



SWP: The road to Respect

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The origins of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) lie in the programmatic disputes in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), the British section of the Fourth International, in the period after the Second World War. Before his assassination in 1940, Trotsky had anticipated that Stalinism in the Soviet Union would not survive a war with Germany and that the war itself would lead to the kind of revolutionary upsurge that had followed the First World War. In such conditions, the Fourth International, with its record of maintaining the revolutionary tradition of the Bolsheviks and the early Communist International and armed with a programme that called for political revolution in the Soviet Union to regain control of the planned economy and a social revolution based on workers' councils and workers' militia in the imperialist countries, would be able to play a similar role to that of the Bolsheviks at the end of the First World War.

In fact, a combination of fundamental strategic errors by the Nazi high command, the prior elimination of any revolutionary alternative leadership in the Soviet Union and the decision of the USA to enter the war against Germany and provide significant aid to the Soviet Union, allowed Stalin not only to survive but to extend the territory under his control.

By the late Forties, although there had been a period of revolutionary crises in the main theatres of war in Europe and Asia, collusion between the Moscow controlled Communist Parties and imperialist forces had ensured their suppression and the subordination of working class movements. Moreover, in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe within Moscow's sphere of influence, the economies had largely been socialised and subordinated to a form of central planning that paralleled the Soviet system.

As the scattered forces of Trotskyism regrouped internationally, they necessarily had to reorientate themselves in these new and largely unexpected circumstances. In particular, they needed to assess whether their previous analyses and perspectives for the Soviet Union and imperialism had been fundamentally wrong or had merely failed to anticipate the way in which events had actually unfolded. It was in this context that the debate over the nature of the Soviet Union, which had already been a major source of disagreement in the Thirties, was re-opened in the RCP.

In the aftermath of the historic betrayals in Germany and Spain, Trotskyists had concluded that Stalinists could not lead social revolutions to overthrow capitalism because revolutionary states would be a threat to the survival of the Soviet regime and its subordinate parties around the world. Yet, by 1949, Stalinist regimes had quite clearly overthrown bourgeois governments and introduced socialisation and planning into Eastern Europe so that their economies were essentially the same as that of the Soviet Union. On the basis of their existing analysis of Stalinism, therefore, there appeared to be two possibilities: either the socialised and planned economies of Eastern Europe showed that Stalinists could lead revolutions or, because there had been no independent working class leadership in Eastern Europe, no workers' councils, no workers' militia and no revolutionary workers' party, there had not been a socialist revolution and capitalism had not been overthrown.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, in June 1950, the political implications of the different analyses became impossible to contain within a single organisation. Cliff and his co-thinkers characterised the war as a clash between two rival imperialisms, the Soviet Union and the United States, in which the 'North' and 'South' Korean forces were simply proxies for their masters. On this basis, they took a 'defeatist' line and supported neither side. The majority of

the RCP, and of the Fourth International generally, maintained their existing position of defence of the Soviet Union and, therefore, support for the 'North'. Cliff and his co-thinkers were expelled for not maintaining this line and went on to found the Socialist Review Group, consisting of 33 members, in September 1950.

Having broken from the Fourth International, the new group necessarily had to establish precisely where they disagreed with Trotsky and Trotskyism on the analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalinism. In the process of re-examining their political inheritance, Cliff and his co-thinkers began to unravel not only the analysis of the Soviet Union and the theoretical advances made by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, but also fundamental elements of the programmatic work of the Bolshevik tradition itself. As we shall see, this led inevitably to a revision of the Leninist concept of the revolutionary party.

With regard to the Soviet Union, however, Cliff interpreted Lenin and Trotsky's recognition that an economically backward country such as Russia could only develop a fully socialist economy as part of an international division of labour, to mean that the isolated Soviet Union of the 1920s could not make any progress at all towards socialism. From this, he concluded that the economy could only have been developed by some form of capitalism. In this analysis, the Stalinist bureaucracy, whose emergence Trotsky had explained, could either have allowed 'private' capitalism to develop or had itself to use capitalist methods to industrialise. He argued that the first five year plan represented the point at which the bureaucracy chose the path of 'state capitalism' and transformed itself into a 'collective capitalist' in the process.

The implication of this theory was that the struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition to re-establish a healthy workers' state based on revived workers' soviets, workers' democracy and planned industrialisation, alongside an international policy of coordinated revolutionary politics in both the imperialist and the colonial world, was a doomed utopia. Ironically, for a group that had rejected the Fourth International's accommodation to Stalinism, this analysis essentially argued that Stalin had followed the only path open to him.

By asserting that history had created circumstances in which revolutionaries had no programme for the working class, Cliff took a first essential step to negating the Leninist concept of the role of the party, namely, to identify the strategic tasks of the working class in the form of a political programme for which it then fights within the class. At the same time, by distancing himself from Trotsky's programme of defence of those features of the Marxist programme which had been established in the Soviet Union: the socialisation of productive property, its subordination to planning and insulation from the international law of value by the state monopoly of foreign trade. Cliff also implicitly distanced himself from a revolutionary programme in the capitalist states that would necessarily include precisely those measures.

Similarly, the characterisation of Russia as capitalist, despite the fact that the economy was socialised and planned, led Cliff not only to scramble the categories of Marxist political economy but to question Lenin's characterisation of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. In its place he and his co-thinkers developed a theory of the Permanent Arms Economy as part of an overall global perspective of convergence between the bureaucratic state capitalism of the Soviet Union and, later, China, and the equally bureaucratic managerial capitalism that they predicted for the imperialist world.

Although Cliff did not accept the Menshevik argument that the October Revolution itself had been a utopian adventure because of Russia's backwardness, his rejection of Trotsky's programme of political revolution began the process of revising the Marxist programme which led him to an essentially Menshevik rejection of the strategy of Permanent Revolution in the colonial and semi-colonial countries of the post-war world. Instead of recognising that revolutionary working class leadership of the struggle for democratic demands and national independence could open the road to a workers' state, as it had in Russia, Cliff insisted that the economic backwardness of such countries ensured that the next stage of their development would be capitalist.

Where national liberation struggles were led by Stalinists, as in Korea and the Vietnamese war against France, Cliff saw them as merely agents of the state-capitalist Kremlin who could be offered no support. However, where the

struggles were led by petty bourgeois forces or elements of the military elite, who used nationalisation and forms of planning and protective tariffs to try to develop the national economy, Cliff described this as 'deflected permanent revolution' meaning that, like the Stalinists in Soviet Russia, such forces were forced to use measures 'borrowed' from the socialist programme to pursue the 'bourgeois' tasks imposed on them by history.

All these revisions of the Marxist programme took place against the background of the Cold War of the 1950s, when anti-communism was often at a hysterical pitch, and were clearly a rightward trajectory away from Trotskyism. However, there was also a 'leftist' strand within Cliff's politics. His recognition of the centrality of the self-activity of the working class pulled in the opposite direction. His hostility to Stalinism because of its suppression of workers' democracy in the Soviet Union and then in Eastern Europe, his refusal to agree with the majority of the Fourth International that the likes of Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh or Fidel Castro were 'unconscious Trotskyists' who had been forced to introduce the essential features of workers' states by the 'process of history', and his opposition to the bureaucratic practices of the trade union leaders in Britain, were all evidence of this. As a result, the Socialist Review Group did not simply dissolve into the reformist ranks of the Labour Party, within which it was active, but established itself as a distinctive centrist current within the labour movement.

Such formations, which eclectically combine elements of both revolutionary and reformist politics, are inherently unstable and in conditions of severe class struggle are generally short lived because the two contradictory elements are pulled apart. However, in the relatively stable conditions of a major imperialist power, they can survive but are inevitably pulled one way and another by the ebbs and flows of the class struggle. An example of this can be seen in the International Socialists' shift to the left in the 1960s as the Labour government in Britain came into conflict with the rank-and-file of the trade unions, in particular the shop stewards' movement, and internationally, the civil rights movement in the USA, the antiwar movement and the 'student rebellion' of 1968 signalled the end of the 'long boom'. In these new circumstances, the group dropped its defeatist position with regard to the Vietnamese Stalinists, a position that would have left them completely isolated, and adopted a position of critical support on the grounds that their struggle was anti-imperialist.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party

The new period, which clearly presented the opportunity to intervene in mass struggles and transform the organisation from a small propaganda society into a mass-based revolutionary party, inevitably posed the question of what kind of party was needed. In the Marxist tradition two models have been put forward in response to this question and both have had a lot of influence on the development of the SWP.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the issues involved were the subject of intense debate in the Second International. Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks pioneered in practice the idea of the need to build a revolutionary party of Marxist cadres. Only a centralised vanguard party, they argued, would be able to lead the Russian masses to revolution. Others, like the Russian Mensheviks, Rosa Luxemburg and, at the time, Leon Trotsky, argued for a more decentralised, looser, or even a federalist, political party. Although when this debate flared up at the Russian Social Democratic Party Congress in 1903, it appeared to be a purely organisational matter concerning the criteria for membership, it later became clear that at the heart of the matter were differences over the role and character of the party. Lenin's insistence on a strict definition of membership flowed from his understanding that the task of the party was to take the revolutionary programme into the working class and to fight against the ideas that reflected the Russian status quo.

His opponents favoured a looser definition that would, in time, allow the entry of broad masses of workers whether or not they were active campaigners for the party's programme.

Lenin had developed his ideas in an earlier dispute with a group within the Russian party who became known as the 'Economists'. They had argued that the party should limit its campaigning within the working class to immediate issues, primarily economic ones around wages and working conditions, because demands for revolution and the overthrow of the Tsar were too advanced. Experience of economic struggle, which would inevitably bring clashes with the oppressive Russian state, would itself politicise the workers.

Lenin, on the other hand, defended the idea, first and most clearly formulated by Kautsky, that socialist ideas are brought to the class 'from without'. Lenin said:

The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively, by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. According to their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. The crucial factor that came to the fore in the debate was how workers would become revolutionaries. Lenin argued that they had to be 'won' to the programme of revolution by the intervention of the party. The critical task for Marxists was to transform the consciousness of workers so that they became 'conscious' of their objective historic interests as a class and what they must do to realise them in terms of strategy, tactics and organisation.

Within the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish Marxist active in the German Social Democratic Party, was suspicious of the idea of revolutionary consciousness being brought to workers by the party. In the light of her experience of the less and less revolutionary character of much of the leadership of the German party, she argued that revolutionary consciousness would arise spontaneously out of the class struggle itself and pointed to examples such as the Belgian general strike and the Russian Revolution of 1905 as evidence of this.

In his biography of Lenin, Cliff said that Lenin's formulations on this issue 'overemphasised the difference between spontaneity and consciousness' and referred to it as an example of Lenin's 'bending of the stick'. This is the nub of Cliff's mistake on the party: spontaneity and consciousness are different. Spontaneity is, by definition, momentary, spasmodic. Consciousness implies a degree of permanence, a recognition that what has happened spontaneously needs to be understood, generalised and learnt from. Lenin emphasised the difference for good reason. The working class has a long history of spontaneous struggles to its credit, but world capitalism still exists. The reason is because consciousness, embodied in a party winning the leadership of the class, has not developed in the heads, and through that the action, of the majority.

Lenin was in no way decrying the importance of working class struggle. Nor was he downgrading the capacity of workers to develop a revolutionary outlook. He was simply saying that within the narrow confines of the daily economic struggle that outlook could not develop spontaneously.

The working class, on the basis of its own experience, fully understands the need to fight collectively for higher wages and better conditions (trade unionism) but this is not revolutionary class consciousness. Socialists, from outside the framework of the day to day struggles, were needed to transcend both the routine trade union consciousness of the working class and indeed their spontaneous (i.e. temporary and short-lived) revolutionary struggles. The party was not simply a trade union or a cheerleader of struggle. It existed in order to help workers achieve a broader, more permanent revolutionary consciousness.

Despite all the huffing and puffing by Cliff and other SWP theoreticians over this, it is really quite unexceptional. It is the very reason a party exists: to bring a message 'from without'. Otherwise there is no need for it as a distinctive part of the working class at all. After all, the programme of socialism was developed through a critique of bourgeois economics and an analysis of history and politics that uncovered the fundamental motor of it as being class struggle. This involved detailed study and theoretical work that Marx and Engels were able to do despite the latter being a businessman and Marx receiving financial support from this source, very much outside of the daily experience of wage slaves in mid-19th century Britain.

However, Lenin did not conceive of the party as being an elite group of middle class intellectuals. He wanted to build a mass workers' party. His only proviso was that this party should be made up of committed revolutionaries with a developed understanding of Marxism. He argued that the party as a whole should seek to erase all distinctions between the intelligentsia and the workers and, indeed, between different types of worker, by uniting Marxist education and revolutionary practice. The class struggle inevitably created leaders within the working class; by winning them to the programme of revolution, the party as a whole could offer leadership to the spontaneous struggles of the working class.

The party was an instrument of revolutionary struggle that had to be organised to exert the maximum influence on the masses driven into struggle because of their harsh material conditions. As such, Lenin advocated that the party be organised on a democratic centralist basis. This meant maximum democracy (in the Bolsheviks' case, inevitably limited by illegal conditions) in determining party policy and maximum centralisation in executing that policy.

During the early years of the Socialist Review Group and then the International Socialists (IS) Cliff opposed building a democratic centralist party along the lines advocated by Lenin. Along with sections of the Labour Party left, to which the IS was at the time adapting, Cliff favoured the looser 'Luxemburg' model of the party. He favoured her tendency to believe that the experience of class struggle would spontaneously transform working class consciousness. His reasoning was grounded upon two factors. First, a false view about how the working class developed revolutionary consciousness and, secondly, a fear of the revolutionary party 'substituting' itself for the class.

In the first edition of his pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg, published in 1959, Cliff agreed with her view of the spontaneously revolutionary character of the working class. He said:

'The revolutionary party, while conscious of its leading role, must beware of slipping into a way of thinking that the party is the fount of all correct thoughts and deeds, while the working class remains an inert mass without initiative.'²
He continued:

'The party' should not invent tactics out of thin air, but put it as its first duty to learn from the experience of the mass movement.'³ (Cliff's italics)

This is a false and demagogic counterposition. Lenin never said that the working class was an 'inert mass' or that revolutionaries should not learn from the experience of struggle. He recognised that in periods of economic and political crisis (revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations) the working class spontaneously undertook revolutionary actions (mass strikes, uprisings) and were, consequently, wide open to the ideas and programme of revolutionary socialism. His welcoming of the soviets, in 1905, was a case in point. He learnt from their creation and then tried to utilise them for more general revolutionary means - at a time when many Bolsheviks were in favour of ignoring them.

The problem is that such periods are not ever present in history and non-revolutionary periods were precisely the ones in which the cadres, the vanguard militants, had to be prepared, trained and educated. This way, as crisis situations developed, there would be, in the workers' own ranks, experienced cadres able to argue for a revolutionary solution to that crisis. Lenin's model of the party recognised this vanguard role that it had to play in taking socialist ideas into the working class movement and acting as a strategist for the movement.

It was this element that Cliff rejected and this has characterised the SWP's approach to the class struggle ever since. Looking at the example of the Paris Commune, Cliff argued that the working class formed a 'proto state' prior to the theorisation of the need for a workers' state by Marxists. He concluded by quoting Rosa Luxemburg:
'Here also the unconscious precedes the conscious, the logic of the objective historical process comes before the subjective logic of its bearer.'⁴

However, she failed to add, and so did Cliff - and the result was a defeat!

The armed Parisian workers drove the bourgeois forces out of Paris, power was placed into the hands of an elected and recallable Commune and a host of pro-working class measures were enacted. The fact that it was Marx and Engels who recognised this as the first example of a workers' government, a dictatorship of the proletariat, rather than the Communards themselves, shows the limits of spontaneity. The failure of the leadership of the Commune to recognise consciously what it was, and what it had to become, led to it being ruthlessly smashed by the class enemy.

The Parisian working class were crushed because they did not realise that they needed to smash the institutions that defended bourgeois rule in the whole country in order to establish working class control of society. They did not march on Versailles and crush its armed forces. They did not seize the Bank of France. Nor were they fully conscious of the

fact that they were in the process of creating a workers' state. What they accomplished was heroic, almost miraculous; the most that could be achieved without the leadership of a party that knew these things were necessary. Nonetheless, they were defeated and it was the lack of a conscious leadership, capable of shaping the 'objective historical process', that was the decisive factor.

At key moments in history, the intervention of the revolutionary party can win the masses to a strategy that leads to victory. Luxemburg's 'objective historical logic' dangerously downplayed this decisive role of the party in winning the working class movement to a consciousness of its historic role. Following her, Cliff also misunderstood the relationship between the party and class from early on in his political career and this did not change when he made his 'turn to Leninism' in the late 1960s.

The second component of Cliff's original rejection of Leninism was his fear of 'substitutionism'. This was a term that Trotsky used in the debate within the Russian Social Democratic Party on organisation at the 1903 Congress. Cliff wrote an article entitled 'Trotsky on Substitutionism' that was based on two pamphlets Trotsky wrote in this period, The Report of the Siberian Delegation (1903) and Our Political Tasks (1904).

The leaders of the faction that became known as the 'Mensheviks' which, at that time, included Trotsky, opposed Lenin's position on party organisation at the second Congress of the Russian Social Democrats. Trotsky argued that Lenin's position would lead to the party 'substituting itself' for the class. Writing in 1904, he said:

'the organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the Central Committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally the 'dictator' substitutes himself for the Central Committee.'

Later in his life, Trotsky argued that these early views were wrong. He wrote in 1929:

'I thought of myself as a centralist. But there is no doubt that at the time [1903] I did not fully realise what an intense and imperious centralism the revolutionary party would need to lead millions of people in a war against the old order.'

Cliff, on the other hand, writing in 1960, argued that it was the young Trotsky's views which showed: 'his prophetic genius, his capacity to look ahead', and he drew the conclusion that, 'the history of Bolshevism since 1917 seems to have completely vindicated Trotsky's warning of 1904.'

Cliff's position gave credence to the Cold War historians who argued that Leninism led directly to Stalinism because of its centralised party structure and because of its commitment to playing a vanguard (i.e. a leadership) role. Indeed, Cliff claimed in the same article that the substitution of the party machine for the class was 'inherent in Lenin's conception of party organisation'.

Lenin had never held the view that the party simply spoke and acted for the working class, let alone instead of it. In What is to Be Done? he explained the restrictions, in Russia, on the sort of loose organisation that Trotsky and others favoured at that time:

'- 'broad democracy' in Party organisation, amidst the gloom of the autocracy and the domination of the gendarmerie, is nothing more than a useless and harmful toy. It is a useless toy because, in point of fact, no revolutionary organisation has ever practised, or could practise, broad democracy, however much it may have desired to do so. It is a harmful toy because any attempt to practise 'the broad democratic principle' will simply facilitate the work of the police in carrying out large-scale raids, etc.'

Illegality and limited democracy in society at large placed limits on democracy, even within the party, but this was a product of the conditions, not a general principle. When the 1905 revolution created a situation of legality or, rather, semi-legality, Lenin emphasised democratic centralism, as opposed to just centralism and castigated the old 'underground' Bolsheviks for being stuck in the rut of illegal means of operating.

At the same time, Lenin advocated the intervention by revolutionaries into whatever broad or legal workers' organisations existed (trade unions, benefit societies, self-education clubs etc) in order to win the leadership of the mass

workers' organisations. In 1917, when it became possible to build mass workers' organisations such as trade unions, factory committees and, most importantly, soviets, the ability of Bolshevik militants to win leadership within them contributed directly to the victory of the October Revolution.

How did this revolutionary vanguardism and democratic practice lead to Stalinist bureaucratism? Cliff accepted that there were historical factors that led to the triumph of Stalin but maintained that this should not lead us to think that there was:

'no causal connection at all between Bolshevik centralism based on a hierarchy of professional revolutionaries and the Stalinism of the future'.⁹

In seeking to prove this, Cliff returned to the question of working class consciousness. He argued that it was the uneven consciousness of the working class that made a revolutionary party necessary but that this was dangerous too because it could lead to a party 'substituting itself' and seeing itself as the vanguard of the class rather than learning from it. He said:

'From this unevenness in the working class flows the great danger of an autonomous development of the party and its machine till it becomes, instead of the servant of the class, its master. This unevenness is a main source of the danger of 'substitutionism'.¹⁰

This completely leaves out of account the question of political consciousness: what ideas about society, the state and so on are held by the workers. If the class were ideologically homogeneous on the basis of the wrong ideas, for example reformism, nationalism or even racism, there would obviously still be a need for communists to fight for the leadership of the class. There is nothing inherently dangerous about revolutionaries organising to maximise their influence over the class so long as they are fighting for revolutionary ideas and a revolutionary strategy.¹¹ In the late 1960s, Cliff changed his position on party organisation and argued that the IS should turn to the task of building a democratic centralist 'Leninist' party. However, he did not break from his incorrect views on consciousness and the working class. He gave two reasons for the 'turn to Leninism'. First, he said that the small scale propaganda work initially undertaken by the IS meant that it was appropriate that 'all branches were like beads on a string'¹² but now, as they shifted to more agitational activity amongst the working class, it was necessary to organise in a more centralised manner.

Second, Cliff observed that the mass workers' struggle in France in 1968 had been defeated precisely because the workers there had lacked a leadership which could counter the French Communist Party. Although it showed his ability to recognise when a change of period required a rapid reorientation of his group, Cliff's response was essentially organisational.

In his biography of Trotsky, written after the turn to 'Leninism', Cliff argued that the early Trotsky (and, therefore, the early Cliff) was wrong to argue that the Leninist party was inherently 'substitutionist'. He wrote:

'The daily struggle for immediate economic demands constantly unites sections of the class but this does not last? The dialectical logic between the unifying and disruptive tendencies creates the need for a revolutionary party which embraces only a minority, perhaps a small one, of the working class. Without such an organisation with its clear demarcation and discipline the socialists will tail end the class?'¹³

Thus, Cliff still ignored the party as a political and ideological leader of the working class. Worse, he claimed that Lenin agreed with his assessment that the working class was spontaneously revolutionary. Cliff argued that, in 1905, Lenin reversed the position presented in *What is to be Done?*:

'Lenin had to protect his followers from allegiance to *What is to be Done?* His formulation there of the relationship between spontaneity and organisation still bedevils the movement. Yet in 1905 he clearly reversed his position: 'The working class is instinctively, spontaneously social-democratic'¹⁴'

Here Cliff is wilfully twisting Lenin's actual position as we can see from the quote in full:

‘The working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic, and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness.’¹⁵

Lenin was arguing that the work of Social Democracy in bringing socialist consciousness to the class over the preceding ten years had ensured that workers were familiar with their major demands and arguments so that, when they ‘spontaneously’ took action, they both raised key demands themselves and were receptive to the revolutionary programme that the revolutionaries brought into the mass movement. It is the latter that the SWP steadfastly refuses to acknowledge as the role of Marxists. John Molyneux, an SWP theoretician, spells out this rejection forcibly. He says:

‘if we accept Lenin’s formulation that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought into the working class from without then there is precious little left of Marx’s dictum that the ‘emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself’.

This argument confuses the act of bringing consciousness to the working class with the act of social emancipation. The latter can only be achieved by the masses of the working class, but the masses must be armed by ideas - made concrete in the form of a programme - formulated and fought for by a revolutionary party. The SWP, on the other hand, see the party as above all an organisational instrument for the class, something that can draw together the different spontaneous struggles in the belief that those struggles themselves will generate a revolution.

A Party without a Programme?

The question of leadership arises from the need for the party to act as a strategist for the class. This necessitates the development of a political programme. The SWP’s rejection of this goes hand in hand with their view of the working class as spontaneously revolutionary.

Towards the end of the 1930s, Trotsky and his collaborators, in order to establish the political foundations of the Fourth International, codified the political method of the communist tradition and the lessons that had been learnt since the Russian Revolution. ‘The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International’, more popularly known now as the ‘Transitional Programme’, presented an overview of the world economic and political situation and, against this background, developed a programme of demands, objectives and forms of organisation that linked the fight for economic, democratic and social demands to the fight for socialist revolution.

As Trotsky put it, the party must seek to ‘find the connecting links in the struggle that lead the masses to the idea of the revolutionary conquest of power’. The programme must be put to the test of struggle and re-elaborated in the light of new historical circumstances and new tasks facing the working class. It is not a catalogue of truisms; it is a manual of action, as Trotsky himself put it.

Throughout its history, the SWP has rejected the need for such a transitional action programme for the present day. They accept that it may have been necessary for a specific historical conjuncture where the Trotskyists thought they were certain of victory and revolution. Cliff says:

‘The basic assumption behind Trotsky’s transitional demands was that the economic crisis was so deep that the struggle for even the smallest improvement in workers’ conditions would bring conflict with the capitalist system itself. When life disproved the assumption the ground fell from beneath the programme.’

Cliff misses the real point of the transitional programme. For him, what was crucial was that there should be ‘conflict with the capitalist system itself’ - providing there was such a conflict, revolution could follow. What this leaves out, characteristically, is the consciousness of those fighting. A conflict over redundancies, pay, working hours, civil rights or housing could develop into a struggle against capitalism itself, but equally it could limit itself to ‘getting the best deal available in the circumstances’ as trade unionism so often does. The difference is not whether a struggle takes place but in how that struggle is led, what demands are raised, what methods of organisation are adopted, in short, what are the politics of the strikers.

The purpose of the Transitional Programme, and the demands it raised, was to give revolutionaries a clear strategy with which to intervene in the struggles that would inevitably erupt because of the economic and political circumstances. It was aimed at linking the fight for reforms with the fight for working class power. The demands and methods of organisation formed a 'bridge' from the day-to-day struggles to the fight for revolution.

The FI of Trotsky never claimed that reforms themselves would create a revolutionary crisis. They said that to be achieved they would have to be fought for by the organised working class. In the process of fighting for transitional demands revolutionaries would seek to win the class to a revolutionary strategy, to taking the struggle ever further forward, rather than allowing it to drift back towards social peace after a reform has been won.

Another SWP theoretician, Duncan Hallas, doubted whether it was possible to find slogans that could lead from the struggles of today to working class power. He said:

'Whether or not it is possible to find slogans or 'demands' that meet these exacting specifications depends, very obviously on circumstances. If at a given time 'today's consciousness of wide layers' is decidedly non-revolutionary, then it will not be transformed by slogans. Changes in actual conditions are needed. The problem at each stage is to find and advance those slogans which not only strike a chord in at least some sections of the class (ideally of course, the whole of it) but which are also capable of leading to working class actions. Often they will not be transitional in terms of Trotsky's very restricted definition.'

He continued

'The emphasis [Trotsky] gave to this matter was' excessive and encouraged the belief that 'demands' have some value independently of revolutionary organisation of the working class.'

Actually, Trotsky gave no such talismanic powers to demands and never underestimated the need to build a powerful organisation. His desperate struggle to forge the FI makes that abundantly clear. What he did insist on was that the organisation should fight to win workers to a revolutionary programme. Such a programme is expressed in a series of demands. The SWP themselves are not shy of raising demands. The question is do those demands advance the struggle towards revolution or do they leave it at the level of a struggle for reform inside capitalism?

In rejecting the transitional method, Cliff and Hallas ended up formulating programmes that never went beyond the limits of militant reformism. They had an economistic understanding of the role of revolutionaries in the class struggle and, linked to this, a misunderstanding of the relationship between party, programme and class. As Lenin had argued against the original Economists, their opposition to promoting revolutionary politics within the working class did not mean an absence of politics altogether. In reality it meant restricting propaganda to the existing 'trade union' politics of the working class.

That this remained true for the IS began to become clear in the 1970s, when it began to develop a significant implantation inside the working class movement. This was at a time of growing unemployment, rampant inflation, mass working class struggle, including the victorious 1974 miners' strike that brought down the Tory government, a large number of factory occupations against closures and mass political strikes in 1969 and 1972 over Labour and Tory anti-trade union laws.

It should have been obvious in this context that revolutionaries needed to put forward transitional demands that posed the question of working class power e.g. workers' control of production and working class defence squads. If a party did not utilise the transitional programme in such a period when would it?

In those years, however, the IS wavered. At the beginning of the campaign against the Tories' anti-union laws, it called for the creation of delegate-based action councils of trade unionists to organise and lead strike action against the proposed laws but, as the tempo of struggles rose, the slogan was dropped. When hundreds of thousands of workers took unofficial strike action in defence of dockers' pickets who had been imprisoned, the IS did not call for an indefinite general strike until the laws themselves were repealed, it called only for 'generalised industrial action' to

free the pickets. Essentially, this was in the same mould as the Russian economists at the turn of the century, tailing the dominant ideas rather than giving leadership. For all Cliff's emphasis on the idea that the emancipation of the working class is the act of the class itself, no link was made between the momentous class struggles taking place and the need to overthrow capitalism and smash the capitalist state.

Effectively, the IS and later the SWP had a minimum/maximum programme. The 'what we stand for' column in the paper argues for revolution not reform, workers' militia, class independence and the revolutionary party. This is the maximum programme, which defines what members of the party 'believe in' but, for the class, the SWP repeatedly advocates only a minimum programme.

This rejection of the transitional programme is linked to the SWP's denial of the role of the revolutionary party as a leadership of the working class. The programme is the codification of the revolutionary party's principles, methods of struggle and goals. The SWP's rejection of Leninism in the 1950s was consistent with this rejection of the transitional programme, but their change of position in the late 1960s posed the question, why is the revolutionary party needed at all if the working class is spontaneously revolutionary, if as Luxemburg said, 'the unconscious precedes the conscious'?

The SWP answer is that the party is necessary to organise the struggle. This is completely insufficient because it leaves out of account what the workers are organised to struggle for. Workers have organised their struggles spontaneously, and effectively, so long as capitalism has existed. The revolutionary party exists to turn those struggles into revolutionary struggles for working class power.

Ironically, Cliff's distortion of the Leninist party leads to 'substitutionism' by the SWP, and often on a grand scale. Real democratic centralism requires a really democratic internal party life, an educated and involved membership and an accountable leadership. None of these things exist in the SWP. The leadership's centrism precludes democratic centralism. In the 1970s, this led to a series of expulsions and purges. Today, it means the leadership act as a secret faction and do not criticise each other amongst the party membership. The members are fodder for carrying out the wishes of the dominant wing of that self-perpetuating and notoriously unaccountable leadership.

The absence of programme, however, does not equal an absence of strategy. It does lead to a constant chopping and change of it - zig-zags. While strategy evolves and changes as Marxists develop tactics for concrete situations, it is also rooted in Marxist principles. Cliff described his 'turns', like the turn to Leninism, as 'bending the stick' but in reality they amounted to a change of political strategy on the basis of an opportunist and empirical reaction to any given new situation.

'Defending Marxism' during the 'downturn'

For the SWP, the period between 1975 and 1990 was a period of retreat for the working class that it characterised as 'the downturn'. The party, so the story goes, had to turn in on itself, retreating to small propaganda circles amidst a tidal wave of reaction in which 'the very concept of Marxism itself was at stake'. This theory was developed to give an objective justification for the SWP's failure to make the major breakthrough it was expecting in the late 1970s.

As any socialist who lived through the period would confirm, this 'downturn' theory bore absolutely no relationship to reality. In the late 1970s, there were mass struggles under the Labour government as car workers, lorry drivers and whole swathes of the public sector took action. Under the Tories, some of the most momentous struggles in the history of the labour movement took place. Engineers, steel workers, health workers, civil servants, printers, seafarers, dockers and, in the great strike of 1984-85, the miners, all did battle against the Thatcher government.

These battles were lost but it is both scandalous and wrong for Marxists to claim that each and every one of these defeats was the inevitable product of 'the downturn'. Each of the struggles themselves offered the opportunity for victory. It was the reformist leaders who betrayed those struggles and paved the way to defeat. To advance a 'downturn' as the explanation lets those traitors off the hook. On a number of occasions, the winter of discontent in 1979, the miner's strike 1984/85, the application of revolutionary politics that intersected with the militancy of the rank

and file could have seen the working class through to victory. As Clare Heath said in 1992, attacking the SWP's position, this 'is the dialectic of the living struggle. Its outcome is not predetermined by the arbitrary perspectival schema of a left group'.

A new period; neo-liberal globalisation and its discontents

As the last decade of the 20th century progressed, it became clear that the policies of the United States and British governments of the 1980s, then variously called monetarism, Thatcherism or Reaganomics, amounted to more than a nation state specific form of capitalist development. They were effecting major changes in the global economy, forcing the other 'European' and 'Japanese' models in the imperialist states to attempt similar changes and transforming the political and economic life of the global south. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in China in the early 1990s provided the major stimulus to this process which became popularly known as globalisation.

Barriers to 'free trade' were lifted, allowing the penetration by US, EU and Japanese corporations into the global south. The international financial institutions were remodelled or strengthened. The dominant business model of the multinational companies changed dramatically, focusing in particular on shifting production lines to the cheap labour markets of the Far East. The capitalist classes worldwide decided that there was neither the need nor the possibility to continue with the high wages and 'generous' social welfare provision that workers had won in the post war period. On all continents, governments set out to roll them back in the spirit of Thatcher and Reagan's assault on their working classes in the early 1980s.

These economic processes were coupled with a propaganda offensive by the ruling class that argued this new world order would finally allow capitalism to fulfil its historic task of bringing peace, prosperity and freedom to every corner of the planet. The end of apartheid in South Africa, and the pacification of resistance to imperialism and Zionism - in Ireland and Palestine, for example - were held up as being indicative of this new 'global humanism'. These changes were to have a dramatic effect on the international workers' movement too.

In Britain, the Labour Party changed its constitution in 1995, removing the embarrassing 'Clause Four' commitment to the 'common ownership of the means of production' and replacing it with vacuous egalitarian platitudes. The party was re-elected in 1997, promising not to increase income tax, corporation tax, or anything else that could be deemed to be an attack on Thatcher's legacy. Its first act in government was to 'free' the Bank of England from political control.

All the major social democratic parties internationally gradually reproduced this neo-liberalisation. These parties had always governed for the capitalists and not for the workers but now the bosses were actually demanding they break up the reforms the workers had put them into office to defend in the first place - free healthcare, public education, public transport and telecommunications, state industries.

Getting confused about the new global order

As the SWP entered the 1990s, Cliff planned a change in course away from the politics of the downturn. He argued that the defeats of the 1980s were being left behind and we were witnessing an exciting new period of recovery.

In 1992, the Tory government under John Major embarked upon the last phase of pit closures. The SWP demanded the TUC 'got off their backs' and call a general strike, a slogan they had steadfastly refused to raise in the great upheavals against Thatcher of the 1980s because they believed it would not find majority support. They began to boast they had 10,000 members and set themselves the bold target of reaching 20,000 within a couple of years.

Cliff began to characterise this new phase as being, 'like the 1930s in slow motion'. The 1930s were a decade of mass polarisation amongst the masses between right and left that saw major struggles of the workers but also the rise of fascism. The SWP theoretician Chris Harman, writing ten years later, described what Cliff meant by this metaphor:

'It summed up very succinctly the effect of successive economic crises at the base of society. This was creating political polarisation such as Europe had not known since the war.'

He continued:

?On the one hand, fascist and racist movements were managing to grow and have an impact on the mainstream of political life - with the rise of Le Pen in France and the wave of racist attacks by Nazi organisations in Germany. On the other, there were signs of a swing to the left politically in the consciousness of many young people and workers, sometimes accompanied by sudden revivals of working class industrial struggle.?

In fact, during the early 1990s in Britain, the workers' movement was still feeling the effects of the severe battering it had taken at the hands of the Tory government. Internationally, too, the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and China strengthened an ideological offensive by the right which put the working class movement very much on the back foot.

The SWP did not understand this latter process because of their flawed theory that identified the Russian economy as state capitalist. Chris Harman summed up their position:

"the move from the command economy to the market is neither a step forward nor a step backwards, but a step sideways, from one way of organising capitalist exploitation to another".

From this perspective, there was no reason why the international working class movement should suffer as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, there was no real reason why the bourgeoisie should feel revitalised and invigorated by it. For the SWP, the collapse was overwhelmingly positive because it would weaken, perhaps remove altogether, the dead hand of the Communist Parties which still exerted considerable political and organisational control within working class organisations. The 'orthodox Trotskyists', who had mistakenly equated defence of the post capitalist property relations with defence of the regimes which controlled them, suffered a degree of demoralisation as a result of the collapse of Stalinism. The SWP, which had only ever been able to see the regimes, felt no such affect; they remained blissfully unaware that imperialism had just registered a victory of historic proportions.

During this period, they remained in relative isolation from the rest of the left, continuing to steadily 'build the party; build the SWP' particularly on university campuses. The 20,000 target figure was never attained but, by the turn of the millennium, the SWP could boast a strong party apparatus, a print shop and a membership of several thousands activists putting it in a position of strength relative to the rest of the British left.

The emerging movements of global resistance

The neoliberalisation of the political parties of the working class movement meant that when a young movement emerged in opposition to globalisation it was, at least in its initial phase, free from the shackles of these reformist bureaucracies. From the mid to the late 1990s, new movements of predominantly young people committed to fighting the injustices of free market capitalism began to emerge.

In Britain, there was increasing activity by a new generation around issues such as the environment, sweatshop and child labour, corporate power, global poverty and against the Criminal Justice Bill. Workers Power oriented to this growing radicalism when it started publishing the youth paper Revolution in 1995, and initiated the autonomous youth organisation of the same name shortly afterwards. Revolution was active in the growing number of direct action events from then on. Similar developments were taking place internationally, often led and organised by the anarchist group Peoples' Global Action that had grown out of the Zapatista solidarity movement in 1994.

The SWP stood aside from involvement in the struggles arising from these new movements. Obsessed with their 1930s-in-slow-motion theory they failed to notice the much greater similarities with another decade, the 1960s, ironically one in which the SWP grew dramatically. The youth radicalisation, the spread of libertarianism, the focus on direct action and anti-corporate activism, all made it more like this decade of re-composition and revival after the first cold war than the decade of devastating defeats (Germany 1933, Austria 1934, France and Spain 1936-1939, Russia 1937).

Only at the very end of the decade did the SWP wake up to the significance of the new radicalisation. On 30 November

1999, a demonstration of 30,000 people, predominantly young activists but drawing in significant support from the rank and file members of the trade unions who were also demonstrating, shut down a meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, USA. The protest signalled unequivocally the coalescence of these disparate radical movements on the world stage as a new international movement. The television pictures from the demonstration flashed across the globe, sending with them an incredible message of solidarity to the struggles taking place in the semi-colonial world against globalisation.

Despite the fact that, in July of the same year, the SWP had ignored the Stop the City demonstration organised by Peoples? Global Action in London, it now realised it had to make a 'turn' to this new movement and, when it turned, it turned in a big way.

A new leadership

Cliff died in 2000 at the age of 82. One of his last political acts was to support Alex Callinicos' enthusiastic estimate of the November 1999 Battle of Seattle as heralding a 'new period' full of opportunities for the SWP. At the memorial service in London in April of that year, 2000 SWP members and supporters assembled to hear not only memorials to Cliff but also the rolling out to the membership of a new and important change in policy.

John Rees, Lindsey German and Alex Callinicos emerged as Cliff's successors at the top of the party and, responding to the new movement, developed new policies and tactics that, while basing themselves on Cliff's economic method, strayed some way from the monotonous 'Build the party: build the SWP' refrain. They argued that this new period meant a turn away from the party's previous isolation and towards an all-out drive to forge alliances and partnerships with the new forces resisting neo-liberal globalisation.

The SWP treated the Seattle demonstrations as a litmus test for its sister organisations within the International Socialist Tendency (IST). Callinicos, for example, engaged in a ferocious polemic with the International Socialist Organisation of the United States that ended with the ISO leaving the IST. In his critique of the ISO, he observed that the new movement meant 'new methods of working are now required' and continued:

'In particular, systematic use of the united front approach developed by the Bolsheviks and the Communist International during its early years (1918-23) is of crucial importance in relating to the new political milieu.' Revealingly, he said that the SWP had, 'stumbled on this more or less empirically during the Balkan War of 1999 and again in the London Socialist Alliance, during the May 2000 elections to the Greater London Authority. Last but not least came the Globalise Resistance conferences in February 2001'.

Turning to the movement allowed the SWP to attract a large periphery of young activists and to grab the attention of the liberal press. At a series of anticapitalist conferences and at its annual 'Marxism' event, the SWP gave a platform to the key academics and journalists of the movement including Susan George, Kevin Danaher, George Monbiot, Michael Albert and Walden Bello.

Its own leading theoretician, Alex Callinicos, wrote a series of articles and books on the movement, most notably the Anticapitalist Manifesto. However, he and the SWP subjected their new allies to only the mildest of criticism and often only in the abstract rather than by putting forward an alternative revolutionary strategy for the movement. It was always too soon to do this; such criticism might split the movement before the time was ripe. This marked a new and major break from the Marxist concept of the united front but it was of a piece with the SWP's long-term refusal to fight within the class for explicitly revolutionary goals.

What type of united front?

Callinicos theorised what they had previously 'stumbled on' by distinguishing between what he called the classical united front and the 'united front of a special kind'. Neither the classical nor the special type of united front were going to be permanent attachments to the party, or episodic alliances, but formally independent organisations that would be the face that the SWP presented when pursuing its campaigning work on a number of different terrains.

The classical united front was supposedly the same as that developed by Lenin and Trotsky after the First World War. Callinicos defined this as, 'bring[ing] together people of diverse politics around a set of very clearly defined issues.'• He cited the Stop the War Coalition as an example of such a classical united front because it restricted its campaigning to three key issues - opposition to the war on terror, the racist backlash and the attacks on civil liberties.

Callinicos then differentiated this 'limited campaigning organisation'• from the 'united front of a special kind'•: 'the most important examples' are the Socialist Alliance and Globalise Resistance. While these coalitions bring together revolutionaries and reformists, their political platform is much broader than some relatively narrowly defined campaigning issue. Most obviously, the programme of the Socialist Alliance, while it leaves open the decisive strategic question of reform or revolution, is an explicitly socialist one that demands the comprehensive transformation of British society.?

In making this distinction, Callinicos completely distorted Lenin and Trotsky's conception of the united front policy. They had formulated this when the initial tide of revolution after the First World War began to ebb in Europe. They recognised the survival of mass reformist parties, and urged the young communist parties to approach the leaders and members of these workers' organisations, both parties and trade unions, with proposals for common action against the capitalist offensive. The purpose of this united front policy was two-fold; first, to force the reformist organisations (and their misleaders) to fight on questions vital to the well-being of their own members and the working class as a whole. Second, to win their best militants to communism by pointing up the incompetence and treachery of the reformist leaders in the course of the struggle. Ongoing criticism and common action were two sides of the united front policy as the Communist International stated: 'While supporting the slogan of the greatest possible unity of all workers' organisations in every practical action against the capitalist front, communists in no circumstances desist from putting forward their views, which are the only consistent expression of the defence of working class interests as a whole.'

Without such criticism the distinct and counterposed character of reformism and communism would be lost and the latter would not appear as an alternative programme and leadership for the class. The united front must never mean a sinking of differences, a melding together of revolutionary and reformist programmes into something that was neither the one nor the other. The reformist workers would never turn to the communists if they were not told what the communists were proposing, how their strategy was different from that offered by their own leaders. Revolutionaries must constantly warn that the ties that bind the reformist leaders to the ruling class would lead to an attempted sell out of the working class struggle.

Trotsky made it clear to his supporters in the 1930s that the united front was for common action against the class enemy, not for common propaganda: 'Do not confuse principles, organisations and banners. March separately, strike together (please, do both).' Callinicos and the SWP, however, dodge the question of revolutionary criticism by describing this notion of the united front as involving the maximum unity of struggle combined with a, 'struggle for political influence over the masses between revolutionaries and reformists'•.

This confuses the goal of the united front tactic in its totality, achieving influence over the masses, with one of the components of the struggle for that goal - revolutionary criticism of reformism. His inability to explain how, without such criticism, the revolutionaries could distinguish themselves from reformism became clear in his polemic with the ISO. The ISO had argued that, within the coalition opposed to the bombing of Serbia by NATO in 1998, the SWP had a principled duty to defend the right of Kosovan Albanians to self-determination while opposing the bombings. This naturally involved the most trenchant criticism of the Serbian regime which was oppressing the Kosovan Albanians even while it was being bombed.

Callinicos dismissed this call for revolutionary criticism of pro-Serbian allies within the united front, arguing that such criticism was not necessary to win militants to the party. He said: 'You make concessions to the misconception that the way in which revolutionaries differentiate themselves within united fronts is by 'putting the arguments' which set us apart from other forces within the united front. In our experience it is more often through being the most dynamic and militant force in building the movement in question that we distinguish ourselves and draw new people towards us. Of course, this process leads to arguments, but these develop from the concrete situation rather than being produced by

some abstract 'duty' to disagree with everyone else.

To say that the communists demonstrate their superiority by being the best fighters is true but totally insufficient and, characteristically, presents a purely organisational reason for workers to split from reformism. SWP central committee member John Rees writing in Socialist Review explained this conception in the context of the anti-war movement. '[the Stop the War Coalition] would not have been so influential, nor would the decisions have been so effectively translated into action, had not an organised body of socialists been willing to advance them and act upon them. In this way a revolutionary organisation willing to work with others in a non-sectarian way can both advance the interests of the whole movement and strengthen that movement's core of determined socialist opponents of the whole system'.

Resting on the complacent view that their practical and organising abilities will win out in the end, the SWP chooses not to criticise whatever ideology is dominant in any given movement. Thus, the strategy of relying on a supposed organisational superiority to win recruits from the ranks of their temporary allies is, in reality, a shame-faced capitulation in the battle of ideas

The United Front of a Special Kind

In both the 'classical' and 'special' united fronts, the SWP advocates the suspension of revolutionary criticism and strategy. However, there is a difference between the two forms. In the 'special' united front, the SWP establishes semi-party bodies that have fairly detailed and thought out political programmes. As Callinicos says, the Socialist Alliance had a 'programme [that], while it leaves open the decisive strategic question of reform or revolution, is an explicitly socialist one that demands the comprehensive transformation of British society'.

This is not a new (or a 'special') idea; in the 1930s, Trotsky had many arguments with those of his supporters who advocated this type of 'special' united front. For instance, in 1935, a minority of the French Trotskyists set up a newspaper (La Commune) and associated bodies called 'revolutionary action groups' the aim of which was to draw in the left wing of the French Socialist Party (SFIO). Pierre Frank and Raymond Molinier, who led this initiative, argued that they were applying the Marxist understanding of the united front.

Trotsky argued that this confused the distinct political programmes of the Trotskyists and the left social democrats. He said: 'the united front is an alliance of the forces of the mass organisations with a view to concrete action. In the case of La Commune, there are neither forces nor action. It is a united front for the publication of a newspaper. Now that is the direct opposite of a united front as it is conceived and interpreted by Marxism. The fundamental rule of the united front, in the meaning of the Bolshevik Leninists, was and remains: March separately, strike together.'

During 2002-3, the SWP theoretician John Rees polemicised with the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) over a number of issues including the Marxist concept of the united front. Rees argued that the SSP's concept of the united front was 'too narrow' and that if, 'at one extreme, the trade unions and, at the other, the soviets, can be described as united fronts, we are not making any great theoretical innovation in describing the Socialist Alliance as a united front of a special type.' After all, if united fronts could be long term formations not restricted to one task, then this justified the Socialist Alliance (SA) and Globalise Resistance (GR). This assessment is wrong. Trotsky's point was that the united front was an agreement with mass forces, including politically distinct organisations, for action.

A trade union is, in this sense, a body for united action against the employers (and their state). The soviet is a committee of action of the workers' organisations, delegates from the workplaces, involving different and competing working class parties. The longevity of the united front is not the issue here. The point is that it must have an action orientated character and the freedom for political criticism.

The 'united front of a special kind' violates the very conception of the united front as a lever to break the working class from reformism and win it to the struggle for communism. In this 'new' conception, the SWP set up reformist political organisations like the Socialist Alliance and Globalise Resistance in the belief that they would be more successful because the majority of working class people and youth were not revolutionary. The SWP then intended to use these forums as a means to recruit on the basis that they were the 'best organisers'. For all the flaws in their politics in the

1970s and 1980s, this move to the open advocacy of reformism within the movement marked a major shift rightwards.

This policy was based upon a schema that involved the working class and youth who came into contact with the SA and GR respectively having to go through a left reformist 'stage' in their political development. This is why, in both organisations, on countless occasions, the SWP obstructed Workers' Power's attempts to win those non-revolutionary workers and youth to revolutionary positions. It was always 'too soon' to do this. It was always 'too dangerous' since it might alienate people.

Since when does an open and honest fight for revolutionary positions alienate workers and youth? Come to that, since when do revolutionaries dilute their demands for fear of being in a minority? As Marx said, 'the Communists disdain to conceal their views'. What is certain is that they will not win workers to those views if they do not say what they are.

Furthermore, and ironically for an organisation that defined itself by its opposition to the USSR, the policy was very similar to the Stalinist 'party front' tactic in the 1930s. In this, nominally open campaigns would be rigidly controlled by the party organisation, but a few 'names' would be invited onto platforms and their signatures added to declarations to give the campaign the appearance of independence.

Globalise Resistance

After Seattle, the SWP took the opportunity to launch GR as a 'united front of a special kind' which it would use to build the anticapitalist movement. The founding conference brought together 1,500 young activists. The time was certainly right to build a broad movement based on campaigning initiatives and direct action and drawing in youth and student organisations, community groups, immigrants and trade unions i.e. a real united front that turned the youth to the trade unions and based itself on the mobilisation of action on the streets. Early on, it organised direct action protests against banks and the presence in London of arch neo-conservative Henry Kissinger from the United States.

However, the SWP soon began to exert tight bureaucratic control over GR's work. This naturally excluded the anarchists and libertarians, who had played an important role in the movement against the Criminal Justice Bill, Reclaim the Streets and the Stop the City 'riots' of 18 June 1999. The SWP was unwilling to compete ideologically with the anarchists because that would go against the party's understanding of the united front as a politically homogenous (reformist) organisation in which they would suppress their own subjectively revolutionary politics and advocate a reformist policy. Instead, its leaders created a bureaucratic facade of an anticapitalist movement and then equipped it with a brand name, a logo, an office, a full timer and a steering committee, although the latter did little to actually steer the organisation.

The SWP alternately rolled out or 'parked' GR according to its own priorities. This soon led to their allies, radical NGOs, journalists like George Monbiot, and the Green Party, withdrawing, bitterly complaining about the SWP's bureaucratic stranglehold. The SWP full timers, who represented GR in the media, put forward a classless democratic anticapitalism devoid of any socialist content. Globalise Resistance has now lost the few active branches it ever had and the last two conferences have gathered together merely 150 people - the vast majority of them SWP members.

In truth, it was not necessary to give the anticapitalist movement such a rigid organisational structure. If the united front's role is to mobilise action, all that is needed is the common agreement of different forces to act. Blurring the distinction between united action and political programme simply obscures the role that the revolutionary party should play in linking up the struggles and developing a revolutionary socialist strategy to see them through to victory.

In 2001, in Italy, social forums which drew in students, trade unionists, campaigning organisations, youth and the unemployed emerged, especially after the European Social Forum meeting in Genoa that year. Workers' Power argued that the movement should seek to build similar co-ordinations in Britain, uniting such groups around common action against war, racism and neoliberalism. The SWP opposed their formation, fearing the effect they could have on their control of the 'united fronts of a special kind' like GR.

The Stop the War Coalition

Unlike Globalise Resistance, the Stop the War Coalition mobilised people in historic numbers. It brought millions onto the streets against the war on Iraq, radicalising a whole new generation of youth. It seemed much closer to the classical united front as it drew in real mass forces, the trade unions, CND and the representatives of the Muslim community around clear goals.

On 15 February 2003, it brought two million workers and youth onto the streets in Britain's biggest ever demonstration. Yet, even in this 'classical' united front, the SWP did not act as an independent revolutionary party fighting for its own strategy and tactics. It steadfastly refused to criticise its coalition partners. On 15 February, it even let Charles Kennedy, leader of the bourgeois Liberal Democrats who supported the war as soon as it began, address the mass demonstration in Hyde Park. Union leaders were also, rightly, given a platform but SWP speakers did not take the opportunity to put them on the spot and demand that they call their members out on generalised strike action against the war. Nor did SWP speakers warn the hundreds of thousands listening that the union leaders might well fail to translate their words into action and that unofficial strikes would probably be necessary to force the union leaders to act to stop the slaughter.

If the SWP leaders had done this, acting as Lenin and Trotsky insisted revolutionaries should do when engaged in common action with reformists, two things might have followed. First, the SWP could have taken a massive step forwards in rallying union members willing to take unofficial action and challenge the grip of the do-nothing union bureaucrats. Second, those self-same bureaucrats would have felt exposed and challenged and might well have left the coalition. The SWP knew this and decided to capitulate to the union leaders.

When the US and UK occupied Iraq, many trade union bureaucrats began to retreat from active opposition to the occupation, arguing that the coalition troops could play a progressive role in Iraq and for the support of pro-occupation trade unions like the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). In the face of this, the SWP argued that StWC should not fight around the slogan 'troops out now' and solidarity with anti-occupation forces in Iraq. Once again, the formal alliance with top bureaucrats was placed above the fight to win the rank and file to a campaign for the sort of action necessary to take the movement forward. The result - the movement has dwindled considerably. Movements that do not move forwards always do.

From the Socialist Alliance to Respect

It is in the field of fighting to build an alternative to Labour that the SWP's flawed conception of the united front has had its most dramatic right wing effects. There have been two main initiatives to build an alternative to Labour; the Socialist Alliance and Respect. The Socialist Alliance (SA), established in 1998, brought different left groups together on a left reformist programme in elections. The SWP joined it a year later as part of their turn to the new movements in time for the London mayoral elections in 2000.

Because of its size, the SWP quickly came to dominate the SA. Chronologically, it was the original 'united front of a special type' according to the SWP whose members became the most eager proponents of restricting it to a left reformist programme, that is, a programme that does not fight for the means - revolution - of achieving its socialist goals. They blocked attempts to mobilise the Socialist Alliance for anything except electoral work, despite the fact that its most successful meeting was a conference of 1,500 trade unionists to discuss a campaign to democratise the political fund - one of the most fundamental practical issues in the fight against Labour.

The SWP also blocked other attempts to turn the coalition towards the task of fighting within the trade union movement for a new working class party. They engaged in a systematic bureaucratic campaign to drive out everyone who opposed them; packing meetings, denigrating working class militants and imposing their will on every local Socialist Alliance branch. When the project failed, as a result of the SWP's political misleadership of it, rather than face up to the political crimes they had committed, they drew all the wrong lessons.

The SWP leadership looked at the mass mobilisation of the antiwar movement, on the one hand, and the poor showing that the SA made in elections during 2000-2, on the other, and decided that the SA was just too socialist! Never mind the fact that the SA was put in cold storage by the SWP during the antiwar mobilisations of 2002-3 or that the SWP obstructed SA speakers getting onto the platform while allowing Liberal Democrats on. No, the SWP concluded that the programme of the Socialist Alliance was too radical to appeal to this mass movement.

The expulsion from the Labour Party of George Galloway, a reformist with a strong record of opposition to the UK's blockades and attacks on Iraq, prompted the SWP to form Respect in autumn 2003. Respect was formed as a coalition that did not stand for, 'a Socialist Britain', as Alex Callinicos put it when describing the SA, did not identify the working class as the agents who could achieve that society and certainly did not argue that revolution was how we would get there. In short, Respect stood on a left populist programme.

Lindsey German, a leader of the SWP, said at the founding conference of Respect that she felt 'people were looking for something less explicitly socialist'. This is a bizarre thing for a Marxist to say. If socialism is to mean anything, it must be the objective interests of the working class. To say that an organisation was 'too socialist' is to say that it fought too consistently in the interests of the working class. Indeed, if the class were really 'looking for something else', socialists had a duty to tell them they were wrong and redirect them.

The SWP observed that large numbers of people on the antiwar mobilisations came from the Muslim community and that this was because of the joint mobilisation for the demonstrations with organisations like the Muslim Association of Britain. Furthermore, the Muslim community was concentrated in certain urban areas which meant its vote, mobilised en masse, could be significant in Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system. Leading SWP members made it clear that principles should not stand in the way of this new project. Lindsey German argued at the party's Marxism 2003 event they should not make a 'shibboleth' out of gay and lesbian liberation if it stood in the way of Respect. Why? Because she, and the SWP, realise there is a powerful but socially conservative middle class in the Muslim community that has influence over working class Muslims; businessmen and imams who could swing the votes of thousands of workers. To get these votes, Respect had to defend the interests of a propertied class. That is why its programme reduces socialism to just the 'S' in the name Respect and restricts itself to Blairite platitudes like 'a fairer and just society'. The SWP were on the road to electoral cretinism; the pursuit of votes at the expense of principles.

George Galloway, speaking at a rally in London on 29 October 2003, expressed his own politics very clearly, 'My socialism is the same socialism that inherited the radical democratic triumphs of the nineteenth century and, working alongside the great Liberal politicians of the turn of the last century, created the welfare state and a national economic infrastructure that was intended to be in the service of the people. My socialism is not that of 'bloody revolutionists' or foreign ideological importations. It is rooted in this land and in its traditions of liberty, dissent, co-operativism and trades union action and it is open to every freeborn British person, every faith, all men and women on equal terms.'

To dispel any fears that he was a dangerous revolutionary, he confessed to having 'a deep patriotism about my own islands' and avowed that the 'exploitation of labour will always exist and needs community action to correct it through active redistribution of wealth and power.' So, Galloway emphasised that he was a fairly middle of the road Labourite who had found himself on the left, indeed outside, of the Labour Party due to Blairism's extreme right wing turn.

Eighteen months later, at the 2005 general election, Galloway was victorious in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency, taking 36% of the vote and winning one of Labour's safest seats. By any measure this was a breakthrough. Votes for some other Respect candidates were also impressive. Salma Yaqoob's 27.49 per cent in Birmingham Sparkbrook & Small Heath, Abdul Khaliq Mian's 20.65 per cent in East Ham, Lindsey German's 19.5 per cent in West Ham, Oliur Rahman's 17.2 per cent in Poplar and Canning Town - were all substantially higher than previous 'Left' candidacies such as the Socialist Alliance had won. But what exactly did these impressive results actually represent?

Certainly, they are a powerful indication of the strength of anti-war feeling and the potential that exists to build a radical alternative to Labour. The problem with Respect is that it is not directing this anger and potential in the

direction of independent working class political representation, let alone socialism or revolution.

The global social movements and the 'united front of a special kind'•

Alex Callinicos insists that Respect is a product of the global social movements and for this reason cannot proclaim itself as working class or socialist;

'The current platform of Respect reflects this process. It is not an explicitly socialist, let alone a revolutionary programme. But it is more than an antiwar manifesto. The issues on which it focuses - war, neoliberalism, racism and sexism - represent the same questions highlighted by successive European Social Forums. The broad ideology of Respect is indeed in many ways that of the anticapitalist movement as it has developed in Europe, particularly since Genoa, embracing a plurality of different currents, reformist, socialist, autonomist, etc.'•

But this is completely disingenuous, if not deceitful. By saying Respect 'reflects'• a process in the broader social movements, Callinicos wants to imply that it has grown out of those movements. In reality, Respect has a programme that Callinicos thinks reflects the concerns of the social movements because that is how he and the SWP leaders drafted it.

Since Seattle, the anticapitalist movement has developed beyond its initial phase of youthful and spontaneous opposition to the summits of the rich and powerful. It has launched global social forums that have discussed the strategic questions that the movement has to face if it is serious about challenging the new world order of the globalisation epoch. The movement has also attracted the support of broader, more mass forces - most of the 'left'• Trade Unions in Europe, many of the former Communist Parties and, significantly, the governments of Venezuela and Brazil. This turning of mass forces towards the movement was an important step forward but, of course, they brought with them reformist politics.

The task for revolutionaries was, and remains, to challenge this reformism while also calling for the maximum unity in action, that is, they needed to apply the notion of the united front as developed by Lenin and Trotsky. To their credit, the SWP pushed forcefully for the European and World Social Forums to make the call for the huge international anti-war demonstrations on 15 February. Intersecting with the militancy of the rank and file, they forced the right wing of the movement to back the call. However, as we have shown when looking at the Stop the War Coalition in Britain, the SWP did not propose anything beyond the huge demonstration. They did not argue for mass strikes to stop the war, nor did they warn the masses of anti-war activists that the right wing of the social movements would not be willing to mobilise this kind of concerted action.

Their intervention went downhill from that moment. At the Paris European Social Forum, when French trade unions and Attac blocked the call for mass coordinated demonstrations against the cuts in welfare across Europe, a 'social 15 February'•, the SWP capitulated. Its representatives did not even expose this treachery to the rank and file activists. In the run up to the London ESF, they struck up an unholy alliance with Ken Livingstone, the London Mayor, and the British trade union bureaucracy. This resulted in the plenary platforms being packed with centre-left trade union bureaucrats who had never lifted a finger to build the movement. There were no speakers from the rank and file and, indeed, only one from the SWP, Lindsey German, and she appeared as a member of the Stop the War Coalition.

Nor have they used the opportunity created by this international movement even to fight for permanent coordination of actions and initiatives through the European Social Forum. Such coordination is essential against the neo-liberal offensive summed up in the Lisbon Agenda but the bureaucratic leaders of the European trade unions are opposed to anything that might challenge their control of the workers' organisations. Key currents in the ESF leadership, including both Attac and the French section of the Fourth International, the LCR, are more than willing to accommodate to this and the SWP has gone along with this in a kind of non-aggression pact. Worse, as the reformists have strengthened their grip on the anticapitalist movement, the SWP have merely tailed this process in Britain by establishing Respect as an electoralist expression of this tendency.

Hitherto, the SWP's strategy has been to recruit to the party out of an ever bigger, ever broader, reformist minded

milieu. When this policy was originally conceived it was always accepted that, for this to work, the SWP had to remain as an independent political force. This was made clear in their polemics with the leaders of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) who were making the case for the building of broad parties on a left reformist basis. Murray Smith of the SSP said that the SWP: "counterpose revolutionary parties, by which it means organisations like itself, to the new parties which are developing. This is a false dichotomy. The new regroupments and parties that are appearing represent a moment in the evolution of a growing layer of the working class and youth. They are not chemically pure revolutionary parties but they are capable of evolving."

Rees' reply to this on behalf of the SWP stressed the need for a party dedicated to the overthrow of the state. He argued that: "the justification for a revolutionary organisation actually rests on the nature of three fundamental characteristics of capitalist society: the state, the capitalist class, and the nature of working class consciousness." He continued by attacking the SSP's concept of a party that could be home to revolutionaries and reformists. Even if the SSP, "relies on the strength of the Marxist current within it to ensure its future direction. But this simply reproduces the dilemma that even if the Marxists win the intellectual argument, how can they effectively translate this into the united action of the whole party when a substantial section of the party disagrees in general and in the specific with its Marxist component?"

Rees' case for a combat organisation to take on the state is correct but the revolutionary party also has an ideological task before we get to that point. It has to tackle reformism and break the masses of the working class away from it.

In six years of opportunist involvement in the anticapitalist movement they have not been able to make a breakthrough by proving their worth as the "best organisers" and "militants". The SWP's membership has, at best, stagnated and possibly declined. As a result, there is increasing pressure to transform Respect into a form of "broad party" similar to that advocated by Murray Smith. Indeed, at the Edinburgh counter-summit during the G-8 protests in July, 2005, SWP leaders announced themselves as "Such and such, member of Respect" and at many Freshers' Fairs in September 2005, Respect stalls took the place of the once ever-present SWSS stands. After Respect's electoral success, a four-page supplement in Socialist Worker carried the headline "Our hopes for this new party" in which Lindsey German argued Respect was "more than a single issue party" and now the task was to build a "mass campaigning Respect".

Murray Smith, also writing after Respect's electoral success, was perhaps justly confused about the polemical exchange he had three years ago. He asked, "does Respect represent a particular tactic for building a broad socialist party, or does it represent an alternative to such a party? [and] if the perspective is not to build a broad socialist party, then what on earth is it? To remain as a loose coalition?"

In the same issue of Socialist Worker Oliur Rahman, a Respect councillor in Tower Hamlets in London, seems to give Murray's question a definitive answer: "Everyone should join Respect and help build a party that we can all be proud of - a party for the people and nobody else." Callinicos tries to throw light on their broader strategy: "The programmatic stance of Respect - like that of the larger anti-capitalist movement with which it overlaps- will evolve and become sharper and more concrete in response to specific challenges."

This is almost identical to the SSP's argument against having a revolutionary programme. The final contradictions of this policy have yet to be resolved. The SWP continues to identify itself as "the revolutionary party" yet, simultaneously, Respect is being pushed as a campaigning political party that will be "the next big thing". What we can be sure of is that the SWP has developed a flawed non-Marxist strategy for the anticapitalist movement that has led to the self-proclaimed "revolutionary party" becoming the fiercest advocate of a reformist policy and the most energetic builder of a broad populist party.

Drawing Conclusions

At the root of the SWP's opportunism is the denial that the revolutionary party must fight to direct the class struggle through a revolutionary political intervention. Their rejection of programme leads them to make a series of twists and turns and respond reactively to whatever movement is thrown up by the class struggle. Cliff laid the basis for this

method when he said 'life disproved the assumption of the need for a transitional programme; that is, because the Trotskyists did not win, the objective process was not a revolutionary one and, therefore, the revolutionary programme became defunct.

In the 1970s, when there was a whole series of mass struggles, many of which were successful, the SWP believed that the struggles themselves, the objective process, would lead the working class to victory (and in the process to the emergence of the SWP as a mass party). In the 1980s, they empirically registered that the working class, despite its great struggles, was suffering a series of defeats and that the SWP themselves had not made the breakthrough to a mass party. They rationalised from this that the objective process was moving in the direction of defeats, that it was a downturn.

In both these cases, the intervention of revolutionaries fighting for a revolutionary transitional programme intersecting with the militancy of the rank and file could have helped direct the working class towards the struggle for power. By not fighting for a revolutionary programme, the SWP found itself defenceless against reformism. It could not politically distinguish its politics from militant left reformism because it did not put forward an alternative strategy.

Today, the party is still seen as the 'generaliser' of spontaneous struggles. Yet, a new distortion has been added that has meant it has gone from being defenceless against the reformist programme to being one of its advocates in the global social movements. The SWP leaders believe that they will recruit out of an ever bigger and ever broader movement and that, through this objective process, the movement will become increasingly revolutionary through a response to 'concrete and specific challenges'.

But if revolutionaries do not fight for revolutionary politics they will not make a revolution. Today, there are real struggles to be had to win sections of the class to revolutionary politics. This will mean using the tactic of the united front, but united fronts based on common action and freedom to criticise allies. Workers' Power supported the creation of the Stop the War Coalition. We supported fighting within the trade unions for their affiliation to it, but we also believe it absolutely necessary to fight within united fronts for revolutionary answers to the questions facing the working class movement.

In the anti-war movement this meant demanding that the trade union leaders called for strike action to stop the war. Today, it means building active solidarity with the Iraqi resistance in their fight against the occupation. It means linking the anti-war movement with the other struggles by building real action committees, like the social forums in Italy at their height, to draw the most dedicated fighters into a broad front of struggle.

Internationally, it means fighting within the global social movements that have come together to oppose neo-liberal globalisation for the development of a strategy for power. It means fighting to forge a new world party of social revolution within the forums of these movements - a Fifth International.

The temptation for SWP comrades who are horrified at the right wing lurch of the last few years might be to look back to the 'golden years' of Cliffism and blame his successors for their problems. That would be wrong. Today's turn to the right is theoretically underpinned by Cliff's wrong concept of the relationship between party and class. His rejection of Leninism, followed by his embrace of a bowdlerised form of it, is, to this day, guiding the tactics of his successors on the party's central committee.

An organised revolutionary party, however small, can still have an impact on the class struggle and change its course decisively. The struggle itself throws up the possibility of victory even though the working class has a reformist leadership that seeks to demobilise that struggle and make an accommodation with capitalism. In the Transitional Programme Trotsky wrote: 'The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat'. With each reformist betrayal today we can see a continuation of that crisis of leadership in the working class. That is why revolutionaries have a duty to fight for a new leadership and to put forward clear anti-capitalist, revolutionary, socialist answers.

Workers Power was expelled from the SWP in 1975. Since then we have developed a rounded critique of their political method. We urge all thinking members of the SWP, dismayed at the turns and failures of the last period and shocked by the sharpness of the current right turn, to discuss with us how to take up the fight for a revolutionary party in Britain and a revolutionary Fifth International.

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