

battle of ideas

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The SWP and the 'IS tradition'

MARTIN SHAW WRITES...

IT IS ALMOST unprecedented for a member of the Socialist Workers Party (formerly the International Socialists) to publicly debate with his own leadership through the columns of *Red Weekly*.

This paper is regarded within the SWP as almost an 'enemy' publication — an attitude which reflects the small-group (or if you like, small-party) mentality which prevails not only among SWP members but almost everywhere on the far left. I do not accept that attitude: our enemies are the bosses, the Tories, the fascists, the Labour Government which is attacking the working class, and not our fellow-revolutionaries. Discussion across socialist papers and groups, conducted in a constructive and fraternal way, should therefore be a normal feature of the life of the left.

Even so, it is still highly unusual to address members of one's own organisation in another group's paper. It is not that means I would normally use, nor that which I intended to use in this case. Public discussion between members of the same organisation is indeed desirable on key political issues, but it should generally take place in their own press. As Tony Cliff suggested, 'all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day: in the open press.' (*Party and Class* p.43). It is only because this has not been possible, and because the SWP leadership has responded to political disagreements by bureaucratic methods, that I have decided to publish in *Red Weekly*.

This 'Open Letter' was written at the end of February for publication in *International Socialism* journal, and is published here as it was first written, which accounts for one or two out-of-date details. It was sent to the Editor on 12 March 1977, and I expressed the hope that the Central Committee would reply in the journal. I explained that 'Although there are many comrades who would agree in large part with what I am saying, I am submitting this letter on my own behalf precisely because I wish to see the arguments focussed on the political questions rather than any factional polarisation'. I offered to make any changes of detail which would make the piece more acceptable for publication.

The only serious reply I received was a purely personal and private letter from Duncan Hallas, which dealt with only one aspect of my argument. From Alex Callinicos, Editor of the journal, I finally received a reply dated 7 April which said simply: 'I see you have pre-empted any decision about printing your open letter to the CC by publishing much the same sort of letter in *The Leveller*'. He went on to offer me the chance to comment in the journal on two articles by Chris Harman on Antonio Gramsci.

is not mentioned in my open letter, and it is about directly political rather than historical and theoretical issues. My *Leveller* letter was only a short comment on a debate started by another SWP comrade, James Anderson, with the views recently expressed by Ralph Milliband. It could not be a substitute for a serious discussion in our own press. Callinicos was offering a very lame excuse for not publishing my letter. Reasoned political arguments for this I would have considered; suggestions for another form for the same discussion might have been acceptable. This brief dismissal was not.

I wrote to Callinicos on 8 April making some of these points. I have not even had the courtesy of a reply from him, or the CC. On 29 April, however, the CC suspended me from membership of the SWP.

The background to this was that the argument about revolutionary unity which I had hoped to begin had meanwhile become of immediate practical importance. In Stechford, the Central Committee of the SWP, having ignored letters from the IMG going back to August 1976, calling for a single united revolutionary candidate in the by-election, went ahead and stood Paul Foot alongside (many thought against) Brian Heron of the IMG. To have two candidates putting forward much the same revolutionary politics, and calling for a fightback against the Social Contract, racism, etc., was disastrous enough, in my view.

But to add insult to this injury to the good name of revolutionary socialism, and especially of the SWP, Steve Jeffreys, a member of our Central Committee (CC), wrote a 'personal' letter to *Socialist Worker* in which he hypocritically alleged that it was the IMG — the ones who had made an approach for unity, and been ignored — who were 'splitting the anti-racist vote'. I wrote a reply to *Socialist Worker*, in my equally personal capacity, setting the record straight. It was not published; I therefore wrote also to *Red Weekly* to make the point it was unfortunately impossible to make in our own press, that not everyone in the SWP agreed with the irresponsible sectarianism of Jeffreys. I believed that this was necessary for the good name of the SWP in the rest of the left, and to prevent the IMG itself drawing the conclusion that the unity cause was hopeless.

For this, I have since learnt, the CC reported me to a body called the Control Commission, who were to investigate my membership. At the time, all I received from them was an abusive letter, on another matter, from an important member of the CC, whose level of irresponsibility was too gross to reveal here. But more was to come, as the CC attempted (at the last minute) to

County Council elections.

The CC had decided, and informed branches early in April, that the SWP would not contest the local elections. At that time, we in Hull had already been approached by the local IMG for a joint 'Socialists Against the Cuts' slate, but had decided against participating, on purely practical grounds. The IMG went ahead, together with the Working Women's Charter and a well-known local building worker militant — the only member of the Trades Council Executive to oppose the calling off of a recent general strike in Hull. Our main Town branch then voted without opposition to give them 'passive' support. This term was in fact misleading, as it meant supporting them in our local bulletin, putting election posters in our bookshop, etc.

I have since learnt that many SWP comrades in other areas where the IMG or SSL stood — South West and Central London, Birmingham, Edinburgh — reacted in much the same basic, non-sectarian way. This was natural, as there was no other line publicised throughout the organisation, let alone discussed or decided in an open way. Comrades naturally assumed that although we were not standing, we would support others standing on basically the same platform.

Only on 23 April did our Party Council (an advisory body anyway) decide, without prior discussion in the districts, to support Labour candidates where the SWP was not standing. Even then there was no explicit decision about IMG or similar candidates. We received a confused verbal report of this discussion only on 27 April, and the text of the resolution on 29 April. By this time I had already agreed to speak at a meeting in Hull University on the 28th in support of Socialists Against the Cuts.

On 27 April I was asked to attend a meeting of the local District Committee (DC), where members who had just phoned the National Secretary and 'found out' that we did not support other revolutionary socialist candidates, requested me to pull out of the SAC meeting without even explaining to the SAC why I was doing so. DC members said the decision received by phone was automatically binding and should not even be discussed by the full District meeting planned for 1 May — although it was the members who had decided to support SAC in the first place. For good measure, some of them, claiming support from the CC for any action against me, tried to suspend me for my *Red Weekly* letter.

I decided not to give in to this pressure, since there was no clear political basis for the demand that I step down. A sudden and unexplained

FROM THE EDITORS

WE AGREE with Martin Shaw that the best place for his 'Open Letter' to the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party would have been *International Socialism*, the journal of that organisation.

But we do not see the printing of this contribution in any way the last we shall publish from SWP members. In the absence of any public discussion by the SWP leadership of some of the important problems facing the far left in Britain today, we will extend space in our journals to members of that organisation to write on those subjects.

In this spirit if the SWP does wish to reply in *Battle of Ideas* to Martin Shaw's points equal space will be given to them to do so.

As those who have read the last issue of *Battle of Ideas* on the SWP will know, we do not agree with Martin Shaw on a number of important political points. A further contribution to the IMG's critique of the SWP will be made in the next issue of this supplement at the end of June.

Although *Red Weekly* will be incorporated into *Socialist Challenge*, the *Battle of Ideas* will continue to be published as part of the new paper.

would have damaged my standing and that of the SWP with students and lecturers in the University. I spoke, stressing the positive aspects of the SWP's own election interventions, and my own College's branch, meeting the day after, voted against any disciplinary action. A District Committee meeting, called for the night of the 29th, might well have come to the same conclusion, but it was not given the chance to. Acting on information from one comrade, the CC reached a 'telephone decision' to suspend me, and by 7pm on 29 April I had lost my political rights in the organisation. Disciplinary action came much more speedily than replies to my political arguments in the Open Letter.

The Hull District meeting, two days later, was faced with a *fait accompli*; it accepted my suspension by 2-1, but at the same time voted overwhelmingly for my reinstatement. Confused by a battery of arguments that the IMG were 'electoralists', opposed to building a revolutionary party, veering towards centrism and even reformism, and that it was our class duty to vote Labour to keep the Tories out (an argument that curiously does not apply where the SWP stands), the District now voted not to support the SAC. And three weeks later there has been no movement at all on my suspension.

It gives me no joy whatsoever to publish these shameful facts about the leadership of the organisation to which I have belonged for more than 10 years, and which is still a key component of the revolutionary left in this country. I am sure that there are too many people who think that revolutionary socialists will always shoot first and ask questions afterwards, and it is tragic that the leadership of the SWP should lend support to this view. But it would be even more irresponsible for those of us who stand for the democratic and non-sectarian traditions of revolutionary socialism to passively accept bureaucratic methods and sectarian politics.

In particular, since there are many, including some readers of this paper, who will assume that it is the ideas of International Socialism which are to blame for this situation, it is essential that those of us who know its best traditions should defend them against the disrepute into which the SWP leaders would bring them. My experiences have only confirmed my conviction that the mass revolutionary socialist party we need will be open and democratic, fighting for the widest possible unity of the working class in action, or it will not be built at all.

And they have confirmed my view that the traditions of International Socialism — although like any traditions they have their weaknesses which must be understood and criticised — can make a powerful contribution to the kind of

OPEN LETTER TO THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY

Dear Comrades,

The declaration by the International Socialists of the Socialist Workers Party has brought to a sort of conclusion the gradual change of IS's approach to the building of a revolutionary socialist party in this country. From seeing ourselves as only one of a number of forces which could contribute to such a party, we moved first through unsuccessful unity moves to the conclusion that our task for the time being was to build our own organisation. But now, clearly and finally, we have adopted a much more radical position: that expanding and recruiting to our renamed 'party' is the way to create the revolutionary party which is needed in this country.

I am writing to you as a long-standing member of IS who disagrees with this position, and I do so openly, above all because I believe that this is an issue of such importance to the whole of the active left in Britain that it is wrong for our disagreements to be confined to internal channels. I hope that you will welcome the opportunity to publicly explain your position.

There is of course a secondary reason for adopting this particular approach, namely that full internal discussion of the most recent change did not take place. The declaration of the SWP was first mooted in the winter of 1975-76, linked then to the recruitment of large numbers of 'Socialist Worker Supporters'. Before a proper discussion could take place, it was apparently shelved, because of sluggish political atmosphere, so that there was no discussion or decision even in principle at the May 1976 conference of IS. A lengthy document which I wrote together with Richard Kuper at that time, criticising among other things the idea that the party could be built simply by the growth of the IS and *Socialist Worker*, never received any reply.¹

Within a couple of months of the conference, however, one of the main ideas of this document, ignominiously rejected at the conference — that IS should adopt a more political stance, instead of submerging itself in the Right to Work Campaign — was taken up when you launched into an electoral turn.² And in connection with this new line, the need to declare the SWP once again became urgent. By September the decision was taken in principle and before the 'final decision' of the December 'Party Council', the 'SWP' had already been advertised to the voters of Walsall North.

The membership of IS was never asked directly about the change. Even the name adopted was never put up for discussion, which meant that when some of you decided at the last minute you preferred 'Socialist Party', there was little support since everyone assumed it would inevitably be the SWP. How the membership of IS,

which has become so used to finding its role restricted to discussing the implementation of the changes which you have already decided, could have been expected to influence this latest development, is beyond me.

It is not, however, my aim to continue to embarrass you further with examples of the imperfections of IS/SWP democracy. Nor do I wish to focus solely on the function of the SWP, although you do seem unable to make up your minds about the significance of this event. On the one hand you are flogging for all it is worth the idea that this is a 'new party'.³ On the other, it is true that *Socialist Worker* announced that there had just been a 'change of name', and Duncan Hallas has argued that the change to a party did not take place in December 1976: 'That was only the change in name. The change in fact had occurred earlier.'⁴ I would agree with this to the extent that the formation of the SWP is only the culmination of a process which has occurred over a number of years. It is this process, and the ideas behind it, which it is most important to discuss.

The traditional attitude of IS to building a revolutionary socialist party in this country — the attitude which was general in the 1960s and early 1970s during which IS grew from a hundred or so up to 3,000 members, which is still more or less what we are today — was well put in an article by Hallas published in 1971. 'Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Party' served as a sort of keynote article for the IS collection *Party and Class*. I quote its concluding paragraphs in full:

'The basis for the beginnings of a revolutionary socialist party exists among the industrial militants who used to look to the Communist Party, amongst increasing numbers of radicalised young workers and students and among the revolutionary groups.

'The latter are an important but difficult problem. The root cause of the sectarianism that has plagued the British left is the isolation of socialists from effective and influential participation in mass struggles. The isolation is rapidly diminishing but its negative effects — the exacerbation of secondary differences, the transformation of tactical differences into matters of principle, the semi-religious fanaticism which can give a group considerable survival power in adverse conditions at the cost of stunting its potentiality for real development, the theoretical conservatism and blindness to unwelcome aspects of reality — all these persist.

'They will be overcome when, and only when, a serious penetration and fusion of layers of workers and students outside sectarian circles has been achieved. The International Socialism group intends to make a significant contribution to that penetration. Without having any illusions that it is 'the leadership' the group exists



TONY CLIFF

to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the regeneration of socialism in Britain and internationally.'

I believe that this summary is still broadly correct today. We could add to the elements which might be seen as the basis of a party sections of the women's movement, some black militants, and militant white collar trade unionists. And it would be sadly difficult for you, the Central Committee of the SWP, to be taken seriously in the kind of critique of sectarianism which was put forward then, because it has become applicable in some important respects to IS itself in the last few years. But in general, the problems are very much the same. The kind of socialist party we need must include some of the important fragments of the revolutionary left; but it cannot be created from the

simple fusion of these groups, as we have learnt from the failure of our 1968 unity call. It depends on 'a serious penetration and fusion of layers of workers and students outside sectarian circles'.

The approach expressed by Hallas then still assumed the need for broader unity of the revolutionary left; we in IS believed that our contribution was to begin to show how revolutionaries could overcome their isolation from the class. The change since that time boiled down to your belief that IS has been successful enough in this task to be able to do without any wider combination of the revolutionary left. The irony of this is that in the very period in which this has taken place, IS's growth has slowed down, and the steady advance of our influence has received important checks. Membership stagnated from 1973 to 1976; only in the last few months has there been a modest revival. Hallas has recently argued, through the internal article which I am sure you will not mind me quoting again, that 'The present membership is vastly better politically than was the membership of four or five years ago.'⁶

I cannot agree, for the simple and obvious reason that so much of the experienced 'cadre' has been lost in the last few years — disillusioned with or opposed to your direction and methods. This is as true of the worker-membership as it is of the 'intellectuals', among whom no doubt you will place me. Even among the more loyal of the remaining and newer cadres, used to putting into practice the decisions they receive from you, there is an enormous cynicism of a kind unknown a few years ago. And it is not clear that there has been an obvious improvement of impact, to compensate for constant numbers and high turnover.

Industrially, factory branches, bravely launched in 1973, have not flourished; the most established of the rank and file groupings, especially Rank and File Teacher, have declined, and a meaningful National Rank and File Movement has not been established; the Right to Work Campaign has had some success, but it is no substitute for rank and file organisation. Meanwhile IS's intellectual impact on the left has withered, as I think all concerned would agree. IS has been reduced to a tactically flexible campaigning and propaganda organisation; we have had some successes in these terms, and been able to recruit modest numbers, particularly of unemployed workers and students. But it is much less certain that we can create a real party, well implanted in the working class, with the continuity in membership needed for solid growth.

So what has IS become, over the last few years, that it needs to change its name to the SWP? Hallas, in his most recent piece, argues that because IS is now big enough to intervene in the class struggle rather than just make propaganda on the sidelines, then we are a party, and have been for several years. 'We are still a very small party and we still play a very small role in the labour movement. We have to grow. But we are a party and we do play a role, we intervene.'⁷

Obviously, given the definition IS cannot be denied the label. But let us pause a moment. On the same definition, surely the WRP is a party — or at least it was, when at its peak. And even the IMG could claim to be something of a party in this sense — if a smaller one — as its intervention and penetration have undoubtedly improved since the early 1970s when it was almost wholly student in composition. It has some influence here and there in the class struggle; not so much as us, but then are we really leading so many workers that we can say for certain that there is a qualitative difference? It is certainly capable of doing what has actually forced the issue of a 'party' for us — standing a modest number of candidates in parliamentary elections. And to take the other main criterion which Hallas produces, that 'Most workers, students and so on who come close to us take it for granted that we are a party — and have done for years. We used to be regarded as the "IS party".'⁸ Surely this too applies to the WRP, the IMG, and maybe even the WSL, who also have a real if localised penetration. Of course the WRP is in decline — the 'semi-religious fanaticism' is finally waning in attraction. But the IMG, WSL, and even the smaller groupings are far from disappearing. In the case of the IMG, the 'entry tactic' appears to be losing its attraction, which means



Photo: CHRIS DAVIES (Report)

'... the Right to Work Campaign has had some success, but it is no substitute for rank and file organisation.'



Photo: G. M. COOKSON (Red Weekly)

'The absurd situation which will arise in the Stechford by-election, where the SWP and IMG candidates will be competing... does not the

competition harm both of us, and with it the very cause of revolutionary socialism?'

IS/SWP. Is that such a bad thing?

What I am suggesting to you is that the SWP may be one, the largest, mini-party on the left, but it has not so clearly escaped from the same little multi-party and group system. Paradoxically, the period of our most obvious supremacy in this league is already past — I would locate it in the years 1967 to 1973. Then we grew very fast, while the WRP stagnated in sectarian isolation, the IMG was addicted to student ultra-leftism, and most of today's other groups had not been born (the Militant too had not produced the modest results which they have since achieved in the Labour Party). It is surely the case that our hegemony at this time had a lot to do with our open and non-sectarian attitude to the creation of the socialist party, as expressed in *Party and Class*.

The objective circumstances of the last few years have certainly been difficult — but can all the problems and losses of IS in this period be explained in these terms? Is it not also the organisational sectarianism of IS in the last few years, our certainty that by ourselves we are building the party, and the related changes in policy and internal regime, which have disillusioned many existing and would-be members? Haven't we helped the rest of the revolutionary groups to grow at our expense, when we weren't actually spawning new mini-sects?

Looking at the terms in which Hallas posed the problem of the party in 1971, it is not clearly the case that the SWP is the body capable of attracting the industrial militants who used to look to the CP, or the radicalised young workers and students, let alone the black, feminist and white-collar activists. Most of these people will see the revolutionary left as made up of several groups — they will vary in their perception according to industry and locality. Many will join other groups, and even more join none at all, partly because IS persists in the hopeless pretence that the rest of the revolutionary left does not matter. Even Hallas admits that there are 'some good people' in what he calls 'the grouplets and splinters'.

You will not win them by turning your backs on what Hallas calls 'the squabbles of sects', but which happen often to be quite serious arguments presented by these same 'good people'. Even less will you win them by ignoring them in practical situations in which they do have some importance. The absurd situation which will arise in the Stechford by-election, where SWP and IMG candidates will be competing, is a case in point, although there are clearly many others in the trade unions (such as the conflict between Thornett [WSL] and Riley [Right to Work] in the TGWU election), in industrial and anti-cuts struggles, in student unions, etc. No doubt the SWP, with Paul Foot, will do better than the IMG in Stechford, but will this be as true where no Foot is available? And does not the competition harm both of us, and with it the very cause of revolutionary socialism?

The revolutionary socialist party which is

needed in this country will only be created by drawing together a wide range of elements such as Hallas described in 1971, including some at least of the forces now in other revolutionary organisations. This is obviously not to be done by an 'open' unity call such as IS issued in 1968, which only gives the opportunity for small sectarian groups to practice entrism on a larger organisation. Any reunification will have to result from a genuine acknowledgement of the inadequacy of present factional lines on the left. It must include a real resolve not to simply reproduce these factions within a united party. It is clear that this basis does not at the moment exist with any of the groups on the revolutionary left, even with those which call for 'regroupment'.

Sectarian nonsense is still rife: for example, a leader of the IMG still finds it necessary to propagate the inaccurate view that 'most of those who hold the view that Russia is a form of state capitalism have passed over the class line into support for capitalism and imperialism', while patroni-

singly conceding that some of us may be genuine revolutionaries.¹⁰ This same writer only considers unity in the context of 'state capitalist' marxists joining the Fourth International, which is surely begging the important questions involved in any sort of political unity. So long as this sort of approach persists — but perhaps not all of the leaders of the IMG would agree with it — there are real barriers to a unification. But it is still essential, when leaders of significant groupings are willing to talk about unity, to do two things. **One**, we must spell out the kind of unification of the revolutionary left which would be meaningful. **Two**, we must discuss the kinds of unity, well short of unification, which would be possible now.

Indeed, I do not believe that your patronising and sectarian attitude to the rest of the revolutionary left in Britain can be squared with other positions you hold. The most important contradiction is between your policy in this country and your position internationally. Here, you believe,

no organisation apart from IS really counts. But internationally, both within individual countries and in the construction of international links, you see regroupment as inevitable. Reunification in Italy, Spain or France is fine (although naturally and correctly you will point out the dangers of unity on an inadequate political basis, as in Italy). And international discussions on a political level are apparently possible, for you, with quite diverse groups — the Maoist Avanguardia Operaia in Italy, or even the Fourth Internationalist LCR in France. The only criteria seems to be size and effectiveness, within a fairly wide political range. Then why not enter into political discussions with groups in Britain which have fairly close political positions, such as the IMG? If indeed the SWP's international discussions ever get past the preliminary stages, it is likely to turn out that the major organisations in other countries will look at the British revolutionary left in a broader light, and ask how can we ignore the other main groups here.

This problem is most obviously going to arise with organisations affiliated to the Fourth International. Certainly, no democratic centralist international is possible in the present period, and definitely not on the simple basis of an enlarged FI. But we shall have to come to terms with the importance of the FI. It is in many ways closer to the SWP than are other organisations. It has moved a long way from the compromised position on Stalinism which it held in the late '40s and early '50s when we broke with it; it has overcome much of its ultra-leftism of the late 1960s. These again are points we cannot afford to ignore.

A further contradiction in your position is that the SWP claims to be building a party of the Leninist type, and has modelled itself closely in quite a few respects on the early experience of the Communist Party of Great Britain. But was not that party formed, at Lenin's direct insistence, by the fusion of political groups far more diverse, and far less close in their ideas to Bolshevism, than are many of the groups on the revolutionary left today? If we accept that fusion as correct, what principled reason can there be for refusing today even to try to find points for collaboration with other groups who are working with much of the same political tradition? It is, of course, more than a question of formal politics, as we have found in the past — with for example the SLL (now WRP) who were quite close to us superficially on some very important questions, but whose utter sectarianism has usually made the most minimal cooperation impossible. But this is an extreme case, which could hardly justify refusal to cooperate with a group like the IMG which has always been much more open, and whose level of sectarianism has declined considerably in recent years.

Perhaps I should repeat the argument behind the approach to unity which I am advocating. It is, in essence, the argument behind IS's traditional approach to build-

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'The most important contradiction is between your policy in this country and your position internationally. Here, you believe, no organisation apart from IS really counts. But internationally... you see regroupment as inevitable.'

ing the revolutionary party. I am not simply arguing for cobbling together the existing groups of the revolutionary left. Far more important for a future socialist party than the members of all the other groups combined are the many thousands of active socialists and trade unionists who look to the revolutionary left, oscillating perhaps between it and the Labour left or the CP, and yet are repelled by its disunity. I agree with you absolutely that the real present and future vanguard of socialism and workers' struggle is not mainly in the existing political groups. But these are part of it, and the disunity and sectarianism between the groups is disturbing to every serious socialist and militant. Even if the SWP did establish the overwhelming supremacy on the revolutionary left which you think it already has, our sectarianism towards the other groups would still hold back many a good activist. As it is, the problem of winning to a socialist party of the wider vanguard which is involved in struggle, requires a serious, principled approach to revolutionary unity.

Related to this is surely the question of the internal life and structure of the socialist party. I am certainly not advocating that the party should be a sort of parliament of the present revolutionary groups, with their strong sectarian Trotskyist traditions. We have had some experience of this in the recent past, with fairly disastrous consequences. What I am arguing is that the structure of a party should be open enough to allow wide-ranging discussions and real influence of the membership before important decisions are taken. I am arguing that the permanent political leadership of the party should never (save perhaps in the conditions of complete illegality which are not relevant to Britain in the foreseeable future) be only in the hands of a small group of full-timers. I am arguing that the structure should allow individuals from different areas, industries and fields of activity, with varying experiences, emphases and views, to be elected to and participate in the permanent policy-making bodies of the party.

Why is it necessary to insist on these sorts of principles, which used to be common ground in IS but are no longer? Not because of an abstract commitment to the ideals of democracy, although I would point out that socialism has always claimed to fight for and develop the fullest possible democracy, and that no socialist before Stalin argued that there should be a systematic limitation in principle of the democracy within a revolutionary party. Nor because of a determined anti-Bolshevism: I should not even go so far as to say, as Duncan Hallas did a few years ago, that 'In the very different conditions of late 20th century capitalism arguments for or against Lenin's position of 1903 are not so much right or wrong as irrelevant.'¹¹ (Although there is a very important grain of truth in that statement.) I would point out,



'Zinoviev and Kamenev openly opposed, and thereby gave away, the plans for the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917... and yet they survived in its leadership until Stalin's purges.'

as you did a few years ago, that in the Bolshevik party important differences of opinion were often expressed, and even led to differences in action, without constant expulsions. Zinoviev and Kamenev openly opposed, and thereby gave away, the plans for the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. This was surely the most important single decision ever taken by the Party, and yet they survived in its leadership until Stalin's purges.

What this shows is that in a revolutionary socialist party which really includes the vanguard of the working class, those who are actively fighting for socialism, and which leads substantial sections of workers, there must be room for quite a range of major differences. These will be differences of theoretical ideas, on important aspects of strategy, and on tactical questions both major and minor; it may not always be easy to reconcile them in practice at any one point in time. But these differences are the lifeblood of a living socialist movement.

This was true in Russia, and it is even more true in the much more complex circumstances of the working class in a country like Britain today. Tens of millions of workers, white-collar as well as manual, skilled and unskilled, in services as well as productive industry, in public as well

as private employment, black and white, working women as well as housewives, not to mention students, let alone the independent middle class: a socialist party is needed to overcome the unevenness between them, and surely it must also be able to have democratic feedback from its activists in all these groups? A working class used to parliamentary democracy, to a wide range of civil rights however precarious, and to democratic practice in a multitude of its own organisations: how can it be won to a party which does not have a very full and open democracy in itself? Will it believe in a fight for a socialist democracy led by a party which shows few signs of it in its own workings?

I have quoted several times from Hallas's article in *Party and Class*; I could have included great chunks of it, together with similar portions of the earlier articles by Tony Cliff and Chris Harman which were also included in that excellent volume, now sadly out of print. I think it is evident that you have changed your minds pretty drastically about the way in which a socialist party will be created in this country. I, and many others, would like to know why. Is there a short cut, call it the SWP or what you will, which can overcome simply by vigorous intervention and re-

cruitment all the complex political and organisational problems of the advanced workers and socialists in Britain, problems of which you used to be so aware? Has the IS tradition really proved so overwhelmingly powerful that it alone forms the basis for a party?

There was a time, when you still maintained more of that tradition, when it seemed as though it might be able to achieve the broad and deep roots in the working class which would make it the main foundation for a party. This was precisely because it was an open tradition: we were open both in our ideas and in our methods to the experience and understanding of workers outside IS, of people involved in many different sorts of social and political movements on the left, and (last but not least), of all our members. So much of this has been lost in recent years, and with it many of the most experienced members and a good deal of the influence of IS. So is the formation of the Socialist Workers Party just a change of name? Can the ideas of International Socialism, which helped us to create the most significant revolutionary organisation in Britain for 50 years, still contribute to the development of an open, democratic, mass socialist party of the working class? Or is our tradition dying together with the name by which it was known?

Yours fraternally,
MARTIN SHAW

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Shaw and Richard Kuper, **Political problems of revolutionary socialism today: the choices facing the International Socialists, IS internal discussion document 1976.**

2. The connection with the ideas of our document can be seen by comparing it with my discussion article on 'Elections', IS 93, Nov/Dec 1976, which is still the only attempt within the SWP to produce a comprehensive political rationale for an electoral strategy for the revolutionary left. This article argued for 'consistent, imaginative and non-sectarian campaigns'; it is unfortunate that it did not spell out the need for a united electoral strategy by the revolutionary left, as this is undoubtedly the way in which an electoral strategy will have most success.

3. See Paul Foot, **Why you should be a socialist: the case for the new Socialist Workers Party, 1977**, and some recent issues of SW.

4. Duncan Hallas, 'Why we are the Socialist Workers Party', *SWP Bulletin*, No. 1 February 1977.

5. Hallas, in Hallas et al, **Party and Class**, Pluto Press n.d. (1971), pp.24-25.

6. Hallas, 'Why we are the Socialist Workers Party'.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. 'Alan Jones', Intro. to 'Problems of the East European Revolution', **Battle of Ideas**, monthly supplement to *Red Weekly*, No. 4, Jan 1977.

11. Hallas in *Party and Class*, p.15.



'Far more important for a future socialist party than the members of all the other groups combined are the many thousands of active

socialists and trade unionists who look to the revolutionary left... and yet are repelled by its disunity.'