The "IS-SWP tradition" 2

The experience of the left

The SWP is, despite everything, the biggest self-styled revolutionary Marxist organisation in Britain today. More than that: there are a lot of ex-members of the SWP (called IS before 1977) around.

It is now what the Healy organisation was in the late 50s and through the 60s — a machine for maiming militants.

Politically, it has assumed the traditional role of anarchism. It is a movement of incompetent militant protest living politically from moment to moment, with no strategy and not much in the way of stable politics. It has one goal only — to "build the party": the party conceived as a fetish outside of politics and history, cut off from the real working class and its movement.

As an organisation it is a rigidly authoritarian variant of the Stalinist model of a party. It is organised around a pope, Tony Cliff, who has the power to loose, blind and eject. In terms of the organisation of its intellectual life it is pre-bourgeois, in fact medieval.

Like the Healy organisation before it, the SWP leaves most of its ex-members politically bewildered and disoriented.

To help straitjacketed ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers its real history, we publish the symposium that follows. There will be other contributions in subsequent issues. We invite contributions. The discussion is completely free. Should representatives of the SWP wish to participate, they will be welcome.

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.

The end of the "Rank and File"

By Jim Higgins*

SOME TIME in 1959 I attended an aggregate meeting of the Socialist Review Group (SRG). The atmosphere was relaxed and easy-going and Cliff, if excitable, appeared modest and had a sense of humour. I recall that his main exhortation at the time was: "The comrades have got to start pulling their socks." I liked this and the atmosphere, so I joined. I was a member for the next sixteen years and the National Secretary from 1971 to 1973. In 1975 I was expelled. By this time modesty was at a premium and the only humour of the gal lows variety.

In 1959 the membership was measured in tens, certainly less than 100. There were a very few industrial workers. Most notable was George Ward, ex-Revolutionary Communist Party and a convenor at an engineering works, ENW. Another was Karl Dunbar. I suppose I was part of the leadership of the group for most of my membership. In the beginning this was because with so few people to do anything, anyone who turned up and showed willing could take on any task he looked halfway able to perform.

The IS's politics were essentially Cliff's version of state capitalism and Kidron's "permanent arms economy." Day-to-day activity was derived from Cliff's intuition on how best he could add to the membership. As Kidron said at one time: "Cliff is a peasant, a very talented peasant, but a peasant." The internal regime was extremely tolerant. The only person I recall we expelled was Sid Bidwell and that was for advocating street quotas for Asian immigrants in Southall. Part of this liberal spirit I think was a reaction to the draconian regime that Healy had run and also because a liberal face to the group made it most attractive to the Labour Party, CND, and Labour Party Young Socialist people who were the focus of recruitment.

Of course, in many ways a lax attitude to organisation and discipline is ideal for someone like Cliff, who can do more or less what he fancies. Certainly there was a fair amount of that going on, and it was a powerful reason why some of us supported the move to democratic centralism in the late 1960s, so that, we thought, we could submit Cliff to some collective responsibility.

There is some kind of notion that the organisation was consciously Luxemburgist in its libertarian phase. This seems to be a confusion. Luxemburg and Jogiches were not libertarian in party matters and the prevailing view in the SRG was that in the Luxemburg-Lenin disputes, Lenin had the better of the arguments. I recall writing a review of Nettl's book on Luxemburg, which came to just those conclusions and I am sure that this would have been discussed with Cliff.

State capitalism was the theory that was the most consistent part of IS theory. Like all those theories — workers' state and bureaucratic collectivism — its main use is to argue against the others and it is best left to internal bulletins and hobbyists. It did play a role, however, and for those who reasonably felt that Stalinism was an abomination, state capitalism was an attractive theory. Regardless of the theory's overall validity, it certainly enshrined the workers, their condition and their relationship to others in society, as the centre of any serious Marxist analysis. This factor, together with a similar emphasis in Luxemburg, was important in setting a long-term agenda dedicated to recruiting workers into the group as a prelude to forming the party. This, I think, is what people talk about when they refer to the IS tradition. The attitude differed from the orthodox Fourth Internationalists, who whatever they said, saw the Party, small but imperialist formed, that is, needed to get bigger through fusion, entrenchment and campaigning. In this sense, the IS group was in transition but it was not centralist (that is, oscillating between reform and revolution) as Workers' Fight charged.

Work in the Labour Party Young Socialists and among students brought recruits who formed the basis for an organisation...
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that could contemplate modest attempts to approach workers on strike and in various union disputes. At the same time we began to develop our ideas about the experience of the Minority Movement in the 1920s. The idea of the rank and file movement as the bridge to the party was an attractive one. At this time there were 250,000 engineering shop stewards and many thousands more lay trade union bodies. There is no space to detail all the reasons why the development of the Rank and File Movement was considered appropriate, suffice it to say that there was a general agreement at all levels in the International Socialists, not least in the mind of Tony Cliff, that this was the perspective.

Despite this agreement on a course that must inevitably involve a long haul, Cliff could not always suppress his “peasant” instinct. One such was the unity campaign of 1968. The hope was to acquire the Revolutionary Socialist League [forerunner of the Militant] or the International Marxist Group, or at least a large lump of their cadre, and in the event we got Workers’ Fight. The mechanics of this “fusion” was that Cliff met Sean Matgamna in a back room somewhere and the job was done. Nobody in IS, not the EC nor the National Committee, knew anything about it until we woke one day to find we had acquired a fully fledged tendency, all geared up for an extended faction fight. Sean must have thought it was Christmas. Three years later an augmented WF was defused to seek fresh fields to conquer. If there had been a proper pre-fusion discussion, it probably would not have happened and certainly there would have been a running-in period significantly shorter than three years. Certainly, part of the subsequently illiberal regime in IS was due to the desire not to suffer another long and debilitating faction fight.

The early 1970s were years of increasing militancy. My personal view was that this new wave was of particular importance. For the first time since the war there seemed to be the chance that militancy might go beyond trade demands. It was a period when we might be able to build something significant, along the lines of our rank and file perspective. Cliff agreed that there was something new taking place.

We resolved to prepare for a conference to set up a rank and file movement in November 1973. It is worth saying that at this time IS had some 3,000 members, nearly half of them manual workers. The group produced a number of rank and file papers, with a combined circulation of 30,000. There were operational Rank and File Groups in the teachers, miners, engineering, post office unions and in the T&GWU, ASTMS and TASS and others I cannot recall off-hand. Modest though these achievements were they were better than anything we had before. Not only that, there was the responsibility that, if Rank and File organisation was not developed, then the Communist Party would play its traditional role of delivering the rank and file into the hands of the trade union leadership.

“The shop stewards and trade unionists whom we had for years sought to influence and recruit were rejected in favour of the young and traditionless.”

Then had:
- A working class base.
- A framework of rank and file activity.
- A number of Rank and File publications.
- A duty to supplant the CP.
- A rising tide of working-class militancy.
- That was the plus side of the equation. On the other side we had Cliff.

Cliff was convinced by two northern organisers that they could not get anyone to the proposed Rank and File Conference. These were Roger Roswall (at the time a particular favourite of Cliff) when last heard of this loathsome creature was adviser to Lady Porter) and John Charlton (there is nothing interesting to say about him, absolutely nothing). But they did think they could get coachloads of the young and enthusiastic to a rally.

At the next meeting of the IS Executive Committee, Cliff proposed replacing the conference with a rally. After the vote Cliff and one of his satraps, I think Harman, were in a minority of two. Cliff immediately demanded three months’ leave of absence so that he could go off to Nigel Harris’s cottage to finish volume one of his book on Lenin. Duncan Hallas, who was deputy National Secretary, and I knew what this meant. Cliff would spend three months organising a counter coup and in the course of it run up such a phone bill as to ruin Nigel Harris. We proposed to the National Committee that we should hold the rally and the Rank and File Conference. We would prove the validity of the differing views in life.

Both the rally and the Conference were a success in terms of attendance etc; but the long term neither worked. Cliff was now seized with the notion that mature shop stewards and lay trade union officials were bent, rotted by reformism. Those people we had for years sought to influence and recruit were rejected in favour of the young and traditionless. Free from all taint of reformism they would take on the shop stewardships and the role of the leadership. For them we needed rallies and excitement and stunts. Recruitment became the be-all and end-all of activity. More organisers were appointed and league tables published showing who made the most members each month. Funnily enough, a more significant table would have been, how many remained members at the end of the following month, because the answer was not many.

This cult of the young worker obviously required further changes. A day-to-day leadership of mature adults, with experience in the movement and in the trade unions, were not suitable for this new field of endeavour. The EC was recast. Such elements as Duncan Hallas, Nigel Harris, and Roger Protz etc. were removed to be replaced with ace recruiters from the provinces. Roger Kiene, Roger Rosewall, John Charlton were among those who turned up occasionally to fulfil this new activist leadership role. Cliff, as the man who thought up this idiocy, was a fixture.

I remained for a while as National Secretary, until I became tired of meetings starting half an hour late so that Cliff and his young leaders could caucus and make all the decisions that were then presented to me at the formal session. Such childishly destructive behaviour was absurd and I resigned, taking up a job on Socialist Worker.

Together with Duncan Hallas, Roger Protz (editor of Socialist Worker), Gwion Williams, John Palmer and others we formed an IS Opposition. From the point of view of continuing employment this was an error, but not one I regret. Not too much time passed before Cliff and Harman had sufficiently wound up two of the journalists on Socialist Worker, Paul Foot and Laurie Flynn, neither of whom were noted for.
intestinal fortitude or political independence, to press for the sinking of myself and Roger Protz. As the EC had initiated the move, they did not waste too much time in debate before accepting the request.

The opposition debated the questions with Cliff at a number of regional aggregates and were hopeful of getting a substantial number of delegacies to the conference. These hopes came to nothing when the constitution was illegally changed making it impossible for us to achieve any more than a handful of delegacies.

As part of the same ultra-leftism, a group of some 20 AUEW members were expelled in Birmingham. Their crime was twofold: support for the IS Opposition platform and disagreement with the running of an IS candidate in an AUEW election (I think for President). As experienced trade unionists of some service and standing they had worked in the broad left and the question of the candidate to support had been agreed long before IS thought to run its own man. Finding themselves unable to renegade on commitments freely made, they were all expelled. The whole episode provides an object lesson that Cliff’s famously intuitive nose and some energetic young organisers, are really no substitute for knowledge of the working-class movement. But then as Stan Newens wrote in the last issue of Workers’ Liberty, “Cliff never really understood the British labour movement.”

Actually I would go further than Stan, I do not think he understands the workers anywhere, he has met hardly any. His oft repeated dedication to the working class is in practice making much of those who happened to agree with him at any given time and then dropping them with a sickening thud as soon as they disagree.

The IS Opposition was expelled and all in some 250 people left with them.

The years since then do not seem to have changed the nature of the group, except that it is now allegedly a party and it is somewhat farther from success than it was 20 years ago. Do I blame Cliff for most of this? Well actually I do.

Socialist Review and libertarian Marxism

James D Young*

WHEN I WAS a twenty-four-year-old student at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1955, I met and formed a friendship with Michael Kidron, the editor of Socialist Review. As a student who opted to specialise in British working-class history, I had eight years of socialist activity as an unskilled industrial worker behind me. Indeed, I was elected as the secretary of the Trades and Labour Council in my home town of Grangemouth when I was an inexperienced nineteen year old youngster. Although I came into the labour movement as a man of independent mind my parents and grandfather had identified with the Independent Labour Party and later on the Labour Party. To understand why I was always critically supportive of the Trotskyist tradition from 1955 onwards, I never felt myself to be an ‘outsider’. ‘Entry work’ and ‘catharsis’ always seemed to be an expression of a mentality utterly alien to me.

During my penultimate term at Ruskin in the spring of 1955, when I was chairing a public meeting of the Oxford University branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain, John Gollan, assistant editor of the Daily Worker, denounced Kidron as a ‘Trotskyist’. I simply had not heard of Leon Trotsky or ‘Trotskyism’ at that time; but when I defended Kidron’s right to free speech inside the labour movement, he must have known that I was a potential recruit. Coincidentally, the only book by Trotsky in the Ruskin library was his History of the Russian Revolution; and it made a big impact on my thinking. Meanwhile Kidron told me about Tony Cliff and gave me a copy of Cliff’s book Stalinist Russia: A State Capitalist Analysis. Having read Trotsky’s Revolution Betrayed by then, Kidron never removed all of my doubts about Cliff’s analysis of the class nature of modern Russia. But I joined the Socialist Review group towards the end of 1955, and I began to write for the paper before settling in London for a few years. I returned to Scotland in the autumn of 1962.

Until my last two years in London, when I worked as the publishing manager of the New Statesman, I was employed by the Oxford University Press. Already a part-time lecturer for the National Council of Labour Colleges, I soon met and formed close friendships with Seymour and Donna Pappert, David Pryn and other members of the Young Socialist section of the Socialist Review group. What struck me about Trotskyism and the Trotskyist groups in Britain at that time was their utter cultural alienation from everything ‘British’ or ‘Scottish’ or Irish.

Contemplating those years now, it strikes me as odd that on the one occasion when I raised the question of us doing more systematic work within the NLC, Cliff said that those of us who thought we had time to work for the NLC could do so as individuals. At the same time, Cliff tried to pull me up before a meeting of the national committee for taking his daughter to a football match. Arguing that no one was a ‘serious socialist’ could even think about going to football matches, he was ridiculed by other members of the leadership. And the younger socialists in the Group were, in fact, very proud that Cliff could not boss us about as Gerry Healy bossed and bullied his members. Moreover, on the only occasion when I won the vote against Cliff and Kidron, the so-called ‘ultra-left tendency’ to which I belonged persuaded the Group to participate in the first Aldermaston march against the Bomb.

I was already quite well-known in the Labour Party and Labour League of Youth (LLOY) in Scotland, anyway, and worked in the LLOY and in the NLC without any sense of being an ‘outsider’, though I was one of the few non-Jews among the London membership of the Socialist Review group. The Holocaust still figured very largely in our discussions; and in those years Cliff and Kidron were anti-Leninist and very critical of the whole Bolshevik heritage.

Differing from himself from Gerry Healy, Isaac Deutscher, Boilevish, ‘state socialism’, and ‘orthodox Trotskyism’, Cliff surprised me in those years by being very sympathetic towards University education. Although Cliff and Kidron took their state capitalist analysis of Russia and Eastern Europe very seriously, most of the members including myself found Shachtman’s concept of bureaucratic collectivism a more convincing explanation of what had gone wrong with the Russian revolution of 1917. What kept the Group together and allowed the young members to recruit new members was the emphasis on libertarian Marxism in the concrete shape of workers’ control, workers’ democracy and the egalitarianism seen in Paris Commune of 1871 and in the early stages of the Russian revolution.

Cliff, Kidron and the small group of relatives around him in the leadership made it clear again and again that they simply wanted to keep the Group together. Keep
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ing the Group together seemed to be more
important than doctrinal questions includ-
ing state capitalism, though Cliff and Kidron
in the revision against 'Leninist excesses'
in crushing parliamentary institutions and
trade union democracy in Russia in the very
early 1920s and the Holocaust, seemed to
have an emotional need for a Biblical Ark.
At the same time, they fostered the idea of
socialism through parliamentary politics
and contact with Labour MPs.

At a time when Yigael Gluckstein/Cliff
had produced Mao's China and Stalin's
Satellites in Eastern Europe and right wing
Social Democracy in Europe was in the
ascendency, Cliff in particular was very pes-
simistic about 'the future of socialism.' Even
the attempt to resurrect Rosa Luxemburg
as a figure of anti-state socialism was an
expression of despair, not optimism. The
survival of the group for the day when the
revolution would surely come in 'the next
or the next again century' was very impor-
tant. It was an expression of the cultural
traditions that Cliff and Kidron had inher-
ited elsewhere.

Alread repelled by Stalinist immorality,
I saw the same anti-socialist-humanist phe-
nomena in the Socialist Review group. Distor-
ting Kant's view of the 'crooked timber'
of existing humanity by conceiving of
working people as history's instruments or
the 'imperfect human material' to be manip-
ulated, used and, if need be, discarded by
the 'superior' vanguard Party, members of
the Group were also seen in this light.
Although I was already half-aware of this at
the time, I and others persevered because we
had a much more optimistic perspec-
tive.

In defence of the Socialist Review group
in those years, I was given space to express
my own views. Against the orthodoxy of
the time, I wrote about such Scottish social-
ist novelists as James Barke, Grasiss Gibson
as well as the Scottish national question
from a Marxist standpoint. Moreover,
although Seymour and Donna Papek, David
Prynn, myself and others were hostile to the
then potential Parliamentarians in our ranks
with their thinly disguised racist views, we
studied hard, sought inspiration in the writ-
ings of the young Marx, etc., etc.

Again we worked with men and women
in Gerry Healy's group and when the Social-
ist Labour League (SLL) was formed we
worked with their younger members who
remained in the Labour League of Youth.
Contributing to the Labour Review under
the fine editorship of the admirable Peter
Fryer before and after the SLL was formed,
we had all been inspired by the workers'
councils thrown up by the Hungarian rev-
olution. Seymour was our link with
Comenius Castorials's Socialisme ou Bar-
barte group in Paris and we spent
considerable time in correspondence and
sharing ideas with members of that group.
Bessie Danyeyevskaya visited me in London
and I wrote one of the first British reviews
of Raya's Marxism and Freedom.

It was a busy time; but we learned the
hard way that democratic, class-struggle
socialism must be a do-it-yourself move-
ment, anyway. What strikes me as so
depressing about almost all the 'Marxist'
groups in 1995 is that they are stuck in var-
ious emotional and time warps. They seem
to be incapable of asking such simple and
important questions as: 'where did Marx-
ism come from?' Of course, everyone who
allows the 'superior' vanguard group/Party
to do his/her thinking for them will predi-
cably respond, according to
Kaushky/Lenin, by saying 'out of the heads
of the bourgeois intellectuals.'

But until young people entering the
gigantic class struggles of the next century
are made familiar with Antonio Labriola's
observation that Marxism itself was 'born
in the soul of the oppressed' socialism will
not escape from the trap of a delayed total-
itarian 1964ism. As I have battled during
the last five years against cancer and heart
disease to complete my history of Socialist
Martyrs, I have become increasingly grate-
ful to some of the 'cultural capital' that I
acquired during those fruitfull years in the
Socialist Review group. I am also grateful
that I had come out of a tradition of Scot-
tish radicalism that is much older — and
more disaffected and carnalious — than
the Marxism I still regard as potentially lib-
erating. And in contrast to Eric Hobsbawm,
who depicts the 'short twentieth century'
between 1914 and 1991 as an "age of exter-
mines" I think it has been an age of One-
Sided Class Warfare against the Poor.

In helping to keep the idea of resistance
to injustice and inequality alive during the
second half of the decade of the 1990s,
those of us on the Left of the Socialist
Review group made a modest contribution
to socialist ideas. They remain relevant in
1995 and I for one still subscribe to the
noble idea express by Bernard Rosenberg
in his article 'Marxism: Conflict and/or
Action':

"The weapon of criticism is undoubtedly
inadequate. Who on that account would
choose to surrender it?"

A rebellion of trade unionists

By Mike McGrath*

I JOINED THE International Socialists in
1966 and left the SWP in 1982.
In 1966 there were about 300 of us in
a very lively, activist organisation.
I had been an anarchist before 66 and I
saw IS distinguishing itself from the
Communist Party and that tradition in the
USSR. I also saw a decline in the trade union
rank and file.

By 1966 they had already had some dis-
cussion about involvement in the Labour
Party's youth section. And earlier in the
1960s they had been more involved.

I suppose IS just drifted out, in that well
known empirical way. Certainly no one
ever said to me: "you really should join the
Labour Party'.

In 1966 IS was not a highly centralised
group. It was federalist. Nevertheless, that
is not to say there was not a group of peo-
lle running the organisation — perhaps in
a more covert, rather than overt, way. Per-
haps they even had more power over the
organisation than under a clear, democra-
tic, centralised structure.

Although the organisation was not par-
ticularly democratic, before the major
fractional fighting of the early 1970s there
was not actually much conflict, and the
actual nature of the regime was not
exposed. Without conflict the issue is not
actually very prominent and the matter is
submerged beneath how to build, how to
extend our influence.

Steve Jeffries and myself were involved in
the "Micro Faction" of the late '60s, which
raised the centralised-decentralised organi-
sation issue. But this was a small matter and
the issue only blew up properly in the
1970s.

It is true that the Trotskyist Tendency
was expelled in late 1971, but that group
was regarded as very much a group of out-
siders. I voted to get rid of this Tendency
as a group which was "not reformable".
The older, consensual group united

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1970s, and secretary of the 'Faction for Revolu-
tionary Democracy'.

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against what was perceived as an outside threat. With hindsight the consensus group was, itself, developing tensions. This was the group which opposed the leadership’s proposals on democratic centralism in the early ‘70s was a very significant opposition, Jim Higgins, Granville Williams, Roger Proz and a large number of second ranking cadres — like me (at the time I was branch secretary of the large Stoke Newington branch).

There was a fundamental dispute and as a result a number of people were expelled for persisting in what was called “overt factionalising”. A lot of others just left IS.

At the next conference there was a re-run of the previous year’s argument. We set up FRED, the Faction for Revolutionary Democracy, with 130 or 140 signatories. Mainly, by this time, those involved were second ranking people — myself, Mike Heym and Ross Pritchard. We were not so much opposed to the leadership itself, just the way the organisation was restructuring. Some of the issues were detail — the size of the National Committee, the power of the Central Committee, the introduction of election from District Committees as distinct from branches — and the fundamental question had already been fought out, and decided, in the previous year.

We had quite a bit of backing, but only got two delegates to conference.

We got absolutely obliterated — completely wiped out. By this time most of the key oppositionists had left IS — one way or another.

In retrospect it was just a last gasp. Much of the opposition came from people like me who were active in the unions, building up rank and file organisations. In that year I instigated a paper called Redder Tape in the civil service.

There was a certain “syndicalist” element running through our opposition. We were bound up in rank and file groups in the unions and day-to-day, we fought the Stalinists and the bureaucrats and we did not like the new democratic centralism in our organisation, IS. I was working so hard in the union it was difficult to compete with a full-time leadership who had time on their hands. The fact they had more time than us was actually a major source of their power.

Is then moved on to gimnick-style politics in the mid-70s with the Right To Work Campaign. This was very much forced upon us. It was the sort of front politics that we spent our lives in the unions confronting.

For an oppositionist I was still comparatively influential. A few of us had bases in the unions and they did not really want to kick us out. I suppose if we had been very arrogant they would have got rid of us. But we were no longer an organisation then — they had us on board and threw us a few crumbs. We ran Central London District at the time.

Later I was the only person on the National Council to oppose declaring the Socialist Workers Party. I appeared to be the only person on that body who could see what was going to happen. They actually developed the decision that the SWP was a Party in the European Marxist — Leninist — sense. They came to believe that the party was genuinely representative of the advanced workers. It manifested was not! The “Party” tried to substitute itself for the class.

One of the political consequences of that delusion was an ossifying of the organisation, internally.

I was going to say that the declaration of the SWP was an important decision — but perhaps it was not so important. After all the basic decision had already been made earlier in the ‘70s. Declaring the SWP just took the process further and was one of the false political consequences of the previous fight — in the early ’80s the rank-and-file union organisations and Redder Tape were shut down. And so was Women’s Voice. They went through a lunatic period where they said that to be a shop steward was to be corrupt.

But by this time there was no internal dis- sension of significance, just isolated individuals. Why did I stay until 1987? If you want to be political there is not a lot of choice. I have never been an Orthodox Trotskyist, buying the Transitional Programme and the workers states theory. The Communist Party is out of the question. I would only join the Labour Party if there was a serious entrist movement.

Then there is the wilderness, so I stayed as long as I could. 

The experience of the left

If you want more documentation about the day to day politics of the SWP in the trade unions and student movement, and on political issues like the call two years ago for a general strike, read these pamphlets.

The Fake Ultra-Left .......................... Xp
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