

# The splits in Cliff's international

By Ian Land\*

THE past few years have seen a number of splits in the International Socialism Tendency (IST) — the international affiliation of groups organised under the aegis of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP). IST groups have split in Greece, Germany, South Africa, Australia and Canada. Significantly, a pattern is beginning to emerge which suggests that more splits are likely. For many years now, the SWP Central Committee (CC) has spent a lot of effort attempting to raise awareness among the British SWP membership of the successes of the various international sections. The annual Marxism summer schools have seen a yearly increase in the numbers of speakers from these groups given key notemeetings to address. Many of these comrades — Ahmed Shawki from the US ISO, David McNally from the Canadian IS, Panos Garganos from the Greek OSE, and others — became centrepieces of the event, guaranteed to draw large audiences. The implication drawn by most SWP members was that the IST, although very far from being an international since its individual sections numbered memberships in hundreds, not thousands, was nevertheless growing at an impressive rate. However, it is becoming clear that, despite the ostensible independence of the international affiliates, and their increased profile in their own countries and with the SWP itself, behind the scenes the situation is far from rosy.

A “star system” operates inside the SWP. Young militants are recruited to the organisation, given high-profile responsibilities, and used as a lever against the “old farts” (generally, more experienced comrades who are perhaps less enthusiastic about the CC's current perspectives). Increasingly, however, these Young Turks are not given the political training necessary to sustain their enthusiasm and activity, and, therefore, gradually become “old farts” themselves, waiting to be pushed aside by the new generation of stars put in place by the CC. Because disagreement with the CC is always interpreted as factional, there are only two states of existence in the party — with the CC or against them, a star or a “barrier to growth.”

The situation is not entirely the same with the new international “stars,” inasmuch as at least some of these comrades are genuine cadres in their own right, capable of independent and critical thinking (and therefore totally unlike the current generation of SWP full-timers). However, an international “star system” is most definitely

in place — in some years the Greek organisation is in favour, in others the American, and so on — and it is clear that increasingly the national perspectives of the fraternal groups are dictated by the SWP CC. Although there are local factors in all the splits, they seem to hinge around two fundamental questions: the imposition of the perspectives of the British SWP on the local sections, and the lack of democratic debate of these perspectives within the groups.

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*“For several years now, the SWP CC has promulgated an increasingly frantic perspective in which the impending crisis of capitalism creates enormous opportunities for rapid growth.”*

spective in which the impending crisis of capitalism creates enormous opportunities for rapid growth. The organisational conclusions of this catastrophism are that there is no space inside the organisation for opposition or even debate. Such debate would be “abstract,” a diversion from the central task of rapid recruitment.

This perspective is a result, amongst other things, of the SWP's success in recruiting in the late 1980s and early '90s, in a period in which the rest of the revolutionary left faced great difficulties. The marginalisation of the Labour left and the decline of Militant left a vacuum which the SWP managed to fill, as the left alternative to mainstream Labourism. The relatively sober and realistic perspectives of the 1980s gave way to the triumphalism we see today. Even more absurdly, however, these perspectives were then applied to the IST's international work, without regard for local political differences or the fact that the fraternal groups are much smaller in membership than the SWP. In the early 1990s, the IS groups were encouraged to “turn to the class,” and engage in the kind of agitational activity which the SWP was attempting. The closing down of democratic debate, as in the British SWP, was seen as the quickest and most efficient method of pushing through these perspectives against the instincts and knowledge of the various groups. It is here

that the star system comes into play, with sections of the international leaderships encouraged by the SWP CC, while others, often the founder members of the groups, were attacked for their supposed “conservatism” and “abstraction.” The result is that each of the IST fraternal groups now seems to have an internal regime not unlike the SWP's own regime in its dogmatism and authoritarianism. The problem is well described by the Canadian comrades who have recently left the IS to form New Socialist:

“We start from the conviction that the political perspectives of the IS leadership — which are largely a crude and mechanical application of an international perspective formulated by the British SWP — have created another-worldliness inside the organization. The essential elements of this perspective are the following:

1) that we are witnessing a profound crisis of world capitalism comparable to that of the 1930s;

2) that this crisis is destroying mainstream parties and ideologies and creating a tremendous audience for revolutionary socialism;

3) that IS groups the world over must transform themselves in the space of a few years from small propaganda groups into the beginnings of mass parties capable of leading major struggles. That the perspective is deeply flawed should be obvious; indeed, it repeats the fundamental errors committed by Trotskyists from the late 1930s onwards.

“In order to try to sustain a perspective that flies in the face of reality, the Steering Committee has consistently substituted fanciful prophecies of great working class breakthroughs for clear-headed analysis of the real terrain of class struggle in this country. Thus, just before the Liberal government brought out the most anti-working class budget in post-war history (with \$9 billion in cuts and layoffs of 45,000 workers), *Socialist Worker* ran the editorial headline “Liberals on the run!” Then, after the defeat of railworkers' strikes by back-to-work legislation, *Socialist Worker* celebrated with the claim that “the fight-back has just begun!”

“There is nothing new about small revolutionary groups which try to sustain morale by constant predictions of great working class victories. But such practices have not been in the IS tradition — at least not until recently. For most of its history, the IS tendency has encouraged serious, sober and critical assessment of the economic and political realities that confront the working class movement. The IS Steering Committee now openly flouts those traditions — with the apparent encouragement of the SWP leadership.”

The crudeness of the SWP's approach to international work is illustrated by the expe-

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rience of the South African comrades. The British SWP reorganised its branch structure in the early 1990s as a consequence of its new perspective — the large branches of old, with an elected branch leadership and weekly meetings covering general political topics as well as organisational and practical questions, were split into many small branches, sometimes with as few as 4 or 5 members, and branch meetings became almost entirely agitational and organisational affairs. The elected branch committees were replaced with organising groups that were essentially appointed on the whim of the local full-timer, and appointed district committees were established to oversee each branch's work in the area. A SWP Central Committee member, Julie Waterson, was sent to South Africa to impose this small-branch perspective there, with the result that about 30-40% of the membership were expelled or resigned (including most of the black membership). The South African comrades, who went on to form the IS Movement, were not best pleased to be attacked for their "conservatism" by Julie Waterson when many of them had been involved in the strikes and uprisings of the 1980s.

This pattern is repeated in Australia and Germany, leading one German comrade in the group Gegen Wind to describe the SWP leadership's approach to international work as "British imperialism."

It would be comforting to conclude that the splits described make it more likely that such an event will happen in the British SWP in the near future. However, several points need to be borne in mind:

1. The bureaucracy of the British SWP is considerably more established and more united than that of its fraternal organisations. The situation in Canada, where one of the leading forces behind the split, David McNally, was a member of the Steering Committee of the IS Organization, shows this clearly.

It is almost unthinkable in the present climate that a member of the SWP CC would lead a split.

2. The active membership of the British

SWP tends to be much less politically educated than that of the fraternal groups, who have been working for years in circumstances where political education has been at the forefront of their work. A very common prejudice within the SWP is that theory is best left in the hands of the leadership. The result, of course, is that the membership rarely has the confidence to question the Central Committee's authority, even if sections of it are unhappy with the perspectives.

3. The more experienced members of the SWP fall into two broad camps: those who are cynical and passive (the majority), and those who are so lacking in principle that they are prepared to argue for any perspective the leadership dream up.

4. The SWP is a comparatively large organisation, and many of even its most disaffected members see no alternative but to stay in at all costs rather than risk the "political wasteland" that the rest of us are apparently condemned to. This is a powerful incentive to say and do nothing.

5. The membership of the SWP is given little hint that anything is wrong in the IST. When we sold copies of the South African ISM newspaper at last year's "Marxism" summer school, most comrades who bought it had not heard anything about the split. Indeed, they were under the impression that the "official" IS South African group was going from strength to strength. The discussions at the international conference held every year after "Marxism" are not communicated to SWP members.

Sadly, therefore, I think it unlikely that the splits described in this article will happen in the near future in Britain. Having said that, there is little doubt that more splits will occur in the fraternal organisations.

One of the many advantages of having access to the Internet is that rapid communications between all the splits can take place. Every few weeks the group to which I belong, the International Socialist Group, receives email from disaffected individuals and groups within the IST who share our basic commitment to the IS tradition's politics but oppose its Stalinised distortion in the "actually existing" IS Tendency. Our hope, and the hope for the revolutionary left in general, is that out of these individuals and groups we can build a new, non-sectarian Marxist movement which respects differences whilst upholding principles. It would be easy to treat these splits as an opportunity to gloat, to laugh at the SWP's absurd perspectives, but it is much more important to build on them as part of the process of the renewal of the revolutionary Marxist tradition. ■

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The SWP's South African section was denounced for "conservatism"