on the British left — the mushrooming of a sizeable number of sects and chapels, and of socialist journals and study groups, concerned not immediately with the class struggle or the tasks described above, or even with clearing some of the Stalinist spittle, blood

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and encrusted mud off the face of genuine socialism, so that it is again visible to the untutored eye. They are concerned primarily with the study of aspects of the history of our movement, or with past great struggles, or with dead individuals once prominent in the movement, or with their own experiences in one or other of the bigger "Trotskyist" organisations!

Much of their activity is that of a sort of fringe academia, or pseudo-academia. Some of it overlaps with official academia, forming a sort of "ectoplasmic pregnancy" between academia and politics. Even when

some of these individuals are in the trade unions or the Labour Party, their political concerns tend to have more the character of a hobby, than that of people Trotsky would have recognised as revolutionary militants.

Perspectives and the discipline incumbent on people determined to do something in the working class — these they eschew. They accept no discipline or activity greater than the discipline and 'activity' of their circle of friends. People come together to kibbitz and grouse and reminisce and maybe to publish something, who could not stay together five minutes if they tried to do political work that required them to define their politics. They are tolerant and uncritical of each other to a fault — indeed, beyond a fault. They tend to be people who have recoiled from an existing organisation like the SWP or Militant or AWL and not to have drawn their recoil out to any political conclusion beyond negativism. Often they have recoiled against things which are necessary to any serious organisation dedicated to the great cause of working-class emancipation — commitment, selflessness, discipline, intellectual rigour, strict political book-keeping. No one's going to tell *them* what to do!

These groupuscules sometimes have names, the most memorable of which was a group in one Midlands town called "The Dead Trots Society" (after the movie, The Dead Poets Society). Most are far less self-knowing.

I know, or once knew, quite a few of the individuals in this spectrum. To tell the truth, what they are doing now is the best thing some of them could do for socialism short of leaving people less subjective than themselves to get on with it! Others are capable of better things.

Above, so to speak, those groups are academic and semi-academic journals with loose groups around them, which sometimes call conferences — Critique, Red Pepper, Revolutionary History, New Interventions, etc. You can get the most weird and wonderful discussions — so I'm told — at a Critique conference! Recently, for example, they had a learned discussion about the Welfare State: should socialists defend it? After all, wasn't it the wrong model? So bureaucratic! Many of the 70 people there seemed to think it funny that Workers' Liberty supporters should want to defend the Welfare State.

As a rule, these individuals and groupuscules tend to be sectarian — either in the

sense of ultra-leftism, dismissing the Labour Party and the unions and refusing to work in them — or, more commonly, in the basic sense of just tilling their own patch of ground without concern with broader perspectives or with the fundamental work of socialists described above.

All of them are more or less cut adrift from the disciplines, rhythms and concerns of the class struggle: their business is prattle and word processing, not practice. This is the single most arresting thing about the citizens of these atolls and islands jutting up in the flood tide of anti-socialist reaction: Marxist to a snobbery, they do not accept any obligation on themselves to go to work and test their ideas in "revolutionary practice" in the labour movement, and in the working class.

Devotees of the memory of this or that revolutionary, and fascinated by old factional struggles — whose protagonists thought they were quarrelling over issues of consequence in the class struggle — they are largely uninterested in integrating themselves in the class struggle now. They don't even accept that the class struggle — at however low a level it may exist — should define their 'political' activity, still less that they should organise their lives around it.

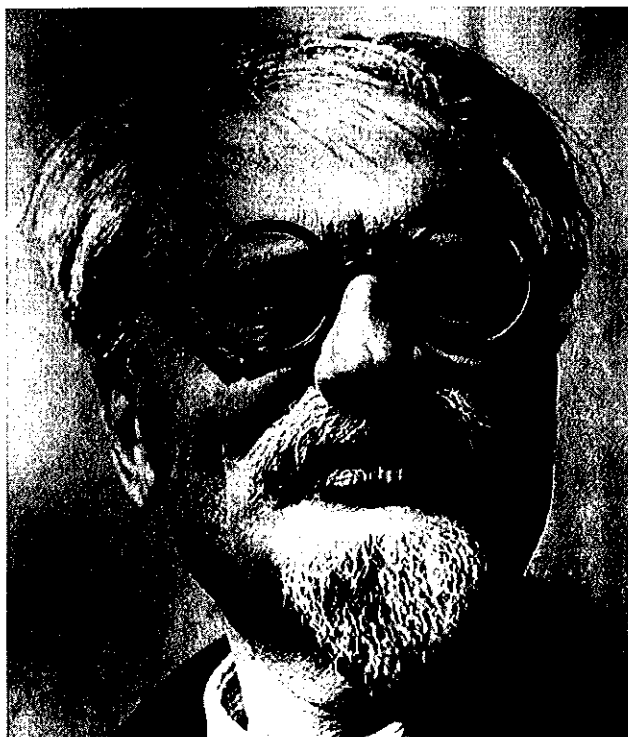
"Revolutionary tradition" for them is books and articles and genning up about the past, not something alive — something that can only be kept alive and growing by being developed and elaborated in revolutionary practice here and now. Thus they dismiss the central tenet that separates Marxism — the only real Marxism — from academia or academic sociology: practice, the centrality of the class struggle, the *revolutionary* Marxist determination to learn from experience and bring it to conclusions that can be used by our class.

Some tend to console themselves with

Diary date

**Workers' Liberty '95
will take place on
Friday 30 June —
Sunday 2 July at
Caxton House,
Archway, north
London.**

Workers' Liberty '95 is three days of socialist debate hosted by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty



Trotsky: "It is not enough to preach the benefits of technology; it is necessary to build bridges."

smug and idiotic — but essentially self-exposing — little half truths, like that contained in the rhetorical question: was Marx theorising or "practising" when he wrote *Capital*? Me, I'd revise my opinion of some of these people for a rigorous 'engaged' article or two. Even David Ryazanov did not disdain the class struggle!

Not everything they do is useless. Useful articles are sometimes produced; *Revolutionary History* is, on the whole, a worthwhile publication; so sometimes is *Critique*. But in the present climate of working class defeat and socialist retreat into sectarianism they are helping to shape a whole sub-culture in which the central Marxist commitment to the class struggle and to practical work for socialism is gone, as is the proper Marxist sense of shame at its absence.

Thinking of this strange, sectarian pseudo-academia that is mushrooming in the Tory-blitzed bomb sites of the labour movement, I dug out an article Leon Trotsky wrote in 1932 in the form of an open letter to the American journalist VF Calverton. Some of it is quoted at the beginning of this piece. Here is more of this important article.

"Proletarian politics has a great theoretical tradition and that is one of the sources of its power. A trained Marxist studies the differences between Engels and

Lassalle with regard to the European war of 1859. This is necessary. But if he is not a pedant of Marxist historiography, not a bookworm, but a proletarian revolutionist, it is a thousand times more important and urgent for him to elaborate for himself an independent judgement about the revolutionary strategy in China from 1925 to 1932.

It was precisely on that question that the struggle within Bolshevism sharpened for the first time to the point of split.

It is very useful to study, let us say, the old differences among Russian Marxists on the character of the future Russian revolution; a study, naturally, from the original sources and not from the ignorant and unconscionable compilations of the epigones. But it is far more important to elaborate for oneself a clear understanding of the theory and practice of the Anglo-Russian Committee, of the "third period" of "social fascism," of the "democratic dictatorship" in Spain, and the policy of the united front. The study of the past is in the last analysis justified by this, that it helps one to orient oneself in the present.

It is impermissible for a Marxist theoretician to pass by the congresses of the First International. But a thousand times more urgent is the study of the living differences over the Amsterdam "antiwar" congress of 1932. Is there today a subject more important for a revolutionist, more

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gripping, more burning, than the struggle and the fate of the German proletariat? Is it possible, on the other hand, to define one's attitude to the problems of the German revolution while passing by the differences in the camp of German and international communism?

A revolutionist who has no opinion on the policies of Stalin-Thaelmann is not a Marxist. A Marxist

who has an opinion but remains silent is not a revolutionist.

It is not enough to preach the benefits of technology; it is necessary to build bridges. How would a young doctor be judged who, instead of practising as an intern, would be satisfied with reading biographies of great surgeons of the past? What would Marx have said about a theory which, instead of deepening revolutionary practice, serves to separate one from it? Most probably he would repeat his sarcastic statement: 'No, I am not a Marxist.'