

The "IS-SWP tradition" 6

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 incoherent 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, bind 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 traumatised 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.

"A slow peeling away of illusions"

By Andy Wilson

I JOINED the SWP as a student in 1984. Before that I had been in the Royal Navy for seven years, where I recruited for the Anti-Nazi League and refused to serve in the Falklands War. In 1982, after an investigation by the RN security services, I was called in to see the captain of my station and told I had 24 hours to return my kit and leave the camp. He then shook my hand and told me "remember you are British".

My politics then were confused but basically libertarian anarchist. I hated parliamentary politics, the Labour Party and Stalinism — which I more or less confused with Marxism. Any illusions I had in the Communist Party disappeared when I applied to join them while still in the Navy. I got a rejection letter from the party secretary, Gordon McLennan on the grounds that membership would conflict with my loyalty to Britain as a serving sailor. Apparently, McLennan too wanted me to 'remember I was British'.

On leaving the Navy I went to the Co-operative Workers' College, and then to York University, where I was accepted as a mature student. I arrived in York a few months before the start of the miners strike. The behaviour of the Labour Party in the strike was shameful, but predictable. The behaviour of the anarchists I knew came as more of a shock. A few wanted to support the miners, but many abstained because of Scargill's Stalinism.

The campus miners support group was dominated by the SWP. As I worked with them I began to read Lenin and Trotsky for the first time. The big revelation for me was reading Marx. As an anarchist I thought of him as one of the architects of everything wrong with our century. Reading him now I discovered a passionate champion of human liberation. But still I couldn't square this with the reality of Stalinism and 'actually existing socialism'.

Reading Cliff's book on state capitalism explained to me the gulf separating Stalinism and all forms of authoritarianism from

authentic Marxism. I still think Cliff's theory offers the only explanation of Russia compatible with Marxism.

The York SWP branch I started to attend was remarkable. Its meetings involved real, informed debate which often would go on into the night. My understanding of Marxism today is shaped by what I learned then. At the same time the comrades were involved in every attempt to support the miners and were active in every campaign and strike both in town and on campus.

I still think that the York branch was exceptional in the SWP. When I began to see something of the other side of the SWP, it was my experience of the integrity and commitment of the York comrades which convinced me that the rest of the SWP could be like that too.

It was some time before this changed, but the signs had been there from the start. I remember the first SWP conference I attended in 1984. When Pete Clarke, the party secretary gave the membership figures I remember thinking they were inflated. I asked my branch secretary why the leadership would do this, and was told that if the members knew the real figures they would be 'demoralised'.

I am ashamed to say that I accepted this, though I now think of it as my first taste of how the party leadership thought of the members — not as the ultimate source of authority in the party, its soul, but as an inert mass to be prodded and cajoled into whatever course the leadership think best for them.

Shortly after this, perhaps just because I had accepted the leadership's way of looking at the members, I was sent to Liverpool as the party's full time organiser. Perhaps I was ruthless in Liverpool, as Chris Jones claimed in his article in the last *Worker's Liberty*, but in many cases I tried to moderate some of what was handed down from the CC — which in one case meant stopping a plan of one of the CC to have the same Chris Jones expelled.

For me, there was no great betrayal of the working class to turn me against the party leadership, only a slow peeling away of my illusions.

Sometimes this involved only theoretical questions. I remember arguing for several years at the party's 'Marxism' event for Engels' idea of the dialectics of nature. I also remember being followed from one philosophy meeting to the next by the party's second rank intellectuals to be denounced as a 'crude materialist' and even a 'Stalinist in philosophy'.

A few weeks before Marxism one year, however, something strange happened. Chris Harman wrote a short review supporting Engels. At that year's meetings the same people who had heckled before — John Rees in particular, with people like

Gareth Jenkins snapping along behind him — were expounding the glory of Engels' dialectic.

Now I have never had anything but contempt for John Rees as one of the worst kinds of preening careerist, but it came as a shock to see a whole layer of party 'cadre' twisting their opinions around to get them to echo Chris Harman's. I simply couldn't understand the gap between the party's formal politics (of 'socialism from below') and the top-down reality of its cadre and organisation — what a few of us began to call its 'actually existing socialism from below'. I still think that Cliff's analysis of Russia is quite brilliant, but find his party's idea of organisation repulsive.

The theory behind this idea of organisation was once explained to me by Sheila MacGregor, then a CC member. While I had argued in the party that Marxism is a science, and therefore subject to all the laws of logic, argument and debate that govern any science, she explained that Marxism in fact, is an *art*. And not only is it an art, but an art that can be mastered by only a select few — in the SWP, she said, this meant Cliff, herself and maybe a few others. Unfortunately, she was so drunk at this point that, as she got up to leave she walked straight into the wall, missing the door by a good five feet. So much for our infallible leadership.

A more serious event that helped change my attitude to the party happened while I was in Liverpool, when a member of the CC sexually assaulted one of the local comrades. This sort of behaviour is best dealt with not by moral outrage and finger waving but by taking firm, public action to make it clear what socialists think of it. But when I tried to raise the issue, I found the response even more shocking than the original attack.

When I approached one member of the CC he refused to have anything to do with the issue; another CC member told the assaulted comrade that nothing could be done about the matter because, under capitalism, women's oppression is inevitable.

I should add that this was all happening

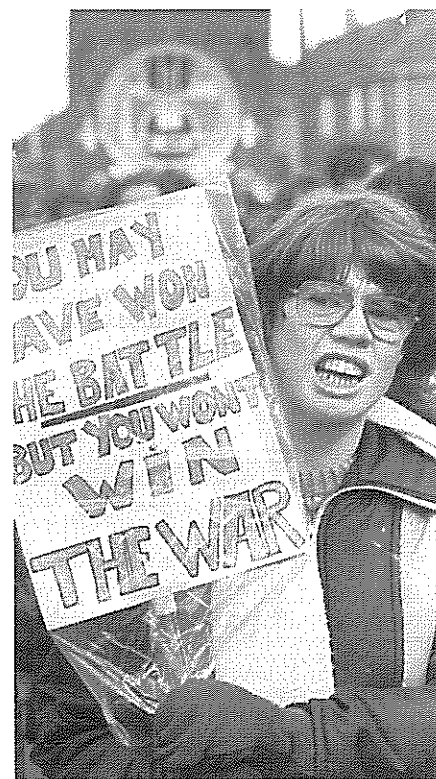
around the time of Gerry Healy's death. Duncan Hallas wrote an obituary arguing that when Healy assaulted WRP members, the real crime was that those who knew about it refused to act. I began to wonder whether there really was such a big difference between the SWP and WRP, whose methods I already knew to be more than just dubious.

For some years before leaving I argued that it was possible to work within the SWP to change it, but I believed this less and less even as I argued it. It was obvious that the leadership and their hangers on could simply dispose of anything that smacked of opposition, and that most members not only accepted this but welcomed it as proof of the party's unity and discipline.

I began to compare the SWP with the Navy. At least in the Navy there is a begrudging awareness of the real relations between officers and ratings, and some contempt for the officers as a result. But the class background of most SWP members means they confuse the spontaneous discipline of great workers' organisations — the result of real struggle, study and solidarity — with the mindless regimentation demanded by the middle classes when they become frantic and hopeless. SWP members are treated with barely disguised contempt by their leaders but, for the most part, are grateful because they see this acceptance of stifling authority as a token of their militancy and commitment to the 'cause'. This idea of discipline is actually a bureaucratic fantasy; inhuman and oppressive. I say this despite the fact that in my experience SWP members are in other respects perfectly sincere in their energetic opposition to anything unjust or oppressive.

The end for me came in 1993. I had already been warned that some of the CC would like to expel me, then a friend told me of a meeting he had been invited to hosted by Lyndsey German and John Rees, where they were sworn to secrecy and told to distance themselves from me as I was 'on my way out of the party'. This prediction turned out to be uncannily accurate; a few months later I was called to a meeting with Cliff and German and told that if I published any of my opinions about philosophy or culture it would be considered 'factional' and I would face expulsion.

Sure enough, I worked on trying to found a non-party cultural review along with other SWP members and some non-members, and in January 1994 I was at last expelled. The 15-20 comrades involved were also threatened with expulsion if they didn't drop the project. To their credit, ten of them wrote to the CC opposing my expulsion and insisting on their right to work on the magazine (one comrade even got up to speak against my expulsion at conference — an act of impetuous bravery almost unheard of among the otherwise fearless class warriors of the SWP). The CC didn't reply. At the control commission called to ratify my expulsion (because, naturally, the 'independent' control commission has never been known to overturn a CC expulsion) it was announced by Alex Callinicos



1984 miners' strike. The SWP's degeneration has speeded up since that great struggle

that no-one else was to be expelled. So much for the leadership's 'iron will' much admired by most of the members.

On leaving the SWP I joined with a few other ex-members to form the International Socialist Group, who argue that the SWP have failed to live up to the idea of liberation implicit in Cliff's theory of state capitalism. We have recently been in touch with a similar group of ex-members in Germany, and also with the rather larger group who were recently expelled from the South African IS group (ISSA) and have taken almost half of their membership to form a breakaway group.

To finish, I should say that unlike most of the contributors to this series, I do not blame Cliff alone for all this, as the pope and guru of the SWP. That would be too convenient for the rest of the left, who have their own popes and gurus to defend. The SWP's style of politics could only exist in a rotten political culture, and I believe that the same culture is common, in different degrees, to most of the rest of Britain's erstwhile revolutionary left, including the publishers of *Workers' Liberty*.

Despite this, my belief in the power of workers to transform their conditions and change society has not changed since the miners strike. It's just that I now believe, in achieving all this, the workers will also have to sweep aside most of the contemporary revolutionary left, with their sects and schisms, their plots, anathemas and demonologies. I do not think that represents a return to the woolly anarchism of my youth, just a belief that Marx would weep to see what is being done in his name. ■

Back issues of Workers' Liberty contain the following discussion on the IS/SWP tradition:

No.18. Contributors: Ken Coates MEP, Sheila Rowbotham, Stan Newens MEP.

No.19. Jim Higgins (IS National Secretary 1971-73), James D Young (Socialist Review Group 1950s), Mike McGrath (member 1966-82).

No.20 contains Vic Collard (IS steward early 1970s).

No.21: Chris Jones (1973 to 1994), Ray Challinor (member of the Socialist Review Group), Rachel Lever (member 1968-1971)

No.22: Steve Jeffreys (IS-SWP full timer from 1972-79)

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