

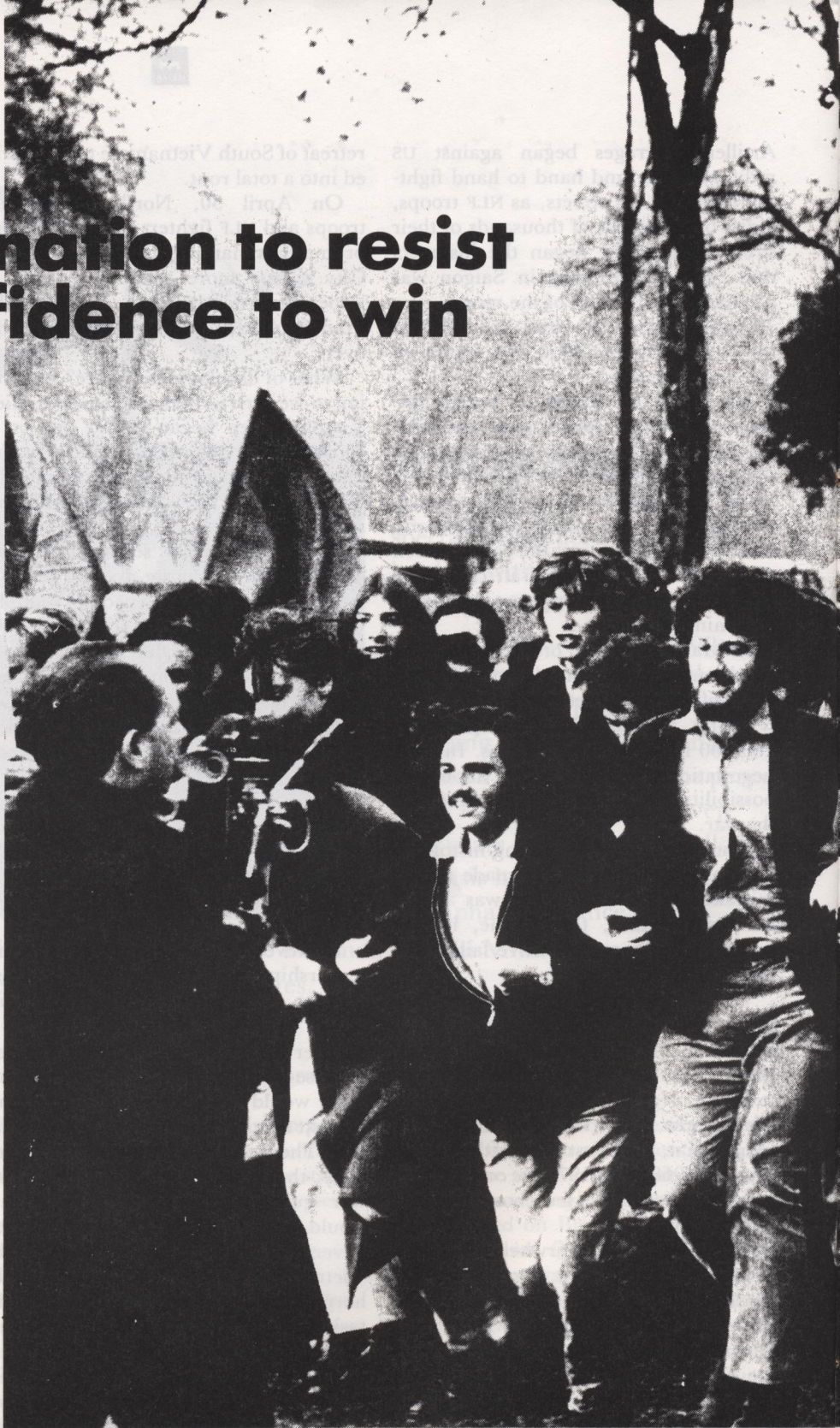
Vietnam solidarity:

The determination to resist and the confidence to win

The mass movement in solidarity with the Vietnamese people against US imperialism was a major feature of 1968 in Britain. It was the focus for the radicalisation of an entire generation: a radicalisation which went beyond the single issue of Vietnam and led many thousands to embrace varying forms of revolutionary politics. **TESSA VAN GELDEREN** spoke to **PAT JORDAN** and **TARIQ ALI**, both founding members and leading figures in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC).

Pat Jordan was a full time worker for the campaign during the mass demonstrations of 1967 and 1968. He was a member of the International Marxist Group at the time and has been a lifelong fighter for socialism. Pat is currently recovering from the effects of a stroke.

In 1967-68 Tariq Ali's picture was never far from the front pages of the press. An editorial board member of *Black Dwarf*, he became a symbol of the mass demonstrations and occupations. His book about the period, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue.



PAT JORDAN

“CND WAS THE left campaign of the fifties, its main activity was a once-yearly march from Aldermaston. The march was like a revolutionary university — people arguing, tactics and strategy debated, thousands of papers bought and sold.

The main organisation to gain from this was, rather surprisingly, the Labour Party Young Socialists (this was before the Socialist Labour League's control in the sixties).

The orientation of CND was to get the Labour Party to adopt unilateralism. Then Aneurin Bevan, after initially supporting unilateralism, made his famous somersault. This rapidly disillusioned people. They realised that they needed something else other than this simple orientation which was entirely within the framework of supporting the Labour Party, at that time under the leadership of Gaitskell.

Many CND activists were people who had left the Communist Party at about the time of the Hungarian revolution in



1956. As a result of these developments the Committee of 100 emerged and argued for direct action.

One of the people involved with this was Ralph Schoenman who persuaded Bertrand Russell to support the committee. The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation was established. The name was to make bridges, Schoenman was the driving force.

When Schoenman went on a visit to Vietnam he was told by the Vietnamese communists that they were very dissatisfied with the anti-war movement in Bri-

tain. This was the British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV) which was led by the Communist Party. The first line of its founding statement was 'we do not take sides, we want peace in Vietnam'. Quite rightly the Vietnamese did not like this as it took out the anti-imperialist essence of their fight.

In Nottingham *The Week* group was in the Labour Party. At the Labour Party conference in 1966 it produced a daily bulletin. There was a resolution from Nottingham South CLP which ended up with 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese'.

There was also a resolution on the agenda which had been inspired by the BCPV which called on the Wilson government to take an initiative 'to bring this dreadful war to an end'.

Nottingham South's delegate, Peter Price, came under immense pressure from the Tribunites to withdraw his resolution: they supported the BCPV. They did horrific things like waking him up at two o'clock in the morning, bullying him. They argued that if the Nottingham South resolution remained on the agenda it would jeopardise the passing of the BCPV resolution.

We were, of course, totally opposed to withdrawing the resolution. In the end it got a not insignificant number of votes as did the BCPV resolution.

This then was the background to the establishment of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. Schoenmann was part of these discussions and observed the production of *The Week* bulletin. He came to us with a proposal that we start a different type of movement against the war in Vietnam. He'd discuss it with Ken Coates, who was a member of the Fourth International and worked for the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.

I moved to London from Nottingham to work for the Peace Foundation to set up such an organisation. I did that in January 1967 and we held the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in June 1967.

We tried to intervene with all groups of people including CND, arguing that they should support the struggle in Vietnam where it was possible that nuclear weapons could be used. We had no joy from them, although individuals did support us. We also had support from various maoist groups. *New Left Review* gave us facilities. We produced a photographic exhibition of the war in Vietnam which was shown round the universities.

There were a few hundred delegates at the founding conference, a large proportion were students but there were a sprinkling of trade unionists and a number of people from Labour parties. Local groups were established to mobilise for national demonstrations and local activities. A favourite pastime was stalking Labour prime minister Harold



Wilson who said: 'Everywhere I go, I get followed by people picketing me about Vietnam'.

There was an attempt to prevent Labour foreign secretary Michael Stewart from speaking at the Oxford Union. This raised the whole question of 'free speech'. You have to remember that the Vietnam war was on the television nearly every evening and there was a revulsion against Wilson who was giving support, at least in a political sense, to the Americans. People were outraged.

We were well aware of our weaknesses in terms of social composition. We took steps to try to remedy that. We organised a trade union conference and a youth conference.

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The steering committee of VSC met weekly over this period. There were many fights and packing of meetings. It was usually a fight between the International Marxist Group and the maoists. At the first conference of the VSC the maoists had wanted to write into the constitution support for the '13 points' and the '10 points'. These were negotiating points put forward by the Vietnamese. We were opposed to that because it would have tied us hook, line and sinker to the North Vietnamese government's position. It would have allowed us no political freedom whatsoever.

The first large demonstration was in October 1967. It was huge by our standards: 10,000 people.

The VSC became the focus for many organisations and individuals to express their opposition to the Wilson government. We would have placards on VSC demonstrations with 'victory to the NLF, we want higher pensions'; 'victory to the NLF, workers' control in the shipyards'. People spontaneously reacted. They knew they were anti-Wilson's government. They knew the demonstration was against something the Wilson government was doing, so they wanted to go on it.

The Communist Party campaigned, at first, vigorously against the VSC. There was a strange amalgam of forces opposed to us: the CP, the pacifists and the Socialist Labour League (SLL, later to become the Workers Revolutionary Party). The latter produced a leaflet for one of the mass demonstrations entitled

'why we're not marching'!

The great strength we had was that we were part of a world-wide movement. If we talk about the objective effects, what the VSC did in part was to reinforce the American anti-war movement which in turn was one of the factors demoralising the American army of occupation. The main factor demoralising them was the fight put up by the Vietnamese and the fact that they were completely socially isolated in Vietnam. Only the scum of Vietnamese society would have any dealings with them.

This was expressed in various ways. Many were drug takers, the level of discipline started to collapse. If American imperialism had not been forced to withdraw its army it would have had a mutiny on its hands. In its widest scenario that's the kind of job that will have to be done in relation to central America. There should be an internationally coordinated campaign.

Vietnam was the first military defeat suffered by the United States. Afterwards the Fourth International drew the conclusion that it was virtually impossible for American imperialism to intervene again because there was such revulsion to the Vietnam experience. I wish they'd been right.

TARIQ ALI

THE SOLIDARITY movement with Vietnam was not spontaneous — it had to be organised. It was in part the result of a decision taken by the Fourth International at its eighth world congress in 1965 when it decided to make solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution the main priority for its sections all over the world. It was that big central push which threw cadres of the organisation everywhere — even in countries where there were only a few — into building the movement.

This coincided with a political conjuncture which was extremely favourable so that it became a mass international movement. The whole uniqueness of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign is that it became an umbrella for a newly developed revolutionary consciousness amongst a fairly substantial and significant number of youth — primarily students but not exclusively so.

Vietnam lit the fuse and enabled people to go way, way beyond a single issue and embrace varying forms of revolutionary politics. I think that's

what gave that whole period its political meaning and left its mark on an entire generation all over the world. The Vietnamese were a focal point in that.

It's foolish to imagine that the Vietnam experience can be mechanically repeated now. If the political situation changes in Europe, anything's possible. But even then I don't think that the particular conjuncture will be repeated because its a conjuncture that happens very rarely in a century.

There's been nothing like it. People say it was like the twenties and thirties. Yes and no. The Spanish civil war was a very big event in Europe. It did not bring about a world-wide radicalisation. The Russian revolution did, so the twenties are more comparable. But the whole business about 1968 is that it was not confined to Europe.

It is true that many important things happened in Europe: the general strike in France, the creeping general strike in Italy, the overthrow of a senile bonapartist regime in Portugal.

But you also had a general strike in Pakistan in 1969 which toppled a military dictatorship and led to the break up of the country. There was a massive peasant uprising in different parts of India, the beginnings of a struggle in Latin America, the fight against the Portuguese in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique and successive strike waves in Argentina. There was the uprising in Sri Lanka. And there was the anti-war movement in the United States which was without precedent in the history of that country. So it was really global and that's what made it so unique.

The struggle of the Vietnamese somehow symbolised all that: the determination to resist and the confidence to win. The fact that the Americans could not defeat the Vietnamese played a very big part in the radicalisation in Europe.

But the victory in Vietnam was not repeated elsewhere; in fact the setbacks in Europe were pretty decisive. The general strike in France — the largest general strike in the history of capitalism — shook the regime, but did not topple it. In the subsequent general election the gaullists were re-elected and that had a very demoralising effect — not immediately but a few years later.

The other important event in Europe was the Portuguese revolution in 1974-75. There too, we had a very big setback. In my view, the far left collectively and the Portuguese Communist Party bear part of the responsibility for that defeat. They failed to understand the central question which agitated large numbers of people in that country — the

links between socialism and democracy. The revolutionary upsurge was not defeated by a bloody counter-revolution; it was defeated by the victory of Mario Soares and the Portuguese Socialist Party.

November 1975 marked the end, by and large, of the period of radicalisation which had opened up in Europe in 1967-68. From that time on there was a continual drift to the right.

This depresses some people. It does not particularly depress me. There are many examples in history where after every revolutionary wave and upsurge you have a period of regression. You have reaction which is triumphant and as the tide goes back it leaves all sorts of flotsam and jetsam in its wake. That is

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how the historical process operates. It is not permanent.

There were people so hypnotised by the fifties that they could not see what was going on in the sixties. It would be a tragedy if people were so mesmerised by the victory of reaction in the late seventies and eighties that they totally fail to see what is possible in the next decades.

The success of the solidarity movement in the United States and in western Europe marginalised during that period all those political parties that were essentially putting forward either a pacifist or a popular front approach. Our movement showed that you could mobilise far more people on a clear solidarity position. The fact that this could be done first split the Young Communist League, then divided the Communist Party and finally the *Morning Star* started reporting VSC activities in a sympathetic way. Likewise in other west European countries.

In the United States it was more complex in that the CP was not the only organisation opposed to solidarity slogans. The US Socialist Workers Party slogan was ‘bring the boys back home’ which was not sufficient.

The group in the US that made the biggest gains was the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) which mobilised around ‘victory to the NLF’. Because the SWP(US) cut itself off from this layer it won over very few people which was a tragedy; many of them went to different organisations and some of them ended up defending individual

terrorism. This could have been avoided.

The stalinist parties refused to accept that what was taking place was a revolution. We did. The Vietnamese themselves were very open and invited us to Vietnam to collaborate with them. They were present at the founding conference of the VSC. The Vietnamese CP belonged to the stalinist family. Cadres were educated and formed in a period when the Communist International was dominated by stalinism. Yet this party also made a revolution and led a successful struggle against three different imperialist powers: the French, the Japanese, the French again and finally the USA. So you could not call it a party which was aiding counter-revolution.

It also did many reprehensible things. Sections of the CP in the south played a very bad role in drowning out dissent, including killing trotskyists. At the same time it was in a united front with the trotskyists in Saigon and there was a joint slate. So it was not a simple issue.

For us in the Fourth International, it was not a problem which prevented us from throwing everything into defending that revolution. Its success would have enormous repercussions throughout the world and on that we were absolutely right. The reason why the Americans have not occupied Nicaragua today is because there is still revulsion in the United States because of Vietnam.

You have to be on the side of those in struggle. You can do this without capitulating to their political conceptions. In the VSC and in our press we did it. It’s not that we were uncritical.

I remember writing in *Socialist Challenge* that the issue of democracy was not unimportant and should not be ignored by the Vietnamese. Many of the things Gorbachev is saying now we were saying years ago and I think some of the lessons of *glasnost* can and should be applied to countries like Vietnam and Cuba. They need them for their own health. These are tactical questions but the tactics are not unimportant. I am very proud that our current in the labour movement was among the first to recognise this.

In 1968 people came out of the Labour Party because the Wilson government was so reactionary it was very difficult to do anything inside the Labour Party. The Labour left, at the time led by people like Michael Foot, was simply incapable of exerting any pressure whatsoever. By and large they defended Wilson’s policies. So there was no possibility of a fightback in the Labour Party and thousands of people left. I think in retrospect that this was absolutely correct. It was the only way we

could build a movement outside the Labour Party.

I would say that the far left was wrong, throughout western Europe, in assuming that this radicalised layer from the sixties onwards would be sufficient for providing the base for building mass revolutionary parties. We are now 20 years away and in not a single country in Europe has this happened. It can’t just be an accident. The far left has got smaller.

The only exception, I think, is Germany, ironically enough, where you have the Greens, which are not a classic revolutionary party but represent a left, radical populist force with a strong socialist component to the left of traditional social democracy and are making an impact.

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Some things could have been different. I think in Portugal it is an open question if the far left and the CP had had a different strategy and a different set of tactics. If you had a revolution that was socialist and democratic it would have been a model for the whole of Europe.

Many people have written, including Marx and Engels, that students are a very good barometer of changes about to happen and in 1968 they were the first on the streets. But the sixties were not just one big street demonstration. It was university occupations that led to factory occupations.

You had a working class upsurge in Britain unprecedented since the twenties. There were the 1972 and 1974 miners’ strikes, very different from the miners’ strike in 1984-85. There was big support for them from other sections of the working class which is why they won. One of these strikes directly brought about the end of the Heath government.

Britain is a bit peculiar because of its antiquated electoral system. It forces Labour to represent all segments of opinion. There’s no way out of it. If you had a system of proportional representation, I think it would be worth having an electoral front. At the moment its utterly useless.

Nothing will happen unless there is a breach in the ranks of labourism. I don’t say you can’t do anything. But there will be nothing big politically which will affect national politics unless something happens in that formation.