

*Alliance for Workers' Liberty
Education Bulletin*

THE COLLECTIVE ORGANISER

**"A newspaper is not only a
collective propagandist and a
collective agitator, it is also a
collective organiser."**

Lenin

£2.50

The Collective Organiser

"The Communists... are on the one hand practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the lines of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."

Marx-Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Why do we produce a revolutionary newspaper? The question is inseparable from another: "why do we exist as a revolutionary Marxist organisation?"

The working class needs a revolutionary party with the ideas that can become a "material force". Ideas that once pushed to the fore in a class struggle will be transformed into strategies to combat the power of the bourgeoisie. Ideas which, taking in the history and experience of the working class struggle world wide, form an immense body of knowledge, irreplaceable in the struggle to reorganise a new world, one where inequality, exploitation and oppression has been abolished.

The AWL has always organised beyond our forces: in the trade unions, the student movement and on the left. We seek practical ways to advance the class struggle in the here and now. But we are far from being a mass organisation of workers. And we are not the party that will ultimately organise the workers to take power in the future. So what is the link between what we do now and the future struggle for workers' power? What is the link between the Marxist tendency that is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the mass workers' party of the future?

The link is the cadres of the AWL. We are a collective of life-long socialists who educate ourselves in the ideas of the past, renew those ideas in the struggles of the present and carry them forward into the future. And our ideas are quite distinct on the left. We stand for human solidarity, international working-class struggle, democratic self-organisation of the exploited class, while the rest of the left often gives up on the working class, preferring to adapt to populist movements of the "Third World", political Islam even.

So how do we keep alive, develop and sustain our ideas... and create new cadre? Through educating ourselves in the history of our movement, through fruitful activity that brings us into contact with new layers of activists and by *organising ourselves around our own literary products*. But the revolutionary paper is not just a product.

The slickest literary product is worthless unless it is *also a tool* which adequately explains the reality of the times in which we live. It needs to articulate, as Marx proposed over 150 years ago, "the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."

People have always come to socialist ideas and socialist organisations from many directions. The conditions for winning new readers, finding friends and supporters and recruiting members are, in that sense, no different than they were thirty or a hundred years ago. Except we live in a world where the bourgeoisie is scarcely challenged by the so-called leaders of the labour movement. The authentic ideas of socialism have been irrevocably tainted by the stinking corruption of Stalinism. Although we are lucky in some ways — we have no secret police, no prison vans to dodge, no taxation on ideas — in other ways we have a tougher job today.

Nonetheless, a new layer of activists has been created in the various and diffuse elements of the "global justice" movement.

Some of the new activists will have a passionate interest in the great events of our time, a natural thirst for ideas and many question. Why put up with war perpetrated by the American hyper-power? What can be done to tackle the injustices and environmental damage of rampant global capitalism? Why is mainstream politics so deathly dull, so insubstantial, so disconnected with the lives of ordinary people. Why *is* the working class the agent of lasting change? Why is the anti-imperialism of the dominant left corrupted? What does the political tradition of Marxism say about these questions?

Our paper has to provide those answers. We aim to create and recreate a living Marxist analysis, responding to, analysing and explaining the events of our time through articles, reports, reviews and editorials. And our cadre? Our cadre has to organise, to go out and sell our literature, to fight for the ideas it contains, and to communicate our belief that we do have answers to the world as it exists we do have a vision of a future world. The paper is a tool for its members in the first place. It is the members that must argue through, clarify and reinforce the basic ideas of the AWL's programme.

This educational pamphlet discusses the linkage between the revolutionary party and the revolutionary paper "the collective organiser". The examples quoted here come from different historical experiences, but the linking theme is the idea that the revolutionary paper is, as Trotsky puts it, a "revolutionary instrument of the party."

Cathy Nugent, May 2004

Excerpt 1: “Win the cadres”

From Isaac Deutscher, *Trotsky: The Prophet Armed*.

This excerpt, commenting on a newspaper which the non-Bolshevik Trotsky published before the First World War, sums up clearly a basic point which runs through most of the other excerpts in this selection: a revolutionary paper must be a tool, and not just a product.

It has to challenge the ideas of its readers, agitate them, educate them, and organise them. And, going against the grain of existing society, it depends on active supporters to push it, sustain it, carry its arguments forward by word of mouth, and to provide it with articles.

We must try to make our paper as good a “product” as we can; but the effort is largely wasted unless the paper becomes a “tool”.

Excerpt 2: “A collective organiser”

From Lenin, *Where to Begin*.

Lenin was arguing the case for an all-Russian newspaper as the key tool to draw together the scattered local socialist groups then (1901) active in Russia into a coherent party. The paper, he wrote, should be “a collective organiser”: “the mere technical task of regularly supplying the newspaper with copy and of promoting regular distribution will necessitate a network of local agents... the skeleton of precisely the kind of organisation we need...”

In other words: a revolutionary paper needs a revolutionary party, just as a revolutionary party needs a revolutionary paper. But a revolutionary paper can be a collective organiser — that is, it can only be a really revolutionary paper — if those “mere technical tasks” are done!

Excerpt 3: “The Communist’s daily weapon”

From Communist International, Third Congress, *Theses on Party Organisation*.

The Comintern, in 1921, was dealing with new Communist Parties which had often been formed by left-wing splits from the old Social-Democratic parties and mergers of old socialist groups, and which had inherited a ramshackle variety of publications.

The German socialist movement, for example, had had dozens of local and special newspapers. In other countries, many socialist papers and magazines operated as personal enterprises.

The Comintern argued for resources to be centralised, and the Communist Parties to aim for “a good... central paper”. Although our circumstances are vastly different from those of the big Communist Parties of 1921, one lesson from then is relevant to us now: the importance of concentrating effort on our central political publication, and not dispersing it on the wide variety of local and special publications which seem (as “products”) to offer quicker short-term successes but cannot (as “tools”) replace the central paper.

The Comintern theses go on to explain how the paper must function as a tool and not just a product.

Excerpt 4: “A communist cultural review”

An editorial by Antonio Gramsci from *Ordine Nuovo*, 23 August 1919.

The notion of a “cultural review” — and one publishing studies on Leonardo da Vinci — seems to run against all the ideas of the paper being a tool rather than just a product. What Gramsci does here is explain why “a communist cultural review”, and not just a paper confined to politics in the narrow sense and to trade unionism, is a vital tool for building a party capable of leading a comprehensive, all-overturning social revolution.

Excerpt 5: “What is a mass paper?”

From Trotsky, *The Crisis of the French Section (1935-6)*.

When this article was written, the French Trotskyists had been working in the Socialist Party for 15 months, and faced moves by the SP leadership to expel them. Trotsky advocated that the Trotskyists should respond by bold defiance, try to pull as many activists out of the SP with them as they could, and aim for building a sizeable revolutionary party which would also draw in other revolutionary groups, for example dissidents from the Stalinist party.

A section of the French Trotskyist leadership, headed by Raymond Molinier, chose instead to get together with the “soft left” of the SP by launching a new so-called “mass paper”, called *La Commune*.

The GBL was the Trotskyist group. “Social patriot” means socialists who took a patriotic (nationalist) line on the coming World War. The “Revolutionary Left” was the “soft left” of the SP, and Marceau Pivert was its leader. “SAPist” means “soft left” (after a German group called SAP). Blum and Zyromsky were SP leaders. Magdeleine Paz was a rather pompous ex-Trotskyist. *L’Humanité* was the Stalinist paper. SFIO was the official name of the Socialist Party. The People’s Front was the alliance of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party with the (bourgeois) Radical Party on an “anti-fascist” programme: Trotsky denounced it as subordinating working-class militancy to the illusion of cross-class “anti-fascism”. *Revolution* was the paper of the Paris youth section of the SP, which was close to the Trotskyists; Fred Zeller was its leader. *La Verité* was the Trotskyists’ own paper.

The core idea of the entire article is in the sentences: “It is the elementary duty of a revolutionary organisation to make its political newspaper as accessible as possible to the masses. This task cannot be effectively solved except as a function of the growth of the organisation and its cadres, who must pave the way to the masses for the newspaper...”

Notice: the cadres pave the way to the masses for the newspaper, not the newspaper paves the way to the masses for the cadres!

Trotsky’s argument is a demolition of the illusions behind such pseudo-“mass papers” as *socialist*, *News on Sunday*, and (in its different way) the old Healyite *Newsline*.

Excerpt 6:

“Not to stop at agitational slogans”

From the founding conference of the Fourth International (1938), resolution on the tasks of the French Section.

This excerpt reprises Trotsky's arguments (excerpt 5) in the form of a criticism of the paper the French Trotskyists were then publishing.

It ties together the need for more solid articles and polemics; the need “to adapt its language to that of the workers and peasants”; and the need for “permanent mobilisation” of all the Trotskyists round the paper — all aspects of the paper being a tool (a “material instrument”), not just a product.

Excerpts 5 and 6 together give the basic political argument for including in the paper a certain number of “heavy” or polemical articles which may be off-putting to some readers. If we made the paper very simple and agitational, it might bring more sales (though almost certainly not many: remember, the “cadres... must pave the way to the masses for the newspaper”), but it would certainly make the paper an inadequate tool for building a revolutionary party. (Trotsky: “I do not know if this newspaper would become, with the help of a magic wand, a mass paper. I doubt it. But it would in any event become a SAPist or Pivertist [i.e. soft-left, politically inadequate] paper”).

Certainly the paper must seek to arouse anger against anti-asylum legislation, the Government which waged war on Iraq and lied about its war aims and so on. But that is not all the paper should do, and not even the most important thing it must do.

Large numbers of people are angry about these things already. Indeed, anyone not angry about such things is unlikely even to consider reading our paper. And the paper must do more than reflect back to people the feelings they have already.

What we must try to contribute, irreplaceably, is political answers. Anger without answers is not effective: we can see all around us today that it can become resentful despair. Even anger plus struggle is not enough: the whole history of the labour movement is proof of that. To win even a sizeable strike generally requires educated, thoughtful leadership: to win the fight for socialism requires a sharp-honed revolutionary party.

Yes, but answers can be proposed and argued simply, and without polemic? The point is not just to have a few “experts” handing down packaged advice to the mass struggle, but to educate an organisation, and as large as possible a periphery around it, in such a way that they can fight effectively for the “answers”, find new answers to new situations as they arise, and become “experts” themselves.

If we are to do that, we must provide more than ready-for-use answers and neat supporting arguments. We must arm those whom we hope to get to fight for our proposals with arguments against the counter-proposals they will meet in the labour movement. We must examine the alternatives and show the process of reasoning which leads to one proposal and away from another which perhaps seems at first sight to respond just as well to the basic anger fuelling the struggle.

The answers need force and organisation behind them, or they are useless. To focus on recruitment and regard

political ideas as disposable gambits to help with recruiting — as the SWP does — is bad; but it is hardly any less sterile to focus on general political ideas and spurn concern with recruitment as “sectarian”. And the second alternative is a real danger. Time after time we have been right on political issues, but lacked the force to swing events decisively and also lacked the “party-building” edge to our work which could help us accumulate the force for next time.

Whether we like it or not, we have bigger competitors — like the SWP — for the allegiance of newly-radicalised socialists. Even if we regard all our polemics, arguments, and jousting with those groups as things we would like to avoid, we cannot avoid them except by giving up and joining the SWP — or giving up altogether!

At worst the polemics and so on are regrettable necessities: in fact if they are done halfway well, they are better than that. They are very important for our self-education and (provided “the cadres pave the way”) for educating and convincing people around us. After all, almost all the Marxist classics of greatest educational value were originally written as polemics against other socialists (and often against ones, like Dühring, whose names now live on only because of those polemics).

Excerpt 7:

“A workers’ paper”

From Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism*.

Here again Trotsky argues that the revolutionary paper must be not just a product (“the task is not to make a paper through... a skilled editorial board”), but “a revolutionary instrument of the party”.

Excerpt 8:

“Readers must pay for the paper”

From Cannon, *Letters From Prison*.

Sometimes it seems that selling papers is too hard and difficult a way of doing political work: why don't we take a short cut by giving papers away free or doing more give-away leaflets? Cannon argues that there are political reasons why this short cut does not work — as well as the obvious financial ones!

Excerpt 9:

“A combination tool”

From Cannon, *Letters from Prison*.

Cannon is arguing for making the American Trotskyists' paper, *The Militant*, bigger and more popular, in a situation (1944) where their support was expanding very fast.

He restates, in different form, some of Gramsci's argument about a “communist cultural review”. And he argues that the paper must be popular, but “not... merely a popular paper”.

The whole argument is organised around the principle that “*The Militant* is a tool...”