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Chus Aguirre

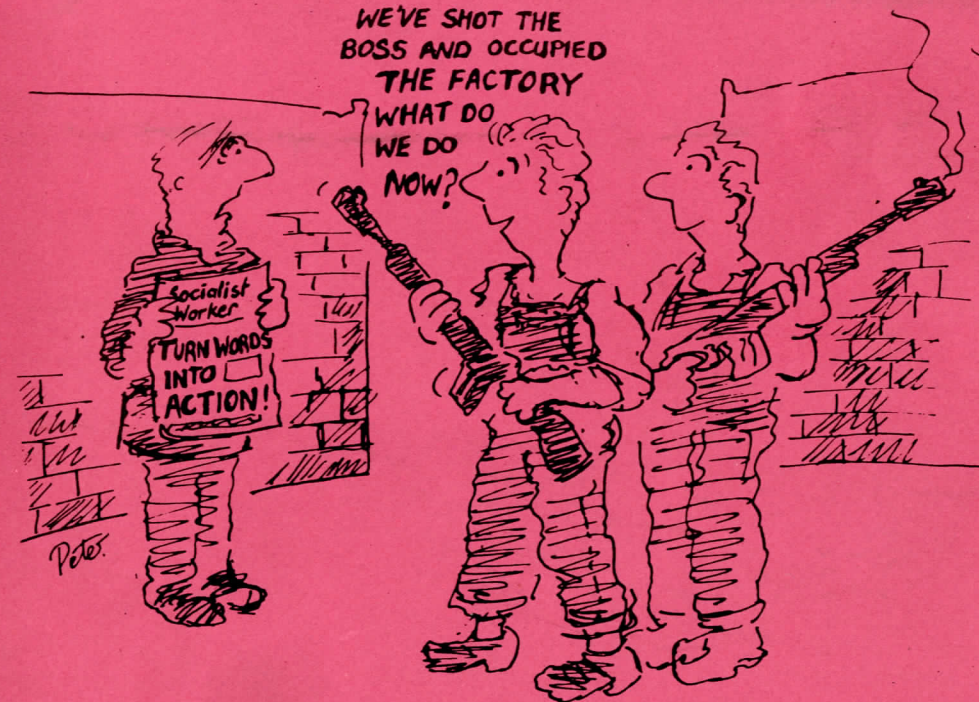
Mo Klonsky

You are at a party and someone calls you a workerist – how do you reply? Could it be true? Yet your boyfriend says you are an ultra-left while your sister claims you have Pabloite tendencies so you don't really know what to say. Such social embarrassment can now be avoided with the aid of this guide. Now you can hold your own in the sub-world of the left. Who knows, one of the groups might suit you. You might even spot a gap in the market coverage and form your own group.



As soon as this pub closes . . .

by Chus Aguirre & Mo Klonsky



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TURNAROUND DISTRIBUTION
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The British Left Explained

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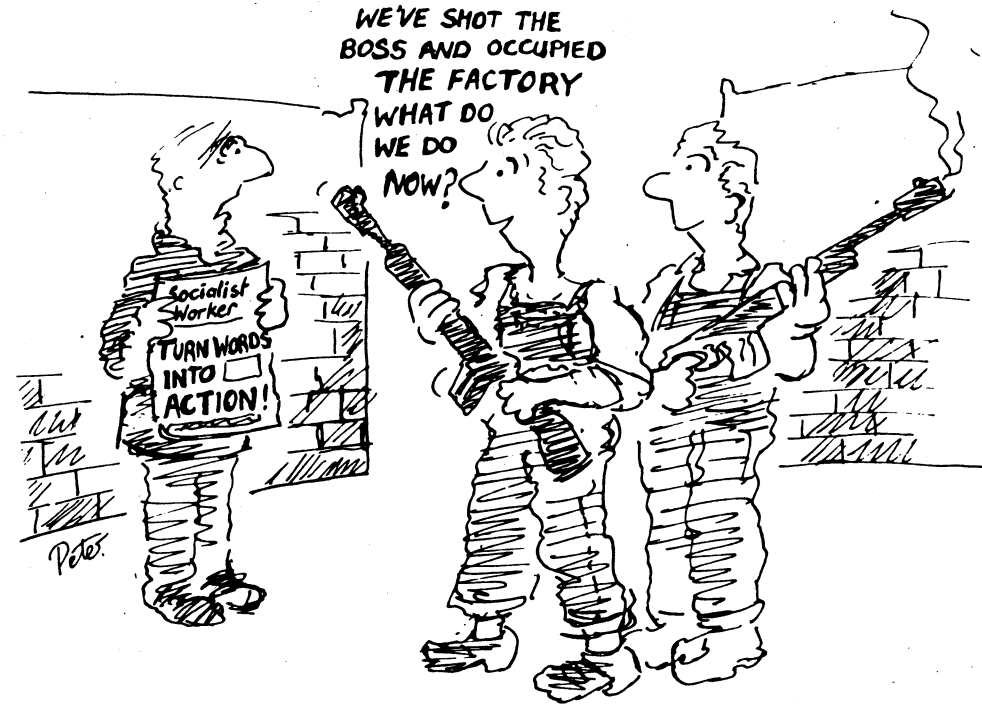
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SEPTEMBER 1986 TUC CONFERENCE: LUNCHTIME

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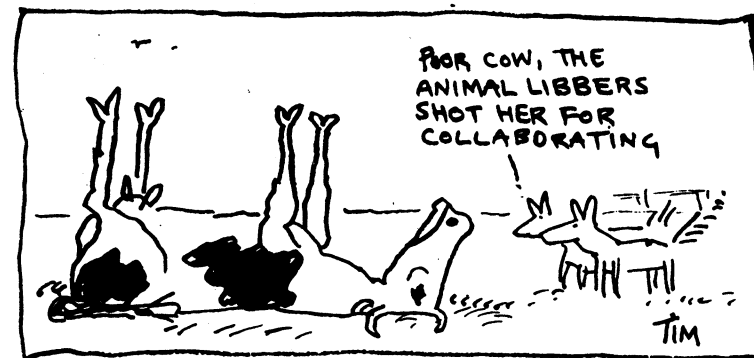
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The entrance to the conference hall is nearly deserted. The delegates have retired to adjacent hostels to sink enough pints to allow them to sleep through the afternoon debate, so most literature sellers have taken a break.

Only two groups remain. One (the Spartacist League) are chanting "General Strike Now" while another (the Internatinal Workers Party) try to drown them out with "Build the ICFI" (International Committee for the Fourth International to the uninitiated). Do they hope to convert each other? Or myself the only other listener? Surely not, but each feels that the first to leave would be chicken. I am glad my daughter is not in sight as she is probably warm and dry: on the other hand she has my coat. Resisting the temptation to raise my own slogan (Smash neo-Kantian revisionism!) I leave both groups to the sardonic screaming of the gulls. The rain drizzles from a lead grey sky as I walk to the station.

"So what" you may say: "I never did care for Brighton." However, the two groups, and their rivals who have gone to lunch form the core of organised British socialism. If a bureaucrat temporarily wakes from his slumber during the afternoon and feels any guilt about applauding the hypocritical rhetoric coming from the platform, he has certainly in his youth been a supporter of one of the socialist groups. This work is to be commended for providing the uninitiated with a guide through the labyrinth.

Dolores O'Shaughnessy



Build, one, two, many, Fourth Internationals!

Not the least of the complications in understanding the divisions on the British Left is the international allegiance of many such groups to rival bodies which all, confusingly, describe themselves as the Fourth International.

The original Fourth International was established in 1938 by Trotsky and his supporters, in the expectation that the approaching war would produce a revolutionary upsurge on the scale of that which followed World War 1. Trotsky had shared Lenin's regret that they had done so little to build an international movement prior to 1914. Next time, he was determined that such an organisation, however small, would be there to connect with the coming struggles. By 1947 it was clear that the outcome of the war had been very different from that following the previous conflict, and that a new analysis was necessary. The capitalist world was embarking on the biggest boom in its history and Stalinism had extended its boundaries to include much of Eastern Europe. Even Communist Party writers now accept that the icepick wielded by Stalin's agent, Ramon Mercador, stopped Trotsky's brain from functioning, but opinions differ on the reasons for the malfunctioning of his followers brains.

Some of the best of them, such as Marcel Hic and Abram Leon were murdered by the Gestapo or perished in the concentration camps. Others, dismayed by the bleakness of the prospects for socialism, fell away. The strongest remaining section of the International, the (American) Socialist Workers Party, was already highly bureaucratic and convinced that the coming American revolution would soon sort out the movement throughout the world. Its influence secured the leadership of the International for Michel Raptis (Pablo) a capable underground organiser during the German occupation, whose contribution to

political theory consisted of spraying a dense fog of sub Marxist language over whatever opportunist practice was convenient. The young Ernest Mandel played Burke to his Hare and the Fourth International enjoyed a peaceful existence for a few years, with an influence confined mainly to Paris.

Pablo eventually tired of his sleepy existence, became resentful of his American puppet masters, and tried to dance on his own. He reacted to the geographical expansion of Stalinism and the continuing strength of the Communist parties in Western Europe by arguing that the Stalinist regimes, with all their defects, were revolutionary and that Trotskyists should moderate their opposition and function as a discreet opposition within the Communist parties. In the early 1950's Pablo's schemes seemed to offer a reasonable prospect of survival for European neo-Trotskyism. He was not to know that Stalin's death and Krushov's denunciation of his crimes were to make capitulation to Stalinism unprofitable as well as unprincipled. His more immediate problem was that his notions, however servicable for his own purposes, were unviable for the American SWP and its jefe maximo JP Cannon, trying to survive in the virulently anti-communist United States by bending to other winds. Cannon, supported by his British acolyte Gerry Healy, broke with Pablo in 1953 and joined up with Pierre Lambert in France who had already fallen out with the International.

The polemical literature denouncing their rivals revisionism produced by both sides in the split makes little sense, even to addicts of that neglected art form the internal bulletin. However, the practical reasons for the split were never in doubt. If you decide to become a fellow traveller it is

advisable to journey with someone in the first class compartment. Supporting Russia in the United States in the 1950's was downright foolhardy, Healy was keener on the Tribune group than the struggling British Communist Party, and Lambert had found a comfortable slot with the American funded trade union federation, Force Ouvriere.

The Pablo/SWP split was the first of many, so that now claimants to be the genuine Fourth International all possess intricate charts, like the genealogies of rival claimants to a medieval throne. We do not have nearly enough space to describe the intricacies of the disputed lines of succession, but if you are interested you can read, The Death Agony of the Fourth Internationall by Workers Power, a group which by denying the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession, has ruined its chances of obtaining the British franchise from any of the rival internationals. Most Fourth Internationals are, in reality, simply the foreign branch offices of one of the larger national groups. For example, Posadas, the leading Argentinian Fourth Internationalist until he fell out with Mandel in the early sixties, started up tiny groups throughout the world, which did little apart from translating and disseminating his speeches. The British branch was known as Red Flag, and need not take up much of our time as it never reached double figures. Posadas speculated that the reported sightings of flying saucers were evidence that there were superior, socialist, civilisations on other planets. This insight was exaggerated by some of his sections into the doctrine that there could not be socialism on a single planet.

Most claimants to be the genuine Fourth International are less bizarre, but the phenomenon is always harmful: a political equivalent to AIDS. A national section of any Fourth International sees the world through the distorting prism of its affiliates elsewhere, so that accounts of events in any other country from

one group will not mention the activities of the sections which, according to its rivals, are leading the struggle for socialism. Fourth Internationalists are aware of the nasty things that their rivals say about their international affiliates, but choose to treat them with the contempt which American evangelical protestants have for the allegations of scandals by their religious rivals. They claim, correctly, that a purely national group, will be unable to achieve a correct perspective on the world. Their mistake is in thinking that their International leadership can provide such a perspective in the intervals they can spare from petty factional intrigues.



Militant

For many people their first contact with Militant has taken the disconcerting form of hearing an audience groan as someone with a fake Liverpool accent and curious hand movements stand up and demand the nationalisation of the country's 253 leading monopolies. When the political novice is then told that the strange figure is a Trotskyist she is understandably confused, all the more so if she is familiar with any of Trotsky's works. How do hand gestures, however elaborate, transform a series of reformist demands into such a fearful revolutionary perspective?

Given the glaring discrepancy between Trotsky's ideas and those of Militant attempts to convict the group of Trotskyism rely heavily on tracing its origin in the Trotskyist movement. This is easy enough to establish and even the journalistic tripe hound Michael Crick in his book on the organisation is able to show that Militant's leader Ted Grant was a leading Trotskyist in the 1940's. Grant, like many others was expelled from the Trotskyist organisation in 1950 by Gerry Healy, the apparatchnik placed in the leadership of the British section by the leaders of the American Socialist Workers Party. Grant had tried to keep an independent organisation going in the horrendously difficult conditions of the late 1940's. His failure in that endeavour led him to conclude that life outside the Labour Party was impossible, a belief which he has never abandoned.

In 1953, when Michel Raptis (Pablo) fell out with the SWP and Healy, Pablo was left without a British concessionaire. Legend has it that Grant answered an advertisement for the post in Tribune. A dozen silver haired veterans have sworn to us that they can remember reading the advert, but until they produce the clipping or give us a precise reference, we must regard the story

as apocryphal. Grant's meeting with Pablo went down in Healyite mythology as a Left wing equivalent of Frankenstein meets the Wolfman. Grant got the job and kept it for nearly 15 years, during which time he and his followers were known as the Pabloites. The practical advantages of the Grant/Pablo lash up were obvious. The Fourth International felt that it had to have a branch in the country where Marx had carried out most of his life's work, and Grant desperately needed the prestige of the international franchise to bolster the morale of his tiny group. All that remained was to devise a political formula to justify the marriage of convenience.

Pablo believed that the Cold War would end in a shooting war in the course of which the Stalinist bureaucracy would be forced to take revolutionary measures. Consequently, the role of the Fourth International was to abandon its, previously independent, posture and offer assistance and theoretical clarification to Stalinism, which was seen as revolutionary, however crude and deformed. Grant had already travelled most of the way to becoming the principled, consistent, Left Social Democrat which he now is, and he was never in the least attracted to Stalinism. How was the circle to be squared? Resort was made to the tried and trusted formula of British exceptionalism and the category of the unconscious agents of world revolution was expanded to cover the leaders of the British Labour Party, on the grounds that the Communist Party was very weak in this country. The Fourth International leadership was never really happy with Grant's performance in edging slowly towards a three figure membership over the next decade, but one must remember how difficult it was to get good staff in that time of full employment.

Pablo, and his successor, Ernest Mandel, moaned continually as their ally failed to reap rewards from the Suez crisis, the agony of the Communist Party in the wake of the Hungarian revolution and the rise of CND. For Grant these were epiphenomena whose only importance lay in providing an audience for the formula which he had already worked out. However, a more promising host appeared to feed off in the late 1950's, when the Labour Party re-formed its youth organisation as part of the endless cycle of toleration and repression as it oscillates between the impossible tasks of harnessing youth's idealism and forbidding it to have ideas of its own. Grant's supporters already appeared as the sociological types with which everyone is now familiar. Grey, uninspiring figures, mainly clerks, who were also hard working and extremely loyal to their group. The Militant journal was founded, with the journalistic formula which remains today, although the dates on the readers letters have altered.

Nevertheless, Mandel, who had replaced Pablo as leader of the Fourth International was becoming absolutely pissed off at Grant's slow progress in the heady atmosphere of the sixties where rival groups were growing rapidly. Disagreement reached breaking point in 1968 as the Vietnam war and student revolt drew tens of thousands into politics. Asked what his group was doing to seize the greatest opportunity in the post-war period Grant demanded that Harold Wilson should arm the Viet Cong, and that the student rebels should stop wasting their time in unproductive solidarity demonstrations, clashes with the police, and college occupations and get down to the Labour Party ward to ensure that Wilson did as he was told. Mandel gave Grant and his group the boot and scraped together about thirty people, to form the International Marxist Group to replace him. Mandel's belief that Grant was bound for the dustbin of history seemed plausible at that time, and during the ensuing

period of industrial militancy, when Grant's style of passive propaganda appeared like a survival of the pre 1914 Second International. However, in the 1970's, as industrial struggle ebbed and the International Socialists declined, Militant slowly grew to become the largest group on the Left. The single most common complaint made against the Militant is that at meetings their members will endlessly reiterate the basic line, in spite of the fact that one of their comrades has just finished making the same speech with identical turns of phrase and the same curious hand movements. On this slender basis sensitive middle class snobs erect a grandiose fable which talks about cloning, thought control and brain washing. In fact, the effect is produced by Militant's thorough, but rather basic educational programme, which teaches the new recruit all he will ever need to know. As for those famous hand movements, they are not taken from some Russian training manual. Have a look at any Victorian book on public speaking and you will see them illustrated.

Opponents of Militant are so eager to find sinister explanations for its behaviour that they ignore the obvious, mundane, evidence which disproves their conspiracy theories. As is well known, Militant's only trade union stronghold is in the civil service union, the CPSA, specifically among social security clerks. One can understand why Militant's passive propaganda should appeal to such people rather than to the industrial militants who once formed the core of the Communist Party. A social security clerk is trained to assist the claimant in filling in her form correctly. If the details are even slightly wrong she may lose her money. Inevitably, this attitude is carried over to the collective task of instructing the working class in the socialist formula for expropriating the bourgeoisie. Just as the individual claimant must put aside the wider calamities which surround her while she completes the form, the working

class must concentrate on the nationalisation of the 253 monopolies and the Enabling Act which will make that possible. Therefore, just as a caring social security clerk will tirelessly repeat the correct procedure to the individual claimant, as a Militant member he will repeat his group's formula at all meetings he attends. Those who, out of hysteria or intellectual snobbery, imagine that his behaviour is the result of a sinister programme of brain washing, should examine the staff training document, drawn up by apolitical civil servants in 1947, which is the core of Militant's educational programme.

An unadvertised feature of the same educational programme is the instruction given on rival groups. Militant seldom publicly acknowledges that other Left groups exist, but in private it is recognised that they are a danger to the young, on a par with drugs drink and glue sniffing. New recruits are given a rather undifferentiated description and warning about their rivals, who are given the collective name of The Sects. Every member is warned of the cancerous nature of these groups and the danger involved in extending any toleration to them. Their main sin is not being in the Labour Party, and where the group is entrust, not having a programme. Militant, it proudly proclaims, does have a programme of nationalisation of the 253 monopolies under workers control. The programme, most people will recognise as the traditional one common to all Social Democratic parties up till 1914. The main addition to the original consists of the proposal that a future Labour government should rush an enabling act through Parliament which will allow it to take control away from the speculators and saboteurs who might try to wreck it. Opponents like to present this as a revolutionary Trotskyist measure, but it was first suggested by Clement Atlee in the 1930's. Militant's patriotism and constitutionalism was demonstrated

during the Falkland's war when it was the only left group to reject the whinging pacifism of the likes of Tam Dayell. Many were surprised that the group did not oppose the war, but any politically educated person must know that Kautsky took an identical attitude to defending Germany in 1914.

In the early 1980's we were told that the groups journal was to become a daily, but as the speed of recruitment slackened the proposal was quietly abandoned. Not even the most loyal supporter would read its unchanging contents every day: really, it would be better as an annual. The most common complaint made against Militant by other Labour Party members is that the group refuses to cooperate with anyone else in the party. The fact that this is so surely refutes the unjustified charge of Trotskyism. Trotsky proposed the entry tactic in the 1930's to enable a small group of Marxists to make contact with the activists of Socialist parties and to influence them through participation in joint activities and debate. Militant has absolutely no interest in what other members of the Labour Party think, and sees itself as becoming the party through a gradual process of recruitment.



A communist plot.

The Socialist Workers Party

The Socialist Workers Party (T, Cliff Proprietor), with more than three thousand members is the third largest group on the British Left, quite a lot smaller than either Militant or the Communist Party, but many times larger than the next one down. It originated, like most of the older groups, as one of the fragments of British Trotskyism, when Cliff and 30 others were expelled from the Healy dominated movement in 1951 for advocating the State Capitalist heresy. Most SWPers, who are not noted for their grasp of theory, are unable to explain what that means, other than that Russia is as bad as America. Its practical consequence in 1951 was that socialists should oppose both sides in the Korean war, and the claim that Trotsky was wrong to advocate that the Stalinist States should be given critical support in the event of war with capitalist powers.

Exclusion from all of the various Fourth Internationals had the considerable advantage of breaking free from the wretched rival cliques sitting in Paris cafes, producing perspectives for world revolution by examining their coffee grounds, while ignoring what went on either in France or abroad. Cliff's tiny group (then known as Socialist Review) set about trying to explain the existence of the post war boom, whereas other groups continually predicted that it was about to end in a matter of weeks. The group came up with the theory of the Permanent Arms Economy, which claimed that spending on arms had staved off a slump. The attempt to understand the actual development of post-war capitalism was very unwise for anyone trying to build a socialist organisation. We feel that Gerry Healy showed a keener instinct in always claiming that the final crisis was nigh. It is important to be consistent here if one is not to fall into revisionism. Cliff's cautious

assessment was most unsatisfying to anyone seeking excitement, and people leaving the Communist Party after 1956 were much more attracted to Healy's promise of imminent crisis. so Cliff's group stagnated throughout the 1950's.

In the 1960s the group gathered strength by recruiting from the Labour Party Young Socialists, CND and, later, the movement against the Vietnam war. At that time the group (then known as the International Socialists) was an entrust faction in the Labour Party, but Cliff disagreed with rival factions who believed that the party was permanently poised for either a lurch to the Left or a split. When one of us asked why we should be there at all Cliff replied. "We live like lice in its hair". Neither he nor we realised then that he would soon be able to afford his own lice.

When the student revolt erupted in the late 1960s Cliff's group entered its golden age. It had nearly 400 members in 1967 and it expanded rapidly as the May 1968 revolt in Paris had its repercussions in Britain. The Communist Party was discredited because its sister party in France thought the whole movement was a plot to discredit itself. The Healy group (then known as the Socialist Labour League) was already living in a miniature version of the same fantasy world where rival groups were composed of police spies trying to draw the revolutionary vanguard into dangerous adventures which would ruin its cash flow and get the leadership arrested. Ted Grant's tiny Militant group urged the flabbergasted students to join the Labour Party and force Wilson to arm the Vietcong. Cliff told the student rebels that they would get nowhere unless they found support in the working class. The dominant ideas in the student movement at that time were a mixture of Althusserian / Maoist/ Mandeliste

gibberish which claimed that students were a new mass vanguard and that revolutionaries should urge them to form Red Bases in the universities, where they could escape the contagion of capitalist, syndicalist and economist influences. Cliff recruited the best of the student radicals, leaving the Maoists and the then Mandeliste franchisee, the International Marxist Group with some rather inadequate human material. Furthermore the heyday of rank and file industrial militancy quickly followed the student revolt and International Socialism recruited young workers and grew to 4,000 members, several times the size of its nearest rival. Cliff gathered a talented team around him, which included Roger Protz, John Palmer and Wendy Henry. Where are they now, we wonder?

The group's mainly student composition was, at that time, seen as a disadvantage. Nominally marxist middle class elements were reluctant to abandon lifestylism/Feminism/Vegetarianism and all the other fads which jostle to fill the vacuum created by the decline of traditional religious belief. Cliff fought hard to persuade the new recruits that such fetishes had nothing to do with the task of building the revolutionary party, and while the momentum of growth kept the group together he was successful. In 1974, when the miners strike brought down the Heath government, Cliff's patience snapped and he abandoned his caution as he prepared to play the part in the revolutionary drama first made popular by V.I. Lenin. We were told that the incoming Labour government would not last as long as Kerensky and it would be our turn soon. When the Wilson/Callaghan government stabilised the situation through the Social Contract the tide of struggle ebbed and Cliff realised he had lost his wager.

What was to be done? Failure went to Cliff's head and he proclaimed that his disintegrating group was now the Socialist Workers Party, something he had resolutely opposed

in happier times. The cadre began to insist that, as the revolution had not appeared on schedule, their lifestyles be recognised as relevant political activity and Cliff was forced to concede, although too late to avoid several splits. When one of us remonstrated with him over his backsliding, an ashen faced Cliff muttered "that's what they want" and we did not have the heart to berate him. Since then Cliff has been going through the motions, sometimes sounding like the old warrior, but once he despaired of changing the world he saw little point in trying to understand it. When Womens, Black and Gay sections of the party were authorised Cliff muttered shamefacedly that these changes only brought the group into line with the norms prevailing in most other groups: precisely.

The least harmful of the lifestyle groups were the Gayfellows, who having consummated a successful entry, zipped up their wranglers and withdrew, leaving the group none the worse. The Black section entrepreneurs were only passing through on their way to jobs in the GLC and Channel 4. Of course, Cliff realised that the recruitment of such elements was a recognition that the group would cease trying to integrate working class blacks, but most of the membership did not. Cliff really caught a cold over Feminism. He has never really believed that we women could take straight politics, but he opposed the separatism of the early womens movement, while he was still serious about building the party, only to embrace it as it began to decline. In 1974 he started a separate autonomous womens section with its own journal, Womens Voice. The traditional womens journals such as Womans Own had become too old fashioned for many young women and Cliff spotted a hole in the market for a mag which, with a light coating of politics would function as a transmission belt between the party and the womens movement. The belt functioned alright, but funnelled women out of the party, so after seven years

trying to find the reverse lever Cliff shut down the journal and the autonomous organisation, to the chagrin of many women who had been very happy in their political Bantustan. The more political women who stayed with the group reacted in a very healthy manner to the wave of corruption in the GLC and London Boroughs, not least because so many ex-comrades had their snouts in the trough. Cliff was pressured into publishing a number of exposes of Livingstonite municipal corruption, but balked at extending them to include the no less blatant corruption of Black and Gay entrepreneurs, or to a political examination of the whole Livingstonite phenomenon. SWP criticism of the new interest group Labour party middle class concentrates on the fact that they are trying to achieve their objects by subterfuge and stealth and is rather silent on the validity of the objects themselves.

Most of the cadre, so carefully built up over a long period, defected as a result of the catalogue of disasters, but many of them are surprisingly tolerant of Cliff's role. Survivors from that period are fond of quoting Sassoon:

{"He's a cheery old card", grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.}

The SWP survived the seventies with a series of campaigns, of which the Anti-Nazi League was the most successful, and the Right to Work campaign the least. The leadership works on an estimate of an inflow/outflow of 800 per year. The group will only be in trouble if recruitment in the colleges drops off for three years in a row. Opponents often dismiss the SWP as merely a student group, but that is a considerable exaggeration. Probably no more than 1/3 of its members are students. Admittedly, the majority of the others are ex-students, but that is no less true of the groups which criticise it. The SWP never recovered the toe

hold among industrial workers which it lost in the mid seventies. Until the early 1980's it had organised fractions in some white collar unions, but these fell by the wayside as unemployment demoralised the trade union movement. Cliff invented a new political category, the downturn to augment the traditional Marxist schema of boom and slump, which were unhelpful in explaining his group's decline. At about the same time he became heavily influenced by Karl Schumacher's book Small is beautiful, critical of the grandiose ambitions which the SWP had once indulged in, and convinced that it should concentrate on "small but concrete issues".

Cliff's criticisms of other groups' habit of issuing calls for dramatic action, while their members fail to carry out even routine trade union activity in their own workplace is undoubtedly well taken: But it failed to take account of the vulgarisation to which his "small but concrete" notion would be subjected at the hands of his less politically educated followers. Sometimes they interpret it as an

instruction to ignore the wider movement and even refuse to attend trade union meetings where, they allege, people are prone to talk about grand issues which are of no concern to the grass roots. Cliff has been criticised for failing to show how his "small but concrete" work will carry over into the transformation of society, but the same charge could be levelled against Schumacher himself. The SWP's members refusal to make links between small and great issues has brought the, unjustified, charge of arrogance against them. The problem is that having refused to advance any specific tactic or strategy which would justify support for

their organisation, SWP members, however modest personally, are forced to proclaim "we do it better", which can easily be mistaken for grandiloquence. If there is no link between immediate struggle and socialist objectives what can an individual do apart from joining the SWP?

The SWP's leaders have a keen appreciation of the dynamics of their group, and have evolved an organisational structure which is remarkably well suited to its functioning. It bears little resemblance to a traditional labour movement bureaucracy and there is no imitation of the Labour Party's baroque edifice of local/ district and regional committees. In fact there are no organisational intermediaries between the central bureaucracy and the local leaderships of branches. Such a structure, accentuated by the absence of a comprehensive educational programme, means that the groups publications play the key role in maintaining group identity and doctrinal cohesion. The process is remarkably libertarian as, although a line is elaborated and spelled out in Socialist Worker, potential dissidents are not instructed on the line by authorised inquisitors. They may even, if they wish, object to it and write outlining an alternative. However, there are no forums apart from the desperately low level branch discussions, where alternative policies can be discussed. Consequently, the group whose ideology most attacks bureaucracy and praises rank and file initiative has a bigger gap between the leadership and the rank and file than does any of its rivals. Some of the leaders privately express distaste for the role of enlightened despots which is imposed on them.

Cliff does not, therefore, have to look over his shoulder in fear of an alternative leadership emerging in area committees or industrial fractions. The disadvantage of such an organisational model is that the SWP has no mechanism for promoting

a cadre which will renew the existing leadership. Rejuvenation depends on the central leadership co-opting younger elements through a process of literary endeavour. The process is not unlike an academic selection procedure and allowed Cliff to maintain his team at a reasonable strength until the late 1970s, since when it has been visibly ageing.

A corollary of the vast intellectual divide between leaders and led has been the lack of empathy between the leadership and grass roots student members. How can Cliff know what will turn the kids on? His solution to that problem epitomises his realism and acute tactical ability. "Don't fight it! Lie back and enjoy it!" he told us. SWP branches have instructions to underwrite any student fashion which is not actually racist or Fascist. The method had been used with considerable success in Brent in the early seventies, but was eventually to backfire. Cliff believes that it would be presumptuous and unrealistic to try to tell students the flavour of the month. The SWP hopes to maintain its student recruitment by establishing itself as the most consistent and resolute advocate of whatever is popular. The formula has a lot to recommend it. The SWP is easily the largest Left group on most campuses, and it provides a social life for many young people away from home for the first time, in a way that a small group cannot possibly do. A heavy reliance on student recruitment has dangers, but the SWP retains the loyalty of a fair number of graduates as they move through Community Work schemes and other forms of disguised unemployment for the idler, downwardly mobile, members of the middle classes.

Sensationalists sometimes claim that Left groups ruin young peoples careers by encouraging them to take inappropriate employment in order to further their group's trade union work. There is absolutely no truth in that allegation in regard

to the SWP, which has no equivalent of Militants implantation in some white collar unions. SWP members are employed in Community Work projects because they find the life congenial, not because Cliff plans to take over the MSC. The harder Left groups who constantly predict that the SWP is about to enter a crisis, fail to recognise the sociological factors which give the group considerable stability. The SWP will survive, and given a revival of student radicalism, might even grow. The group's own version of its history is to be found in the booklet, "The Smallest Mass Party in the World" by Ian Birchall which every aspiring hagiographer should study closely. The title nicely captures the SWP's peculiar mixture of arrogance and self deprecation. The, genuinely, learned author has modelled himself on the Byzantine court chroniclers. The successes of the group are explained by its correct theory and its reverses by objective circumstances. Cliff's own hagiographical style is displayed in his four volume life of Lenin which reads like a biography of John the Baptist written by Jesus Christ.

Socialist Organiser

Socialist Organiser is the current name both of the organisation led by John O'Mahony which is one of the most enduring features of the British Left and of his weekly journal. Operating for the past generation under a bewildering variety of names, it has at some time or other split and fused with most of the longer established groups. Although most leaders of longer established groups are ex-partners of O'Mahony they seem unable to make a balanced assessment of his fascinating political odyssey.

As we do not have nearly enough space to describe the long, complicated history of what is,

currently, Socialist Organiser it would help if we could explain the guiding ideas which have given continuity throughout so many changes of name and partners. Unfortunately this is not possible either, as there are none! That such formidable intransigence and organisational continuity has co-existed with a bewildering variety of positions goes some way to explain his former associates fury. For example, when O'Mahony (then trading under the name of Workers Fight) led an entrism faction in Tony Cliff's International Socialists, he was strongly anti Labour Party even to the extent of calling for electoral abstention. Today, Socialist Organiser is extremely loyal to the Labour Party and reserves most of its spleen for attacks on Militant.

Let us leave accusations of mental instability as the last resort of O'Mahony's exasperated former partners, and seek to explain his conduct by its social context. Lenin was fond of quoting Tolstoy's anecdote of the man who appeared, from the distance, to be making lunatic gestures, and could be seen as deranged. When seen from closer up the man was engaged in the perfectly rational activity of sharpening a knife on the kerbstone. Those who who have been the kerbstone on which O'Mahony's political knife was stropped are hardly impartial witnesses. O'Mahony once believed that Ernest Mandel's Fourth International was a basically healthy organisation, which was cursed with a lousy British section, the IMG, whose leadership included the likes of playboy Tariq Ali. O'Mahony's bid for the Fourth International franchise was turned down by Mandel who is said to have since regretted his decision. Mandel thought that O'Mahony's aggressive style was unsuitable for a group which wanted to attract student youth. In fact, intransigence and hardness verging on personal rudeness is an advantage for an organisation which, ideologically, is travelling light.

O'Mahoney's style, by appealing to other toughies, has sometimes brought him curious allies. For example, in the early 1970's, as mainstream feminism disintegrated, some socialist feminists, repelled by trends towards mysticism and libertatian domesticity, and anxious to stay in the labour movement, chose O'Mahony. They had come to agree with Mae West that a hard man was good to find. When, under their influence, Socialist Organiser protested that divorce was becoming too easy, we were prompted into a rare unladylike remonstrance. O'Mahony eventually tired of his unrequited love for Mandel's Fourth International and tried to set up his own. This required the elaboration of theoretical differences, not a difficult task, given Mandel's drift away from Marxism. In the Falklands war O'Mahony was very much in a minority in resolutely opposing the war, while refusing to support Galtieri, whom the rest of the Left saw as a combination of William Tell and Robin Hood. He was of course taking up the orthodox communist tradition of Lenin and Liebnicht, but it inevitably split his group, throwing his then partner, Alan Thornett, into the arms of Mandel. O'Mahoney knew that, once the Falklands war was over, he would need to find other issues to justify his organisational independence, not any easy task in a Labour Party crowded with entrism groups which were (prior to the publication of this guide) indistinguishable to the average observer.

O'Mahony needed a good package mix, and unlike some of his more ignorant competitors, he knew that the package could not be assembled from just any old ingredients. We make history in conditions not of our own choosing. The kerbstone and the knife are already there and we can choose only how to deploy them. O'Mahoney considered, and rejected, attacking the corruption of the GLC and the London boroughs, mainly because the hated SWP had already done so. He did not even consider attacking the Black careerists in the Labour Party because they were

allies in the fight against the, even more hated, Militant. Engels position on Gay Lib was examined and quickly discarded as political kamikazi. What was left? Socialist Outlook's student supporters were fed up at being shouted down by feminists for being men, or members of a male dominated group if they were women. They launched an attack on the Feminocracy who denied that there were class differences among women. When that line got a good response from young women, O'Mahoney realised he was on to something. He then looked at the doctrine of uncritical support for the PLO, till then unanimous among Left students, and saw a point of attack. He accused the student Left, and the SWP in particular of anti-semitism. We think this charge is unjustified; SWP students include a fair number of Yobbos, who are not too delicate in their debating style, but they are, on average less anti-semitic than traditional conservatives. Nevertheless, O'Mahoney, who for years had castigated other groups for giving only lukewarm support to the PLO, decided that Israel had a right to exist. O'Mahoney, who can think on his feet, realised that consistency demanded that he extend his argument to maintain that no ethnic group was intrinsically evil, and come out against genocide in principle. Therefore, he next attacked the contention of the IRA and the majority of the British Left that the Irish Protestants were intrinsically reactionary. He now argues that Irish reunification should be achieved by a united working class. Where will it end? Is O'Mahoney going to end up as an orthodox Marxist? Many of those who were tounge-lashed by him for suggesting just a fraction of what he now proclaims are bewildered. His enemies (who if got together would be the largest group on the Left) say that he is on the way to becoming a full fledged Zionist. That is probably not true: what is true is that any position he advances has an organisational reason behind it. In this case O'Mahony's belief that he might be able to recruit from the Jewish Socialist, a small group of nice

people who get upset at the confusion between anti-Zionism and anti-semitism which prevails in student politics.

There is one exception to O'Mahony's distaste for continuity: He has always been a consistent Stalinophobe. That is, he has taken one side of Trotsky's rich and complex analysis of the Soviet Union and announced that the bureaucratically run State economies are reactionary. A more common deviation among self-styled Trotskyists has been to treat Stalinism as something in the past and to act as cheerleaders for more recent Stalinist bosses. It is certainly difficult to apply Trotsky's analysis consistently, and many former Trotskyists such as Max Schachtman and Tony Cliff, have reacted by arguing that it is politically incoherent. Yet, everyone who has ever had to suffer corrupt, drunken and incompetent union leaders, while defending the union against the employers recognises the validity of Trotsky's analysis which, admittedly, gives us no formula for instant solutions to new problems. O'Mahony has, in fact, accepted the thesis, advanced by Schachtman in 1940, that there is no progressive element left in the bureaucratized States. Why then does he not say so? For two reasons: one, he is still disputing the claim for the orthodox Trotskyist market with Mandel and his ilk, so a declaration of Schachtmanism is, as yet, premature. Secondly, the British SWP, which agrees with him on issues such as supporting the Mullahs in Afghanistan and the Pope in Poland is very much larger than his own group. Agreement with the hated SWP would create problems for the smaller group, so the coming alteration in line must be carefully prepared and will probably not be announced until 1989.

O'Mahony's theoretical journal, Workers Liberty is currently the most stimulating read on the Left and makes one wish that such a keen intelligence could be freed from the constraints of short term

factional and organisational appetites. However, the logic of total immersion in domestic Labour Party matters will make soon reduce political discussion to Militant bashing, so read it while you can, as the journal is unlikely to maintain its present level for long.

The Spartacist League

The Spartacist League (Sparts for short) are a colony of an American group of the same name who split from the American SWP in the early 1960's, when the parent group became Castroites, lost interest in the labour movement, and became ardent supporters of armed struggle (except in the United States where guerrilla war is illegal). Consequently, the SWP fired Gerry Healy, who had been their British concessionaire up till then, made it up with their old enemies Pablo and Mandel and created the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Those, mainly in the SWP's youth wing, who could not accept the change in policy were expelled and eventually became the Spartacist League. They tried to work with Gerry Healy who the Sparts leader, James Robertson, recognised as a kindred spirit, but Healy demanded unconditional obedience and worship at his personal shrine. If the group was to escape from national isolation it needed its own International, so teams of missionaries were despatched to strike at the revisionists European base. Although less successful than the Mormons, they managed to recruit some natives and now have a group of about 60 people, which publishes a journal named Workers Hammer.

The Sparts complete parasitism on other groups makes them very unpopular on the rest of the Left, so, regrettably, little attempt is made to understand the theory which explains their behaviour. The Sparts core belief is that, in the foreseeable future, it is impossible

for revolutionaries to address themselves to significant sectors of the working class, as anyone open to revolutionary politics is already a supporter of one of the groups which, falsely, claim to be revolutionary. The key task of revolutionaries is, therefore, to win over supporters of these Ostensibly Revolutionary Groups (ORGS), by heckling their meetings and hoping to be thrown out. The Sparts will, in this way, achieve the primitive accumulation of cadres which is a necessary stage to be gone through before proceeding to a direct involvement in class struggle. The belief in the long slow haul is combined with the view that there is not much time left to build the vanguard party before the final struggle between socialism and barbarism. Such a theory may be contradictory but it is necessary if the group is to maintain revolutionary fervour while confining its activity to a propaganda onslaught on the ORGS.

Surprise is sometimes expressed that such an introspective strategy comes from a group born in the stirring sixties, heyday of youth revolt and the movement against the Vietnam war. Are the Sparts not too kind to the ORGS, in spite of continually bad-mouthing them? As usual, an examination of the groups own history and political predicament will provide an explanation which eludes us if we confine our attention to the realms of grand theory where the Sparts would like to contain it. The core of the Sparts joined the SWP in the late 1950's, after splitting from Max Schachtman's Workers League, a formerly Marxist organisation which moved rapidly to the Right during the 1950's. Schachtman had split from the SWP in 1940 and ended up supporting the Vietnam war, so the young men who joined the SWP were accepting that party embodied the revolutionary tradition. They were almost alone in joining what was already an ossified liberal sect, which is why they immediately dominated its youth movement and breathed some life into a decrepit structure.

When the Sparts found themselves outside the SWP they had, in order to justify joining it in the first place, to construct a myth that it had degenerated recently. The contention puzzled other American Leftists. Some of the old SWP members were loyal and dedicated comrades, but the party's intellectual level was abysmal, it had hardly any industrial clout and young people, apart from those who were to become the Sparts, saw it as an irrelevance. So did their younger sisters and brothers, when the anti-Vietnam war movement developed in the 1960's. J.P. Cannon, the Healy prototype, who the Sparts continue to see as the American Lenin, retired from active leadership but retained political solidarity with the subordinates who replaced him. The SWP, after the departure of the Sparts, acted as handboys of the liberal Democrats in opposing the more radical elements in the anti-war movement. Our indigenous Sparts are carefully brought up in a myth which dates the SWP's degeneration a decade and a half later than the facts warrant. The contradictions in the Sparts view of the movements history conditioned their inability to understand British politics, once they stepped ashore. The antics of the American SWP's co-thinkers here were appalling, so the Sparts slated them mercilessly. On the other hand the theory said that such groups embodied the revolutionary tradition, in however deformed a fashion, so the Sparts could not abandon them and search for a healthier corpse to feed off.

Why stick with such a contradictory theory and live in such a repulsive environment? It is a more intellectually satisfying variant of the Mandelbrot belief in the revolutionary potential of the flotsam of that milieu, and fulfills the same function of providing a justification for avoiding the working class. No one unfamiliar with American society can appreciate the enormous difficulty in maintaining a hold on reality in an environment where student radicals have to compete

...The Spartacist League

with Hari Krishna and Lyndon La Rouché, a former Spart who is now a leader of a Moral Majority sect. It is surprising, not that the Sparts are crazy, but that they are not even madder. The Sparts belief that the ex Trotskyist movement was healthy until the 1950's allows them to avoid any discussion of the much more important discussions of the 1940's. They cannot help but be aware that the British section of the Fourth International, the RCP, was one of the healthiest and most working class and that their hero, Cannon, helped in its destruction when he imposed his clone, Healy, as its leader. Consequently, their anti-British chauvinism seems like a mirror image of Militants patriotism. The Sparts fixation on their very individual view of history, and their chosen field of operations limits their interests. They found it easy enough to outrage your average middle class trendy by reiterating traditional Marxist views on such issues as Black and Female separatism. As unusually learned Marxists, they are well aware that the founding fathers views on Gay Liberation are even more shocking to many of those who consider themselves their followers, but they wisely decided not to press that point.¹ It is more difficult to extend this method to cover areas such as political economy where the trendies do not have a view. In any case the Sparts heart was not in this. Once the overriding aim to zap the Org's is understood, everything else about Sparts activity falls into place. For example a revolt in South Africa is intrinsically less interesting than the wrong response of the Dutch or German Pabloites, to that event. As illusions in Eurocommunism, feminism and the youth vanguard crumbled in the mid-1970's and the radical Left were thrown into crisis, the Sparts hoped to benefit from the decline of their softer rivals. In practice, the collapse of that milieu had a calamitous effect on them in the early 1980's. When the dog dies the fleas also die. Unused to developing the independent activity which was

clearly necessary, now that there was not much meat on the ORGS, the Sparts lost most of their cadre in Britain.

Because many of the Sparts formal positions are more acceptable to labour movement activists than the lunacies peddled by their competitors, there is the danger that people outside the radical middle class milieu will want to join them. To prevent the inevitable tensions which would result from recruiting working class militants, reasonable positions are expressed in an intolerably harsh manner: that works quite well. American ex-Sparts describe a very Healyite organisation where Robertson sits behind a steadily growing pile of empty beer cans carrying on a rambling drunken haraunge interspersed with senile laughter, yet we have found Robertson charming on his visits to London. It is true that many of the leading Sparts go in for a macho-man image of guns and swords. The perfectly reasonable call for the abolition of the licensing hours is elevated to a central demand, and there are signs of a flirtation with Scots nationalism. As befits its American origin, the Sparts are individually competitive. New ideas are floated, and if successful their originators get promoted, while if the idea is found to be revisionist they are demoted. If you believe that she who lives by the sword will die by the sword, you have probably guessed the Sparts destiny. In the early eighties a group of veteran Sparts in the Bay Area of California, where they had their only toe-hold in the labour movement defected. The renegades, who originally called themselves the External Tendency, had absorbed their Sparts training well. They reclassified their parent group as an ORG and turned up to intervene at its meetings carefully restraining themselves against attempts to goad them into violence. Innocents in Bootle or Lyon can hardly be expected to understand that the main purpose of all Sparts literature is to discredit that tiny group in California.

...The Spartacist League

Goaded by the External Tendency the Sparts became increasingly unbalanced, and now agree with the despised Pabloites that a wave of sexual repression is sweeping over Britain. If the External Tendency (now known as the Bolshevik Leninists) are able to smuggle a colonist with the requisite ethnic qualifications past Thatchers racist immigration police, so that she or he could do to the Sparts what they do unto others, they would lose control completely and go the way of the Healyites and accuse their rivals of working for the CIA. The Bolshevik Leninist group is an extremely small flea, but its bite could well prove fatal.

1) See letter from Engels to Marx, 22 June 1869

Socialist Action & International
(formerly IMG)

You may have heard people speak of the IMG, and even know that it stands for the International Marxist Group, without recognising the International Group and Socialist Action, the two splinters which currently dispute its inheritance and the Fourth International franchise. When the Mandel tendency and the American SWP reunited in the early sixties Gerry Healy had his concession from the SWP terminated, and Ted Grant, the Mandel concessionaire was foisted on the reluctant SWP. The main currents in the International have seldom for long agreed on anything except the need to huddle together and minimise their differences, but they were both glad to give Ted Grant's Militant the heave in 1968 and concentrate on the student revolt. But who was to get the British concession?

In that marvellous year even the Fourth International was able to muster 30 recruits for its British section, but quality was a problem and has remained so. The International Marxist Group from the beginning concentrated solely on the student and anti-Vietnam war movement. An alliance with Ken Coates and the Bertrand Russell peace foundation foundered over obscure financial controversies, and the few members of the IMG who had any commitment to the Labour movement were turfed out and formed the Chartist (a group which, eventually was to give corruption a bad name). No one in the group had any weight in the labour movement or experience of the Trotskyist tradition. Its whole effort was put into the Vietnam Solidarity Movement, and while the war lasted that produced some results. Apart from a few aristocrats the group, like its present successors, was completely middle class, but unlike most Left groups it was not in the least concerned about that fact. It made a virtue of its discontinuity with the British Trotskyist tradition, whose more than 30 years of history it saw as an uninteresting prelude to its own appearance.

Complete absorption in student revolt was, in 1968, less of a distinguishing feature than a common denominator of Maoist and New Left politics. The IMG's only distinctive badge of identity was its status as the Fourth International's British licensee. Insofar as it had a strategy it consisted in building Red Bases in the University on the model of the Chinese Red Army's strongholds in Yanan which acted as the springboard for the seizure of power in 1949. It was never explained how or when the revolutionary cadre was to sally forth and occupy the enemy territory. When they did would not their voluntary withdrawal from the labour movement make them fish out of water? To be fair to the IMG they did not dream this up themselves. They got it from Ernest Mandel who re-vamped Herbert Marcuse's ideas and came up with

the theory of the Youth and Student Vanguard. In spite of the notorious deficiencies of the British educational system, most radical students had enough sense to realise that students could not replace the working class, so they signed up with groups who had some working class orientation.

As the student revolt subsided the IMG had to find new constituencies. The most obvious one was Ireland and they quickly signed up as members of the Provo's fan club, producing the slogan, "Victory for the IRA" which even the Provo's found bizarre. The women's and Gay movements were other obvious markets and, eventually, as the strike wave of the 1970's mounted the working class was admitted to the club of potentially revolutionary forces. The IMG shocked traditional Trotskyists by refusing to call for a vote for Labour in 1970, but they were eventually pulled by the Bennite tide as their ex-student contemporaries renewed their faith in the Parliamentary system, although they were standing candidates against the Labour Party as late as 1979.

Unkind people, unwilling to make allowances for the group's isolation, have made a great deal of some of the IMG's startling aberrations. The political illiteracy of their average member was encyclopaedic, and their Marxism always owed more to Harpo than Groucho. You have probably heard that they once argued that Apartheid was progressive because the laws preventing people living with their dependents tended to break up the family. Contrary to popular belief that was never the group's official line, merely a factional position within it. As the British branch of the Fourth International the IMG was, inevitably, torn between its rival patrons, the European Mandelites and the American SWP. While the partners were friendly, the IMG could happily serve two masters, but when they fell out its position as part of both Europe and the English speaking world meant that it did not fit easily into

either sphere of influence. During the 1970's the IMG became factionally divided over issues which only made sense in terms of the Mandel/SWP rivalry. Outsiders laughed at these incomprehensible factional divisions, but their very lack of relevance to domestic issues prevented the group from splitting.

Fourth International divergencies were eventually to trip up the IMG just as they had Healy and Grant in the past. During the 1970's the ageing SWP (US) was taken over by a group of Yuppies led by Jack Barnes, who had cut their teeth as opponents of the radical tendencies in the anti-Vietnam war movement. They threw out most of the veterans, as well as supporters of Mandel, and started to "junk the old Trotskyism" in the hope of becoming the authorised agents of Havana and Managua. Mandel, more responsive to the European labour movement, had no alternative but to build up national factions to prepare for the inevitable split. The result in Britain is the International group formed in 1986, by defectors from Socialist Action. The International Group, which publishes the journal, Socialist Outlook, fused with Alan Thornett's faction which had split with Socialist Organiser because of its refusal to back Galtieri in the Falklands war. At the end of 1987, less than a year after the defection of the International Group, Socialist Action split once more. A new faction followed its American mentors, embraced Stalinism, and is now attempting to create a dwarf version of the American SWP in Britain. Although both of the factions were in agreement in junking the idea of the self activity of the working class, their appetites then diverged. The rump of Socialist Action were uninspired at the thought of being a liberal sect, and decided to maintain the alliance with the Campaign Group of MP's. This unusually close agreement between a Parliamentary faction and an extra-parliamentary organisation, resembles the alliance between horse and rider.

The MP's assure us that Socialist Action is cured of its youthful radicalism, and will cheerfully prostrate itself by selling the MP's abysmally boring Campaign Group News.

The people who formed the International Group were not prepared to go along with their former comrades in explicitly proclaiming that the working class was merely one part of the progressive alliance formed by the Feminists, Gays and the Labour Party's Black Sections. Interestingly enough, all of the Campaign Group MP's we have spoken to have more in common with International than with Socialist Action on this point, but complain that it is difficult to get good staff nowadays. Although the division between the three groups originated in a dispute over international spheres of influence it seems reasonable to expect that the normal process of competition will eventually produce further political differences. The united group were agreed on lining up with the Labour Party leadership, the Liverpool Bishops, the Race Relations industry and the Liberal Party in attacking Militant and the other Left wing councillors on Merseyside. Similarly, neither group has criticised the "right on" Labour councillors as they implement cuts and worsen the condition of their staff, while handing out well paid jobs to their friends. However, Socialist Action's attitudes seem more definitely anti working class, so we fear that their next step will be to exclude the proles from their position in the broad Left alliance.

The International Group's position is much less definite. Its members shuffle their feet when asked if the working class is still the revolutionary force, betray unease when reminded of the crimes of their trendy allies, and remain committed to trade union struggle. They have toured their new partner, ex car worker Alan Thornett, round

their branches, and to their credit, react defensively when questioned about his role in the 1979 engineering strike.



Tearsites and Yaffeites

Three quite distinct groups have their origin in a single split from the International Socialists (Now the Socialist Workers Party) in 1973/74. They are: The Revolutionary Communist Party, The Revolutionary Communist Group and the Discussion Group. None of the groups willingly admit to their common parentage, and they are, at first sight, unlikely cousins. However once they are examined under the infra red rays of the dialectoscope, the similarities which derive from a common ancestry show up clearly enough.

All three derive from an, undeclared, faction formed inside the International Socialists in 1971. The faction had no definite ideas and represented little more than a vague dissatisfaction of young people resentful at the prospects of promotion in a group with too many students and graduates. The absence of a distinct programme, dogma or theory of their own made the faction vulnerable, and consequently very secretive. Two of the groups maintain this secrecy still and the Discussion Group still refuses to publicly acknowledge its existence. The faction was influenced by the, now deceased, veteran Trotskyist Roy Tarse. When asked to contribute to a discussion, faction members would either remain silent or mutter something about the groups tradition being wrong. The ingenious idea of a faction without a theory threw Cliff and his lieutenants into fits. Yet it made good sense: an attempt to agree on a theory, or on specific proposals would have split the group. By playing the cards from the top of the deck, the faction was able to claim that its members were being denied their democratic rights. Such an existence was too good to last for ever, so when at the end of 1973, Cliff turfed them out, the dissidents had to decide where they were going.

The Discussion Group

At the first meeting of the faction after being expelled a bid for leadership was made by Doctor Yaffe who unveiled the velocitometer, designed in his Sussex University laboratory, which could calculate the speed of the falling rate of profit to limits of 0.00002 feet per second. He invited the participants, to join him in founding the Revolutionary Communist Group which, with the aid of his ingenious device, would build on the fleeting insights of Marx, and provide the theoretical basis for the revolutionary party. About half of those present, impressed by the gleaming chrome tubes and elaborate dials of Yaffe's machine, did so.

However, the core of the clandestine faction were shocked at Yaffe's indiscretion in admitting to the groups existence and refused to join. The Discussion Group, which they now called themselves, had been so deeply marked by their experience of clandestinity that the thought of "coming out" was inconceivable. They retired to their cell for the rest of the 1970s to work out a theory which would justify their inactivity. The theory which was eventually produced declared that the trouble with most of the Left is that it lives in an enclosed world where its ideas are never subjected to the test of practice. An adequate theory will be constructed only when significant sectors of the labour movement, engage in both discussion and action. Until that happy day comes only very tentative ideas can be discussed. Consequently, the group, which soon drifted into the Labour Party, practices a discretion which one would normally associate with people living under harsh dictatorships. Its members normally deny that their group exists, and some of them refuse to admit to each other that they are members. The group has retained a very high

proportion of its original members and has recruited almost no one in 15 years. An experience of its, rare, meetings will explain why this is so. On these occasions, a few carefully selected guests are presented with a very general exposition of socialist theory, and then asked to present their own programme for the way forward for the labour movement. This tactic does for political clarification what lockjaw does for conversation, so the guests retire without ever knowing that they had briefly been candidate members of the Discussion Group.

A Discussion Group member justified his group's procedures to us by stating that as they took discussion seriously, they were not prepared to indulge in it casually, or with just anyone. A group which believed in insurrection would not erect the barricades on impulse, so why should those who favoured discussion be promiscuous about it? Who could have any respect for a Christian who leapt into bed with someone before going through the proper rituals? The last time the Discussion Group edged discreetly out of its closet was in 1980 when it joined with Ken Livingstone and the WRP in sponsoring a very lavishly produced journal Labour Herald. While that episode lasted the groups caution vanished, as Labour Herald had extremely detailed and specific policies, all of them about the Middle East. This, it was argued privately (the Discussion Group does not argue publicly) was a subtle dialectical device. The Middle East was far enough away for British marxists to analyse, whereas in Britain, it was difficult to see the wood for the trees. That particular venture collapsed because of a falling out between Livingstone and his partners, so the Discussion Group has resumed its vow of political silence, producing only the occasional pamphlet. The whole Labour Herald episode remains unexplained. It would seem that while the other partners in the enterprise had good reasons for secrecy the Discussion Group valued it for its own sake.

The desire for privacy has driven many members of the Discussion Group to live in Stockport, but there are clots in Bristol and Lambeth. What do they actually discuss? It is easier to answer that question negatively, as the group has a larger number of taboo subjects than the Womens Institutes. The organisation, wisely, does not discuss Russia, the Middle East, Ireland, or most of the topics which the Left is prone to tear itself apart over. The reason for this is that lacking the stability given by a public existence, regular publications or open campaigns, the group fears that a debate might threaten friendships of 16 years standing, and therefore the organisation's existence. Having opted for talk rather than action, the talk soon became quite inhibited. After a decade and a half of existence, the group is no nearer to being able to answer the question first asked by exasperated fellow members of the International Socialists in 1971. "What the hell do you believe in?"

The REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST GROUP

Such a congenital terror of adopting a political line was incomprehensible to Doctor Yaffe. as he delicately adjusted the controls of his velocitometer. He and his followers, mainly earnest post graduate students, plunged into theoretical work to remedy the appalling empiricism of the British Left. The RCG was the concentrated expression of purely student politics and it quickly shook off the residual influence which the working class exercised on its parent group, describing the manifestations of this as syndicalist deviations. The RCG soon adopted a Stalinist ideology, an early example of what was to become a common tendency as former student revolutionaries abandoned the libertarian and anti-bureaucratic spirit of 1968.

The RCG's Stalinism brought it no closer to the British Communist Party, which it saw as just as incurably syndicalist as the Trotskyists. The working class was

denounced as beneficiaries of imperialism, and enemies of its real revolutionary victims. The Irish, Blacks and Third World dictators. All of which was familiar stuff among liberals and Maoists, but the RCG has some peculiarities of its own which delight the connoisseur of sectarianism. Its members insist on using pseudonyms, after first making sure that everyone knows their correct names. They publicly announce that they keep their address a secret. What police agents make of such ostentatious secrecy God only knows. Given the RCGs world view, its main focus of activity has to be on solidarity with struggles abroad and with the immigrants who are seen as the emissaries of the Third World here. In its early days the group devoted much effort to wooing middle class immigrant associations, but lost out to competition from government funded agencies. It complained bitterly when its associates in the Southall Youth Movement defected on receipt of a cheque for £20,000, and most taxpayers would agree that our money should not be allowed to distort the normal working of political market. Realising that trying to compete with the Home Office was fighting above his weight, Yaffe turned towards Anti-Apartheid as the strongest representative Third World force in Britain. As he proclaims that no British group or person, because they are personally guilty of the crimes of imperialism, has any right to to criticise imperialisms victims, Yaffe's only possible tactic was to bid for the British franchise, from the African National Congress. It was a bold attempt from a young and small group, but the ANC leaders, rightly or wrongly, decided to leave the Communist Party in charge. The RCG then took over the City of London AA as a base to harass the national leadership of the organisation. That group is far more active than all the others and mounts a permanent vigil outside South Africa House in Trafalgar Square. The national AA have instituted fairly draconian measures to fight off the RCG,

thereby transforming a loose solidarity movement into a doctrinally orthodox organisation. What help all of that is to the workers facing the South African bosses, armed police and goon squads is a matter of opinion.

The RCG's lack of interest in the topics which have generally occupied Marxists is demonstrated by the title of its journal Fight Racism: Fight Imperialism. The group is interested in manifestations of capitalism rather than the thing itself. It has also made a bid for the Provo franchise, but the Provo's have, so far, refused to hand over the British solidarity work to it. It would seem that one of the RCGs problems is that it is attempting to do too much in serving the interests of all anti imperialist leaderships. A small organisation should, perhaps seek out one or two clients, rather than do too much. The RCG takes its anti workerism to greater extremes than anyone, with the possible exception of the London Labour Left. Black workers, in the now independent countries are behaving in an objectively imperialist way. when they demand trade union rights, and deserve all they get from the anti imperialist leaders who have them jailed or shot. Any white Leftists who supports solidarity action for such reprobates is playing the imperialist game. The RCG has painted itself into a corner in its struggle for control of Anti-Apartheid. Its dogma that anti imperialist leaderships cannot be criticised must include the ANC and the South African Communist Party, and surely they are entitled to appoint whoever they please to head Anti Apartheid in Britain? The only way out for the RCG would be to extend its criticism of the AA leadership to include the ANC. That would be an abuse of their white skin privilege and would be objectively imperialist and a denial of the group's whole evolution, so the RCG's prospects are bleak.

The Revolutionary Communist Party.

Yaffe's plunge into full fledged Stalinism, combined with a disagreement over the mathematics in Capital with his chief lieutenant Frank Richards produced a split, which eventually became the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). The new group declared itself anti Stalinist, and took several steps sideways in an attempt to differentiate its product. The ancestral curse of all the Tearsites still dogged it, as it too found difficulty in defining a suitable mix of slogans and demands to attract custom in an already overcrowded market. The group dropped Yaffe's hostility to the working class and adopted an agnostic attitude to the historic divide between Stalinism and Trotskyism. At first sight it is a much less repellent group than its parent, but its essential eclecticism has landed it in some strange company. Opponents translate the initials RCP as Ray Chadwick Party, after the leader of the breakaway Union of Democratic Miners, because of the group's support for a ballot during the miners strike.

The RCP cobbled together a programme from various pieces of ultra-Leftism and Third Period Stalinism without worrying too much that the various pieces did not fit together well. It dates the degeneration of the world Communist movement from the Popular Fronts of the 1930' rather than the ultra Left period which helped Hitler to come to power. Yet while indulging in a typically British pragmatism it constantly stresses its theoretical credentials. The theory is student theory as the faint link between orthodox Trotskyist groups and the working class movement never existed for either the RCG or RCP. Its rehabilitation of the working class from the purgatory which Yaffe had consigned it too has not given it any specific interest in the actual labour movement. This comes across strongly in its weekly journal The Next Step, which is a kind of Left

Wing answer to Marxism Today, sharing that journals eclecticism. The RCP speaks of the working class in tones which seem similar to those of traditional Marxists, but that is deceptive, as the class is seen as a collection of groups which are all part of the revolutionary project, while hardly being a class for itself. When the group took to standing in Paliamentary election in 1986/7 it formed the Red Front which like most fronts had nothing behind them except for the tiny Revolutionary

Democratic Group(RCG) and the Squaddists of Red Action. The front's electoral programme consisted of a minimalist series of demands, which did not attack the capitalist system, nor advocate serious reforms, very similar to the programmes which the SWP used to present when it indulged in such antics. We doubt if the RCPs style and vigour will be enough to carry it through the tough times ahead.

What then gives the RCPs eclectic mishmash the appeal which made it the fastest growing group of the 1980s, with a dynamism notably absent from both the RCG and the Discussion Groups? The answer is style. The group is part of the harder aggressive, post-punk move away from peace and love and the average RCPer looks very different from the grotty SWPers. They have been described as "the SWP with hair gel." and many a parent, pleased at the improvement in their child's appearance have welcomed the move from one to another. Alas! their mind remains just as untidy. Whatever the RCP's problems the are nothing to that of its political cousins. Fellow members of the Labour Party continue to believe that the Discussion Group is just a collection of drinking mates, held together by age/peer group loyalty and sexism. As for Doctor Yaffe, he fiddles aimlessly with his his fantastic machine which sits gathering dust in the laboratory, having proved incapable of producing a formula for the South African revolution. The

laboratory technicians like it better than the squat Japanese electronic devices which are currently fashionable. Psychologists will, no doubt, explain some of the behaviour of these three political cousins by the traumatic affect of being part of an undeclared faction, ashamed of having no valid reason to exist. Yet the vast majority of members of two of the groups were never in the SWP and know little of their group's origin.

theoretical rag to cover their nakedness. Most people expected they would diissolve as they found it impossible to explain why they should be an independent group. However to do so would have given a victory to both Cliff and O'Mahony so Workers Power decided to grit their teeth and soldier on. Their lack of any distinct programme or theory led to them being nicknamed, "The class of 75", implying that they were merely a group of friends: few thought that the group would survive.

Workers Power (Class of 75)

Workers Power like so many other sects is a split from International Socialism. (Now the Socialist Workers Party). It originated in 1975, by which time, because of previous splits, the political space available was becoming scarce. The group was a result partly of a generational revolt, partly of dissatisfaction at the parent group's attempt to reconcile the incompatible demands of work in the labour movement and support for the IRA. From its inception Workers Power felt its theoretical inadequacy and tried to negotiate a merger with some more experienced operators. Maoism was already dated, the RCG's theory too obscure, and the most suitable partner, the IMG, was rejected because its carelessness had allowed Workers Power intrigues to become known to the leaders of International Socialism. Unwisely, the naive young faction stumbled into the arms of John O'Mahony, then trading under the name of Workers Fight.

O'Mahony proclaimed the fusion of the two small groups as the greatest step forward for revolutionary politics since the foundation of the Communist Party, and his new partners believed him! When thy realised that O'Mahony had taken them to the cleaners, they were left fuming, with hardly a

For some years Workers Power held on to their parent group's fetish of State Capitalism, while alleging that the SWP were not applying their own theory. When Russian troops entered Afghanistan Workers Power stood out from most of the Left by refusing to call for their withdrawal: the group had stumbled into a Trotskyist position which it later ratified by dropping the State Capitalist fetish. Having done so it logically had to consider whether to put in a tender for the Fourth Internatinal franchise, which would inevitably meant being told to unite with the polirical illiterates of the IMG. Recoiling from this fate, Workers Power had no choice but to justify its decision by producing a criticism of the Fourth International by means of a critical history. Surprisingly, the work entitled, The Death Agony of the Fourth International, produced in 1983, was an excellent well researched booklet, demolishing many of the myths about that venerable body, through a very accurate account of its tragi-comic history. Like a previously dull child who has unexpectedly passed an exam, Workers Power grew in confidence and went on to produce a very decent theoretical journal titled Permanent Revolution. The group believed that it had sorted out the problems caused by its late development and curious ancestry, and was poised to begin the task of building the genuine revolutionary party. Alas!, it was not to be: Workers Power remains a group of 1970's students, becoming Polytechnic lecturers. Its monthly

paper of the same name, filled with really appalling gibberish, is after the Militant the most unreadable of all the Left periodicals, light years away from its theoretical journal. Workers Power has an Irish sister organisation, the Irish Workers Group, which has tentatively begun to apply Marxist theory to Ireland. This will end in tears: a Marxist analysis of Ireland will shatter the romantic green nationalism which the English Left depends on.

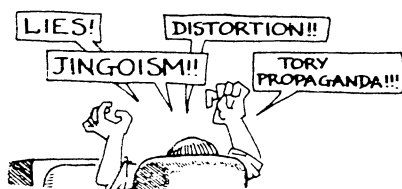
Red Action (AKA the Squaddists)

In the early 1980's as Tony Cliff was walking through Islington market he stopped to watch some of his supporters battling it out with the National Front, when something struck him as odd. His followers were on suspiciously good terms with the "enemy" and the battle was obviously being conducted according to recognised rules. When the whistle blew for half time the antagonists bowed to each other and went off to drink in the same pub (admittedly in separate bars). Cliff, a near teetotaler who genuinely detests Fascists, ordered an inquiry fearing that the local SWP had been infiltrated by the Sealed Knot Society, who dress up and re-enact historic battles. It transpired that, on a previous occasion, a rising young SWP intellectual had been recognised by his own comrades and beaten up when he refused to join in the fun.

The street fighters, known as "Squaddists" by other SWP members now serve as an inspiration to the currently fashionable Gay Nazi pop artists Gilbert and George, refused to admit that their behaviour amounted to revisionism. Cliff, who is historically well informed, had in consenting to their semi-autonomous existence, been taking a leaf from the book of the Catholic Church which creates religious orders to channel the enthusiasm of particularly devout believers,

while preventing them from getting in the way of the mainstream operation. Some "Squaddists" adopted the RCP line that Fascists are more honest than Labourites and Trotskyists, who although equally racist, hypocritically refuse to go out and beat up Blacks. It was alleged that the SWP's inability to appreciate the rules of chivalry observed in the battles with the National Front were a proof of its pacifism and that many Front members were good types although politically mistaken. When the "Squaddists" were shown the door they set up the journal, Red Action, and denounced all other groups as incurably petty bourgeois because of their addiction to reading and discussion and refusal to engage in physical combat.

The "Squaddists" insisted that they were the only authentically working class group on the Left and that they were particularly eager to assist all genuine struggles for national liberation. Such a juxtaposition is confusing only to those unable to decode the message. A group which wants to hire itself out always makes such a declaration. When dropping their jeans to display their charms it is important to emphasise to potential customers that these exquisitely shaped buttocks are proletarian. Most bourgeois nationalist groups have preferred to seek more up-market partners.



The Revolutionary Democratic Group

There is little to say about the Revolutionary Democratic Group, which publishes a journal, the Republican Worker. It is a clot produced by individual defectors from the SWP in London and Scotland who came together to indulge their nostalgia. They see themselves as an external pressure group on the SWP which they would rejoin if the party would turn towards the working class, re-form its rank and file groups and institute a more democratic internal regime. The SWP leaders ban them from their public meetings on the grounds that nostalgia is both debilitating and catching.

The RDG have retreated from the difficult questions facing late 20th century Marxists by deciding that we must give more weight to democratic demands and fight for the democratic republic, free speech, votes for women and the separation of Church and State (except in Ireland where society is not yet ripe for such an advanced step). It caused some surprise when they supported the RCP's RED FRONT in the 1987 General Election, but the minimalism of the programme appealed to their nostalgia for the SWP of the 1970's. They seemed, when we spoke to them, a little shamefaced about that episode and admitted that the RCP are a "rum lot", hardly a convincing marxist analysis.

Will the real "WRP" please stand up?

Until August 1985 Gerry Healy was the most charismatic figure on the British Left¹. Suddenly the Central Committee of the WRP, led by long-time Healy clone Mike Banda, announced that their founding father was being charged with the sexual abuse of dozens of female comrades, use of party funds for his own purposes, and complicity in the murder of opponents of the Iraqi government by selling information on Iraqi dissidents in Britain.

Knowledgeable WRP watchers reacted by saying "that's as may be but what has he done to annoy Mike Banda?". James P. Cannon the mentor of both Healy and Banda used to say that in any split there was always two reasons: a good reason and the real reason. The real reason was that the petrodollars were drying up as the lords of the desert who were Healy's bankers became sceptical about their franchisee's ability to influence British politics. Furthermore, the paymasters were demanding more and more risky services, which if discovered, would alarm the WRP cadres most of whom were Equity

members. Healy's personal conduct with the youth section was becoming more and more bizarre and difficult to conceal from the members; one outraged father had physically attacked the venerable patriarch and had to be persuaded to keep quiet. Financial bankruptcy would have led to the auditors examining the books and revealing God knows what. Worst of all, although Healy had relinquished the post of General Secretary to Banda he was not giving up power. Banda was pushing sixty and feared that he might never inherit the throne.

Banda conspired with Sheila Torrance, the WRP's membership secretary to force Healy to retire, but Torrance feared that Banda, who lacks Healy's bluffs Irish good nature, would be an untrustworthy colleague, so she defected back to Healy who also kept the allegiance of the actors, leaving Banda with most of the full time organisers and the "red professors" who had, for many years, provided Healy with theoretical justification when he required it.

However, a majority of the Central Committee agreed that Healy's colourful life style, was grounds for expulsion. In the chill of dawn, the conspirators shivered at the enormity of what they had done. Killing the king would surely bring retribution. Banda tried to raise morale by describing the benefits which his reign would bring, but some old timers feared that Caligula was replacing Tiberius. Once the deed was done Banda's coalition began to fall apart. Although Healey had started his rise to fame as a lackey of the American Socialist Workers Party, he had soon created his own myth of infallibility. Many WRP members unable to face life without their all-wise leader had mental breakdowns.

The first to desert Banda were a group of satellites of Healy's American franchisee David North. North had fallen out with Healy over some interpretation of the dialectic and had been promptly denounced as a CIA agent, Healy's standard riposte to anyone who disagreed with him. North was forced into temporary alliance with Banda and his sidekick Cliff Slaughter, but their interests were different that it could not last. Banda/Slaughter needed to attack Healy's record and his claim that anyone who differed with him was an agent of the CIA, so they announced that they were withdrawing such charges and even apologised to the victims. North could not go along with this as for many years his groups main political activity had been mounting a slander campaign against Healy's former political accomplices in the American Socialist Workers Party, alleging that its leaders were drawing double salaries as agents of both the CIA and the KGB. North found British acolytes amongst a group of veteran Healyites, who for many years had stood complacently by while Healy had screwed, first their wives, and then their daughters. By suddenly junking Healy's record, Banda was asking them to accept that they had allowed their families to be abused by an elderly satyr for nothing.

In 1986 North's British supporters formed the International Communist Party which, under its leader an Ehratz Healy, Doug Hyland, tries to have Healyism without the great man himself. As Hyland lacks Gerry's charm, initiative, intelligence and dynamism they don't have good prospects. With only 60 members, all they can do is produce a monthly journal attacking their rivals. Banda himself was moving fast, ignoring Slaughter's attempts to slow him down. He realised that, in spite of his Kruschovian role in denouncing Healy, he had been playing the Beria part for so long that he was an obvious target for anyone seeking a scapegoat. The more critical comrades were bound to ask if things had begun to go wrong only in the past ten years or at some other point in the 35 year Healy/Banda collaboration. After several months meditating in a Sri Lanka ashram Banda came up with an answer whose audacity left his rivals gasping. The movement had been wrong since 1923: in other words Stalin, not Trotsky, had been right all along! so he Banda, was not to blame for the present shambles. Nice one Mike! With a dozen supporters he now publishes a journal called Communist Forum, but rumour has it that he is falling out with them too

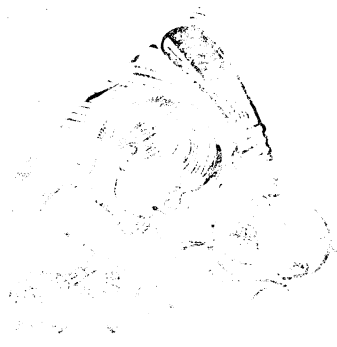
That was going to far for Slaughter, so his faction, once the Banda/Slaughter group became the slaughter Banda group. The split took the usual form with minimal political discussion and mutual allegations of stealing party property. Slaughter was left with about 200 thoroughly demoralised people who could not face the prospect of winding up the party and admitting that it had all been a waste of time. He made a virtue of necessity and announcing that there would be a wide ranging discussion aimed at a clarification and regroupment of the revolutionary movement. The only preconditions for the discussion would be an acceptance that the remaining WRP leaders were nice people who had not realised what Healy was up to.

The Slaughter WRP(I) published a weekly journal Workers Press which immediately adopted the standard absurdities of the middle class left on Gays, Women, Irish and Blacks which Healy's plebian acumen had rejected. The supply of petrodollars dried up so the group had to settle for a very much reduced scale of operations. They realised that they needed an International, an essential device for filtering out reality on a world scale. A search for partners in the political marriage market unearthed one Nahuel Moreno the caudillo of an Argentinian group named the MAS. Moreno's political record was more bizarre than Healy's personal life. Beggars can't be choosers but some WRPs blanched a bit at this piece of rough trade. When Moreno died at the end of 1986, former associates speculated on his motives, but he had removed one of the chief obstacles to the merger. The WRP's leaders hastened to end the general political discussion which they had promised, much to the annoyance of the smaller Left groups who had briefly been allowed to participate in the unity negotiations. The WRP seemed well on its way to recovery when the courts declared that it, not Healy, was the rightful owner of Trotsky's death mask; the nearest to a splinter of the true cross anyone on the Left possesses. However It still needed a true heir to Healy, who tended, by eliminating rivals to destroy successors. Several aspirants for that role, eager to give WRP members the lashing they so enjoy, and aware that none of the "red professors" were up to the task, joined the party following Healy's expulsion. Alas! in March 1988, just as things seemed to be looking up, the Slaughter WRP splintered into four different fragments, the victim of the Morenoites factional dexterity: a belated revenge for the Falklands war.

The WRP(2). The Healy /Torrance rump took about 150 members from the parent group insisting that yet another CIA/KGB attempt to destroy the revolutionary leadership had been foiled. The party's trade union base, predominantly in Equity remained firmly behind Healy and by February 1986 the daily journal Newsline had been re-established, with the help of the leading Equity militants Vanessa and Corin Redgrave. However, the group's leading propagandist, Alex Mitchell, defected to work for Murdoch in Australia and Torrance, came to the conclusion that, although she could not expel Healy, he was clinically mad and should be promoted to an honorary capacity. This was unacceptable to the actors who know a good performer when they see one and at the end of 1986 about 40 of them broke away to form the WRP (3), which in July 1987 produced a journal, The Marxist, devoted mainly to an exchange of letters between Torrance and Healy's supporters. In August 1987 Healy's troupe launched a new production The Marxist Party at the riverside Studio in Hammersmith. Many reviews said that the production was under rehearsed and some surprise was voiced at the sight of performers reading their lines, in what was supposed to be a live performance, not a rehearsal. As a result of the poor reception given to the launch, plans for a provincial tour, leading up to a West End production were postponed, some think for ever. We do not agree: Healy's troupe may be small compared with the cast of Dynasty, but old fashioned actor-managers trod the boards for years with smaller groups, bringing drama to the masses. In early 1987 a further split in the WRP(2) produced the Workers Socialist League formed by some former full time apparatchniks, This group, about thirty strong, publishes a journal Workers News which has no political analysis whatever. Such a defection is more worrying for the dwindling ranks of the WRP (2) than one based on political differences, as it shows a basic lack of confidence in the parent group's survival.

Now that Gerry Healy has no political influence, it is possible to take a balanced view of a colourful and charismatic personality, who does not really belong in our dull mundane world. Because we long for a world more marvellous and coherent than our own commonplace lives we create Gerry Healy's, just as the Christians created God. Healy realised early in his political career that many middle class people desperately wanted to be abused and humiliated by a self appointed representative of the proletariat. Perhaps he should be criticised for indulging them, but has he really done any more harm than Billy Graham or the Moonies? Healy had always resented the contempt in which he was held by the working class leaders of the RCP in the 1940's, who saw him as a good organiser with no grasp of Marxism. The fact that he was appointed as the leader of British Trotskyism, by the American leadership of the Fourth International rather than getting there on his own merits, also rankled. Veterans of the RCP express some bewilderment at his rise to eminence. In fact his theoretical weakness was an advantage in allowing his natural pragmatism to flourish. He

compensated for his ignorance of economics and history by becoming a master of the dialectic. No one, apart from his acolytes, can make head nor tail of the gibberish he has written on this topic, but to be fair to Gerry, there is no evidence that he himself ever took it seriously. His followers, including the highly educated "red professors" wanted to believe in magic and he was willing to oblige. Much the same can be said of the criticisms of his sex life, a lot of it prompted by jealousy of what seems a remarkable performance for a man of 75. These peccadilloes only started after many years of indulging the middle class cadre in the ritual humiliation which they demanded. One was a logical enough continuation of the other, but it does seem hypocritical to blame it all on Healy, who is surely more of a victim than a monster. Now that he wanders like King Lear, deserted by almost everyone but his faithful Cordelia, Vanessa, one can surely hope that his defeat will evoke the compassion, which would have been inappropriate in his years of triumph.



¹ Ken Livingstone of the GLC had given permission to erect a plaque at Hyde park corner to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the great man's conversion from Stalinism to Trotskyism. Healy had been part of a group of YCL members who used to beat up Trotskyist paper sellers until he saw the light. The conversion had been almost as dramatic as that of Paul on the road to Damascus.

The Communist Party(s)

The Communist Party was, until recently, easily the largest group on the British Left. It quickly shook off its revolutionary origins and became a model Stalinist party which enthusiastically cheered on the Moscow Trials in the 1930's and the murder of their own comrades in Eastern Europe in the 1950's. The core of the party was formed by trade union bureaucrats, who once helped to power by the party machine, behaved much like other bureaucrats, to the puzzlement of the more naive party members. Why should an established pillar of the labour movement now be disintegrating because of disagreements which seem minor compared to the storms it has weathered in the past?

The party never really recovered from the effects of Krushov's speech spilling the beans on Uncle Joe. Since then it has been like a clock slowly running down. As it lost its appeal to militant workers and rebellious youth its search for a domestic market led it, in clear breach of its franchise, to make cautious criticisms of the Soviet Union. Such apostasy produced a pro-Moscow faction, half of which split away in 1977 to form the New Communist Party (NCP). The other half of the faction did not agree with that action and stayed within the party, while publishing a fortnightly journal, Straight Left, which advocates entry into the Labour Party. The monolith had begun to crumble. The NCP's bid for the Moscow franchise was not accepted, but it has been recognised by Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Czechoslovakia. The CPGB leadership, emboldened by the NCP's failure to grow, continued to take their distance from Moscow, but that led the faction which controlled the party's newspaper, the Morning Star, to break away in 1985 and begin to form a new party.

Outsiders are puzzled by the contrast between the violent factional hatred expressed by the

participants in the dispute and the absence of any clear political differences, but this is traditional in the Communist Party. Although discussion focused on finance and interpretation of party rules, the dispute concerned the party's whole marketing strategy and therefore its survival. By gently criticising specific actions of the Russian bureaucracy, while still trying to retain the franchise, the party's leadership had avoided a serious split, but at the cost of losing any clear profile. Market analysts, when asked to evaluate rival survival plans, favoured the one produced by the party's theoretical journal, Marxism Today which proposed to dump class struggle in favour of a broad alliance of feminists, Gays and community workers, and a friendly relationship with Dr. Owens SDP, which was then riding high. As Marxism Today was the party's only success story, its faction got the support of the leadership including the General Secretary, Gordon McLennan, a pragmatic Scotsman who would not recognise a principle if it came up and pissed in his shoe. The journals contributors include Professor Hobsbawm who cut his teeth under Zhdanov, went on to become one of Hampsteads leading advocates of guerrilla war (in Latin America) and eventually, a major influence on Neil Kinnock who finds his icepick an invaluable addition to the traditional arsenal of bans and proscriptions in hammering the Labour Left. However, some leading party members argued that the party should stick to the traditional trade union market.

Morning Star editor Tony Chater sneered at the veteran bureaucrats who had switched from Soviet Weekly to the New Musical Express and argued that while the market for a pro Kremlin paper might be small it was steady, while the pop culture scene was overcrowded.

Once free from party control the Morning Star dropped its flirtation with Liberalism and its pages are once again full of charming articles about the successes of Bulgarian agriculture and the delights of Soviet child care provision. It benefits from the 1950's nostalgia boom and sales in pensioners clubs have shot up. In 1985 it seemed that the Morning Star faction would soon fill the space vacated by the Eurocommunists, but Gorbachov's promise of reforms in Russia scared them shitless. If Gorbachov was not on their side perhaps history was not either. Nevertheless the faction pressed on and formed an organisation called Communist Charter as a holding operation until the CPGB could be "reconstituted". The launching date, set for August 1988, the twentieth anniversary of the entry of Russian tanks into Prague, had to be brought forward to April because of "Euro" harrassment. However independence revealed disagreements which had been obscured by the fight against the "Euros". The new party is much smaller than Militant or the SWP, and is forced to compete in the same market. The Morning Star began to take a much less hostile line towards the IRA, although the Russians are not really keen on that body. The numerous pensioners in the faction were disappointed that Gay Lib was not abandoned once the break with the "Euros" was made. However, the major disagreement was with the camarilla around trade union baron Ken Gill boss of TASS. The new party was clearly going to be a very small platform and so Gill decided not to join it, a decision which was bound to be followed by most of his underlings. Some faction members, eager to regain a tradition of trade union militancy, were glad to see Gill depart. The Morning Star's extreme sensitivity to the feelings of the trade union bureaucracy makes it a very dull read.

The evolution of the new Labour Left caused problems for all factions of the CPGB. Marxism Today

is, by far, the biggest influence on such people, but its touting for the Social Democrats caused a lot of ill feeling. The "tankies" want to re-establish their traditional alliance with the Labour Left, but find it difficult to communicate with people who take holidays in Nepal, instead of going to the Black Sea like ordinary people. The CPGB leadership were heartened by the "Tankies" confusion, but their departure revealed divisions in its own ranks. In the 1987 election the party encouraged tactical voting, while simultaneously running its own candidates! The poor showing and subsequent split in the SDP was bad news for those who had seen themselves as marriage brokers between Owen and Kinnock, and prompted some "Euros" to move half a step back towards the labour movement. Others want a loose discussion group set up which will not be tied towards any particular social class, while the harder right wing Mercador faction, have not given up on Dr. Owen and long for their departed leaders Sue Slipman and Jimmy Reid to return to them.

The divisions among the "tankies" are even more complex. Straight Left, once the largest such faction, resolutely declares itself to be party loyalist and hostile to the Morning Star, although once the split is finalised, the party leadership will no longer need their services and will give them the bum's rush. The new pro Moscow party cannot possibly attain a membership of 2,000 unless Straight Left and the NCP sign up, and negotiations are currently at a delicate stage. The Leninist, which split from the NCP to re-enter the CPGB in the early 1980's is not being offered a seat at the negotiating table as it has criticised both Stalin and Gorbachov. The group is the British affiliate of a split from the Turkish Communist Party, an interesting reversal of the pattern where agencies from the advanced countries set up shop in the undeveloped world. Alone among the "tankie" factions, it opposes the Popular Front, except in Turkey

where, apparently, special conditions apply. I fear this dish will prove too spicy for the British palate. Proletarian, a much smaller faction, has more limited ambitions and bases its entire claim to leadership on the fact that Russian officials have appeared on its platform. It would no more dream of doing its own thinking than a Macdonalds concessionaire would devise his own menu. Now weakened by the defection of the Partisan faction, it is in poor shape to face the newly competitive world of modern communism, and will be excluded from the lash up headed by Communist Charter. There is only one certainty about that organisation. No serious political discussion will be allowed, as the participants are deeply divided on many issues and have no experience of, nor taste for an open discussion. Disagreements about economic strategy, attitudes to the Labour Party or the trade union bureaucracy will be settled by discreet horse trading: old habits die hard.

Current difficulties have moved Yevgeiv Legation, head of the British desk at the International Department of the CPSU, to consider withdrawing from the quicksand and placing a contract with Saatchi and Saatchi, but Stonewall, the most discreet of the CPGB's factions is trying to persuade him not to do

so. It argues that neither the leading bureaucrats nor the great majority of party members are "Euros": they have merely been panicked into embracing a fashion which is already fading and can, by silence, patience and cunning be won back to the party's traditional place on the centre left. Stonewall believes that Gorbachov's popularity makes the polarisation between anti-Kremlin elements and British Brezhnevites unnecessary and outdated. If the core of the party bureaucracy can be persuaded to break with Marxism Today a reconciliation can be arranged with the Morning Star, Straight Left can be seen off and representations made to the Afghans and Ethiopians to have the NCP's franchise terminated. Stonewall would also like to get rid of the Furies, the boiler suited radical feminists who demand a curfew for men and whose systematic harassment of Arthur Scargill has caused great offence to party members of both sexes. Stonewall claims to represent the great majority of party members, although the "Euros" dismiss them as a bunch of pensioners out of touch with modern life. Both may be right: if a referendum were held it is likely that Stonewall's view would prevail, but the whole momentum of the party is provided by active minorities intent on a split, which the faction is powerless to prevent.



The Communist Party of Britain
(Marxist Leninist) [(CPB-(M L)]

The formation of the CPB (M L) the largest remaining fragment of the once flourishing Maoism of the 1960's, was an early sign of the break up of British Stalinism, as a number of activists became confused over the quarrel between Moscow and Peking and saw in Chairman Mao the great helmsman who would steer them safely away from the currents of revisionism. Most British Maoist groups were student based, but the CPB-(ML) had considerable support among engineering workers in London and were temporarily able to displace their former comrades in the CPGB from the leadership of the North London District of the AEU. This toe hold in the working class movement provided the CPGB (ML)s leader Reg Birch with a position on the Executive of the AEU.

The Chinese bureaucracy, sensibly, refused to give an exclusive franchise to any of the squabbling groups led by rival aspirants to be the British Mao, but gave them all a certain amount of encouragement, by inviting fraternal delegates to its junkets and conferences. As the CPB (ML) was never more than a few hundred strong these duties were a heavy burden to shoulder. It was not just party occasions but Youth, Trade Union, Womens and peasants conferences which had to be covered, so leading members were obliged to spend a considerable part of their lives on these arduous tasks. The British working class has never shown proper gratitude for the heroic efforts which the party made to ensure that we were properly represented. It was not just China which had to be covered but Albania also. The party leaders never complained, but it must have come as something of a relief when, in 1974, the Chinese and Albanian leaders fell out, and the burden diminished as the CPB (ML) chose Enver Hoxha, partly because the travelling distance was less.

The CPB (M L) from the beginning, adopted an ingenious device to avoid the danger of being torn apart by the political disagreements which were destroying their rivals. The party deliberately confined itself to making very general statements of opposition to imperialism and support for the working class. The only exception to this was support for guerrilla warfare, such as had brought Mao to power. The British labour movement's adaptation of Mao's tactic was to consist of localised strikes which were not to make the mistake of linking up and making generalised demands. To do so would be equivalent to the peasant masses lining up in massed formation to oppose an imperialist army, instead of taking to the hills. The strategy went down well among Reg Birch's right wing colleagues on the AEU executive where he was comfortably ensconced. They had always wanted to avoid fighting the employers, and as they lacked the power to stop local shop stewards leading a fight, Birch's ideas suited them nicely.

A corollary of the refusal to raise generalised demands was that CPB (M L) members were not to waste their time discussing politics among themselves. The branches were not allowed to communicate with each other, so the political level remained abysmally low. Isolation produced an unfortunate tendency to fantasise, so that party members were given to describe tremendous struggles in their workplaces which their fellow workers had heard nothing about. The loss of the support of their Chinese comrades was a severe blow for a group which claims that the idea for the Chinese Cultural Revolution was given to Madame Mao by Madame Birch, but worse was to follow. Enver Hoxha, their remaining patron, insisted that Marxist/Leninist orthodoxy demanded that

they set up independent Red Unions, or at least rank and file action groups. By that time, most of the manual workers had departed and the core of the group were teachers, so it would have been impossible to erect even a plausible facade which could have kept Comrade Hoxha happy. The group was forced to relinquish the franchise and set up shop as a completely independent business.

The CPB (ML) then, abruptly and without explanation, altered their world view and declared that the Soviet Union, previously described as an imperialist state ruled by counter revolutionaries, was a bastion of socialism. Did this mean that they were bidding for the Moscow franchise? It was not as simple as that and an understanding of the party's reasoning demands a grasp of dialectical thought. Stalin had established that there could be socialism in one country. Therefore, there had to be a country for socialism to exist in and Russia's claims were the longest established. The "tankies" in the CPGB hoped that the CPB (M L) would dissolve its separate organisation and return to the fold to assist in the fight against the "Euros", but it was already too late. Secrecy has become an obsession with the CPB (M L) and members have taken to denying that their organisation exists, or that they know anything of its history! How can a non-existent party be dissolved? Members do not divulge either their membership or the party's existence to colleagues at work. Their journal, The Worker, still exists, but is no longer sold openly. Sociologists of religion are familiar with this phenomenon through the study of the revolutionary sects of the 17th century, some of whom survived for a very long time by adopting passivity and a secretive way of life. The CPB (M L) may be slowly disappearing from view: if you are in touch with any of its members, it is essential that you do nothing to alarm them, as it would be a loss to science if they become so secretive that they can no longer be studied.

The British and Irish

Communist Organisation (BICO)

Few groups have been as successful in marketing an original product as the, oddly named, BICO. It all started in the late 1960's when Brendan Clifford, an unemployed, Jesuit trained, gravedigger was whiling away the time in the library of Trinity College Dublin. Tiring of waiting in the long queue of clerics desirous of studying Gaelic erotic poetry, Clifford asked to see some of the works of the revered fathers of Irish republicanism, which were in no great demand. Having blown off the dust, he was flabbergasted to discover that these saintly heroes, who he had been told were the Irish equivalents of Garibaldi and Mazzini, were a shower of bigoted, racist, shitbags, who hated England because it had prevented Ireland from establishing its own empire with its own blacks to chain up and flog. The odd man out among this unsavoury crew was Wolfe Tone, a Protestant whose view of the Vatican tallies closely with that of Ian Paisley.

There was consternation on the British Left when Clifford's findings were published. (The Irish were less bothered as he had not uncovered any closet atheists). The British groups hastily summoned the managers of their Irish branches to London, and asked if Clifford's findings were genuine, or were merely paranoid fantasies. The unfortunate Paddies had to confess that they did not know. Never having had the occasion to read any of the heroes writings, they had, unwisely, accepted what the priests had taught them in school. The British groups which had been keeping charming but feckless Irish intellectuals in Guinness, reacted by cutting off the subsidies, so that the poor buggers were driven to take up school teaching in order to keep body and soul together.

In the ensuing despair desperate action was contemplated, but it was already too late. Clifford's Jesuit training, ensured that he took photocopies and warned the librarians to look out for British arsonists. The reputation of most Irish "Marxists" has never recovered from Clifford's revelations, and they are reduced to arguing that it is wrong to consider the opinions of Irish revolutionaries outside their historical context. That is presumably true of Hitler and Atilla the Hun.

Clifford's victory, once the quotations were verified, was almost too complete. Other groups had little choice but to adopt neo Cliffordian positions, but unwilling to serve as a pilot to the Left through the suddenly bewildering currents of Irish politics, he spurned all ecumenical offers and pressed home his attack, calculating that if Left views on Ireland were a fantasy, the same might apply to the rest of their politics. Clifford adopted the working assumption that whatever the Left said on a given issue was wrong and he applied his training by finding examples which would demonstrate truths already established by faith and doctrine. For example: if the Left favours Irish unification, opposes the Common Market, and deplors racism, we should adopt the opposite view in each case. Anyone can do that: it is more difficult to argue a case, based on Marx and Lenin, supporting the Common Market, the Orange Order or Thatcher's immigration policies. The Jesuits have lost the knack of such apologetics since they adopted liberation theology.

Because the conclusion to any of BICO's arguments can always be predicted by reversing the sign on current Left orthodoxy their writings provide little sense of intellectual discovery, but even friends who do not share Clifford's intellectual background assure us that the argument is always a pleasure to read. Clifford's main journal is The Communist, but there

are a number of offshoots and Fronts, the most unlikely of which is the Ernest Bevin society. The logic of this is impeccable: if Bevin hammered the Left for a generation, he must be a misunderstood genius, whose thoughts should be revived. In fact, if Bevin ever had any deep political thoughts, it would take Jacques Cousteau to locate them. Some thought that Clifford would become a guru of the Labour right, but that tendency is so dominated by Nonconformity, Fabianism and pragmatism that they have found him a bit of a puzzle. The discomfort is reciprocated, as Clifford does not like the remnants of sentimental humanitarianism, they still display. The gravedigger has still not found his final political resting place.

The Socialist party of Great Britain (SPGB)

The oldest socialist party, the SPGB, was founded in 1904, when the left wing of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) rejected the opportunist politics of Hyndman, Marx's bete noir, the leader of their parent group, which culminated in congratulating King Edward on his accession to the throne. The original Left faction was a confused amalgam which included some people in London and a number of Scots comrades influenced by the American Marxist/Syndicalist Daniel de Leon. Unfortunately De Leon's ideas came to them through the agency of the Edinburgh adventurer James Connolly who ended his career as an Irish nationalist and Catholic martyr. Instead of fighting to win the SDF to a Marxist policy the Scots broke away in 1903 to form the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), leaving the London SDF members compromised and isolated. The following year they themselves split from the SDF and formed the SPGB.

The double dealing of the faction which formed the SLP made the SPGB an angry and suspicious group from the beginning. That was demonstrated by the Declaration of Principles (D of P), carried in the first issue of its journal, the Socialist Standard. The key part of the document is Clause 7, the famous "hostility clause" which states: "That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party which seeks working class emancipation, must be hostile to every other party".

The "hostility clause" was a stroke of genius which expresses the essence of the SPGB and achieved a simple formula for achieving isolation and non co-operation which the party's rivals try to obtain through confused and inconsistent dialectical contortions. Religious sects achieve the same effect by shaving their heads or wearing distinctive clothes. The hostility to other groups was reciprocated from the beginning as the SPGB's insistence on writing in plain English caused great offence: most Left groups consider that a church must have its own language and liturgy, and have laboriously constructed a jargon comprehensible only to the initiated. The SPGB's insistence on using the vernacular has provoked much the same response as that of the Papacy towards those who translated the Bible into the common tongue. The D of P has never been seriously challenged and the party has never looked back. It has been fortunate in finding a biographer in Robert Baltrop, whose book The Monument is a truthful and warmly affectionate account of a group whose aggression and cantankerousness have placed a strain on the tolerance of most people who encounter them. People have the impression that a group bound to a doctrine first enunciated in 1904 must be composed of dogmatic robots. Nothing could be further from the truth! The SPGB was, until recently, full of the

most delightful and varied eccentrics one could hope to meet. The reason for this is that although the D of P is sacrosanct it covers only the question of how the socialist society will be brought about. The party, in contrast to many other sects, does not try to regulate its members domestic lives, eating habits, or personal relationships.

The party's formula for achieving socialism is beautifully simple: the workers are to become individually convinced of the socialist case and when that has been done they will vote in a government which will decree socialism at a stroke. No attention is given to boring questions of tactics or strategy. The SPGB, thus, achieves the unique distinction of being both constitutional and revolutionary. Through this formula the SPGB avoids the strains which drive other socialists to drink or revisionism. The very simplicity of the formula might seem to rule out the possibility of discussion. However, the D of P, inflexible as it is in the area which it covers, does not specify what the society of the future will be like: consequently, SPGB meetings, whatever the ostensible topic, quickly tend to gravitate towards discussion on precisely this theme. Under socialism will we be vegetarian, monogamous or not? Will we still live in cities? Will we use more or less water, and will goods still be mass produced? Visitors to SPGB meetings, expecting to hear solemn Marxists discussing how to overthrow the bourgeoisie, are usually surprised and charmed. No speculation is forbidden by the D of P, so imaginations can soar, unfettered by the tedious discussions on tactics and strategy which form the content of most socialist theory. Even the least imaginative of the speculations are more appealing than descriptions of the Christian's dreary, male chauvinist, heaven.

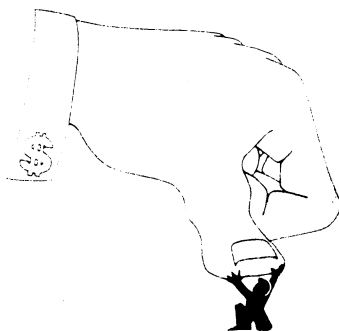
It is accepted sociological wisdom that any organisation which has

existed for three generations should have achieved a measure of family continuity, and so be relieved of the constant necessity to win converts from the outside world. As the SPGB is the only political sect which has been around long enough to test the theory on it has attracted more attention from sociologists than from students of politics. In fact, the SPGB's achievement there has, not yet, equalled that of any established religious sect. What does happen, according to Baltrap, is that new members join because of social relationships rather than formal propaganda, which serves as a diversion for the members rather than as a source of recruitment. The party is, apart from the Discussion Groups, the only socialist organisation which is at all difficult to join. Members have to satisfy a committee that they understand the SPGB's case: in contrast, the vanguard groups will accept anyone who does as she is told.

In the 1950's the SPGB seemed like a survivor of the Edwardian era, rather like the Secular Society with whose cultural milieu it overlaps. However, just as that scene was rejuvenated by a revival of interest in the Universities so, to a lesser extent was, the SPGB. This has changed the internal atmosphere, in ways which are sometimes worrying. Discipline, once draconian, has become very lax: some of the younger members interpretation of the "hostility clause" is frankly alarming. They argue that the while the D of P enjoins hostility to rival organisations, this need not be extended to the members of such organisations. On a strictly legalistic reading of the D of P this is perhaps allowable, but it would severely weaken the social effect of the hostility clause. It would never have been accepted by the stalwarts who built the party, and goes against its whole tradition. Some of the new wave wish to substitute a plan to transform society gradually through the growth of co-operatives for the party's traditional programme of an

immediate transition to socialism, once it has a firm parliamentary majority. It would be sad indeed if a party which fought so long against the Social Democratic theory of gradualism were to succumb to the lifestylism which has destroyed so many of its rivals.

As we reach the tag end of the 20th century, thoughts inevitably turn towards the centenary celebrations in 2004. Conway Hall has been looking a bit dowdy in recent years, but it is a central spot with many associations for socialists, so it might well be the site for the festivities. A committee will be set up to determine the precise form which these will take, as the party does not believe in arbitrary decisions by authoritarian leaders. It can look forward with quiet confidence. Membership has grown from a mere 100 founders to nearly 700. In contrast, most of its early rivals have passed into history, and later competitors are in disarray. The Communist Party is splintered and in apparently terminal decline, while the Labour Party has abandoned whatever socialist rhetoric it once employed to deceive the masses. The Socialist Workers Party no longer attracts intelligent young people as it did in the early 1970's, so the SPGB can look forward to having the field to itself. The apolitical sociologists asking boring questions about the party's social composition are a nuisance, but the D of P has nothing to say about them.



Conclusion

Those who express bewilderment that, presumably sane, members of the Left groups can continue to believe nonsense, which is continually disproved are comparing their behaviour with some, presumed, model of rationality to which the majority of the population comply. All the evidence shows that most people, whether politically active or not, operate with assumptions which are just as magical as the members of the groups whom we have attempted to sympathetically portray.

In fact, the Left groups do not exist outside history, and if we consider the context in which they live their actions are as rational as anyone else's. If we should criticise them particularly, it is because they claim to have a superior understanding. Curiously, members of Marxist groups are particularly incensed that the Marxist criterion that social existence determines consciousness should be applied to themselves. If, for example, you are a social worker in Hackney you will almost certainly number SWP members among your friends, but if you are a canteen assistant in Scunthorpe that would be most unlikely. If existence determines consciousness will that not have an effect on the Left group? Yet Left group members argue that their ideas must be examined on their own. They will accept that the social composition of their group does limit its influence but they believe it has no significance whatever in explaining its ideas, strategy and tactics. They might accept, in theory, that their rivals behaviour is determined by their real position in the world, but they really prefer to see their enemies backsliding in terms drawn from Victorian melodrama: treachery, corruption and inordinate ambition. Members of Left groups do not, on waking up each morning, ponder whether the group to which they belong does indeed have the right

analysis, or whether their leaders are indeed far sighted, learned and wise. Does anyone? Would not the stress provoked by the literal application of Marx's injunction, "Doubt everything", produce an unacceptable level of mental illness? Why should we be so contemptuous of loyalty to a leadership which perhaps does not deserve it, when we regard it as admirable for women to grant such loyalty to individual men? It may be objected that the Left group member has to forgive not the occasional betrayal, but a constant reiteration of beliefs which are contradicted by daily experience, and the regular disappointment of predictions which fail to come true. Yet surely the test of faith is in failure and adversity? Any fool can trust a general after he leads the charge which scatters the enemy. We should judge commitment by its quality, not by the worth of its recipient.

If we move on from absolving the individual sect member from the unjustified charge of mental instability, we will examine the reason why the sect itself cannot submit its beliefs to the test of experience and modify them accordingly. The claim that a group of people engaged in a continual discussion should be able to produce a more accurate analysis than a single individual seems plausible. However, group cohesion needs a doctrine. An ongoing discussion which continually presented all the group's fondest beliefs to a searching criticism would be a recipe for an unbearably tense existence, like that of a couple constantly on the edge of divorce. A fanatical zealot for truth might be able to live in such an atmosphere, but the average person would find it unbearable. Group discussion has a much more modest function. It fills in the detail of an outline which has already been agreed on, and allows new areas to be explored so that

group members can together agree on its interpretation. If one is honest can one claim that discussion in a mainstream church or political party is any different? The implicit agreement that discussion must not disturb accepted truths explains the common, bewildered, accusation by loyal members that the latest defector, once a leading comrade, left without ever discussing her differences. Once differences are admitted, the member may find, within weeks, that the whole paradigm which she accepted for years is an absurdity, so that to argue with people who have been valued comrades for years is like an attempt to communicate with people speaking a different language.

To the rest of the members her abrupt departure seems light minded, unprincipled and inexplicable. Yet, few groups have deliberately created a system where questions of principle cannot be discussed because of self censorship. In fact, there will be regular occasions when errors will be admitted with a view to correcting the line. Such sessions do not generally deal with really heavy deviations, but rather with venial sins. That is hardly surprising. A church prayer group would not expect to hear confessions of murder, robbery and orgies, so a political group discussing its errors, will concentrate on matters of presentation, emphasis and efficiency. Its grosser errors will not go unnoticed as they will be pointed out by its rivals. The groups theoreticians have the delicate task of showing that the contradictions in its politics are only apparent. If serious mistakes were acknowledged as such, the group would be exposed to the virulent abuse of its competitors.

Do not the leaders of Left groups have greater freedom of manuevere than do bishops weighed down with centuries of dogma and congregations with no interest in intellectual inquiry? The contrast here is smaller than one might

suppose. Left group leaders are stuck with the followers they have, and they well know that any drastic change will lose much of the membership, while there is no guarantee that they will be replaced by better people, although such people may well exist. A bird in the hand=====!. Why should the groups not benefit from experience? Should not the continual test of such experience bring different group's practice closer? That assumes that a group's theory is devised through a careful examination of economics, politics, and history. Yet, consider how terribly difficult this would be! The ruling class's analysis of the world and predictions of what is going to happen has generally been mistaken, in spite of the enormous resources and hired brains at its disposal. Is it fair to expect that a group of young people, without these advantages, will be able to examine the world and come to a more correct understanding? If you were Marx himself the task would be formidable. Fortunately there is an easier way: every successful group leader's maxim is:

"But always remember- these rules are to help you to explain to the customers what you do after you do it, not before, when you have a project, do it exactly as you see fit; then fit the facts round the event, not the other way round". Robert Scheckley, Dimension of Miracles, p. 84. Don't try to reverse the Scheckleyan formula! It would be like trying to construct a car engine from a heap of metal. Once you have decided on the programme you want it is not too difficult to search for quotations, precedents and philosophical formula. Not everyone is capable of doing this, or we would have more groups than we do, but it is not nearly as difficult as learning a skilled trade or profession.

Once we accept that a Left group leader does not live outside history, but has to work with material and circumstances not of her choosing, many things become clear. What, for example, can be done to keep the members happy in

times when little is happening? This is not a constant problem; often the group will be stretched to mount a campaign which is honestly seen as desperately important and where the leadership wish that they had ten times the forces available to put into it. Not always though: An older, established group can accept that sometimes times will be quiet and they can concentrate on their trade union work, propaganda and political education. A younger group, lacking implantation in the labour movement, will generally be incapable of reacting in this way. For example, the (British) SWP after the success of the Anti-Nazi League campaign of the mid-seventies, promoted a number of other campaigns, which even its own leaders cannot now remember: yet, each was mounted in response to what was presented as some mortal danger. At the worst such campaigns can be cynical attempts to keep the troops happy; modern versions of the childrens crusade, but generally the leaders will be temporarily convinced that the campaign of the month is useful and necessary.

Most other aberrations have an equally rational explanation. There is, for example, the urge not to appear chicken. If a rival group calls for a General Strike, how can we fail to do so even though we know that few of us have enough influence over our workmates to win their support for that call. Left groups are caught in a continual competition to up the ante. But does not the need to defend your ideas from the criticism of other groups sharpen the mind and help to correct errors? Not really: a specific occurrence can generally be fitted into the general theory, so that after a particular reverse in the trade union struggle, a member of the SWP will conclude that the bureaucracy have sold out once again, while a Militant member will know that further efforts must be made to acquaint the workers with the socialist programme, familiarity with which is the one sure remedy against the recurrence of such defeats.

Do Militant and SWP members in the same staff room or office refuse to talk to each other? Not at all: They will often be on the best of terms, but their political discussion will be in formalised terms, where each knows the others responses in advance, much like the conversation of Catholics with Methodists. There is a common misconception that members of Left groups spend much of their time arguing with supporters of rival groups. In fact, both the larger groups, and the hyper-active smaller ones, provide a very comprehensive social life so that a members taken for granted thought world is seldom challenged.

Activists, when they develop differences, generally do so in a fragmented fashion, as the group's line conflicts with some aspect of their experience. When it is pointed out that the policy which they object to is in conformity with the group's general theory, which "you say you agree with", the average militant, unable to provide an alternative world view, either withdraws her criticisms or leaves the group in a state of confusion, aware that something is wrong but fearing that the fault is hers. Some of the smaller groups, unable to provide the extensive social life of the larger groups, rely on having a more rigorous theory, and do try to engage the larger groups in discussion. Unfortunately, the effect is often counter productive. Leaders of the larger groups object to their meetings being leafleted by "sectarians" and "parasites". The resources built up by many years of members sacrifices are not to be squandered on sterile discussions on matters "which were settled long ago".

Some critics of the Left groups have cast the full timers in the role of villains: older people manipulating the naive young. We think that view is mistaken. Full timers are generally extremely loyal to their organisation. They work longer hours for less pay than the rest of their comrades, although it is fair to say that their job is generally less

stressful than those on the production line or chalk face. They are often excellent comrades, but can sometimes display a lemming-like attitude to disastrous orders from above. Many of them fall into the category of stupid and industrious officers who the great General Schieffler recommended should not be employed in any capacity whatsoever. But is the story any different for full-timers

in mainstream parties?

In sum political sects provide a refuge which many people need, either permanently or temporarily. They are the heart of a heartless world and will disappear only when that world begins to change.

PREHISTORY

