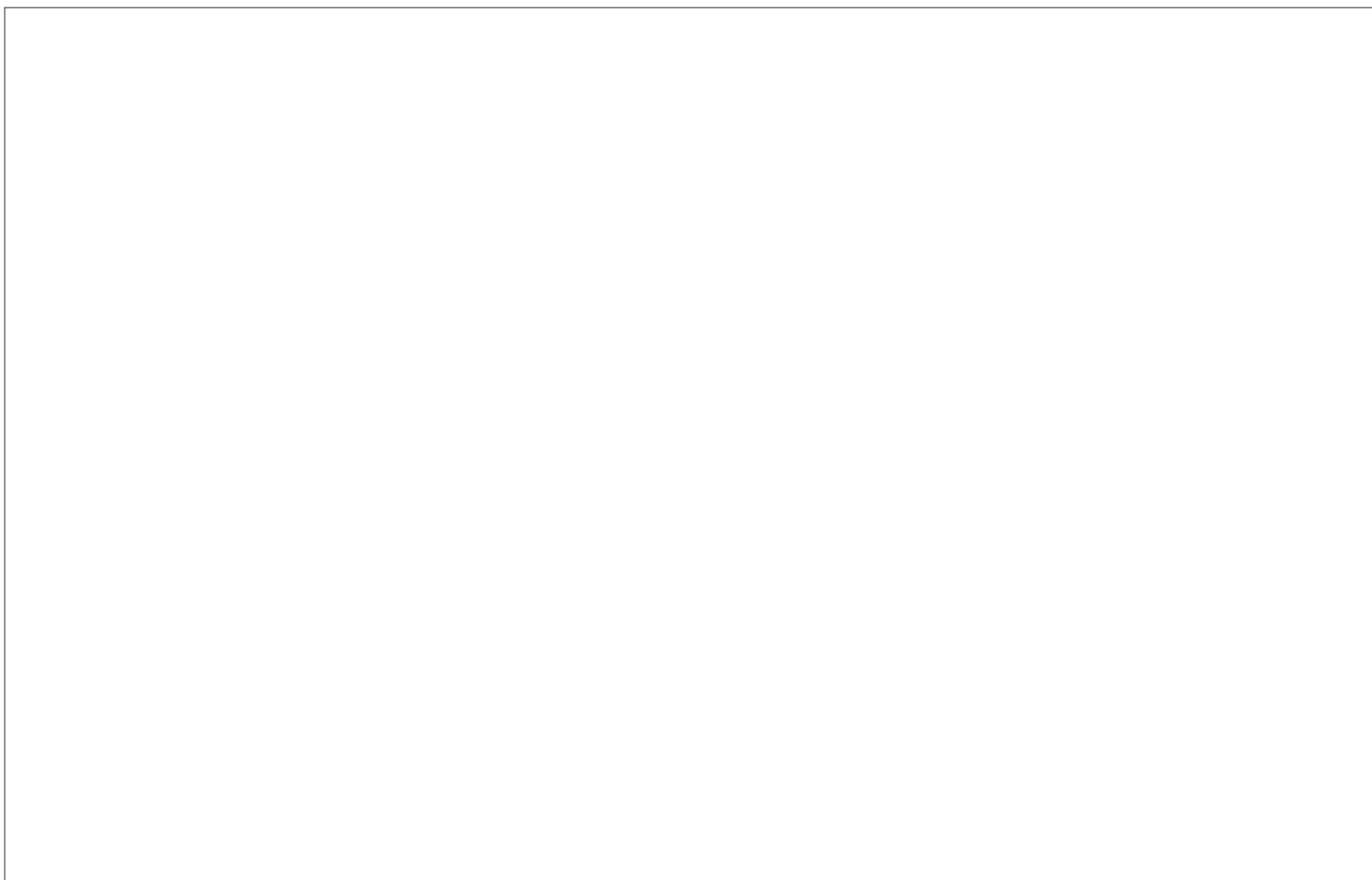


LOOKING BACKWARD



Workers' Fight contingent on a demonstration against the coup in Chile, 1973. Sean Matgamna is on the left (with the beard)

Reflections on 50 years in the socialist movement

In 2009, Sean Matgamna, a founder of the AWL political tendency, marked 50 years in revolutionary politics. In discussions with Sacha Ismail, Jill Mountford, Ed Maltby, and Martin Thomas, he talked about those fifty years, and especially about the background to the decision by him and two comrades to launch the Workers' Fight group, forerunner of the AWL, in 1966.

How the AWL tendency started in 1966

The political tendency now organised as AWL originates from Workers' Fight, a small Trotskyist group formed in 1966. Why, and how?

Workers' Fight came into existence as a distinct tendency in response to two linked "crises". There was a prolonged crisis of British capitalist society and of the labour movement, which had grown so very powerful within it and yet was unable — despite a mass socialist sentiment in the trade unions — to overthrow capitalism and replace it by a working-class socialist system.

That would be resolved in the victory of Thatcher and the defeat of the old labour movement.

And there was a crisis of the older Trotskyist (and quasi-Trotskyist: IS, later SWP) currents. That would be "resolved" by the would-be Trotskyist groups turning themselves into self-oriented sects — "revolutionary parties" — each oscillating like a spinning top on its own axis, around itself and the politics that would, it thought, allow it to survive and grow.

With the welfare state created in its modern form by the post-1945 Labour government as safety net; with full employment and a prolonged seller's market in labour-power; with organisation industrially in the trade unions, whose membership was steadily growing, and politically in the Labour Party, the working class was an immense power in British capitalist society.

In the factories and in whole industries we could and did, in practice, challenge the right of the capitalist class to rule as it liked, in its own interests. In the 1800s Karl Marx had called the Ten Hours Act a little bit of the working-class political economy imposed on the capitalist system. The welfare state was that — and on a very large scale.

The nationalisations of the 1945-51 Labour government — and of the 1974-9 Labour government — were of course only measures of state-capitalist rationalisation of the capitalist system by the capitalist state, in the fundamental interests of the capitalist ruling class. But typically they brought benefits to the working class; conditions for the miners improved enormously, for example.

When the Tories won the 1951 election (though getting fewer votes than the Labour Party, they got more seats, by dint of the electoral system), the Trotskyists expected an immediate Tory drive to reverse the welfare state provisions of the outgoing government — a Tory social counter-revolution.

It did not come. The opposite: the Tory government denationalised steel, but embraced the welfare state and even expanded it. The political reputation of Harold Macmillan, who became prime minister in January 1957, had been made by his success as Housing Minister. The big push of "counter-revolution" against Labour's constitutional revolution of 1945-8 came fully thirty years later — in Thatcher's offensive against the labour movement after 1979. And even then the post-1945 welfare state was, though damaged, not destroyed.

One very small group of Trotskyists, around a Glasgow barber (and future MP, from 1973) Harry Selby, maintained in the mid-60s that there was in Britain a condition of "dual power" between the working class and the bourgeoisie, something akin to the dual power between the Provisional Government and the Soviets in Russia in 1917, before the October Revolution.

As a conceptualisation, that was bizarre, not least because it took no account of the stable bourgeois state and all that implied for the future. But it caught some of the reality.

The situation continued for twenty, twenty-five, thirty years, as did the long waves of industrial working-class militancy; but it could not last indefinitely. Either the working class and the labour movement would push further, and take control of society — or the bourgeoisie would regain full control of affairs in "their own" society. Our gains would be rolled back, perhaps, so the founders of Workers' Fight thought, bloodily.

When the roll-back came, it came in the form of

Thatcher's offensive — against a labour movement which, stricken by a tremendous economic slump from 1980, which brought mass unemployment, by and large accepted defeat without a fight. It came with much destruction and suffering for the defeated working class — for a whole young generation in many parts of the country in the 1980s — but bloodlessly, except for the hundreds physically damaged and a few killed in the miners' strike.

In France they used to call the hellish fever-ridden penal colony on Devil's Island "the dry guillotine". Thatcherism as bourgeois counter-revolution was our dry guillotine.

The TUC general secretary, George Woodcock, could orate at the 1960 TUC congress that the labour movement had come in from the cold, into "the corridors of power". But his successors bowed meekly and accepted being expelled from those "corridors of power" without a struggle.

Such was the prolonged crisis of British capitalist society, and its resolution for the bourgeoisie by the Thatcher government after 1979. The crisis of Trotskyism was equally prolonged.

It wasn't of course a purely British crisis. It is best and most briefly summed up by the answers that the Trotskyists gave to a series of linked political questions. We, "Workers' Fight", posed those questions in our polemic against Militant in 1966. That polemic was focused on Militant, but was nonetheless for us a matter of summing up on the other Trotskyist groups too, in the first place the SLL (later WRP). At the time the SLL was the biggest and most seriously organised of the Trotskyist groups. It was in a league of its own compared to the others, the IS, the proto-IMG, and Militant.

THIRTEEN QUESTIONS

1. Was there already an adequate socialist consciousness in the British labour movement? Militant said yes, there was.

We said no. The "socialist consciousness" of the 1960s was vague, unfocused, a matter of hopes and of resolutions nodded through at union conferences.

The SLL said that too, less clearly. But for them every economic struggle would quickly lead to political conclusions — especially when the state got involved, which then by definition made the industrial struggles "political".

The SLL's approach was a variant of what Lenin, Plekhanov, Martov and Trotsky in Russia had called "economism".

IS was even more "economistic". It behaved and talked as if every strike was indistinguishable from socialism. They used "workers' control" as a synonym for socialism.

2. Would the British labour movement, including the Labour Party, evolve organically, ever to the left, until it was an adequate revolutionary socialist movement, led by a Marxist and Trotskyist party? Militant said yes.

We said no. The transformation of the labour movement would have to be won, spearheaded, organised by Marxists; or it would not happen.

The sectarianism of the main Trotskyist organisation, the SLL, prevented them from playing the necessary role here. It made them, and their "build the revolutionary party" sloganising, a negative force in working-class politics — and increasingly so.

3. Was the future a matter of inexorable evolution to working-class victory, or could the whole movement be thrown back by way of working-class defeats at the hands of the ruling class? Militant predicted inexorable evolution to socialism.

We said no. Defeat, most likely bloody defeat, was possible and, without radical changes in the labour movement, inevitable. We quoted Trotsky from his writings against the Austro-Marxists: "The bourgeoisie is not a stone dropping into an abyss but a living historical force which struggles, manoeuvres, advances now on its right flank, now on its left..."

The SLL, from the end of the 1960s, talked as if military dictatorship was an immediate threat.

4. Would the British working-class revolution be a purely peaceful affair, with the ruling class surrender-

ing quietly to a socialist working class intent on destroying the bourgeoisie as a possessing and ruling class? Militant's main leaders said yes.

We said no. In the light of history, the idea of peaceful revolution was absurd.

On that, the SLL said the same as us. IS, until the mid 60s, presented its programme in its press as a list of demands for a future Labour government to carry out.

5. What was a "Marxist perspective"? Not "the perspective", not any perspective, but a perspective as a tool for orientation for Marxists?

Was it a "prediction", and thereafter a passive waiting on events, for the "train" of History, which the Marxists had identified boarded, to arrive at its pre-designated destination of socialism? Or did it belong more to the thinking that James Connolly, after Machiavelli, had neatly summed up thus: "The only true prophets are those who carve out the future they announce".

Militant in effect said that "perspectives" were a matter of catching the inexorable "train" of History. We said that was mechanistic joke-shop Marxism, not revolutionary Marxism.

The SLL acted as if it believed voluntarism, sloganising, "building the party", could realise the perspective of socialist revolution, more or less at will.

6. Was a revolutionary party necessary for working-class socialist victory? If so, what was its nature? What was its role? What was its fundamental activity? How should it be organised? Was it a democratic political party, or a cult? How did it relate to the pre-existing labour movement?

Paying lip-service to the Lenin-Trotsky tradition, Militant and the SLL were both sectarian cults, though different in many details. IS was loose and federal and relatively liberal, but it too was a cult, around the Cliff-Kidron-Rosenberg family.

7. What was the Labour Party — "the workers' party", or a "bourgeois workers' party"?

All agreed that it was flatly "the workers' party" — until we in 1966 disinterred the definition from Lenin and the early Comintern, that it was a "bourgeois workers' party".

8. Should Marxists work in the Labour Party, the mass party of the trade unions? The SLL had taken itself out of the Labour Party in 1963-4.

9. Should Marxists in the Labour Party try to organise the broader left, or confine themselves to general propaganda for socialism and for "the perspective"?

Militant said explicitly that Marxists should confine themselves to propaganda. In fact, they made old Fabian propaganda for nationalisation by the bourgeois state. They didn't even stipulate that it should be nationalisation "under workers' control".

A perennial running dispute in the Labour Party Young Socialists in the mid 60s had Militant insisting that nationalisation of "the monopolies" was the great working-class demand, and IS dismissing it in favour of "workers' control".

Idiocy! Both "ignored" the question of state power. 10. How did Marxists relate to the industrial class struggle? Go along with it, more or less exclusively on its own level (and, paradoxically, thereby undervalue its potential)? "Support" it, but passively, seeing and the general propaganda work of the Marxists as more important?

Militant, in our dispute with them over the seafarers' strike in mid 1966, dismissed it as "ephemeral" (Peter Taaffe).

The SLL talked as if big strikes were the socialist revolution. IS, then, aspired to no more than a humble middle-class servicing role in relation to strikes and industrial militants.

We criticised the IS approach; but, as compared to the other two, we thought it preferable, and less destructive.

11. What was Stalinism? This argument was not, despite superficial appearances, about name-tags: degenerated and deformed workers' states, state capitalism, bureaucratic collectivism.

It was about whether Stalinism was progressive or reactionary in relation to capitalism, and whether it was a short-term or a long-term phenomenon in history.

Although Militant called the Stalinist states "degenerated and deformed workers' states", and IS called

them “state capitalist”, in practice both of them saw them as a long-term new form of class society, stretching beyond or at the most advanced “end” of capitalism.

The SLL insisted on the contradictions and instability of Stalinism, but incoherently: it would become Maoist for a while in 1967.

We held to the anti-Stalinist “edge” of the view that defined the Stalinist states as unstable “degenerated and deformed workers’ states”.

12. What exactly was the Trotskyist tradition? For Militant, the SLL, and us, it was the post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” elaborated by James P Cannon, Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel and others in the 1940s and early 50s.

So too — and this is central to their later evolution — was it for the Cliff group, though they had had some connections with the “other Trotskyist” tradition, the “Shachtmanite” Workers’ Party and ISL of the USA.

In the 1960s the Cliff group spurned “Trotskyism”, identifying it with the SLL. But in 1968 Cliff would tell Trotskyist critics of IS that the problem was that the other IS leaders — such as his brother-in-law Michael Kidron — had, unlike himself, no “Fourth Internationalist” background.

He meant it too, as the later transformation of IS into a second-string SLL would show.

13. Should we work to build an industrial rank and file movement? Both Militant and IS then said no. The SLL said yes, but instead of a real rank and file movement they built a sectarian front, the “All Trades Union Alliance”.

TROTSKYISM IN THE MID-60S

The crisis of Trotskyism lay in the answers the different groups gave to these questions, and therefore how the Trotskyists related to the working class and the labour movement in the crisis of British capitalist society. The crisis of the society was worked through, and the crisis of the Trotskyist groups expressed itself in their way of trying to respond to it.

In the mid-1960s there was no organisation based on the Workers’ Party / Independent Socialist League current. In Britain there were four or five Trotskyist or Trotskyist groups that had any sort of organisational or political future, all of them rooted in 1940s “orthodox Trotskyism”. Two of them still exist, more or less, much changed.

As I have already said, the biggest and by far the most important Trotskyist group in the 1960s was the SLL, led until it fell apart in 1985 by Gerry Healy, a transplanted Galway peasant. The Healyites had perhaps a thousand members, a big youth movement, and a formidable “party machine” of full-timers, ruled with the proverbial rod of iron by Healy.

The organisation had been shaped historically by a determined orientation to the existing labour movement, the Labour Party and the trade unions. It had worked in the Labour Party from the late mid 1940s. It had recruited some hundreds of people from the Communist Party after 1956, when Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev denounced him as a crazy mass murderer and then quickly proceeded to show his own Stalinist cloven hoof by slaughtering the Hungarian revolutionaries a few months later.

The Healyites were “Orthodox Trotskyists Mark Two”, people who in 1953 had followed James P Cannon’s lead in repudiating the Pablo/Mandel Fourth International, whom they accused of softness on Stalinism and of refusing to be unequivocal about backing the East German workers’ uprising of June 1953.

The Healyite organisation had always had an authoritarian regime and been politically primitive.

Where Militant was passive, the SLL was wildly sectarian and disruptive. The IMG-in-formation were deeply disguised as left-Labourites, thought they would soon (1967-8) turn into slightly demented ultra-left phrasemongers and revolutionary fantasy-peddlers.

IS was, organisationally and politically, a loose grouping, a political hodge-podge, in many respects quasi-anarchist, but also an advocate (until 1965) of long, long term work in the Labour Party. It was loose enough to have an important group of members, engineering workers in Stockport, leave the group in 1968 because it condemned the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Such was the crisis of the Trotskyist groups.

It was overlaid on the fundamental contradictions of all post-Trotsky “Trotskyism”.

On “imperialism” IS were terminally incoherent. In the early 1960s they picked up on the theories of such as the one-time Stalinist and then Labour minister John Strachey, and declared imperialism dead, a category of the past. In the late 1980s they would flip over to a crasser version of the populist anti-imperialism of the earlier “orthodox Trotskyists”. They called Stalinism “state-capitalist”, but were for Stalinist victory in

Indochina (as, of course, were we). They were “Luxemburgists”, anti-Leninists, or most of them were.

What did the tiny Workers’ Fight group propose to do about all that? The first public political statement of the group called for a “Trotskyist regroupment”.

CALL FOR REGROUPMENT

Our idea was that the many healthy individuals we thought to exist in the groups, despite their terrible politics, could regroup around authentic “orthodox Trotskyism”, which for us was the politics of Cannon in 1953. The call for regroupment was the editorial in the first issue of Workers’ Fight (October 1967), and then, in a revised and clarified text, a pamphlet. The revision in the pamphlet was merely to clarify what we said to do now, meanwhile, before a regroupment could be won. We said: “Workers’ Fight will attempt an initial regroupment... the recruitment of fresh individuals to the Trotskyist programme... as a step towards the larger regroupment which must follow if there is ever to be a healthy Trotskyist party in this country...”

Calls for unity almost always have the implied subtext: meanwhile, join us. It was not catchpenny opportunism on our part — as it would be in the IS call for revolutionary socialist unity half a year later. It was an attempt to make sense of what we were about and to define what needed to be done “objectively”.

We were ridiculously young people. When the conflict with Militant came to a head in mid 1966, I was the Workers’ Fight “veteran”, with about seven years’ activity. I was just reaching 25. Rachel Lever and Phil Semp were two years younger, with two or three years’ political experience.

Just after we left the RSL in October 1966, I wrote a letter to Phil Semp — of which I recently found a carbon copy in an old file — saying that if we looked only at ourselves, the size of our grouping and the talents we could deploy, then we would “despair and die”. We had to believe that our politics would attract more able people.

It was a variant of a thought from Cannon and Trotsky: the programme will allow us to build an organisation adequate to the programme. There was neither pretend-modesty nor false-modesty in that — certainly not on my part. The alternative to the thought was to look at the situation, and the state of the revolutionary forces, there and then, and “despair and die”.

The programme of left unity remained central to the group for a long time, and in pursuit of it over the next decade and a half we initiated and organised a number of group-to-group fusions: IS, 1968; ex-IS Left Faction, 1975; WSL, 1981.

In 1971, when the IS leadership drove to expel us, a central charge (from Duncan Hallas) was that we didn’t believe in “the party”, but instead, as our Trotskyist Tendency platform demonstrated, in a future revolutionary left regroupment. He meant that we didn’t see IS then as “the party”, and for sure we did not.

IS itself had come a long way from 1968, when the term Trotskyist was a pejorative and talk of building a revolutionary party in British conditions a mark of “toy-town Bolshevism”.

But of course, the class struggle did not wait on us, or on the Trotskyists, being ready to meet it and ensure the best outcome for the working class. It progressed to the working-class defeat under Thatcher from which we are not yet recovered.

We were wrong in two respects. “Healthy individual revolutionaries” can degenerate with their organisations. They do. Political self-determination of individuals is comparatively rare. They stay with the organisations that awaken them to political consciousness, or that they found first, or they fade away. Very few SLLers survived as revolutionaries — very few of us indeed.

It is a variant of the general phenomenon of “autonomy” in political culture, of workers and others remaining tied to their organisations, whether it was the Social Democracy after 1914, or the Communist Parties as Stalin transformed them.

HOW THE 1960S GROUPS CHANGED

In the 1960s the SLL was the most important group and the only one that had an implantation in the labour movement such that it could possibly have made a decisive difference to the outcome of the class struggles of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. It became more and more sectarian; went crazy; and then sold itself, in the mid 70s, to Libya, Iraq, and the PLO as a propaganda outlet and spy agency (on Arab dissidents in Britain, and on Jews prominent in British life). It imploded in 1985.

The IS, the quasi-anarchist, quasi-reformist hodge-podge of the mid 60s, evolved into a sectarian group for which “building the party” became the only thing that mattered or influenced or determined what the “party” did — a variant of the SLL.

Militant developed an astonishing, and to my

Workers’ Fight, February 1972: “Bloody Sunday”

knowledge unprecedented, modus vivendi with the tolerant Labour Party regime of the 1970s. They took over the Labour Party Young Socialists in 1969, after both the SLL and the IS had abandoned it, and used it as a school and a recruiting pond for a decade and a half. They were even subsidised by the Labour Party in doing so: the Labour Party paid a Militant member to be the full-time Labour youth officer. They kept their heads down, made general propaganda in which nationalisation by the bourgeois state was “socialism”.

As I’ve said, they made propaganda for their perspective for the labour movement and for the world (i.e. that Stalinism was expanding into the “Third World” as the next stage of the world revolution, inexorably creating “deformed workers’ states”).

They grew very big in the early 80s (some thousands: the figures vary). They became a sort of surrogate second-string CP in the bureaucratised labour movement. They won the leadership of the Liverpool labour movement — the Labour Party and many trade unions — and then collapsed in fiasco, having betrayed the striking miners in 1984-5 by cutting a short-term deal with Tories in 1984.

If you had asked me in 1966 whether Militant could coexist with the Labour Party bureaucracy in that way, I’d have said no. Whether they could grow as they did — again, no.

If you had asked me whether their stewardship of the Liverpool labour movement could happen as it would, I’d have said that was impossible too: they would learn in the struggle. But they didn’t. The miners’ strike too was “ephemeral”, as nothing compared with the survival of their own organisation.

The defeats of the labour movement, the moves to the right by the Labour Party, and the collapse of Stalinism — all defying the “perspectives” on which Militant had built itself — led it to collapse. Greatly depleted, it continues now as the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal.

Curiously, the SP leaders of today, having split with Ted Grant, now repeat much of the criticism which Workers’ Fight made of the Grant leadership in the 1960s — decades too late, when it is a matter of an autopsy and not of correcting the course in time to be able to play a better role in the class struggle.

And Workers’ Fight? We faced the long haul of building an organisation in the working-class movement. I have no doubt that we were right in our criticism of the revolutionary left of the mid-60s. But in retrospect you see that our chances of changing the course of events from the mid 1960s was nil.

We didn’t “despair and die”; but we couldn’t prevail. Of the two other comrades who started the Workers’ Fight tendency with me, Phil Semp lasted 11 years and Rachel Lever 17 before giving up. And we suffered with the working-class defeats of the 1980s and 1990s.

That too is a variant of something very old — the typical experience of the Trotskyist movement in the 1930s, seeing clearly (or, in our case, relatively clearly), but being too small to affect events.

We still believed that 1953 “orthodox Trotskyism” was adequate, the authentic Bolshevik-Trotskyism. We have had to face the fact that it was not; that we were not politically adequate.

We have had to lay the political and theoretical foundations for a better, an adequate, revolutionary left. We are still doing it. That is what our conflicts with the rest of the would-be left are all about.

Finding my way to Trotskyism

Sean Matgamna founded the Workers' Fight group after political battles with and within the bigger Trotskyist groups that existed in the mid-1960s, the SLL and the Militant. How did he come to do that? Or to become a Trotskyist at all?

I'd considered myself a communist from when I was between 15 and 16, early in 1957. In 1959 I became politically active as a would-be revolutionary trade unionist, and I decided to join the Young Communist League.

I was working in a timber yard in Salford where was no union for the labourers. I decided to join the union and see if I could get the others to join.

I took an hour off and went to the TGWU offices at The Crescent in Salford. The official I talked to told me that the union had asked and been refused permission to organise the timber yard. He asked me to take in some leaflets and give them out. I agreed eagerly. I agitated — talked socialism, as I understood it, more than trade-unionism — got five or six other young workers to join, and some promises from others that they would join if I wasn't sacked.

I started organising on the Monday, and I was sacked on the Friday. From the point of view of learning about revolutionary socialist politics and the class struggle, it was a very instructive experience, a very useful beginning to political activity. You might say I was lucky.

About three weeks later I was taken to an interview room in a police station and roughed up by a couple of cops investigating vandalism at the yard. Truck windows had been smashed, and they were checking through people who might have had a motive. The yard owners set them on me.

I've had worse, but it was frightening — and instructive and focusing, too. Certainly, it sharpened my will and drive, and worked against any chance there might have been that I would accept the CP dogma about a peaceful revolution in Britain.

What was the background from which I came to the YCL?

I had lived for my first twelve and a half years in Ennis, County Clare, Ireland.

My mother had been 20 when the Irish Civil War ended, my father three years younger. Both of them were story-tellers, good story-tellers, rooted in a rich, entirely oral, culture, and my mother was a story-maker. I continued the story-telling and story-making habit with my son, Thomas Ruah Carlyle; and he, and sometimes I, continue it with his children, Nina and Charlie.

The tales were often political, and to do with what was to me history. I listened throughout my childhood to tales of the 1919-21 War of Independence against the police and military forces of the British state which then occupied Ireland, and of the 1922-3 Civil War which followed the surrender by Britain of 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland.

My mother was from Miltown Malbay, and was in the area when armed police went berserk after Republicans ambushed and killed a group of them at a place called Rineen. She told me about them shooting wildly, looting drink, setting fire to houses, killing "suspects", and burning the centre of Ennistymon, one of the cluster of small towns in the area. She made me feel the terror she felt then.

My father had been a trade-union militant long before I was born. He had been one of 24 men of Ennis charged in court with intimidation and conspiracy during a mass picket by the single-town union, the Ennis United Labourers' Association.

There were some echoes of that in my childhood, but it was all very unclear and unfocused. The "town labourers" had scattered to jobs in England when World War Two made jobs for them there. My father too, back and forth. There was a militant labour tradition in the town. One of my very earliest memories — aged four or so, I deduce — is of men with placards walking up and down Abbey Street during a dispute, though by then emigration to wartime England had opened escape routes.

My parents voted, both of them, in the Irish proportional-representation system, first Labour and second Fianna Fail.

I grew up as an Irish nationalist in a very conventional sense. The schools in Ennis taught us history as a long struggle for Irish freedom, Catholic freedom.

It was an ethnic-sectarian middle-class version of Irish history where the good guys and girls were the Gaelic people rising again and again for freedom. It was a narrow, separatist, physical-force-revolutionary

"construing" of a vastly more complex story.

In fact a number of the "risings" we were taught about could be called real risings only by stretching the truth. But where English kids learned about kings and queens, we learned about armed uprisings, and memorised the dates: 1641; 1690; 1798; 1803; 1848 and 49; 1867; 1916... Uprisings that were again and again defeated, until the bitter triumph in the second and third decades of the 20th century, and in which the heroes were often martyred. Fidelity was all, come what came.

The stories of the martyred of Irish revolts — who included Protestants, but Protestants who had fought for Catholic-Irish freedom — merged easily into the tale of Christ and his death on the cross to save humankind from original sin.

Here too, I was lucky. That history was myth-saturated, but there was also in it profound truth, including the most profound truth about the Irish history it mythified. And it was a twisted approximation to a Marxist account of history as the age-old and continuing struggle of classes, of the oppressed against the oppressors. It was all Hibernicised, and the enemy was England rather than the ruling class — but it was the English ruling class, the English landlord class, the Ascendancy class.

Though the term was not used, it was the story of a "proletarian" nation, the Irish common people, rebelling against an upper class that was also the English garrison class.

It conveyed the idea that social and political conditions were mutable, could be changed and reversed — that things which seemed age-old and fixed could be undone — that oppression should be resisted — that virtue lay in those who fought and never surrendered to iniquity.

THE "MANACLES" OF NATION AND CLASS

In 1954, we moved from that world, taking with us the intense class-awareness of the small-town world of the town labouring class — learned and absorbed from a thousand encounters, interactions, slights, exclusions, assumptions, rather than fully consciously — to Manchester, to the radically different world of large-scale-capitalist England, where the working class was vast and the workers' movement had already created a strong welfare state. That was a great education in itself.

We lived in Cheetham, still very much the Jewish area of Manchester. The left-wing parties, the Communist Party and Labour, and the main industry, clothing, were all populated heavily by Jewish people. That too was an education for a bigoted young Catholic who had never knowingly met a Protestant, let alone a Jew.

I'd read a Catholic popular re-telling of the Bible, and knew a little of ancient Jewish history. I soon learned in some detail about the Hitlerite mass murder. I came to think that Jews were oppressed people too, like the Irish and the victims of colonialism and imperialism.

I was, midway between 12 and 13, old enough, and with enough history (school history and stories, mainly my mother's, of the War of Independence and the Civil War), to have absorbed an unforgiving Catholic-Irish nationalism. I was slow to re-learn. In my mix of childish naivety and nationalist narrow-mindedness I couldn't understand why my parents were so appreciative of such things as the National Health Service and regular employment. I didn't want to understand. I found it nasty and ridiculous that my half-Anglicised cousins should celebrate "Guy Fawkes day" when, unfortunately, Catholic conspirators failed to blow up James I's Parliament.

Of course, the populist-nationalist outlook took on a radically different meaning in the new circumstances. The Jacobin ideas of Irish Republicanism assumed very different meanings in the social condition of the Manchester working class.

In Manchester I memorised some of Patrick Pearse's verses from a book I sought and found in the lending library. Pearse's verse has had great influence in 20th century Ireland — including two memorable pieces called *The Fool* and *The Rebel*. They influenced me, and deep in my mind no doubt still do.

In *The Rebel* he says:
*The children with whom I have played,
 The men and women with whom I have eaten
 Have had masters over them, have been under the lash of
 masters,
 and though gentle, have served churls.
 The hands that have touched mine
 the dear hands whose touch is familiar to me*

Have worn shameful manacles...

In terms of Irish history for the 50 years of English reform-from-above that preceded the 1916 Rising, this is hyperbole. But it is plain fact about class society.

The lash of deprivation, hunger, exclusion from the "good things" of the society, and sometimes the thump of police batons, was and is real for the working class, for my people.

The "churls" were Irish as well as English churls. The robbers and exploiters of the men and women "of no property" (Wolfe Tone's phrase at the time of the French Revolution) in independent Ireland were Irish. The gentle people ruled by churls were not only Irish, but also English and every other nationality of workers.

When we migrated I found myself confronting "the enemy", the English, in their lairs. A strong Catholic-Irish nationalist consciousness at first, and for a while, shaped my way of seeing the new world around me.

I had been an altar boy. I took the theology seriously, such as I had of it; and, on the elementary level, I had quite a lot of it. I had worked at it and thought about it, for example about the old Protestant-Catholic disputes.

I tried to explain away to my own satisfaction reasonable Protestant criticism of the Catholic Church, which school had acquainted me with. Had Martin Luther been right to criticise the sale by the Pope of "indulgences" — remissions of time in the fires of Purgatory in the afterlife?

No, I decided, the Church had been wiser and more merciful. Better off people were softer than "we" were and couldn't do the physically demanding penances that were the alternative to "indulgences".

I was 14 then, and, evidently, thinking about the world in crude class terms.

When exactly the general ideas of Catholic-Irish oral history — and the attitude to "England" which they demanded — hardened in me into contemporary republicanism, I no longer know. I was "hard" enough at the age of 13, I guess, to refuse to stand up for the British National Anthem at a schools concert by the Halle Orchestra at the Manchester Free Trade Hall.

I suppose the report of IRA activity would have influenced me. For years before the "formal" Border Campaign that began in December 1956 there were arms raids and attacks on barracks and RUC stations that got a lot of coverage.

Simultaneously, I got valuable lessons in comparative history, learning in my English school about the history of England and the British empire from a radically different point of view to that of Irish nationalism. I held on to the Irish "anti-imperialist" view, but I must have had to think about it.

Of course, you'd have to be a nutter to sustain any real hostility to the real people around you — decent, good, thinking and feeling people. And I was inclined to like people, to empathise. I had the strong example of my parents, especially my father, in that. You could say I was an instinctive communist rather than the instinctive chauvinist I'd have had to be to sustain the narrow Catholic-Irish nationalist attitudes.

Soon they began to dissolve. My growing awareness of a British labour movement and of its history was like breaking through from a tree-shaded narrow historical creek into the broad ocean.

BREAKING FROM THE CHURCH

My religious convictions began to fall apart too, between the ages of 14 and 15.

In Irish school history you were taught about the Catholic Church and the Irish people as if they were one. The cause of Ireland is the cause of Catholicism, and the cause of Catholicism is the cause of Ireland.

But it's not true. The invasion of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans in the middle of the 12th century was fomented by the Church and authorised by Pope Adrian IV (as it happens, the only English pope in history). The attitude of the Church to Irish revolutionaries has typically been one of bitter hostility. "Hell is not hot enough, nor eternity long enough, to punish these miscreants", as one bishop said of the Fenians in the 1860s.

I had, for whatever inner psychological reason, a longing for the past. I was obsessively interested in Irish and English history. I was holding on to and asserting my identity, I suppose. The parallel now with Muslim children of non-militant immigrant parents is obvious.

That spurred me to seek information and to read (and sometimes memorise) the verse of such nationalist "Irish Ireland" writers as Thomas Moore, Thomas

Rally against the Labour Party's ban on Socialist Organiser (forerunner of Solidarity), 1990. Speaking: Jeremy Corbyn. On the left: Sean Matgamna. On the right: Ken Livingstone

Davis, J Clarence Mangan, and others, as well as of Patrick Pearse, the great heroes and exemplars of our school history. To this day I sometimes still find myself thinking and, sometimes, writing in the rhetoric of those poems.

When I came across the facts of real Catholic-Irish history, they shattered my belief. It took a while. It was a long struggle, but I found myself abandoning Catholicism.

(The level of political consciousness is of course only the tip of a psychological iceberg. Underneath it were all sorts of conflicts associated with the great changes that were going on at puberty. But that would not be of interest here).

I finally decided that I knew nothing about God and all the rest of it because all I knew was what the priests had told me, and they and the school teachers were liars because of what they had told us about the history of Catholic Ireland. I gave up on Catholicism, and very soon after that, midway between 15 and 16, I became a communist.

How? It's hard for me to reconstruct that now. The sequence of events is clear, though. I read the fourth volume of Sean O'Casey's six-volume memoirs, *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well*. (Inishfallen is a poetic name for Ireland). I probably chose the book in the library for that reason. I had found and read B Ifor Evans's Penguin *Short History of English Literature* and some other similar books, and those may have listed O'Casey as a "communist". I knew it anyway.

By the time I read *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well*, I may have effectively ceased to think of myself as a Catholic, or I was close to that. I found in O'Casey a class view of Irish society; an account of the Tan War; criticism of the Catholic Church (which was in fact largely Protestant criticism).

O'Casey's account — a mix of imagination and fact, I think — of a Black and Tan raid on a tenement block in Dublin lit up my mother's accounts of such things in Clare. His account of class distinctions and of the difficulties of the very poor, which is very bitter and in its way true, was a mirror for my own and my people's experience.

His account of such people as Thomas Ash, killed by force-feeding in 1917, and Eamon De Valera took me into things I'd heard of and imagined. I had heard about the death of Thomas Ash from my mother; I'd served masses with De Valera in the Pro-Cathedral, as he was often there, Ennis being the centre of his Dail constituency.

It was the discovery of seams of knowledge I needed to have. It was the "secrets" of the grown-up from my childhood world, "recovered" and expanded.

Re-reading O'Casey's book a few years ago, I found it a strange hodge-podge. O'Casey was a real fuckwit politically. He became a Stalinist in the 1930s, when he was also still writing friendly letters to Ramsey MacDonald, the Labour prime minister and soon Labour traitor. The book is a very strange confection.

But, by whatever process of reshaping my pre-existing nationalism and small-town proletarian class-consciousness, it convinced me of the general notion of communism.

I didn't like what I understood of the "communist" societies. Yet, what did I "really" know about them? For sure the horrible homburg-hatted, top-coated, grim-faced, triumphant old men standing on top of the "Lenin" Mausoleum watching soldiers and tanks and rockets parading threateningly held no attraction for me, embodied no ideal. They alienated and repelled, rather than attracted, me.

COMMUNISM... AND "COMMUNISM"

But if you thought of yourself as sympathetic to the general idea of communism, there was a tremendous pressure on you to defend the existing "communist" states. You were forced by the hostile pressures and your own inability to distinguish between "communism" and the "communists" (in fact, Stalinist) in power to rationalise from what the "communists" were doing.

Most people dealt with the criticisms of "communism" by simply saying that the capitalist press was lying. That's a psychological gambit of the left to this day, including now the anti-Stalinist left, to allow people not to take on board what they don't want to take on board.

This two-millstones pressure from bourgeois public opinion and from rationalising from what you knew of "actually existing" communism exerted a deadly effect on the labour and socialist movements for many decades. It pushed generations of would-be communists into nonsense and political self-betrayal.

For instance, Stalinist shop stewards assimilated and rationalised what was Stalinist rule with their own difficulties in "controlling" and influencing "their own" workers.

I felt that pressure, and I was inclined to distrust and disbelieve all the "authorities" around me, lay as well as clerical, including, of course, the newspapers. But I was also, consciously and from the beginning, aware of the possibility of going from Catholicism to another religion, and perhaps because I felt my own hunger for it, I was determined not to do that. To some extent, of course, I did; but I never went along with the pressure fully, and I went along with Stalinist elitist and substitutionist ideas substantially for not very long, a few months perhaps at the age of 17.

I was politically isolated, entirely isolated, so I wrote things down and argued with myself. In describing my views then, I do not just rely on memory.

The thing that exercised me about my CP and YCL comrades, when I joined them, was their radically uncritical and unreasoning Russian "patriotism" — vicarious, ridiculous, displaced "patriotism". I was too close to my struggle with my own patriotic chauvinism not to see that, and not to despise it.

O'Casey influenced me greatly, I think fundamentally because of the class viewpoint, which I had inherited with my mother's milk, and the nationalism, which is also there.

The other book which influenced me decisively was *Inside The Left*, by Fenner Brockway, written in 1938 and published in 1942. Brockway had been the secre-

tary of the Independent Labour Party in its "revolutionary" phase of the 30s and 40s. He was, though I didn't know it then, a Labour MP for a while in the 1950s.

He was, if you like, the quintessential centrist, hovering between reformist and revolutionary socialism, though he had a good record as a campaigner against colonialism and imperialism. He would wind up in the House of Lords, a defeated MP "ennobled" by Harold Wilson in 1964.

Later, I would see him greeting the CND Aldermaston to London march at Easter 1960 (Aldermaston was in his constituency, Eton and Slough). I was too inhibited to go and talk to him, which I regret.

The book is both a broad survey and a personal account of his experience in the labour movement in the first part of the 20th century.

It introduced me to the British labour movement as a movement, and to British (and not only British) labour movement history, in a way I had not been able to see it properly before. It correlated class, socialist politics with my pervasive "anti-imperialism". It gave me an overall sense of socialism as not just ideas but a movement, locating it in history for me.

And he was criticising Stalinism from the left. Brockway had been linked to the "right-wing" opposition communists, the Brandlerites. But even the Brandlerites, in their criticism of Stalinism, by the late 1930s criticised it from the left.

As well as a sense of the labour movement, I got the idea from Brockway that there was a privileged bureaucracy in the USSR.

That idea did not translate for me into any lucid conception of Russia for about 18 months, but the seed was planted early, and by Brockway.

Strangely enough, I found that book in the town of Ennis in mid 1958. I went back there and lasted for only about three months. There was a library that was open for a few hours three days a week.

It was an era when there was all sorts of censorship. Many Irish writers, like Frank O'Connor, had some stories and books censored so that they could not be circulated in Ireland. Yet, mysteriously, I found Brockway, the "communist", there. Part of the reason for that may have been the strong labour tradition in the town, although I didn't know that at the time. Part also because Brockway gives an account of being in Lincoln jail with De Valera in 1917, and of De Valera's escape. Brockway as a life-long campaigner against colonialism had a deservedly good reputation, and he must have been persona grata with De Valera and others in Ireland.

That may account for the book being there, but in any case the political censorship was not as rigorous as the censorship about sexuality.

I also went through a long phase in England, before and after my time back in Ennis, where I had no guidance on what to read concerning communism. The well-known writers on "communism" were "anti-communist", or ex-"communist" (ex-Stalinists, in fact). Thus I read Orwell: *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. I read Arthur Koestler.

I didn't read much Lenin or Marx. I remember the amusement of the second-hand bookshop owner in central Manchester when I asked if he had *Das Kapital*. I tried to read a collection of quotes from Marx, found in the library, but I couldn't make sense of it. I remember reading Marx writing that the ancient proletariat lived off society, whereas modern society lives off the proletariat. It is perfectly sensible, but to me as a 16 year old it didn't make sense, and I blamed myself for being a fool.

I came across something from Lenin in which Lenin was belabouring the liberals. From my point of view then, "liberals" were good people, people who were against repression and for tolerant, liberal attitudes. Of course, Lenin was belabouring a particular political current of the Russian bourgeoisie, but at the time I couldn't make sense of it.

Two pamphlets, however, did influence me. One was Connolly's *Labour, Nationality, and Religion in Ireland*. He wrote it in 1910, a polemic against a Catholic priest who lectured against socialism, from within the assumptions of left-wing Catholicism. I found it understandable, and I learned from it.

I had been a Trotskyist for a couple of years before I got hold of James Connolly's *Labour In Irish History*. I stayed up all night reading it through, finding in it a wonderfully "turned-round" version of the Irish middle-class Catholic-sectarian history I'd been taught and had been found in books.

I also came across a little collection of Lenin, called *The Teachings of Karl Marx* — very instructive, though very hard to follow.

I didn't get access to any wide range of Marxist literature until I joined the Young Communist League.

Before that, and without any guidance, I depended on library books, and a book market of barrows that existed then in Manchester, in Shude Hill, where you would get lots of the old Left Book Club orange volumes from the 30s and 40s. Symptomatically, you would find left-wing criticism of Stalinism — Victor Serge, or Andrew Smith's *I Was A Soviet Worker* — in books put out by the Right Book Club, a feeble riposte to the Left Book Club.

READING AND LEARNING

I was always bookwormish. The fact of being first-generation literate — my father couldn't read or write; my mother could, but rarely did — brought me some privileges. Is this ridiculous paradox-mongering? No. I had the privilege of having parents who really wanted me to read and learn. My mother, for example, when I was still at school, bought me a book she saw in the window of a junk shop, about the Reformation. My poor mother was soon thereafter convinced that she had put the seed of heresy in me.

Another time — I suppose I was 14 — she came back from some cleaning job with her sister in law Elsie with a wonderful Victorian family Shakespeare — heavily bound, almost tabloid size, and with a full-page colour drawing facing each of the plays.

I read at school. In Ireland then you left school at 14, in England at 15. I was on track to leave at 14, which meant that I was a bit ahead of my peers in England. In my last year I was allowed to spend a lot of time reading at the back of the class, things like Dickens.

I fell between the exam stools. To my great relief I didn't do the Irish primary exam, and when I arrived in England I was too old for the eleven-plus.

But I was lucky enough to find myself in a small Catholic school, St Peter's, just over the border into Salford, run by civilised, good-hearted people. De facto there was a policy of no violence against the children, and no threat of it. That was rare at the time. The teachers were very helpful, good people. They were very tolerant of my exhibitions of nationalism.

When I wouldn't stand for the National Anthem at the school concert at the Free Trade Hall, I didn't get the heavy-handed response I had expected from my experience in Irish schools. Instead, I met sympathetic attempts to understand and talk about my attitudes from my teacher, a long-domiciled Irish woman, Miss Dignan, and the headmistress, a kind if mildly severe English woman named... Lynch.

I was a timid little fellow, and must have had a struggle to screw myself up to defiance at the concert. The result of their sympathetic attitude was that I felt guilty: would I have dared to do something like that in Ireland? I am morally certain that the teachers did not intend to create that response in me.

I remember being intimidated by the grandeur of the great Central Library in Manchester, a late 1920s copy of the old British Museum library in London, with circular spokes of desks radiating from a centre. It is still there, now somewhat shabby and decrepit. Working-class people often are intimidated by such alien and grand things.

When I was leaving school, the headmistress did what was probably the best thing she could have done for me in the circumstances. She gave me a little pam-

phlet with hard-cover binding on how to use libraries, the Dewey Decimal system and so on.

I learned how to use libraries. I'd used libraries before. I was a member of the lending library in Ennis. My mother was always very encouraging. I got one of my cousins, Johnny, to join the library in Manchester, and I would go with him and he would take out books for me from the adult library, which as a child I was not allowed to do. Miss Lynch's little book gave me confidence in using libraries to my own purpose.

The conclusion that I drew from breaking from Catholicism at first was that I knew nothing. Together with my family background, that created a tremendous drive to read, a tremendous hunger for knowledge. With the hunger went the sense of infirmity. Realising when young that on a lot of things you know more than your parents is not as ego-inflating as you might think. If you identify with them strongly — and I did and do — their deficiency is yours, as a sense of inferiority and unappeasable, growing ignorance.

The biggest early shaping influence — I suppose oddly, and maybe it will sound pretentious — was the late 19th century French writer Guy de Maupassant, best known for his short stories. Things by de Maupassant would be published with very salacious pictures, and I was a hungry adolescent, starved of knowledge and other things. I think I got interested in de Maupassant because of the smut factor.

De Maupassant was a very acerbic if implicit critic of society. His stories fitted in very well with my own social observations, and my parents'.

FAMILY CULTURE

My mother, for example, was very sharp on the social relations around her. She was also very sharp on the treatment of children. She had been an orphan. She had experienced, and then as an adult seen, the ill-treatment of children.

She would have been a revolutionary if she had lived in a different world. As it was, her attitude to the treatment of children implied a revolutionary criticism of society that she herself never made. I would make that criticism.

She hated the ill-treatment of children. She hated material differences within families, and children not being given the best possible. She hated violence against children. In theory she was in favour of hitting ill-behaved children, but she probably hit me just twice in my entire childhood, and then it was just a token — notional, you could almost say.

My father had pretty much the same attitude, though without the bitter intensity: his experience was of being the favoured youngest member of a large and close family. The thing to fear from my father was his oral aggression. Fiercely articulate, he could be fearfully critical and admonitory.

Both my father and my mother were sharp, intelligent people, and — by the time I was born, when my father was 35 and my mother 38 — they had had a lot of experience. Both of them were benevolent, tinged with bleak realism.

She was more astringent, and expected not much good of people, though she was ridiculously appreciative of kindness from others. He combined his hair-trigger oral aggression with comprehensive empathy and easy sympathy. I guess my poor father, with his black wiry hair, darkish complexion and light eyes, and the character I've outlined, was a bit of a stage-Irish cliché.

I went through the expected adolescent conflict with him, and learned how fierce his verbal assaults could be. It was good practice for politics!

It was a family culture in which furious rows could flare up and harsh words fly, and be forgotten half an hour later. My father had an uncle, before my time, known as "Patsy the Savage". Normally a good-natured man, he would suddenly "turn", verbally tear someone apart, and then be surprised and sorry at the damage he had done.

It took me a long time in politics to understand that harsh words, once spoken or written, are not forgotten in half an hour — or half a decade — as fierce family rows involving my father were.

My parents married when my father was awaiting trial as one of 24 men, members of a single-town union, the Ennis United Labourers' Association. They were charged with conspiracy and threatening behaviour over a mass picket of a quay near Ennis.

The jury acquitted them, despite something close to an instruction to convict by the judge — who promised the jury that he would not jail them if they were convicted.

Contemporary newspapers testify to a phase of tremendous militancy in the town. Most of the unions' 500 members would march to mass pickets behind their band, even in small disputes.

Those men had, like my father, scattered to the far corners of England when jobs became available there with the outbreak of war.

There was nothing in my family by way of a sense of glorious class struggle. For that, for their experience in the 30s to be seen like that, they would have had to be part of a proud, continuous, political and trade-union culture, and we were not. My father, working in Salford gas works, was in the GMB, and would grumble that the union did little for the workers. It was an all-suffusing disappointment.

Yet the attitude, in big and little things, of class awareness, was there. I picked up on it, I suppose.

When I left school, I didn't have any plans. I wanted to be a carpenter, a maker, like the artisan carpenter in Ennis who made furniture; so I was sent by the careers adviser who visited the school to be a trainee wood machinist in a factory that made furniture out of chip-board with veneer.

In the factory they had a system of taking on lots of 15 year olds as "trainees" — basically cheap labour. You were supposedly being trained, but actually you were just cheap labour. Most people didn't stay long, and me neither. I would run into a couple of the boys from there later when working on the Salford docks.

Then I got a job in the clothing industry, literally by walking down a long street trying at one place after another for work and eventually getting in. I became a trainee cutter.

At 15 I had no plans in the sense of a realistic project that could shape what happened. A large part of what working-class people put up with is that they have no idea how the system works. My parents knew the world they grew up in, but they didn't know the Manchester world. We had no idea of controlling or shaping anything.

As I've said above, I conceived of the notion of going back to Ireland, which on one level was a desire to turn back to childhood. When I was 16 exactly I went to work in a clothing-rags warehouse, because I could get an adult wage there, though a very low one. I got £2.50 in the first job, which you could make up to £3 by working Saturdays. In the warehouse it was £8 or £9.

I saved up £100 and went back to Ireland with a fantastic plan to resettle there. But I was a child. I was 16, probably emotionally immature even for 16, and also immature in my awareness of social reality — which in a sense was a positive thing in that it made me explore things rather than settling into my parents' bleakly realistic acceptance.

In Ennis in mid-1958 I went around calling myself a communist and an atheist. The atheist bit was, you might say, a bit of self-aggrandisement, not fully true. Until, at about 18, I finally sorted it out in my head, I was still a little short of the hard and sweeping conviction that there is no super-nature and no God, nothing at all.

I have sometimes wondered how many other open and self-proclaimed communists and atheists there were in the west of Ireland then, or (again, perhaps self-aggrandisingly) if there were any at all. Except for my relatives of my parents' generation and older, who were not enlightened people or inclined to be tolerant, I found a general tolerance that surprised me. But generally I've found that people are inclined to be decent if they are given the chance.

Tolerance was limited, though. I was still a nationalist, and had not separated out communism from nationalism. (In fact I never have had a sense or belief that I have abandoned the positive things in Irish republicanism and nationalism — freedom from oppression and freedom to develop — only of all that being subsumed in socialism).

So I applied to join the Republican movement in the town, talking to the local secretary of Sinn Fein, a young man named Butler. Oh yes, he'd let me know when the meeting was.

He never did, even when I "chased" him. Maybe, as he said in his own way, the Sinn Fein branch was in disarray. I finally concluded that their quota for 17 year old atheists and communists was filled up for that year, and for that decade too!

I came back to Manchester after a bit and returned to the clothing industry. Then I worked in various factories, a foundry, the docks...

JOINING THE YCL

It was very hard to distinguish between criticism of Stalinism — which is what the Communist Party's "communism" was, of course — and basic hostility to the ideas of communism.

All I had, I suppose, was a general notion of a world which would be organised like a good family, a caring family. It was very primitive, but also very heart-felt.

I was torn for a long time — for two years, in fact — by inner conflict about such things as the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956. I finally decided my indecision was self-indulgence, and I joined the YCL.

As I've said, a strange thing was that what I'd read about communism tended to be anti-communist stuff, writings by people whose names I came across in the press and other books. For example, Arthur Koestler.

I'd waded through a lot of criticism of "communism". But in Koestler, for example, behind the criticism there is a romantic soured commitment. You can take from Koestler different things from what Koestler himself intended. And of course Orwell was a socialist.

I joined the YCL because there was nothing else visible. The Communist Party in Lancashire at the time had about 1200 members. The YCL was big. Cheetham YCL had about 40 members. A lot of them were the children of CP members, and a lot of them were not in any real sense revolutionaries, but there was a lot of social life around the YCL. It was a good place to be. There was no official Labour Party youth movement at the time.

The Trotskyists were a tiny group. They had just recently become public after being buried in the Labour Party for a decade, but I wasn't aware of that.

I joined the YCL with many reservations. The great boon of that was simply getting access to literature — Lenin, for example.

As I described, around the same time I joined the YCL I'd been given a mild beating-up by cops in a police station. Was that a matter of the cops being anti-Irish? No.

I don't think I've ever experienced anything that could meaningfully be called anti-Irish racism. You got prejudice. You got anti-Catholic prejudice. You got assumptions that you were thick. But some years later I went around with a woman who was of Indian background and looked "Indian", and the sort of frozen hostility we encountered belonged to a different world from anything I'd ever met as an Irish person. Call prejudice against Irish people racism, and you have to use another word for what black people encountered.

Of course, there were a vast number of people in Manchester who were of Irish background. I think the days of real anti-Irish racism were probably well in the past by the time I came to Manchester.

I saw a lot of what little hostility I did encounter as class prejudice, or mainly class prejudice, not anti-Irish prejudice. From my background in Ennis I was aware of, and expected class prejudice, and I interpreted things as class prejudice which others have chosen to interpret as "anti-Irish racism".

I think the fact that so many things are interpreted as "racism" today when the truth (or a big part of it) may be one of class discrimination is a consequence of the eclipse of class politics.

LEARNING FROM LENIN

I was shocked to find that the Communist Party believed in the parliamentary road to socialism — a peaceful revolution in which the ruling class would meekly surrender to a communist-socialist government and allow itself to be expropriated and, as a ruling class, destroyed. The CP told me that this had been Karl Marx's "position" too (as indeed, in a different world, in relation to a different Britain, it had been).

Anyway, knowing what I did of Irish history, how could I think that the British ruling class would let itself be extirpated as a class peacefully? My mother had been in her late teens at the time of the Irish War of Independence, and I grew up hearing stories about that war. My inbred romanticism about revolution, rooted in Irish history and Irish Republicanism, also predisposed me to reject the idea. Those influences did not misdirect me, either.

Here too, I was very lucky. I was faced at the start of my active political life with the need to learn to think like a Marxist, or else to go along with what I knew from instinct and from my smattering of history to be nonsense. That is, I was faced with the question: what is Marxism? And the implicit question: what is a-historical dogmatism? And, though of course I didn't know that at the start: which tradition of those into which "communism" had split, Stalinist or Trotskyist, was the authentic Marxist one.

I couldn't believe what the CP people were saying. But they could quote Marx at me. In the YCL at the time, if you were seen to be a bit leftist, you were told to read *Left-Wing Communism*, Lenin's little book against the council communists from 1920. So I read Lenin.

I read *State and Revolution*. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin takes up Karl Kautsky on the idea of a peaceful revolution in England.

Lenin says: let's be Marxist here. Let's examine it concretely. The truth is always concrete. Why did Marx think that about a peaceful revolution at that time? Was he right at that time and in those circumstances? Are the circumstances the same now?

Marx thought a peaceful revolution might be possible in England and the USA because at the time there was no fixed and powerful state bureaucracy. In America there was almost no army apart from small forces fighting the Indians.

Lenin asks: is that true now? No, it is not. It was a lesson in how to think, in what Marxism is, and it helped me to deal with the nonsense in the YCL. It was a les-

son against dogmatism. It has shaped and governed my attitude to the Trotskyist tradition for which I have enormous respect, but which I try to see in Marxist perspective.

I thought of myself as a Trotskyist from late 1959. But I wasn't a Trotskyist. I was a Deutscherite. The second volume of Isaac Deutscher's biography of Trotsky was published in late 1959. There was a lot wrong with it, but it was tremendously valuable in terms of education.

At that time a lot of people were still arguing that Trotsky had worked with the fascists, that sort of thing. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 had completely destroyed the structure of Stalinist dogma, if you looked at it logically, but in practice it was still strong.

The Cheetham CP had a big house, bought during the war when the party was very strong. The YCL had one room, and the party had another room — with Stalin's photo on the wall. I used to go into the adult party room after YCL meetings and turn Stalin's photo against the wall, but someone turned it back again. That, I suppose, isn't a bad metaphor for the way Stalinist two-camp politics has re-emerged on the left, after Stalinism's demise in Russia and Eastern Europe, but now focused on Islamist clerical fascism instead of Stalinism as the "anti-imperialist" force.

I was a Leninolator, an idolator of Lenin. But you can't be a consistent Leninolator and remain a Leninolator. You learn from Lenin to see his politics as he saw those of Marx and Engels. You learn to judge and assess them in their time and their circumstances. You learn that "the truth is always concrete".

JOINING THE SLL

I became convinced that Trotsky had continued Lenin's politics. Inside the YCL I argued specific issues. I subscribed to a magazine published from Amsterdam by the Pablo-Mandel Fourth International. I got Trotsky's *Diary in Exile*, which Max Shachtman had published in 1959, out of the library, on the recommendation of a review by Michael Foot in *Tribune*. I answered advertisements for Trotskyist literature in *Tribune*.

Trotsky's writings were very much out of print. The Healyites had reprinted *Revolution Betrayed*, but I could not get hold of that for a while. Most of what you could get was pamphlets from Ceylon (Sri Lanka). There was a big Trotskyist party in Ceylon at the time, and I got hold of some of Trotsky's pamphlets on Germany, on Spain... They were very badly printed, on cheap paper, and fell apart easily, but they were immensely valuable to us.

It finally dawned on me that the Trotskyists were right. In one of the pamphlets by Trotsky that was available at the time, he predicted exactly what would happen if the fascists were allowed to take power in Germany. There was a passage in it:

"There are among the Communist officials not a few cowardly careerists and fakers whose little posts, whose incomes, and more than that, whose hides, are dear to them. These creatures are very much inclined to spout ultra-radical phrases beneath which is concealed a wretched and contemptible fatalism. 'Without a victory over the Social Democracy, we cannot battle against fascism!', say such terrible revolutionists, and for this reason... they get their passports ready.

"Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for any place; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!"

That passage still moves me. When I first read it, I found myself crying. When you consider the consequences of the victory of Hitler in 1933, there was an awful lot to cry about. And, in 1959, it was a lot less distant than it seems now. Crying solves nothing, of course; political activity, education, organising a revolutionary group, does, or may do.

So I became a Trotskyist. There were a number of Trotskyist groups then, but they were very invisible. The biggest was the Healyites. They were a party — a very small party, but a party. They had a very bad reputation among the other Trotskyists. I had read denunciations of them in the Pablo-Mandel magazine.

There was the Grant group, the RSL, that would later become Militant, and today the Socialist Party. It was utterly feeble. It published a duplicated monthly bulletin which you couldn't get hold of.

There was a small group linked to Pablo and Mandel, the proto-IMG, Pat Jordan and company in Nottingham. They had just broken with the RSL.

The first Trotskyist I ever met was someone who came to meet me in response to my writing to Pat Jordan's bookshop in Nottingham for literature. A man called Theo Melville, an art historian, came over from

Liverpool to meet me.

Two years later, he would be one of the founders in Britain of the Posadists, a Trotskyist group who believed that it was the duty of Russia to start World War Three. They also believed, or at least their leader Juan Posadas believed, in flying saucers!

Anyway, I eventually joined the Healyites. I was a secret member of the Healy group, working within the YCL, for about six months.

I went to the 1960 YCL congress. I had been nominated for the YCL National Committee. Nobody got on the NC without backing from the top. I got not a single vote. I discovered later, looking through some papers, that there was another candidate for the NC who had no official backing, and that was Arthur Scargill. He had the sense to withdraw. I must have encountered Scargill at that congress, but I have no memory of it at all.

The YCL congress was an education. For a start, it wasn't a congress. The secretary then was Jimmy Reid, who later broke with the CP, became a journalist, and played a foul scab-herding role during the miners' strike of 1984-5.

Reid had been trained in Moscow. I remember vividly that whenever any speaker mentioned Russia or an Eastern European state, Reid would get up and lead the whole congress in applause.

I was more or less known as a Trotskyist by then, and for the congress in London they sent me to stay with someone they could rely on to contain me politically — Peter Kerrigan, who was the industrial organiser of the party. He resigned as organiser a couple of years later when the CP was exposed as having rigged ballots in the Electrical Trades Union, which they had controlled.

Kerrigan had been a political commissar in the Spanish Civil War. He was a hard core Stalinist. I asked him such questions as why the Comintern had been dissolved in 1943. To me at the time it seemed a big thing, an open abandonment of the socialist revolution, though that was a half-ignorant view of it: the CPs had abandoned working-class revolution long, long before that.

Kerrigan was absolutely imperturbable. Well, he said, that was to help the alliance between America and Russia. No qualms, no problems.

At first I hesitated about joining the SLL. It was very daunting. Eventually I decided that I was being a Menshevik by hesitating, so I let myself be persuaded.

In Manchester the Healy group was then going through a crisis. Some long-time basic cadres had just left, and the group was in a bad state.

Cheetham YCL had 40 members. The SLL had about a dozen members for the whole of Manchester, and perhaps as many more people on its periphery. Some of them were very active in industry, but not particularly active politically. There was a nucleus of us who went round visiting them, acting as the live part of the branch.

Politically, I needed to be persuaded on one particular point — whether the bureaucracy that I had come to believe existed in the Soviet Union could peacefully reform itself or not. Deutscher argued that with the growth of prosperity in the USSR, the bureaucracy would gradually soften and reform itself out of existence. I wasn't sure about that. I think I wanted to believe that the bureaucracy could disappear. But I was convinced very easily. The SLL organiser, Ted Knight, lent me Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed*.

Ted Knight became very well known in the 1980s, in London local government, and not in a good role either, but at the time he was a full-time organiser for the SLL. (He would still be a satellite of the SLL/WRP as leader of Lambeth council in the 1980s).

Knight was full-time organiser for Manchester and for Glasgow, on a nominal wage of £8 a week. He actually got £4 if he was lucky.

The SLL cadres, like the hardcore CPers and YCLers, were seriously dedicated people. The Trotskyists were a lot less easy-going than the CPers — more fraught, more terrorised and hag-ridden by the sense of responsibility. We were "Protestants", with no pope in Moscow, Belgrade, or Beijing. Unfortunately, we tended to compensate by creating our own little popes and cultist organisations.

The CPers were remarkably calm and placid politically. They had the law laid down for them by an external power, whereas the Trotskyists were not like that; they had to think for themselves. The CPers believed that everything was moving towards socialism on a world scale. Their role was to back the USSR's "socialist camp". It would be almost a decade before the CP first disagreed with the Russians on anything, when they opposed the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

As individuals, the CPers were pretty pleasant, certainly towards me. I think it was partly a matter of my age, and the fact that they could see that I was honest about what I thought, and seriously committed.

I never had qualms about deceiving them. Trotskyism was the truth, and I wanted to win them to it. It was right to do what was necessary. But eventual-

ly they nailed me as a Trotskyist. They gave me the choice of leaving the YCL and joining the adult CP. The Cheetham CP branch was dead, a bunch of old people from the 30s and 40s. So I decided just to leave the YCL, with the agreement of Knight and the SLL.

In retrospect, I think that was a mistake. I think I should have forced them to expel me: there was a big element in my decision to leave of just being soft. If I had forced them to expel me, it would have hardened me more — taught me to stand up for my politics against people whom I was friendly with.

The Healy group, when I joined it, was not the sect it became ten years later. It had relatively educated cadres who gave it some life. But for those who stuck in the Healy organisation there was a selection by personality type. You had to be very careful about saying anything outside the norms. You had to repeat a fixed "line". You had to go along with the deification of Gerry Healy.

We had a literature, which was the story of the struggle of the Trotskyists against Stalinism. But at the same time we had to hold to a fixed "line". That created tensions.

There was a great deal of bullying and ideological terrorisation in the top layer of the Healy organisation even then. Individuals would be picked on as epitomising some fault, and a tremendous assault would be staged on them. I saw that at the SLL conferences. You had to be tough to take that, but you also had to have certain psychological traits — and you had to lack, or have forcibly removed, certain political traits, including an understanding of what an organisation of militants must be. I came to the conclusion that the central core of the Healy organisation was fuelled by sadomasochism.

The Trotskyists had split in 1953, with the US Trotskyist leader James P Cannon breaking from Pablo and Mandel on the grounds that they were accommodating to Stalinism. The Healyites had sided with Cannon. We were very anti-Stalinist. And yet at the same time we were fundamentally committed to the USSR. For example, Healy had pronounced that we supported the USSR keeping the nuclear bomb. When Russia had the bomb, it was a deterrent. When Britain had the bomb, it was a threat to make war on the USSR.

We had a "two-camps" view of the world alongside a very hostile attitude to Stalinism. It was all very contradictory.

But the question of Stalinism didn't figure in the criticism I would start to make of the Healyites. On second thoughts, that is not quite true. Let me explain.

The Cannon "orthodox Mark Two" Trotskyists were extremely anti-Stalinist. They accused the Pablo-Mandel group of effectively backing the East German bureaucracy and the Russians against the East German workers in 1953. The Healy group had been very active against Stalinism in Britain after 1956, and successfully: they recruited some hundreds of ex-CPers.

So we had a built-in hostility to Stalinism. And there was a pamphlet by Cannon from 1946 in circulation, *American Stalinism and Anti-Stalinism*. It says that it is the job of the workers to smash the Stalinists, rather than allying with the bourgeoisie to do that.

Laced in with that we had the idea that the Russian system was developing economically and technologically, and that would undermine the bureaucracy. Healy argued that you had to have a revolution in Russia, but the Healyites also partly accepted that the bureaucracy would begin to be dissolved by the objective conditions.

In reality the entire post-Trotsky "orthodox Trotskyist" current was caught in contradictions. We were anti-Stalinist. We were for a "political revolution" in Russia, but the term "political revolution" was misleading jargon: we wanted a workers' takeover, a complete smashing of the Stalinist state machine. We wanted a workers' revolution. At the same time we had the belief that Russia was progressive. That wasn't actually Trotsky's thinking, at the end, as anyone who goes through his writings after 1937 will discover, but it was what we accepted as Trotsky's thinking. We firmly believed that we had to back Russia against the West.

In January 1959 Fidel Castro and his comrades won the Cuban civil war and took over in Havana. They moved in the next 18 months towards establishing an early Stalinist state, partly by linking up and becoming dependent on Russia in response to pressures from the Americans against the reforms that Castro started off with.

By about late 1961 Cuba was structurally a Stalinist state. It was a relatively attractive Stalinist state. It didn't have the horrors commonly associated with Stalinism everywhere else.

Some of the "orthodox Trotskyists Mark Two", like James P Cannon, decided that Cuba was a workers' state or moving that way. That led to a split with the Healyites, who said it was not a workers' state.

The split broke up the international network of the "orthodox Trotskyists Mark Two". Some of them fused with Mandel and his people in 1963.

The Mandelites and Cannonites responded to the

Healyites by saying that it was utterly self-contradictory to say that Cuba wasn't a workers' state but China was, unless they were saying that only Stalinists — certified Stalinists from the beginning — could create a deformed workers' state. (Though they didn't say it was "deformed" — they just said it was a workers' state).

To a very large extent the Healyites were just factionalising, picking a line that would allow them to exert pressure. But the dispute did make some of us begin to think about the whole question. It was certainly unanswerable that if the Healyites were right about Cuba not being a workers' state, then the whole orthodoxy about China and so on being workers' states would have to be looked at again.

I broke with the Healyites with that question in my mind as very important. But when I broke with the Healyites I thought I was just being a Cannonite, in the continuity of "orthodox Trotskyism".

When Labour lost the general election in 1959, the Labour leadership made a drive to re-establish a Labour youth movement. There was a mushrooming of membership — 25,000 to 40,000 members within a short time. The Healyites were able to win a majority of that organisation.

By 1962-4, flushed with that success, the Healyites were ready to break with the Labour Party. Our youth paper, *Keep Left*, was banned in the middle of 1962. We decided to keep it going. To sell it, we had to exchange members, say, from Leeds to Manchester: Leeds members would sell papers at labour movement affairs in Manchester, and Manchester members would sell in Leeds, to avoid being expelled from the Labour Party. It was obviously untenable.

In 1964 the Healyites decided to launch an independent youth movement. They fundamentally became sectarians. They fundamentally became people who saw building their own party, cut out from the existing labour movement, as the main objective.

At first, to square their consciences, they talked as if they believed they could divorce a whole generation of young people from the experience of the working class in general. But they were pulling out of the Labour Party at the time when Labour was coming back to power (in October 1964) and the labour movement was about to learn the lessons of the Wilson government. It made no sense whatsoever, except that it was organisationally easier and more convenient to organise their own separate youth movement.

They built a youth movement that was sustained by agitation and existed on the outside of the labour movement. Essentially they started on a track that would smash up their own organisation.

BREAKING FROM THE SLL

I found myself at loggerheads with the SLL in 1962-3. The first thing was that I found the regime utterly disgusting. Nothing was done gently that could be done brutally. People were bullied and humiliated. But I stuck in the League because there was, I thought, no alternative.

I found myself in conflict with the League in 1963. A large part of the Manchester branch were very critical of the way things were run. The criticism was not very developed politically. Certainly mine wasn't. I knew the regime stank, but I had the belief, which is hard to credit now, that what was really wrong with the SLL was that we had a lot of young people who had been recruited without being properly educated, and that they had swamped the old cadre of what had been a healthy organisation and so allowed the Healy centre to do what it looked. The answer was to educate the young people and work to build the League. That is what I thought I was doing.

I had been marked out by the SLL leadership from very early on because they discovered that I had been reading the literature of the Pablo-Mandel tendency, and for other reasons. When it came out once that I was reading Arthur Koestler's *Arrival And Departure*, Cyril Smith, one of the group's intellectuals, attached himself to me like a hungry dog with a bone, and wouldn't let go for a long time. The central character in *Arrival And Departure*, an ex-CP'er, was just a "nut-case", wasn't he? My defence against that sort of stuff was only the experience of having been a Catholic, and being determined not to be bludgeoned. In fact, though, for a long time I let myself be bludgeoned. They targeted me as the designated chopping-block to teach the rest of the branch to behave itself and to be scared..

In September 1963 I was charged with "actions harmful to the League and the working class". The constitution said that you could be expelled for "actions harmful to the League and the working class".

What had I done? That was very unclear. There were some attempts to claim that I hadn't sent in to the centre sales money which I had collected as the branch newspaper organiser. But nobody in the branch would have believed it, so they dropped that.

I was summoned to a specially-convened meeting, and expelled. For fourteen months after that I remained loyal to the SLL, because I still thought its politics were basically right.

I was active in the Young Socialists, and secretary of the YS branch. There were a lot of young people around, including one, Phil Semp, who was recruited to the SLL by Cliff Slaughter to help expel me, but would later become of the founders of our tendency together with me. He was in our YS and I won him over.

The SLL was now beginning to go for full-scale confrontation with the Labour Party. I didn't agree with that. I also found myself the target of local SLLers, who organised secretly to kick me out as secretary of the YS branch, even though the guy they replaced me with wasn't a Healyite (he joined briefly, but didn't stay very long).

I had contact with the Grantites, the RSL. They didn't have a paper at that time. They were mainly in Liverpool. They had lots of tales to tell about Healy in the past, and had their own distinct political line.

By then I was very troubled by the question of the Stalinist states. I was inclined to reject the whole notion that they were "workers' states" of any sort. The Grantites had their own theory. And whereas in the SLL you couldn't get hold of any of the old internal bulletins discussing these issues, from the 1940s, the Grantites were falling over themselves to make them available. I did some serious reading.

But I continued to go along with the Healyites until November 1964. There had a whole wave of national engineering apprentices' strikes, and there was another one building up in 1964.

An apprentices' movement was set up, including Young Communist League people, Grantites from Liverpool, and the Healyites. The committee decided to set a date for a strike in November 1964.

The Healyites said it was premature. The "Pabloites" and the Stalinists were going to behead the movement. I thought the Healyites were right about the date being too soon. But what did they do?

The strike went ahead. On the day of the strike they turned up at the engineering factories in Trafford Park, Manchester, with leaflets telling the apprentices not to strike. They set a date for the following March for a strike, on which nothing happened. In effect they helped break the strike.

That forced my final break with the Healyites. I couldn't possibly endorse such a thing. And I suppose I had come to see the SLL more clearly from outside. I was privileged by them kicking me out.

I decided to fight the Healyites in the Young Socialists. But then I was in hospital for a couple of months. When I got back, the YS was virtually dead. The Healyites had split, and there was almost no life in what was left. I went along to a meeting intending to move a coded resolution criticising the Healyites, but the meeting didn't happen.

By this time I had contact with the Grantites. I eventually joined the Militant group — as it was then called: they had started the paper in October 1964 — with great scepticism. They had maybe 100 members all over the country, but they were very badly organised and decrepit.

By this stage I had decided that I was agnostic on whether the Stalinist states were "workers' states" or not. I wasn't sure of an alternative, and I knew it wasn't a matter of picking a label. It was a matter of a full-scale re-analysis, which I didn't have and quite rightly didn't think I could make. The Grantites had worked-out theories of Stalinism which were interesting, though I'm not sure I was ever convinced, even temporarily. Basically their theories were a form of "bureaucratic collectivism". Where Shachtman saw "bureaucratic collectivism" as negative, they saw it as positive; but under the labels of "deformed workers' state" and "proletarian Bonapartism", they described a new-class form of society.

The Grantites were defined not so much by ideas as by what they called perspectives. The world revolution was coming in two stages, first "Bonapartist workers' states" which would be created by Communist Parties, and after that, at some point, workers' revolution. The labour movement in Britain was evolving towards becoming a mass "centrist" (left-wing) movement within which the Marxists, i.e. them, would stick around until they in turn were raised to leadership.

They had a mechanical notion of the ripening of the labour movement towards socialist revolution. Some of them, Grant for example, also believed in a peaceful revolution. (Others said they weren't sure, but on balance thought probably not: Peter Taaffe, for example, and Keith Dickinson).

The great benefit I got from being in the Grantite group was they let me read their archives. I spent my summer holiday in 1965 in London going through their archives, back to the 1940s. It was a fantastically valuable experience.

How the dockers won solidarity, and how they lost it

Nothing will ever efface for me the memory of my first real strike — on the Salford docks — the first time I saw my class acting as a surging, uncontrolled force breaking the banks of routine capitalist industrial life and, for a while, pitting itself against those who control our lives.

Docks strikes were quick and frequent then, in the mid-'60s. Dockers fought back; they stood together. Lord Devlin's Commission of Enquiry into conditions in the ports reported that to get a strike going in Liverpool often all that was needed was somebody running down the quays shouting "everybody out." Dockers would stop to see who was in dispute, who needed support, what it was all about. That was essentially a true picture. It was not only true of Liverpool. And there was nothing senseless or mindless about it.

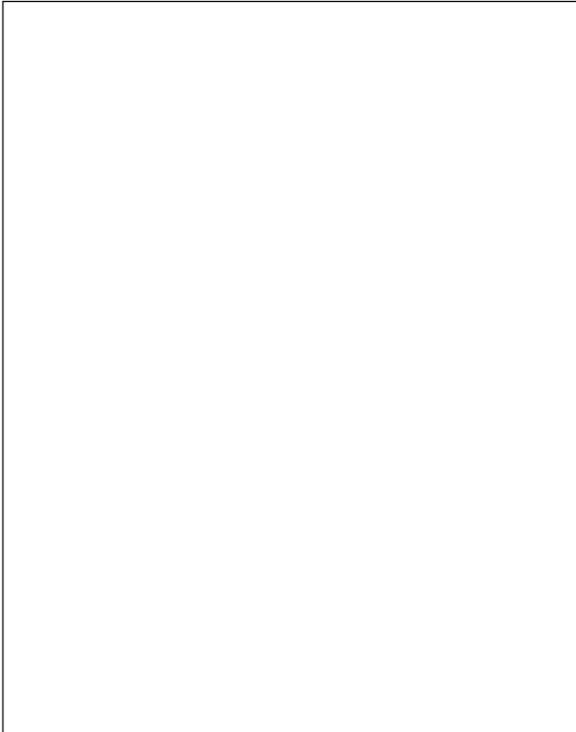
Imagine the scene on Salford docks. The Manchester Ship Canal, a deep, wide, wide man-made waterway linking Manchester to the sea, 30 miles away; ships tied up along the quays as far as the eye can see; towering cranes forming an endlessly stretching picket, lining the edge of the water. Just behind the cranes, railway tracks and wagons being loaded or unloaded; behind the rail lines, a roadway with lorries moving and parked, loading and unloading; at the far side of the road, multi-storied warehouses stretching as far as the eye can see in a parallel line to the ships.

Cranes dip delicately into the hatch-uncovered ships, lifting, or depositing heavy loads, moving from ship to warehouse and back again, high above the road and the rail line. Plying wrought steel hooks formed like question marks crossed at right angles on the base by a wooden handle, dockers move bags and crates, direct the movement on slings of long bars of steel, or motor cars, load and unload railway wagons; a barge here and there is being loaded in the water on the other side of a ship.

Into this hive of hard alienated work the call for a stoppage comes and explodes like a slow-motion bomb, changing everything.

First there is the news that there is a strike, that some men have stopped work. Word spreads. Nobody knows exactly why, or what the issue is. What is known is that those dockers who do know, the men involved, think action is necessary, and that they have stopped work. This is done often, but everybody knows, despite idiotic witch-hunt stories in the press, it is not done lightly. The men who have come out know why and they need support. They are entitled to support! You know they would support you. The place to find out what it is about and whether they deserve support is at the mass meeting on "the croft" — waste ground — outside one of the dock gates. Let's go there! I no longer remember the issue, but I will never forget the sight of it, the first time I saw it and took part in it. Word spreads; dockers see others stopping, suddenly, in the middle of the working day; they too stop and come out on to the roadway. Men in battered, ragged old clothes and headgear, stained by age and chemical dust. A few men wearing company-issue blue overalls: they have been on some especially dirty cargo — blacking or asbestos — which saturates your clothes, skin and hair because bags always burst. Dock-hooks are slung over the curve of shoulders or hooked in belts or lapels. Men trickle out from the warehouses; others who have climbed up out of deep ships' holds far below the water line, come down the gangplank in Indian file out of the ships. Crane drivers climb stiffly down the tall iron ladders from their cabins in the sky. Some men in the throng are far better dressed than dockers — checkers/tally clerks. Before long there is a great teeming, wide, growing stream of men on the roadway — 2,000 dockers work in this port — talking, laughing, gesticulating, cheerful at the excitement, the break in the monotony, the respite. Eisenstein in bright sunlight, and no fear of Cossacks, or of the mounted police Prime Minister Thatcher would send against miners in the 80s.

That first time, it reminded me of the great crowds of people coming out from 12 o'clock Mass in our west of Ireland town. Quite a few other Salford dockers had also been in such processions in such towns. Here solidarity was God! Walking in that great mass of workers asserting themselves, you got an inkling of the human strength that powered the port and the whole economy. You felt the reality and the potential of these



Workers' Fight, 1972: dockers face anti-union laws

minds and hands without which nothing moved — the muscles and the brains of thinking, reflecting human beings trapped in wage slavery who had come to know — most of them only partly to know — their collective power, and who already felt and acted according to the high ethic of solidarity which socialists who work to cultivate it know to be the seed of a new and better civilisation. When action becomes necessary, solidarity effaces personal rivalries and conflicts, job-jealousies, old pub brawls, politics, religion, race (in Manchester, unlike London, there were black dockers). Class predominates.

When the human trickles and rivers had emptied themselves out of warehouses and ships, bringing the whole enormous port complex whose life blood they were to a dead stop, and assembled on the croft, the meeting would begin. The issue would be carefully and didactically spelled out to upwards of 1,500 men by Joe Barry or Joe Hackett, the unpaid officials of the minority union in the port, the NASD (the so-called Blue Union: their union card was blue, that of the TGWU, the big union, white). The Blue Union Committee doubled as an unofficial rank and file committee. Both checkers, Barry and Hackett were the real leaders in the port, not the despised full-time officials of the T&G, to which most dockers belonged. These two, who would stand as spectators at the back of the croft, were known contemptuously as "Houdini" (after the American escapologist) and "The Gas Man" because they would come from negotiating the price for unloading a difficult cargo — to take a terrible example, though we did not then know how terrible, asbestos when a lot of bags had burst in a ship's hold — and shout down the hatch to men covered in chemicals, or whatever, either that they could do nothing — "Me-Hands-Are-Tied", thus Houdini — or had got a measly shilling extra, a bob for the gas meter — "The Gas Man". Officially, they were the only people empowered to negotiate, but the Blue leaders had tacit recognition and went, as they would boast, sotto voce — and with a pride that told you what they were — "up the back stairs", where the White union officials went in the front door. Compared to the T&G full-time officials, who were the dregs of humanity, the Blue leaders were real trade unionists. But they were time-servers; Barry at least was a Catholic Action man; and by the '60s they too were part of the port establishment, albeit unofficially.

On the croft, after Barry or Hackett had explained what it was about, anybody who had anything to say would then have a chance to say it. You could get up and disagree, and argue your case. Sometimes things would get rowdy — on one occasion, very rowdy, just short of violence, when Barry launched a savage witch-hunt to protect himself and his friends from criticism and the danger of being outflanked by denouncing

young Trotskyist militants as "politically motivated" "home wreckers", men intent on "smashing the port and the industry"; but it was taken for granted by everybody that our group had the right to reply and Barry vacated his little step ladder so I could get up on it to speak. (Not very well, as I recall it; but we got a third of the votes — even though Barry and Hackett had threatened to resign — for a motion to add two Trotskyists and an old militant, John Magennis, who worked with us, to the Committee.) This was rough and volatile, communication was often bad and things sometimes got confused, but it was nevertheless real democracy. Everything was put to the vote, or could be after a light. If satisfaction for the grievance was not forthcoming we would usually vote to stay out. But satisfaction was as a rule quickly to be had.

In serious disputes we would normally use the tactic of the rotating one-day strike. One week the dockers would strike for a day and the cranemen and checkers would turn up for work that was not there, thus qualifying for payment before going home again; the next week the crane drivers would strike, the week after that, the checkers, then again the dockers; and so on until the Ship Canal Company crumpled.

Despite two unions in the port, some non-unionists and three distinct classes of workers, our efforts were easily coordinated.

When you consider where dockers "came from", a few decades earlier, the culture of militancy and solidarity they developed, a small vignette of which I have tried to sketch here, is all the more remarkable.

For centuries docking was casual, irregular work because ships came and went. There was little continuity. Men would be hired and fired as needed. Anybody could go on the docks.

It was a buyers' market in labour, and those who did the hiring were all-powerful. Gangs of often hungry men, with hungry families, would crowd around them jostling — and sometimes fighting — each other for their favour, and a few hours' work. Docker was murderously pitted against docker. Then the dockers began to organise.

In 1889, led by Marxist socialists such as Tom Mann and John Burns, both of them skilled engineers, not dockers, and with Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor helping out, London dockers struck and organised themselves in a union — then a new sort of union — for the "unskilled." The union was thrown up out of a volcanic eruption of revolt and militancy. It survived to civilise and educate the dockers to the ideal of working-class solidarity. They had to fight early struggles on such questions as stopping the then prevalent practice of paying dockers their wages in pubs, where they would be tempted to drink their wages, to the detriment of their children and the benefit of the publican (and the foreman, who'd get a cut from the landlord). Over decades the working-class weapon of solidarity — serving as both ideal, socialism its developed form, and weapon of struggle — allowed workers to win serious improvements. Dockers began to exert a little bit of control over their own working lives. In the days when great armies of men laboured to hump and haul cargoes in and out of Britain, dockers had perhaps the greatest power of any group of workers. Organised, they learned to use it.

After World War 2, the Labour government, rejecting demands for nationalisation, nevertheless created the National Dock Labour Scheme and its "Board", the NDLB — an agency which would employ registered dockers and hire them out to employers.

The NDLB paid a (very low) guaranteed fall-back wage, which dockers would get if they failed to find work after turning up twice a day, morning and dinner time. The NDLB was staffed 50% by employers' representatives and 50% by the TGWU. The NDLB embodied big gains for dockers, but it also meant putting officials of a very bureaucratised union, which should have represented the men, in charge of them as both employer and disciplinarian. It led to union officials organising strike breaking and to threats from union leaders to sack dockers "making trouble" in the union. (The whole Manchester Branch Committee was hauled up before TGWU Secretary Arthur Deakin, who threatened to have all of them sacked if they didn't do what he, their union's General Secretary, told them to!) All differences kept in mind, this system was a little bit of

From “orthodox Trotskyism” to “the Third Camp”

Stalinism rooted inside the British capitalist system. Ultimately it led in 1954 to the breaking away from the union of 16,000 dockers of the northern ports.

Nevertheless, there was a wonderful flowering of working-class self-assertiveness and self-control within the NDLB system. It was a time of full employment, and by way of countless short local strikes dockers gained a great deal of real control of their — still very hard, underpaid and dangerous — working lives. Dockers not prone to idealising their lot would talk about “the freedom of the docks.” To take perhaps the most extreme example, there was a “custom and practice” system known in Liverpool as the “welt” and in Glasgow as “spelling” under which only half a gang would work at any time. It meant working half a shift! In Manchester, where we had no welt, they would when it suited them “shanghai” temporarily redundant dockers and bus us for night work to Liverpool — where we worked four hours and spent the other four reading or playing cards, yarning or napping, or whatever, while the second half of the gang did their stint! But you cannot have socialism — or even what dockers had — indefinitely in one industry. The technical basis of docking was changing. A system was growing up of moving goods through ports in giant containers packed in one factory, rolled on and off ships, and unpacked in another. Everything had to change in the docks.

Who would gain the benefit of the new technology, dockers or employers? For example, would work, on the basis of the new technology, be divided up, or would tens of thousands of docking jobs be destroyed? These questions were decided in the struggle around the reorganisation of the ports — “decasualisation” — in 1967, and in subsidiary battles in the 70s.

Sweetened by desirable things like regular employment, decasualisation was fundamentally about the employers clawing back all the elements of workers’ control dockers had won, so that they would be able to carry through the revolution in port technology — containerisation — under their control, in their own way and for their own benefit. Dockers resisted, but in a confused and disorganised way. Dockers had no unofficial national structures; they did not then even have shop stewards. The leaders of both White and Blue docks unions backed “Devlin.” So the bosses succeeded in ramming the changes through amidst confusion and resentment, though not without long strikes in London and Liverpool and a week long strike in Manchester.

Because of wretched leadership, the dockers, once the most powerful and militant group of workers in Britain, lost. The NDLB was abolished in 1989.

To become a committed socialist in times like these, when the working class is disoriented and cowed, you have to make an imaginative leap from the working class around you to the working class as it will be when it fulfils the hopes and expectations of Marxist socialists.

Today, it is difficult to resist the commonsensical cynical view that workers will never rise up and remake society, that we are by nature incapable of it, that Marxist socialists are chasing a will o’ the wisp.

The proper answer to such pernicious nonsense lies not alone in hope for the future, in discerning the seeds of that future in working-class activities in the present, but in remembering the past — and learning from it: for there was nothing inevitable about the defeat of Britain’s dockers, or of what, at their best, they stood for.

There are important lessons for the labour movement today in the story of how some of the most degraded, atomised, exploited and initially backward workers pulled themselves up out of misery and degradation to create a splendid culture of class and human solidarity. Certain material conditions — insecurity and so on — allowed that solidarity to develop. But it would not have developed without the example, the leadership, and the patient propaganda of socialists. Left to themselves conditions in the ports for a very long time bred savage individualistic competition, not solidarity, amongst dockers. The socialists made the difference.

Just as the degraded dockers in their time rose up, so the victims of today’s dog-eat-dog anti-solidaristic culture will rise up. Those who keep alive the memory of the past and spread it will speed that day.

It is in the nature of the class struggle to ebb and flow; of the working class to be repeatedly made and remade by the never-ceasing changes in capitalist production and technology. The working class, as the story of the dockers shows, pays dearly for missed chances and for defeats.

Until it takes control of society, the working class movement — aided by socialists who try to be its memory — is forced again and again to resurrect, remake and redefine itself. The job of socialists is to help it do that, and, learning from the past, help avoid defeat in the next round.

I disagreed strongly with the Healyites’ decision to bail out from the Labour Party in 1963-4. But it’s not really true that I broke with the Healyites over the Labour Party. It was a consideration, but I don’t think I would have broken with the SLL if I had disagreed with it on what could be seen as a tactical question. I don’t think I would have had the self-confidence to break with them if it were not for their Third-Period-Stalinist style strike-breaking in the apprentices’ dispute.

By the time we came to start the Workers’ Fight group, after breaking from the RSL (Militant) in 1966, it wasn’t a matter of us not being in favour of doing Labour Party work.

We had to use our very limited resources selectively, and we had to prioritise what we did. In fact the Workers’ Fight group still had some presence in the Labour Party in the north-east. You will find a little letter in one of the issues of the Workers’ Fight magazine from a Labour councillor in Newcastle.

But the Labour Party had changed rather dramatically, and so had the Young Socialists. It is now very hard for anyone to think themselves back into the atmosphere of the period after Labour won a majority government in March 1966.

There was rapidly bitter disillusionment. There was great hostility to the Labour government bringing in a statutory incomes policy, the first time ever, as far as I know, in Britain that the state would use legal means to hold down the rise in wages resulting from the working class having industrial strength in a full-employment economy.

There was a great hostility to the Labour government’s racist immigration laws. In 1961 the Tories had brought in laws to curb Commonwealth immigration. They were very mild compared to what has happened since, but at the time they were shocking. The Labour Party opposed those laws. It was part of a general orientation towards the Commonwealth which also led to the Labour leadership opposing the Tories’ first moves towards joining the Common Market [what is today the European Union].

When the Labour government introduced its own harsher laws against Commonwealth immigration, that shocked us. In terms of what has happened over the last 40 years, the new laws were still mild, but we were right to be shocked. This was a world where there was still a lot of overt discrimination against black immigrants, and where fascists had been active since the Notting Hill racist riots of 1958.

There was a general collapse of Labour Party membership from about 1967. Labour went on from the statutory incomes policy of 1966 to attempt to bring in general anti-union legislation in 1969.

There was an atmosphere of crisis on all sides. In 1968, there was even talk of a military coup against Wilson in some ruling-class circles, around Cecil King, the then boss of the Daily Mirror newspaper, which was a much bigger concern then than it is now, and in fact wasn’t a bad popular newspaper compared to today’s redtops.

Labour Party Young Socialist branches collapsed. Militant took control of the LPYS in 1969, but it was a rump. The IS just walked away. Militant was a very lifeless group. It largely sat out the big demonstrations against the Vietnam war in 1967 and 1968.

We had no choice, if we were going to establish a national group and a press, than to ration our activity very severely. We joined the Irish Workers’ Group — or rather, we entered into an alliance with the Irish Workers’ Group — in October 1966. The terms were that we would produce the IWG magazine, which had ceased to appear, as a general Trotskyist magazine including material we could use in the British labour movement.

Rachel Lever and I produced the magazine, and it took a lot of work. We found, having undertaken to physically produce it, because we had bought a stencil duplicator, that we had to write large parts of the magazine and rewrite practically all of it. I came close to

wrecking my health doing what we actually did in 1966-8, producing the Irish Workers’ Group magazine *Workers’ Republic* and the *Workers’ Fight* magazine while working full-time at heavy jobs.

There were tensions in the Irish Workers’ Group, and I think our decision to start producing *Workers’ Fight* too, from October 1967, was the last straw for our opponents. They organised a coup in London on the IWG steering committee, and we found ourselves in a big faction fight up to March 1968. We rallied the Trotskyists in the IWG — we didn’t get a majority, but we came very close to it.

They expelled us at the IWG conference in Dublin in March 1968, and then spent the rest of the day rowing among themselves. The IWG quickly fell apart. We organised what had been the Trotskyist Faction of the IWG as the League for a Workers’ Republic, but that was a weak group too, and eventually drifted away from us politically.

The decision by the Workers’ Fight group to take up the unity call from IS (now SWP) in 1968 provoked great controversy inside *Workers’ Fight*, in fact a big split. But we were right to go ahead with it.

We had published an editorial in the first issue of *Workers’ Fight*, in October 1967 — and republished it later as a pamphlet, with some amendments to clarify things — in which we called for a Trotskyist regroupment.

We criticised the nominally Trotskyist groups, and I see nothing to take back from the criticisms we made. We called for a regroupment of “the healthy elements”, by which we understood primarily individuals, of whom there were many scattered and disgusted by the SLL’s behaviour but who still reckoned themselves Trotskyists.

If you read our stuff from before the Healyites went Maoist in 1967, we saw them as sectarians, but there was a certain amount of respect for them. Then they supported the Cultural Revolution in China. They denounced Isaac Deutscher, who had been the father of what the Healyites called “Pabloism”, because he was hostile to the Cultural Revolution. That shocked me.

Michael Banda, who was the editor of the SLL paper, wrote that they would “march, even under the banner of Stalin”, with the Maoists. The Healyites were building a youth movement in Britain, and they saw advantages in talking up the “wonderful youth movement in China”, the Red Guards, who were actually controlled by the Chinese military as a whip unleashed against one layer of the bureaucracy by another.

WORKERS’ FIGHT AND IS

We attracted a dozen or so individuals quickly after publishing the first issue of *Workers’ Fight*, but a lot of them split away again after we took up IS’s unity call.

We had a “traditional Trotskyist” hostility to IS, seeing them as people who had “reneged” in the Korean war. On the other hand, a lot of what IS was now doing made sense to us.

By now the Healyites would go along to strike meetings and pack the hall with their young activists so that the strikers couldn’t get in. They actually did that in the seafarers’ strike in 1966. They went round denouncing “economism”, and were very sectarian.

IS at least tried to talk with workers reasonably, and tried to serve the class struggle. They may have done it in a politically soft way, but it was a sight better than the Healyites.

We regarded IS as “centrist” [half-revolutionary, half-reformist], and we weren’t wrong about that. But we came to see it as healthy compared to the SLL and RSL. We had friendly relations with the IS in Manchester.

We might have joined IS in 1967, rather than start the *Workers’ Fight* magazine then. But the June 1967 Israel-Palestine war intervened. We were in contact with a group of people in IS who were highly critical of IS’s political looseness. In the June war we were solidly “Israeli-defeatist” though not for the destruction of

Israel.

Our co-thinkers in IS were bitterly critical of Cliff's hostility to Israel in the 1967 war, and we were very much on Cliff's side. Even Cliff, in those days, did not talk about destroying Israel. We all talked about a socialist United States of the Middle East with autonomy for national minorities like Jews and Kurds.

But the war made a breach between us and our co-thinkers in IS, and we didn't join IS. Then we wound up in a faction fight in the Irish Workers' Group in which IS people made a big part of the bloc in opposition to us, which stretched from Guevarists — some of whom would soon become outright guerrillaists — through soft Stalinists, soft Maoists, and Trotskyists who had no backbone, to the IS people.

One of the issues in dispute in the IWG was our attitude in retrospect to the workers' rising in East Germany in 1953. Gery Lawless, who was the organiser of the bloc against us, said it was "just a building workers' demonstration" and it would not have been right to call for the withdrawal of the Russian troops then because that would have let the Americans in. Yet the biggest element in his bloc was the supporters of IS, who had joined the IWG with our very enthusiastic agreement.

After the IWG split, I wrote in a joint internal bulletin for the League for a Workers' Republic (the former Trotskyist Faction of the IWG) and Workers' Fight that we might have to go into IS. I did that because there was understandably a lot of hostility to IS from their unprincipled role in the IWG faction fight.

In Manchester we had started the local Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. We did it in alliance with a group called the Syndicalist Workers' Federation. They were good people, and we had friendly relations with them. At first we couldn't get IS involved in the campaign, though IS was relatively strong in Manchester, about 50 members.

Nevertheless, we found that a lot of the people whom we activated through the Vietnam campaign would jump over our heads and join IS instead, because they couldn't see what the differences were between Workers' Fight and IS.

In the middle of 1968, IS put out a unity call. They did it in a very demagogic fashion, basing the call on "the urgent threat of fascism" in response to a march by dockworkers in support of Enoch Powell, a Tory politician who had made a racist speech.

But we got involved in the discussions. We thought there would be some sort of general regroupment, involving for example the Mandelites, who were growing and launched themselves as the International Marxist Group in early 1968. In 1968 there was a vast ferment of young people who wanted to be revolutionaries, and large numbers of them could have been organised in an open, intelligent, sensible left organisation.

In the event the IMG decided dogmatically that they had to have an "open organisation of the Fourth International". They had spent years buried deep in the social democracy, and now they were making a principle of independence from a lively and open radical left-wing movement. Their attitude in 1968 still strikes me as grossly sectarian.

THE TROTSKYIST TENDENCY

Anyway, we fused with IS in late 1968. Workers' Fight had grown relatively well since late 1967, though we were held back by the pressures of the IWG faction fight. Paradoxically, the main people we recruited in Manchester were people who had been in the Communist Party — some of them people I had known for a long time.

Having started with just four people in the whole country when we broke with Militant, we had nine members of Workers' Fight in Manchester by then. But one of them, Trevor Fox, died in an accident. Four of the others split off rather than join IS. They were just hopeless sectarians, I think.

But we joined IS and started a "Trotskyist Tendency" there. We grew quickly inside IS — in Manchester, for example, we recruited everybody in the IS branch who could remotely be called a cadre, except Colin Barker, and he agreed with us on a lot of questions for a while — but we were still a very small group.

In the literature about IS at that time, which there's a lot of, there is much speculation about why Cliff agreed to the fusion between IS and Workers' Fight in 1968, and the common assumption is that we, Workers' Fight, were such awful people that you have to find some hidden explanation. That is a matter of reading backwards a ghettoisation, a pariah-isation, of the Trotskyist Tendency that came later. In fact we had a relatively fruitful, constructive, friendly relation with IS for the first nine months, until IS started splitting branches to ghettoise us.

We did a lot of things in IS which people have forgotten. We started an IS youth paper, called Rebel. We moved the first resolution proposing a rank and file

movement.

We had big political disputes inside IS, between 1968 and 1971, about Ireland and about Europe, which I've written about elsewhere. Another dispute, both with the IS leadership and within the Trotskyist Tendency, was about the 1970 general election and the Labour Party. By now there was immense hostility to the Labour Party in layers of the working-class movement. There had been a big exodus from the Labour Party in 1967-70.

THE 1970 GENERAL ELECTION

Some of us — at the start, the Trotskyist Tendency was more or less united in this view, with one or two exceptions — thought that we couldn't propose a blanket "vote Labour" policy in the 1970 general election without making nonsense of what we had been saying over the last few years. We proposed a vote only for those Labour MPs and candidates who had opposed the anti-union legislation — which would have excluded Tony Benn, for instance — and that IS should stand a candidate and try to make that candidacy a national focus. IS wouldn't do that.

As the election approached, more and more of the Tendency became convinced that we had to back Labour. When it came to it, I think there were only three of us left in the Tendency who rejected a general vote for Labour — Rachel Lever, Andrew Hornung, and myself.

The shift wasn't necessarily for good reasons — just the pressure of the movement. But it reflected the fact that the ties of Labour to the unions remained intact despite all the recent tensions. And at that stage the Labour Party structures were still wide open. The membership had collapsed, but it could reassemble very quickly after 1970, whereas any Labour revival in the period ahead now will face much bigger obstacles and probably have to find new channels for itself.

In principle, I think that Trotskyists should be in favour of standing in elections if they can. And I still don't think we were entirely wrong to refuse an automatic vote for Labour after all we had been saying about the Labour government. But the problem was that there was no viable alternative. The Communist Party went through the motions of putting a few candidates, but we would never have backed the CP.

We published a special discussion bulletin, in which there were articles by Rachel Lever and myself putting our view, and by Phil Semp and Geoff Hodgson arguing for a general Labour vote. The article by Rachel and me was in two parts, one about the immediate tactical questions, and the other attempting to look at the whole thing historically. It took it for granted, and said so, that we would eventually end up back working in the Labour Party. We said that in theory, but in practice by that stage we were all so hostile to the Labour Party that it was very difficult for us to adjust when the Labour Party revived after 1970.

In autumn 1971 the IS leadership started moves to expel us. The Trotskyist Tendency had been in the doldrums for a while by then, and in July 1971 we had two splits, one after the other on two successive days, so the IS leadership thought they could easily get rid of us and we would quickly dwindle to nothing.

By then the ghettoisation had reached such a stage that Rachel Lever, writing in a polemic, could describe us as "non-patrials" within IS, adapting a distinction made in new Tory government anti-immigrant legislation between "patrials" (i.e. people of white descent in the former British Empire) and "non-patrials" (in practice, non-white people from Asia and Africa).

That started with the splitting of IS branches on political lines in order to isolate us.

There was a "libertarian" current in IS in 1968-9, suspicious of Cliff's new move to "Leninism" and "demo-

Founding conference of the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, 1978

cratic centralism". In late 1969 the "libertarians" in Leeds broke the Leeds IS branch into two branches in order to separate themselves off from the Trotskyists in Leeds IS.

As it happens, we had no members of the Workers' Fight tendency in Leeds. But the IS leadership, instead of refusing to accept the unilateral action by the "libertarians" in Leeds, generalised the policy. Very soon the "libertarians" in Teesside, where there were Workers' Fight people, did the same thing.

In Manchester, Colin Barker decided he wanted to separate the rest of the branch from the Trotskyist Tendency. We had a big IS branch in Manchester, 60 members maybe.

There had been a lot of resistance in Manchester to Cliff's centralisation policy. After we joined we won over a number of the former "libertarians". And we had personally friendly relations with some of the remaining "libertarians". At one point Barker and some other people attempted to drive the "libertarians" out of the branch. I got to that branch meeting very, very late. When I saw what was happening I immediately defended the "libertarians" and forced Barker to retreat. It caused a great upset in the Trotskyist Tendency, but the consequence was that thereafter Barker could not appeal to the "libertarians" in Manchester against us. When Barker eventually split the branch, most of them stayed with us.

Nevertheless, even though there was a vote in the branch of about 75%-25% against splitting it as in Leeds and Teesside, Barker's group split, and thereafter they were the favoured Manchester IS branch, serviced by the IS centre, etc.

The level of denunciation of us in IS was pretty terrible. For example, I went to Teesside in 1970. There were two IS branches in Teesside. Some people had joined after the time of the split into two branches. When I arrived, for some reason Phil Semp and our people weren't around. I saw a paper sale in the city centre by the other branch and joined it. I wound up being put up for the weekend by one of them — Tony Duffy — and I managed to win them over a weekend to fusion of the two branches. Later on, at the time when we were expelled from IS, we would recruit Tony Duffy and his son Lol Duffy.

I'd like to think that success in Teesside was because I'm very, very good at such things, but actually I think it was because the demonisation had been such that anybody who didn't have two heads would have appeared reasonable compared to the image of us that was put around.

EXPULSION FROM IS

So we were ghettoised and isolated in 1970-1. We went into the doldrums. We had two splits in one weekend in July 1971 on the question of the general strike.

The Healyites, and then IS, had started raising slogans for a general strike in the big demonstrations against the new anti-union legislation being brought in by the Tory government, the Industrial Relations Act. Some people in the Trotskyist Tendency argued that we should not call for a general strike, or favour IS calling for a general strike, unless and until IS was in a position to lead that general strike. It was a recoil against IS using the general strike slogan demagogically, but it was nonsense.

They had raised their argument at the Easter 1971 aggregate meeting of the Tendency. They were beaten down and isolated there. Then other people raised the same argument at the July 1971 aggregate meeting, and at the end of a long day's debate they were defeated too. Some of them walked out that day, including the infamous Henry sisters, Sara and Wendy. The following day, another group walked out.

IS expelled us at a special conference in December 1971 in retaliation for a campaign that we had started in summer 1971 against their switch of line on the Common Market [European Union], from an internationalist position to “keep Britain out”. So we had to find an independent course for ourselves again.

We believed that the task of revolutionary socialists was to reorient the labour movement. That didn't exclude such stances as what we advocated in the general election in 1970, but it was a basic orientation.

We came out of IS into a tremendous period of working-class struggle. We saw that the Trotskyist movement was utterly inadequate, and IS was moving towards a position where from the middle 1970s they would adopt what had been Healyism a decade earlier — the Healyites in the meantime having gone to the outer edges of madness.

We were convinced that there was great urgency. We refused to accept the IS leadership's diktat to disband, and came out of IS with about 36 people, most of them recruited in the course of our campaign against the expulsion, though some of them didn't stay long.

We were expelled on 4 December 1971. We appeared with the first issue of a fortnightly paper — more or less — on 14 January 1972. We'd got hold of a headquarters in London. We got comrades to mortgage property to raise the money for a printing press. We had comrades who could work the printing press, though they soon came to a bad end.

We launched our little craft on the waves. The basic idea was that you must be guided by the logic of the class struggle. Psychologically, we couldn't have sat down and become a theoretical discussion circle then.

You could argue that a group our size had to be a propaganda group, and we were. But we tried to develop a combination tool. The term comes from Cannon. We had quite a lot of propaganda in our paper — detailed explanations on issues of debate in the left — but we also faced it up with agitational stuff.

We had a lot of industrial bulletins. We came out of IS with bulletins for the hospitals in Manchester and for the docks. We very quickly set up a publication called *Real Steel News*, based on Tony Duffy and other comrades in Teesside. We got stuck in. There was a lot of enthusiasm.

There were also illusions about how quickly we could go. We thought, for example, that we could recruit a lot of people from IS. In fact we recruited a few. We also developed a group of co-thinkers inside IS who eventually became Workers' Power, but that is another story.

Trying to guide ourselves by the logic of the class struggle, we faced a situation where the strength of the working class had been industrial strength. The logic of that industrial strength was for the workers to act to push the bourgeoisie aside. That may seem excessive and extreme, but it wasn't, if you look at the struggles that developed, and, for example, the wave of factory occupations through the 1970s.

INDUSTRIAL BATTLES OF 1972-4

The workers were refusing to be governed in the old way. Lenin laid down three conditions for a revolutionary situation: the ruled are no longer prepared to go in the old way; the rulers cannot go on in the old way; and there is an alternative.

The first two conditions were there. The ruling class couldn't control what happened in their own society. But politically the working-class struggle was blind. The syndicalists before World War One had a conception of overthrowing capitalist society by way of industrial unions and industrial struggle. In the early 1970s you had tremendous “syndicalist” militancy, but without any conscious perspective of overthrowing the system.

Politically, the main thing you had was Communist Party nonsense about a peaceful road to socialism, and the Communist Party was the big force in the industrial movement in so far as there was any political leadership besides a sort of fallback Labourism. You had a headless syndicalism that couldn't realise its own potential.

We saw the potential of the industrial struggle, and we saw that if it all just ended in another Labour government that would be a defeat. We focused on the call for a general strike and explanations of what a general strike could do.

At first we did that very one-sidedly. There was a discussion, and we rectified it on the level of slogans: we were for kicking out the Tories and getting a Labour government as well as for a general strike, but we didn't focus much on that.

We emphasised that a general strike could pose the question of power, and that working-class organs of administration could be created out of a general strike. We found ourselves seemingly being pedants against the way other left groups put the question of a general strike. The Healyites (now called WRP) and the Mandelites (IMG), and occasionally IS too, called for “a

general strike to bring down the Tories”.

That was idiotic. A general strike has tremendous potential for transforming the whole situation, and you set its goal as achieving a routine parliamentary election!

The Healyites didn't care about slogans beyond what sounded good, but the “general strike to bring down the Tories” was also raised by people who had higher pretensions.

A big strike, once it gets going, can snowball. For example, in the General Strike of 1926, the number of strikers was still growing when it was called off. A strike can start on a particular issue — smashing the Tories' anti-union laws, at that — and as it gets going all sorts of other issues can be raised.

The idea of transitional demands is very often vulgarised as demands which are not realisable under capitalism. That's nonsense. Transitional demands are mobilising demands which have an open-ended perspective, which can be linked together. The revolutionary party decides which demands are relevant for which time, if it knows what to do.

We focused on smashing the anti-union laws, but we want to keep open the possibility of a mass strike movement which started around that issue developing further, whereas focusing the general strike on getting an election and changing the government would have cut off any such development completely.

We didn't have too many illusions. We knew we were a very small group. But we felt a tremendous responsibility. So we threw the slogans out broadcast, and they did get some response.

In this period IS made a lot of recruits — partly helped by their opportunist change of line to oppose British entry into the Common Market [European Union] — and they began to do some of the work of trying to build a rank and file movement in the trade unions which we had advocated earlier, when we were in IS.

They called a rank and file trade unionists' conference in March 1974, which was reasonably sizeable. Now, a small left-wing group, relating to such broad conferences called by bigger groups, has two choices. You could go in as a propagandist, denouncing IS, or you could go in trying to develop what was healthy in what they had.

We wouldn't have been ourselves if we hadn't taken the second option. We tried to participate constructively. Some of our comrades got a resolution to the conference through a well-attended branch meeting at the big steelworks in Stanton, Derbyshire, with three key points: commitments against racism, for women's rights, and for nationalisation and workers' control.

But the resolution was defeated. This was 1974, when the National Front was growing and there had been a second wave of working-class racism against the Tories letting Uganda Asians into Britain in 1972. In 1976 there would be a strike by Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester, where the white workers scabbed. The idea that you could have a serious rank and file movement that didn't have a clear line on racism, or women's rights, was mind-boggling. But IS used the factional whip to defeat the resolution.

Between 1972 and 1974 we also had to look at the Labour Party anew. Once we were out of IS, we had to examine all sorts of possibilities.

In fact Labour Party life had regrown much more quickly than we were aware. Our prejudices stopped us seeing that for some time.

In 1972 we decided to explore the possibilities in the Labour Party Young Socialists. The first couple of people we sent in to explore came back telling us there was no life there at all. We began to do a bit of LPYS work from 1972, but slowly, so that by the time we got properly involved Militant had already built a relatively sizeable base there over which they had firm control. We didn't start to do Labour Party work seriously until 1974, by which time it was quite plain that there had been a revival.

In 1974 we were forced to face the fact that when it came to it, the Tories did take the election escape-hatch. They escaped from industrial confrontation by calling an election. After Labour came back to power, there was a downturn in industrial action, though a small one compared to what happened later.

All the mills of industrial class struggle had been grinding, and they had produced a Wilson Labour government, first a minority government, and then after another election in October 1974 a majority government.

In the run-up to the election, we had a small fight in the group about whether to say vote Labour. We did say vote Labour, but we were still boneheaded in some ways. If you look at the paper *Workers' Fight* — which we made weekly early in 1974 — we also called for a vote for the nine WRP and three IMG candidates who were standing. We were still moved by formal labels: these candidates were Trotskyists, so we had to support them. We shouldn't have supported them. By the time of the October 1974 election, where there were ten WRP candidates standing, we had stopped that non-

sense. We were capable of learning, even if we were slow.

There was a spate of by-election candidates from the IMG and SWP in 1976-8, some of whom did relatively well, but we didn't support them. It had become quite clear that Labour had repaired its political position, more or less. Labour got elected in February 1974 by default, and there was a lot of dissatisfaction then expressed by a much increased Liberal vote, but the Labour Party was still the labour movement party, and we had to relate to it in a way we hadn't wanted to. There was no point pretending things were what they were not. Labour had been the only “working-class” — “working-class” in quotes — alternative to the Tories at the height of the class struggle.

The ruling class was served by that Labour Party, and by the trade union leaders — including left-wing trade union leaders — who supported it. To change that, we had to relate to the reality as it was.

In 1969-70 we had written — I had written — in various articles that we would soon have to work within the Labour Party again. But that was just repeating stock generalities. In practice, our orientation was one-sided between 1972 and 1974. We weren't entirely wrong about the one-sidedness, but we were slow to adjust.

SOCIALIST CAMPAIGN FOR LABOUR VICTORY

In 1978 we were faced with a Labour government which had brought in big cuts, under IMF diktat, in 1976; which had imposed wage controls; and which was going to have a major confrontation with striking workers in the so-called “winter of discontent”, in 1978-9.

At first the election was expected in autumn 1978. What were we going to do? The Tories had attempted a very mild version of Thatcherism in the 1970-4 government. That government was brought down, and the ruling class had to rely on the Labour Party, which as it happened served them very well.

But the ruling class was faced with the fact that they couldn't control their own system. Radical shifts took place in the Tory party. What would be called Thatcherism — a hard class-struggle species of Toryism — emerged in the mid 70s. At first there was reason to believe that this shift by the Tories would make them unelectable. But by mid 1978 it was plain that the Tories might well win the election, and that they represented a new threat, a new militant ruling-class programme.

After Labour lost the election in 1951, the Trotskyists and the left expected a full-scale Tory counter-revolution to get rid of the welfare state introduced by Labour in 1945-51. That didn't happen. The Tories had been hegemonised by welfare-statism.

But by 1978 things had changed. The counter-revolution wrongly expected in 1951 was gathering strength, and was a serious threat. The Tories were embittered by their failure with a first, milder, attempt in 1970-4.

In that situation we couldn't say that it didn't matter whether the Tories won. So we had to find some way of combining our bitter hostility to the Labour government with opposition to the hard core militant warriors of the ruling class now leading the Tory party.

At that time — it was very different from now — there was a lot of life in the Labour Party. The Labour Party had grown again in the 1970s, and from about 1975 the Labour Party became very critical of the Labour government. The Labour Party “in the country” counterposed itself to the Labour government — the development that the Blair coup, after 1994, was meant to smash the possibility of.

We developed the notion of an independent campaign for Labour, against the Tories, which would simultaneously during the election campaign express hostility to the Labour leaders and to the Government's record.

We were able to link up quite a variety of Labour left-wingers. We founded the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory at a conference in July 1978 in London, at which the chief speakers included Ken Livingstone and various other heroes who later would not be heroes at all.

We built a network of supporters. In the general election, which eventually came in May 1979, we had four constituencies officially supporting the SCLV and we put literature out in a number of other constituencies. We started *Socialist Organiser* as the paper of the SCLV, and we ourselves, slowly, over a period of two years, merged our paper (called *Workers' Action* since 1975) into it.

Very soon after the Tories won the election, the broader Labour left inside the SCLV and ourselves began to drift apart. One of the bases of the SCLV had been that Labour should use any strength it had, in local government for example, to mobilise against the Tory offensive.

Once the Tories were in government, we found a large section of SCLV people who were local Labour

councillors reneging on that commitment. Instead they went for temporising by way of raising local taxes (rates) to make good cuts which the Tories imposed on local government.

By that stage we had enough influence and profile to launch another broad movement, the Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Democracy, which succeeded in uniting the very broadest left in the Labour Party, including even, nominally, Militant.

We grew as a tendency, and we also grew in our influence and strength. *Socialist Organiser* was our paper in the sense that we did the central work of producing it, circulating it, and financing it; but we ran it not as a closed-off paper laying down the law but as a paper oriented to dialogue.

We would get labour movement dignitaries to write in it, or interview them, and we would debate with them. We never pretended that we had much in common with the basic politics of the Labour left. For example, we disagreed with them all on the Common Market [European Union], which had been the precipitating issue for our expulsion from IS. Nevertheless, we were able to get a hearing for our ideas, and we were able to get a better resonance for those ideas through debates with people like Tony Benn.

We were also hostile to the dominant economic policy of the Labour Left and the Communist Party, the Alternative Economic Strategy. Even without that name it had been in circulation for a long time. What it came down to was the notion that Britain could become socialist as a siege regime modelled on World War Two. In fact it would be siege capitalism, with the state controlling things in a very bureaucratic fashion.

It was nonsensical. It was utopian. It could not be realised. Such a policy could only act as a sort of diversion, until the people who advocated got to the point where they might form a government and could implement. In fact they could not have implemented it. All it could do is create reformist delusions.

We debated it. We debated with lots of people. We built a sizeable current. We were also active in support of the East European working classes.

The entire Labour left was pervaded by Stalinism, to varying degrees. For example, Tony Benn had been a Labour government minister until 1979. He came out of being a minister full of illusions about the USSR.

He decided to build a left, and he decided to build a left out of the existing political positions generally thought of as "left wing". You can't build much out of rotten wood. There was a lot that was rotten in the ideas of the Labour left, and the most rotten bit was the attitude to Stalinism.

We were at loggerheads with the left on many issues. Yet we managed to maintain our place in that left by debating them.

For example, we were solidly hostile to the Russian regime. We were solidly hostile to the role of the Russians in Eastern Europe. We were solidly for Solidarnosc. Although everyone was for Solidarnosc in the strike wave that started it in August 1980, there was a great falling-away from Solidarnosc later. People like Tony Benn would peer at you suspiciously if you were for Solidarnosc in the later period.

AGAINST RUSSIA IN AFGHANISTAN

In that period we also made a radical turn away from the traditional Trotskyist position of supporting Russian foreign policy with caveats. We denounced Russian foreign policy in 1979-80 when Russian invaded Afghanistan.

The Theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern were a formative text for me. It is a duty for socialists in an advanced country to back struggles for freedom by the colonies or semi-colonies of that country, irrespective of the politics of the leadership of those struggles.

In Afghanistan, when the Russians invaded, you had a powerful mass movement resisting what was in fact an old-style drive for colonial conquest, and in fact became a very vicious colonial war akin to the French war in Algeria, and with methods similar to those of the US in Vietnam.

We sided with those resisting colonial rule in Afghanistan. We didn't back them politically. We didn't endorse them politically. When the question arose, after the Russian withdrawal, we sided with the towns in Afghanistan against the rural reactionaries. But solidarity with those resisting colonial conquest is a bedrock position.

That was right. We also have to recognise the changes today from the world where the Comintern theses were adopted, a world dominated by old-style colonies. The Comintern was also a world-wide revolutionary movement, which saw a world revolution developing, and saw the struggles in the colonial countries as auxiliaries which could augment, stimulate, and link with the struggles of the workers in the advanced countries for socialism.

The Comintern did not expect any great number of

countries then colonies to quickly become independent. The plain fact was that some of the colonies were not yet ripe even for bourgeois society. You see that problem manifested even today.

That world of colonial empires disappeared by the 1970s. The last example was the Portuguese Empire, which ceased to be an empire in the mid-1970s. Russia's drive for colonial conquest in Afghanistan was an anomaly.

Today we have to face the fact that some nationalist rallying cries, in Third World countries which are no longer colonies or semi-colonies, are empty or deceptive slogans. A country that is politically independent may want to assert local economic control over important entities in the country which are controlled by international finance capital, and you may want to support that as part of a drive for self-determination. But beyond that, where there is full political self-determination, the only sort of anti-imperialism that is viable in such countries is working-class socialism and anti-capitalism.

Today we see movements which, although they are "anti-imperialist" in the sense of being hostile to the big powers, are utterly reactionary and utterly regressive. The Stalinist revolutions in the colonial or quasi-colonial countries proved to be reactionary. Even though in the 1940s it was right to champion China against colonialism and neo-colonialism, the Maoists created a reactionary regime.

THE KHMER ROUGE IN CAMBODIA

A number of events in the middle and later 1970s established the facts very clearly, for example the Stalinist takeover of Cambodia.

In Cambodia you had a powerful Stalinist, populist anti-imperialism. We were never for the Stalinists controlling society, but we were for the Stalinists de facto against imperialism, as for the rest of Indochina.

We saw the Cambodian Stalinists take power and do to their own people what Hitler did to people whom he defined as not his own people. You could even see a parallel between the genetic mumbo-jumbo of Hitler and the "class" mumbo-jumbo of the Cambodian Stalinists, who thought you could simply dispense with layers of society by butchering them.

We had a discussion in the group about Cambodia. The discussion centred on whether or not Cambodia was a "deformed workers' state" in the sense that China and other countries were "deformed workers' states". Was Cambodia so exceptional that you could exclude it from the "deformed workers' state" schema which, of course, we held to in a very critical fashion?

In the opinion of some of us, you couldn't separate what the Stalinists did in Cambodia from what they did in China. In Cambodia it was telescoped, it was more intensive, but it was what the Maoists had done in China in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. If China was a "deformed workers' state", then so was Cambodia.

Those of us who argued that Cambodia was a "deformed workers' state" were not being pro-Stalinist. We were simply refusing to take the easy option of saying that the Cambodian system, which was simply indefensible on every level, was really not like the Maoists. The fact is that it was like the Maoists.

IRAN, 1978-9

The biggest lesson on reactionary anti-imperialism for us was the Iranian revolution. That was very anti-imperialist in the sense that it wanted to break with the American-led bloc of which the previous regime, the Shah's regime, was part.

It got support from all the Stalinoid left, and it got support from us. A large part of the mobilisations in the Iranian revolution were working-class mobilisations. But politically it was an utterly reactionary movement. It led very quickly to an utterly reactionary regime, a clerical-fascist regime. It was not better than the Shah's regime. In fact it was worse because it had mass support. It was a sort of "totalitarian democracy".

Some of us — I was one — had wanted to be far more critical at the time of the revolution. But afterwards it all became very clear. We all had to face the fact that some revolutions are not progressive. Some revolutions against "imperialism" do not counterpose to it something more progressive. You can get a reactionary anti-imperialism in the same way that Marx and Engels wrote about reactionary socialism, or reactionary anti-capitalism.

Marxists are not "absolute anti-capitalists". There are worse things in the world than capitalism. Stalinism was one — Stalinism, which enslaved the working class.

You cannot guide yourself by a principle of just being against advanced capitalism, which is what the "anti-imperialism" amounts to in many cases today. You have to be more judicious.

If in Iraq today, what was going on were what went on under the Russians in Afghanistan — a drive for colonial conquest — then we would take the same line as with the Russians. But that isn't what is going on.

On the other hand, it can be plausibly argued that the cost in human lives of what the Americans are doing already makes nonsense of what they are trying to do. So we have criticised concretely.

A large part of the left today has a policy of supporting reactionary movements on the grounds that they are "anti-imperialist". The clearest-cut example, to my mind, are the idiots who go on as if it is in anyone's interest, including in the interest of the Iranian people, for the Iranian mullahs to have the atomic bomb. They argue that it is a matter of self-determination, of equality. The Americans have the bomb, the Israelis have it, so we should insist on Iran's right to have it.

That reduces left-wing politics to self-destructive gibberish. The cardinal principles for us must be the working class, and what allows it to develop, and the logic of the class struggle of the working class.

THEORIES OF THE USSR

From the start we were Trotskyists. We were very proud of the Trotskyist tradition as we understood it, and strove to understand it. In IS, when we joined, "Trotskyist" was a badge of odium. By the time we were expelled, they were all claiming to be Trotskyists.

Our tradition was that of the "orthodox Trotskyists", around Cannon. In fact we were very ignorant of the history of the Trotskyist movement. So was everyone else. There was very little literature available. It was only in 1970 that the American SWP began publishing Trotsky's writings from the late 1930s.

The version of the history which guided us was that the orthodox Trotskyists were the ones who had fought against softness on Stalinism and for the workers' perspective in the Stalinist states. They did in fact do that after 1953, though there was a whole period behind that which we knew very little about.

We distinguished our "hard" anti-Stalinist Trotskyism — "orthodox Trotskyism" as we saw it — from the "soft" people, like the Mandelites, who were for a workers' revolution in Russia, but until 1969 were not for a political revolution in China.

I wrote an article in 1966, on the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian revolution, which was bitterly anti-Stalinist. We wrote very anti-Stalinist articles on the Cultural Revolution, in 1967, and on Czechoslovakia in 1968.

But under the surface there were a lot of contradictions. At the same time we were for revolutionary Stalinism, Third-World populist Stalinism. We were for the Vietnamese Stalinists fighting the USA. We weren't uncritical, but we didn't make much of the criticism either. We were very hostile to what would come after the Vietnamese Stalinists won, but all that was drowned by our support for them against the US imperialists. We were anti-imperialists, first and foremost, and we subordinated everything to that. But reality forced us to begin to unravel the contradictions.

From the late 1970s, I didn't really believe that the Stalinist states were "deformed workers' states".

There are various labels, and all the labels have many different variations, many different theories within them. The demystifying way to approach it is to ask yourself what each stance means in practice. Does it see Stalinism as progressive vis-à-vis capitalism? To be defended vis-à-vis capitalism? Does it say Stalinism is to be overthrown by the working class? And so on.

Inside all the labels — "socialism", including "degenerated workers' state", "state capitalism", "bureaucratic collectivism" — there are many different theories. For example, Tony Cliff's theory of state capitalism is not the same as C L R James's.

There is a whole variety of "degenerated and deformed workers' state" theories, some of which effectively describe new class societies but give them the label "deformed workers' states" as means of vindicating the description of them as progressive. The clearest example there is the Militant/ Socialist Party theory.

We were different. We held to the "degenerated workers' state" formula, which was the formula of the Trotskyist movement into which we were born, but we gave it our own interpretation again and again. Within that framework we jumped back in time to Trotsky's variant of the formula. We picked up, for example, Trotsky's argument from 1937 against those who wanted to say the USSR was state capitalism or bureaucratic collectivism. "Well, all right. If I grant you the label, what do you propose to add politically. The Trotskyists have a clear programme for a workers' revolution against Stalinism. What do you want to add to that concretely?" The answer, of course, is that they had nothing to add. We picked that up retrospectively.

In my opinion now, Trotsky should not have argued like that in 1937. He should have abandoned the formula. We picked up Trotsky's argument long after he

was dead, and in fact long after it was ridiculous, but we applied it to combine support for revolutionary populist Stalinism against imperialism with the most bitter hostility to Stalinism where it ruled.

We had an absolute contradiction, in my opinion. We were for Stalinist movements in their guise as anti-imperialist movements, but we regarded their social system as utterly repressive for our class and for what we believed in. In practice we found ourselves reacting empirically to concrete questions as they arose. Step by step we sloughed off the formula. It became a loose skin for us.

One of our strengths, I think, right back to my arguments with the YCL about when they said you could have a peaceful revolution in Britain because Marx said you could, and I had to learn from Lenin how to think as a Marxist, was that we always related concretely. There is nothing in our history in the way of false political stances on issues to do with Stalinism, unless you want to include the fact that I supported the Chinese in Tibet in 1959 under the influence of the Mandel-Pablo Fourth International and on the grounds that the Chinese were extending the revolution. I regret that, and I am ashamed of it, but I was a kid. Beyond that, I think, on every concrete question we were consistently anti-Stalinist.

We didn't back the Americans against the Stalinists in Vietnam, of course, but we were right not to do that. Whatever theory one might have that the Americans might perhaps set up bourgeois democracy in Vietnam, in practice they represented the pulverisation and destruction of that society. It was summed up by General Westmoreland in early 1968 when, during one offensive of the Stalinists, he said that the Americans had had to destroy a city "in order to save it". They were destroying the country "to save it from Stalinism". You couldn't support that. You had to oppose it.

At the same time we were hostile to the Stalinists. For example, if you look at our response to the victory of the Stalinists in Vietnam, we were very pleased about it, but we immediately started talk about the anti-Stalinist struggle. It was inadequate, grossly inadequately, but you will find us advocating the anti-Stalinist struggle more than the "state capitalist" IS did.

On the concrete questions, we evolved more and more away from the "deformed workers' state" stance as anyone else had it. We had our own attitudes. We defended the right-wing oppositionists inside the Stalinist states. We defended the rights of the workers and the oppressed nationalities in the Stalinist states to fight back even if that meant disrupting the bloc politics of the Russians. We did that from the very beginning.

A TURNING POINT

The biggest turning point for us was Afghanistan. The Russians invaded Afghanistan at Christmas 1979. The "orthodox Trotskyist" position would be: "we didn't want them to invade, but we're not going to ask them to get out once they're there. We now want to have a political revolution in Afghanistan". Something analogous had been Trotsky's attitude to Stalin's seizure of eastern Poland in 1939.

We didn't jump to conclusions. We had a discussion. We had some comrades whose instinct was to be mechanical about it, but we looked at the concrete issues, and we could see no sense in backing such a monstrous war as would have to be, and was, mounted by the Russians. We decided we were against it.

Every "orthodox Trotskyist" group in the world adopted some variant of either actively supporting the Russian invasion — in Britain, that was the attitude of Militant, today the Socialist Party — or refusing to call on them to withdraw. Some of them changed quickly, and there were big minorities even at the start in some organisations, such as the French LCR, but we were the only "orthodox Trotskyist" group to come out solidly for Russian withdrawal.

In fact we had very little in the way of internal ructions about it. We took a few weeks to think it through, but we thought it through, and we defended our position.

We continued the break with the orthodox Trotskyists over Solidarnosc. Everyone was in favour of the strikers in August 1980, but when it became a matter of the state versus the working class — and a working class that was not necessarily committed entirely to nationalised economy: that didn't emerge for some time, but the possibility of it emerged quickly, and the attitude of the left was quickly governed by such considerations — it was different. You got a large section of the Mandelite "Fourth International", that led by the American SWP, calling for gigantic Western aid to the Polish state just as it was heading into all-out conflict with Solidarnosc. We were solidly for Solidarnosc, as we had been solidly for the Czechs,

irrespective of the political implications, in 1968.

Less and less did we think that the "workers' state" formula had any meaning. In fact we had revised some of the "orthodox Trotskyist" attitudes a long time before. We argued for "defencism", but we meant by it that we were against the Western powers conquering the Stalinist states. We said explicitly in resolutions that "defencism" was a matter of tenth-rate importance for us, and we meant it. One measure of it is that when we were in IS there was never a concrete case where we disagreed with the "state capitalists" on attitudes to the Stalinist states. In the Vietnam movement, we were far more critical of the Stalinists than some of the "state capitalists" were.

At the IS conference in September 1969 I made a speech denouncing IS for having links with what I called the "State Department socialists" who were the left-Shachtmanites, no longer linked with Max Shachtman himself, in America. That was the "orthodox Trotskyist" attitude, which I had in spades, picked up from Cannon and from Trotsky's polemics in 1939-40, gathered in *In Defence of Marxism*.

I had the notion that there were two extremes. One was the Pabloites, soft on Stalinism, and the other was the Stalinophobes who became soft on capitalism. I thought the combination that avoided both aberrations was "orthodox Trotskyism" on the model of James P Cannon in 1953.

Now it was true on a certain level that 1953 "orthodox Trotskyism" avoided being soft on either capitalism and Stalinism. And it was true for us. We did steer empirically between being soft on Stalinism on any level — except as regards the "anti-imperialist struggle", which of course is rather a large level — and being soft on capitalism.

But actually we were "two-campists". We were ultimately in the Russian "camp". We were "orthodox Trotskyists".

It's a sad thing to say, but it is true, that the "degenerated workers' state" theory served to reconcile many people, in different varieties, to Stalinism even after they had acquired a knowledge of its horrors. For higher reasons — the shape of history, Stalinism's role in relation to imperialism — they could remain pro-USSR while having no illusions about life in the USSR.

A straight Stalinist could be disillusioned by being given the facts. Most of the "orthodox Trotskyists" knew enough of the facts — certainly I did — to see Stalinism for what it was as a totalitarian tyranny over the working class. The "theory" was a factor of corruption.

Nevertheless, we did see the facts empirically, with all the qualifications I've made. And on concrete questions of opposing the Stalinists, we were right politically.

We were not consistent "two-campists". For example, we were not "two-campists" on Afghanistan. In fact we evolved to a point where on many questions we were really "third-campists".

THE THIRD CAMP

"Third Camp-ism" is a term I don't like much. It is the historically-shaped term for politics which insisted on working-class opposition to both Stalinism and capitalism, refusing to join either "camp". The actual thing it describes is independent working-class politics. We were always for independent working-class politics, even vis-à-vis the Stalinists when we were solidly for the Stalinist camp. And we got to the point where we weren't any longer solidly for the Stalinist camp.

We were no longer seeing Stalinism as progressive. For example, we no longer saw Stalinism as progressive because "it took areas out of the control of imperialism". In our discussions on Cambodia in 1978, Dave Spencer said that we must see Cambodia as a workers' state because it had been taken out of the control of imperialism. But most of us rejected that nonsense.

It became obvious that a lot of what we were trying to say had been said before, said better, and said from a much higher starting point than the "orthodox Trotskyist" culture we had started with.

I had read Max Shachtman's *The Struggle For The New Course* in 1967. I had gone through a phase in the mid-60s of saying that I was agnostic on the question of "degenerated workers' state" or "state capitalism" or whatever were better terms for the Stalinist systems. I never was agnostic on the politics: I thought you should side with them against imperialism (meaning, against the US-led bloc).

Shachtman's *The Struggle For The New Course* is extremely eloquent and extremely powerful, but all it did was confirm what I already knew about the horrors of Stalinism. Shachtman's approach seemed to me very similar to Trotsky's, except for the fact that he gave a more negative overall judgement on what he described. I didn't see a great deal of advance, and I didn't want to go the same way as Shachtman did in old age.

Trotsky's polemics against Shachtman in 1939-40 are absolutely unbalanced, and the selection in *In Defence of Marxism* is grossly unrepresentative of Trotsky's output at the time on the events in Poland and Finland. Nevertheless, *In Defence of Marxism* had a tremendous emotional resonance with us.

In a debate in our group in 1976 between "state capitalists" — future Workers' Power — and me (see p.15), I made the point that the expansion of capitalism since World War Two meant that Trotsky's objections — to the effect that if "bureaucratic collectivism" was right, then the whole historic perspective of Marxism was overthrown — were no longer valid. Actually those objections were not even true in 1939.

There was a slow movement in our attitudes on Stalinism. Afghanistan broke down the walls completely. And our stance on Afghanistan, in turn, was prepared by our foolishness on Iran. We had an easy time reorienting the group on Afghanistan partly because people had learned the lessons from Iran, that "anti-imperialism", meaning anti-USA-ism, was not an adequate guide in politics.

After that I didn't positively defend the "workers' state" position. I defended it by default as late as 1982. I wrote an article in *Socialist Organiser* giving facts about the bureaucracy. My intention was to arm comrades with hostility to the bureaucracy. Somebody started a discussion about "workers'-statism", and I "defended" it by pointing out difficulties with alternative views.

Essentially we had sloughed off all theory. But we were not different from the other Trotskyist groups in that. All the groups have their own concrete answers to a number of questions. Those, rather than the official theoretical formulas, determine what their attitude really is.

RETHINKING THE STALINIST STATES

We finally knocked the "workers' state" formula on the head in 1988.

If it is a matter of picking a label that expresses your feelings about Stalinism, then plainly no-one who knows the facts will choose the term "workers' state". The problem is that all the labels imply whole outlooks on history. The label you give to Stalinism implies how you see in relation to world capitalism and in relation to history.

If it were a matter of simply picking a label, anyone could do that. The Workers' Power group, which came out of the IS Left Faction which we fused with in the mid-1970s, had a label, "state capitalism", but they had no theory. Eventually they switched to "workers'-statism".

Tony Cliff had a peculiar theory of state capitalism which Hal Draper described — and Cliff didn't try to contradict him — as not really state capitalism at all, but a variant of bureaucratic collectivism. I think that's true. It's very debatable how what Cliff is describing is any sort of capitalism, on his own description.

We had a lot to be modest about in not rushing to change labels, to pick a new label. It would have been far better if we had been able to elaborate new fully-worked-out theories about the whole world. But we didn't. And if we had gone about doing that, we would by definition have been incapable of appreciating the issues, and we would have wound up as some sort of charlatans.

Tony Cliff ended up praising himself for what his theory of state capitalism has in common with all theories of state capitalism or bureaucratic collectivism — rejection of the "workers' state" thesis — and that is all he could say for it. Every development in Russia refuted Cliff's specific theory no less than it refuted the workers' state stuff.

It would have been better if we had been Trotskys. It would not have been better if we had pretended to be Trotskys, able to elaborate a whole world view where Trotsky himself got certain things wrong. We were right not to have delusions of grandeur. We were right to take it cautiously and empirically.

Better if we had been able to be fully-developed Marxists on the question. But we weren't. And we managed politically. We weren't a theoretical tract society. We were a political tendency. And we were reasonably competent at steering politically, guided by the idea that we were for the working class irrespective.

It wasn't that we couldn't conceive of having a different label. It was that the whole business was so complicated.

Eventually I realised that for a long time we had in fact operated with "Third Camp" politics, seeing the Stalinist states as exploitative and sometimes imperialist class systems which were worse, from a working-class point of view, than capitalism. And over the 1980s we became aware of the existence of a credible — I think enormously credible — alternative body of theory on Stalinism, the theory developed in the US Workers' Party and ISL in the 1940s and early 50s.

The USSR

Workers' Fight — the initial group of what is now the AWL tendency — inherited the "orthodox Trotskyist" view that the USSR and the other Stalinist states were "deformed and degenerated workers' states". Why did we take so long to move away from that view towards the conclusion that the Stalinist states were in fact a new sort of exploitative class system?

My presentation in a debate we held in 1976 may help explain. We had recently merged with the Left Faction of IS (SWP). They held that the USSR was "state capitalist", though they rejected Cliff's specific theory. (In fact, they were unsure. A chunk of them soon split away from us and evolved into the present-day Workers' Power group, deciding along the way — in response to the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979! — that the USSR was after all a "degenerated workers' state").

This is what I said in 1976:

I take very seriously the section of our 1975 resolution which says that the "deformed and degenerated workers' state" theory is a working hypothesis only. It is very much that for me.

However, in this debate we are focusing on the USSR. Even on the USSR I would dissociate from... Mandel's idea of the chief contradiction being between the bureaucracy and the plan.

What is the argument about? It is clear that the bureaucracy is a distinct social stratum, parasitic on the working class, ruling through a police state, unable to plan the economy rationally, and needs to be smashed by a political revolution with wide-ranging social effects. That is agreed. But the argument relates to the possibility of socialism.

State capitalism is theoretically possible. It has happened episodically, e.g. in Egypt, now returning to a private capitalist economy, but only episodically, without a smashing of the old ruling class. The Stalinist states are products of revolutions of one sort or another, and are not episodic. If they are state capitalist, then all these revolutions leading to state capitalism imply substantial new possibilities for capitalism.

Dave Hughes [of the ex-Left Faction] argues against the IS/SWP analysis of the USSR as imperialist, though if the USSR is state capitalist then logically it must be imperialist.

But if state capitalism is a way for China, the USSR, etc. to break out of imperialism, then state capitalism is progressive, and Marxists, not being moralists, should recognise that, and be defencists. Also, that view would imply a revision of the Marxist idea of this being the epoch of proletarian revolution. It would imply a perspective of proletarian revolution only in isolated Paris Commune-type cases.

There is no theory of state capitalism, as Dave Hughes' exposition made clear. Cliff's theory is not state capitalist, nor Marxist. Neither Cliff nor Dave Hughes establishes capitalist economic laws of motion. For example Dave Hughes rests his argument that the USSR has been state capitalist since 1928 on its involvement in world trade now. Cliff rests his on competition of use values in arms production, and thus stands Marxist economics on its head.

Cliff tries to cram his model into Marxist categories, but unsuccessfully. In fact he describes a new ruling class, of a new type, controlling one third of the world, with a new form of society. It destroys the whole Marxist perspective. It wouldn't necessarily follow today as it did for Trotsky in 1939 that bureaucratic collectivism will expand world-wide, because capitalism has expanded since World War 2.

The "deformed and degenerated workers' state" theory is not very satisfying. But bureaucratic collectivism and state capitalism have added nothing to the "deformed and degenerated workers' state" programme of anti-bureaucratic revolution; thus we can afford to be cautious and conservative about the unclarity of "deformed and degenerated workers' state" theory. The process of developing a new theory of society, if we need that, will be long.

We do not need to make a break now to state capitalism or bureaucratic collectivism. We can use the "deformed and degenerated workers' state" theory as an "algebraic formula" on the model of Lenin's formula of "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry", provided that we keep our political cutting edge on a clear definition of political revolution. A revolutionary tendency cannot live on speculations. It can live with uncertainties if it keeps clear its definition of the political tasks.

The dilemmas of "communism"

At 15 I fell in love with the idea of communism — the image, the goal, the seduction, the hypnosis, of it. I fell in love with the idea of humankind as a great caring family, a world governed by class and then human solidarity. I've never fallen out with it. Everything I see in the capitalist reality around me has reinforced and strengthened it — renewed and yet again renewed my conviction about it.

I have shifted in the sense that I tend to take — and believe I should take — a longer view of things, beyond the instant agitation of the would-be left which is opportunistic in the sense that Lenin used the term — going for short-term advantage and easy "gain" that contradicts the larger goals and ultimate purpose of socialism.

The mix of instant agitation and powerlessness to affect reality dominant on the would-be left leads to a self-debilitating negativism. Never mind what the position is, or its implications for the working class and socialism, you back it so long as it expresses hostility to the established order. That approach is deadly for the would-be left.

The slogan "Troops Out of Iraq" is a terrible example. We opposed the invasion of Iraq, AWL no less than the rest of the would-be left. But then the demand for an instant solution, the focus on one aspect of the solution that socialists want, became a demand on the invaders to leave Iraq in the worst possible shape, even if it meant the destruction of the nascent labour movement, and a choice to ally with militant clerical fascists as opposed to those who stood for something like bourgeois democracy, or not far from it.

I loathe and reject, and want to oppose and fight, class society and capitalism now not less than when I was in my teens. More, perhaps, in the sense that I know a very great deal more about it. And I believe that the working class, and the working-class movement, represent the only progressive alternative to it.

Revolutionary socialists have to make not one but a number of political "dedications" to the fight for socialism. At first you are more or less naive and ignorant, and more or less full of illusions, including illusions about yourself. You become less naive, less ignorant, disabused of your illusions about reality and about yourself.

Experience forces you to engage in a ceaseless learning process. You come to a crisis. Then you either renew yourself on a new basis, make a new "dedication" to the goal, or die as a revolutionary.

That has been truer than ever in the era when "socialism" was Stalinism; when "socialism" was state tyranny of an awful intensity.

Of course, when I became a communist, I had little idea of the troubles and contradictions in reality, the result of the cumulative defeats — lost chances, betrayals — that beset the struggle for socialism in the 20th century, or of the reserves of strength of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois society.

In 1958, the socialist movement was a maze to find your way in — a multi-storey maze. The mass "communist" movement of fifty years ago — and until the 1990s — was not a communist movement, but a terrible combination of militant workers in the capitalist countries allied with the totalitarian Stalinist powers. In so far as it had a programme beyond what served Russian interests, it was the bearer of a programme — the establishment of a totalitarian Stalinist state — which was utterly reactionary, and most reactionary of

all in what it meant for the working class and its labour movement.

For a couple of decades I had a running argument with another comrade, Martin Thomas, about whether it was right for the Trotskyists in the 1940s and after to raise the demand that the French and Italian Communist Parties take power. I thought we shouldn't want them to take power — that a French or Italian CP regime would be reactionary, and in the first place because it would destroy the labour movement. Martin solved the problem — for himself — with the argument that in order to take power the CPs would have to become something else than what they were — that the communist workers would escape and assert a different programme. The great questions that was being begged was: what if the existing Communist Parties, as they were, took power?

For example, in Czechoslovakia, there had been a mass Communist Party before World War Two, and mass support for the Stalinist regime after 1945. The Russians gave the CP effective control of the state — the Ministry of the Interior, etc. — though it was formally part of a coalition government. The Stalinist coup of February 1948, which marked the tightening of the state to totalitarian intensity, had mass working-class support. The Stalinists organised a sort of parody of a working-class revolution — mass working-class demonstrations and so on.

In 1968, the period of the Prague Spring — the "socialism with a human face" of Alexander Dubcek and his faction of the CP of Czechoslovakia and the Russian/ Warsaw Pact invasion to restore stone-faced Stalinism — I read a lot about Czechoslovakia and the Stalinist revolution there in the 1940s.

Dubcek was the son of an old pre-war Communist Party militant. He had mass support from workers who remembered the socialism they had set out to fight for and, despite over 20 years of Stalinism, had not forgotten it, or accepted the lie that Stalinism was socialism. By 1989-90, when European Stalinism fell apart, all those socialist aspirations had been destroyed by another 20 years of Stalinist rule.

Reading about Czechoslovakia made me aware of the complexities and hybrid forms that Stalinist reality had thrown up. The experience of the 1948 parody of a working-class revolution, and of mass working-class support for it, seems to have thrown a layer of the Workers' Party/ Independent Socialist League — people like Irving Howe, Manny Geltman, Stanley Plastrik and others, who went on to found the magazine *Dissent* — into a crisis of political faith and confidence in the working class.

Reading about 1948 did not make me go that way. But it made it impossible for me to take refuge in glib "logical" formulations such as: if Stalinists take power in Western Europe, then ipso facto they will have ceased to be Stalinists.

That solution was too like the Mandelbrot gibberish that the spread of Stalinism was the refutation of "socialism in one country". Yes, but it wasn't the point — and it did not signify that Stalinist society, whose first nascent ideologising in the mid-20s had centred around "socialism in one country", had been superseded.

Portugal posed the issue for us, when the Communist Party tried to take power after the 1974 fall of Christian clerical fascism. We didn't come out of it all that well. Hope and the orthodox Trotskyist tradition weighed down on us.

What would my 18 year old self say to me now?

What would my 18 year old self say to me if somehow he could meet me today? Possibly: "I know thee not, old man!" Most likely: "Where's your hair?"

Seriously, he'd be disappointed at how little I've managed to do, and maybe impatient with the plea, "I did my best". I might tell him Orwell's comment: "Everyone's life seen from within is a failure". He'd say: "Maybe, but that doesn't change anything".

Indeed, I might cite Trotsky's explanation to C L R James that the revolutionary socialist movement, if it is that and not an onanistic sect, cannot rise when the working class goes down to defeat. He'd say: "Don't use 'epochal' excuses for your own inadequacies". I'd say: "No, indeed. But nonetheless it is true".

I think he'd be pleased to find that I've stuck to it, that I'm still in the fight. He wouldn't be surprised. He'd say: "That's the least you could have done". On that, at least, he would see eye to eye with me. The fight to replace capitalist society with working-class socialism is not something to pick up and then drop as you get older, tired, and more self-knowing.

Would he say: "Politically you are now on 'the far right of the far left'?" Yes, perhaps. He was a moralistic little git, so maybe he wouldn't listen when I explained to him that there is nothing left-wing about a militant "anti-imperialism" that lines you up with Islamist clerical fascists who repress the working class, smash first-budding early labour movements, inflict a savage sexual and social oppression on women and young people.

As a fervent "anti-imperialist", he might find that argument emotionally unsatisfying, but I think he'd grasp the point that the "anti-imperialist" and "socialist" champions of clerical fascism are not left wing in any working-class sense. He'd certainly understand that the working class and the labour movement, their defence and development, are the highest values of socialist politics — that "the emancipation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat itself".

He might jeer at me that I was only a repressed sectarian, but I think he'd be induced to think about things a little when I told him that Lenin and Trotsky proclaimed themselves the far right wing of those who participated in the Communist International's Third Congress (mid 1921).

"All are not hunters who blow the hunting horn" — and those who let a populist-nationalist "anti-imperialism" line them up with reactionaries are not working-class anti-imperialists.

I wouldn't have any difficulty in convincing him that I am not less angry at the capitalist world around me, not all less loathing of it, than he was; and no less committed to a working-class socialist alternative.

He'd probably say: "I need more experience, and must read more, first, before I make my mind up", when I would argue that in reality the long political purgatory of Stalinism created a "left" in which many attitudes, values, and positions of the old Right, even the fascist Right, are now inextricably entwined in the politics of the kitsch-left.

For sure, we'd be able to join in reciting Pearse's lines, which the 18 year old me memorised in a Manchester library:

Did ye think to conquer the people,

Or that Law is stronger than life and than men's desire to be free?

We will try it out with you, ye that have harried and held, Ye that have bullied and bribed, tyrants, hypocrites, liars!

In revolutionary politics — in any politics, I guess — you start with given ideas, most likely incomplete and inadequate pictures of the world, of yourself, of what you can and can't do in it. Experience, study, personal changes from age and self-knowledge, are continuous.

If you stick to it, you must at some point make a new "dedication". This happens more than one. Instead of elaborating a new "dedication", many drop out, in different directions.

The history of the labour movement is on one level the history of such slow transformations, at every level, of the labour and revolutionary socialist movements all through their history. Between me and my 17 or 18 year old self there are quite a few such transitions, new dedications.

The very high attrition rate in revolutionary socialist

A Socialist Organiser meeting in the 1980s. Speaking: Reg Race. On the left: Sean Matgamna. Chairing: Mary Corbishley

politics is a function of the effect of bourgeois society being prosperous and seemingly the only possible system. It is also a function of the blind-alley, sectist nature of what has passed for revolutionary politics for many decades.

Fervent young people may cheer Al-Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, or the Taliban in Afghanistan, for loathing of their advanced-capitalist or imperialist enemies, but the nonsensicality of it registers on most of them sooner or later. The same disillusion came to those who supported Stalinism, and the Stalinist "workers' states", for the sake of their hostility to advanced capitalism, with the Stalinist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Myself, I was privileged to grow up in a world where the revolutionaries, failed or successful (almost all of them failed), were presented to Irish children, at home as well as at school, as the heroes, the virtuous ones.

I had to change much in that, but I've never lost the conviction that standing against iniquity, fighting it irreconcilably, is necessary and right.

On top of that, I found the culture of the internationalist-socialist, Leninist, Trotskyist, Luxemburgist revolutionary movement, which embodies and sums up the experience of the working class and revolutionary socialist movements over many decades.

You could not plausibly say that I have been a copy-book, paint-by-numbers, politician, but certainly I have always given immense weight to that tradition. You have to think about your world for yourself, and if you don't you are a parrot, not a Marxist — but you do it within a framework of ideas, positions, postures, traditions. You alter any of that, if you do, not before you have thought about it twenty times and then twenty times.

I've survived because I am solidly anchored in those two traditions, Irish Republican and Trotskyist, and in a clear class identity.

Would I do anything different? A million and five things, at least, and I would not do again some of the things I did do. Of the fundamental commitments, aspirations, goals, values — no, I wouldn't change anything.

We live in a vicious class-predatory capitalist world that is all the more intolerable because it is not necessary. A better, socialist, society, governed by working-class and human solidarity and not by variegated

drives to exploit, dominate, and despoil others, is possible.

What have I achieved? We have built a political tendency rooted in the authentic Lenin-Trotsky tradition. We try to reason about the world.

Marx famously told certain German revolutionaries in 1850: "We say to the workers: 'You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power', you say on the contrary: 'Either we seize power at once, or else we might as well just take to our beds'."

The truth is that the revolutionary left needed its decades of defeat to remake itself and slough off the effects of Stalinism. It still has a long way to go. I think we have achieved something worthwhile in that work of rebuilding and reconceptualising the left. It is far from being enough, but better than the rest of the left.

Any Marxist politician who lets considerations of popularity and unpopularity influence him is in the wrong trade!

When I became a Trotskyist, things were a lot easier for us than they had been three or so years earlier, before Khrushchev in 1956 denounced Stalin and thus blew up the old mountain of Stalinist lies under which Trotskyists had been submerged.

But there was still a lot of Stalinist debris cluttering the landscape. You still met with a lot of hostility for being a Trotskyist, and occasionally physical attack. I became a Trotskyist while a member of an organisation — the Young Communist League — where lots of people still talked of Trotskyists as fascists or "agents" of fascism. To proclaim yourself a Trotskyist you had to be convinced. And tough.

The hostility AWL comrades face today is, though unpleasant, a great deal less than that. All we can do is try, in the old formula, to appeal to the reason of the people around us against their prejudices. What's important is to be right, not to be popular with people whose own politics tells you that their judgement of us is worthless.

My own attitude is in the quote from Dante which Marx put at the beginning of *Capital* volume 1: "Go your way and let the people talk".

Roots and branches

Like many revolutionary activists over the ages, Sean Matgamna was an immigrant, someone shaped in his thinking by the shifts and contrasts from living in one culture to living in another.

The differences in the 1940s and 50s between life in Ennis, the small west of Ireland town I grew up in, and in a city like Manchester, were immense.

To travel from Ennis to Manchester was to travel between different worlds. Ennis then was nearer to Thomas Hardy's mid-19th century England than to the contemporary English cities a few hundred miles away.

The miles of sea and land separating Ennis from Manchester were also, so to speak, a vast span of time. The trains and boats to England were, in their way, also social and economic time-machines.

Most industry in Ennis was artisanal, handicrafts. Apart from incoming newspapers and Radio Eireann, it was pretty isolated. Most of its network of social relations was still pre-capitalist. The small working class there still had some of the characteristics of a pre-proletariat.

In Ennis, we lived in a triangular street with a small patch of waste ground in the middle. The base of the triangle was the back of the shop fronts that faced the great cathedral across the road. The five houses in our row formed one side of the triangle.

The great gray spire of the Pro-Cathedral, visible for miles around the town, loomed close by, symbol of the true state of things: the Church — priests, nuns, Christian Brothers — dominated and shaped everything.

The Pro-Cathedral's tolling bells, ringing out across the town, and the ceremonies there and at the friary chapel at the other end of the town regulated our lives minutely: mass on Sundays, the men's confraternity on Monday evenings, the women's equivalent on Tuesday evenings; saints' feast days; the great ceremonies of Christmas and Easter and the lesser ones such as Corpus Christi and St Patrick's day.

Our lives were organised around those events, and around the priests and nuns. They ran the schools as teachers or managers.

This account of things appeared in the journal of Maynooth, the main clerical college, in 1954:

"It has been said: 'Ireland is one huge monastery'. In spite of exaggeration [this] correctly emphasizes the fact that religion and the supernatural are a vital element in Irish life. At every twist and turn of the day a man is reminded of the affairs of the soul. Thus he meets priests and nuns, he passes by churches and convents; he hears bells ringing for Mass, the Angelus, etc. The whole atmosphere is conducive to spirituality".

That strike me as pretty accurate. At the same time, though, much of the mass culture in the town was curiously American. The single cinema had a staple of Westerns and Arabian Nights fantasies. We got American comics and film magazines and so on.

The pervasive atmosphere in the town — in the whole of Catholic-nationalist Ireland, I suppose — was one of loss, of living in a time of decline, of a better past having been lost.

My own strength of that feeling was no doubt rooted in family changes in my infancy, but everything worked to create and reinforce the feeling.

We heard of the old glories of Dark Ages Irish Catholics, of heroic wars and endeavours. We ourselves lived in an anti-climactic present. The town was stagnant, with half the population of a century before.

The nostalgic song of Thomas Moore summed it up for me: "Let Erin remember the days of old".

PRE-INDUSTRIAL

In the postage-stamp yard behind our house, you would hear from over the wall the hammering and bell-like clanging of "Blokey" Flannery's blacksmith's forge — alternating light and heavy strokes of the blacksmith's hammer and his striker's heavy sledge. In the ramshackle old wooden shed, iron was made white-hot and shaped and hammered into wonderfully intricate gates and many other craft objects by the versatile smith and his one labourer, my cousin Michael, who was something of an older brother to me.

I would sometimes after school go to "help" Michael, taking a spell at rhythmically pulling down the cross-

beam that formed the handle at the end of the chain that inflated and deflated the bellows that made the little fire and the irons put into it white hot.

On Saturdays a lot of smoke would cloud the air, from a big circular turf fire built all around narrow tyres of steel. They were made red hot so that they could be put around the wooden wheels of horse cars, then shrink back to a very tight fit as they were suddenly cooled in a trough of water.

An incidental reward of helping in the forge was that big old pennies would often come out of old wheels, hammered in by countrymen to tighten tyres that worked loose on country roads.

On Saturday mornings, we would wake up too to the indignant screaming of bonhams, small young pigs. They had been brought to market in "creels", boxes erected by slotting raised wooden walls, barred like gates, around the edges of flat horse cars, and were being roughly picked up and handled by owners showing them to buyers. That was another fifty yards on from the cathedral.

In the market was a different sort of blacksmith's shop. Outside his hut the farrier, Jack D'Arcy, would nail red hot iron shoes on the hooves of horses. With the horse behind him, he would hold the raised smoking hoof between his knees as he hammered in the nails. Twenty yards up a little hill was the saddler's shop, leather horse-furnishings hung on the walls and outside.

A few doors further beyond the farrier's forge was the cooper's shop, the barrel-maker with his curved staves.

THE "TINKERS" AND THE "ARISTOCRATS"

In the early 20s, the government of the army of the newly independent Irish Free State had put three captured Republican civil war prisoners up against a wall of the military barracks and shot them dead. Now, the abandoned military barracks, fifty yards from the Cathedral on the other side, housed the town's one factory. It made braid, employing 200 or more people, mostly women.

A lot of the traffic was still horse-drawn — working cars such as the creels, and traps to transport people. These were chariots with seats, curiously like a raised wooden cup on wheels, and built of lighter wood. Many pubs still had yards and stables where incoming customers' horses could be cared for.

The triangle of which our houses formed one side had been used for public hangings in earlier times, and now often served as car-park for country people come in to mass. On Sunday morning it would fill up with traps and horses and old motor cars. Archaic old farm machines, great heavy metal things, would be left there for the blacksmith to repair.

Sometimes travellers, "tinkers", would camp there, people in horse-drawn wagons and some of them with flat tinkers' boxes of tools, like suitcases, slung over their shoulders. Narrow-minded neighbours of ours — an elderly unmarried woman, and her two unmarried brothers — would sometimes set the garda on them.

I remember standing on a table to look out of the window at big women in their plaid shawls — so my memory has it — fighting guards who had drawn their batons on them.

If the Irish are "the black people of Europe", and in history surely we are, the "tinkers" (travellers is their preferred term) are the black people of Ireland. They are Ireland's oppressed "racial" minority, lower by far than even the labourers of such a caste-ridden small town as Ennis.

Homeless "tinkers" were persecuted, driven from place to place, harassed and forever moved on, routinely batoned and beaten by the police, and sometimes by ash-plant-wielding vigilantes. They were jailed for two weeks or a month at a time for begging, for trespassing, for fighting, for being drunk — for being.

My parents were sympathetic. They had a strong fellow feeling with the "tinkers", I suppose. Both of them easily empathised with people they felt were hard done by. I remember only that I didn't like the garda.

On Saturdays and other livestock fair days, the normally quiet town would be thronged with people and traffic. In my memory the well-fed countrymen are slow-moving, heavy, black-coat-clad men with pipes in their mouths, hawking and spitting on the ground (something which also distinguished them from the townspeople, who didn't spit repeatedly as the coun-

Symbolising the relation between priests and people, Church and society, in Ireland of the 1940s and 50s

try folk did).

These were independent Ireland's landed class come to town. To the town proletariat, they were the aristocrats, as the huckster shopkeepers were our big bourgeoisie. No love was lost between any of them and the town proles.

My father, who had dealings with some of the landed country people, would say of them: "Ah, they wouldn't give you the haet of their shit".

I remember traveller-tinker women street singers standing in the middle of narrow O'Connell Street on fair days, singing for pennies and selling "ballads", single printed sheets with the words of a song on them.

I like to imagine that one of them might have been the great Margaret Barry, who then lived then in Cork and cycled around to fairs. I remember a visitor to my town from the Western seaboard area, where my mother came from, who paid for his lodging by sitting at the fire all evening and playing his fiddle for us.

In a cul-de-sac at the end of our row of five houses, less than a minute's walk up the lane from the Cathedral, was a slaughterhouse. Each shop-owning butcher in town had his own. There, the kids of Barrack Street, having helped "turn" the animals into the cul-de-sac to meet their fate, could watch our big good-natured neighbour, Sean Brown, slaughter sheep and cows a couple of times a week.

Sometimes he would put a pistol to their heads and shoot a retractable steel bolt into the animal's brain. Sometimes he would smash the sheep on the skull with a sledge-hammer — though it was illegal, that was cheap, because it saved bolt-gun bullets — then haul the creature, shuddering in shock, up on a pulley by its hind legs, and stick a knife in its neck to let the red blood come showering out, some of it into a bucket and the rest sloshing on the reeking, slippery floor.

I remember too — again, I must have been very small — watching through the door, frightened, as they slaughtered a bull with a spike-ended pole-axe.

I have no memory of ever finding it all as horrible as it was: it was what happened and what I'd known about and seen ever since I could remember. Reaction didn't come until I was 16 and full of adolescent empathy and sympathy. Then I stopped eating meat or fish for some years in horror at the slaughter. (The SLL disapproved strongly of such "individualism", and its pressure, forming an "unprincipled bloc" with my mother's, persuaded me to give it up).

There have been a lot of academic studies made of Clare, including David Fitzpatrick's very valuable account of what happened there in the revolutionary years.

Much of Clare was owner-occupied farms, employing relatives for labourers, and enterprises such as owner-occupied shops, employing relatives and "shop-boys". Some of those would eventually go on to open their own shops.

The working class was a minority in the towns, and more so in the countryside. James Connolly in left-nationalist mode attempted to brand capitalism as alien to Ireland — "the English system". Yes, but the most important "English system" in that Ireland was peasant-owned land.

In a profound "revolution from above", British government — most importantly Tory-Unionist governments, though the Liberals had pioneered a variant of the approach — had financed the buying out of the Irish or Anglo-Irish landlords by their tenants, who became owner-occupiers.

For the most part the government gave the tenants the land on mortgages that were usually less than the rent they had been paying. The great landed estates were transmuted into their petty peasant spawn.

This was the main Irish bourgeois revolution, made from above in the half-century before a Dublin government was set up. The political revolution of 1916-22 had nothing like the social effect of the Tory-organised economic revolution that preceded it.

THE TOWN PROLETARIAT

The proletarian minority in the towns divided into two great segments. There were those with regular jobs and regular incomes — railwaymen, people employed in institutions like hospitals, permanent labourers in big merchant shops like Dan McNerny's, which sold in bulk to country-people. These were the aristocracy of labour — not well-paid, but paid regularly.

My mother worked in the County Home. She got a ridiculously small wage for back-breaking work; but it was a regular wage. That stopped when I, her first child, was born on her 38th birthday.

The other segment, my father's, were workers without regular employment, casual labourers, many of them illiterate, who eked out a living as best they could and relied on large extended families to keep them from starving in bad times.

In some respects they were not full proletarians. For instance, my father and his brothers would hire out as drovers at the quite frequent cattle and horse fairs, driving cattle for buyers. They would walk or, later, cycle up to 30 and more miles — to Gort, for example, from Ennis — in the hope of a day or two days' work.

In season they would go up the crags (woods) around the town and cut scallops to sell — supple hazel saplings, rods to form the frames and staples for the bundles of sedge that served as thatch on houses. Scallop-cutting was on its last legs by then, as thatched roofs were replaced by slate and corrugated iron.

In my early childhood, my father, Tommy, would cycle up the country each day and cut his scallops, using a fierce-looking scallop knife which the blacksmith had made for him (without charge, I expect) out of a bit of a scythe and a piece of a goat's horn for a handle.

He would hide what he cut. Then on a Friday he would take out his pony and cart — the pony was "boarded" with a farmer called Mr Hogan, grazing in return for having the horse work most of the time for the farmer — and come back with a big load of large barths, bundles, tied with "gads", loose "ropes" made out of hazel rods which had been twisted out of the consistency of timber but still retained great strength and could have loose knots tied in them.

He would haul the very heavy big bundles of scallops to the back yard, and then take the horse back to the farmer, cycling and leading it for the three or four miles, and then come back and "dress" his scallops, working as late as necessary.

Clearing the furniture to one side of the living-room/kitchen, he would cut the gad and break open the big barths. Sitting on the ground on an old coat, with the big opened bundle thrown against the wall under the window on his right side, he would twist a scallop into a gad and lay it between his legs. Then, one by one, he would take scallops from the big pile, slice off leaves and shoots, and put them on the ground between his legs, dividing his gleanings into smaller barths for sale on Saturday at the scallop market.

The "scallop-market" was held in the upper market on Saturdays. Bundles of "scallops" were propped against the high, back-leaning, yellow-ochred wall of the stableyard of Jim Daffy's pub.

Sometimes I would be with my father trying to sell scallops. Standing there, he taught me to do mental arithmetic. Because Tommy never learned to write figures down or how to do on paper the complicated

sums he did in his head, he was very good at it.

On the Saturday, the countrymen would view the scallops, bend to the oblique-cut white ends of the hazel rods standing on the ground, pull a handful forward and up to see that no too-thick rods were hidden in the middle, then let the springy scallops slap back into the bundle. After that they would start the bargaining. My father loved bargaining.

He would also cut "blocks", wood for firing, and sell them for six pence a dozen. On the days he brought a load down from the crags, he would hand-saw the timber until late at night — midnight, perhaps — on a home-made wooden horse.

Branches to be sawed into usable, and saleable, lengths would be held in the upper V of the two Xs of the "horse". I'd "help" by taking one end of the bow saw and pulling and pushing it as he pushed and pulled it back and forth, adding to the pile of sawdust on the ground.

I was very small, and I must have hindered more than I helped him in the irksome and hard work. But Tommy, who was not invariably a patient or long-suffering man, was always encouraging and full of praise for my efforts.

Some of my best childhood memories are from that time, like being taken on the cross-bar of his bicycle to the crag, up round old country roads in winter, the pot-holes filled with hard white ice. It was all over soon. Before I was nine, and my sister Mary seven, he was gone to work in England, coming back only for two weeks' holiday a year.

Sometimes people would be prosecuted for stealing timber or scallops. At the British Newspaper Library in Colindale, seeking information about the Ennis labour movement, which in the 1930s went through a phase of great militancy, I found a report of my grandfather, Mike Mahony, in court on that charge during World War One.

A RECORD OF SOLIDARITY

Mike was not meek, not one quietly to bow to what he saw as intolerable treatment. He made a loud protest in court at being summonsed for trying to eke out a living.

According to the paper, he shouted in a loud voice: "In the name of heaven, what are we to do?" He had three sons in the war, he said, up to their knees in blood in the Dardanelles, he said, "fighting to protect the interests" of the landowner who had prosecuted him, and other such landowners; and here he was being prosecuted for trying to eke out a bare, miserable living.

They fined him, anyway. The proles weren't expected to talk back. My grandfather was dead five years before I was born, and there are no photographs, so I can only imagine that he looked like my father and my uncles.

I imagine I hear what Mike said in that court in my father's voice and manner. Mike's protest against the world he had to live in and his place in it was, I think, in keeping with the spirit of the town working class. They were proud, often angry and quarrelsome, people, who had to submit to endless humiliation.

They lived in conditions in which furious competition for what jobbing work there was might have set them at each others' throats. Conditions where, in James Connolly's words describing the plight of Dublin workers before the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union organised and roused them up, there were "no other weapons of defence than the arts of the liar, the lickspittle, and the toady". Yet somehow they created a tremendous class solidarity and relied on that to defend themselves.

The labourers organised a union in 1911, a one-town union of perhaps 500 members, without full-time officials, that expressed and organised and cultivated that solidarity. (I think the one-town union merged with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in the mid-1940s).

In the early 30s — the files of the newspapers record it — the union would organise pickets of 300 men and more, marching behind their band, to the road work or building site or quarry where there was a dispute, or to enforce the union rule that all workers so employed should be in the union, and that all such work in town should go to union members.

For instance, a half dozen or so workers engaged in digging foundations for houses at Ard na Greine, then at the edge of the town, struck work, and the employer shut down the whole job. A few weeks later, he started again, and a group of men were sent from the Labour Exchange.

The union insisted that the jobs belonged to the original group of workers. The new group, members of the union, accepted that. So did another gang sent by the Labour Exchange to replace them.

The issue was, essentially, whether the union or the Labour Exchange controlled the jobs. It led to a two-

day town "general strike" which ended with the County Council accepting the demand of the union. A couple of months later the government overruled the County Council — that is, came to its rescue.

The question here, of course, is how did such solidarity of the underclass come into existence? I don't know, but it was a powerful force.

Among the influences that created it must have been the example of the Land League, the peasant "trade union" that from 1879 welded the tenants together to fight the landlords. Its weapon was, centrally, peasant solidarity and its warlike expression, the boycott, wielded both against landlords and against tenants who, for instance, took possession of land from which the earlier tenant had been evicted.

THE "HOVELS"

There was also, I suppose, generalisation from the solidarity of the large extended family clans of the workers in the proletarian parts of the town — the long streets of single-story 3-room thatched and corrugated iron roof houses stretching to the west of the town, Turnpike, Drumbiggie, Old Mill Street and its extension, Cloughleigh, and to the north, the Boreen, the small streets around the quays, and the people in the two old military barracks on the edge of the town.

The houses in those areas were again and again defined as "hovels" in annual reports by conscientious County Clare medical officers of health.

These houses had no running water, no sanitation, no cooking place but the open fire, only one main room and two tiny bedrooms. The houses in Cloughleigh and on the quays (which were no longer in use) were, most winters, flooded by the rising waters of the river Fergus.

There were competing hurling teams in the different parts of the town — Turnpike, Market, Old Mill Street. There were street hunting associations whose members hunted rabbits and hares, following packs of beagles on foot.

THE EMIGRANTS

Emigration more or less stopped in the slump-struck 1930s, when De Valera brought in a weak Irish version of what in the USA was the New Deal. When the Second World War opened up jobs in Britain — and a voracious demand for recruits to the British army — the town labourers began a stampede of migration, followed after a while by the country labourers. The tremendous solidarity scattered with the union members, but most of them, I think, would join the labour movement in England (my father, the GMB).

They took lowly places in Britain — but lowly places in a powerful working class and working-class movement, which would impose the welfare state on British capitalist society. My parents' two children were labour movement activists — my sister Mary not for long. So is one of their grandchildren, my son, Thomas Rua Carlyle.

In many ways, it was a pre-literate society. My father's story was perhaps typical. Tommy's was a very big family, where the siblings and cousins learned to rely on each other. They cut and sold scallops and firewood; they hired out as drovers at fairs; they worked at building when they could. Sometimes, so the story went, my grandmother would go up the country, begging food from farms and, no doubt, sometimes stealing crops from the fields. My father, in his 20s, worked on building the hydro-electric dam, the so-named Shannon Scheme.

Such people would sometimes own asses or ponies and carts, as my father did. They had to be enterprising to stay alive. They would when they could travel for jobs, as far as England and Scotland, work six or nine months, then come home for a bit.

It was a 20th century version of the almost-landless Irish peasants of the 19th century who would flock to England and Scotland in the hungry summer months before the crop in their small potato gardens was ready to eat.

My father was enterprising and multi-skilled, if I can put it like that. He went to England to work before I was a year old — a 35-year old man who, like many of his people, could not read or write, moving into a very different world.

Hundreds of thousands went from a world in which at least they knew their way around, socially and geographically, to war-torn England (and many thousands of them into the British army), many of them unable to write their name. It took a courage I'm never sure I am capable of properly imagining. If that sounds pious, well, there is, I think, a lot for their descendants to be pious about.

My father would talk about the difficulties and humiliations of getting a letter home written for him. He was back and forth for a decade, sending money

Ennis town labourers on stone-breaking work. Sean Matgamna's father Tommy is second from the right in the front row.

every week. Then he settled in Manchester, where there was already a big family of his brother's children, and came back to Ennis only on holiday. Four years later the rest of us joined him.

That was the pattern for many families. Of the six families in the five Barrack Street houses, one consisted of 3 unmarried siblings. Of the remaining five, three whole families went piecemeal, like ours, and individuals from the remaining two.

A famous study of the town in the late 1930s by the American sociologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball found that the proletarians were the longest-established group in town. The upper layer — shopkeepers, etc. — were more socially mobile. After one or two generations, their children would graduate into the professions (a considerable proportion becoming priests or nuns).

My father's family were long-time town proletarians, his father coming from Nenagh Town in Tipperary. My mother came of land-rooted people in Miltown on the West Coast. Her father was a farm labourer. She had been a spirited and very strong-minded young woman. Her mother died when she was about ten. When, not long after that, her father married again, she left home, putting stones through her stepmother's windows as she left, and jobbed around the countryside, eventually arriving in Ennis as a servant.

She became a paid helper at the workhouse, one of the institutions renamed by the Free State as County Homes, which were simultaneously hospitals, pauper asylums, orphanages.

She worked in the laundry and as what would now be called a nurse's aide. She had learned to read and write through the good will of an old lady, Mrs Lynch, on a farm where she worked for a while. The old lady died, and my mother moved on.

Because my father was enterprising, we were comparatively well off, never short of the basics. When times were hard, it was not the children who would suffer. We lived in not one of the "hovels", but a two-storey house, in a street where skilled workers lived — tailors, in three of the five houses. The tenancy of the house had been passed on to my father by his aunt's family, who were stonemasons, when they moved to Limerick.

Even so, we had no running water and no lavatory

— and only a fire to cook on. At the worst end of our class, children would not have shoes, even in the winter. I saw my cousin Paddy Cleary get his bare toes stamped on in the playground.

THE "INTELLECTUALS"

When I read through some of the files of the Ennis papers, the *Clare Champion* and the *Saturday Record*, at the British Library at Colindale, the thing that stuck me most about my parents' and my own childhood world was that the comparatively isolated small town — the county town, which in its variety of functions and classes was in fact a small city — was a complete little world, a microcosm or perfect miniature of the relationships in class society in varying historical forms.

Every year in the 20s and 30s there would be a big demonstration organised by the labourers' union to petition the County Council to give them a few weeks' work so that their families "could have a Christmas dinner". That formula about "a Christmas dinner" was always used. In 1928 some of them carried placards with the slogan: "Remember 1916? [the Easter Rising]. We'll make you remember 1928!"

They, or some of them, would get one or two weeks on relief work. That was usually work breaking stones into chips that could be used in road surfacing. In winter weather, they would sit at the side of some road and with sledges and hammers break stones into small chips for road making. A bigger stone would serve as anvil. My father had a saying for work that was seriously obnoxious to him — "I'd sooner go breaking stones".

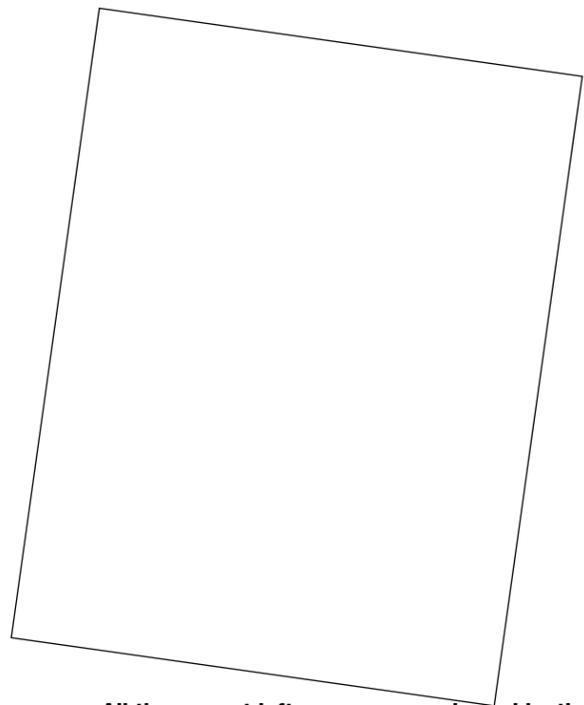
There were a number of colleges in the town, including one where priests were trained and ordained. There were lots of teachers and other educated people. The proletarians were often half-starved, chronically short of work. The educated lived comfortably with that — a gruesome peacetime example of the truth in the saying: "It's easy to sleep on another man's wound".

The educated people lived on top of that small society, knowing about it, reading newspaper descriptions of the hovels from the reports of the county health inspectors almost every year. They saw their impoverished fellow townspeople, many of whom they would

know on some level as individuals.

They saw children without enough food, many of them without shoes or proper winter clothing. For instance, 500 children, in a total town population then calculated at five thousand, attended the Christmas party given by the St Vincent de Paul charity at Christmas 1953.

The people whose education supposedly gave them a broader and deeper awareness and outlook took it for granted that things were like that — as the upper layers in, say, India do today, and as such people — with some honourable exceptions — have done everywhere throughout history. So did the farmers. That was the real "treason of the intellectuals", the foul treason to the mass of the people, that with individual exceptions you will find in every age and every society.



All the current left groups were shaped by the political battles in Labour's youth movement. <http://www.workersliberty.org/seedbed>

What is to be done?

Trotsky knew:
I see the bright green strip of grass
Beneath the wall.
And the clear blue sky
Above the wall
And sunlight everywhere
Life is beautiful
Let the future generations cleanse it
Of all evil, oppression
And violence
And enjoy it to the full.

Marti knew:
With the poor people of the earth
I want to share my fate.

Zbigniew knew:
Go upright among those
Who are on their knees:
Let your anger be like the sea
Whenever
You hear the voice of the insulted
And beaten.

Connolly knew:
Impartiality as between
The strong and the weak
Is the virtue of the slave.

Trotsky knew:
A party or a class that rises up
Against every abominable action
Wherever it has occurred,
As vigorously and unhesitatingly
As a living organism reacts
To protect its eyes
When they are threatened
— Such a party or class is sound at heart.

Marx and Engels knew:
History is the history
Of class struggles
That each time ended
Either in a revolutionary
Reconstitution of society, or
In the common ruin
Of the contending classes.

Connolly knew:
Contemned and despised though he be
Yet, the rebellious docker
Is the sign and symbol to all
That an imperfect civilisation cannot last
For slavery cannot survive
The awakened intelligence of the slave.

Marx knew:
A state of society
In which the process of production
Has the mastery over man
Instead of being controlled by him.

Engels knew:
Labour power, wage-slavery,
Produces value greater
Than it costs
The capitalist
To buy and use.

Rosa knew:
The proletarian revolution
Is at the same time
The death knell
For all servitude
And oppression.

Gramsci knew:
Reality is the result
Of the application of wills
To the society of things:
To put aside
Every voluntary effort
And calculate only
The intervention of other wills
Is to mutilate reality itself:
Only those who strongly want to do it
Identify the necessary elements
For the realisation of their will.

Connolly knew:
To increase the intelligence of the slave
To sow broadcast the seeds
Of that intelligence
That they may take root
And ripen into revolt;
To be the interpreters
Of that revolt, and finally
To help in guiding it to victory
Is the mission we set before ourselves.

Lenin knew:
To say that socialists cannot
Divert from its path
The labour movement created
By the material elements
And material environment
Whose interaction creates
A certain type of labour movement
And defines its path
Is to ignore the truth
That consciousness
Participates
In this interaction and creation:
With Catholic labour movements
The difference is
It was the consciousness of priests
And not the consciousness of
Marxists
That participated.

Connolly knew:
The only true prophets are those
Who carve out the future they announce

Trotsky knew:
Face reality squarely;
Do not seek
The line of least resistance;
Call things by their right names;
Speak the truth
No matter how bitter it may be;
Do not fear obstacles

Lenin knew:
It is necessary to find
The particular link in the chain
Which must be grasped
With all one's strength
In order to keep the whole chain in place
And prepare to move on
Resolutely to the next link.

Trotsky knew:
An individual, a group,
A party or a class
That 'objectively' picks its nose
While it watches men drunk with blood
Massacring
Defenceless people
Is condemned by history
To rot and become worm-eaten

"Socialist Students in NOLS", led by AWL people, picketing in support of Chinese workers and students

While it is still alive.

Marx knew:
For the producer, co-operation,
And the possession in common
Of the land
And the means of production.

Rosa knew:
When the working class
Seizes
The entire power
Of the state
In its calloused fist
And uses it
To smash the head
Of the ruling classes,
That alone
Is Democracy,
That alone
Is not
A betrayal
Of the people!

Zbigniew knew:
Let your sister scorn
Not leave you;
Be courageous,
Whenever the mind fails you,
Be courageous:
Only that is important.

Gramsci knew:
The emancipation of the proletariat is not
A labour of small account
And of little men; only he
Who can keep his heart strong
And his will as sharp as a sword
When the general disillusion is at its worst
Can be regarded as a fighter
For the working class
Or called a revolutionary.

Trotsky knew:
Be true in little things
As in big ones;

Steer by the logic of the class struggle
Be bold
When the hour for action arrives.

Tsintsadze knew:
Woe to him who cannot wait!

Tsintsadze knew:
Many others too have died
As I am dying,
In prison or internal exile:
It will enrich our tradition;
A new generation, learning
From the struggle
Of the Bolshevik Opposition,
Will know
On whose side truth lies.

Pearse knew:
Did ye think to conquer the people
Or that law is stronger than life
And than our desire to be free?
We will try it out with you,
Ye that have harried and held,
Ye that have bullied and bribed,
Tyrants, hypocrites, liars!

Marx knew:
The knell
Of capitalist
Private property
Sounds.

Marx knew:
The integument is burst asunder:
The expropriators are expropriated.

Gramsci knew:
Only the one who wills something strongly
Can identify the elements
Which are necessary
To the realisation of his will.

Connolly knew:
Hope, and fight!

SM