Short extracts from Martin Upham's history of British Trotskyism to 1949

A cluster of contacts consisted of those in the ILP and outside it, who had not been in the Communist Party and thought revolutionary politics had to make a new start. Sometime in 1929 and 1930, the Marxist League was formed, an independent revolutionary propaganda group. It was not large. Its leading figures were Frank Ridley, Chandu Ram and Hugo Dewar.

Trotsky was unimpressed. He expected an Opposition current to develop from within the CPGB When it did it would stand on the shoulders of Bolshevik experience. Ridley and Ram advanced theses for a Fourth International but they had made no struggle against Stalinist control of the Communist Party.

Hugo Dewar withdrew, dissenting from its view of trade unions. He joined the ILP in Clapham and then moved to the Tooting local of the CPGB.

The Opposition was a London affair. Reg Groves, Stewart Purkis and Billy Williams had read Where Is Britain Going? and The Lessons of October before the General Strike. They worked together as members of the Clearing House Branch of the Railway Clerks Association in Poplar and were part of the influx of new recruits into the Communist Party immediately after the General Strike.

Henry Sara (1886-1953), the same age as Purkis, was moderately well known in the party. He was a former SLP member and wartime conscientious objector, who had not joined the CPGB at its foundation, but came into it following a trip to Russia.

The fifth key personality from the early cadre of British Trotskyism was Harry Wicks, another railwayman. In 1927 Wicks, unlike Groves, accepted an invitation to join the Lenin School in Moscow. He stayed there until 1930, attended the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928 and witnessed the final rout of the Opposition.

Years later, Stuart Purkis recalled "we came together in 1930, brought together by agreement on the need for propaganda for the United Front". The marrying of disparate discontents into a Trotskyist critique occurred during 1931.

The "Balham Group" existed from some time in the later months of 1931, though most of its members had been working in South-West London before that. In the Autumn of 1931, the Americans began to force the pace. In November a meeting was convened in the flat of Flower at which Groves, Sara, Purkis and Wicks agreed to establish a British Section of the Left Opposition. What actually crystallized was a tiny body which, like the young CPGB was entirely working class and had only made a limited critique of Comintern theory.

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For a year and a half they functioned independently of parties but with an ILP fraction. On 19 August 1933 a plenum of the ILO unanimously resolved that its British Section should enter the ILP. Trotsky began at once to press the point in private correspondence and devoted public space to discussing the fate of the party. At the end of 1933, the organization split over the tactical issue of whether or not to commit itself entirely to entering the ILP.

Trotskyists were present in the ILP in significant numbers for three years, Those who followed Trotsky's advice to join the party were the least experienced of his followers in revolutionary activity. Yhey left the ILP, as individuals and small groups throughout 1936.

Some were for entering the Labour Party, and joining Harber who was already there. They had the inestimable advantage of support from Trotsky himself, who ridiculed any "independent" posturing. The Marxist Group was so tiny that its policies were barely noticeable in any case. "A few hundred comrades is not a revolutionary party." Their job was to oppose reformism within the mass parties. And the mass party was the Labour Party. Clinging to the ILP was ridiculous. Its best members would leave in any case, and the time spent on them might be passed more profitably with the hundreds of potential Labour Party recruits. "We are" observed Trotsky, "too generous with our time".

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The "Bolshevik-Leninists" in the Labour Party worked in the political area with the greatest potential for Trotskyist growth in the 1930s: the Labour League of Youth. It took two years for them to concentrate in the LLOY, and they thus lost their best chance to rival communist sympathisers on equal terms. Differences of style among the Bolshevik-Leninists, now known as the Militant Group, maimed their organisation at the end of 1937.

The Fusion Conference convened on February 17 1938 with Henry Sara in the chair. Wicks introduced the discussion, arguing that the standing distinction between those in and those out of the Labour Party could be overcome. There would be an independent organisation with more successful fraction work in the mass parties.

The Fusion Conference took the name Revolutionary Socialist League. The RSL affiliated at once to the Bureau for the Fourth International.

[Meanwhile] the Paddington branch of the Militant Group [had] maintained its distinctive style of street and public paper sales, while continuing to be active within the Labour League of Youth. It may also have been the first Trotskyist faction in Britain to cover strikes on a regular basis. On 1 January 1938 it began publication of Workers International News, the first theoretical journal of the Trotskyist movement in Britain. Early editions showed an attempt to put right a perceived deficiency in the movement's performance by putting some of Trotsky's prolific output into print.

The International Secretariat made its official British Section the fused RSL, which resulted from the Peace and Unity conference of July 1938.

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The fall of France tilted WIL in a new direction. WIL concluded that this was the time to build on an anti-fascist mood. It still expected government repression but began to see an opportunity to differentiate between those who would and who would not fight a genuinely anti-fascist war. But the RSL saw in responses to the fall of France "a determination to make any sacrifices to help British imperialism to win". It continued to assume that the first sign of a move to the left would be war weariness.

In the WIL and in the SWP [USA], however, thoughts were turning towards a programme on which those participating in the war could stand.

What became known as the American Military Policy (AMP) rested on two principal texts: a speech by J.P. Cannon to the Chicago convention of the SWP in September 1940 and his presentation on behalf of several defendants at a trial for sedition the next year in Minneapolis. At Chicago Cannon called for public money wherewith the trade unions might set up their own military training camps. He argued that the pre-war policy

of the Fourth International had been sound but insufficient. Trotskyists had warned against war yet failed to prevent it:

The RSL was to accuse WIL of lifting Military Policy from its American context, but there was stimulus enough for it in the last writings of Trotsky and even in some of his articles from before the war. Trotsky had been involved in a lengthy discussion with SWP members on attitudes towards war preparation. He advised against draft avoidance and argued for using military training to acquire skills of arms. Military Policy

"... is revolutionary in its essence and based upon the whole character of our epoch, when all questions will be decided not only by arms of critics but by critiques of arms; second, it is completely free of sectarianism. We do not oppose to events and to the feelings of the masses an abstract affirmation of our sanctity."

What Trotsky advised was that the Fourth International should counterpose a genuine struggle against fascism to the "false fight" of the Petains. The need for a positive programme in wartime made a deep impression on WIL and from the late summer of 1940 it tried to counter embryonic Vichyism with its Military Policy: elected officers, government-financed trade union-controlled training schools, public ownership of the armaments industry and a class appeal to German soldiers.

Since revolutionaries were inevitably isolated under such circumstances, the RSL was not surprised that some should seek to break out by means of short cuts. These were opportunists however:

"The basic task of revolutionary socialists in such a period is not to seek opportunist 'short cuts' to the mass but to explain patiently the reactionary nature of the war ."

Trotskyists themselves, argued the RSL, had a guarantee against backsliding in the policy of revolutionary defeatism. The alternative was to end up like the WIL and the Fourth International. Cannon's Chicago policy was "in the spirit of Kautsky", a "petty bourgeois hotch potch".

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Workers International League seemed to have poor prospects at the end of 1938 with all other Fourth Internationalists grouped in one body. Yet it survived, put a regular press on the streets and became the pivot of a limited regroupment. WIL moved from its original interpretation of entry work to a position in 1941 outside all parties. This, with its ability and flair, won it industrial support from 1942 on. It intervened in all major industrial disputes from this time and was more successful than any other party in its attempt to fill the vacuum left by the communists, who had become advocates of increased production.

WIL had practically no one working full time, but it was more visible than the RSL because of its policy of putting its press on streets.

WIN appeared regularly. In September 1938 WIL launched a monthly agitational paper, Youth for Socialism, to supplement its activities in the Labour League of Youth. Youth for Socialism was a lively newspaper.

[Its later paper] Socialist Appeal established itself in 1942 as the main Trotskyist vehicle, helped chiefly by being the badge of WIL's energetic intervention in industry.

It approached the ILP and the Anarchists with a view to arranging united action on the industrial field. In Scotland the name Clyde Workers Committee was appropriated by a new body on 15 May 1943, which was led by expelled communists, some of whom had been recruited to WIL. A meeting of June 5/6 decided to establish a National Confederation of Workers Committees on a programme which endorsed the aims of the Clyde Workers Committee.

In early November 1943 the Coordinating Committee took the name of the Militant Workers Federation. In the internal contest within the MWF, WIL achieved an ascendancy over the ILP.

In April 1944 the Government decided to charge four RCP leaders with conspiracy and acts in furtherance of a strike in contravention of existing legislation: the Trades Disputes Act (1927).

A Fusion Conference met on 11-12 March 1944. There were sixty-nine delegates, fifty two from the WIL and seventeen from the RSL. This reflected a membership split of 260/75 in WIL's favour.

The leading WIL figures were confirmed in the key positions. Haston became general secretary, Millie Lee organisational secretary, Ted Grant the editor of Socialist Appeal. Workers International News remained the theoretical journal. The decision to adopt the name Revolutionary Communist Party was at once a rebuke to the CPGB and a reflection of WIL optimism rather than the bleaker outlook of the RSL.

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The RCP expected big things to occur at the end of the war. In the early 1940s WIL had predicted that fascism would follow a British victory. It was certain that peace, as in 1919, would bring with it an economic catastrophe. "A terrible crisis of unemployment" was inevitable.

In 1945 the party had set itself the target of 1,000 members by its next conference, but it failed even to maintain membership. In 1946 the party was reported to be "overwhelmingly proletarian in composition". But this could not disguise the collapse of expectations.

The massive Labour victory declared on 26 July 1945... Even before that discussion had boiled up within the RCP about possible entry into the Labour Party. The Entrist Faction (or Minority as it was commonly known) [led by Gerry Healy] argued that the "open tactic" could be justified only by the special circumstances of the war. It had plenty of evidence to argue from with the collapse of third parties and the recovery of Labour Party membership. Healy called for entry into the Labour Party in June 1945. RCP leaders resisted the entrist proposal.

A resolution [was passed] at the September 1947 plenum of the International Executive Committee for separating the British party... A special conference of the RCP was convened on 11 October for the purpose of implementing the IEC decision in favour of entry into the Labour Party by the Minority. From 1 November there were again two Trotskyist organisations in Britain.

The majority retained the name and most of the apparatus of the RCP But from this point the party press began to run down [1] and it seems that there was a decline in membership and in the activity of those who remained during the fifteen months to the opening of the final debate in January 1949 [after which the RCP decided to dissolve, and its remaining members joined the Labour Party].

[There was then a Trotskyist group in the Labour Party under the leadership of Healy. Healy expelled the main leading figure surviving from the RCP, Ted Grant, and the supporters of Tony Cliff. From 1951 there were three main groupings, all in the Labour Party: Healy's group (the main one), a group led by Ted Grant and Jimmy Deane, and "Socialist Review", in which Cliff was influential].