South Africa: the case for a workers’ party

In its response to the struggles in South Africa, Socialist Action has aligned itself more or less totally with the African National Congress (ANC), ignoring or dismissing as sectarian, groups to its left like black consciousness and the non-racial trade union. Tom Rigby examines Socialist Action’s policy and the theories constructed to justify it.

SOCIALIST Action’s long march away from working-class politics passed another milestone recently with the publication of an article by ‘Rick Carter’ (John Boss) on ‘Revolution in South Africa’ (1 November 1985).

The article is the most elaborate attempt so far by Socialist Action to theorise its political line on South Africa. It gives no facts, information or detail about what’s going on in South Africa. Instead, it argues entirely by abstract logic. It says:

- The ‘axis’ of the revolution in South Africa is the democratic question.
- All political forces in the liberation movement are to be judged by their attitude to the democratic changes of the revolution — redistribution of land; free trade unions; one person, one vote; an end to the apartheid system.
- Judged from this point of view, Socialist Action says that the new emerging black workers’ movement in South Africa is not as politically advanced or developed as the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF). (The UDF is the broad cross-class alliance of some 650 affiliated groups; it identifies with the tradition of the Congress Alliance, and its leader Nelson Mandela, but also includes religious leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Alan Boesak).
- As a result ‘in this fight for democracy Marrists seek unity in action with the revolutionary nationalist organisations in South Africa such as the ANC’.

The struggle for democracy is to be carried through by the implementation of the ANC’s programme, the Freedom Charter. But ‘these democratic tasks can only be carried through by transferring political power into the hands of the working class’.

Leadership

Underlying this analysis is a conception of the ANC as part of an emerging ‘new world leadership’. The other components of this group, says Socialist Action, are the NUM leadership in Britain, the leadership of Sinn Fein in Ireland, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Cuban ruling elite around Fidel Castro.

The article is a contrived and scholastic attempt to give a Trotskyist gloss to a position argued more starkly by the US associate of Socialist Action, the Socialist Workers’ Party (USA) and its paper ‘Militant’.

The recent SWP conference — according to ‘Militant’ — ended with the delegates chanting ‘ANC! ANC! ANC!’ The SWP’s position on South Africa is to support the ANC 100% and uncritically and to ignore all the other forces in the South African liberation movement — black consciousness groups like Azapo, semi-Trotskyist groups like the Cape Action League, the independent trade unions, etc.

In the first place this falsifies reality. Though the ANC is probably the strongest single political force in the liberation movement, other influences are sizeable, and the trade unions are probably the biggest organised force of the movement. In the second place the SWP’s position represents, to a considerable degree, an alignment with the right wing of the liberation movement against the wing that wants a socialist revolution.

Socialist Action has the same line, only decked out with more pompous theory.

Ross’s argument consists of a nominally Trotskyist framework and a Stalinist political content.

Take one of Socialist Action’s central contentions: that the new non-racial independent trade unions are less politically advanced than the ANC/UDF. The unions are ‘not one homogeneous force. A real genuine living movement of hundreds of thousands of workers cannot be. There are competing and very different strands within the unions. But the mainstream, as represented by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), is not at all politically developed than the ANC/UDF.

At the 1982 FOSATU congress, for example, general secretary Joe Foster rejected social democracy and Stalinism as models of working-class politics.

In the capitalist economy these working-class movements have power and organisation yet politically the working class is still subject to policies and practices that are clearly against their interests. And as the struggle of Solidarity shows, even the fact that a country is said to be socialist does not guarantee that workers control their own destiny. Solidarity was not struggling to restore capitalism in Poland, its struggle was to establish more democratic worker control over their socialist society’.

He pointed out that the real world is not just one of apartheid and anti-apartheid, but of capital and labour.

‘Behind the scenes of the great battle between the apartheid regime and its popular opponents the capitalist economy has flourished and capital emerges now as a powerful and different force. In the economy capital and labour are the major forces, yet politically the struggle is being fought elsewhere’.

Moreover, from a working-class point of view the ANC’s policies are alien. In particular: ‘To the major Western powers it has to appear as anti-racist but not as anti-capitalist. For the socialist East it has to be at least neutral in the super-power struggle and certainly it could not appear to offer a serious socialist alternative to that of these countries as the response to Solidarity illustrates. These factors must seriously affect its relationship to workers’.

Nationalism

Foster also referred to the general experience of Third World nationalism.

‘All the great and successful popular movements have had as their aim the overthrow of oppressive — most often colonial — regimes. But these movements cannot and have not themselves been able to deal with the particular and fundamental problems of workers. Their task is to remove regimes that are regarded as illegitimate and unacceptable by the majority. It is, therefore, essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. This organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters’.
Some trade unionists have gone further. For instance, Moses Mayekiso, secretary of the Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (a FOSATU affiliate) in the Transvaal: ‘At present the FOSATU shop stewards’ councils, and also MAWU, are discussing the political set-up. We are looking at the crisis and the solution to the crisis. The general feeling is that the workers must have their own party and their own freedom charter...’

The Freedom Charter of the ANC is a capitalist document. We need a workers’ charter that will say clearly who will control the farms, presently owned by the capitalists and state, control the mines, the mines and so on. There must be a change of the whole society. Through the shop stewards councils people are opposed to this idea that there will be two stages towards socialism, first capitalism, then socialism. It’s a waste of time, a waste of energy and a waste of people’s blood.

On the questions of Stalinism, the independent role of the working class, workers’ control, and democracy, the unions are very advanced indeed.

**Politics**

Anyway, even if the unions were politically correct, revolutionary Marxists could not prefer the ANC to the real living, growing, workers’ movement. The working class as it actually exists and organises is our starting point. History is made by class struggle, not by the using of abstract concepts. The attitude of Marxists to cross-class nationalist organisations can never, even at its most sympathetic, be the same as for workers. The ANC and Marxist politics is the self-liberation of the working class.

The ANC is an organisation which deserves a far better fate than to fight against apartheid. It is not in any meaningful sense a workers’ organisation. At the core of the ANC is a hardened Stalinist group, the South African Communist Party, who have a political perspective of a two-stage revolution — first ‘democratic’, then afterwards a class struggle for socialism. Around this core have been attached various liberal and democratic figures. Since it went underground in the early ’60s, the ANC has been dependent on the material aid of Stalinist governments. Its magazine, for instance, is published in East Germany.

So the ANC cannot be judged just by what it writes on paper. And in terms of the actual aspirations of the black working class for democracy and workers’ control, the programme of the ANC does not go very far at all.

From the angle of democracy the Charter has been criticised for ‘liberalism’ and in particular for the two-stage move for defining the oppressed blacks according to apartheid’s categories of Coloured, Asian, and African. In relation to workers, the Charter is very limited. Women in the new independent unions have won more in terms of maternity leave and benefits than is mentioned in the Charter.

The tactics of the South African CP’s two-stage strategy is much worse: it is ‘socialism’ on the model of the USSR. No advanced democracy there.

But it is not only what one might expect from a Stalinist organisation, the ANC is very utopianist and bureaucratic about the struggle for democracy. Rather than taking its cue from the actual mobilisations of workers and peasants against the miseries of capitalism, it uses those issues to reinforce the strength, prestige, and bargaining position of its apparatus.

From the early 1960s until recently, the ANC’s politics centred round guerrilla armed actions, discord among the working class. Today its slogans are ‘make South Africa unenovable’ and ‘no education before liberation’. It does not seek to help the masses form the practical basis of democratic gains, but rather to increase the disorder that harasses the regime.

It has no immediate democratic demands for those of us who are in South Africa in the black townships. It supports the campaign to destroy the local councils that collaborate with the regime, but proposes no positive alternative — even when workers’ leaders like Alex Erwin, by contrast, have proposed the building of democratic, accountable structures in the townships to lead struggles on issues like rents, fares, civil rights and so on.

The ANC’s attitude to the democratic struggle for legal rights for trade unions has throughout been negative. Seeking to preserve for itself a position of sole representative of South African non-racial trade unionism (though SACTU organises no workers in South Africa), the ANC claimed that the workers’ trade unions were impossible in ‘fascist’ South Africa. When the non-racial trade unions won semi-legal status, the ANC denounced them as ‘economists’.

As Charlie van Gelderen has documented in ‘Internal’ no.1, the ANC is still slandering the unions today. It still opposes direct links between South African and British trade unions.

The ANC’s demands have to ‘End Apartheid’ and ‘Free Nelson Mandela’. Neither is quite what it seems. ‘End Apartheid’ means ‘hand over to, or at least negotiate with, the ANC’. ‘Free Mandela’ is in the first place a sectarian slogan: groups like Azapo have argued rightly that the slogan should be ‘free all political prisoners’. And the ANC also insists that it will not accept the freeing of Mandela unless it is without conditions and other ANC prisoners are also released. The aim, in other words, is not so much to free Mandela as to highlight his position as the ANC as symbols of opposition to apartheid.

**Support**

True, the ANC has tremendous support among the black people of South Africa, support won by its status as a symbol (recognised by governments) of opposition to apartheid, and by the courage of its militants like Nelson Mandela. But, despite the heroism, the ANC is not a good leadership of the struggle for democracy. And with its present tactics it will never be.

The struggle for democracy in South Africa is intertwined with the class struggle of the black workers and peasants. The struggle for democracy in South Africa is not a sectional struggle dedicated to the maximum independent mobilisation of those workers and peasants.

To advocate a workers’ party counterposed to the ANC is not, as Ross would have it, a sectarian mistakes. The struggle for democracy itself calls for a workers’ party.

Even from a democratic point of view, let alone a socialist one, the ANC’s volume and its strategy are not advanced but deeply flawed.

The mode of operation of the UDF is one that might be described as deeply suspicious of. It is an organisation with no formal democratic structures. Actions are called without any consultation with the constituent bodies. The unions feel that they are being treated as a stage army by the middle-class leaders of the UDF. An evaluation has the middle-class leaders of the UDF by car to the prison. This points to the basic problem: that although the UDF can mobilise hundreds under its auspices, it is not treated by large numbers of trade union militants who have no more commitment to democracy and rank-and-file control in the workers’ movement.

**Combine**

The SWP-US (and its co-thinkers in Britain) are relative workers’ militants. They coupled the alignment to the Stalinist ANC with a rejection of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. Ross, however, tries to combine the same practical conclusions with a formal acceptance of Trotsky’s theory. So while saying ‘The solution of the democratic tasks of the South African revolution, which are its axis of development, can only be solved in the direction of permanent revolution’ (Socialist Action — apart from mangling the English language — ends up advocating a political perspective which means subordinating the working-class programme of bourgeois democracy in a struggle led by a Stalinist political formation.

Now Trotsky’s theory in its bare essentials is this: in a ‘backward’ or ‘under-developed’ capitalist society, one where elements of modern industry are combined with pre-capitalist political and social relations (feudalism on the land, colonial overlords), one that is in the process of capitalist development, the revolution against these pre-capitalist relations can be led by the working class and thus combined with a socialist revolution. In Russia it was its emphasis on democratic issues that made the difference. In South Africa the black working class can lead the apartheid democratic revolution and make it part of a socialist revolution together with a struggle for workers’ power.

This perspective does not mean ignoring democratic issues. In Russia the main demands of the Bolsheviks and of Trotsky were land to the peasants, the Constituent Assembly, the eight-hour day. Trotsky explained it like this: ‘As a point of step, the workers must be armed with a democratic programme. On the basis of the revolutionary democratic programme, it is necessary to oppose the workers to the “middle-class tendency”, at a certain stage in the mobilisation of the masses under the slogans of revolutionary democracy, Soviets can and should arise...’

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The workers need a political voice

but the living class struggle of the workers.

As Trotsky put it in 'Lessons of October':
"Only on that condition [breaking from
defence] could the proletariat at the next
stage become the axis around which the
tolling masses of the village would group
themselves."

Trotsky saw the workers as the axis. The
pioneer Russian Marxist George Plekhanov
expressed the same basic idea when he
wrote that the Marxist — as against the
populist — "is convinced that not the work-
ers are necessary for the revolution, but
the revolution for the workers."

Trotsky saw democratic issues as central,
and argued therefore for a workers' party
to take the initiative on those issues. Ross sees
democratic issues as central, and argues
therefore for workers' initiative to be
subordinated to a Stalinist-bourgeois
alliance.

The experience of the black workers'
movement in recent years has refuted all
scholastic conceptions of the relationship
democracy to class struggle.

The non-racial unions have fought for the
most limited demands while not compromis-
ing their revolutionary aims. They have co-
operated with broad cross-class organisa-
tions like the United Democratic Front on
many bases, while retaining working-class
independence.

The relationship between the differ-
ent aspects of struggle is similar to what
Ross, Luxemburg, observed in the mass
strike movement in Russia in 1905.

But the movement on the whole does
not proceed from the economic to the politi-

cal struggle, nor even the reverse. Every
great political mass action, after it has
attained its political highest point, breaks
up into a mass of economic strikes. And
that applies not only to each of the great
mass strikes, but also to the revolution as
whole."

"With the spreading, clarifying and
involution of the political struggle, the
economic struggle not only does not
recede, but extends, organises and
becomes involved in equal measure.
Between the two there is the most com-
plete reciprocal action.

"Every new onset and every fresh victory
of the political struggle is transformed into
a powerful impetus for the economic strug-
gle... And conversely...

"Cause and effect here continually
change places; and thus the economic
and the political factor in the period of
the mass strike, now widely removed, com-
pletely separated or even mutually exclu-
usive, as the theoretical plan would have
them, merely form the two interacting
sides of the proletarian class struggle in
Russia. And their unity is precisely the
mass strike."

Imprint

But if experience of struggle provides the
basis for an answer to the strategic
problems, it does not automatically spell
that answer out and imprint it on people's
minds. It does not, automatically sweep
away false, erroneous, misconceptions, and
the influence of middle-class politicians on
the working class. Still less does it sponta-
neously provide solutions to all the tac-
tical problems that arise.

The party, which requires, is the workers'political party with a vigorous internal life.

The non-racial, trade unions, especially
FOSATU, have, been trying to develop
working-class politics. But trade unions,
by their very structure, cannot substitute
for political parties.

The best way forward would be a work-
ers party based on the trade unions. In
form it could be similar to the British
Labour Party, which was founded as a
federation of trade unions and socialist
groups and later developed an individual
membership structure in addition. It
should be much more democratic than the
British Labour Party, and could be so,
given that the non-racial unions in South
Africa do not have entrenched bureauc-
cracies like the British unions already had
to a considerable extent in 1900.

They have concentrated on building up
strong rank-and-file organisations, shop
stewards' structures and direct worker
involvement. Strict accountability of
leaders — who have to obtain mandates
from their members for all that they do —
has helped prevent the leaders from being
coopied by industrial conciliation bureau-
cracy.

Full-time union officials are paid similar
rates to the workers they represent.

Politically such a workers' party could
be very different from the British Labour
Party, developing a programme for
working-class revolution rather than stogy
tinkering with the system. How successfully
it did that would of course depend on the
work of organised socialists and Marxists
within the party. Already-existing semi-
Trotskyist groups in South Africa, like the
Cape Action League, could play a fructify-
ing role.

There are, many difficulties with this
approach. It requires a workers' party based
on the trade unions, and consequently many South
African trade unions sympathetic to the
general idea feel that now is not the
time for it.

These objections need to be discussed
effectively. But Socialist Action is a different
case, it has put itself on the wrong side of
the central political divide in the South
African liberation movement.
The USFI today

The whole history of the current now organised as the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) has been one of repeated political accommodation to Stalinist or nationalist forces leading big struggles. Since 1979 the USFI's US associate, the Socialist Workers' Party, has taken this method further, identifying 100% with the Cuban government. Clive Bradley surveys this turn and the response to it of the USFI majority led by Ernest Mandel.

IN 1983, a group of oppositionists — broadly in support of the Mandel tendency — were expelled from the SWP and set themselves up as a new group, 'Socialist Action'. Their founding statement gives some indication of current state of the SWP.

"Immediately after the party convention in 1981, with no possibility for anyone who disagreed to reply, Jack Barnes, the SWP's central leader, announced that he no longer accepted the idea of fighting for a directly socialist revolution in underdeveloped countries. [Then in an article in 1983] Barnes insisted that 'our movement must discard permanent revolution'."

They go on to look at the political results of what they consider to be 'a serious adaptation to Stalinist ideology'.

On Poland: "In 1981 it was clear that the SWP did not want to be too prominent in support of the Polish workers — this might embarrass them in its relationship with [Cuba and Nicaragua]. The SWP rejected demonstrations of any kind, refused to participate in virtually all meetings of the Left to support Solidarnosc..."

"Its official position is for 'political revolution'... [But] shortly after the beginning of 1982, this concept... virtually disappeared from 'The Militant'. In its place ambiguous formulations appeared that could be interpreted as calling merely for the reform of the Polish CP'."

On Iran: "...the SWP's press refused for many months to defend any victims of repression... Universally known facts about torture of every variety of dissenter in Iranian prisons, military assaults on the Kurdish national minority areas...none of this could be found in 'The Militant'."

"They got on: 'You could not tell what was going on in places like Iran, Poland, Afghanistan, North Korea, Vietnam or Ethiopia from reading the manipulated accounts in 'The Militant'." And — though Socialist Action, because of their own politics, do not say this — for sure you cannot tell what is going on in Cuba or Nicaragua from the glowing reports in 'The Militant'."

The SWP's 1979 turn

The current phase of the SWP's politics began quite abruptly in 1979, after the death of their veteran theorist Joseph Hansen. But its roots can be traced back further.

In the early 1960s the SWP — as against their Healyite detractors — recognised that a revolution had taken place in Cuba, and that capitalism had been overthrown. But they went further. They played down the elements of bureaucratic control in Cuba, and played up all the revolutionary internationalist and anti-bureaucratic aspects of Castroism — all this to the extent that they blundered over the fact that the Cuban government was controlled by a tiny handful of people (with popular support, but no real popular control), and that the working class had no independent political voice. They abandoned any project of building a Trotskyist organisation in Cuba; the Castroite leadership 'team', given further evolution and good advice, could become quite adequate.

What needs to be stressed, in the light of current disputes in the USFI, is that the SWP's analysis of Cuba was shared by the Mandelites. Even now, there is no fundamental programmatic dispute over Cuba in the USFI: the Mandelites no more call for independent working-class action and political revolution in Cuba than do the SWP.

From the late '60s to the late '70s, the SWP was more critical of Castroism than the Mandel faction. In particular the SWP opposed guerrilla tactics in Latin America — often in a sectarian, almost parliamentarist, fashion.

In early 1979 the SWP published a speech by Jack Barnes on '20 years of the Cuban Revolution', enthusiastically dropping all criticism of Castro. For some months yet 'The Militant' continued to dismiss the Sandinistas' guerilla war against Somoza as futile, misguided, and petty-bourgeois.

In July 1979 the Sandinistas triumphed — and 'The Militant' switched round 180°. From sour, negative rejection of the Sandinistas' struggle, they turned to 101 per cent support of the Sandinista government and all its policies.

'The Militant' today makes very strange reading. The revolutions in Central America and the Caribbean dominate its pages, but in a curious way. There is extraordinarily little analysis, or even considered comment, on events in the region. There is more less coverage on El Salvador — where civil war rages — than on relatively stable Cuba. The bulk of the material consists of speeches, or articles hugging around quotations, by Castro, Ortega, or Bishop.

The SWP on Cuba

Its presentation has a tone, a mood, a feel that cannot easily be described. So here is an example. This is an extract from the second front page lead article of 'The Militant' of 25 January 1985.

'Tipitapa-Maicaotoya, Nicaragua — In front of a huge sign reading 'July victory... people's victory, symbol of Cuba-Nicaragua friendship', a new sugar mill was inaugurated here January 11... The refinery is the largest in all of Central America and the largest single industrial plant in Nicaragua. It was built with extensive aid from Cuba.'

'Present at the inauguration ceremonies was Cuban President Fidel Castro, who gave a two-and-a-half hour speech. He announced that Cuba is cancelling the $75.8 million debt owed by Nicaragua...'

'...A speech was also delivered by Jaime
The SWP has completely collapsed inde-
pendently working-class politics into a crude
view of international power-politics ‘blocks’
or ‘camps’ — one that does indeed marry with
Castroism very neatly. In the SWP’s world,
the world is divided between “imperialism”
and the “revolution” fighting it out. Socialists
must choose their camp.
This leads them to reactionary political
conclusions.
How can workers be ‘neutral’ in the war
between Iraq and Iran? ‘The Militant’ asks
(18 May 1984). They answer emphatically no.
... ‘We view this war — and all wars today —
from the standpoint of the international
fight against imperialism and the struggle
to advance the world socialist revolution.
The [Iranian revolution] strengthened the
working class. The world working class,...
helped serve the interests of US imperial-
ism. An Iranian victory in the war would be
an inspiration for all those fighting imperialist oppression in the Middle East.’
And what about Iranian oppositionists
fighting the Khomenei regime? Certainly.
The Militant admits, there has been a
camouflage on the left; the regime is bour-
geois; and it is not as anti-imperialist as
Nicolae.
In 1981, the regime took advantage of
a terrorist campaign against the revolution
to啦 a petty-bourgeois radical group called
the Islamic Republic party out against
sweping arrests and executions.... [but the work-
ing class] refused to defend the Mujah-
ideen because they correctly saw its
assistance as furthering the ideology of
aiding the imperialists and monarchists”.
The SWP criticises government attacks
on the left, on the working class, and
on the national minorities. But there is no
question of siding with opponents of
Khomeini. It is all in the context of
‘defence of the Iranian revolution’.
The workers are in a stronger posi-
tion to fight for their interests today
under the Islamic Republic — than they
were under the Shah. Under conditions
where the Iranian masses are not ready to
replace the current regime with a work-
ers’ and peasants’ government, overthrow
of Khomenei can only be in the interests
of imperialism”.

In the peak of Cuban involvement in
revolutionary struggles internationally, in
the context to concern was the Third World and that alone. Castroism
is a form of radical Third-Worldist popu-
listism; it rejects the very idea of working-class
revolutionary action in the advanced capi-
talist countries. The so-called non-aligned
movement, Cuba allies with thoroughly
bourgeois and often dictatorial Third World
governments. In the Third World, too, their
perspective is not that of working-class
self-liberation.

The situation in Cuba is a crucial
point. Even where Castro aids revolutionary struggles, he does so
from his own viewpoint, with his own aims.
And that viewpoint, those aims, are not
theses of independent working-class action.
Castro’s whole conception of revolution and
socialism is different from ours.

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on the national minorities. But there is no
question of siding with opponents of
Khomeini. It is all in the context of
‘defence of the Iranian revolution’.
The workers are in a stronger posi-
tion to fight for their interests today
under the Islamic Republic — than they
were under the Shah. Under conditions
where the Iranian masses are not ready to
replace the current regime with a work-
ers’ and peasants’ government, overthrow
of Khomenei can only be in the interests
of imperialism”.

In the peak of Cuban involvement in
revolutionary struggles internationally, in
the context to concern was the Third World and that alone. Castroism
is a form of radical Third-Worldist popu-
listism; it rejects the very idea of working-class
revolutionary action in the advanced capi-
talist countries. The so-called non-aligned
movement, Cuba allies with thoroughly
bourgeois and often dictatorial Third World
governments. In the Third World, too, their
perspective is not that of working-class
self-liberation.

Of course, the SWP have had to try to
come with Castro’s line on Poland. This,
you admit, is a mistake — but a mistake
consistent with revolutionary... Fine revolu-
tionaries these, you may think; whose ‘mis-
takes’ consist of supporting counter-revolu-
tionary violence against the class.

But such matters are of no importance.
On the contrary, the Cubans “have set an
example of proletarian internationalism in
action”, and have cleverly “reduced to allow
a wedge to be driven between Cuba and the
apparatchik workers’ states”. Such a wedge — criticism of
Juszczelski! — is undesirable because of
the decisive role of economic and military aid to the Cuban revolution from the Soviet
Union. In other words, the SWP has lost its
political bearings that it consciously
covers up for the Cuban leadership, and justifies Cuba’s political alignment with Moscowa.
'associatism' they seek to criticise.

Permanent revolution is not, for the Mandelites, a strategy, but a process. Maoists, Castroists, Sandinistas, are compelled by the 'historical process' to carry out the socialist revolution.

This notion leads the Mandelites into big theoretical difficulties.

Michel Lowy, a leading Mandelite theoretician, has produced a detailed theoretical exposition of their views on permanent revolution entitled 'The Politics of Combined and Flexible Development'. Lowy confronts the theoretical problem — that capitalism has been overturned by forces other than the working class led by genuine Marxist parties — in such a way as to define it out of existence rhetorically. Did these revolutions (Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam), Lowy asks, occur "under the leadership of the proletariat...and more precisely under the direction of a proletariat (communist) party"? (p.107). He answers yes. 'Communist' party equals proletarian party equals proletariat. The real problem — that the Chinese revolution, for example, was carried out by a peasant army — is thus not confronted but avoided.

"The party", Lowy claims, "were the political and programmatic expression of the proletariat, by virtue of their adherence to the historic interests of the working class (abolition of capitalism, etc.)...the party's ideologies were proletarian and the membership and periphery were systematically educated to accept the values and world view of the international working-class movement" (pp.214-5, emphasis in original).

For a Trotskyist to conclude that Stalinist parties, like the Vietnamese, which massacred the Trotskyists in 1946-7, or the Chinese, which suppressed all independent working-class activity on its entry into the cities, were politically, programmatically and ideologically proletarian is to retreat into mysticism. If this is how to defend 'orthodoxy', then better be revisionist!

The Mandelites on Nicaragua

A view of permanent revolution such as this is no real answer to the SWP. It indicates that the Mandelites lack the theoretical tools seriously to challenge the SWP.

On Cuba, their differences are essentially to do with assessment: the Mandelites are slightly more critical. On Nicaragua, the Mandelites are if anything less critical: the debate at the 1985 USFI World Congress apparently focused on whether Cuba or Nicaragua is the real socialist model.

Daniel Bensaid, a leader of the Mandel current, spoke revealingly in an interview in 'International Viewpoint' (17 June 1985):

"... the Nicaraguan revolution represents a challenge for us. It is a revolution made by others, and at the beginning we understood it badly..." "Did the Sandinistas lead their revolution in spite of themselves, despite their policy of alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie, despite their conception of economic transition?..." Today...we recognise that the Sandinistas won thanks to their policy and not 'in spite of it'... The proletariat can have different allies at different times in the revolutionary process". (Emphasis added).

So the USFI have learned from the Nicaraguan revolution that... alliances with the bourgeois are work! It is the same basic problem as with Cuba two decades ago: a failure to look towards a working-class perspective, combined in this case with bewilderment at their own irrelevance. Bensaid also, incidentally, discusses the SWP’s abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution as an understandable reaction to dogmatic sectarianism...

Salah Jaber’s theory

What it amounts to is a chronic inability to deal with reality without suffering gross illusions in ‘revolutionists of action’. But it has to be theorised. And it has to be theorised in counterposition to the SWP’s revisions. Lebanese Mandelite Salah Jaber has performed the task.

In a long article in ‘Quatrieme Internationale’, ‘Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, Jaber spells out what now seems to be common ground among the USFI majority. Paraphrasing Engels, he writes:

"Of late, the philistine Eurocommunist has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the
Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at Nicaragua. That is the dictatorship of the proletariat” (November 1964, p.114).

Jaber surveys working-class history since the Paris Commune in a polemic directed against the SWP. His essential point is that the class character of the state is determined by the “armed bodies of men”.

“The destruction of the armed forces of the bourgeoisie by the armed forces of the workers marks the birth of a workers’ state” (p.63).

Whether or not the state carries out nationalisations is, he argues, completely irrelevant. And by these criteria Nicaragua has been a workers’ state — not a ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’, as the SWP would have it — from the moment that the Sandinistas took power.

Previous USFI positions are, Jaber states, absurd. The SWP’s notion that China, for example, became a workers’ state around 1955 — after the final wave of nationalisations — is a theoretical confusion. There was a workers’ state in China from 1931 when the Maoists established a regional government in Kiangsi.

On Cuba, Jaber is yet more forthright.

“A movement of the masses as proletariat, if not more, than those of the Paris Commune, endowed with an ideology at least as radical as that of the Commune, which totally destroyed the bourgeoisie army, to the gain of a rebel Army, as proletariat if not more so than the Federation de la Garde Nationale, what is that? A government of workers and peasants? A dual power sui generis? No, comrades: it is the dictatorship of the proletariat” (p.101). Moreover, “In this sense... Fidel better understands the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state than... Mandel [or the SWP].”

Squaring the circles

Jaber confuses a number of issues. His main argument, that nationalisations do not determine the class nature of the state, and that the old state apparatus — specifically the “armed bodies of men” — must be smashed, is obviously true. But the notion that “relations of production” have nothing to do with it is ridiculous.

A new state apparatus, installed by a revolutionary army, and transformed into a refurbished bourgeoisie state. Only if we give full political trust to the Sandinistas could we say that their military victory immediately defined a workers’ state.

To square the circles of his theory, Jaber must eventually resort to the same fiction as Lówy: that the Yugoslav, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc. Communist Parties were politically workers’ parties.

On some issues the Mandelites have quite sharp political disagreements with the SWP — notably Poland and Iran. But they are by no means uniformly clearer on basic tasks of independent working-class action.

In the South Atlantic war, the USFI majority shared the approach that viewed Argentina’s war as “a just national liberation struggle” — although one of the USFI groups in Argentina, Nuevo Curso, argued that the war was reactionary on both sides.

The Mandelites share with the SWP a political tradition and world view. The SWP have drawn out its logic more fully: but the Mandelites do not represent a real Marxist alternative.