As a follow-up to the pull-out in the last issue of Solidarity, “Looking Backward”, we publish a summary of the political and ideological traditions on which Workers’ Liberty and Solidarity base ourselves.

Isaac Newton famously summed up the importance of studying, learning, and building on fore-runners. “If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”, he wrote, referring to René Descartes, his contemporary Robert Hooke, and presumably also to his direct predecessor Isaac Barrow.

In science few people think they can neglect the “tradition” and rely on improvisation. In politics, alas, too many.

The summary here, written in 1995, starts as follows: “Living in an age of apostasy to socialism and Marxism, and of a great turning of backs on the past, it is necessary for us to publicly identify and proclaim our roots and traditions”. That is even more true now than it was in 1995.

Reaffirming the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky, the document is also critical of Trotsky on the question of the Stalinist states, like the old USSR.

Some socialists today dismiss that whole debate as yesterday’s business. But it is not.

The shadow of Stalinism is there over every conversation we have with people new to politics about what “socialism” is, and how anti-capitalism can avoid falling into Stalinism. Variant Stalinist systems — Cuba, North Korea — still exist, and still have influence as models.

And on a whole range of questions — some not obvious — the activist left today still sails in a vessel awash with Stalinist seepage from decades past.

The siding of many would-be Marxists with Milosevic’s Serbia, or Ahmadinejad’s Iran, a stance modelled on the schemes and emotions of the “old” siding with the USSR against “imperialism”, is a chief example.
The Bolshevik-Trotskyist tradition

Living in an age of apostasy to socialism and Marxism, and of a great turning of backs on the past, it is necessary for us to publicly identify and proclaim our roots and traditions. We are Marxists; that is, we believe that Marx was right in his fundamental analysis of capitalist society as a regime of wage slavery; in his analysis of the roots of capitalist exploitation; in his understanding of the class struggle as the locomotive of history; in his identification of the proletariat, the slave class of capitalist society, as the bearer of a new and higher civilization: “The emancipation of the working class must be con-quered by the working class itself”; “The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race and sex.”

LESSONS FROM 1917

2. We are Leninists: that is, we believe that the October Revolution was one of the greatest liberating events in human history, and that all socialists who came after that revolution must learn, critically assess, and accommodate its lessons, and adapt them to their own conditions.

Central to these are:

That the class struggle is fought on at least three fronts — the economic, political and ideological fronts — and that socialists are effective only if they fight that struggle on all three fronts in the Bolshevik way: consistently, relentlessly, implacably, irreconcilably.

That the class struggle proceeds in three stages: struggle, struggle, struggle, as socialists organise themselves into a disciplined, educated, democratic, collective guiding, themselves by a Marxist theory, form of class and sharpened in the light of working class experience.

That because socialist revolution can be the creation only of a united, active working class, socialists serve the working class by helping it, educate and organise it.

That socialists connect themselves indissolubly to the working class wherever it is to be found, at what ever level is to be found, in what conditions — political, social, ideological — in which it is held under the rule of capital.

That because in all conditions, even when they act as a working class vanguard who believe that their propaganda, lesson-drawing and organising work is essential to the class, socialists serve the working class, and can therefore neither substitute themselves for the working class, nor adopt the role of more passive spec ulators about future working class activity.

That the serious socialists prepare for the class struggle “when they are not fighting it, or when it is at a low ebb: without the slow, preparatory work of many years there would have been no working class revolution in 1917.”

TROTSKYISM

3. We are Trotskyists: that is, we believe that Trotsky was right in his concrete analyses and descriptions of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, and of what that means for the working class; that his analyses were exact, continuous, accurate and adequate as an account of the USSR — he did not fail to record that Stalinism is different from Hitler “only in its more unbridled savagery” — and though the conclusions he drew for working class politics inside the USSR were adequate and consistently social-ist — from 1933 he advocated a new working class rev-olution to overthrow the political and social rule of the bureaucracy, calling it a political-military revolution. Trotsky’s conceptual framework was first inadequate and finally led him to radically wrong conclusions.

We see now that the designation “degenerated workers’ state” made no sense in the 1930s. Trotsky himself acknowledged this at the end, when he accepted the theoretical possibility that the USSR could, while remaining exactly as it was, bureaucratically collectivised property intact, be con ceived of as a new form of class society [The USSR in September 1938]. He refused to draw the conclusions to which everything he wrote pointed, that the USSR was a new form of class society that could be lived. Trotsky could, and should, have reversed and repudiated his entire train of thought, or at least concluded that Stalinism was a new and inferior form of class society. Trotsky would not have been a post world war two “Trotskyist” on this question.

The politics of the post-Trotsky Trotskyists towards Stalin’s Russia was no part of the authentic Trotskyist tradition, but a Stalinist excrescence on it.

“DEFORMED WORKERS’ STATES”?10

9. Trotsky bears no responsibility for the often grotesque politics which his “official”, “orthodox” followers built up. Trotsky himself often drew the conclusions to which everything he wrote pointed, that the USSR was a new form of class society that could be lived. Trotsky could, and should, have reversed and repudiated his entire train of thought, or at least concluded that Stalinism was a new and inferior form of class society. Trotsky would not have been a post world war two “Trotskyist” on this question.

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STALINIST IMPERIALISM

10. The majority of the would-be post-Trotsky Trotskyists followed Stalin, and adapting it to the whole cluster of Stalinist formations, the post-Trotsky official Trotskyists, assembled behind the “workers’ state” and as a manifestation of the same organism, all of them, which those Trotsky expressed in the same terms. Trotsky’s label was retained; all his analyses, persp ectives and definitions — all the ideas for him encapsulated in that term — were radically changed. The politics of these Stalinists blends with the Stalinism from which they expressed in the same terms.

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STALINIST IMPERIALISM

12. Trotsky had in 1939/40 already recognised “ele-
ments of imperialism” in Stalin’s foreign policy, and said. “We were and remain against the seizure of new territories by the Kemelian. Though the USSR had a vast empire, for Mandarin and his friends it was not “imperialized.”

13. Stalinism destroyed labour movements and imposed totalitarian regimes on the working class of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, etc., regimes like that of the USSR which Trotsky in 1938 had rightly described as differing from Hitler’s regime “only in its more unbridled savagery,” but still this was the — deformed — workers’ revolution.

According to every criterion the labour movement throughout its history had measured by — civil liberties, political democracy, the free existence of labour movements, free press, speech, sexuality — the USSR, China, etc., were at least as much of a regression as Nazism had been. But, because the — totalitarian — state monopolised property, these systems were, for Pablo and Mandarin, unconditionally progressive vis-a-vis capitalism.

14. Does the bureaucracy play a necessary role in production? You could not, on the post-world war two facts, contradict Trotsky’s answer: not even for the USSR. If these were workers’ states it was not accidental. Stalinism had been done away with.

15. Pablo, Mandarin and others reinterpretted the ideas of Trotskyism so as to present the expansion of Stalinism and the creation of totalitarian states in large parts of the world as the first stage of the social rev- olution. Despite the crushing of the working class in the Stalinist states, and its quiescence in the big capital- ist countries, the “world revolution” was continuing to “develop” — albeit, said Mandarin and company, in a “deformed” — workers’ revolution.

“Marxism cannot stand still, because social reality does not stand still.” In 1975 our paper (then Workers’ Fight) hailed the Stalinist Khmer Rouge victory in Cambodia. The small print had criticisms, and more than in other would-be Trotskyist papers — but they were in the small print. We were forced to recognise that Stalinism was not a step beyond capitalism towards socialism, but was in history a blind alley murderous to labour movements. Again, in December 1978 our paper (then Workers’ Action) saw the movement in Iran as having immediate potential to push aside Khomeiny and win workers’ power; by August 1979 (right-hand picture) we had to sober up.

Believed that Stalinism and fascism were essentially the same, and that — though Trotsky’s polemic was unprincipled — both were pro-gressive, both transitional between capitalism and socialism, both towards socialism, he saw their horrible features — such as Nazi anti-semitism — as mere kinks in an immature but sufficient anti-capitalist consciousness.

By the end of the 40s Official Trotskyism was expressing not Trotsky’s — with his friend Rizzi’s — and Bernard Shaw’s — ideas about Stalinism in the term- inology Trotsky had used to express his radically differ- ent ideas.

18. The epigones of Trotsky proclaimed that the survi-val and expansion of Stalinism meant defeat for Stalin’s “Socialism In One Country” and posthumous triumph for Trotsky and his Permanent Revolution. Mao and He were Trotsky’s legatees, not Stalin’s. In fact, this assessment of the Stalinist states and the Stalinist-led world revolution implied acceptance of the essentials of Socialism In One Country.

The point for Trotsky and his comrades, as for all ear- lier Marxists, was that socialism had to come after advanced capitalism, could not come otherwise. Though the workers might take power in a backward, socialist economy, centrally backwardly. If the revolution did not spread to countries ripe for socialism, it would be doomed.

The idea of stable, evolving socialist growth from peripheral backwardness to socialism, in competition with advanced capitalism, was a revival on a gigantic scale of the pre-Marx colony-building utopian social- ism of people like E velocitytain, who built small socialist colonies, parallel worlds, in the American wilderness in the 1840s.

Pablo and Mandarin in their “World Congress” docu- ments [The Rise and Decline of Stalinism (1954) and The Decline and Fall of Stalinism (1957)] vainly chopped logic to hide this. One country? No longer one country! Socialism in isolation? Not isolated now! Etc.

It was the work of religious zealots, reasoning around daft, unquestionable, fixed ideas, not Marxism. The need for it arose because all the “revolutionary” prospects, and hopes of “official” post-Trotskyism (Trotskyism were spun from the survival), expansion and likely continuation of “Socialism In One Country”, that is, of the USSR, a world power ‘in transition to socialism’.

THE “WORLD REVOLUTION”, 1943-89

19. Worse than that. In Lenin and Trotsky, as in Marx and Engels, the historical protagonist of the anti-capi- talist revolution is the proletariat. The Trotskyism of Trotsky was the revolutionary working class politics and perspectives of the early Communist International minus, deprived of, the working class armies assem-bled by the Communist International to make the rev- olution. Stalinism had “captured” and perverted them. Thus the terrible combination in 1930s Trotskyism of acute awareness, accuracy in understanding and pre- diction — in pre-Hitler Germany, and in Spain for example — and all this taken over by Stalinist events of tiny, tiny groups whose natural identity, like their “constituency”, had been stolen.

All Trotsky’s “optimistic” hopes and perspectives were premised on the shifts and regroupments in the proletariat and its parties which he worked to bring about. There would be working class self-clarification, self-regeneration and political regroupment in the heat of class struggle. Workers’ state, certainly. But Trotsky’s was a perspective in which ends — dem- ocratic workers’ power — and means — working class risings, the creation of soviets — were appropriate to each other.

By contrast, in post-Trotsky official Trotskyism — “Mandelism” — the identification of Stalinism and Stalinist expansion as the “actually existing” unfold- ing, albeit deformed, workers’ revolution led ineluctably to the destruction of all rational notion of ends and means. The “official Trotskyist” fetish of nationalised property — which for Marxism is a means, not an end, and by no means a self-sufficient means — took the central question out of rational assessment. Stalinist statification and its alleged working class character was a ‘given’, something to reason from, not about.

20. When the “Trotskyists” transformed themselves into an apparatus — critical, of course — of Stalinism, they thereby became bureaucrats.

Primitive totalitarian sects, often communist in their ideas, have looked to supernatural events like the second coming of Christ, to transform the world into an ideal place. They had no notion of ends and means such as the labour movement would develop — action by named human forces for specific goals. In practice, they would look to some bandit, warlord or lunatic to begin the designated change. Central for our purposes here was their lack of a rational notion of ends and means.

In post-Trotsky Trotskyism, c 1950, both the ends and means of the proletarian revolution in the original Trotskyism, as in traditional Marxism, disappear — or are pushed to the far horizon of history. The “world revolutionary perspectives”, which Mandarin wrote and refurbished for successive world congresses were, though dressed up in the husks of ideas taken from Trotsky and Lenin, now spun around the USSR, not around the proletariat or its methods or its old socialist goals.

The protagonist in “the workers’ revolution” is, for now, the Stalinist bloc — Mandel’s mentor Raptis-Fabian once speculated that Stalinism would last for centuries — not, as in Trotsky, the working-class, self-clarified vanguard party. But otherwise the apparatus. The protagonist is the Stalinist state, the “Red” Army, the Chinese peasant army. Though “perspectives” and hopes for bureau- cratic reform and for working class democracy are plentiful in Mandarin, they are just tagged on.

21. The proletariat may be crushed under regimes akin to Stalinism but despite the brutality, no-
22. The point at which millenarianism triumphed can be dated: the Korean War and the belief that the seemingly inevitable World War Three would be world-revolution, an international civil war. The nuclear Armageddon — albeit with early nuclear weapons — would also be the revolution. The “Red” Alliance of its Communist Party allies in western Europe would bring working class victory in the looming war-revolution.

You could not go much further from the idea of the social revolution — protagonist, ends, means — in Trotsky, and in all previous Marxism. Where, a decade later, the Posadas wing of Mandel's organisation took to advocating that “the Russian workers’ state” start the third world war, because this would accelerate the world revolution, it only brought out the crazy other-worldly millenarian logic with which Mandel's group had replaced the Trotskyism of Trotsky at the time of the so-called third coming of the Fourth International.

23. Millenarianism on the scenario of 1931-3 centred on Stalinism and war as the agency. Eventually that gave place to a less millenarian, promiscuous-ends, means. Various nationalist forces, plausibly and implausibly assessed, were assented — though Stalinism always would have been the “real revolutionary” perspective of all the factions — WRW SWP USA, Morenists, Laminists, Canonnites, that made up the “Fourth Internationals” of Trotsky's epigones. Trotsky's tradition and Trotsky's political terminology were thus reduced to the doings of blocs in ideologically constructivist terms. Ernest Mandel was from his youth the pre-eminent master in this work. He had many imitators and competitors.

24. Of course their adaptation to Stalinism was never uncritical acceptance of it, never a surrender of the idea that the Stalinist states had to be dehumanised and transformed.

Bureaucratic form, by Ernest Mandel ushured and his intellectual talents to weave, from the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky, ideological clothing which could be draped on Stalinism to identify it as part of the world revolution of the proletariat. Directly and indirectly, Mandel and his organisation and its ideological splinter groups in turn reduced the “world revolutionary” perspective of all the factions — Leninists, Leninists and Trotskyists. As far as Trotsky’s writings went, the Trotskyists were an anathema. Lenin and Trotsky, ideological clothing which could be draped on Stalinism to identify it as part of the world revolution of the proletariat. Directly and indirectly, Mandel and his organisation and its ideological splinter groups in turn reduced the “world revolutionary” perspective of all the factions — Leninists, Leninists and Trotskyists. As far as Trotsky’s writings went, the Trotskyists were an anathema.

25. Ernest Mandel especially played a role similar to that of Karl Kautsky two generations earlier, who rationalised, from the point of view of a hollow “orthodox Marxism”, that every new socialist-from, we are both Cannonite and Shachtmanite: in our continuing development we are neither: we continue to evolve our own AWL tradition.

TASKS OF THE AWL

30. Critically drawing from the experience of the whole current of Trotskyism, in Trotsky's time and after, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty will continue to build up its forces and fight to win influence for Marxism in the labour movement and working class communities. All that this will mean is to understand what theory was the property of a small elite of bourgeois intellectuals, and not even minimally — on such a subject as the history of political economy and the theory of state capitalism — the property of the membership.

We criticised them early on, for that and for the crude and manipulative demagogy that served the priestly caste to mediate between their theory and the rank and file of the organisation. They did not, we said, understand what theory was for in a revolution — any organisation; that either it was a real guide to cogitations, discussions and decisions by all the members of the party, or else that the organisation could not be a functioning Marxist collective at all. We said with tragic accuracy, before it occurred, that this state of affairs would inevitably lead to the degeneration of Marxism in the organisation; and then again different levels within any leading committee. Some people will know and understand more. We said that the way the Trotskyist organisation has no tolerance for denial of this, or for demagogic pseudo-workerist demands for levelling down — no one has a right to know more, or if they know it, to express more than we poor workers can effortlessly understand — of the sort the essentially petty bourgeois” Throntettes once so notorious in our ranks. The Marxist movement levels up, not down.

The Trotskyist organisation will normally insist on a process of recruitment and induction where the aspirant member is put through a basic minimum indoctrination in Marxism. It is essential that this takes place inside the organisation until such education is complete.

In conditions of major working class upsurge we would of course recruit more loosely. We can only do so for the safety of the identity and security for our political integrity when:

1) There is already a properly educated cadre.

2) There is adequate selection of the cardinal functions to educate the militants recruited.

3) The experience of the “Bolshevik” party, together with knowledge of the history of the organisation, and the working class and social movement to make sense of the codifications that make up Marxism.

One of two things then: Marxism to the property of the whole organisation, that is, the whole organisation consists of Marxists educated above a high basic level; or Marxism in the organisation is the property of a minority, even a small minority, who form a mere sect inside the organisation. If they are the leadership, they assume the role of a priestly cast in relation to the rest of the organisation's members.

It is a pre-requisite of a healthy Marxist organisation, that everybody knows the basics; that, to a high minimum, everybody is able to understand what is going on, what the ramifications and implications of the issues raised are.

33. The AWL bases itself on Marxism — that is, an acceptance of the basic tenet that the history of Marxism, together with knowledge of the history of society and of the working class and social movement, led to the making of sense of the codifications that make up Marxism.

Marxism, whose adherents analyse, interpret, codify and try to shape an ever changing, evolving, perpetual social world such as the world of work and of classes, and develop, or else — as in many of its sectarian embodiments — it perishes or withers, and thereby dies. Marxism cannot stand still, because social reality does not stand still.

CENTRALITY OF SELF-EDUCATION

34. A feature of most of the kitch-Trotskyists sects is that in them there is a priestly caste, with an unhealthy, manipulative relationship to the membership.