The formation of the SWP

By Sean Matgamna
The formation of the SWP

“Standing resolutely on the side of the proletariat, the socialists do everything in their power to facilitate and hasten its victory. But what exactly can they do in this case?”

“A necessary condition for the victory of the proletariat is its recognition of its own position, its relations with its historical role and its socio-political tasks.

“For this reason the socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of this consciousness among the proletariat, which for short they call its class consciousness.

“The whole success of the socialist movement is measured for them in terms of the growth in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Everything that helps this growth they see as useful to their cause: everything that slows it down as harmful” Plekhanov, The Tasks of the Social Democrats in the Famine.

“Tactics contradict principles” Tony Cliff (quoted by Ian Birchall, International Socialism no.127)

We are now in the middle of a capitalist crisis whose equal has not been seen for decades. And yet the left is ineffective. It is divided into a number of competing and usually hostile organisations, the biggest of which is the SWP.

Where do these divisions come from? We can identify a series of fractures where forces have been scattered. At the end of the 1940s, the RCP, which had for a while united all the Trotskyist tendencies in Britain apart from one small group, broke up. Out of that came the Cliff group (today the SWP), the Grant group (today the Socialist Party), and the Healy organisation (which collapsed in 1985). That division set the pattern for the whole of the 1950s. There were occasionally other small groups, but the three main groups were shaped by the break-up of the RCP.

A second scattering came from the sectarian self-destruct of the SLL in the 1960s. Most of the activists scattered by the SLL disappeared from organised revolutionary politics, but one of the products of that scattering was Workers’ Fight, which then became the Trotskyist Tendency, and today the AWL.

The next big scattering came with the tightening-up of the regime in IS, from say 1971 to 1975. In 1971, Workers’ Fight (the Trotskyist Tendency), which had fused with IS in 1968, was expelled.

The Right Opposition, which called itself the Revolutionary Opposition, was expelled in 1973, and then split into a number of groups, the most important of which remaining is the RCP and the best known of which was the RCP (now Spiked Online).

The “IS Opposition” which was expelled from IS in late 1975 had about 200 members, including many of the leading cadre of the previous period. They formed the Workers’ League, and one could have expected them to do well. In fact they fell apart quickly. They brieferated; some of them went off to bourgeois careers, and the leading journalist in the group, Roger Proz, who had edited Socialist Worker from 1968, became the well-paid champion of real ale.

A “Left Faction” had taken form in 1972, heavily under the influence of Workers’ Fight. They were expelled in 1975 and immediately fused with Workers’ Fight. Various differences then led to the splitting-off of a little more than half of the Left Faction people who had fused. After many mutations they became the Workers’ Power and Permanent Revolution groups of today.

There has been a new period of scattering more recently, and it is continuing. The crisis of the SWP has already produced Counterfire (John Rees and Lindsey German) and the International Socialist Group (Chris Rambery), and it seems unlikely the process of the SWP shedding splinters has ended.

Some of the differences that have contributed to the splintering, and then become consolidated, are of real importance. They can’t be wished away or skated over. Realistically today, we cannot hope for a full unification of all the left groups, though in general terms that would be desirable. We can unite the groups in action on specific questions, and seek dialogue where there are serious differences.

One of the consequences of the sectist nature of the SWP and of the SLL before it, has been the atrophying of any real debate on the left. There was discussion in the 1950s and 60s. But that habit of dialogue has broken down. The spirit of Zinoviev has come to rule among the British left-wing groups — a pernicious heresy-hunting and demonisation.

We need unity in action where we agree, and real dialogue about our differences. That needs a transformation of the culture of the left.

Fulily to overcome entrenched divisions — divisions which have their own autonomy because they are bound up with party leaders, party machines, petrified dogmas — takes some tremendous event like the Russian Revolution which sidelines those divisions because it presents everyone with new perspectives, new ideas, new tasks.

Even then, the unification in Britain, for example, was incomplete. The formation of the old Communist Party (1920-1) brought together the British Socialist Party (which had been the SDF): the De Leonites, who were in some respects sectarian but in others had been the clearest of the socialists in the previous period; a group around Sylvia Pankhurst originating in an attempt to relate the suffragette movement to the working class in East London; and others.

Even then, the unification did not end there. The new Communist Party never joined the Communist Party. Sylvia Pankhurst was soon expelled. But the main bulk of the organisations stayed.

There is no magic formula that will bring about unity at will. But the historical experience in the USA tells us that where political organisation is possible, and a will to find unity in common areas of activity.

And we can foster a culture of democracy. Splits may happen anyway, however good the movement’s democracy. But splits are absolutely inevitable given a culture where the majority rules absolutely and the minority must not only observe unity, but also be silent and publicly pretend to agree with politics they do not really agree with and may detest. This conception of “democratic centralism” is an engine of dispersal. It comes from Stalinism. It was not Lenin’s conception. He wrote in 1906:

“Criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Programme must be quite free, not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism... cannot be prohibited. The Party’s political action must be united. No calls that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated... at public meetings, or at Party members, or in the Party press”.

We need a cultural transformation. And that is one of the reasons why the AWL publishes material from the past dealing with the possibility of real debate on the left. “The battle of the SWP of the USA in the 1940s, which was very active in the class struggle but nevertheless maintained a democratic culture, shows how it is possible to have a discussion.

This is a fundamental practical question. If we had that transformation, if the forces of the left were all at adequate, then we might have won the miners’ strike in 1984-5. In fact the SWP was sectarian and apologetic for the first six months of it. The Militant (today the SP) was immersed in its own manoeuvring to preserve its base in Liverpool council. Instead of mobilising the working class in Liverpool alongside the miners, it made a deal with the Tories for short-term financial expedients to rescue Liverpool council which secured nothing for longer than a year.

Either the revolutionary party is a movement such as Marx and Lenin and Trotsky described, regulated by the logic of the class struggle, or it is something that sees its own organisational needs as central. During the miners’ strike, and with tremendously bad consequences, the SP did see its own organisational needs as central.

Yes, indeed, we need to build a party “machine”. But the machine is only of use if it is attuned to the working class and its struggles. We have to educate the working class — about the nature of capitalism, the history of capitalism, the history of the revolutionary movement. We have to learn the lessons of the errors which destroyed previous revolutionary organisations or made them inadequate. That can only be done by building a party which is a “machine”, but is also democratic and governed by the logic of the class struggle and the imperatives of winning power.

If the groupings within the SWP now had a culture in which they could take it for granted that differences emerge, even when all sides are arguing in good faith, then they could have had a real dialogue. On each issue there would then be a majority which decided what the group did; but the structure of the SWP, the fact that it has a culture hostile to any real debate, has decreed a situation where it seems certain that the SWP will scatter a lot more activists.

Seven Periods

We can periodise IS, and the Socialist Review group which followed it, and then the Workers’ Liberty group as follows:

• From 1948 to their expulsion in 1950, as an ideological trickle inside the majority “orthodox Trotskyist” group, the RCP.

• From 1950 to 1953. In 1953 the group goes through a crisis and then reorganises with a simplified but regular paper

• From late 1953 to 1957. By this time the SR group is solidly immersed in the Labour Party. In the first years, after the collapse of the RCP in August 1949, it had been much more “sectarian”, though it was in the Labour Party

• A period of transition which ends about 1960, with an apparent end of loss of members in 1959

• The supposedly “Luxemburgists” period, from 1960 to 1968. The group grew sizably, first in line with a general
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Socialist Review's record on Korea was not quite as the conventional history portrays it

I've been told by Ken Tarbuck, who was for a while secretary of the Socialist Review group, that there were 60 or 70 people at SR's first meeting. Nothing like that number were consolidated. You can make some guess at their numbers from their publications.

“Socialist Review” began in November 1950 as a stencil-duplicated magazine. In all, between November 1950 and April 1952, when the first printed SR appeared, seven duplicated numbers were published.

One of the myths in the very mythologised SWP-IS history was that there was first the theoretical period, then the propaganda period; and when they had sorted out their propaganda, they started doing things. It’s moonshine.

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The myth of the golden age
The history of the British Trotskyist movement has largely been written from the viewpoint of the majority of the RCP (the main Trotskyist group in the 1940s). There is a myth of a golden age of the RCP. But it is a myth.

The RCP collapsed in 1949. Its central leader, Jock Has ton, quickly evolved to the right, and was involved in the right wing of the ETU for much of its subsequent life. The minority of the RCP, which was led by Gerry Healy, has had a very bad press. In some ways it is a deservedly bad press. But it is misleading to read the Healyism of the 1970s and 80s backwards into history.

The Healyites were confused, politically very confused indeed. But, for example, they refused to follow the RCP leaders in their position that the East European states were deformed workers’ states. They didn’t have an alternative, and eventually they followed Cannon into accepting the “deformed workers’ state” formula. But they were better than the others.

The only Trotskyist group in the world to support the final totalitarian Stalinist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 was the RCP.

Throughout the late 1940s the Healyites advocated involvement in the Labour Party. From 1945 that made very good sense indeed, and the sectarianism of the RCP majority was a golden age.

The Healyites’ regime was always pretty authoritarian, but it did not become the full-scale horror which IS and SWP emulated until the late 1950s or early 1960s. And the Healyites did things. They organised the left. They related to the broad labour movement.

The horror story is told that when the RCP collapsed, and its remnant went into a fusion with the Healy group which had separated from the RCP in 1947 and gone into the Labour Party, publishing a monthly paper, Healy got the leadership although his supporters were a minority, and used the leadership to purge the majority. It is true, and it is a horrible story.

But it had been established in the middle 40s that they could not agree on what to do in the Labour Party. The majority had come into the Labour Party after the RCP collapsed, but their basic attitude had not changed. They remained sectarian, making propaganda in an alien environment rather than trying to organise the left.

For the Healyites to accept rule over their Labour Party work by the old RCP sectarians because they were a majority was never reasonable. I don’t know whether Healy and Palfre had it in mind to fuse and then smash the old majority, but in reality there was no possibility that the call for unity could have answered any of the practical questions about activity in the Labour Party. The Healyites were right to think that the old RCP majority would ruin their work in the Labour Party if they got a chance.

The golden age of the RCP is a myth, and one which IS and the SWP used to subscribe.

growth of all the revolutionary groups inside the new Labour Party youth movement. After 1965-6 it drifted away from the Labour Party and then grew quickly thanks to the tumult of 1968 and the descent into suicidal sectarianism of what had been the most visible revolutionary group, Gerry Healy’s SLL (later WRP)

1968 to 1971: the reintroduction of so-called “Leninism”. The creation of a formal structure and machine with an array of full-time organisers. After 1970, a rush for recruitment based on the fact that industrial struggles against the Tory government are opening up new chances to recruit trade-unionists. An increasing impatience with democratic procedures or theoretical scruples which may inhibit the implementation of hunches or improvisations which bring advantage and growth. This culminates with IS’s shift of line on Europe, and the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency (forerunner of the SWP) in 1971.

• From December 1971 to 1975-6 the regime is finally tightened. After 1975-6, the IS’s (from January 1977 the SWP’s) operation is more and more an aping of Healy. It is interesting to trace the various subsequent ups and downs and zigzags, but the group is fully-formed by that stage.

The IS group, forerunner of the SWP, and before it the Socialist Review group, was something of a personality cult around Tony Cliff. Not just Cliff, but Cliff and his family: his wife, Chanie Rosenberg, his brother-in-law, Michael Kidron, and at one stage, I believe, another sister of Chanie and Kidron, were operating in a group which at the end of the 1960s had about 20 members.

Despite the myths and the appearances, SR was in substance an “orthodox Trotskyist” tendency with quirks. The quirk throughout the 1950s was that it considered Russia to be a state-capitalist. The break in the pattern comes most of the 1960s, when it declared itself Luxemburgist, countering an imaginary Luxemburg in Lenin, or, in fact, to an imaginary Lenin. And then in 1968 Cliff reinserted “Leninism”, for him, meant stuff he had learned in his formative period.

Korea
The Socialist Review group started with the expulsion in 1950 of some people from the main “orthodox Trotskyist” organisation, forerunner of the SLL, which was then called The Club. They were purged ostensibly because of their line on Korea. They rejected the support for North Korea which was to be the position of the Fourth International. In reality, they grouped people around them who were simply hostile to the authoritarian Healy regime in The Club.

If you look at North Korea today, which is in its third generation of hereditary Stalinist monarchs, with the people half-starving, it seems very ironic indeed that Korea was a cause of so many ructions in the Trotskyist movement, and that failure to side with North Korea could seem so damnable at the time and for decades after.

In 1950, all the Trotskyists had been very hostile to Stalinism in Korea. The main Trotskyist group, the SWP-USA, did not come out with support for North Korea until about six weeks after the war started. Then it did it by a bit of mental juggling. The SWP-USA knew it was Stalinism that was being spread. They didn’t like Stalinism. They didn’t want Stalinism.

They believed that Russia was a degenerated workers’ state, and ergo, if Russia replicated its structure, as it had in much of Eastern Europe, the result had to be some sort of workers’ states. However, the SWP-USA did not arrive at that conclusion firmly until the end of the 1940s. It was very unhappy about the invasion of South Korea by the North.

It solved the problem this way: James P Cannon wrote an open letter to the President and Congress of the United States in which he identified what was going on in Korea as “the
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Korean revolution", reducing Stalinism to a mere detail.

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We entered as an ideological tendency, not a faction. Our distinctiveness was in our general political approach and tradition, not in this or that conflict with the leadership on immediate questions. We remained a tendency all the way through, even though at the end we were forced formally to declare ourselves a faction by the new rules adopted in 1970 and enforced in 1971.

We argued for what we thought was the Trotskyist method in politics and organisation, that is, a critical accounting, discussion based on education and commitment — all of which we counterposed to IS’s old looseness and to its new “Leninism”, which we thought was only administrative centralisation.

Our platform stated: “Our conception of method in politics is the essential link between our various positions... We take seriously the Bolshevik method of attempting to work out each question theoretically and of being actively guided by Marxist analysis, which is then clarified on the basis of activity. Blundering empiricism such as characterised IS on Ireland and in general is as alien to revolutionary politics as is the aloof refusal of an SSL to look the actual facts of reality in the face”.

On some questions, our interaction with IS was a sort of cross-crisis. We came from a “Cannonite” background (after James P. Cannon, the leading figure in “orthodox” Trotskyism after Trotsky’s death) and would be impelled by the sharp possibility of break with which we threatened from that background into questioning stock “orthodox” ideas about the Stalinist states being ‘degenerated and deformed workers’ states’.

IS was moving from a background in which it had, although only erratically, spoken of a working-class ‘Third Camp’ counterposed to both capitalism and Stalinism, towards adopting the political technique of the Healyite SSL. In 1968 we believed that the Trotskyist Fourth International movement was fundamentally correct, despite immense weaknesses. We believed its tradition had been correct in seeing issues like the colonial revolution and to the Korean war.

We suffered from a contradiction. We were extremely anti-Stalinist — more so than many people in IS, including many of the “libertarians” — and at the same time we were ardent supporters of anti-imperialist struggles while Stalinists were the alternative to the imperialists, as in Vietnam. In late 1960s, we — like IS, and the Mandelites and the SSL too — expressed our position on Vietnam as ‘Vic- tory to the NLF!’ This was a matter of differentiating us from the Communist Party, which called for negotiation; but the attitude contained a fundamental political flaw of identifying with and championing a particular political tendency which in fact we knew represented police-state control over the Vietnamese working-class.

We had to learn, and we learned very slowly. But, despite the formal clash between us calling the USSR a degenerated workers state and the IS leadership calling it ‘capitalist’ — never in the whole period of our union with IS was there any actual political clash on attitudes to the Stalinist states in current politics. We had a common set of conclusions, even if we did not always reach the same successful, coherent and political speaking. We won over a number of the cadre in the Manchester branch of about 50 members, which we quickly came to dominate. We recruited a number of members of the IS National Committee not elected as Trotskyist Tendency people.

But soon we were easily ostracised. The Trotskyist Tendency was unpopular because we were seen as being associated with the Healy organisation. A lot of the old IS people had been “libertarians”. We became scapegoats for their animosity towards the centralisation that Cliff was introducing.

In the middle of 1969, the IS leadership adopted a policy towards us which we called ghettoisation. In Manchester and Teesside, the only two areas where we had any numbers, we were used as a weapon against IS, as “their” branch, and we were thereafter treated as the unwanted children.

In 1970, IS split or expel us, because the central IS resources were then directed to the “loyalist” branches in Manchester and Teesside. It was also a throwback against the federalism which Cliff had said was discarding the year before.

We published internal pamphlets, for example a collection of Trotsky’s writings on the Russian state. We also tried to be constructive in this way.

For example, we proposed a motion in the first half of 1969 that IS start a rank-and-file movement in the unions. The proposal was backed not just by us, but also by Colin Barker, the leading Cliffite in the Manchester branch. It was met on the National Committee by something close to howling down. Our motive for the proposal was not just a rank-and-file movement would be a good thing in industry; it was that we wanted IS to start to differentiate between contacts, sympathisers, and educated members. An auxiliary organisation would assist that. For some reason Jim Higgins claimed to have originated this idea of a rank-and-file movement, which was eventually put into practice by IS in 1973, but he forgets all about the Trotskyist Tendency.

We took up big political questions as they arose; or rather we became embroiled in a big political fight on Ireland, for example, in 1969.

In the early years of IS there was a heavy reliance on reprints, often reprints from the ISL-US paper Labor Action. There was one advertisement in SR for Labor Action. There was no evidence of any collusion.

The ISL’s chief and most visible links in Britain at that time were with the ILP. The ILP was “Third Camp”-ist. Confusingly so: as an organisation, it was a patch-work, with many different tendencies. But the ILP paper Socialist Leader was quite a big paper, with a circulation much bigger than the ILP’s declining membership.

As far as the files of SR tell us, closer links between SR and the ISL were not established until 1956.

SR and state capitalism

What role was played by SR for the theory of state capital- ism, which is said to have been the lodestone of the tendency, the magic talisman which protected them from the mistakes that other Trotskyists made? Very little.

The SR Group 1950-5

One way of getting a picture of the early SR group is through an archaeological survey of its publications. The first seven issues were stencil-duplicated magazines of between 26 and 42 pages. Those first issues were a “magazine” rather than a “paper”. SR described itself on the first cover as “Live writing on the left”, but in fact much of it was heavy, research-paper-type articles, statistics-dense and turgid. The dominant conception evidently that Marxism was primarily an understanding of the economic background to politics.

In April-May 1952, SR went into print, 12 quarto-size pages (smaller than A4), with quite small print. In that printed 12-page “number” five issues were produced, between April and October 1953. In 1953 the group had some sort of crisis. A number of the founding members left the group. That included Don Hallas, or as he later called himself Duncan Hallas, who after a 15-year “sabbatical” came back to the organisation in 1968. Only two issues came out between December 1952 and October 1953. The editors were offered no explanation for the break.

From October 1953 SR was more or less stabilised as a monthly. Michael Kidron, Cliff’s brother-in-law, who, I guess, had just come from South Africa, became editor. SR was now a smaller size — eight pages of bigger type. It read more like a youth paper, even its name had been “libertarians”. SR described itself on the first cover as “Live writing on the left”, but in fact much of it was heavy, research-paper-type articles, statistics-dense and turgid. The dominant conception evidently that Marxism was primarily an understanding of the economic background to politics.

The Trotskyist Tendency 1966-71

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Cliff on Russia and China

SR in the early 1950s insisted on the inevitability of World War Three, and in a peculiar way.

World War Three was inevitable because Russia needed to invade Western Europe to get the capital equipment that it lacked. That idea was a generalisation based on the Russian dismantling of East European and East German industry at the end of World War Two. SR considered World War Three imminent and inevitable long after the orthodox Trotskyists — who had had the idea in the early 1950s, anyway — had abandoned it. SR, like the Stalinists, was general to their thinking in, say, 1951 — had changed their ass

1956

SR were orthodox Trotskyists in almost all respects. They would follow the lead of the Healyites on many other issues.

In February 1956, Stalin’s successor Khrushchev denounced Stalin as a crazy mass murderer, saying many of the things that Trotskyists of various hues had been saying for a long time. The SWP in America set up movement throughout the country, which fitted both Russia and China.

ESR grew in the mid to late 1960s, as a very amorphous revolutionary tendency. Its main political targets in the early 1960s, Young Guard, was more anarchistic than anything else. But the group which had dominated the revolutionary left for the previous period, Gerry Healy’s SLL, obliged the IS by becoming increasingly mad and suicidally sectarian, for example boycotting the big demonstrations against the Vietnam war in the late 60s.

Despite the caricature Marxist idea that material reality decides everything, there is also a cultural reality, which has an autonomy. The previous political cultures in a working class, social-democratic, Stalinist, or other, have an autonomy.

The culture does not change easily. In fact the culture on the revolutionary left didn’t change much, because the IS group adopted much of the culture of the previous SLL, as sea-creatures crawl into shells. As the SLL declined in the 1970s, its culture was taken over by the IS group.

That autonomy of culture is in fact what Trotsky summed up in the idea of “the crisis of leadership”, or it’s a facet of the same thing. Workers tend to stick with the organisation that educated them or first brought them into political life, and new activists tend to take their political culture from the main body of established activists which they first find. That is true within the revolutionary left, too.

Not many people survived politically from the wreckage of the SLL, and possibly not many will survive from the crisis of the SWP.

But IS grew from the mid 1960s through the early 1970s. It had resources. It raised quite a lot of money because it had quite a lot of well-off members.

In 1971 SWP (then called IS) had 115 branches, with an average of maybe 20 active members per branch. Today the SWP has 93 branches, and a branch is considered thriving if its attendance is in double figures. The SWP’s growth, or lack of it, since the early 1970s gives little basis for boasting.

Despite the exaggerated claims, the SWP has maybe a thousand active members, and another thousand or so people who pay dues and occasionally attend SWP meetings.

The SWP seems more prominent on the left today because the groups which in the early 1970s were bigger than it (the Communist Party and Healy’s Workers’ Revolutionary Party), and those which then were smaller but visibly in the same league (the IM Group and Militant), have imploded or collapsed. The Militant (continued as the SWP) has revived a little since its low point of the 1990s, but those other groups exist today only as small splinters.

The SWP today, also, has built up a large income (it has quite a few old-timers who no longer do much activity but have well-paid jobs), and so can finance several dozen full-time organisers, whose activity makes up most of the profile of the SWP.

The SWP has had ups as well as downs since the early 1970s. Its status as the most visible group on the left has enabled it to recruit, over the years, many talented activists. The problem for the SWP is that it has avoided implosion since the early 1970s is no vindication of its political twists and turns.

And it holds good only until larger political tumult either shows the SWP into crisis or creates a cali

How the SWP grew
The formation of the SWP

“Orthodox” Trotskyism

Solidarity and Workers’ Liberty are Trotskyist. But we have argued that “orthodox Trotskyism” from the 1940s became warped by traits and syndromes alien to the SWP, though sometimes not to the letter, of the ideas of Trotsky and the Bolshevik rearguard. More light and instruction can be found in the tradition of the “Third Camp” Trotskyists such as Max Shachtman and Hal Davis.

To describe the SWP (IS, SR) as “orthodox Trotskyist with quirks” seems puzzling. The core idea of “orthodox Trotskyism” was that of the USSR, despite become the world’s second big power, remained a “degenerated workers’ state”, and the Stalinist states from Poland to North Korea were “deformed workers’ states”. The SWP (IS, SR) called them “state capitalists”.

Two things explain the puzzle. The most characteristic quirk of the SWP (IS, SR) has been its readiness to sideline theory of any sort in favour of hunches, improvisations, and borrowings from elsewhere. So, for example, for most of the 1960s IS sidelined the idea of a combative, centralised party in favour of borrowings from the ILP.

Benjamin, Cliff’s distinctive version of “state capitalism” (there are and have been many others) was one which presented Russian state capitalism as the most extremely advanced species of capitalism — “the highest stage which capitalism can ever reach... speed of the development of the productive forces... far outstripping what youthful capital­ism experienced, and the very opposite of what capitalism in decaying and stagnation experiences”.

The difference is not great between that and seeing the Stalinist states as a “most backward” form of workers’ state (as in the particular strand of “orthodox” Trotskyism in which Cliff was involved in the CP majority of Ted Grant). In any case, despite the difference of label, the SWP (IS, SR) attitude to the Stalinist states has often been little different from that of some strands of “orthodox” Trotskyism. The main body of this supplement discusses the differences of China and Korea. In his book Trotskyism Alex Callinicos retrospectively aligns the SWP with Cannon and the “orthodox”, not with Shachtman and Draper, in the split of 1940 over Russian revolution.

In the introduction to the book The Fate of the Russian Revolution, volume I, I sketched the characteristics of “orthodox” Trotskyism in four points. All four apply to the SWP (IS, SR) with small modifications.

1) Marx and Engels made socialism “scientific” by converting it from a moral scheme, counterposed to capitalism, into a logical, historically and dialectically developed from material preconditions created by capitalism. In neo-Trotskyism (that is, mainstream revolutionary socialism for a whole era) a pre-Marxist sectarian rejection of capitalism on a world scale, and an identification with Stalinist states as a progressive alternative (because they were anti-capitalist), had replaced this idea of the relationship of capitalism to socialism.

2) The idea that capitalism (and even on some levels imperialism) is progressive was excised from Marxism. So was the idea that to reject and negate the progressive work of capitalism (technology, bourgeois civilisation, the creation of the working class) is sectarian and backward-looking. Marxists reverted to the spirit of those who in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to go back from industrialism and of those against whom Lenin polemised for their “petty-bourgeois” desire to unscramble imperialist concentrations of industry back to an earlier stage of capitalism... Even reactionary alternatives to capitalism, and not Stalinist ones alone, were seen as progressive, even though they destroyed the fruits of world civilisation since the Renaissance. World history seems teleologically process with an outcome — world socialism — mechanically fixed in advance, irrespective of what living women and men did or failed to do.

3) The patently false notion that capitalism had reached its historic end was used in the spirit of utopian socialists who felt they had discovered “the last word”...

4) Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto saw the development of the organised, conscious communist political party as integrally interlinked with the self-development of the whole working class. The communists would ‘represent the future of the movement in the movement of the present’. This was replaced by the notion of a ‘party’ self-defined by the possession of an esoteric doctrine and revelation...

Tony Cliff: not as heterodox as he claimed

prospects than the rest of the “orthodox”; no special credit accrues to Cliff for going with the majority. Pretty much all Trotskyists recognised the facts of capitalist stabilisation in the 1950s and 60s. SR depicted World War Three as imminent and almost-inevitable for longer than the others. IS shines only by contrast with one particular “orthodox” Trotskyist group, the Healyite SLP, which in the 60s, spilling off into sectarian ruin, went in for manic crisis-mongering. And it does not shine bright. IS’s alternative was not sober and accurate, but a claim that capitalism had become stable for a long time to come, made most confidently just on the eve of the break-up of the high days of the 1950s and 60s. Since the early 1970s, SWP has been dedicated to permanent crisis talk.

3) The idea that the proletarian revolution is made by the proletariat and cannot be made for them had been displaced by the idea of a locum acting to create, if not socialism, then the first decisive step towards socialism — the creation of a ‘workers’ state’... Hence early was a desirable explanation for Russia. The “Cliff-justifies-Stalinism” argument against “state capitalism” was more effective than people think.

SR tried to respond to the opening, Cliff wrote a pamphlet directed at the Cpers. It was mostly telling stuff that was no longer new to them, but it enabled SR to recruit a few Cpers in 1957.

The Healyites, however, made far more impact. They were the biggest group, and they were the nearest thing in the Trotskyist world to a real organisation in terms of membership and being able to take initiatives. They did things. For example, they called broad conferences which lots of CP types would have attended. They were known. They were seen as a force in the labour movement. And they had a plausible explanation for Russia. The “Cliff-justifies-Stalinism” argument against “state capitalism” was more effective than people thought.

The personnel of the SR group would probably have affected the way they were perceived, too. Cliff was an intellectual, very “foreign” in that more insular British Kidron, who came from Ireland via South Africa, had a marked English upper-class accent. SR must have looked like a small, strange, quirkly, middle-class group.

The Healyites were very much by composition; they were dynamic; Healy believe it or not, could be quite charming. He won over two of the most prominent dissident CPers: Peter Fryer, the Daily Worker correspondent in Hungary, whose true report had been suppressed; and Brian Behan, a leading industrial militant. Called to speak from the floor at a gathering of ex-Cpers in April 1957 at Wortley Hall, in Yorkshire, Healy began his speech by saying: “This is a time for reading books, not for burning them”. He presented himself, truly, as someone who had been expelled from the Communist Party in the 1930s for opposing the Moscow Trials. It was effective.

And, to repeat, the Healyites did things. They had roots in the Labour Party, which helped make them attractive to Cpers who would otherwise have recruited broader layers of people in 1956-7, including some people who had been prominent in the CP.

The Healyites presented themselves as in the historical continuity with the Third International and the Russian Revolution. They had radical criticism of Russia, in fact a call for a new workers’ revolution which for technical reasons they called a “political revolution”, but in a sense they demanded less from the ex-Cpers.

There was another group, the Forerunners of today’s Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal, around Ted Grant and the Dean brothers, Brian, Jimmy, and Arthur. But that was in a dreadful state. It published a very small magazine very occasionally. Some of them had been the majority leaders of the RCP, but now they did very little. Grant and his friends had been expelled formally from the Fourth International in 1951. Then suddenly, in 1957, they became the official British section of the main “Fourth International”, that is, of the Pablo, soft-on-Stalinism faction of the Fourth International. But it did them little good. They made very little impact.

SR and ISL

At the end of 1956 SR put out one issue of a publication jointly with Max Shachtman’s Independent Socialist League (ISL) in the USA. One version of it was published in the London evening paper The New Statesman. It was the beginning of a new start. At one blow it more than doubled the size of the paper.
The formation of the SWP

Cliff's text on Stalinist Russia, first published in June 1948, played a smaller role than we might have believe.

There was only one such issue, but thereafter SR kept the same format and began to expand. For the first time SR had a somewhat impressive publication. In 1956, however, another of SR's strange mishaps occurred. Eastern Europe went into ferment. Stalinists who had been purged in the early 1950s re-emerged as leaders, Nagy in Hungary, Comuhlka in Poland. There was real fear of the Russians losing control.

In mid-1956 a rash of workers' councils spread across Poland. I don't think you can describe those councils as full soviets, but they were a tremendous step towards them. The Polish workers were barely kept under control by the Stalinists who had been in disfavour, around Comuhlka. The Russian leaders made an emergency visit to Warsaw on the basis of which they would decide whether to invade or not; but Comuhlka convinced them that he could dismantle the movement, and he did, though Poland had a far more liberal regime thereafter.

At the same time in Hungary Nagy became prime minister. In November 1956 he announced Hungary would withdraw from the military alliance led by the USSR, the Warsaw Pact. The Russians responded by invading Hungary. They met fierce resistance. Then the Russians seemed to withdraw. Some of the Russian troops had become disaffected. Then a new wave of Russian troops came in and fought their way to control. The workers struck and contested control of the factories with the Russians. It was one of the great events of the history of the working-class movement.

SR's misapprehension was that in November 1956 it went to press with a front page headline and article about the fighting in... Poland! There was no fighting in Poland...

But in 1956, as I've said, after SR had raised the 'Third Camp' as a prominent slogan for the first time in 1955, SR established or re-established some working relations with the 'Socialists', the 'ISL' in the USA. The ISL's relations with the ILP have become very strained indeed when the ILP justified the Labour Party's expulsion of the Healy paper. SR-ISR would run to 1958, when the ISL merged into the Socialist Party in the USA.

In September 1955 there was a conference in London of 'Third Camp' socialist groups - a big conference, which also incidentally included the Ba'th party, then very different from what it would become when it fused with elements of the military took power in Syria and Iraq.

There was a quickening of life in SR. As we have seen, it reacted comparatively energetically to the Communist Party crisis. Shachtman got his passport back in the mid-1950s and he may have visited England and Ireland. But it's hard to see much ISL influence on SR. In his 1948 text, Cliff had taken things wholesale from Shachtman, but without acknowledge, and while abusing the giver and compressing what he had taken into a theory of state capitalism which, considered in the context of the many state-capitalist theories of Russia, is very odd indeed.

In 'Labor Action' in January 1956 Hal Draper reviewed Cliff's 1955 book, in a distinctly patronising fashion. He said it was an extremely valuable book for its facts - which it was - and that the theory was "virtually identical" with bureaucratic collectivism; Russia was "labelled a hyphenated-capitalist [i.e. "bureaucratic state capitalism"] only as a matter of terminological taste". It was a rather contemptuous dismissal. A couple of months later Draper reviewed another book giving facts on Russia, which he praised unqualifiedly, in effect saying it was better than Cliff's. But the important point is that neither Cliff nor anyone from SR (authors of the angry little footnote on Wang a few years earlier) responded.

Bernard Ox, who was a trade union official and ended up as a Welsh nationalist, may at some point have served as a link between the ISL and SR. He wrote articles for the Healyite Socialist Outlook and for the ISL's Labor Action. He disappeared from the British left press at the time the Labour Party banned Socialist Outlook in 1954, but continued to write in Labor Action until 1958. He may have had some involvement in SR, but briefly.

SR in the Labour left, late 1950s

From the beginning of 1957 SR had an 8-page tabloid, well laid-out and good-looking despite having no illustrations. It was far more attractive than it had been. SR claimed they had doubled the circulation.

One of SR's peculiarities within the left then is that they made no claim to a heritage, to being Trotskyists. There was nothing about the history of the Trotskyists, or of Bolshevism, in their publications. At that point they did not even mention Luxemburg.

SR wrote an article in January 1957 by Cliff on Plekhanov, in which he cited Plekhanov's idea ("Socialism and the Political Struggle") that a revolutionary socialist coup in Russia would end up adopting "the ideals of patriarchal and authoritarian communism, only modifying those ideals so that national production is managed not by the 'russian sons of the sun' and their officials but by a socialist caste". It was a way of opening up the whole historical background, but without answering any of the questions, and without identifying SR as Trotskyists.

What SR did do was engage with a part of the Labour left, with the eight or so of what would become New Left Review, John Hughes and others. They conducted debates with them on issues like incomes policy, which some Labour leftists at that time advocated.

SR had a fashion of presenting articles as "forum" or "discussion" when they really weren't, but it did get some interaction. There was life in the paper. Some members of the group, including the editor, which was published, saying that it was just a digest of the Financial Times, but that was unfair. In fact, throughout 1957 SR was a more impressive paper than the Healyite Newsletter (which started in May 1957 as Peter Fryer's Newsletter).

SR went biweekly in 1958. There was energy in it. It was on a relatively high level, not so much Marxist high theory as written for people with formal education. It related to industrial struggles, too, in a way that was indistinguishable from the Healyites.

SR expanded its membership, but that was very relative. In 1958, according to Cliff, they had about 20 members.

In 1957, according to the myth, Cliff discovered the "permanent arms economy". That is not just myth, but ten times myth. The idea of the "permanent arms economy" was common-place. There was even a big special feature in the big-circulation magazine Newswork about it. It's typical of the group to be dishonest about this and claim the idea of the "permanent arms economy" for their own when in fact it was everybody.

What Cliff discovered in 1957 was not the idea of a "permanent arms economy", but the idea that it would work indefinitely to stabilize and consolidate capitalism. The practical implication was that there were very few revolutionary possibilities, and SR worked in the Labour Party without much idea of ever doing anything else.

One of the latter-day myths is that SR was never in the Labour Party really, that they only joined for the audience. That may have been true at the beginning, when they collapsed into the Labour Party in 1949, like the Grantites, and operated there very much as outsiders (though they were always seriously involved in the Labour League of Youth). But by the mid-1950s SR was expressing its programme, the list of demands on SR, fully and in print in every issue, as a programme for the Labour Party.

That was more than just a pedagogic adaptation. The mid-50s programme was introduced by the statement: "The Socialist Review believes that... a Labour Government must be brought to power on the basis of the following programme". Telengil, it took the line to SR, or of a group of ex-Communist Party people to get this modified (in June 1957) to: "Only the mass mobilisation of the working class in the industrial and political arena can lead to the overthrow of capitalism and and the establishment of Socialism. The Socialist Review believes that a really consistent Labour Government must be brought to power on the basis of the following programme..." That was a distinct improvement — achieved by introducing into the SR platform a formula about mass mobilisation from the Communist Party's evasive programme of 1951, The British Road to Socialism.

You could see from 1957 a winding-down from the origins of the group. The recruits did not become more than a trickle until the beginning of the 1960s, but the whole focus of the publication changed towards debate and dialogue with a section of the Labour left. SR did not stress any Trotskyist background at all.

SR and peace campaigning

In the late 1950s people were becoming concerned with the threat of nuclear war. The Healyites picked up the demand "Black the bomb, black the bases" very early on, and tried to get dollars to do SR. "Black", of course, meant "don't work on", "boycott", "shun". From 1957 it became the shibboleth of SR. SR had always been for workers' control, continuing the emphasis which the RCP in its last period had put on that idea in order to distinguish itself from the Labour government's nationalisations. Now SR raised the call for workers' control of the nuclear arms industry. For what? They would continue to produce nuclear bombs under workers control? It was a piece of demagogic nonsense, which made no sense except that it could appeal to intellectuals who wanted a proletarian orientation.

In the 1960s, 'workers' control' would become for SR/ISR a general synonym for workers' power and socialism. By 1959-60 SR had a massive focus on the peace movement. SR hadn't abandoned the view that World War Three was imminent until well after the orthodox Trotskyists had abandoned it. SR held to that view even after Khrushchev's thaw and even after the demise of April-July 1954. SR's focus on peace campaigning gave it some base in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when it started to flourish (about 1958 to 63). In my experience CND never had much of an active membership, but the SWP's story is that SR recruited from CND youth.

The turn to "Luxemburgism"

By the late mid-1950s the Healyites had transformed themselves. They always had an authoritarian regime, but that varied from time to time. When there were cadres it was authoritarian. It would stand up and in the mid-1950s there were, it was not quite the monstrous thing it became. And it loosened up in 1957 to help recruit the ex-Standardisation of CP'ers were joining the Healy organisation from 1957, and that made it attractive to people in SR.

In 1958 the 20-strong SR group voted by a majority to approach the Healyites for fusion. Cliff's account of it, to me...
The formation of the SWP

1971 and Europe

In a nutshell, the story of IS's transformation and the emergence of the neo-Halleyite SWP out of it is the story of how a very large group, with a family at the centre, grew, centralised itself, and developed a "machine" with the once seemingly benign cult figure in control.

The IS/SWP line before June 1971: in or out of the Common Market was a battle between bosses' factions

Labour and trade-union left on this? As IS had argued for many years, they were at best insular and stupidly nationalistic and at worst unashamed chauvinists. And the CP line was unmistakably a mere reflex of USSR opposition to bourgeois moves towards European unity.

Well, wrote Cliff and Harman, we could repeat the old IS policy in union discussions, then 'vote with the left' — that is, with the chauvinists and little Englanders — thus repudiating what we had said in discussion! The aspiration to retain contact with workers and with 'the left' is no contemptible one. But politics is politics. To argue as vehemently as the differences required against the Communist Party and Labour-left chauvinists, and then vote with them — that was to invite and deserve ridicule. It would show that you had no confidence in your own politics, and put you in the role of fawning pup to those you allowed to determine your vote. It was impossible nonsense.

The issue split the cadre of the Cliff tendency right down the middle. Even Paul Foot, high priest of the Cliff cultists, initially opposed Cliff. So did Jim Higgins, Ian Birchall, and a lot of others; a majority of the usually vocal people on the National Committee, in fact. Some of them went so far as to publish critical Internal Bulletin articles.

But what was to be done about it? Either, accept with conscience-saving protests, that the National Committee majority — it was not a big majority, either — could overturn the conference vote and bow down before the chauvinist tide. Or, refuse to accept that this was a proper way to go about things. The only recourse then against the National Committee majority was a special conference. The constitution allowed for a special conference if 23 branches — one-fifth of the total — called for it.

The Trotskyist Tendency decided to campaign for a special conference. The solid citizens of the group, such as Higgins, did not. Why not? After all, it was no small matter, this bowing down before the chauvinist wave in a political world where not only chauvinism but its even uglier brother racism was a feature of even the militant sections of the labour movement. In 1968 London dockers had struck in support of Tory racist Enoch Powell.

Yet the Higgines of the group, who could almost certainly have got a majority against bowing down to the nationalists, had no intention of making a fight of it. Consequences salved by protests, they were going along with Cliff!

Why? Habit and deference were, I think, part of it. Paul Foot, who had opposed Cliff on the National Committee, quickly came to heel and published an Internal Bulletin article to recant. He entitled it, appropriately, "Confession". The jokes did not displease him, and that was enough for that. It was, the others did not "confess"; but they acquiesced. They believed, from habit and experience, that Cliff's instinct or, as the expression went, Cliff's "nose" for these things was better than their own. They wanted the advantaged tages of change of line would bring (and nobody disputed it would make things easier in the unions). They did not want to rock the IS boat or antagonise Cliff. They knew an argument was volatile. They saw themselves as an elite, special people. The whole old pre-1968 IS system of deference and division of labour allowed them to combine the satisfaction of having their political virtue forced. To put it very politely, theirs was easy virtue.

We got the support of 23 branches, but we did not get a special conference — not on the European Union question.

The new-minted national secretary, Duncan Hallas, said that notification from one of the 23 branches of support for a special conference had arrived a day late. It was not to be counted. He was ruling it out of order. The matter was now settled. The secretary of the 23rd branch said he'd postponed it on time. Probably Hallas was lying, but in any case such rigid interpretation of an arbitrary committee-decided deadline was, as far as I know, something new in the group. A typical piece of labour bureaucrat's chicanery was now the leaders' recourse against the threat of having to face the membership.

The leadership knew they would most likely lose at a special conference. And our co-thinkers on the political question in dispute, like Higgins, knew that at a special conference they would either have to knuckle under like Foot and betray their own politics, or else fight Cliff. They would do neither. That evasion was a textbook example of what the Trotskyist Tendency, after Trotsky, meant by saying IS was a "centrist" organisation.

Jim Higgins, Ian Birchall, and others wrote, and in some meetings spoke, as if they thought the question of Europe was not very important. But they, Cliff and co rather did not act as if it did not matter that the organisation had buckled before the nationalist wave.

They did this even though they were allowed little acclimatisation time. They were given little or nothing to save their faces. Within a few weeks of the NC vote, Duncan Hallas, the supple-sinned new National Secretary — who was resolutely and wantonly anti-European and anti-Trotskyist — was making strident anti-EU propaganda in Socialist Worker.

Things would get worse, but by the time the last date for supporting a special conference or protesting against the bureaucratic cheating of the 23 branches fell due, no-one could fail to see the enormity of what had happened and the extent of the falling off from the politics proclaimed in the very name of the group. Yet, even then, the drive for a special conference remained exclusively the project of the Trotskyist Tendency and some allies here and there.

The group was supposedly run under the democratic and centralised constitution of 1968. In fact, it dealt with the change of line on Europe in the manner of the old pre-1968 extended family around Cliff — decisions being made by "nose" and whim, people disagreeing but "knowing their place" and Cliff's prerogatives.

To stop the formal rules being used to subvert and cut across this old, easy way of doing things, to stop the members from "intervening", or rather to stop the Trotskyist Tendency from organising the members to intervene, the IS leaders had to work outside the 1968 constitution. They had to lay down tight rules to restrict the effort to appeal to the members and, then, even within their own new-made rules, to cheat.

I think the Cliff group would have lost at a special conference with the behaviour they thought was right: that, according to their calculations, would have been seriously damaging to the group's prospects in the unions. Cliff and his allies on one side, and the old ISers like Higgins on another, looked at each other like lovers bemoaned and emotionally exhausted after a fight with the knowledge that they have come close to a serious rupture neither wanted. Yet, even then, Paul Foot and the Trotskyist Tendency might go around with a unified fury on the Trotskyist Tendency. Our co-thinkers on the defining and detonating political question in dispute

The IS (SWP) book More Years For The Lowcut (a sort of history of IS/SWP) is an example. For people like Higgins the "Bagelot Question" arises. Walter Bagelot, the Victorian political economist and analyst of the British constitution, asked the question concerning the then exclusive Queen and her playboy son, the future Edward VII: How does it come about that "a retired widow and her unemployed son" can play the pivotal role in the legal structures of the British constitution?

How could Cliff achieve such power in the organisation that in the 1960s prided itself on its democracy and freedom from Gerry Healy-style dictatorship, and which had members...
turned on us with at least as much fury as those whose opportunist hands we had tried to tie. It was time to settle accounts with the Trotskyist Tendency! Its existence was intolerable.

Yet, good or bad, villain or Bolshevik, the Trotskyist Tendency was not in itself their problem. Democracy was. Any system that tied down and limited Cliff or his machine — or that might tie them down and impose restraints on them — was. The 4 December 1971 conference set the stamp of a one-faction sect on IS, formally ruling out anything other than ephemeral opposition.

The first issue of a new series of Workers’ Fight, which came out on 14 January 1972, commented:

“Stripping away the hysteria and the exaggerations which dominated the internal struggle leading up to the 4 December conference, the IS leadership’s explanation for the expulsion move was that the Trotskyist Tendency called IS centrist (e.g. vacillating between reformism and revolutionary politics, being revolutionary in words but reneging in the crunch) and that this was intolerable.

“But this explains nothing. We never characterised IS otherwise, either before the 1968 fusion or after. We said clearly when we joined that we thought IS would only be changed as a result of a serious internal struggle.

“The IS leaders have created — often through good and useful work — a large-ish organisation, most of whose members are young and politically inexperienced, and consequently there is an absence of a serious and stable political basis for their political domination of the group. They rely increasingly on demagogic manipulation of the members, and on a bureaucratic machine which has qualitatively changed and worsened the internal life of the IS group.

“With increasing reliance on their control on a machine and on demagogy, real democracy becomes a threat. Or rather, the existence of an organised tendency whose politics challenge the machine is a threat.

“Politically, the expulsion indicates a qualitatively bureaucratic hardening of IS. Now the leadership openly proclaims its right, when faced with an opposition tendency, which has fundamental political differences, to resort to pre-emptive expulsions, even when such a tendency part is a disciplined part of the organisation. Thus they claim and proclaim their right to stereotype the organisation politically.

“The expulsion had the trappings of democracy, and no liberal could object. But Leninist democracy has nothing in common with the bare, empty forms, filled by the demagogy and witch-hunting and machine manipulation with which the IS leadership filled such forms.

“The expulsion of Workers’ Fight is a disruptive and sectarian blow to left unity. Instead of practical concentration on the constructive work we can do, and have done together with the majority of IS, and the creation of a Bolshevik internal democracy, we have one more split on the left.

“The real tragedy, though, is that the opportunities for the revolutionary left which existed in 1968 should have led only to the consolidation of a tightly controlled left-centrist sect, which is most certainly what IS now is.”

1968: last days of IS’s orientation to the Labour Party

from page 7

around 1968, was that only he and Chanie Rosenberg voted against. In reality the Healyites didn’t want them, and it was very easy to provoke a failure of any attempt to fuse. SR lost two of its prominent people to the Healyites, Seymour Papert and Donna Papert. The need to compete with the Healyites generated a series of responses in SR which would amount to a break, for a decade, in their “orthodox Trotskyism”. SR became “Luxemburgist”.

That was done bluntly in response to the Healyites. The Healyites were the Trotskyists, the Bolsheviks, and so on. Cliff had been very careful not to identify with Trotskyism and Bolshevism in the period of CP ferment, which was still going on. Now SR hinted that they were not Leninists.

At the same time SR made a shift to deeper involvement in the Labour Party, and a focus on dialogue with the ex-CP intellectuals in the Labour Party. SR would eventually recruit from the Healy organisation the “Stamford Faction” of ex-CPers, Peter Cadogan, Ken Coates, Jim Higgins, and so on, in 1960.

In 1959, after what had been a vigorous period of effort, SR went into another crisis. The paper didn’t appear for months. It seems that a layer of people like the future Labour MP Stan Newens dropped out, considering that the broader Labour left group Victory For Socialism was doing what they wanted to do. VFS had existed for a while, but it was becoming more active. It seems also that SR lost a lot of their own verve, because the effort of the previous period had produced small results.

SR restarted on a stable basis at the beginning of 1960. And Cliff published his small book on Luxembourg. It was a serious academic study, but Michael Kidron, reviewing it in SR, pointed out that a lot of it wasn’t Luxembourg; it was Cliff weaving stuff into Luxembourg. From then on SR proclaimed itself “Luxemburgist”.

SR/IS became “libertarian”. In 1968 they used to boast that there had never been more than four expulsions from their organisation — Ellis Hillman, for gossip; Sid Bidwell, for racism; Peter Cadogan, for giving out information to the Daily Mail about a Marxist neurosurgeon, Christopher Pallas; and one other.

However, we found that the real anarcho-syndicalists in Manchester bitterly hated the IS libertarians, because they weren’t very libertarian. They were what you might call “Oedipal libertarians” — “you can’t tell me what to do”. In our experience after 1968, most of the IS libertarians were authoritarian once there was any real political clash. The exception was Manchester, where we became friendly with the IS libertarians.

Peter Sedgwick, who was held to be the leading IS libertarian, resigned from the IS National Committee in 1970 in protest at the new rules which would later help to expel us.

Then at the expulsion conference in December 1971 he backed our expulsion. He started his speech with a crude “psychoanalysis”, saying that we felt better in a faction than we would as individuals. Even if that was absolutely scientific psychoanalysis, it had nothing to do with the politics at stake. That episode strengthened me a great deal. I remember feeling re assured that I had misunderstood the nature of the IS group.

From the Labour orientation to the shop stewards

One of the things difficult to grasp looking back from 2013 is just how dominant the Labour Party was in the labour movement in the 1950s, and how much it hegematised the revolutionary groups.

Labour carried through major reforms in the 1940s. The Clifffites, the Healyites, and a lot of other people took it as granted in 1951 that the election victory of the Tories would be followed immediately by a full-scale assault on the welfare state and the measures of the Labour government. It didn’t happen. The Tories even expanded social housing, and the counter-offensive would not really come until Thatcher in the 1980s. But through the 1950s the Labour Party and the Bevanite left had big meetings. A lot of the Trotskyists saw the future in terms of a new Labour government which their ideas would dominate: Labour up to 1951 had carried through some elements of socialism, and a new Labour government could continue that work.

Labour’s general election defeat in 1959, with the Tory leader Harold Macmillan using slogans like “You never had it so good”, and the Labour leaders’ subsequent attempt to swing Labour to the right, had a tremendous shaking-up effect on the left, including Socialist Review. SR had to reorient. It had become very immersed indeed. There was an atmosphere of crisis in SR in 1959-60.

SR was still very much in the Labour Party. In 1963, John Palmer, as a representative of the group in the Labour youth movement, the YS, declared: “The onus is on the YS to find a relationship with our Party which will radically reduce these frictions and clashes which are leaving such a bitter heritage in the ranks of young people joining the YS. One thing must be made clear above all. There is no future for the YS outside the Labour Party; our only hope is to find a relationship even more close to it than at present, but one which will allow us essential freedom as a youth movement”.

But over the 1960s SR’s orientation changed. In 1963-6 they would redefine themselves as being in the Labour Party only to look for an audience.

Workers’ Liberty 9
The formation of the SWP

Cliff first appeared in the international Trotskyist press in 1943 as “Lee” when he and his book would grow into a clifft. He contributed to a discussion on Palestine in the American Trotskyist publication New International. He was obviously a young man trying to think things through with some positive disposition, but in 1939 he was in favour of the right of Jewish migration. He would criticise himself on that much later, in an interview in the SWP magazine in 1987.

In late 1944 Cliff wrote an open letter, published in the RCP journal Workers’ International News, to the delegates at the Labour Party conference held in December 1944. The open letter set out to blacken as much as possible, in the eyes of the conference delegates, the Jewish population of Palestine.

It was not signed, but you can tell it was Cliff. Cliff would later recycle chunks from it in his other writings. The conference had a motion, which it would pass, supporting a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and the open letter was aimed at dissuading the delegates from supporting it.

In 1948 the outbreak of the War Two the British had been placating Arab opinion by limiting Jewish migration into Palestine. In practice during the war there was a sizeable movement of Jews finding any way they could into Palesti- nia, and there was open conflict between some of the Zionists — right-wing Zionists, in fact — and the British authorities over that.

The Palestinian Arab leader of the 1930s, Husseini, had been in Bosnia during the war, trying to raise a Muslim army to fight for Hitler. The British were doing what they could to placate the Arabs.

In 1946 the full extent of the Holocaust was not known, but that there had been mass killings of Jews was known. The British army would liberate Belsen early in 1945, and the whole thing would become public, but even before that much was general.

For Cliff to write what he wrote, making the Jewish popula- tion of Palestine look as bad as possible, and for the RCP to publish it in the midst of the European Holocaust, seems to me to show political disorientation. Cliff was now against the right of Jewish migration into Palestine.

In the mid-1940s he wrote a series of articles which were later gathered together into a number of different pamphlets, The Middle East at the Crossroads. It was a strange pamphlet, full of background facts about oil production and so on, but with few political conclusions. As ever, Cliff wrote background papers and left the political conclusions to be worked out in a separate process.

Cliff came to England in September 1946 and became a member of the majority of the British Trotskyist organisa- tion, the RCP, led by Jock Haston, Ted Grant, and others. From 1948 to 1967, there is simply nothing about Israel in Cliff’s publications. Nothing at all. In the mid-50s one of the big points causing scandal around the Communist Parties was that it came out that there had been anti-Semitism in England. All the Trotskyists denounced the anti-Semitism.

There was an article in Socialist Review written, I guess, by Michael Kidron, which makes the obvious points against the anti-Semitism in Stalinist Eastern Europe. But there was nothing in SR’s publications about Israel.

Other people were paying attention: for example, there was an article by Ellis Hillman in Israel in the Healyite maga- zine Labour Review of May-June 1957. But from SR and IS there was nothing until the 1967 war, in which Cliff came out for full-scale defence of Israel. So, I should say, did Worker’s Fight come out against Israel.

We didn’t understand that defeat would mean destruc- tion for Israel. You would think that Cliff would understand that. On the other hand, he might have been involved in demagogery knowing that American backing for Israel, though it wasn’t what it is now, would stop things going as far as they went.

Cliff published a pamphlet in 1967, The Struggle in the Mid- dle East, which repeats some of the stuff from the 1940s. In his speeches at that time, he certainly repeated some of the harmful stories from the letter of 1944.

In 1967 Cliff was still sufficiently constrained by the back- ground and tradition of Trotskyist politics to warn that “an anti-Israeli campaign quite easily degenerates into a ‘Jihad’, which disorients the working class, and not just for the SWP today, a good thing!”. He stated his solution in terms which implied, if unclearly, the same rights of na- tional self-determination for the Israeli Jews as for the Kurds, a socialist republic, with full rights for Jews, Kurds and all national minorities.”

After 1967 Israel became a colonial power in the West Bank and Gaza. Naturally socialists opposed it. Neverthe- less, the question arose: what is our policy for the Middle East?

Up to the late 1960s the Palestinian Liberation Organisa- tion was dominated by Egypt. Its leader was a man called Ahmed Shukeiri. He used to call for “driving the Jews into the sea”. As far as I know, no socialist in Britain condemned that, though there was very little discussion about the issue. In 1969 the PLO changed its policy from Shukeiri’s clear statement to demanding a “secular, democratic state for Jews and Arabs” over all pre-1948 Palestine. In fact that was a bit of political repackaging. You couldn’t get such a state without Israel’s agreement, and neither party would ever agree to face up to the sharp choice: did our support for the Pales- tinians mean that we were willing to see Israel overrun and destroyed?

I think that if that choice had been posed plainly to us, we would have answered no. But the “secular democratic state” formula seemed to answer all the problems: to give Jews rights in a secular democratic state satisfying the Palestinians.

If adopted the secular democratic state, too, and publi- cised the Palestinian struggle. From about 1969 or 1970 it gave explicit support to the Palestinian guerrillas. IS 2001-3 we moved that the Alliance support Is- rael’s occupation, and it was right to side with the Palestinians. Complications happened and they had no weight in the subsequent story. It’s not denial, but it’s minimisation.

The SWP got caught in this mindset, and has been driven on by righteous and just indignation against Israel’s mod- ed, until its policy has become identical with the most cha- ushivist Arabs or Islamists.

For ourselves, we began to rethink the question in the late 1970s, and we concluded in 1986 that “two states” was the only democratic solution and also the only solution possible in the short medium term. From that point onwards we have vigorously opposed those whose policy amounts to the call for the destruction of the Jewish state or the forcible incorporation of its people into an Arab state.

The SWP changed its approach on the issue radically around 1986-7, at the time of its general “anti-imperialist” turn, and its switch to backing Iran in the Iraq-Iran war. Around that time it produced its pamphlet, written by John Rose, which on the cover depicts Israel as a mad dog.

The SWP had until 1987 opposed taking sides in the Iran- Iraq war. They had opposed siding with Argentina in the Falklands war of 1982. But the practice of effectively siding with the designated “anti-imperialists” on their own terms had made them bedfellows with the mandatory anti-imperialism to Israel to build on, a real personal hostility on the part of Cliff, certainly. A search for “anti-imperialist” forces to sup- port gathered momentum in its politics.

That was part of the process leading the SWP into the Re- spect adventure of 2004-7, in which they accepted as their own what they included to be the politics of the oppressed Mus- lim populations in Britain. That attitude is not Marxist pol- itics, especially when the leading figures from the oppressed group, the Islamists, are part of an aggressive and extremely rich-world-wide reactionary movement.

It has been one of the most terrible things in the history of the SR-ISP-SWP organisation. They have demonstrated AWL as unresponsive to the Palestinians, but when in the Socialist Alliance of 2001-3 we moved that the Alliance support Is- raeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, the SWP voted it down. They wanted to stick with the Arab and Islamic chauvinist position which demands the destruction of Israel even at the cost of opposing immediate redress for the Palestinians.

When Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by the Islamic Republic in Iran, all sensitive socialists backed him. But the SWP, who were publishing in the UK did not. In recent years, SWP writers from Lindsey German to Alex Callini- cos have revised their position to the point where they suggest they were wrong to take that stand, and that they should take the opposite stand in any similar case in future.
How was it in 1971?

The Merlin's Cave pub, off Farringdon Road, London, November 1971. Big meeting. Duncan McLintock, then IS (SWP) National Secretary, debating Sean Matgamna of the Trotskyist Tendency.

It is part of the build-up to the special conference at which the Trotskyist Tendency is to be "de-fused" — uncouth people say 'expelled'.

The Trotskyist Tendency is a tiny proportion of the meeting. The chair is Roger Prots, who makes a debating point each and every time he calls for a speaker opposed to the "de-fusion" of the Trotskyist Tendency: "If there is one."

Summations. Duncan Hallas, new-minted National Secretary of IS, is a thin-skinned, insecure bully. He is easily rattled. He has been showing signs of increasing anger at each show of opposition from the floor. He has a bitter hatred of the Trotskyist Tendency.

He is a powerful, emotional speaker, with an unpleasant schoolmasterish tendency to suggest that only an idiot would disagree with him. He is passionately convinced of his case; and also passionately resentful that the Trotskyist Tendency makes fun of his Old Bolshevik pretensions and has let him know they think him a spineless old poser. Now, summing up, he rises to the occasion.

The Trotskyist Tendency has been a problem for three years. They have criticised people like him — real citizens of the IS group — to raise rights of people like himself. They would be able to function more freely. Comradely discussion would come back to the group. By outlawing generalised opposition, IS democracy would — it was paradoxical but true — be enlarged and expanded.

Hands raised as if to embrace the whole meeting, passion distorting his face, his voice rising to a high, emotional pitch and volume, he appeals for support in throwing out the Trotskyist Tendency.

"Comrades! This has gone on too long. It has gone on year after year for three whole years! It should not go on any longer;"

Hand-chopping the air in an unconscious mime: "Comrades: we must put an end to it now. Find a solution!" Large swatches of the meeting by now begun to giggle unashamedly, but he is too high to come down or notice that he has lost much of his audience. "Comrades, I say it again: there has GOTTEN TO BE A FINAL SOLUTION!"

Most of the meeting is by now squirming, giggling or laughing in open derision. IS was still a living political organisation in November 1971.

Theory and practice

The peculiar relationship of theory and practice, of prattle to praxis, in IS was described thus in a document of the Trotskyist Tendency in mid 1971:

"IS has a pretty solid body of theory and is nearer to than almost all the 'orthodox' Trotskyist groups to a 'party' in the sense of being a rounded 'whole' — however small, and however far from being able to play the role of a revolutionary party in relation to the class. The 'orthodox' groups are all to a far greater extent than IS mere factions that have failed to become anything wider."

Yet I agree with [your] statement that IS has contempt for theory. Why? Because the IS theory is the possession of a handful of mandarins, who function as both a group mandarinate and as a segment of normal academic Britain. What theory there is, is their theory: they are quite snobbish about it. For the non-initiated popularisations will do.

This, of course, is inseparable from a manipulationist conception of the organisation. The members don't need to know the theories — the leaders can be relied upon — and demagogy and word-spinning phrasemongers like Cliff and Palmer can bridge the gap.

"It is in this sense that IS has contempt for theory — contempt for the Marxist conception of theory and its necessary relationship to the organisation as a heaven and tool of the whole group. Contempt is not the best expression for it, though, is it?"

"The party must most certainly have contempt — for the unintitated — but their theory is their special treasure, their badge of rank, their test for membership of the inner elite. There actually is such open caste snobbery in IS — as you know…"

"The second sense of IS's 'contempt for theory' is in their use of theory, the function of theory, the relationship of theory to practice: there is no connection between the two for IS. Do you know that in last week's debate [on the European Union] at the National Committee Cliff said and repeated that principles and tactics contradict each other in real life!

"This is organically connected, of course, with their mandarism... It is an esoteric knowledge — for if principles contradict tactics and practice, if theory is not a practical and necessary tool, if theory and practice are related only in the sense that theory sums up (in one way or another) past practice, perhaps vivified with a coat of impressionistic paint distilled from what's going on around at the time — but not in the sense that theory is the source of precepts to guide practice, to aid in the practical exploration of reality — why then, where is the incentive to spread theoretical knowledge?"

"What is to prevent the polarisation of the organisation into the mandarins and the subjects of the demagogic manipulation of the mandarins and their mandarins? What is to prevent the esoteric knowledge of the mandarins from being just one intellectual 'in-group's' defining characteristic, to be played with, juggled with, and to do all sorts of wonderful tricks with: after all, it is very rarely tested since it doesn't relate to reality…"
The formation of the SWP

Agitation and propaganda

On dozens of questions, over the years, the IS (SWP) leaders have developed the idea that they can say one thing in "agitation", and quite a different in "propaganda". To say that agitation and propaganda are both essential is not to say that they just lead to action. It is to say that education and action must be integrated, must interact, that the most important and chief reason for anything to be said and done is that it educates the mass and raises their consciousness, preferably in action.

After the mid-1960s SR/IS drafted out of the Labour Party. They were still in the Young Socialists, and effectively they had control of the YS for a period after the Heath government. Although it was not a complete YS. Militant did not yet have much presence. There would be at least one case of a YS branch joining IS now.

IS started to develop a perspective based on industrial action. They published a book written by Cliff and Colin Barker, called "Incomes Policy, Legislation, and Shop Stewards", in 1966. It was sold to many contacts. It was heavily syndicalist.

Focus on rank-and-file workplace struggles, and more or less clearly suggested that linking-up and escalation of any workplace struggles was a sufficient strategy to achieve socialism.

There is a strange history to this question. The Healyites believe that agitation and propaganda are one thing and the most important thing. The SWP, on the other hand, believe that agitation and propaganda are two different things.

Unless we have a clear conception that the reason for putting demands, for making agitation and propaganda, is directly to try to raise the level of consciousness, to show that there is something wrong with the present units, to sharpen that struggle so that the masses, or at least those of the vanguard that we reach, learn the best political lessons from it, we are hamstrung from the start, we are tied down to a reformist conception, to a stance of petitioning the powers that be, looking to their actions and decisions for alleviation, rather than to the direct action of the working class.

If there is no mass action to make a demand that wasn’t immediately realised.

Moreover, if we do not see the various forms of "communication" (demands, slogans, agitation, propaganda, headlines and small print) as necessarily bound together by a single aim and programme, with the single purpose of raising consciousness (whether this be ‘purely’ literary or whether it be linked with immediate action) then what is there to link them, to prevent them flying apart into contradictions and inconsistencies?

For revolutionaries, there can be no contradiction between the content of agitation, propaganda and theory. The difference is one of form, of style and technique, and of scale. The content and meaning does not differ according to whether action might or might not follow, or whether that action is on a mass or a personal scale.

What is the essential meaning of the well-known definition of Plekhanov: “A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator present only one of ideas that is propaganda, but flowing out of it, and effective because they agreed with him. Cliff responded by talking about "the urgent threat of fascism". That was nonsense, and I don’t suppose Cliff believed it. But it was part of a “join IS” campaign. In 1968 IS also called suddenly for left unity, on a minimal four-point platform:

1. Opposition to imperialism; for the victory of all genuine national liberation movements.
2. Opposition to racism in all its forms and to controls on immigration.
3. Opposition to state control of trade unions; support for all progressive strikes.
4. Workers’ control of society and industry as the only alternative to fascism.

That too was blatantly demagogic. Who did they expect to unite with? The Militant group? The Healyites? They didn’t in fact expect anybody. It was a come-on.

Workers’ Fight had come into existence as a public organisation in October 1967. The editorial in the first issue of our magazine, which we then expanded and produced as a small pamphlet, was a call for Trotskyist regroupment. We believed, and we said, that the existing main organisations of Trotskyism were completely bankrupt, and we were calling for a regroupment of individual Trotskyists.

We didn’t believe IS’s talk about the urgent threat of fascism. But when they made their call for unity we responded, not because we believed their demagogy, but because IS was a relatively loose organisation, comparatively speaking a democratic organisation, and we could continue doing what we were doing separately, such things as workplace bulletins and campaigning against the Vietnam war.

1968: growth and demagogic

In 1967-8 IS grew quickly because the Healy organisation was increasingly sectarian and increasingly bizarre. IS became a very disparate, chaotic organisation, and unbelievably demagogic in many ways. In April 1968 the Tony M P Enoch Powell made a vehement speech against immigration. The London dockers, who had been on a ten-week strike just recently, struck and marched supposedly in defence of Powell’s right to free speech (he had been sacked from the Tory front bench), but in reality because they agreed with him. Cliff responded by talking about “the urgent threat of fascism”. That was nonsense, and I don’t suppose Cliff believed it. But it was part of a “join IS” campaign. In 1968 IS also called suddenly for left unity, on a minimal four-point platform:

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After 1970

In 1970 the Tories unexpectedly won the general election. In IS the run-up to the 1970 election there had been many different attitudes to the Labour Party. There were people who were against it in all conditions, and there were people who were very much for it.

Cliff’s approach on that question illustrated IS’s characteristically narrow approach at that period. A snapshot: IS conference at the Beaver Hall in central London, Easter 1969.

IS has over 1000 members, mostly young, politically raw, with bright enthusiasm for economic affairs and an interest in political restraint. Ultra-left, in the in-your-guts sense in which young people should be instinctively ultra-left. All they need is experience, political education, tempering, and the benefit of the political wisdom of the older comrades. But what will they get?

There is a dispute in the group about what to say in the next general election. Can we really call for a Labour vote? For Wilson’s Labour government? Everybody, even those who think we should vote for the labour movement’s party,
hates the Labour Party. It is only nine or ten months since nine million French workers have staged a stupendous general strike and seized the factories. Things are heated and alarmingly confused at conference. 

Cliff is called to speak and trots down the gangway to the large, room-style lowered stage in front. He grabs the microphone militantly, as if he’s going to fight with it, body language exuding combativity and positively teenage impatience with political restraints.

“This”, he said heatedly, “is an unnecessary discussion. We don’t need it. You know why we don’t need it? Because we won’t take part in the blinking election when they call it. What’ll we do? We’ll call for a general strike, that’s what we’ll do! Not a general election, but a general strike!” Thunderous applause.

What happened when the election came? IS shouted: vote Labour.

The young people who needed calming down had been fed with amphetamines; those who needed political education, placated with political gibberish! But it “worked”. Cliff was fed with amphetamines; those who needed political education, placated with political gibberish! But it “worked”. Cliff was as free from Lenin when he was as “Leninist” as when he had been an “anti-Leninist”.

Later he would start to use Lenin as a Cliff palimpsest, as a way of justifying himself. Someone joked about the multi-volume biography of Lenin which Cliff would publish from 1979 that it was a biography of Tony Cliff by Lenin. It was an enterprise in collecting texts and facts from Lenin’s life so that they would fit whatever Cliff wanted to do.

Fundamentally what happened after 1970 was that the leadership sensed new opportunities and wanted to get the group — which in 1968-9 had been very chaotic — into shape. There was nothing to be condemned in them wanting to get the group into shape. The question is how they did it.

The dispute on Europe 1971

By mid-1971 there was a lot of bad feeling between the Trotskyist Tendency and the IS leadership. We had disputed with them on Ireland and other issues. What triggered their move to expel us was the question of the Common Market (as the European Union was called at that time).

The campaign to expel us took the form of a “de-fusion” campaign. It was done that way because the members would not have been quiet about a purge if it had not been dressed up. The leadership called a special conference, and we had a very fruitful six weeks to campaign against the expulsion.

It was a very democratic six weeks in its forms. Though in practice it was unbalanced and subject to the most god-awful demagogy, it did not seem obviously the end of a democratic regime. A lot of people voted for the expulsion who would not have voted for its implications.

When we pointed out the implications of confining the right opposition to episodic single issues, we were generally not believed. That was partly because among those supporting our expulsion were people who had been on the same side as us on the Common Market issue. The difference between them and us was that we had tried to requisition an IS special conference to stop Cliff changing the policy as he did.

The IS leadership carried the day at the conference, with 40% opposing them. About 35% of us refused to accept the ban on the faction. We had the option of going underground and pretending that our faction had dissolved, but we felt that doing that would simply dissipate our strength and miseducate people. So we went out on 4 December 1971.

A few people who hadn’t made their minds up then would join us later. One member of the Trotskyist Tendency decided to stay in the IS. He said that the differences were not big enough to justify the separation. On one level that was true: the initiative for the separation did not come from us.

We set about organising the group in the way it hadn’t been organised as a tendency in IS. A couple of comrades, Phil Samp and the late Dave Spencer, remortgaged their houses and we bought a printing press. We rented an office and set out to produce a fortnightly paper.

We were suddenly faced with responding directly to a rising class struggle, and it was very invigorating. There was a miners’ strike in early 1972, which was victorious. The closing of Saltley Gates, which was decisive in that strike, was about the time we produced the first issue of our paper.
### The formation of the SWP

#### Chronology

1940, April: the Trotskyist movement splits, in the USA and internationally, between those who "defend" the USSR invading Finland (led by James P Cannon) and those who reject such defence (led by Max Shachtman). Over the next decade this split between "orthodox" Trotskyists (Cannon and others) and "Third Camp" Trotskyists (Shachtman and others) will widen and consolidate.

1946, September: Tony Cliff comes to Britain, and joins the majority faction of the British Trotskyist movement (the RCP), led by Jack Haslam and Ted Grant.

1947, the majority of the British Trotskyists, led by Gerry Healy, separate from the RCP majority in order to begin systematic work in the Labour Party around the paper Socialist Outlook. Cliff moves to Dublin (until 1951).

1948, June: Cliff publishes first version of "Russia: A Marxist Analysis".

1949, August: The RCP collapses; its members join the Labour Party and are reunited with the Healy group there.

1950, June: Korean war starts.

1950, September: Supporters of Tony Cliff expelled from the British Trotskyist group in the Labour Party, led by Gerry Healy, and form their own "Socialist Review" (SR) group. 33 members.


1953, Crisis in SR group: paper appears only with big gaps.

1954, February: Khrušchev denounces Stalin. Over the next couple of years a big crisis develops in the British Communist Party. Meanwhile, from 1955 strike activity (mostly local, short, and unofficial) increases (average 2,069,000 striker-days per year 1945-54; 4,601,000 1955-59).


1958-60: SR group much eclipsed by Healyites; has crisis in 1959; redefines itself as "Luxemburgist".

1960: Labour Party relaunches Young Socialists; all the Trotskyist groups will grow with recruits from the 1%; clear disarmament movement also flourishes.


1961, Young Guard launched (paper for YS also including the future Militant but dominated by SR). SR also launches Industrial Worker, soon renamed Labour Worker.

1962, SR ceases publication; group takes the name IS.

1964, October: Labour returns to office (until 1970). After about 1968 disillusion with Labour will become angry and widespread. In 1964 Healyites pull out of Labour Party to launch their own "IS" (they had won the majority in the official YS). IS left with majority of YS.

1965: IS shifts to more detached attitude to Labour Party: between 1966 and 1968 it will drift out, bit by bit. By the end of 1965 IS has increased to 200 members, from a couple of dozen in late 1950s to 200. It shifts to an orientation to "linking the fragments" of (mostly industrial) militancy.

1966, August: Founding nucleus of what would become Workers' Fight, and today the AWL, breaks from Militant group and publishes its document What We Are And What Must Become.

1968, May-June: Name of Labour Worker changed to Socialist Worker (and in September SW goes weekly). IS responds to anti-immigrant speech by Tony politician Enoch Powell by proclaiming "urgent threat of fascism" and calling for left unity on the basis of four points. IS is growing fast—maybe 1000 by the end of 1968.

1968, June: Cliff calls for democratic centralism.

1968, December: Workers' Fight merges with IS.

1969, August (and after): sharp dispute between Workers' Fight (Trotskyist Trend) and IS leaders over IS leaders' effective support for deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland.

1971, June: IS switches from its previous line on Europe. "In or out, the fight goes on", to "No to the Common Market". The shift is first proposed as a tactical fallback (vote no if your internationalist resolution has been defeated in your union branch), but soon becomes IS policy; the old line disappears.

1971, December: IS expels ("de-fuses") Workers' Fight at a special conference.

1973, April: IS expels the "Right Opposition" on the following grounds: "The undeclared Right grouping within IS is fundamentally out of consonance with IS politics, programme, strategy and tactics... The NC therefore resolves to expel the main proponents...".

1973, Summer: crisis in IS leadership — EC purged — High Higg and others in opposition.

1974, February: Tories fall, Labour government elected. SWP policy of "steering left" (ultra-militancy).

1974, March: IS organises first national Rank and File conference. Votes down amendment, moved by Workers' Fight, for commitment against racism, for abortion rights, for manual trade unionists quit.

1975, December: IS proclaims the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP).

1976, December: IS proclaims the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP).

1977, August: Anti-fascist "Battle of Lewisham".

1977, November: SWP launches Anti-Nazi League ("alternative to street-fighting").

1977, November: Third (and last) national Rank and File conference declares one-day general strike for 7 December in support of the fire-fighters, then on strike. Complete failure.

1978, April: Cliff starts arguing "downturn" thesis.

1979, May: Labour loses election, Thatcher takes power.

1979, November: SWP conference formally adopts "downturn" thesis.

1980, Rank and file left-wing rebellion explodes in the Labour Party. SWP aloof.

1984, April: Tony Cliff says that the miners' strike, then in its fourth week and still on the up and up, "is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers' Party have called the 'downturn' in the movement".

1985, March: Student Jewish society banned at Sunderland Polytechnic because it will not disavow Zionism. SWP evasive but sympathetic to ban.

1986, October: SWP publishes pamphlet, "Israel: The Hijack State" (with cover pic of Israel as mad dog dragging along Uncle Sam).

1987, September: SWP switches line on Iran/Iraq war (raging since 1980) to support for Iran.

1988 June: SWP announces the end of the "downturn" and its replacement by the "new mood of anger".

1992, October: SWP demands "General Strike Now / TUC must act" against new pit closures.

1993, July: SWP beats up AWL member Mark Sandell for leafleting at SWP summer event.

1997, SWP republishes itself as those who "hate the Tories but have doubts about Blair".

2000 to 2003: SWP participates in London Socialist Alliance, then Socialist Alliance, with AWL and others.

2000, April: Tony Cliff dies.

2001: SWP expels ISO-USA from its international network.

2002, April: SWP signals full-scale turn towards Islamism by uncritically backing Muslim Association of Britain demonstration against Israel.

2004, January, to 2007, September: SWP in Respect coalition with George Galloway, and then ejected by Galloway (who takes a few prominent SWPers with him). SWP leadership scapgoats John Rees for the fiasco.

2010, February: John Rees, Lindsey German and others quit SWP, form Counterfire.

2011, April: Chris Bambery quits SWP, forms ISG.

### More on the SWP

The SWP crisis of 2013

workersliberty.org/node/20344: The SWP crisis of 2013: weblinks

workersliberty.org/node/20342: The SWP and "Leninism": response to Alex Callinicos's "Is Leninism finished?"

workersliberty.org/iso: Where will SWP opposition go? (comment on ISO-USA and Socialist Alternative)

The political record of SWP-IS

workersliberty.org/node/9394: The paradoxes of Tony Cliff, 1917-2000: a critical memoir, by Sean Matgamna

workersliberty.org/node/17352: "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice": review by Paul Hampton of Ian Birchall's biography of Tony Cliff


workersliberty.org/in-1969: The politics of IS (SWP): a 1969 speech on IS's switch from concreted "Luxemburgism" to a "Leninism" redefined as administrative centralisation

The IS-SWP tradition: a Workers' Liberty symposium

workersliberty.org/jeffreys: Steve Jeffreys

workersliberty.org/node/16561: Ken Coates, Sheila Rowbotham, Stan Newens, the ISG workersliberty.org/node/16545: Jim Higgins, James D Young, Mike McGrath workersliberty.org/node/14419: John Palmer workersliberty.org/node/13526: Pete Keenlyside

Also

workersliberty.org/node/16608: Alex Callinicos and the future of the SWP: Workers' Liberty 3/33

workersliberty.org/swp: AWL versus SWP: educational and background texts

workersliberty.org/node/19062: “Neither plague nor cholera”: open letter to SWP about their call for a vote for the Muslim Brotherhood
the Healyites (selectively, of course) to break from the broad labour movement and build IS as an organisation revolving on its own axis. That did not last for ever all at once, and there was resistance to it even after 1975. A whole swathe of the cadres — Higgins was the representational figure — had been members of IS in the 1960s when it was an organisation which got off on skiting at the Healyites, jeering at them, mocking them, very sceptical, "Luxemburgist". That hermitage was inimical to what Cliff was now trying to do. A Healyite would have joined some sort of restating, sustained by vote, conviction, and intolerance, with the moral cadres IS had had before 1968.

Cliff went through various manoeuvres, culminating in an exodus of the people around Higgins. They were expelled for refusing to dissolve their faction after the 1975 conference. It was an irony after their role in expelling us and the Right Opposition.

From that point on, IS was consolidated as a single-leader, rather cultist group, oriented to building its own organisation on any basis Cliff decided was usable. The group became highly centralised to the point that, some years down the track, an organiser could simply expel someone at will. The days when Cliff would boast that no more than four people had been expelled in the whole history of the group were no longer cited as a model.

The next great landmark came between April 1978 and 1980 when Cliff became convinced of the "downturn" and imposed that doctrine on the SWP. This "downturn" doctrine was a vastly premature giving up on the struggle. In this as in other things Cliff followed in the tracks of other people, in the first place of Eric Hobsbawm, who first put forward a similar thesis in March 1973. The "downturn" period was, I think, the final nail in the process of making IS (from 1977, the SWP) a self-orientated sect. There had been a progression in the previous history of the group. They related to the Labour Party. Then they tried to relate to the rank-and-file industrial movement. They tried to relate to the shop stewards. They retreated and become more and more self-oriented in the cult of Cliffism. At some point in the declaration at the end of the 1970s that the labour movement had no more potential for struggle and nothing could be done except building the SWP.

In 1979, after Labour lost the election, a big upsurge began in the Labour Party, backed by some of the unions and even some of the union leaders. The phenomenon is known as "Bennism", though there was a lot more to it than that term would convey. The SWP was not repelled and grew at the beginning of the 1980s — and the SWP stood aloof. They coined an idiotic witicism to explain why they would not join the Labour left: if you want to push a wheelbarrow, you don't sit in it.

In the great miners' strike of 1984-5, Cliff would write: "The miners' strike is an extreme example of what we in the Socialist Workers Party have called "downturn" in the movement" (Socialist Worker, 14 April 1984).

Week after week in the early months of the strike, when it was very buoyant, Socialist Worker would deplore its short-comings and comment sadly that it was going ill. June in it saw it as almost lost. "The chance was lost to rejuvenate a strike which has been drifting towards a 'compromise' settlement." Until October 1984, it deplored the miners' support groups set up by many trades councils and Labour Parties as "left-wing Oxfam". Throughout it ignored the calls for a general strike and for wider strike action by many people in the labour movement, and polemicated against the idea of a general strike as only sectarian hot air.

Only after October 1984 did the SWP correct itself, and then only partly.

What happened to IS democracy?

There is no doubt that IS was loosely democratic up to the mid 1970s. What happened to it in 1979? There was a Commission on Factions. Its report denied that there could be such a thing as an ideological tendency. There could be divisions defined by short-term battles over short-term issues. But the Trotskyist tendency was a tendency. We were people from a different tradition who upheld what we thought to be the basic and long-term ideas of that tradition; we were not a faction in the narrow sense of fighting over each day-to-day issue, or fighting for control. We didn't want to be.

So the Commission report proposed to wipe out the basis on which the Trotskyist Tendency existed. It was carried by the National Committee. That was the basic legislation under which the expulsion of the Trotskyist Tendency was carried through in 1971, and the drive by the leadership against IS democracy started.

Even then IS was quite democratic. We got 40% of the vote at the special conference called to expel us. A breakaway from our tendency, which developed into what became known as the Right Opposition, was placated into effectively condoning the expulsion by way of silence; without that there might possibly have defeated the leadership. It was still possible for members to contribute to an internal bulletin, and there were real debates.

But the conditions were changing rapidly. A machine of full-time organisers was being built up. We had no objection to that. We were in favour of the organisation having the resources and weight which full-time workers could give it. The problem was how, in what political culture, with what conception of what the organisation must do, that machine was being built up.

In a small platform in the Trotskyist Tendency: "It is not a machine or hard 'professional' centre, as such, that is objectionable... but this machine, staffed by these specific people, with their specific attitudes, ideas, and."

The machine was built around the previously informal cultism of the old IS group, around Cliff. It saw its job as augmenting the organisation, using political ideas as instruments and selecting them by assessment of what would best attract attention and support; and it saw Cliff's hunches and instincts as the main instrument of that assessment.

Only a year and a bit after our expulsion, the Right Opposition was expelled, in early 1973. Workers' Fight had had two splits in a meeting in July 1971. One splinter dissipated quickly, but the other was in fact already a distinct tendency, which remained in IS after we were expelled. This was a grouping whose actual leader was Roy Tease, who had been in the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s and out of politics since.

Cliff had a policy in 1968 of trying to resuscitate old members. He succeeded with Duncan Hallas, who was a very useful man from Cliff's point of view, and was undoubtedly talented, and he failed with Tease. But he got Tease rounded up enough to show an interest and start developing a group of disciples.

This opposition tendency included a wide variety of people — David Yaffe, Tony Polan, Matthew Warburton, and others. They had learned from our fate, and they would not proclaim a faction. To take advantage of the still-liberal regime, they published pamphlets of their own on particular subjects. They seem to have reached an agreement with the leadership on that. They published a pamphlet on the Common Market, another on the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders and the shipyard workers, and another on racism. In practice they were a faction, or a tendency.

The new opposition called itself the Revolutionary Opposition, but was known by the IS leaders, and I think rightly, as the Right Opposition. They became quite numerous. The IS leaders, and anyone else with sense, could see that their claim not to be a faction was only pretence, but, oddly, quite a few people joined the opposition who really believed that it was not a faction.

They were right-wing because they had no confidence in the rank-and-file industrial militancy that was springing up all around them. They were very pessimistic. They said that the militants were running ahead of the masses, and that could be remedied only by first winning broad support for a worked-out Marxist perspective before there could be large working-class activity.

They were expelled in early 1973. About six people were expelled on the grounds that they had ideas "out of consonance with IS politics, programme, strategy and tactics". The implication was that expelling us as IS did was that certain socialist ideas were not reconcilable with membership of the group, but here the IS leaders spelled it out very clearly: you could leave the organisation because the leadership found your political differences too extenive.

That would progress quickly to mean: any serious difference of all at once too big! By 1992, prominent people were being expelled simply for criticising one of Cliff's far-fetched ideas, or the call for a general strike to stop a new round of pit closures. The labour movement was in 1992 nowhere near mov-
loose and unstructured. To a large extent the leadership was not under the control of the members. The members could debate and pass resolutions, but the leadership would then decide what was done and how it was done. It was a bit like conditions in a trade union where members can dissent freely enough to force a debate but the final decisions find ways not to be bound by those resolutions.

Once the group lost its “extended family” character, and a formal organisational structure was introduced, the alternatives were either that Cliff’s hunches and improvisations would often be thwarted, or that the structure be shaped to allow for a formal and regular enforcement of whatever came out of Cliff by way of the Central Committee, with little or no debate outside the C.C. The SWP leaders chose the second course, and after 1971 imposed it as an ever-tightening noose around the neck of the organisation.

After the “downturn”

How did later political turns by the SWP, such as its lurch after 1987 towards supporting almost any force which came into conflict with the USA, happen?

It is beyond the scope of this supplement to analyse each and every turn. A fundamental fact, however, is that the drastic political turns were possible only because the regime was what it was. Cliff could do things like he did in 1992. In that year the Tory government proposed to close 31 out of the remaining 50 coal mines left in the country. There was a great upsurge of indignation. Suddenly, the SWP, which had been talking about a downturn, printed thousands of posters and placards calling for a general strike. It became their slogan for a brief period when there were two big demonstrations, one on a Wednesday and another the following Sunday. The SWP expelled people for disagreeing with their approach to politics. Such was the regime.

There was a loss of political consciousness, a wholesale conversion to a method of chasing hunches and inspirations which would attract (or it was hoped would attract) attention and support. Then after each turn the members would be told that only “sectarians” cheated over past differences, and it was time to lunch in another direction.

There was a depoliticisation, an erosion of political ideas beyond the level of asserting the need for socialism, and therefore the need to build “the party” and to deploy whatever ideas would help to build “the party”.

I never really liked the old IS people, as types. Their whole approach to politics was very limited. Someone like Jim Higgins can go on lamenting until his death many years later the fact that he left his job as a post office engineer to become national secretary of IS and was then booted out: that says something about socialism, and it’s not a revolutionary spirit. But these people were relatively independent-minded and well-educated.

After the mid-1970s Cliff had got rid of nearly all of them. Mutatis mutandis, and keeping all things in proportion, it was a bit like Stalin’s purge of all the factions, including his own, in the mid 1930s. It left Cliff with national secretaries who had no independent political stature. There was a general decline of the political level.

The focus on “building the party”, and its use as a substitute for real political answers in the real world, inevitably produced a depoliticisation of the membership. The approach was a straight steal from the Healyites in the middle and late 1960s.

There was a progressive selection and reselection of membership from second-rank leaders. A lot of people dropped out. Some old-stagers stayed and adapted. The young people were mis-educated into the idea that “the party” as such is an answer to specific political questions and that the internal life of the party must be the peace of the graveyard.

The depoliticisation made all the changes possible. Cliff’s penchant for revolution was a characteristic of the factionalism. Until the middle 1960s he was heavily oriented to academic-type productions, and to argument that the struggle for socialism does better with loose coalitions and networks.

But what is a revolutionary party?

The answer to the question, what is a revolutionary party?, is another question: what is a revolutionary party for? What does it do? The passage quoted at the start of this supplement, from Plekhanov, stated the guiding idea of the Bolshevik party: “The new Socialists consider it their principal, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of class consciousness among the proletariat”. If you subscribe to “the party”, the IS, the SWP and the SWP’s methods are a distillation of forty years’ successful work to “build the party”, and that if the SWP adopted the IS’s methods then it would allegedly be “smaller and weaker”.

In revolution against such arguments, some left-wing critics of the SWP, and probably some people within the SWP, come to deny outright the idea of building a revolutionary party, and to argue that the struggle for socialism does better with only loose coalitions and networks.

What is the revolutionary party?

Throughout, since the early 1970s, the SWP or IS leaders’ final reply to all criticism has been the need to “build the party”, and the assertion that the gambits, methods, and policies which they propose are necessary to “build the party”. The ILP didn’t really care what your politics were, as long as you didn’t express your disagreement in SWP or AWL, put it — you could disagree on, say, the Middle East so long as you didn’t express your disagreement in SWP branch meetings and thus “confuse” other members.

At the end of the day, Cliff believed in some vague socialism, and then in himself — his own instinct and his own, informed by the political culture he’d been formed in and industrial unionism. And, though the ILP was a loose organisation, it had in its own way made a fetish of the party.

The ILP didn’t really care what your politics were, as long as you didn’t express your disagreement in SWP branch meetings and thus “confuse” other members. The ILP is centrally important. But it is important within a cluster of ideas, then it is not a socialist party being addressed.

In order to do the work of promoting class consciousness, the revolutionary party has to be so organised that it is clear politically, and it learns from events. The whole party must be able to learn from experience and then spread the knowledge to all the membership, but the people who make the final decisions find ways not to be bound by those resolutions.

The ILP’s methods are a distillation of forty years’ successful work to “build the party”, and “building the party” is one of the dominant traits of the SWP.

The revolutionary party must be structured democratically, as the Trotskyite and SWP tradition of centralisation is in action. Given unity in action, there can be as much discussion as necessary. Without discussion in the ranks — honest discussion, which allows more than one viewpoint — it is not possible to train an expropriated membership.

If “building the party” becomes the all-saving, all-explaining, all-defining idea in politics, then the membership becomes more or less depoliticised. To shout “build the party” as the answer to political questions now is only another way of saying: leave it until later.

The cry “build the revolutionary party” expresses a yearning for a condition of completeness, a condition where the working class is militant and socially conscious. It is a yearning for a general change in conditions which cannot be brought about at will, translated into something which can in theory be brought about at will, namely building the organisation.

But if the organisation is healthy, its role is to prepare the working class and educate the working class. You cannot do that by means of organisations, but you can do it if it is brought into the broader working-class. That is not a revolutionary party, whatever size it has, and whatever implantation it has.

The early Christians believed that the second coming of Christ was beyond the level of asserting the need for socialism, and it cannot be abstracted as an answer in and of itself to the problems or delays of that process. If the party mistakes its function, if it has a wrong idea of its purpose, then it will not do what it might do to prepare the conditions in which a revolutionary party can lead the working class. The fetishisation of “building the party”, and the subordination to it of everything else, is a harm less aberration. It is poisonous.

Suppose the SWP took power. For that to be even possible we would have to have tremendous transformations in the working class, perhaps even their only, duty to promote the growth of class consciousness among the proletariat”. If you subscribe to “the party”, the IS, the SWP and the SWP’s methods are a distillation of forty years’ successful work to “build the party”, and that if the SWP adopted the IS’s methods then it would allegedly be “smaller and weaker”.

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