

The life and times of Bob Pennington

By Patrick Avaakum

BOB Pennington's last home, I'm told, was a spike hostel; he died recently, alone in Brighton on a park bench. 70 years old, Bob Pennington had been an active revolutionary socialist for 40 years. In those years Pennington wrote many good articles and pamphlets. He recruited many people to class-struggle politics and helped educate them in politics. He took part in and sometimes organised working-class battles in industry, inside the labour movement, and on the streets against racists, fascists and police.

At one time or another he was a prominent figure in most of the larger organisations of Trotskyists.

His political life was in many ways an epitome of the post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement. Even the circumstance of his end, dying amidst outcasts and booze-solaced, socially-isolated people, was redolent of much of the recent fate of that movement.

The best way to commemorate Bob Pennington and to accord him the respect which is his due is critically to evaluate his political life. I knew Bob Pennington quite well at one time, brought into contact with him about 1970 by a busily ecumenical friend, Peter Graham*, with whom Pennington had much in common, not least waywardness and Lothario-ism.

The first three decades of Pennington's Trotskyism were years when, objectively, it was possible that the Trotskyists might have created a sizeable, stable, non-sectarian, intellectually self-regenerating movement; and, doing that, we might have ensured a better outcome from the protracted class struggles of the 1950s, '60s and '70s — the struggles which ended, in historic fact, with the victory of the Thatchers. Instead we have a cluster of mainly sterile sects. What can Bob Pennington's life tell us about the reasons for that? What can his experience tell us about what we ourselves must do in the future?

II

BOB Pennington left the Communist Party and joined the British Trotskyist movement in 1951. That was the year of the so-called Third World Congress of the Fourth International. In reality this was the first congress of a new hybrid movement. It continued to call itself the Fourth International, but its governing ideas and postures were radically at variance with those of Trotsky and the Fourth International he had founded in the '30s. This Fourth International was politically more distant from Trotsky's Fourth International than Trotsky's had been from the first "Fourth International" — the one set up in 1921 by the sectarian "council



After Khrushchev's savage repression of the 1956 Hungarian revolution many CPers joined the Trotskyists

Communists", such as Herman Gorter, Anton Pannekoek and Sylvia Pankhurst.

The organisation, still claiming continuity with Trotsky, and religiously using Trotsky's words as a sacredotal language — but with different meanings, values and perspectives attached to them — was reconstituted on a new political basis. Incorporated into this new "Trotskyism" was much that belonged properly to the political heritage of the so-called "Brandlerites", the soft-on-Stalinism Right-Communist opposition of the 1930s. Against Trotsky they denied

that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a distinct social formation, and rejected his call for a new — "political" — revolution to overthrow it. Trotsky had been their bitter critic and enemy and they his.

Maintaining Trotsky's programme for a new ('political') working class revolution in the Soviet Union, the New Trotskyists advocated mere reform for Stalinist China, Yugoslavia and, later, Vietnam and Cuba. Their politics were incoherent and inevitably produced chronic instability. 1951 was the year in which Trotsky's widow, Natalia, felt obliged, after a long internal struggle, to break publicly with the new "Fourth International" because of its "critical support" for the Soviet bloc. Tendencies which had agreed with Natalia on Stalinism had been forced out of the International. The "Fourth International" Pennington entered in 1951 was deep in a crisis of political identity and perspectives from which it would never emerge.

At the core of the positions of "New Trotskyism" codified at the 1951 congress was an acceptance of international Stalinism — which had recently taken control of new areas amounting to a sixth of the Earth, and containing hundreds of millions of people — as the motor-force, and first stage of a rapidly-unfolding progressive world revolution. The neo-Trotskyists did still criticise Stalinism, and propound a programme for working-class "political" revolution, or drastic reform, in the Stalinist states. But despite their faults those states were, they said, "in transition to socialism". Those "degenerated and deformed" societies were the actually-existing "first stage" of the socialist revolution. Despite everything, they were the progressive alternative to capitalism and imperialism.

Trotsky had defined the bureaucratically collectivised property of the USSR as only "potentially progressive" — it depended on whether or not the working class could overthrow the bureaucracy — but, to the New Trotskyists, nationalised property created by Stalin's armies or Mao Zedong's totalitarian state was both progressive and entirely working class.

The Stalinist regimes behaved like the most brutal imperialism; Trotsky had already in 1939 pointed out the elements of imperialism

* See *Workers' Liberty* 36.

in the USSR's foreign policy; but somehow to the neo-Trotskyists this was not imperialism. "Imperialism" gradually became not a term to describe policy or actions by states but a synonym for advanced capitalism. Over decades some of the New Trotskyists would come to embrace a millenarian "anti-imperialism" that was no more than a hopeless Third World utopian hostility to the modern world.

Thus Trotsky's old policy of defence of the Soviet Union, which he coupled with unsparing hostility to the Stalinist regime, and with a historical perspective in which USSR Stalinism was seen as a regime of degeneracy and decline that could not long survive, was turned into its opposite: "critical but unconditional" defence of Stalinist imperialism and "unconditional" support for its expansion. It was "the revolution", in all its unexpected complexities. The Stalinist states were defined in an opposite way to Trotsky's definition of the USSR, as a regime of crisis — and if it was not that, Trotsky had said, it was a new form of class society — they were societies "in transition to socialism". This gutted "Trotskyism", into which had been interpolated politics and perspectives that Trotsky had spurned with contempt as incompatible with elementary Marxism, became an ideology colouring up reality to sustain the pipe-dream that the world was moving rapidly towards socialism, and hysterical fantasies that the Stalinists "for now" were blazing humanity's trail to the classless society. The neo-Trotskyists, despite their best intentions, despite their sincere criticisms of Stalinism and active opposition to it, were on all major questions of world politics satellites of the Stalinist world system. Their entire conception of the world generated in them a compulsion to be such satellites and committed them to the view that to be anything else was to betray the socialist revolution.

They had come a very long way from Trotsky. The typical soul-searching debates of this current in the '50s concerned their own *raison d'être*: in face of the new Stalinist revolutions, like the Chinese and the Yugoslav, was there a role for Trotskyism, even their radically recast variant of it? Many said no, and either joined the Stalinists or left politics. (One of them is a respected left wing MP). The others were driven to ridiculous positions: for example, though China was socially and politically identical to the USSR, really, some of them said, it was not Stalinist: Mao Zedong was the legatee of Trotsky, not Stalin!

And yet, apart from the Shachtman group in the USA, which was 'bio-degrading' into social-democracy, and a few minuscule

and as a rule passive groups such as *Socialist Review* in Britain, this was almost all that was left of the old revolutionary socialism and communism after the prolonged and multifarious depredations of Stalinism and fascism, followed by post-war capitalist prosperity. And in their own way the neo-Trotskyists propagated socialist ideas; they circulated Trotsky's books; they criticised Stalinism, albeit inadequately, from a democratic working-class point of view; and they prosecuted the working class struggle. They represented the old inextinguishable socialist hope for something better than capitalism and Stalinism.

In 1953 James P Cannon and his British co-thinkers, of whom Pennington was one, would recoil against some of "1951 Trotskyism". But these belatedly "orthodox-Trotskyist" Cannonites never abandoned the premises of the 1951 Congress and its basic conclusions about Stalinism. Rejecting too-blatant accommodation to the Stalinists, they continued to reason, not coherently, within that 1951 neo-Trotskyist framework. Apart

from a brief lurch, Pennington's political life would be spent within the current shaped by the ideas of 1951 and the partial and incoherent "orthodox Trotskyist" reactions against them.

The Trotskyist organisation Pennington joined in 1951 was led by Gerry Healy. It worked in the Labour Party, in the Labour League of Youth, and in the trade unions, around a newspaper called *Socialist Outlook*. It had a notoriously stifling and authoritarian Stalinist-type regime, but it was despite everything a serious organisation, able to build support in the working class for broadly revolutionary socialist ideas.

Pennington played an important part in one of the key episodes of the class struggle in which the Healy group was significant: the secession of 16,000 dockers in Hull, Liverpool and Manchester from the autocratic TGWU and the attempt to make the little London stevedores' union, the NASD, into a replacement democratic national dockers' union. For some years before 1957, Pennington worked as a full-time NASD organiser in Liverpool and was thus an organiser of major strikes.

III

IN February 1956 Nikita Khrushchev, the first reforming Stalinist Tsar, denounced his predecessor Stalin as a paranoid mass murderer. Then Khrushchev himself savagely repressed the Hungarian revolution. As a result the British Communist Party, which then had about 40,000 members, was thrown into turmoil. There was open and relatively free discussion for the first time in decades. Many CPers were emboldened to read the arch-heretic Trotsky; many left the CP; some hundreds joined the Trotskyists.

Very, very little of Trotsky was by this date in print. Decades of weeding-out by Catholic-Actionists and by Stalinists — numerous in the Labour Party, and thus on local councils too — had made books like Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and *Revolution Betrayed* uncommon even in public libraries. So the

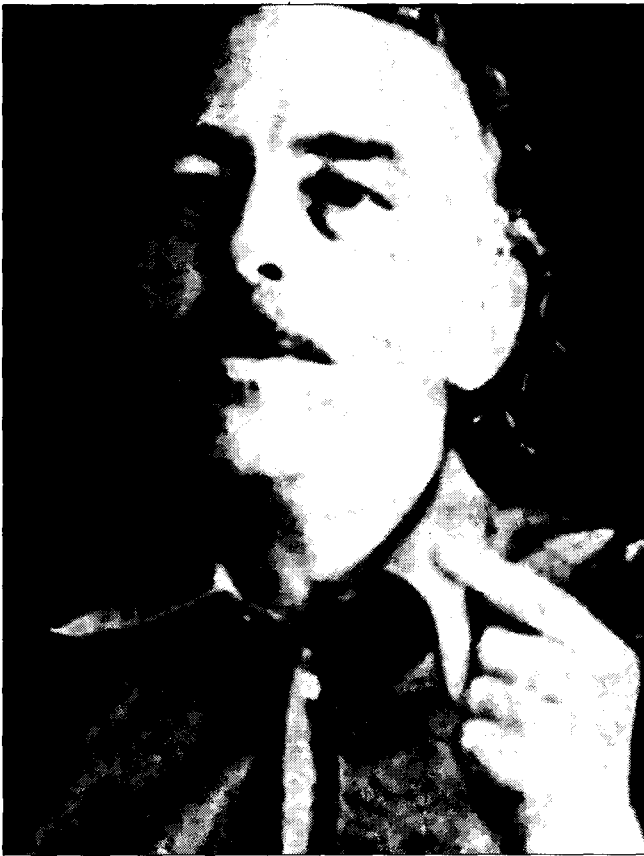
old books and pamphlets circulated from hand to hand until they fell apart. The Healy group did not have a publication worth speaking of when this crisis broke (their paper had been banned by the Labour Party in 1954). Accepting the ban in order to stay with the large left-wing Bevanite movement in the Labour Party, they sold *Tribune*, the Labour left paper. They were able to recruit ex-CPers because of their dedication and hard-nosed persistence and because they represented a force, however weak, in the labour movement. They

systematically visited or otherwise accosted every CP dissident they got to hear of. As one of them, Bill Hunter, later put it, didactically: when you got someone's address, you went to knock on the door even if all you said was "Balls!"

By January 1957 the group was able to start an impressive bimonthly journal, *Labour Review*, and by May a tiny weekly, *The Newsletter* — in size the equivalent of eight pages of *Workers' Liberty* and sometimes on a bad week, half that. Pennington, who had been an effective worker with dissident CPers in the north-west, was brought to London from Liverpool to help consolidate and expand the newly enlarged and better endowed organisation. Soon he was in the thick of activity against the Mosley fascists in Notting Hill, where in 1958 anti-West-Indian race riots had broken out.

An older comrade once gave me the following description of Pennington in action at Notting Hill. Up on the mobile "soap box" platform at a street meeting, Pennington, wearing a loud yellow

"Up on the mobile 'soap box' platform at a street meeting, Pennington, wearing a loud yellow rollneck jumper, wags a finger scornfully at a fascist-minded heckler in the crowd, and tells him, in practical, down-to-earth, North-of-England tones: 'Why don't you catch on to yourself? You'll never get anywhere in Britain with that rubbish!'"



Bob Pennington speaking at the meeting in the Conway Hall to protest at the police raid on *Workers' Fight* (a forerunner of *Workers' Liberty*) in September 1973.

rollneck jumper, wags a finger scornfully at a fascist-minded heckler in the crowd, and tells him, in practical, down-to-earth, North-of-England tones: "Why don't you catch on to yourself? You'll never get anywhere in Britain with that rubbish!" What had impressed and at first startled my informant was Pennington's matter-of-fact, non-doctrinaire, mock-matey approach, the appeal to the common sense of even a fascist.

The Healy group then might have laid the basis for a mass Trotskyist movement. It was rooted in both the Labour Party and the trade unions — in 1958 it could get 500 working class militants to a rank and file national conference. It had a chance no subsequent group has had. It failed because it was seriously diseased, having neither a realistic assessment of the state of capitalism (then at the height of the long post-war boom) nor the internal democracy that would have allowed it to develop one by way of free discussion. They held out vastly unrealistic perspectives of imminent major capitalist crisis, big revolutionary struggles — and immediate large-scale growth for the organisation. In February 1959 the Healy group, privately known for a decade as "The Club", publicly relaunched itself as the Socialist Labour League, and was immediately proscribed by the Labour Party. From mid-1959 the disoriented, tightly 'bossed' group went into a protracted crisis. A series of prominent individuals — almost all the prominent ex-CPers — and small groups left, usually with acrimony, and more than once after violent confrontations with Healy or his supporters.

IV

THROUGHOUT this period of growth and then disintegration — though the group was not reduced to anything near its pre-'56 size and would soon begin to recruit large numbers of young people in the Labour Party Young Socialists — Pennington functioned as Healy's hatchet-man. Then, without much warning, month or so after Brian Behan, the group Chairman, last of the

prominent ex-CPers, had been expelled, Healy-style, on the eve of the 1960 group conference, Pennington and a small group, led by the neuro-surgeon Christopher Pallas, suddenly broke with the organisation and came out as supporters of the politics of the French "ultra-state-capitalist" (as we used to say) current led by Cornelius Castoriades (who was variously known as Pierre Chaulieu or Paul Cardan). This tendency was virtually anarchist.

On the fringes of Healy's comparatively large neo-Trotskyist organisation there was then a cluster of small, hybrid groups and "independent" individuals, ultra-left and anti-Bolshevik in varying degrees. The *Socialist Review* group, forerunner of the SWP, was one. In autumn 1960 *International Socialism* was launched as a printed journal, controlled by *Socialist Review* though pretendedly separate and involving other groups, including the Pallas group, now called *Solidarity*. Pennington became joint editor, with Michael Kidron. Around this magazine the future SWP would group. It was at that stage — despite what some contributors to *Workers' Liberty* have said in these pages — explicitly anti-Leninist.

Pennington did not stay long. He said later that he found the way IS was run — as a Cliff-Kidron family concern — intolerable. He drifted away from *Solidarity* too. Drowning in a sour, carping, obsessive concern with their Trotskyist past, *Solidarity* had a quirky, sniping-from-the-sidelines, conception of politics. They were utterly sterile. Pennington soon realised it, and cut loose. This, as far as I know, was the only time Pennington radically re-examined the foundations of "post '51 Trotskyism". The experiment with *Solidarity* drove him back towards mainstream neo-Trotskyism, and he joined the Revolutionary Socialist League (Militant) in 1963 or '64. The RSL was then the British section of the international current led by Ernest Mandel, the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Long moribund, they began to recruit a smattering of disillusioned SLLers and youth from the Labour Party Young Socialists. They fused with a separate group of USFI supporters, the future IMG.

They were the object of a sustained campaign of bitter animosity from the Healyites, not all of it baseless or just factionalism. A grouping appeared in the Militant echoing the SLL denunciations of Militant. Though it made some just criticisms of Militant, it was effectively working for the SLL, which was now becoming increasingly bizarre, sectarian and destructive. The group's organisers were Ted Knight — who would play an important role on the left in the early '80s as "Red Ted", leader of Lambeth Council — and... Bob Pennington. Knight knowingly worked for Healy. Considering how blatant it all was, it is hard to believe that Pennington was a dupe, but the alternative, that he knowingly worked for Healy, is simply impossible.

Knight and Pennington and the Healyite press campaign succeeded in splitting the newly-fused Militant-IMG group apart. The future IMG had been reluctant participants anyway. Knight and Pennington went with the IMG. Pennington had found his last resting place in politics.

Knight — who had been immersed in the Healy cult from his teens and emotionally and intellectually was incapable of making a decisive break from it — continued to work for Healy. That was known, but proof was another matter. Knight and Pennington were eventually suspended by the IMG.*

Pennington — supporting the USFI but kept outside its ranks — was now in political limbo.

● The second part of this appreciation of Bob Pennington will appear in the next issue of *Workers' Liberty*.

* Knight seems then to have genuinely drifted away from the SLL orbit. He would return to it around 1980, having become leader of Lambeth's Labour council, and — in tandem with Ken Livingstone of the Greater London Council — play the role of an especially malignant and cynical 'fake left' in local government.