

# The new left opposition

By Martin Thomas

**Today the political tides in Eastern Europe are flowing strongly for the pro-capitalist right wing, and sometimes for nationalists and chauvinists, not for workers' liberty. The authentic socialists, those who fight against both Stalinism and capitalism for a self-managing commonwealth, are everywhere a small minority.**

## Poland

The strongest of the movements for workers' liberty in Eastern Europe is in Poland.

In 1980-81 the whole of Solidarnosc committed itself to the programme of a "Self-Managing Republic". "We demand the implementation of...a new socio-economic order which will conciliate the plan, self-management and the market.

"The basic organisational cell for the economy should be a social enterprise, governed by the workers represented by a council, and with the running of the enterprise entrusted to a manager chosen by the council through competitive vote and recallable by it. The social enterprise will dispose of the common property entrusted to it in the interests of society and of its own workforce. It will do business on the basis of economic calculations. The State should influence it through regulations and by means such as prices, taxes, loans, rates of exchange, etc..."

"Reform should humanise planning. The main plan should reflect the aspirations of the population and be accepted by it..."

Probably some members and leaders of Solidarnosc supported this socialist programme only because it seemed to them inopportune, unnecessarily risky, or impossibly radical, to advocate a free market economy. But there was a genuine movement for a democratic working-class alternative to both Stalinism and capitalism.

Somewhere around the mid-'80s, according to opinion surveys, that movement petered out. Polish workers and their leaders swung round to the view that the best they could aim for was a Western-style market economy. That shift of opinion in Poland shaped working-class politics right across Eastern Europe.

A full analysis of its causes is matter for another article. That the period after 1983 was the first since the Second World War when the West was markedly more stable and dynamic economically than Eastern Europe must have been a factor, even

though Latin America and Africa suffered worse times than Eastern Europe. The Western Left's hesitant, equivocal, or sometimes plainly hostile attitude to the Polish workers' movement was another factor.

Under martial law the leaders of Solidarnosc found their strongest — and wealthiest — support from pro-capitalist circles in the West. Their politics shifted to suit. A minority of Solidarnosc activists responded by launching the *Polish Socialist Party (PPS)* in 1987.

In 1988 the PPS split, more on the lines of impatient young activists versus cautious veterans rather than left versus right. The PPS-Lipski is now a small group in the secular social-democratic wing of Solidarnosc's political front (the Citizens' Committees). The PPS-RD (Polish Socialist Party-Democratic Revolution) became an energetic, visible activist group, although with only a few hundred members.

In early 1990 the PPS-RD again split, this time on political lines. The name PPS-RD was kept by the group around Zuzanna Dabrowska and Piotr Ikonowicz, centred in Warsaw; the other faction, centred around Jozef Piniór in Wrocław but with members in Warsaw too, took the name "Socialist Political Centre".

The politics of the Dabrowska-Ikonowicz faction are somewhere between anarcho-syndicalism and social democracy. They are revolutionaries, in favour of the workers taking over the factories, mines, shipyards and offices. But after the workers' takeover they reject any central planning, wanting instead market relations between the worker-run enterprises purged of any monopolistic elements.

They concede that a state is necessary. But instead of advocating that the bureaucratic state be replaced by a *workers' state*, they propose that the state be *limited*, for example by reducing the army from a conscript force to a professional force and by transferring all powers of taxation to local government.

The split between them and the Piniór faction came after a confused and furious argument over "Trotskyism", the Dabrowska-Ikonowicz faction being "anti-Trotskyist". Another issue was orientation to Solidarnosc, the Dabrowska-Ikonowicz faction being more inclined to cooperate with green, pacifist, and anarchistic groups and to downgrade work in Solidarnosc.

The Piniór faction ("Socialist Political Centre") is now a distinctively Trotskyist

group, of maybe a hundred members. Of the various neo-Trotskyist factions internationally, it has the closest relations with the Mandel group ("United Secretariat"), but it does not share Mandel's view that the old regime in Poland was a "deformed workers' state" and it remains open to other ideas.

Despite its small size, the "Socialist Political Centre" has considerable influence and contacts in Solidarnosc, at least in the Wrocław region. Jozef Piniór himself is one of the best-known Solidarnosc leaders from the period of martial law.

The "Socialist Political Centre" champions Solidarnosc's programme from 1980-1, the "Self-Managed Republic". And it has spelled out a programme for workers' action in much more detail than any other left opposition group in Eastern Europe. It demands weekly cost-of-living increases to wages, with prices monitored by the unions; social control over food distribution; the right to work, and a shorter work week; and the opening of the books of management.

Piniór assesses Poland today as follows: "The bureaucracy is trying to change itself into a strong class with a lot of elements of capitalism. I don't know whether it will be capitalism or not capitalism. Of course it will not be socialism! The bureaucracy is completely reactionary.

"It is different to say how this process will look. On the one hand the bureaucrats' position is very strong because they have the army and police, on the other hand very weak because they have workers' resistance.

"They couldn't advance economic production. They organised the first step on a massive scale — industrialisation — then stopped. Now they are looking for a new way to advance themselves."

## Germany

The *United Left* in East Germany is bigger than the Polish left groups, or than the other left groups in Eastern Europe, though its roots in the working class are nowhere near as strong as the Polish left's. Although the Honecker regime tolerated very little independent political activity, it could not stop people watching West German TV, and the books of Trotsky, for example, were available in German to anyone with a bit of determination and access to a university library. Some space was thus created for a left opposition culture to develop.

The *United Left* is a loose federation of groups — left-Christian, semi-anarchist,



United Left conference: "Self-management, not sell-out"

radical reformers from the old Stalinist party, independent Marxists. It must have several hundred members. In the March 1990 elections it won 20,000 votes.

It was founded in early October 1989 on the basis of the "Bohlen platform":

1. Social ownership of the means of production as the main foundation now and for the future for socialist socialisation.

2. Extending self-determination of the producers in carrying through real socialisation of total economic activity.

3. Consistent implementation of the principle of social security and social justice for all members of society.

4. Political democracy, the rule of law, consistent application of unrestricted human rights and the free development of the individuality of every member of society.

5. Restructuring of society in accordance with environmentalist principles.

6. All these principles are valid world-wide.

Despite being a loose federation, with a constitution carefully designed to favour local initiative and forestall a strong centre, the United Left has vigorous internal debate, and has produced a much more detailed manifesto than any other left opposition group in Eastern Europe. Having devoted much thought and discussion to the question of the market and planning, the United Left explains itself with great clarity on this question. It explains that it wants both *more market* and *more planning*.

"It is not planned economy which has collapsed in the GDR, but a system of bureaucratic command economy disguised as 'planning'. It is a specially harmful form of planlessness, because a system of state control, based on huge apparatuses, veiled the devastating results of its management with penetrating claims of success.

"We need not somewhat less, but more planning — economic regulation according to need, economically based, work-

ing with value and price regulators, based on workplace self-management and operating through the use of market mechanisms.

"Below the accountable central planning of infrastructure, market regulators must operate, to ensure proportionality and the needed production, in particular, of goods of mass consumption. The state should influence the economic planning of self-managed enterprises not through command but through regulation.

"Planning in the sense of a people's economy will thus gain acceptance 'from below to above', in a centrally influenced economic framework.

"The apparent alternative, 'planned economy or market economy', is used by the advocates of a 'social market economy' in the current discussions in order to offer as 'the solution' for the GDR a capitalism which is anything but social."

Not all the groups of the United Left would argue the same way. A manifesto produced by the Rostock group, for example, for the March elections, tends much more towards to the "market/self-management" model proposed by the Dabrowska-Ikonowicz group in Poland.

Distinctively, also, the United Left has a feminist plank in its programme, and an organised Marxist-feminist group ("Lila Offensive") within it. Defence of the liberal East German abortion law (abortion on request within the first three months) against the much more restrictive West German law will be one of the big issues for the left as Germany unifies.

The United Left opposed German unification. Though different people in the United Left had different slants on this — some seeing unification under any foreseeable circumstances as a veritable catastrophe, others saying that it was really a matter of arguing over the *conditions* for unification — still a basic leaflet ("What Does the United Left Want?") had as its very first words, "We are for the defence of the sovereignty of the GDR

vis-a-vis all demands for a quick 'reunification'..."

As some comrades in the United Left will concede, the strongest drive for unifying Germany came from *the East German workers* — and not necessarily because these workers are nationalist-minded, or pro-capitalist (though many are), but because they could see that the East German state was *finished* and wanted to grasp levers which would enable them to secure the same rights and conditions as West German workers. The United Left thus isolated itself from the workers.

Now that unification is fast becoming an established fact, maybe that isolation can be mended. Maybe, also, the independent trade union groups in East Germany can make progress. The Initiative for Independent Trade Unions (IFUG) has so far remained very small, and the old East German government-controlled unions are being taken over lock, stock and barrel by West German unions. The East German TUC (FDGB) has dissolved itself so that the East German unions can be taken over one by one. IFUG's policy is now to build links with rank-and-file groups in West German trade unions.

The United Left, too, will have to consider its relations with West German groups; the debates on the German left in coming years will be a unique microcosm of the relations between East European and West European leftists. According to Thomas Kupfer, a United Left member from Halle, "There are some Trotskyists in the United Left — but not dogmatic. You have to defend Trotsky against a lot of Trotskyists..."

"I would accept none of the theories about the nature of the Stalinist states. They all elevate one aspect. There are a lot of theories in the United Left.

"It wasn't capitalism in the traditional sense used by Marxists. State capitalism? It's true it was not an alternative to exploitation and alienation in capitalism. Socialism in one country is not possible.

"But the Stalinists were forced to make

some improvements, for example in social security. And a lot of things were promised in the laws which weren't realised but should be defended — for example, we defend the 'people's property' against the bureaucrats' attempts to sell it off although in fact it was the property of a minority.

"'Bureaucratic collectivist' theories are interesting too. But it's very complicated."

## Czechoslovakia

In Czechoslovakia there was the only Trotskyist publicly active in Eastern Europe before 1989, Petr Uhl, a sympathiser of Ernest Mandel's "United Secretariat". In and out of jail, constantly harassed and under surveillance, Uhl remained bravely active as a leading member of the "Charter 77" democracy movement.

In the revolution of 1989 "Charter 77" became the basis for the Civic Forum, now (with its Slovak sister group Public Against Violence) Czechoslovakia's ruling party. Civic Forum is a coalition, mainly of Christian Democrats and hard-nosed free-market economists. Although the people of Czechoslovakia told an opinion survey in December 1989 that only three per cent of them wanted capitalism, they also wanted a government of "experts" — and the economic experts in Civic Forum are free-marketeters, now increasingly in the ascendant. In June 1990 they announced a crash programme for selling off most state enterprises within two years.

Uhl is still accepted as a left-winger within Civic Forum. He is now boss of the government news agency, and was a Civic Forum candidate in the June 1990 elections.

Late in 1989, however, Uhl did launch a group called "Left Alternative", which remains active even though Uhl himself plays little role. It has about 50 members, with a periphery of maybe 150 more. Its members are mainly veterans of 1968, mainly in Prague. Left radical youth are more attracted to anarchist groups, though Left Alternative is able to collaborate with some of them.

Left Alternative's platform demands that: "The mammoth 'state enterprises' must be divided into rationally functioning economic subjects. The self-management structures must work not just on the level of factory management, but also the plant and workplace level.

"The bureaucracy must be rejected. It's necessary to find a form of organising work, and of legal authority, which would not just guarantee productivity, but in which the paid employee would have a real influence on the management and results of his labour and on the distribution of the profits created."

Unlike anywhere else in Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia has had a strong reform movement in its official, formerly

government-controlled, trade unions, which has replaced their entire leadership. So far Left Alternative has failed to make links with that (mainly syndicalist) reform movement. But a turn away from its origins as a left wing of Civic Forum, and towards the working class, is vital for the future of Left Alternative.

## Hungary

Hungary had had a more liberal political regime than the rest of Eastern Europe for some years before 1989. A left group had developed on the fringes of the ruling party, called the Alternative Left. In a manifesto dated March 1989, it declared:

**"The success of the workers' efforts is prevented by the State as well as by Capital. We believe that the Left should commit itself to the realisation of workers' self-management..."**

**"In the given conditions of the international relation of forces, Hungary should strive to create a mixed economy, dominated by social property, which would contain a direct social sector alongside the state and private capitalist sectors. This direct social sector would be the domain of direct collaboration of consumers and producers, organised from below..."**

The Alternative Left, however, was unable to play any role in the hectic events which followed. A tiny Trotskyist group exists in Hungary (the League of Revolutionary Socialists of Hungary, linked to the Workers' Revolutionary Party in Britain) but it also has had little impact.

Most of the radical youth have gone to FIDESZ, the Federation of Young Democrats, a group distinguished by a more radical and activist drive for democracy than the two main opposition groups, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (now the governing party) and the Alliance of Free Democrats. Dominant opinion in FIDESZ is pro-capitalist, but there are, it seems, a few socialists in it.

A Hungarian "Solidarity" union movement was launched by activists from FIDESZ, but it remains very tiny. Other independent unions, of white-collar and technical workers, are larger, but not very large, and strictly bread-and-butter movements. The left remains very weak in Hungary.

## Bulgaria

Bulgaria has an independent trade union movement called Podkrepa (Support). According to the scanty reports in the Western press, it is mainly based among white-collar and technical workers, with only some tens of thousands of members. Nevertheless, in early 1990, it felt strong enough to call for a one-day general strike (for faster progress towards democracy) against the neo-Stalinist government and against the wishes of the opposition coalition (Union of Democratic Forces, UDF) in which

Podkrepa participates. The strike was called off only after definite concessions from the government.

Podkrepa has taken part in counter-demonstrations opposing chauvinist protests against the government's restoration of rights to Bulgaria's Turkish minority. But we have no information about it developing an economic and social programme independent of the UDF's.

The UDF's programme is the standard one of the middle-class opposition movements in Eastern Europe: democracy, a market economy, protection of the environment. Unfortunately for the UDF, the revamped neo-Stalinist party in Bulgaria has moved deftly enough to win the June 1990 elections on much the same programme, and to control the whole process of reform, so far, from above.

## USSR

Boris Kagarlitsky's Socialist Party and Socialist Trade Union Association (Sotsprof) are, of all the Eastern left opposition groups, by far the best-known in the West. Kagarlitsky himself has had two thick books published in Britain ('The Thinking Reed' and 'The Dialectics of Change'), and received the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize. The Socialist Workers' Party has launched fund-raising efforts for Sotsprof to the exclusion of all other socialist and workers' groups in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

The Socialist Party and Sotsprof are certainly important groups which deserve support from Western socialists. But they are not the be-all and end-all of the Eastern left. They have less weight in the USSR than the Polish left groups or the East German United Left have in their countries; and they are less clear politically than the Polish or East German groups.

Kagarlitsky himself is a sort of left social-democrat. "In my view," he writes in 'The Thinking Reed', "Martov and Allende were right, not Lenin." He defines the USSR as having a non-capitalist and non-socialist "statocratic mode of production", which he also sees as prevailing in such Third World states as Mexico. He seeks a "middle way" to a new society, between reform and revolution.

The Socialist Party and Sotsprof have only some hundreds of members. The USSR, however, unlike Eastern Europe, has a fast-growing and militant independent trade union movement. An independent miners' union is now (June 1990) in the process of formation, with around one million members. An independent trade union centre, the Confederation of Labour, was formed in May 1990. Kagarlitsky's group, mainly intellectuals, has little influence in these circles, which tend towards ideologies of worker self-management at enterprise level, a free market, and social-democratic welfare provision.