

# The "IS-SWP tradition" 9

## The experience of the left

**TO help traumatised ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers its real history, we continue our symposium on the "IS/SWP tradition."**

**Some of those who participate in this symposium have moved a long way**

**from the politics they had in the IS/SWP, and from the politics of *Workers' Liberty* now. Nonetheless, at the end of this discussion we — and the thinking left in general — will be better equipped to formulate the lessons of the IS-SWP experience.**

## When IS went sour

By Pete Keenlyside\*

I JOINED International Socialists (IS) in April 1972 and was expelled in August 1975.

I joined in Cardiff where at the start we had three members. For about a year the local organisation had a shaky, middle-class existence. In the months before the February '74 election, we began to grow quickly, on a diet of anti-Toryism. The general mood in the movement at that time was virulently anti-Tory. IS swam with the tide. A lot of workers joined up.

By mid-1974 IS had set up perhaps 40 or 50 factory groups. Nevertheless, IS had no idea how to relate to a Labour government. What we built soon fell to bits. A year into a Labour government, not one of the jerry-built factory groups existed.

The character of the organisation changed radically over this period. At the first conference I attended, in 1972 or 1973, there was one delegate for every five members. Conference was open to all members. By 1974 the delegates came from District organisations and the effect of this change was to make it nearly impossible for dissidents to attend. In 1975 the members were not even told where the conference was to be held!

In 1972 members still received National Committee minutes with records of votes and what was said. People with differing views were, at that time, still elected to the NC — although even then there was some messing about. The joke was that the centre always had a "worker of the year" elected. Whoever had led a particular strike was pushed as the "worker of the year" to go on to the National Committee.

Now, there is nothing wrong in principle with pushing workers forward for NC places — but merely having led a strike is not necessarily a qualification for political leadership.

This procedure was a piece of sand-in-the-eyes tokenism by the leadership. The

"worker of the year" only lasted a year, was replaced by the next star worker, and — usually — never seen or heard of again.

Even so, at that time the national leadership still felt it necessary to go to meetings and argue their case with the members.

The cult of Cliff was in its early stages. But gradually things changed.

There were a few real or concocted security scares, with the police. They were used to justify stopping the circulation of NC minutes to the members. One day we got a circular telling us to burn all our internal documents — dutifully we went down to the bottom of our gardens and set fire to the stuff — real shades of Healy and the Socialist Labour League.

My expulsion took place in August 1975 for "factional activity". I was a member of the Left Faction, who were expelled as a group two months later.

I was given a sort of trial by the local District Committee and was suspended. I then got a letter from the National Secretary, Jim Nichol, telling me that I had been expelled. I had no hearing or any sort of right to defend myself.

My expulsion, and that of another Cardiff Left Faction member, had been secretly prepared, in advance, by the national centre. I had some glimpse of how they were working: I was the paper sales organiser and I turned up at a comrade's house to deliver his papers, and there discovered a Central Committee member in the front room; I went to a local union fraction meeting with the papers and found Duncan Hallas in attendance, preparing.

I think they got rid of the two of us first because we had a lot of contact with the working-class members whom we had just helped to recruit — and they needed to get rid of us quickly.

Then, in October 1975 the Left Faction were asked to dissolve and stop fighting for their politics. They refused and were booted out. I had originally joined the Left Faction in 1972. I thought that the problem with IS was not just that they had the wrong politics

— which they did on a lot of issues — but that for IS, politics was always an optional extra.

A lot of the previous contributions to the *Workers' Liberty* symposium on the IS-SWP tradition just simply miss this point. They have said: IS did this wrong and that wrong, but basically they were OK. I do not accept that.

The root problem is that politics for IS were always after-the-decision justifications for pragmatic, opportunistic twisting and turning. Politics was invoked to preach 'good' reasons; the real reasons were not political apart from the politics of "building the party", on any basis.

The most striking example, initially, was over the Irish question. I was aware of the discussion in 1969. IS continued to manoeuvre on the issue, and this was the issue that the Left Faction was initially most concerned with.

Later, in the run up to the 1975 EEC referendum — and I distinctly remember this — we received a bundle of leaflets which said something like "No to price rises, Yes to a socialist united states of Europe" — not perfect, but at least the germ of internationalism was there. The next week we received another bundle which said "No to price rises, No to the EEC", with instructions to throw away the first lot of leaflets. There was no political accounting, and the explanation was simply that the IS leadership wanted to sail with the nationalist tide which was running against Europe. Even if they were right — and they weren't! — on the issue, this was no way to proceed.

After the 1973 conference the first Left Faction dissolved. I think the faction leadership at that time were closer to the IS leadership's positions than some of the rest of us. I voted not to dissolve the fraction.

Later the Left Faction — very much under *Workers' Fight's* influence [*Workers' Fight* was a forerunner of *Workers' Liberty*] — developed much deeper, broader criticisms of IS and became a tendency rather than a faction. By the end we realised that it was not just necessary to oppose particular IS positions, but that winning votes at conference meant nothing in an organisation where the leadership would ignore any conference decisions it did not agree with.

The Left Faction did not actually advocate membership of the Labour Party. But by the time of my expulsion I was certainly of the opinion that IS should send members in. Even if it had sent in half its 4,000 members it could have made a radical impact on the Labour Party as it was then. Perhaps the Labour left would have won all the battles of the late '70s and early '80s — instead of going down to eventual defeat. Things could have been very different for the class as a whole. And for that alone the IS leaders bear a great responsibility. ■

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