

# The USFI today

The whole history of the current now organised as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) has been one of repeated political accommodation to Stalinist or nationalist forces leading big struggles. Since 1979 the USFI's US associate, the Socialist Workers' Party, has taken this method further, identifying 100% with the Cuban government. Clive Bradley surveys this turn and the response to it of the USFI majority led by Ernest Mandel.

IN 1983, a group of oppositionists — broadly in support of the Mandel tendency — were expelled from the SWP and set themselves up as a new group, 'Socialist Action'. Their founding statement gives some indication of current state of the SWP.

"Immediately after the party convention in 1981, with no possibility for anyone who disagreed to reply, Jack Barnes, the SWP's central leader, announced that he no longer accepted the idea of fighting for a directly socialist revolution in underdeveloped countries. [Then in an article in 1983] Barnes insisted that 'our movement must discard permanent revolution'."

They go on to look at the political results of what they consider to be "a serious adaptation to Stalinist ideology".

On Poland: "In 1981 it was clear that the SWP did not want to be too prominent in support of the Polish workers — this might embarrass the party in its relationship with [Cuba and Nicaragua]... The SWP rejected demonstrations of any kind, refused to participate in virtually all meetings of the Left to support Solidarnosc..."

"... Its official position is for 'political revolution'... [But] shortly after the beginning of 1982, this concept... virtually disappeared from 'The Militant'... In its place ambiguous formulas appeared that could be interpreted as calling merely for the reform of the Polish CP"

On Iran: "... the SWP's press refused for many months to defend any victims of repression... Universally known facts about torture of every variety of dissenter in Iranian prisons, military assaults on the Kurdish national minority areas... none of this could be found in 'The Militant'."

They got on: "You could not tell what was going on in places like Iran, Poland, Afghanistan, North Korea, Vietnam or Ethiopia from reading the manipulated accounts in 'The Militant'." And — though Socialist Action, because of their own politics, do not say this — for sure you cannot tell what's going on in Cuba or Nicaragua from the glowing reports in 'The Militant'.

## The SWP's 1979 turn

The current phase of the SWP's politics began quite abruptly in 1979, after the death of their veteran theorist Joseph Hansen. But its roots can be traced back further.

In the early 1960s the SWP — as against their Healyite detractors — recognised that a revolution had taken place in Cuba, and that capitalism had been overthrown. But they went further. They played down the



Poland: the workers' struggles of 1980-1

elements of bureaucratic control in Cuba, and played up all the revolutionary internationalist and anti-bureaucratic aspects of Castroism — all this to the extent that they blurred over the fact that the Cuban government was controlled by a tiny handful of people (with popular support, but no real popular control), and that the working class had no independent political voice. They abandoned any project of building a Trotskyist organisation in Cuba: the Castroite leadership 'team', given further evolution and good advice, could become quite adequate.

What needs to be stressed, in the light of current disputes in the USFI, is that the SWP's analysis of Cuba was shared by the Mandelites. Even now, there is no fundamental programmatic dispute over Cuba in the USFI: the Mandelites no more call for independent working-class action and political revolution in Cuba than do the SWP.

From the late '60s to the late '70s, the SWP was more critical of Castroism than the Mandel faction. In particular the SWP opposed guerilla tactics in Latin America — often in a sectarian, almost parliamentarist, fashion.

In early 1979 the SWP published a speech by Jack Barnes on "20 years of the Cuban Revolution", enthusiastically dropping all criticism of Castro. For some months yet 'The Militant' continued to dismiss the Sandinistas' guerilla war against Somoza as futile, misguided, and petty-bourgeois. In July 1979 the Sandinistas triumphed — and 'The Militant' switched round 180°. From sour, negative rejection of the Sandinistas'

struggle, they turned to 101 per cent support of the Sandinista government and all its policies.

'The Militant' today makes very strange reading. The revolutions in Central America and the Caribbean dominate its pages, but in a curious way. There is extraordinarily little analysis, or even considered comment, on events in the region. There is much less coverage on El Salvador — where civil war rages — than on relatively stable Cuba. The bulk of the material consists of speeches, or articles hung around quotations, by Castro, or Ortega, or Bishop.

## The SWP on Cuba

Its presentation has a tone, a mood, a feel that cannot easily be described. So here is an example. This is an extract from the second front page lead article of 'The Militant' of 25 January 1985.

"Tipitapa-Malacatoya, Nicaragua — In front of a huge sign reading 'July victory, people's victory, symbol of Cuba-Nicaragua friendship', a new sugar mill was inaugurated here January 11... The refinery is the largest in all of Central America and the largest single industrial plant in Nicaragua. It was built with extensive aid from Cuba.

"Present at the inauguration ceremonies was Cuban President Fidel Castro, who gave a two-and-a-half hour speech. He announced that Cuba is cancelling the \$73.8 million debt owed by Nicaragua..."

"... A speech was also delivered by Jaime

Wheelock [a Sandinista leader, who said]: 'Without the contribution of the Cuban revolution, it would have been totally impossible to build this refinery...'

The article goes on to take up the whole of page 9, which consists almost entirely of quotations from Castro's speech.

Both in style and in content, 'The Militant' is like a Cuban embassy news-sheet. The SWP has even set up a travel company to organise trips to Cuba and Nicaragua to 'see the revolution'.

The SWP consider the Sandinistas and — especially — the Cuban leadership to be Marxist. A resolution submitted to the USFI World Congress comments that:

"There is a political convergence between our world current and other revolutionists in the Americas, in the first place the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba, who are charting a course in practice that leads to re-establishing continuity with the internationalist programme and strategy of the Communist International in Lenin's time".

### Ethiopia, Poland, Iran

This claim has implications, of course, for how the SWP views the world. A case can be made that Cuban foreign policy in *Central America* is in the direction of aiding rather than crushing revolutions. But beyond Central America it is a different story — Cuba actively backs the Ethiopian dictatorship against the Eritrean people fighting for self-determination; Cuba backed Jaruzelski's crushing of Solidarnosc. (Two facts which alone ridicule the title of an SWP publication, 'Cuba's Internationalist Foreign Policy, 1975-80'). And even in Central America the argument is dubious: in Mexico, where there is a powerful workers' movement, Cuba has a warm attitude to the ruling party, the PRI.

This is a crucial point. Even where Castro aids revolutionary struggles, he does so from his own viewpoint, with his own aims. And that viewpoint, those aims, are not those of independent working-class action. Castro's whole conception of revolution and of socialism is different from ours.

At the peak of Cuban involvement in revolutionary struggles internationally, in the mid to late '60s, their concern was with the Third World and that alone. Castroism is a form of radical Third-Worldist populism: it rejects the very idea of working-class revolutionary action in the advanced capitalist countries. And in the so-called non-aligned movement, Cuba allies with thoroughly bourgeois and often dictatorial Third World governments. In the Third World, too, their perspective is not that of working-class self-liberation.

Of course, the SWP have had to try to cope with Castro's line on Poland. This, they admit, is a mistake — but a mistake committed by a revolutionary... Fine revolutionaries these, you may think, whose 'mistakes' consist of supporting counter-revolutionary violence against the class.

But such matters are of no importance. On the contrary, the Cubans "have set an example of proletarian internationalism in action", and have cleverly "refused to allow a wedge to be driven between Cuba and the Soviet and East European workers' states". Such a wedge — criticism of Jaruzelski? — is undesirable because of "the decisive role of economic and military aid to the Cuban revolution from the Soviet Union". In other words, the SWP has so lost its political bearings that it consciously covers up for the Cuban leadership, and justifies Cuba's political alignment with Moscow.

The SWP has completely collapsed independent working-class politics into a crude view of international power-politics 'blocs' or 'camps' — one that does indeed marry with Castroism very neatly. In the SWP's world there is only 'Imperialism' and 'The Revolution' fighting it out. Socialists must choose their camp.

This leads them to reactionary political conclusions.

"Should workers be 'neutral' in the war between Iraq and Iran?" 'The Militant' asks (18 May 1984). They answer emphatically no.

"We view this war — and all wars today — from the standpoint of the international fight against imperialism and the struggle to advance the world socialist revolution. [The Iranian revolution] strengthened the world working class. The Iraqi invasion... helped serve the interests of US imperialism... An Iranian victory in the war would be an inspiration for all those fighting imperialist oppression in the Mideast".

And what about Iranian oppositionists fighting the Khomeini regime? Certainly, 'The Militant' admits, there has been a clampdown on the left; the regime is bourgeois; and it is not as anti-imperialist as Nicaragua.

"In 1981, the regime took advantage of a terrorist campaign against the revolution — led by a petty-bourgeois radical group called the Mujahedeen — to carry out sweeping arrests and executions... [but the working class] refused to defend the Mujahedeen because they correctly saw its assassination campaign as aiding the imperialists and monarchists".

The SWP criticises government attacks on the left, on the working class, and on the national minorities. But there is no question of siding with opposition to Khomeini. It is all in the context of 'defence of the Iranian revolution'.

"The workers are in a stronger position to fight for their interests today — under the Islamic Republic — than they were under the Shah... Under conditions where the Iranian masses are not ready to replace the current regime with a workers' and peasants' government... overthrow of Khomeini can only be in the interests of imperialism".

In real terms, therefore, the SWP is against any opposition to the Khomeini regime. How is a workers' and peasants' government to be formed if not by socialists agitating? And to put forward even elementary democratic demands in present-day Iran would put militants in very sharp conflict with Khomeini.

The SWP's whole perspective is permeated with the 'campist' idea that 'the Iranian revolution' advances the interests of the masses regardless of what it — i.e. the Iranian state — does to them.

### Workerism

The SWP have inevitably been led into support of the brutal regime of the Derg in Ethiopia (which is fully supported by Cuba). Reports of the Ethiopian famine in 'The Militant' say the Derg is not to blame at all; and they do not mention even the existence of Eritrea and Tigre, never mind the bitter wars of liberation taking place there against the Derg.

The SWP's international turn has gone hand in hand with some odd turns in their domestic orientation.

In 1978 they embarked upon a 'turn to industry' — that is, an attempt to send most of their organisation into industrial jobs. So far, so good. Others in the USFI objected that the turn to industry was how-

ever being seen as a 'cure-all'. That is an understatement. For the SWP the turn to industry is positively magical.

"... the concrete working-class outlook we gained by being based in industry oriented us to respond as a proletarian internationalist party to the revolutionary advances being registered by workers and exploited rural producers in the Americas" ('New International' vol.2 no.1, p.27).

So the adaptation to Castroism is justified via a workerism no less crude for being metaphysical. The SWP has become more proletarian and the Cuban revolution has become more proletarian; ergo, their paths converge.

### The Mandelites and the SWP

Simultaneously the party programme has been amended. 'For a workers' government' has been replaced by 'For a workers' and farmers' government'. This in the US where the percentage of the labour force in agriculture (i.e. wage-labourers as well as the SWP's 'working farmers') is only 2%. It would be as rational to call for a 'workers' and small shopkeepers' government' — probably more so.

SWP articles on the current — very real — agricultural crisis in the US sing hymns of praise to Cuban achievements to be adopted as a model — as if the two countries were remotely comparable.

Perhaps the sickest quirk of the SWP's turn in US politics is its attitude to the Jews. When during the presidential election Jesse Jackson referred to New York as 'Hymie-town', the SWP jumped to his defence.

SWP presidential candidate Mel Mason spelled it out:

"I strongly condemn the racist slander campaign against Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam... In spite of Jackson's retraction of the remark, he, and all Blacks, were smeared as anti-semites..."

"As to Farrakhan's comments on Hitler ... Farrakhan said that some Jews 'call me Hitler'. Answering them Farrakhan said that Hitler was 'a great man' who 'rose Germany up from nothing'..."

"Farrakhan, however, went on to say that since he is 'rising his people up from nothing' there might be some superficial likeness between himself and Hitler, but otherwise 'don't compare me with your wicked killers.'" ('The Militant', 27 April 1984).

It is clear, then, that the SWP today is a very long way indeed from revolutionary Marxism. Why is a party so hostile to Trotskyism part of a movement calling itself the Fourth International? And why does that 'Fourth International' tolerate them?

On some important issues, the Mandelites majority have stuck to a form of Marxist orthodoxy. They have stood by the theory of permanent revolution, for example. They — or at least their better sections, like the French, the West German or the Swedish — are recognisably trying to relate a body of ideas derived from historic Trotskyism to the actual events of today. The SWP, by contrast, appears to have lost any connection with historic Trotskyism and with large parts of reality; it is more like one of the Maoist groups of the early '70s, with Havana substituted for Peking, than even a decayed form of Trotskyism. The SWP is an isolated sect, internally a bureaucratic cult, which must appear bizarre to most US leftists. The Mandelite organisations are, as a rule, less degenerate.

Yet the Mandelite version of Marxist 'orthodoxy' is fatally coloured by the very

'campism' they seek to criticise.

Permanent revolution is not, for the Mandelites, a strategy, but a process. Maoists, Castroists, Sandinistas, are *compelled* by the 'historical process' to carry out the socialist revolution.

This notion leads the Mandelites into big theoretical difficulties.

Michel Lowy, a leading Mandelite theoretician, has produced a detailed theoretical exposition of their views on permanent revolution, entitled 'The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development'. Lowy confronts the theoretical problem — that capitalism has been overthrown by forces other than the working class led by genuine Marxist parties — in such a way as to define it out of existence rhetorically. Did these revolutions (Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam), Lowy asks, occur "under the leadership of the proletariat... and more precisely under the direction of a proletarian (communist) party"? (p.107). He answers yes. 'Communist' party equals proletarian party equals proletariat. The real problem — that the Chinese revolution, for example, was carried out by a peasant army — is thus not confronted but avoided.

"The parties", Lowy claims, "were the *political* and *programmatic* expression of the proletariat, by virtue of their adherence to the historic interests of the working class (abolition of capitalism, etc.)... the parties' *ideologies* were proletarian and the membership and periphery were systematically educated to accept the values and world view of the international working-class movement" (pp.214-5, emphasis in original).

For a Trotskyist to conclude that Stalinist parties, like the Vietnamese, which massacred the Trotskyists in 1946-7, or the Chinese, which suppressed all independent working-class activity on its entry into the cities, were politically, programmatically and ideologically proletarian is to retreat into mysticism. If this is how to defend 'orthodoxy', then better be revisionist!

### The Mandelites on Nicaragua

A view of permanent revolution such as this is no real answer to the SWP. It indicates that the Mandelites lack the theoretical tools seriously to challenge the SWP.

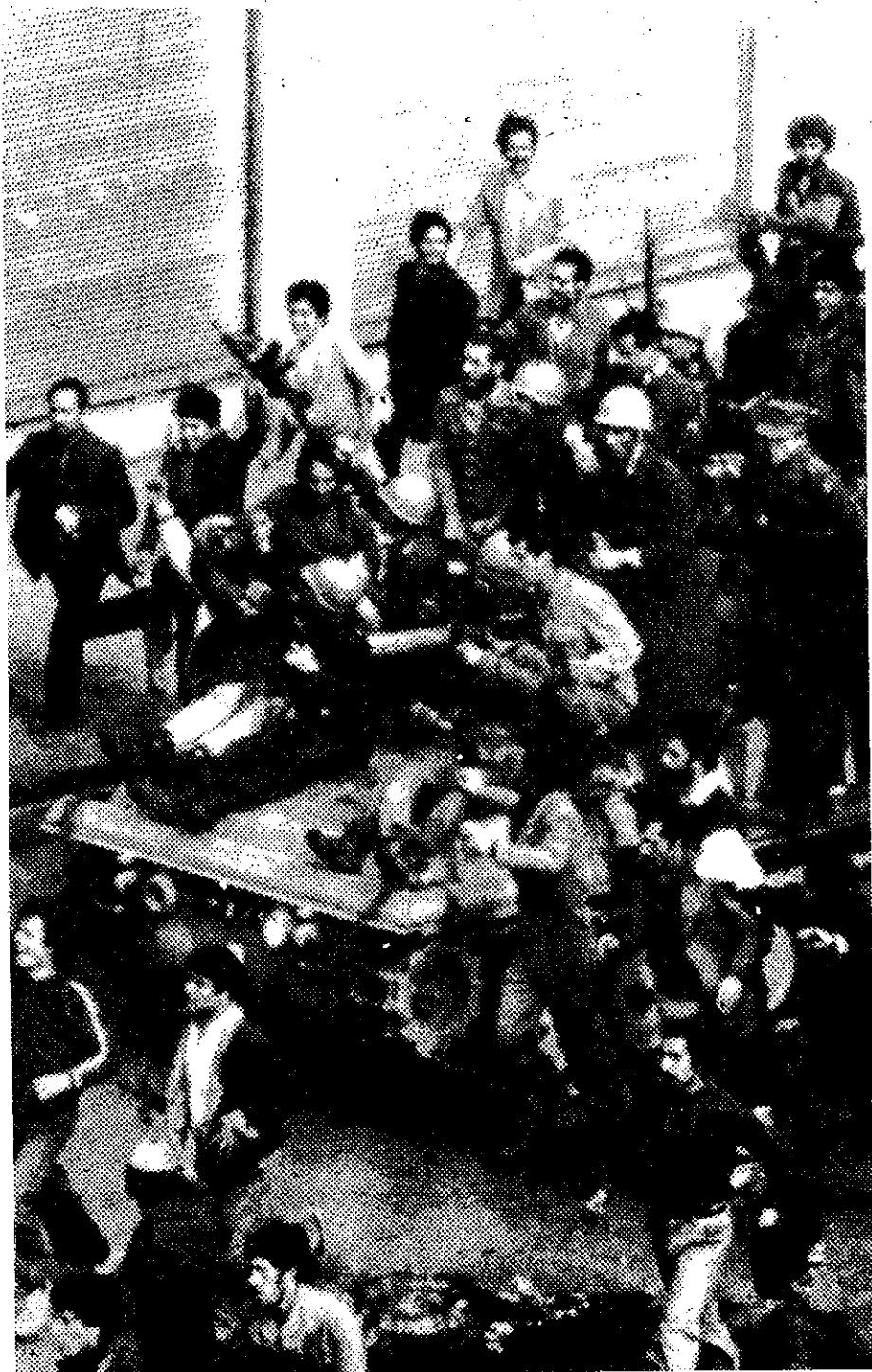
On Cuba, their differences are essentially to do with *assessment*: the Mandelites are slightly more critical. On Nicaragua, the Mandelites are if anything *less* critical: the debate at the 1985 USFI World Congress apparently focused on whether Cuba or Nicaragua is the real socialist model.

Daniel Bensaid, a leader of the Mandel current, spoke revealingly in an interview in 'International Viewpoint' (17 June 1985):

"... the Nicaraguan revolution represents a challenge for us. It is a revolution made by others, and at the beginning we understood it badly..."

"Did the Sandinistas lead their revolution in spite of themselves, despite their policy of alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie, despite their conception of economic transition?... Today... we recognise that the Sandinistas won *thanks to* their policy and not 'in spite of it'... The proletariat can have different allies at different times in the revolutionary process". (Emphasis added).

So the USFI have learned from the Nicaraguan revolution that... alliances with the bourgeoisie work! It is the same basic problem as with Cuba two decades ago: a failure to look towards an independent working-class perspective, combined in this case with bewilderment at their own irrele-



Khomeini supporters on a tank in Teheran

vance. Bensaid also, incidentally, discusses the SWP's abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution as an understandable reaction to dogmatic sectarianism...

### Salah Jaber's theory

What it amounts to is a chronic inability to deal with reality without suffering gross illusions in 'revolutionists of action'. But it has to be *theorised*. And it has to be theor-

ised in counterposition to the SWP's revisions. Lebanese Mandelite Salah Jaber has performed the task.

In a long article in 'Quatrieme Internationale', 'Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', Jaber spells out what now seems to be common ground among the USFI majority. Paraphrasing Engels, he writes:

"Of late, the philistine Eurocommunist has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the

Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at Nicaragua. That is the dictatorship of the proletariat" (November 1984, p.114).

Jaber surveys working-class history since the Paris Commune in a polemic directed against the SWP. His essential point is that the class character of the state is determined by the 'armed bodies of men'.

"The destruction of the armed forces of the bourgeoisie by the armed forces of the workers marks the birth of a workers' state" (p.63).

Whether or not the state carries out nationalisations is, he argues, completely irrelevant. And by these criteria Nicaragua has been a workers' state — not a 'workers' and farmers' government', as the SWP would have it — from the moment that the Sandinistas took power.

Previous USFI positions are, Jaber states, absurd. The SWP's notion that China, for example, became a workers' state around 1955 — after the final wave of nationalisations — is a theoretical confusion. There was a workers' state in China from 1931 when the Maoists established a regional government in Kiangsi.

On Cuba, Jaber is yet more forthright.

"A movement of the masses as proletarian, if not more, than those of the Paris Commune, endowed with an ideology at least as radical as that of the Commune, which totally destroyed the bourgeois army, to the gain of a rebel Army, as proletarian if not more so than the Federation de la Garde Nationale, what is that? A 'government of workers and peasants'? A 'dual power sui generis'? No, comrades: it is the dictatorship of the proletariat" (p.101). Moreover, "In this sense... Fidel better understands the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state than... Mandel [or] the SWP".

### Squaring the circles

Jaber confuses a number of issues. His main argument, that nationalisations do not determine the class nature of the state, and that the old state apparatus — specifically the 'armed bodies of men' — must be smashed, is obviously true. But the notion that 'relations of production' have nothing to do with it is ridiculous.

A new state apparatus, installed by a revolutionary army, can be transformed into a refurbished bourgeois state. Only if we give full political trust to the Sandinistas could we say that their military victory immediately defined a workers' state.

To square the circles of his theory, Jaber must eventually resort to the same fiction as Lowy: that the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. Communist Parties were politically workers' parties.

On some issues the Mandelites have quite sharp political disagreements with the SWP — notably Poland and Iran. But they are by no means uniformly clearer on basic tasks of independent working-class action.

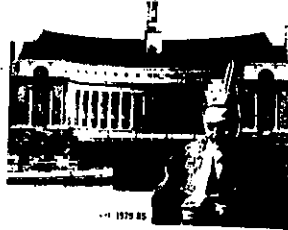
In the South Atlantic war, the USFI majority shared the approach that viewed Argentina's war as 'a just national liberation struggle' — although one of the USFI groups in Argentina, Nuevo Curso, argued that the war was reactionary on both sides.

The Mandelites share with the SWP a political tradition and world view. The SWP have drawn out its logic more fully: but the Mandelites do not represent a real Marxist alternative.

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