

SPGB Education Document (1995) WHERE THE SWP IS COMING FROM

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The SWP can trace its origins back to 1917. Not only was this the year of the Bolshevik coup they so admire but it was also the year of the birth of their spiritual leader, Tony Cliff, in Palestine, then a province of the Ottoman Empire soon to be taken over by British imperialism. In his own words, Cliff came “from a middle-class family with a quite good, educational opportunities and quite a good standard of living” (interview with Idiot International, 6 June 1970). Although his family were Zionists, at a relatively young age he became an anti-Zionist joining the Palestine Communist Party before becoming a follower of Trotsky.

During the war he was a student at Trinity College, Dublin. Returning to Palestine at the end of the war he retained his links with the Revolutionary Communist Party, the body which for a few years after 1948 united most Trotskyists in Britain. It was at this time that he adopted the pseudonym of Tony Cliff, more appropriate it might be thought for a popular band leader than a Trotskyite conspirator.

I LET’S GO WITH LABOUR (1950-1968)

Cliff was one of those members of the RCP who left in 1948 to “enter” the Labour Party. This was in accordance with a specifically Trotskyist tactic known as “entrism” which had been devised by Trotsky himself in the 1930s. Realising that if they were to form their own independent organisation it would be pathetically small, Trotsky sent his followers into other organisations with a view to recruiting more followers and then leaving when they reached a more respectable number and setting up the “revolutionary party” to lead the workers. Before the war the old ILP was a victim of such political parasitism. Other Trotskyists tried entering the Communist Party in their country, but in Britain the main target has been the Labour Party.

Cliff was to remain a card-carrying member of the Labour Party for some twenty years. He wasn’t to last so long in the ranks of official Trotskyism, being expelled in 1950 for refusing to support the North Korea/China side in the Korean War. Cliff took this position in line with the theory he had adopted that Russia under Stalin was not the “degenerate Workers State” that Trotsky had held it to be, but was a form of state capitalism. He was undoubtedly right and his group became known as the “state capitalist tendency” within the Trotskyist movement or, more simply, as the “state caps”.

Except on this issue of the nature of Russian society, Cliff took with him all the rest of the baggage of Trotskyism. The belief in the ultimate need for a centralised, vanguard party and that the crisis facing humanity was the absence of such a party. The belief that a workers’ revolution had taken place in Russia in 1917 and that a “Workers State” had existed there until Trotsky’s final defeat in 1928 in his struggle for power with Stalin. The belief that this vanguard party should seek to lead the working class by offering them a programme of “transitional demands” aimed at getting them to struggle for something that was unattainable under capitalism in the expectation that when they realised this they would become anti-capitalist revolutionaries. And the belief that those seeking to build such a party should be extremely flexible, not to say machiavellian, in their tactics.

So, in 1950, Cliff found himself on his own with a couple of dozen faithful followers. Undaunted, he did what any other would-be Trotsky leader of the working class would have done in the circumstances. He drew up a programme of “transitional demands” and started a journal to advocate them.

Called Socialist Review and billing itself as a “Labour journal”, this was aimed at trade union and Labour Party activists, who it assumed would be attracted by the following programme:

- (1) The complete nationalisation of heavy industry, the banks, insurance and the land.
- (2) The renationalisation without compensation of all de-nationalised industries.
- (3) Suspend interest on the national debt. Compensation to ex-owners only as a result of an Income Test administered by elected workers’ committees.
- (4) A majority of workers’ representatives on all nationalised and area boards subject to frequent

election, immediate recall, and receiving THE AVERAGE WAGE OBTAINING IN THE INDUSTRY.

- (5) Two or more workers' representatives to sit on boards of all private concerns employing 20 or more people with access to all documents.
- (6) Workers' committees to control hiring and firing and working conditions.
- (7) Abolition of payments for national health service and of private beds.
- (8) Establishment of principle of FULL WORK OR FULL MAINTENANCE.
- (9) Sliding scale of adequate pensions based on new and realistic cost-of-living indices.
- (10) Interest-free housing loans to local authorities and drastic powers to requisition and rent free state-owned land.
- (11) A foreign policy based on independence of both Washington and Moscow.
- (12) Withdrawal of British troops overseas; freedom of colonial peoples and offer of economic and technical aid.

All this was conventional leftwing Labour stuff, but Cliff's group didn't make much progress till the revival of radical political activity and ideas inaugurated by CND's "Ban the Bomb" campaign that began with the first Aldermaston March in 1958. Latching on to this, Cliff promoted foreign policy issues from the bottom to the top of his list of attractive demands. By 1961 the first item of Socialist Review's programme had become:

"The unilateral renunciation of the H-bomb and all weapons of mass destruction, withdrawal from NATO and all other aggressive alliances as preliminary steps to international disarmament".

The Cliff Group was in particularly good position to take advantage of this change of political mood as it had embraced the theory of "the permanent arms economy" as its explanation as to why there had been no major slump since the end of the war.

The group wasn't always clear about how arms spending did this. The economic journalist John Palmer, indeed Cliff himself, appeared to suggest that it did so by providing an additional market for the output of capitalist industry. The group's expert on the matter, however, Mike Kidron, a professional economist, argued that it did so by slowing down the rate of capital accumulation (see his 1968 book *British Capitalism since the War*). But in the end the details didn't matter. The very name of the theory established a link in people's minds between the Bomb and the capitalist economy: the Bomb served to stabilise the capitalist economy and so, to get rid of it without causing a slump, you had to get rid of capitalism. On this basis a number of Ban-the-Bombers, mainly within the Labour Party and its youth section, the Young Socialists, were attracted to the group, whose numbers now reached triple figures.

In 1959 the group began publishing an occasional theoretical journal called *International Socialism* whose title was to become the group's name. This was re-launched the following year as a well-designed high-brow quarterly, full of book reviews and articles by university lecturers. The proles were offered a few issues of a 8-page agitational paper in 1961 called *The Industrial Worker*. The following year, when publication of *Socialist Review* was discontinued, this became *Labour Worker*. At the same time the Group obtained editorial control of a paper called *Young Guard* circulating within the Labour Party's youth section.

International Socialism proved to be a great success and eventually provided a new name for the group. What attracted people was the name with its internationalist connotations at a time when a foreign policy matter like nuclear disarmament was a dominating issue, and also the content, an apparently undogmatic and sometimes libertarian Marxism as propounded in particular by such contributors as Peter Sedgwick, Alasdair McIntyre, Ray Challinor and Nigel Harris (who was editor from 1965 to 1968).

In the early and mid-sixties IS was essentially a group of pro-Labour intellectuals similar in character to, say, *Socialist Outlook* or *Labour Briefing* today. It, too, managed to capture a Constituency Labour Party though hardly a proletarian one, only Esher in the Tory heartland of Surrey. It even managed to get a couple of its members adopted as official Labour candidates, once again in Surrey: John Palmer stood for Labour in Croydon North West in the 1968 election and Mike Dowling in Woking in 1966. Both were eventually taken off the list of approved Labour candidates but IS was never proscribed by the Labour Party. Not having (at this time) a centralised Leninist structure, it didn't present the same

threat as the Socialist Labour League did and which had been proscribed in 1959 and as Militant was to later.

Why the Labour Party was IS's main field of activity was explained by Cliff in an 11-page article "The Labour Party in Perspective" in *International Socialism* 9 (summer 1962):

"Marxists should not set themselves up as a party or embryo of a party of their own. They should remember that the working class looks to the Labour Party as the political organisation of the class (and no doubt when a new wave of political activity spreads among the working class millions of new voters will flock to its banner and hundreds of thousands will join it actively). Marxists should never forget that consciousness of the aims of socialism on the part of the mass of the workers is a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of socialism.

"Marxists should strive to unite with the Centrist Left in activity in defence of the traditional working class content of the Party (as on the issue of Clause 4, defence of Conference supremacy, etc) against right-wing attack, trying to isolate the Lib-Lab revisionists.

"Above all the Marxists should help to build bridges between the different sectors of the struggle, in industry, CND, etc, with the clear knowledge that political struggle is meaningless without a political organization to channel it, and that the only party the working class in Britain thinks it own, with all its defects, is the Labour Party".

Naturally, IS called for a Labour vote in the 1964, which was to bring Harold Wilson to power after 13 years of Tory rule, and its members, as members of the Labour Party, were out campaigning for their local Labour candidate. Today, the SWP likes to give the impression that they left the Labour Party as early as 1965. In his book *The Left in Britain 1956-1968* David Widgery (who was a member of IS and the SWP until his death in 1992) wrote:

"As early as 1965, the executive of International Socialism passed Mike Kidron's motion that 'The IS Group rejects the Labour Party as an instrument for social change, rejects it as a milieu for mass conversion to socialist consciousness; and sees in it primarily an area for ideological conflict and source of individual recruitment to a revolutionary programme'" (their emphasis) (p. 120).

But this – using the Labour Party as "a source of individual recruitment" – had always been the position of the Cliff Group. So this represented no real change. In 1965 in fact, in answer to criticism that they supported the Labour Party in spite of the anti-working-class stance already evident in the policies being pursued by the new Labour government, an editorial "Why Labour?" in *International Socialism* 22 (Autumn 1965) defiantly proclaimed:

"To ignore the Party as an arena of struggle is to ignore the greatest opportunity socialists have for engaging the political attention of the working class. Again, the Party still provides the main link between almost all the organs of the Labour movement, even if these organs are drained of their former life – socialists must be at the link to unify and provide an alternative programme. To make socialists is one of our primary purposes, and, in present circumstances, the Labour Party provides one of the key sources of such recruits. For these reasons, the present government has in no way shifted our support away from the Labour Party."

Clearly, Cliff was not yet ready to pull his followers out of the Labour Party. Most IS members, including the leaders, remained members of the Labour Party till 1968, some even longer. Until then the Group's monthly agitational paper continued to be called *Labour Worker* and continued to carry articles signed, for instance, John Palmer (Esher CLP), Ian Birchall (Wood Green CLP) or Roger Crossley (Kingston YS). The final break with Labour came with the decision to change *Labour Worker* into *Socialist Worker* as from the June 1968 issue. The March issue, announcing the coming change of name, explained:

"The Labour in our title always meant the labour movement, but it also reflected the emphasis which our work placed on the struggle inside the Labour Party, particularly in the early 1960s around the unilateral nuclear disarmament campaign and the right-left clashes in the Young Socialists. Now, in a new situation, with more and more sections of the labour movement beginning to fight back against the Labour government, the International Socialism group is engaged in an activity which has taken its members and supporters far beyond the boundaries of the Labour Party. At the same time, working-class disillusion with the government has led to some confusion over the paper's name. Our circulation

has grown, but many sellers have had to break down an initial reaction against the paper because of the title. So we become Socialist Worker”.

The beginning of this turn away from the Labour Party had been announced (as all the group’s tactical “turns” are) by Tony Cliff, in a series of articles that appeared in Labour Worker at the beginning of 1967. Cliff proclaimed “the end of reformism”, by which he meant the end of the possibility of obtaining improvements in working class conditions through parliament, and that this meant the decline in the importance of the Labour Party – the vehicle for such parliamentary reformism – as a field of activity for “revolutionaries”; instead, these should turn to the only field on which working-class conditions could now be defended and improved – struggles in the factories and council estates and by rank-and-file trade unionists.

The turn away from work in the Labour Party – the end of entrism – did not mean that IS no longer supported Labour at election time. On the contrary, IS called for a Labour vote just as strongly as before. But, in 1970, after six years of an anti-working-class Labour government, the leadership had difficulty in convincing even its own members to toe this line.

The editorial in International Socialism 42 (Feb/March 1970), in a cryptic reference to this internal problem, wrote:

“It would be a mistake, although not a major one, for the Left to call for a vote ‘against both Tories’ and to urge abstention. This would be to claim that a vote for the overt party of capital and a vote for the shamefaced party of capital are the same, a claim which most militant workers still reject. It would be to accentuate precisely what differentiates us from most workers, not what we have in common. If there were anything like a credible alternative to offer this would be justified; if there is not it only makes the long term task of relating revolutionary politics to the aspirations of ordinary workers that much more difficult.”

An editorial reply in Socialist Worker (6 June) put the same argument, though characteristically much more crudely:

“We call for a vote against the Tories because we think that Tory victory would lead to a demoralisation among important sections of workers. Labour in opposition, possibly with a new leader, would show its ‘left’ face again in an effort to channel the industrial and political struggle into safe ‘out with the Tories’ campaigns.

“We do not favour voting Labour because we have any illusions that they are the ‘lesser of two evils’. We believe that it is important for Labour to be in office so that the workers can see them in action, attempting to solve big business’s problems at the workers’ expense.

“A Labour government gives the revolutionary left the chance to argue its policies to a far wider audience than when the Tories are in power. The opportunities for building a genuine revolutionary socialist movement are greater when Labour is in office and workers cannot turn to them as a ‘left’ alternative to the Tories”.

This manipulative approach is still the SWP tactic today: get workers to vote in a Labour government so that they can undergo the experience of its failure and so turn to the “revolutionary left” for leadership, since under a Tory government they are more likely to turn to leftwing Labourites.

Peter Sedgwick, a member of the editorial board of International Socialism and one of the dissidents, wrote in reply:

“Your position amounts to this. Either we have hundreds of socialist candidates standing with a practically certain chance of defeating both Labour and – or we have to vote Labour despite the capitalist nature of the Labour Party. Yet this argument ensures that the building of a real alternative to fight elections can never be begun. Keep your editorial safely on file comrades. You will be bringing it out again at the next election, and the next, and the next after that. You might change the headline though to ‘VOTE LABOUR UNTIL DOOMSDAY’.” (Socialist Worker, 20 June 1970).

Sedgwick was right. Socialist Worker did trot out the same “Vote Labour” line in February 1978 and in October 1974 and in 1979 and in 1988 and in 1987 and in 1992 and

II BACK TO LENIN

The year 1968 was an *annus mirabilis* for radicals. In May a student revolt in France sparked off a workers' general strike that nearly toppled De Gaulle. In August Russian tanks put an end to Dubcek's attempt in Czechoslovakia to establish "communism with a human face", so exposing for all to see the Russian regime as the brutal state-capitalist dictatorship it was. Meanwhile the Vietcong (with whom, for some reason, many radicals identified) were making advances at the expense of the US Army, cheered on by their supporters in the West who, in Britain, organised a massive demonstration in October outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square.

Like other groups, IS benefited from this and, according to Chris Harman, "grew from about 300 members at the beginning of 1968 to about 1000 in the autumn of that year" (*The Revolutionary Paper*, p. 39). Most of the new members were radicalised students, like Harman himself who had been one of the leaders of the student sit-in at the LSE in March 1967.

Of the events of 1968 it was those in France which had the biggest impact. Here radical students by their own actions had been able to spark off a general strike. Up until then it had been assumed that "revolutionaries" had to be in the "mass political organisation of the working class", as they flatteringly called the Labour Party, in order to make contact with and influence workers. This was seen as confirming the position towards which the IS Group was already moving: that conditions had now changed and that direct contact could now be made with workers. As a result, most Trotskyist groups, not just the IS, left the Labour Party (leaving Ted Grant's Militant group with a virtual monopoly within the Labour Party to hunt for followers, but that's another story).

Cliff and his leading followers in the IS Group drew another conclusion from the French events, or rather applied another old Trotskyist dogma to them. According to them, the only reason why these events had not led to the overthrow of capitalism in France has been the absence of a Leninist-type vanguard party to lead the working class.

Lenin had set out his views on how revolutionaries should organise in a pamphlet published in 1902, which Cliff has summarised as follows:

"Lenin's *What is to be done?* was a merciless attack on 'economism' or pure trade unionism. He argued that the spontaneity of the masses' struggle – everywhere so obvious in Russia at the time – must be supplemented by the consciousness and organisation of a party. a national party with a central newspaper of its own must be created in order to unify the local groupings and infuse the Labour Movement with political consciousness. Socialist theory must be brought to the proletariat from outside; this was the only way the Labour Movement could move directly to the struggle for socialism. The projected party would be made up largely of professional revolutionaries, working under an extremely centralised leadership. The political leadership of the Party should be the editorial board of the central newspaper. This should have the power to organise or reorganise party branches inside the country, admit or expel members and appoint local committees." (Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg*, first edition, 1959, p.46).

Although Lenin claimed to accept Marx's ideas, this concept of revolutionaries organising as a disciplined body of professional revolutionaries controlled by a Centre was the traditional organisational form favoured by the Russian revolutionary tradition (Marx himself was in the West European tradition which favoured an open, democratic organisation controlled by its members). When Lenin's views became known outside Russia a wave of protest unfurled. Among his severest critics was Rosa Luxemburg, who wrote of Lenin's organisational plan:

"Nothing will more surely enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straitjacket, which will immobilise the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee" ("*Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy*", 1904, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, pp 126-7)

Despite being a committed Leninist himself, in this book Cliff allowed himself to take some of this criticism on board:

"Marx's statement about the democratic nature of the socialist movement, quoted previously [*"All*

previous historical movements were movements of minorities or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority”], and Lenin’s, that revolutionary Social Democracy represents ‘the Jacobin indissolubly connected with the organisation) of the proletariat’ are definitely contradictory” (p. 49).

“For Marxists, in advanced industrial countries, Lenin’s original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg’s, notwithstanding her overstatements on the question of spontaneity” (p. 54).

“Rosa Luxemburg’s conception of the structure of the revolutionary organisations – that they should be built, from below up, on a consistently democratic basis – fits the needs of the workers’ movement in the advanced countries much more closely than Lenin’s conception of 1902-4 which was copied and given an added bureaucratic twist by the Stalinists the world over” (p. 93).

At the time that Cliff wrote this – 1959 – he had an interest in playing down his Leninism as he was trying to attract to his group people who were reacting against their experiences within a rival, rigidly Leninist organisation, the Socialist Labour League, then the premier Trotskyist organisation in Britain. It was precisely because Luxemburg had criticised Lenin’s concept of the party as over-centralised, that Cliff had chosen to produce a pamphlet on her at this particular time.

Cliff had to take some stick from other, more orthodox Trotskyists for this apparent lapse from Leninism. But what he was guilty of was opportunism rather than non-Leninism since he remained wedded to Lenin’s basic concept of the need for revolutionaries to organise into a disciplined and centralised vanguard party to lead the workers. In any event, in the second edition of his study of Rosa Luxemburg which came out in 1980 he took out his critical comments on Lenin. By then he had already decided that the time had come to reorganise his own group along Leninist lines.

One wit, commenting on the aftermath, of the May events in France had commented:

“Exclusively by their own efforts, non-proletarian revolutionaries are able to develop only a Leninist consciousness” (Denis Authier, introduction to French translation of Trotsky’s *Rapport de la délégation sibérienne*, 1969, p 45).

Actually, this was a bit of an exaggeration as May 1968 also gave an impetus to anarchist and “spontaneist” ideas including those of Rosa Luxemburg. It was true, however, that May 1968 did lead to a spread of the Leninist doctrine of the need for a disciplined and centralised vanguard party to lead the workers. Leninist groups of all sorts, not just Trotskyists but also the followers of Mao or Fidel Castro or Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara or even Enver Hodja in Albania, all found a ready audience amongst radical students for their view that a revolution had not happened in France for want of a vanguard party.

But not everybody fell for this. One who didn’t was Daniel Cohn-Bendit who, as Danny-the-Red, had been the most prominent of the student revolutionaries in France. With his brother Gabriel he wrote a book, called in English *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* whose final section on “The Strategy and Nature of Bolshevism” is a devastating attack on Leninism in theory and practice.

Leninists, they wrote, “no less than the capitalist state, all look upon the proletariat as a mass that needs to be directed from above”:

“This disdain for the working class and its capacity for self-emancipation can be heard most clearly in Lenin’s a theoretical justification of the leadership principle” (p. 213).

“The Leninist belief that the workers cannot spontaneously go beyond the level of trade union consciousness is tantamount to beheading the proletariat, and then insinuating the Party as the head” (p. 215).

“The most forceful champion of a revolutionary party was Lenin, who in his *What is to be done?* argued that the proletariat is unable by itself to reach a ‘scientific’ understanding of society, that it tends to adopt the prevailing, i.e. the bourgeois ideology. Hence it was the essential task of the party to rid the workers of this ideology by a process of political education from without. Moreover, Lenin tried to show that the party can only overcome the class enemy by turning itself into a professional revolutionary body in which everyone is allocated a fixed task. Certain of its infallibility, a Party appoints itself the natural spokesman and sole defender of the interests of the working class, and as

such wields power on their behalf – i.e. acts as a bureaucracy”. (p 250)

The Leninists were outraged. Reviewing the Cohn-Bendit’s book for the bourgeois readers of the Sunday Telegraph IS member Paul Foot wrote:

“I doubt whether even the Cohn-Bendit’s revolutionary readers will be satisfied with their conclusions – that the working class itself, unpolluted by parties and vanguards, can and will seize power for itself and throw up the democratic organisations necessary for an egalitarian, libertarian society. Revolutionaries should, they argue, do no more than ‘support, encourage and clarify the struggle’. To establish their faith in the spontaneity of workers’ action, the Cohn-Bendits must necessarily explain how it was that the only even partially successful socialist revolution in history was carried out under the leadership of a party” (Sunday Telegraph, 18 December 1968).

Actually, the Cohn-Bendits had answered this in their book by arguing that the so-called workers’ revolution of October 1917 had not been this at all, but the successful seizure of power by a vanguard party which had then proceeded to suppress the workers. And so the argument went on, and not just between the Cohn-Bendits and Foot. The point at issue was: How should “non-proletarian revolutionaries” relate to the industrial working class whose mass action alone they considered could bring about a new society? Should they seek to serve them or to lead them?

This argument had gone on once before in recent political history: in Tsarist Russia in the fifty or so years up to the first world war. On the face on it, there doesn’t seem to be much similarity between the conditions under which revolutionaries had to operate then (an absolutist state with no constitution and an actively repressive police force suppressing any sign of opposition) and today (a political democracy where every adult has the vote and with relative freedom of speech, assembly and organisation). And, in this respect, there was no comparison. What was the same was the existence, in both cases, of people from one social group who wanted to overthrow the existing order but who believed that only action by members of another social group could do so,

It was because the students and ex-students of the late 60s and 70s perceived themselves to be in the same sort of position as the anti-Tsarist revolutionaries of pre-WWI Russia that the arguments which went on amongst the latter seemed to have relevance for them, indeed to fascinate them. It is only this that can explain why in the 1970s people were still arguing furiously over an obscure pamphlet like Lenin’s What is to be done? which had been written some seventy years’ previously.

Cliff (an ex-student himself of course) and the students and ex-students he had recruited to his group in 1968 clearly imagined they were living in Tsarist Russia and that the organisational form and tactics which had worked for Lenin would work for them too. Accordingly, IS decided to reorganise itself on Leninist lines.

In practice this meant becoming a centralised organisation with wide powers of decision-making and order-giving concentrated in the hands of “the leadership”. Sheila Rowbotham, who joined IS at this time, later reflected on the significance of this change:

“I joined for about eighteen months, following a drive to recruit people who agreed very generally with their aims after Powell’s racist speech in 1968. A debate about organization was just coming to an end. I puzzled over various position papers in bewilderment. In a sense I’m still puzzling, for ideas take years to sink in and grow out of me. Anyway in retrospect this argument seems to me to have been crucial. It involved discussion about the degree of autonomy local branches should have. The case for a centralized structure was eventually accepted. This debate came to be referred to as a closed issue – as if it had been settled. But its implications were critical for the course which IS was to take as an organisation . . .

“In retrospect again this episode which remained mysterious to me for years was in fact an elaborate conjuring trick. Tony Cliff held the rabbit of Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism of the undemocratic features of Leninism and the dangers of the Party substituting itself for the working class in one hand. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, it had gone into the hat and out came a knotted scarf ‘democratic centralism’ and a long Leninist tradition – more and more and more of it” (Beyond the Fragments, 1979, p 27-8).

By 1973 the IS was issuing a pamphlet which proclaimed that “the International Socialists is a Leninist organisation” and, ignoring Cliff’s lapse in 1959:

“The International Socialists have consistently defended Leninist principles against all those who sought to ‘revise’ them” (Roger Rosewell, *The Struggle for Workers Power*).

The pamphlet went on to analyse the problem facing the British working class as a “crisis of leadership”:

“The working class has the strength and militancy to fight but what it lacks is an organised leadership. The crisis of the British working class therefore is the crisis of this lack of leadership. The International Socialists are trying to build the revolutionary party that will overcome this” (p 38).

This was pure Trotsky, a return to classical Trotskyism. Though Trotsky himself had seen the lack of a vanguard party as a problem of even more grandiose importance. The manifesto he drafted for the founding congress of the Fourth International (attended by about 30 people in the front room of a suburban house in Paris) and entitled *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* had begun: “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat” and declared:

“All now depends on the proletariat, i.e. chiefly on its revolutionary vanguard. [i.e. on Trotsky and his handful of followers]. The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership . . . The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership”.

The mantle of Trotsky’s megalomania had now fallen on to the shoulders of Tony Cliff.

III A LEADERSHIP-DOMINATED ORGANISATION

At the beginning of 1968 the IS group was organised on relatively democratic lines. There were branches; there was an annual conference of branch delegates which debated and voted on motions proposed by branches; there was an executive committee elected by the branches and responsible for the week-to-week administration of the group’s affairs and for the implementation of conference decisions.

Within the framework of the group’s overall political position, branches were free to choose which line of activity to engage in; some chose to concentrate on the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign; others on tenants’ associations; others on combating racism; others on students, and so on. In the light of the various momentous events of 1968, which had led to a tripling of the size of his organisation, Cliff decided that this was not good enough and inaugurated a campaign to rein in branch autonomy. He proposed a more centralised structure which would allow the group’s interventions in the various struggles that were going on at any time to be organised in a more co-ordinated way; the body that would co-ordinate and to a certain extent direct the activities of the branches was to be the executive committee.

Since some degree of centralism is compatible with democracy, indeed is necessary to make it effective, this seemed a reasonable proposal and it was eventually accepted. In Cliff’s mind, however, this change was not seen as a move to make democracy function more effectively but as a step towards changing the IS group into an organisation based on Leninist “democratic centralist” lines in which the executive committee would become a policy-making leadership.

IS entered the 70s with a constitution which was still recognisably democratic, similar in fact to the rulebook of a typical trade union. The annual conference remained the body which made the major policy decisions; its purpose remained to discuss the report of the executive committee and to debate and vote on motions proposed by branches. a given number of weeks before the conference branches were invited to submit motions; these were included in a provisional agenda that was sent to branches to allow them to submit amendments, which were then circulated in the form of a finished agenda for branches to vote and mandate their Conference delegates on. to take account of the increase in membership a new body was established between the Conference and the EC – the National Committee. The members of this large committee (of some 40 members) were elected by the conference from nominations made by branches and in turn they elected the EC from amongst their number; they met on a regular basis in between conferences to hear reports from the EC.

Cliff, however, was still not satisfied with this structure. The main problem for him was that it didn't give the EC as the leadership a free enough hand since, at least on paper, it was still subject to some degree of control by the National Committee which elected it. Various ways were found round this: the composition of the EC was changed; its members were all made full-time officials; the EC arrogated to itself greater powers. In the end, however, the group's constitution was changed to end the EC's formal status as an emanation of the National Committee. In 1975 the EC was given the more Leninist-sounding name of "central committee" and was to be elected by the Conference rather than the National Committee; this latter was reduced to the role of a purely advisory body to the new Central Committee.

It was with this structure that the IS became the SWP at the beginning of 1977. But, as the experience of all trade unions (and, according to the partisans of the so-called "iron law of oligarchy", of all large organisations) shows, there is a difference between an organisation's formal constitution and the way it actually functions. On paper, the SWP's statutes still allow some degree of democratic control by the membership: the branches could still decide policy and could still control the Central Committee through electing to it only those who carried out their will as decided at the annual Conference; the National Committee could check in between Conferences that the Central Committee was implementing Conference decisions. But this is not the way the SWP works in practice; nor is it the way it is supposed to work since such control from below, by the membership, has no place in the theory of "democratic centralism" as laid down by Lenin.

David Lane has provided an objective and neutral description of what Lenin meant by this term:

"By 'democratic' Lenin understood that decisions should be resolved according to majority vote of the central committee (of the executive) of the Party and that all Party members had the right to participate in general Party policy-making. The Party Congress was to be supreme over policy. There were to be periodic elections of the leading officers of the Party . . .

"By 'centralism', Lenin meant that once general policy was agreed, the day-to-day operation of the Party had to be decided centrally, where all information and the Party leadership are located, and the decisions of central bodies were absolutely binding on lower bodies. In Lenin's view, democratic centralism was a synthesis between democracy and central control: it gave members the right to participation and it gave a creative role for the leadership" (Leninism: A Sociological Interpretation, 1981, p 48).

Such a structure institutionalises the principle of leadership. Most existing political parties and trade unions do operate on this basis, where those at the top make all the key decisions and generally control the organisation. Normally, however, this is not how these organisations are supposed to function; they are supposed to be controlled by their members. In this sense the practice of leadership is a departure from their formal constitutions and rulebooks. Leninism makes a virtue of this by not accepting that it is desirable that a political organisation of the sort they want should be organised on the basis of democratic control, and maximum participation in decision-making, by the membership. They are not afraid of the "iron law of oligarchy". They like it and want to facilitate its operation, indeed to institutionalise it.

The SWP is unashamedly a leadership organisation, not just in the sense that it seeks to lead the working class but also in the sense that it is organised internally on a leadership basis; in fact on a hierarchical basis where each layer of leadership has power over the levels below it, with the party's national leadership – the members of its central committee – at the top.

The national leadership decides everything important and then seeks to get the membership to follow their lead. This is not necessarily a difficult task since the membership, who also believe in the organisational principle of "democratic centralism", accept the leading role of the leadership and are generally prepared to follow. So Lenin's "democratic centralism" places an enormous power in the hands of the leaders and in practice reduces the rank-and-file members to a mere consultative role.

Conference procedure

In Lenin's scheme, as described by Lane, the supreme policy-making body is the Party Congress; this decides the general line which the Central Committee has to follow until the next Congress. This is the theory; the practice is that the Central Committee completely dominates the Congress (or Conference, as in one concession to the more normal usage in Britain, the SWP's Congress is called).

The main item on the agenda is a report by the Central Committee on the political “perspectives” which is usually a document of pamphlet-length. The Central Committee also submits other reports – on work in special areas of activity (industry, students, women), internal organisation, finance – for the Conference to discuss. In the SWP, branches still have the formal right to submit motions, but they are strongly discouraged from doing so. As an explanatory note intended for new members, accompanying documents submitted for the party’s 1983 Conference put it:

“Branches can submit resolutions if they wish and these may [sic] be voted on. But in recent years the practice of sending resolutions to conference has virtually ceased” (Socialist Review, September 1983).

What this means is that it is the Central Committee – the leadership – which quite literally sets the agenda for the Conference. The branch delegates meet, therefore, to discuss only what is put before them by the Central Committee. Not that the delegates are delegates in the proper sense of the term as instructed representatives of the branches sending them:

“Delegates should not be mandated . . . Mandating is a trade union practice, with no place in a revolutionary party”.

Since voting on motions submitted by branches is dismissed as a “trade union practice”, another procedure, more open to manipulation by the leadership, is operated:

“At the end of each session of conference commissions are elected to draw up a report on the session detailing the points made. In the event of disagreement two or more commissions can be elected by the opposing delegates. The reports are submitted to conference and delegates then vote in favour of one of the commissions. The advantage of this procedure is that conference does not have to proceed by resolution like a trade union conference”.

No branch motions, no mandated delegates, what else? No ballots of the entire membership either. In the first volume of his political biography of Lenin, Cliff records in shocked terms that “in January 1907 Lenin went so far as to argue for the institution of a referendum of all party members on the issues facing the party”, commenting “certainly a suggestion which ran counter to the whole idea of democratic centralism” (Lenin, Building the Party, p. 280)

In fact no official of the SWP above branch level is directly elected by a vote of the members. One power that the branches do retain is the right to nominate members for election, by the Conference delegates, to the National Committee, but, as over presenting motions, they are discouraged from nominating people who do not accept the “perspectives” espoused by the Central Committee. So elections do take place to the National Committee but on the basis of personalities rather than politics. However, it is the way that the Central Committee is elected that is really novel: the nominations for election to new central committee are proposed not by branches but . . . by the outgoing central committee! Once again, in theory, branches can present other names but they never do.

It is easy to see how this means that the central committee – the supreme leadership of the organisation – is a self-perpetuating body renewal in effect only by co-optation. This is justified on the grounds of continuity and efficiency – it takes time to gain the experience necessary to become a good leader, so that it would be a waste of the experienced gained if some leader were to be voted off by the vagaries of a democratic vote. Choosing the leadership by a competitive vote is evidently something else “with no place in a revolutionary party” any more than in an army.

Centralised command structure

That the SWP does function in this way – as a top-down organisation controlled by its leadership – is confirmed by the description of how it operates (or should ideally operate) provided by its own leaders.

Chris Harman, generally regarded as the No 2 in the organisation and Cliff’s likely successor and so someone on a position to know how the SWP does function, has explained “democratic centralism” in the following way:

“The revolutionary socialist party needs to be democratic. To fulfil its role, the party must be continually in touch with the class struggle, and that means with its own members and supporters in the

workplaces where that struggle takes place. It needs to be democratic because its leadership must always reflect the collective experience of the struggle” (How Marxism Works, 1993 edition, p. 74).

Democracy is being justified here, not in terms of the members making decisions (this is evidently not regarded as important or a principle of organisation) but as a way of providing the leadership with accurate information on which to base its decisions.

Harman continues:

“But the revolutionary socialist party must also be centralised. For it is an active party, not a debating society. It needs to be able to intervene collectively in the class struggle, and to respond quickly, so it must have leadership capable of taking day-to-day decisions in the name of the party. If the government orders the jailing of pickets, for instance, the party needs to react at once, without the need to convene conference to take democratic decisions first. so the decision is made centrally and acted upon. Democracy comes into play afterwards. When the party hammers out whether the decision was correct or not – and maybe changes the party leadership if it was out of touch with the needs of the struggle”.

The key passage here is that where Harman confirms that what happens in the SWP is that the leadership makes a decision and then seeks retroactive endorsement from the membership.

The same point has been made by Lindsey German, who as editor of Socialist Review and a full-timer is also a member of the top leadership of the SWP:

“The revolutionary party has to have a quite different structure from the reformist parties – it has to have a democratic centralist structure. This term itself seems a contradiction. How can democracy operate through a centralised command structure?” (“The Party isn’t over”, Socialist Review, March 1990).

How indeed? Her answer is that majority decisions, once made, have to be carried out. This is indeed a principle of democracy, but it in no way implies the need for a “centralised command structure”. German went on to describe how she envisaged those at the top of this structure should behave:

“Leadership inside the class means leadership inside the party, which fights for its political position and fights to implement the decisions that are made. But the leadership should be certainly tested in terms of whether its decisions are basically correct, whether it implements them properly and so on”.

So, it is the leadership which makes the key policy decisions within the Party; it then “fights” to get them carried out by the membership and, if need be, defends them against criticism at the following party conference. Once again, it is those at the top of the centralised command structure who have the initiative; they decide policy and then seek the endorsement of the membership at a later date. In theory the membership could disavow them, but this is unlikely especially in view of the immense power that the leaders of a Leninist organisation have vis-à-vis the and-and-file membership.

This is not the sort of party Cliff talked about in 1959 “built, from below up, on a consistently democratic basis” or that anyone who believes in democratic control could be comfortable in.

Double standards

Imagine the hue and cry that would arise if a trade union were to be organised on such a basis. In fact we don’t need to imagine this. All we need do is to record Cliff’s protestations when trade unions have pursued practices that are current in the SWP.

In the book *Income Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards* which Cliff wrote with Colin Barker in 1966, he discussed a series of rule changes made at the Conference of the ETU in 1956. The union’s executive council had proposed to turn itself from a body of lay members into one of full-time officials, to be elected every five years instead of every two as previously; to make branch secretaries into full-time officials; and to abolish the area committees composed of delegates from the various branches in an area. These proposals were carried, and Cliff quoted with approval the protestations of a delegate opposed to them:

“The Executive Council are calling for a Full-Time Executive Council. This will mean that we will be electing the supreme policy-making body in the Union for five years instead of two years as at present. Not only will the executive council decide policy, but they will implement it and conduct all important negotiations. The individual Executive Councillor by virtue of that office will become the senior official controlling Area Officials in a large Regional Office. By judiciously recruiting Branches and installing a full-time Branch secretary, this Executive-Council-devised structure, including their proposals to eliminate Area Committees, will ensure complete domination from the top on all policy questions and national and district wage negotiations” (pp. 73-4).

The passages underlined are all features of the SWP’s Central Committee.

In his 1975 book on *The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism* Cliff wrote that “in some unions, even the formal trappings of democracy are missing” and again attacked the ETU (which had in the meantime become the EEPTU):

“In the EEPTU, for example, all full-time officials are appointed by the Executive Council” (p. 122).

Just like in the SWP.

Cliff went on to describe how “even where democracy does prevail the union leaders find a way round it”, by, in the case of the NUT, only allowing a small number of branch motions to be considered and voted on. Rather like in the SWP, except that in the SWP no motions from branches are considered since branches have been discouraged from presenting them, not to say instructed not to.

Later in the same book Cliff says that union members should raise the following demands among others:

“All trade union officials to be elected and subject to instant recall”.

“Union policy-making bodies to be made up from elected lay officers only” (pp. 156-7).

These are both sound enough democratic demands which union members should indeed try to get incorporated into their union’s rulebook. However not only are neither of them implemented in the SWP but they are explicitly rejected as being trade union practices “with no place in a revolutionary party”.

Cliff is nothing if not frank. Trade unions should be organised on a democratic basis but not the vanguard party. That should not be organised on the democratic lines that a trade union should be; but on an undemocratic basis as a top-down organisation dominated by its self-perpetuating leaders.

The main objection to this position is not so much the double standards that it involves as the fact that it would not be possible for a top-down organisation to establish a society in which people would democratically control all aspects of their lives. The end of such a society determines the means by which it can be established. A democratic society can only be established democratically. In other words, the “socialism from below” which the SWP claims to stand for is incompatible with the Leninist organisational principles on which the SWP is based.

Sheila Rowbottam made a similar point in 1979 in *Beyond the Fragments* at the beginning of her section headed “Prefigurative Political Forms”:

“We need political forms which consciously help people to overcome the continual mining of our capacity to resist which is characteristic of modern capitalism. Socialists have been learning this in the last two decades but it goes completely against the grain of a Leninist approach to socialist organisation. How can we struggle for prefigurative changes through an organisation which reproduces the relationships of power dominant in capitalism?”

“The right, being part of how things are, often grasps the significance of the connection between areas of control more thoroughly than the left. In education, for example, left groups have supported comprehensive schools and opposed streaming and authoritarian teaching methods, but also have been quite capable of using exactly these authoritarian approaches to their own ideas of political education and propaganda. Similarly, sections of the left have developed a theory which is critical of bureaucracy within the trade union movement while remaining blithely unselfconscious about the effects of

bureaucratic power in revolutionary organizations” (pp. 13“-3).

It might be thought that, following the collapse of the one-party Leninist dictatorships in East Europe in 1989/90 and in Russia itself in 1991, the SWP would have soft-peddled a bit on their Leninism. But quite the opposite happened. They chose to emphasise the Leninist nature of their organisation and politics:

“There are those in the West like members of the Socialist Workers Party who continue to adhere to the revolutionary Leninist organisation . . . Far from Lenin’s theory of the party being out of date, it will be indispensable if the working class is to succeed in making a socialist revolution” (Lindsey German, “The Party isn’t over”, *Socialist Review*, March 1990).

“All those who want fundamental change in society have to be part of a Leninist organisation . . . Socialism in the 1990s means rebuilding the real Leninist tradition” (Lindsey German *Why We Need a Revolutionary Party*, SWP pocket pamphlet, 1991).

“A model of the kind of revolutionary organisation Socialist Worker wants to build is the Bolshevik party, developed in Russia and led by Lenin in the years up to 1917” (*Socialist Worker*, 9 January 1993).

We have been warned.

IV THE INDUSTRIAL OBSESSION

Cliff has always envisaged his Leninist vanguard party emerging out of the file-and-file struggle of industrial workers; not spontaneously, as his critics have often claimed (and as his own vaguer formulations sometimes suggested) but as a result of “revolutionaries” making contact and merging with the leaders of such file-and-file militancy.

In 1966 in a book *Income Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards* written in conjunction with Colin Barker, Cliff had said:

“When in the future the capitalist system enters into sharper contradictions, and when the speeds of the different escalators on which workers rise vary less and less, then out of the shop stewards’ organisations will rise a new socialist movement, much mightier than ever before. Its roots will be in the class struggle at the point of production, and it will lead the fight against all forms of oppression, economic, national, cultural or political. to defend and extend the shop stewards’ organisation of today is to build the socialist movement of tomorrow; to fight for the socialist movement of tomorrow is to strengthen the shop stewards movement of today” (pp 105-6).

This sounds like a syndicalist position and Reg Birch, an AEU official and at the time a Communist Party member (he later became a Maoist), was moved to comment in the Introduction he was asked to write: “I do not accept that the extension of shop stewards’ organisations, their increase in number, will automatically lead to the development of a Socialist movement” (p. 3).

This wasn’t in fact Cliff’s real position since, as a Leninist, he holds that socialist ideas have to be introduced into the spontaneous working class movement from above, from outside that movement. His position was well expressed in a short book published nearly ten years later by two IS academics, James Hinton and Richard Hyman, on *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (Pluto Press, 1975). Hinton and Hyman argued that the formation of the British Communist Party was “an attempt to bring together and organize effectively the new stratum of working class ‘rank-and-file’ leadership thrown up by the industrial upheavals of the 1910-1920 decade” (p. 12). They had in mind the leaders of the pre-war industrial syndicalist and war-time shop stewards movements, many of whom did join the Communist Party when it was formed in 1921.

Although their basic thesis was that the CP failed in this because it misjudged the situation (“By attempting to build a mass revolutionary party in Britain in the 1920s, where the labour movement was in retreat, the Communist Party committed a tragic blunder”, read the blurb on the back cover, “it sacrificed clarity in its propaganda and its theory, and lost the opportunity to form a revolutionary cadre”), they undoubtedly echoed Cliff’s view when they argued that the Leninist vanguard party would, and should, emerge out of a militant file-and-file movement:

“The revolutionary movement, properly so-called, consists of those who form the stratum of authentic leaders of working class militancy – men and women themselves committed to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism who can command a rank-and-file following in mass industrial or political action . . . The ‘revolutionary movement’ describes a developing relationship between committed revolutionary leaders and ‘spontaneous’ file-and-file militancy. It describes the stratum of revolutionaries in their relationship with mass activity. Organize this vanguard into united revolutionary party, internally constructed on democratic centralist lines, and you have the ideal type of the Leninist party” (p. 50).

Ironically, Hyman was soon to fall out with Cliff on the grounds that Cliff’s frantic attempt to build a mass party in the 1970s was a repeat of the mistake made by the Communist Party in the 1920s. Even more ironically Cliff was later to in effect admit that Hyman had been right.

At the beginning of 1969 Cliff should have been a happy man. In the course of the previous year the membership of his group had tripled in size and now numbered 1000. But most of these were students and ex-students like himself and, for him, this wasn’t good enough. Since he believed that the revolution could only come from the action of the industrial section of the working class – factory workers, dockers, miners, railwaymen, and the like – rather than from the working class as a whole, he could not regard his group as a serious revolutionary organisation until it was mainly composed of such workers. To try to achieve this he ordered a “turn to the class”. This, wrote David Widgery (a doctor), was:

“aimed at utilizing the entire group’s resources to establishing a substantial industrial base, through the systematic sale of two booklets, *Income Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards* and [*The Employers Offensive: Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them*], the production of regular factory bulletins using information from sympathisers within plants, and the establishment with other socialists of democratic file-and-file papers for particular industries” (*The Left in Britain 1956-1968*, p. 488).

Chris Harman has described what this involved for IS members like himself:

“People would get up at 6am to get to factory gates very Friday, getting rid of four or five copies if they were lucky, then spend hours selling on the high street on Saturdays getting a few more sales, then traipsing around council estates on Sunday mornings” (*The Revolutionary Paper*, 1991, p.39).

What this amounted to, in terms of the parallel with the pre-1917 situation in Russia, was the Nardonic policy of “going to the people”. Some members took this to extremes, by themselves getting a job in a factory, on the buses or on a building site, going to live on a council estate and, in the London area, adopting the mock outer London accent which is still the mark of London SWP members to this day. It worked in a limited sort of way. Contact was made with some industrial workers and an impressive range of file-and-file papers were launched, the most successful of which, however, continued to be the one for schoolteachers.

The students and ex-students who took part in this exercise were undoubtedly sincere. They really did want to “serve the workers” and in a sense they did, raising money for strikes, publicising the strikers’ cause, and the like. Cliff’s policy must have struck a chord in such circles as the membership of IS grew to over 2000 in 1972 and reached nearly 4000 by 1974.

This period can now be seen to have been the heyday of the IS/SWP. Chris Harman again:

“If Socialist Worker took off in the years 1968-70, its greatest success came in the period of heightened industrial struggle after the return of the Tory government of Edward Heath. These years saw the highest level of industrial conflict since the 1920s, with major disputes in the postal service, mining, engineering, building and docks, big conflicts in particular car plants, a succession of political strikes against the Industrial Relations Act and the spread of militant trade union action for the first time to groups like the hospital workers and civil servants.

“The formula which Socialist Worker had based itself on now yielded marvellous results. The print order rose from the 13,000 of 1970 to 28,000 during the miners’ strike of 1972, and had stabilised at about 27,000 in March 1973. It then rose again at the end of that year, reaching 40,000 during the 1974 miners’ strike and even touching 53,000 for one issue before the crucial 1974 election over ‘who rules

the country”’. (The Revolutionary Paper, p. 41).

There is something ironic about Cliff’s group doing so well under a Tory government since this contradicted the main reason they gave for supporting the re-election of Wilson in the 1970 election despite his continuous six-year anti-working-class record in power. The editorial reply to a letter in Socialist Worker of 6 June 1970 which we quoted earlier had argued:

“We call for a vote against the Tories because we think that a Tory victory would lead to a demoralisation among important sections of workers. Labour in opposition, possibly with a new leader, would show its ‘left’ face again in an effort to channel the industrial and political struggle into safe ‘Out with the Tories’ campaigns”.

In fact, as Harman noted, the election of a Tory government, which proceeded to implement the anti-union legislation – particularly aimed at unofficial strikes – which the outgoing Labour government had planned, led to a revival of industrial militancy.

By 1973 Cliff felt confident enough to take matter as a stage further and ordered his members to set up factory branches. This was in accordance with the directive of the 5th Congress of the Communist International in 1924 (which Cliff accepted as valid since Trotsky was still in power in Russia at the time):

“There can be no talk of building a serious internally-solid mass communist party so long as it is not based on party cells in the factories themselves. This is not merely an organizational, but a serious political question. no communist party will be in a position to lead the decisive masses of the proletariat to struggle and to defeat the bourgeoisie until it has this solid foundation in the factories, until every large factory has become a citadel of the communist party” (quoted by Hinton and Harman, pp. 13- 4).

Paul Foot explained this “turn to the factories” in an IS pamphlet issued at the time:

“The main objective of the International Socialists is to build IS factory branches which meet regularly to raise political questions inside the factory: that is, to link the trade union battle in their place of work with trade union battles in other places of work, and to link those battles with all the political issues which so closely bear upon them: rents, prices, unemployment, the ‘money crisis’, equal pay, Ireland, Vietnam . . . and, of course, racialism” (Workers Against Racism, p. 21).

By 1974 some 40 IS factory branches had been established, but they covered only about 10 percent of the membership, 90 percent still being organised in the traditional geographical branches. As 1974 saw both the election of a Labour government and the biggest slump in Britain since the war, Cliff became positively euphoric at the prospects:

“It is now possible to talk, and talk credibly, of the need to build socialist workers’ party that will sweep away capitalism. Building such a party is now fully on the agenda. It is a challenge the International Socialists willingly accept. Such a party has its mainspring in workplace branches. That is where workers’ power lies. And that is why last year IS built 38 factory branches and this year the IS Conference decided to aim at 80 factory branches plus number of white collar branches by autumn 1975” (The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism, 1975, p 182).

This was accompanied by a drive to expand the file-and-file papers and to co-ordinate their activities. In March 1974 a “Rank and File” conference was held, attended by some 500 delegates from 270 sponsoring organisations (shop stewards committees, trade union branches, file-and-file papers). This was an impressive achievement for IS and resulted in the election of an organising committee, dominated by IS members, to try to launch a Rank and File Movement which would play the role Cliff had envisaged a nation-wide shop stewards’ movement playing in the 1960s: developing into the leadership of a vanguard party with a mass following. In fact IS even dreamed of capturing the unions:

“Only the strengthening of trade unionism and a serious struggle against the employers can improve working class living standards. This must, however, be accompanied by a mass fight by the rank and file to democratise the unions and convert them into organisations of real revolutionary struggle under a marxist leadership” (Roger Rosewell, The Struggle for Workers Power, p. 13).

The model was consciously seen as being the Minority Movement which the Communist Party had launched in 1928 and the dream was to replace the Communist Party as the party of industrial militants.

At first things seemed to go Cliff's way. The impressive attendance at the conference in March 1974 reflected the hard work put in by IS during the period of Tory rule between 1970 and 1974 to cultivate rank and file groups. But it came to nothing. Industrial militancy had peaked with the 1974 miners' strike which led to Heath's downfall. The conference turned out to have been called at the end rather than the beginning of a period of increased industrial militancy. Contrary to a firmly-held belief amongst Trotskyists like Cliff, the economic crisis and slump made workers less not more militant at their places of work. Significantly, the first campaign launched in the name of the new Rank and File Movement was . . . The Right to Work Campaign, i.e a campaign amongst workers with no workplace. This, too, was an attempt to ape the pre-war Communist Party and its National Unemployed Workers Movement.

In any event, in this context "rank and file" was a misnomer. Quite apart from the fact that the term itself implies the continued division of workers into leaders and led, the intention was not to develop an autonomous movement of ordinary workers organised on a democratic basis to wage the day-to-day struggle in the workplace. The intention was to develop an alternative leadership for this struggle to the permanent union officials.

The rank and file, in other words, were to remain the rank and file – followers – only of different leaders, of, to continue with the military metaphor, their NCOs (the shop stewards) rather than their officers (the trade union officials). But, worse, the NCOs were to be integrated into a vanguard political organisation whose aim was to lead the file-and-file workers on to the political field too.

However, Cliff misjudged the situation, in two different ways. First, he misjudged the nature of industrial militancy and of activist industrial militants. And secondly, he misjudged the general political situation and prospects, or "perspectives" as Trotskyists call them.

Industrial militancy is just that: militancy on the industrial field. Those who are most active in this do tend to have political views, generally of a leftwing nature, but it is not for these views that they are supported; it is for their negotiating skills and their ability to stand up to the bosses and express what their fellow workers feel about pay and working conditions. There have been numerous examples of shop stewards and works convenors who at work have been able to "mobilise" thousands of workers but who, when they have stood at elections for the Communist Party, have received only a few hundred votes.

Industrial militancy does not lead to political militancy, but ebbs and flows as labour market conditions change – and industrial militants can in no way count on leading their supporters on or on to the political field. Most experienced industrial militants are well aware of this and wouldn't dream of trying to.

A number of industrial militants did join IS over the 1970-75 period, but Cliff was not able to integrate them into the leadership of his embryo vanguard party. In fact he found them hard to digest as they brought trade unionist ideas into his party. Many of them were in IS essentially because they saw it as a workers' support group providing publicity, information and printing facilities for workers in struggle. So it is a moot point who was using who. Cliff imagined that, in true Leninist fashion, he was manipulating the industrial militants but in practice he was being manipulated by them. When after 1975 Cliff tried to tighten discipline in his organisation, many of the industrial militants left; his factory branches withered away. Cliff vowed to never again let trade union forms of organisation influence his party; "craftism" and "sectionalism" became deviations to be combated.

The workers' reaction to the failure of the 1974-79 Labour government to deliver its promises to bring about "a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families" failed to confirm the reasons the IS/SWP gave for having voted it in. Trotskyists believe that they stand a better chance of gaining support under a Labour government since, according to their theory, when the Labour government inevitably fails workers will turn to them for leadership. Labour failed but, as in 1968 with Enoch Powell, more workers turned to the racists than the Trotskyists. From 1977 on the National Front enjoyed a success the Trotskyists would have loved

to have gained, polling 10 percent of the vote and pushing the Liberals into third place in a number of elections.

The SWP responded by setting up the Anti-Nazi League, an initiative for which it is still remembered today and on whose reputation it is still living. This was a movement which caught the imagination of the large number of young people who were against racism and who were appalled at the rise of the National Front. The SWP likes to suggest that it was the ANL that burst the NF bubble. In fact what did this was the Tory election victory in 1979, partly achieved by the Tories stealing some of the NF's clothes. The fact is that movements like the NF grow as a reaction to the failure of Labour reformism in power; they, not the Trotskyists, flourish better under Labour.

In any event, Cliff, though of course a sincere anti-racist, regarded the ANL as a bit of a side show since it was a movement not based on the workplace. A statement on "Industrial Perspectives" issued by the SWP Central Committee in October 1979 – by which time the new Thatcher government had been in power for some months – for the SWP Conference made this quite clear:

"Workers' power is in the workplace. That is why we are obsessed with building the SWP in the workplace . . .

". . . industrial work must become the obsession of each member of the Party – students, unemployed, lecturers, etc. a local strike must be considered more important than a local Nazi march . . .

"In every branch we must win the argument that laying the foundations for expanding our industrial strength is more important than chasing the National Front".

This "obsession" with the workplace is the one constant in the SWP's politics. Obsession is the right word too as no experience dents their confidence that the workplace is the only arena where people can defend themselves or obtain improvements. It led them to neglect, and in the beginning even oppose, the nascent women's liberation and gay liberation movements. When CND revived in the 1980s the SWP advocated strikes and blackings as the best way to combat the installation of Cruise missiles. Their initial reaction to the anti-Poll Tax agitation was to advocate action by the town hall clerks charged with administering it ("non-collection") rather than "non-payment" which they dismissed as an ineffectual gesture.

It eventually dawned on Cliff that he had misjudged the "perspectives" in 1974: that that year had heralded a period of declining rather than rising industrial militancy. This perception became known in SWP jargon as the theory of the "downturn". It had far-reaching implications for the work of the SWP and it wasn't readily accepted by all members, but, as it was Cliff's view, it eventually triumphed. What it meant was that, although the party should try to maintain what links it could with industrial militants, it should concentrate on preserving and strengthening its ideological purity so as to be better able to take advantage of the "upturn" in industrial militancy when it came. What Hinton and Hyman had called forming "a revolutionary cadre".

This new turn, when it finally came in 1981, involved abandoning what factory branches and file-and-file groups still existed and concentrating activity on general political education and propaganda in the geographical branches. Cliff now reasoned that too direct links between the party and industrial militants was having the opposite effect to that intended: instead of being a transmission belt for introducing his Leninist political ideas into the industrial struggle, it had become a transmission belt for introducing defeatist and sectionalist views into his Leninist party. This had to be stopped.

Brian Higgins, one of the prominent members of the SWP's Building Workers Group, has described what happened when the SWP tried to close it down:

"When the SWP wrongly diagnosed what to do in response to (what they determined was a downturn in workers struggles an combativity but what some of us subsequently realised was and is) an intensified capitalist offensive, they quite bureaucratically and dictatorially ordered all the R&F organisations to close down and all of us to retreat to our geographical branches to await the (mythical) upturn . . .

"At meeting of building workers in Manchester in July of 1982, Tony Cliff, of the SWP Central Committee, who had been invited to address the meeting, ordered us to close down the paper and Group. We were astounded and very very angry. Cliff was told that the BW group was a united front and as such was composed of and open to workers of varying political persuasions and thus it did not

belong to the SWP, and it never would, and neither the SWP or SWP members in the BW group had the authority to close it down. Neither did we have the desire to work for its closure! He was told the way to respond when the going got tough was not to sound the retreat. There is no credibility in this . . . The meeting voted, with only one against, to keep the paper and BW group. In fact Cliff, who was considered by many (including himself) to be among the foremost political thinkers and leaders of that time, was politically routed by a group of ‘rag, tag and bobtail’ site and political militants” (Brian Higgins, “The Broad Left, the Unions and the Joint Sites”, Discussion Paper dated 27 April 1992).

Higgins, and the others in the SWP who felt like him, were expelled and the Building Worker continued a precarious existence under a group of ex-SWPers who remained wedded to the policy the SWP had pursued in the 1974-79 period. Cliff, no doubt, put this loss down to being one of the casualties that always occur when the vanguard party has to execute a tactical turn.

The experience of the 70s did force one change in IS/SWP theory. They found that the largest and longest-lasting of the and-and-file groups they sponsored were not those for industrial workers but those for white collar groups such as teachers, town hall staff and lower level civil servants; indeed, they found that, apart from university lecturers, this was where most of their members came from.

This was a bit disturbing in terms of Cliff’s 1966 perspective about a “new socialist movement” arising and that “its roots will be in the class struggle at the point of production”. Some white-collar groups – draughtspeople, technicians – are productive workers, but not those amongst whom the SWP made the most headway. What to do? Revise the theory and extend the definition of the working class to include these groups. Harman and university lecturer Alex Callinicos were commissioned to write a serious study to justify this. Of course they had no problem in doing so since such groups are part of the working class, though their classification of which white-collar workers fall into the working class and which don’t (based on the degree of authority they are or aren’t able to exert over other workers) ended up being a bit tortuous (see their book *The Changing Working Class*, Bookmarks, 1987).

The SWP was forced to make this shift towards recognising that most, if not all, white collar workers were fully-fledged members of the working class because they had to accommodate their average member. It was all very well telling students and university lecturers to concentrate on selling Socialist Worker to factory workers and manual workers generally (the SWP still does this), but telling white collar workers to forget their own problems over pay and conditions to do this was quite another matter. It just wouldn’t have worked. And Cliff, whatever his private views may have been (and he’s probably an old workerist at heart), knew it wasn’t worth trying; so the SWP made a virtue out of necessity.

But the SWP’s turn away from “rank-and-file” was not yet quite complete. The IS/SWP had adopted a “rank and file” strategy, as opposed to the so-called “Broad Left” strategy which consisted in mobilising workers to elect Leftwing union officials and which was pursued by the Communist Party, Labour leftwingers and some of its Trotskyist rivals. In the 1970s they had mercilessly denounced this policy, arguing that capturing official union posts could be no substitute for file-and-file militancy; this alone could bring results; leftwing officials would, and did, sell-out as surely as rightwing officials, especially under a Labour government.

The SWP’s abandoning of a file-and-file strategy, even if only supposed to be temporary for the duration of the “downturn”, meant they had nothing to fall back on, and they eventually embraced the Broad Left strategy themselves, joining the Broad Left alliances in the various unions.

Cliff is now prepared to admit the mistake he made in the 1970s, of, in his terms, believing the period to be an “upturn” when in fact it was a “downturn”. Many would perhaps see the downturn in industrial militancy as dating from the election of Thatcher in 1979; certainly that victory forced many leftwingers to revise some of their assumptions. But Cliff has gone further. In a revealing self-criticism he made in 1983 he dated the “downturn” from the election of the Labour government in 1974 and the “Social Contract” it signed with the TUC:

“We ran into problems from 1974. We understood the generalisation in terms of what the workers didn’t want. They didn’t want incomes policy; they didn’t want the Industrial Relations Act; they didn’t want the Tories. But we weren’t at all clear what workers wanted in a positive sense. When they shouted “Heath out” we didn’t understand that they wanted Labour in. So we weren’t clear what the

impact of a Labour government would be. All of us assumed that the Labour government would mean a short honeymoon period – that trade unionists would give Labour the benefit of the doubt for a short period, but then they would see the reality and fight.

“But the Social Contract wasn’t just a honeymoon period – it had much more impact for years to come . . . The Social Contract was really the beginning of the downturn. This was the experience of the Labour government of 1974-9. It took us time to understand it. Once we did, we fitted our politics to the changed political climate” (Interview, Socialist Worker Review, July/August 1983).

However, he doesn’t seem to have realised the enormity of what he has conceded here. His reason at the time for transforming IS into the SWP as the “infant” vanguard party of the working class was precisely that a period of industrial and political “upturn” was expected. In conceding that the “downturn” began in 1974 or 1975 Cliff was conceding that, in terms of his own general perspective, the SWP should never have been launched.

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