



Auto-Labourism in crisis

Almost without exception the left enthusiastically called for a Labour vote on May 1 1997 - the SWP being a stock example. The habitual reasoning was eminently simple. But profoundly wrong. After nearly two decades of Tory government the election of New Labour would trigger a crisis of expectations.

Nothing of the kind materialised. Three main factors explain the predictable outcome.

Firstly, at this historic juncture, the working class no longer asserts itself politically. The class that found an expression in Labourism for 80 years at present exists sociologically, as wage slaves and voting fodder. But in no sense as a subject - ie, maker - of history. On a world scale both 'official communism' and social democracy have suffered devastating ideological defeats at the hands of neo-liberal capitalism.

Secondly, in Britain Margaret Thatcher shifted the balance of class forces to a degree never witnessed before in this century. Over the last 10 years strike days have been ratcheted down to an all-time low.

Thirdly, in opposition Tony Blair did everything to reduce expectations to zero. Hence the mass of voters rightly believed that little of significance separated the two main parties *vis-à-vis* working class rights and living conditions.

Only the sects invested high hopes. Not surprisingly then it is not New Labour which is in the midst of a crisis of expectations. It is the left. In point of fact the old left stares extinction in the face. Whatever the particular antique shibboleth - the USSR as workers' state, as state capitalist, as bureaucratic collectivist, etc - the old left has been defined by one, underlying, characteristic. Auto-Labourism. Far from representing independent working class politics - albeit in embryonic form - historically the left acts as a Labourite tail.

The crisis of auto-Labourism is manifested in moralism, organisational decay and programmatic nullity. Take the June 10 EU elections. The sects proved to be more part of the problem than part of the solution. Here was the first general - ie, all-UK - elections since 1997. Moreover, in what should have been a window of opportunity, they were conducted for the first time under the auspices of proportional representation.

Despite concerted and persistent attempts by the CPGB the left failed to unite and field a national slate of candidates. The SWP was the first to break ranks after its divided leadership narrowly decided to retreat from its electoral turn - agreed only at the end of 1998. Naturally the rank and file were kept in total ignorance - policy-making is the monopoly of a closed circle centred around comrade Tony Cliff.

Either way, having caused mayhem in the Socialist Alliances, the SWP eventually confined itself to a vote

for Scargill's red-brown Socialist Labour Party in London (half his candidates were Stalin Society members), Dave Nellist's Socialist Alliance list in West Midlands and Tommy Sheridan's Scottish Socialist Party. When it came to the bulk of the country, SWP members were left guessing. No guidance. No leadership. No support, even critical, for the 'Weekly Worker' lists (ie, what remained from the Socialist Alliance election blocs in London and the North West).

The Socialist Party in England and Wales mirrored the SWP's bankruptcy. Workers Power - a sect which since its foundation as an SWP split has religiously preached auto-Labourism - recoiled from the prospect of voting for bomber Blair. As if Nato's air war against rump Yugoslavia was not a continuation of the New Labour politics of May 1 1997 which they voted for. But likewise, instead of backing the 'Weekly Worker' lists, Workers Power anarchistically preferred moralistic boycottism.

Not surprisingly the auto-Labourite left is in an advanced stage of organisational decay. The fragments of Stalinism and Trotskyism continue to shed limbs and overall weight. The *Morning Star's* so-called Communist Party of Britain, cleaved by the Hicks-Rosser rebellion, now limps on as a support group for Serbia, China and North Korea. The tiny New Communist Party is equally prostituted and politically deranged. To all intents and purposes the Democratic Left is a fetid corpse. Like a maggot Nina Temple crawls away.

As for Trotskyism, SPEW is not untypical. Having lost its jewels - Scotland and Liverpool - further schisms are in the offing. The fate of the Workers Revolutionary Party beckons. Organisationally the SWP appears to be an exception. However, politically the crisis is only too evident ... and politics decides.

Auto-Labourism was always a variety of economism (ie, the strikeist or trade union politics of the working class). Hence the left sects - not least the SWP - neither understand nor prioritise democratic demands. That is why, though repelled by Blairism's open pro-capitalism, the old left still clings to New Labour.

Blair might not be meticulously working towards some fully articulated 'third way' blueprint. Nevertheless he cannot be dismissed as simply a pragmatist and a philistine in the traditional British mould. Amitai

Etzioni inspires. Perry Anderson theorises. Rupert Murdoch sympathises. Anthony Giddens evangelises. From the beginning all the portents and signs indicated a far-reaching resolve. Blair was not content with tinkering. He is remaking the constitution and, if he can, the popular sense of Britishness.

What does it mean? Certainly not the beginning of the end of Britain's supposedly incomplete bourgeois revolution. Blair's remaking of the UK constitution is in fact both the continuation and the complement of the Thatcherite counter-reformation. Blair has no intention whatsoever of resurrecting or re-creating the 1945-1979 social democratic settlement. His communitarianism is a reinvention of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. The 'greatest good for the greatest number' is to be ensured by the market and the endless drive for profit.

There is, of course, a complex and dynamic interrelationship between reform from above and discontent below. What is particularly striking about Blair's constitutional revolution, however, is the absence of any working class input or alternative. Indeed it is the atomisation, the (temporary) disappearance of the working class from the political stage, that creates the conditions whereby Blair can propose and carry through his programme. There is neither pressure nor threat from those below. Nevertheless the main factor behind Blair's programme has been the fact that popular identification with the UK state has been gradually slipping away since at least the late 1960s. During the long Thatcher years slip-page became a slide.

The Iron Lady unleashed a neo-liberal tornado against the post-World War II social settlement. Millions were thoroughly alienated. Militant trade unionists and non-conformist youth. Migrants and homosexuals. The long-term unemployed and semi-employed. Scots and poll tax refuseniks. And not merely from the Tory government, but to a considerable extent from the monarchical state itself. New identities were sought and often found. That explains why Blair does not simply want to change the way we are ruled. Blair is determined to rewin popular identification with and acceptance of the state.

The UK is therefore being rebranded. In the name of democracy and in the absence of a democratic movement from below Blair seeks a

new consensus. That is what his programme is designed to achieve. The political foundations, and thus the political architecture of the UK, are being transformed. The liberalisation of Labour, devolution for Scotland and Wales, peace for Northern Ireland, elected mayors in London and other big cities, reform of the House of Lords, a slim-line monarchy, European integration, PR elections - all are component parts of an overarching constitutional revolution.

The auto-Labourite left responds piecemeal rather than comprehensively to the whole. Using the defeatist logic that something must be better than nothing, virtually the whole spectrum lined up behind New Labour and urged a 'yes' in Blair's referendums in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. It is essentially the same story when it comes to the London mayor, the House of Lords and the monarchy.

The inability of the left to challenge Blairism in the sphere of high politics - how we are ruled - stems from a programmatic nullity epitomised by the SWP.

The Cliffites have steadfastly refused to present their main politics and overall strategy in the form of a testable and democratically sanctioned programme (as we all know, such a stance is contrary to the spirit and example of the Bolsheviks, whom they claim to emulate). *Socialist Worker's* thumbnail 'What we stand for' column is all very well for introductory purposes. But its pinched abstractions bear little relationship to daily practice or any discernible vision of how the working class is to make itself into a ruling class. That, when it comes to the SWP, is a mystery.

Indeed comrade Cliff and other SWP intellectuals have made a virtue of anti-programmism. They have written on countless occasions about the *advantages* of not being tied down. True, without a programme the rank and file cannot hold them to account. As a trend the SWP's history has therefore been one of sudden opportunist zigzags. Any turn can be adopted as long as it is perceived to serve short-term interests, usually judged arithmetically in terms of crude membership figures.

The SWP's 'Action programme' would seem then to represent a break with the past. Since it was launched last September, it has not only been reproduced as a glossy brochure, but there has been a drive to get labour movement bodies to adopt it as their

own and finance propaganda around it. Sad to say, what we actually have is another zigzag, not a conversion to Bolshevism.

Theoretically the SWP's 'Action programme' is backed up with reference to Trotsky's 1934 'Action programme for France' (see Alex Callinicos *International Socialism* No81, and John Rees *Socialist Review* January 1999). But the boldest claim is that it is premised on broadly the same conditions which prompted Trotsky's 'Transitional programme'. In our opinion Trotsky was badly mistaken in 1938. He maintained that capitalism could no longer develop the productive forces or grant meaningful reforms. Therefore, he declared, defence of economic gains would spontaneously produce a final and apocalyptic collision with capitalism. No matter how we excuse Trotsky and his tiny band of followers in terms of how things appeared on the eve of World War II, there is no escaping that he was wrong in fact and method.

Comrade Cliff wrote - only six years ago - that Trotsky's 'Transitional programme' was only relevant when there was "a situation of general crisis, of capitalism in deep slump", and that many of the programme's proposals - eg, workers' defence squads - "did not fit a non-revolutionary situation" (T Cliff *Trotsky: The darker the night, the brighter the star* London 1993, pp299-300).

Yet now, with workers' confidence at a nadir and revolutionary consciousness almost non-existent, the SWP has decided that pursuit of even the most minimal demands is all that is required to fell a supposedly tottering capitalism. In his most recent work comrade Cliff insists that we live not in a period of reaction (albeit of a special type), but of imminent revolution: "Capitalism in the advanced countries," he claims, "is no longer expanding and so the words of the 1938 'Transitional programme' that 'there can be no discussion of systematic social reforms and raising the masses' living standards' fits reality again" (T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, pp81-2).

Herein lies the root of the SWP's crisis. It is not simply that Cliffism cannot grasp the period - the overall productive forces continue to expand and in Britain the average full-time wage has just passed £20,000. No, for all the revolutionary verbiage employed to sell it, the SWP's 'Action programme' amounts to nothing more than conventional economism. Instead of a fully rounded alternative to Blair's constitutional revolution from above - eg, a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales from below - the SWP leadership concentrates entirely on *minimal* questions of pay, hours and union recognition. The workers are to be left as an economic class of slaves, not elevated to a *political* class of self-activating revolutionaries ●

Jack Conrad

Marxism

'Marxism', the Socialist Workers Party's annual school, starts on Friday, July 9. This event will be the largest 'educational' gathering of leftists and revolutionaries in Britain this year. Over the course of seven days, thousands of comrades - predominantly young - will attend the event, where they will be instructed in the SWP's version of socialist politics. This is both positive and negative.

We are not sectarians. We believe that - particularly in a period such as this - the fact that thousands are coming together, listening to speakers, reading revolutionary journals and being encouraged to delve into some of the basic texts of the Marxist tradition can only be a good thing. Moreover, it is far better that these comrades are organised rather than unorganised. For many, it will be their first experience of left politics. It will inspire hundreds and lead them forward to an active engagement with socialism.

Of course, our qualification is that much of what is being taught is not 'Marxism' at all, but the economic world view of the SWP. The two - as we have extensively argued in these pages - are not necessarily the same thing.

In an unsigned article entitled 'Tasks for the left' (*Socialist Worker* June 26) it is maintained that one of the central challenges facing the left is the fight to achieve "clarity of ideas". To do this, "we need serious discussion. To be effective, the left must debate and at times argue over the situation we face and the way forward". And "that" - apparently - "is why 'Marxism' ... is more important than ever. It will bring together *important strands* of the left in order to discuss these very questions" (my emphasis).

Of course, the SWP's method *excludes* the fight for "clarity of ideas"; it does not facilitate it.

First, because when the SWP refers to "important strands" on the left, it is clear from the itinerary of 'Marxism' that what it means are social democratic trends to the right of it. There are *no* scheduled debates with other revolutionary groups in the workers' movement. Indeed, we know from previous years that SWP cadre often act with outright hostility - up to and including physical assault - against other revolutionaries who have the temerity to distribute literature or try to intervene at their event. Revolutionary ideas - even mangled SWP versions of them - are infinitely more coherent and logical than those of left reformism. No matter how erudite, at the end of the day they present little theoretical challenge to the towering abstractions of the SWP, in other words.

Second, while there will be some debate at 'Marxism', there remains no provision for SWP dissidents to air their views, neither internally nor externally. The nature of this bureaucratic centralist regime is fundamentally at odds with creating a party of independently minded, self-activating militants. Instead, it has the tendency to create what Trotsky called - when writing on the subject of party education in 1909 - "*self-satisfied semi-literates*". A repulsive figure - whether worker or intellectual" (cited in H Ticktin and M Cox (eds) *The ideas of Leon Trotsky* London 1995, p372).

Parroting the 'line' - the modus not simply of 'Marxism', but also the educational activities of most of the left - is foreign to Marxism as a genuinely critical, controversial *science*. In this context, it is instructive to recall Kamenev's telling observation against Stalin's doctrinairism when discussing Lenin's writings:

"Lenin did not write and could not have written a textbook of Leninism. I am even afraid that every attempt to expound the teaching of Lenin in paragraphs, divisions and sub-divisions, to create any kind of a 'handbook' of Leninism, a collection of formulae applicable to all questions at any time - will certainly fail. Nothing would be more foreign to Lenin in his work than any tendency to catechism ... [his work is] permeated through and through with anxieties and lessons of a particular historical situation ... That is why we approach the real science of Lenin through a consideration of his complete works in the light of contemporary events" (cited in P Le Blanc *Lenin and the vanguard party* New Jersey 1990, p344).

Take a look at Lenin's *Collected Works*. In them, we see Leninism in its natural habitat - that of fiercely rigorous, exacting and *open polemical struggle* against not simply other trends within the workers' movement generally, but also within his own shade, faction or party. It was this open clash of ideas, the attempt to *publicly* engage with others within the workers' movement at the highest possible level, that lends Lenin's writings their enormous value. We see in Lenin a genuine search for the "clarity of ideas" that the SWP apparatus professes to believe in.

This is why the CPGB strives to introduce controversy and the clash of opinions into seminars and meetings. Our forthcoming Communist University will feature speakers from an extraordinarily wide variety of political backgrounds on the left (see p3 of this issue). This is not an expression of our organisation pleading for a theoretical truce - far from it. Simply, it creates the best possible conditions - of light and air - for the correct ideas to thrive, defeat mistaken views and become strong. The SWP's approach nurtures opportunism.

Of course, we have our own problems with theoretical passivity in the ranks of our organisation, something we have publicly referred to in this paper. At least - however - we recognised it as a weakness.

Sadly, in the SWP it appears to be a basic requirement of retaining membership ●

Mark Fischer
national organiser

'Marxism' starts with a rally on Friday July 9 in
Friends Meeting House (opposite Euston station)

Shortcomings

How interesting. Comrade Alan Fox writes an article detailing the all too obvious shortcomings of the anarchists' 'Carnival against capitalism' - and of anarchist ideology in general (*Weekly Worker* June 24).

For his efforts, comrade Fox is accused by Phil Rudge of "delivering a Marxist sermon", and for good measure is damned for being "a puritanical moralising philistine" (Letters, July 1). Rather than comrade Fox being "prissy", it is more the case that Phil Rudge is being rather cavalier with the truth. It is a plain fact that many of those who attended the 'carnival' were drunk, some of them determined from the outset to start a ruck and go on a vandalism spree. Why be afraid to openly say it?

All riots, virtually by definition, are spontaneous outbursts - not *conscious* acts. All rioters, by definition, are motivated to a greater or lesser extent by the desire for *personal* revenge. Sometimes by the desire to 'liberate' from the nearest shop a few expensive stereos or wide-screen televisions. How can this turn the working class into a ruling class?

But I forget. Phil Rudge objects to what he calls the 'we Marxists know best' line of the CPGB. However, if he can name others who know better than "we Marxists", then logically the CPGB - and all the other left organisations - should immediately liquidate themselves in order to follow and 'learn'.

Eddie Ford
Middlesex

Serious approach

Anne Murphy seems to find it particularly irksome that the Alliance for Workers' Liberty is able to cooperate on the basic issue of trade union rights with Arthur Scargill and co (*Weekly Worker* June 17).

I will return to this point, but first I must point out that she has missed a division in the SLP (not something one would expect from the *Weekly Worker*). Anne attacks Hendy and Crow and lumps their approach in with Scargill's. Hendy and Crow are too focused on the TUC: they wrongly argue that only by winning the TUC over can the anti-union laws be repealed. Scargill's approach is the total opposite. At last year's United Campaign for the Repeal of the Anti-Trade Union Laws AGM Scargill argued that we should never let the TUC near the campaign.

Of course none of the SLP leadership share the AWL's drive to build a militant rank and file movement across the unions. It is no secret that our comrades in the RMT fight for such a policy and regularly criticise Crow's feeble leadership. Does this rule out working with the SLP in a united campaign to repeal the anti-union laws and support workers in struggle? No, it should not. Only 10 years ago Stalinists in the British unions, including the forerunners of the CPGB, the Leninists, would not have worked with Trotskyists. We have always proposed such unity in action, even if it is new to those from the Stalinist tradition.

Anne also attacks the AWL for our position on the structure of the campaign. Anne supports the few delegates who wanted political parties and broad lefts to gain voting rights. I presume the CPGB's support for this idea is not unconnected with the fact they were unable to get a single delegate to the AGM from a trade union branch, trades council or strike committee.

Of course support from anyone should be welcome, but if the campaign is to be a real force, it needs to be based on basic class struggle organisations. Any serious socialist organisation should aim to win support in the unions, should fight to win affiliation to the campaign and get delegated, but should one individual socialist get the same vote as a delegate from a workplace union representing thousands of workers?

Anne quotes Lee Rock, who argued that the SWP needed to be allowed to get involved as the SWP. I would like SWP members to get involved as representatives of the union branches where they have influence. But if branches of the SWP, SLP or whoever were able to outvote union delegates it would discredit the campaign in the eyes of most trade union activists.

Affiliation by union broad lefts is also problematic. Unions often have many broad lefts: it is not the campaign's job to pick and choose. However, any broad left that has a real base in a union should be able to win branch affiliations, or even donations where union rules are restrictive, and send delegates through, not outside, union structures. The campaign also gives places on its committee to official and unofficial strike committees.

I think this is a serious approach to the real situation in the British workers' movement.

Mark Sandell
AWL

Unionist veto

It is interesting and disturbing to note that Jack Conrad supports the right of protestant (British-Irish) self-determination (*Weekly Worker* July 1). To my knowledge this is a new position for the CPGB and highlights the danger of posing the right of self-determination in an abstract, formal manner.

If the protestants have the right of self-determination, does that not necessarily imply that they have the democratic right to decide to remain a part of the UK? If so, the armed struggle of the IRA to win a united Ireland and end the unionist veto can be viewed as anti-democratic, since it is obvious that the British-Irish do not want to separate from the UK. Indeed you could go further and support the struggle of the loyalist paramilitaries in their fight against forced incorporation into a united Ireland (while of course criticising their sectarian tendencies). It may be necessary to raise the slogan of 'Arm the UDA' and denounce British imperialism for refusing to recognise protestant self-determination.

We would have to warn the British-Irish not to trust the UK state to protect their right to govern themselves. Look what they did to Stormont. The lack of a written constitution guaranteeing the British-Irish self-determination would be seen as a form of oppression that communists must denounce.

Jim Baxter
Glasgow

Any answers, WP?

Mark Fischer's critique on how Workers Power radically and inexplicably changed its electoral line is entirely valid (*Weekly Worker* July 1). As a former WP activist I would like to put further questions:

For around 25 years WP and its international tendency (the LRCI) have always voted Labour. June 10 is the first time they have called for a vote *against* Labour. What is the difference with the past? Does it mean that they have now also ceased to vote for Swedish, French, German and Austrian social democrats? Why did the LRCI, which is based within the EU, not adopt a single joint resolution or organise a single joint campaign with regard to the only international elections in which most of their sections have ever participated?

Are they going to repeat the same anti-Labour line in future elections, and if not, why not? WP called on workers to spoil their ballot papers in nine of the 12 UK constituencies. Why did they call for a vote for Alternative Labour in East Midlands and *against* this same force in Yorkshire and Humberside?

In Coventry, when Dave Nellist achieved more than 40% in a local election (1994) and five percent in the general election (1997), WP campaigned

Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed.

against him and for Labour, saying that they preferred to be with the reformist workers than to back a centrist sect. This time in the same area WP voted against Labour and a more popular Labour dissident (Oddy achieved 4.34% in West Midlands), and for Nellist who only obtained 0.85%. Why?

Why did they not participate at all in the building of the Socialist Alliances?

Why did they refuse to vote for the SLP on the grounds of their positions on the war? Yet they also refused to vote for the CPGB, who were closer to them on the war than other people - like a certain former Labour MEP who supported Nato.

H Johnson
LCMRCI

Anti-Craig

In his latest plunging the depths of Kautskyite apologetics ('Trotsky versus left Trotskyists' *Weekly Worker* July 1), Dave Craig does little more than conjure up vivid images of arses and elbows.

Apparently, in the fantasy world of comrade Craig, Lenin wrote *What is to be done?* as a critique of centrists in the RSDLP who were content with existing bourgeois democracy in tsarist Russia. It escaped not one of Lenin's contemporaries (no matter how dim-witted) that Russia circa 1902 had nothing approximating bourgeois democracy.

I have to ask Dave (for the umpteenth time), what is this 'democracy in general', as distinct from 'bourgeois democracy in particular'? We know that for Lenin (at least from his *April thesis* onwards) 'democracy in general' is the mendacious phrase of the liberal out to fool the workers. Whereas Lenin, after February 1917, never forgot to counterpose bourgeois democracy to proletarian democracy, Dave, yet again, calls for a blurring of the two. This is sheer Kautskyism.

Tom Delargy
Paisley

Nothing less

I would like to make some additional comments to comrade Dave Craig's generally admirable defence of revolutionary democracy ('Trotsky versus the left Trotskyists' *Weekly Worker* July 1).

The comrade is quite right to mock the views of Barry Biddulph on this subject. The latter's continued insistence that the views of the CPGB/RDG are "Kautskyite", and that the call for a federal republic makes "a cult of formal structures", is an extreme example of the very burnt kettle calling the scrubbed clean pot black.

As Barry loves to point out, Kautsky contrasted "democracy" to "dictatorship". Yet surely Barry does exactly the same - only in reverse. He counterposes, in the most artificially stageist way, the "workers' republic" to the federal republic, and democracy *in toto* to socialism *in toto*. It seems to me that Barry is an inverted or ultra-leftist Kautskyite.

We can see the essential absurdity, and ultra-formalism, of his methodology in his most recent letter to the *Weekly Worker* (June 24). He writes: "If *The Observer* calls for the federal republic, that's bourgeois, but if the CPGB calls for it, it becomes proletarian." Yes, Barry, *exactly*. The Huttonites want a controlled removal *from above* of the constitutional monarchy, which (they hope) will usher in a bourgeois, presidential-type system. The CPGB wants the revolutionary democratic removal *from below* of the constitutional-monarchical system and its replacement by organs of workers' power. Perhaps I am being a bit dim, but that sounds like all the difference in the world to me.

Danny Hammill
South London

AWL election contest Sub-reformist

As Tony Blair continues to pull New Labour to the right, to the stage when the party's pre-tence to be some kind of vehicle for working class advance is almost a distant memory, slowly but surely the left is being forced to abandon its previous automatic support for Labour.

A case in point is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Along with most left groups, it advocated a Labour vote on May 1 1997, in full knowledge that Blair's government had not the slightest intention of implementing any measures at all in favour of working people. But, according to *Workers' Liberty*, "Breaking the icy Tory grip is the *only way* to begin to open British politics up again ... It is the *only way* for the labour movement to begin to move forward again" (my emphasis, April 1997). The AWL persuaded itself that Blair was "likely to be more vulnerable to working class pressure than the Tories ever could be".

It hardly seems worth the bother of asking the obvious questions just over two years later. Is the labour movement moving forward? Has Blair been "more vulnerable"? What "working class pressure"? If voting Labour really had been the "only way", then clearly our cause would be hopeless. But, as we predicted, the "crisis of expectations", so eagerly awaited by so many, failed to materialise.

The left got it wrong - even if most of them do not care to admit it openly. However, actions speak louder than words, and the welcome decision by the AWL to begin at long last to contest elections, to stand *against* Labour, represents a glimmer of recognition that the working class needs to press forward its own independent political alternative.

For this reason the AWL's participation in the aborted Socialist Alliance electoral bloc for the EU

elections, its more active cooperation with local alliances and its standing in local elections should be viewed as a positive step. Leading AWL activist Jill Mountford is fighting a south London council by-election on July 15. She is standing in Churchdown ward, Lewisham, as 'Socialist, defending jobs and public services'. The intention had been to stand as 'Socialist Alliance', but strangely Lewisham SA had been unable to obtain the necessary accreditation in time from Dave Nellist, the registered 'leader' of the national Socialist Alliance, or his London representative, Julie Donovan of the Socialist Party in England and Wales. Written confirmation is necessary in order to comply with the Registration of Political Parties Act.

Nobody should expect comrade Mountford to run the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates close on July 15. However, circumstances are reasonably favourable for the intervention of a socialist candidate. Firstly, the by-election comes just a few weeks after the well publicised victory of SPEW's Ian Page in another Lewisham ward. Comrade Page himself has been helping the AWL campaign. Secondly, comrade Mountford was able to mobilise members and supporters who were in London attending the June 19-20 AWL school for mass leafleting and canvassing. And thirdly, it is less than two years since another candidate bearing the name 'socialist' contested a Churchdown by-election. Terry Dunn won 104 votes (5.5%) for the Socialist Labour Party in July 1997.

Although the AWL has been working with Lewisham SA alongside SPEW, it seems that some elements have been less than happy with the AWL's complete absence from comrade Page's successful campaign to win back his council seat in Pepys ward, which he first held as a Labour Party member. Replying to a "Lewisham council worker" who had criticised this non-appearance in the previous issue of the Welfare State Network's *Action for Solidarity*, the AWL's semi-official fortnightly, comrade David Pendleton of Lewisham AWL writes: "It is no secret that the Alliance for Workers' Liberty has had an ongoing discussion about the Labour Party and working class representation ... In the light of the changing situation in the Labour Party, our position was altered at our national conference earlier this year.

"We were unable to help in the Pepys by-election because, firstly, our comrades were tied up in building the Left Unity event that a number of notable Socialist Party members had agreed to speak at, although none of them turned up, and because some of our comrades are trying to keep Labour Party membership cards and were well known to Labour Party members in Pepys" (*Action for Solidarity* July 2).

The concern about retaining Labour membership seems to have diminished somewhat within a couple of weeks. AWL members of Blair's party in Lewisham have been noted, including by Labour canvassers, backing comrade Mountford's intervention.

The AWL may have "altered" its position, but there is no doubt that it propagates an outlook entirely within the narrow frame of practical reformism. It stands before the electorate as a Labourite Janus - campaigning for

"a working class alternative to New Labour policies", while at the same time looking back to a mythical Labour Party. The address states: "Lewisham already has one socialist councillor. Returning another socialist committed to truly representing the interests of local people, exposing Labour's cuts and privatisation policies and campaigning for the Labour council to deliver what they were voted in for would be a big step forwards in making politics work for us and not against us."

The AWL is, or pretends to be, unaware that the Labour council was "voted in" a year ago on an openly Blairite programme of continuing its "cuts and privatisation policies".

After initial consultations with Lewisham SA comrade Mountford's address was drawn up by the AWL alone. It does not result from a series of lowest-common-denominator compromises, but from the AWL comrades' own considerations. Here is the total list of demands it carries:

- A massive injection of cash for the National Health Service and education.
- An end to privatising education, healthcare and care for the elderly.
- The creation of real jobs with decent pay.
- A minimum wage of at least £5 an hour.
- Full trade union rights.
- An end to racism and discrimination.
- The public ownership of gas, electricity, water and the railways.
- Tax the rich to pay for public services.

The address concludes: "All this and more besides could be paid for by taxing the rich and big business. Taking back the tens of billions of pounds given away to the rich by the Tories in tax cuts kept in place by New Labour."

It would be difficult to come up with a more dismal set of demands for workers to aspire to. The AWL is *explicitly* calling for a return to the situation before Thatcher, when gas, electric-

ity, water and railways were nationalised; when higher income tax paid for better "public services". In other words, a return to the social democratic consensus, a return to old Labour governments like those of Wilson and Callaghan. In fact just 20 years ago you would have been hard pressed to find a Labour politician - left or right - who would have opposed *any* of those demands or their equivalents.

Is this your vision of 'socialism', comrades of the AWL? Why do you even fail to mention the word in your election material? There is not a hint of the need for workers' own self-activity, of a new society, of the real *political* questions under capitalism that our class must adopt as its own if it is to free itself. Not a word about self-determination for Ireland, Scotland and Wales; abolition of the monarchy and the second chamber; Nato's Balkans adventure and Kosovar independence; rights for women and gays. The address is also strangely silent on the environment - at least the greens have some sort of global alternative to neo-liberalism.

For an economistic AWL workers need not concern themselves with such matters. They are to remain a slave class, hoping for better conditions and a (slightly) bigger slice of the cake. They must begin with vague, sub-reformist platitudes before tackling high politics.

The AWL is distancing itself from the Labour Party's structures. But it is as though it dare not discard *Labourism*. Communists must do all they can to encourage that break, to pose the need for a Leninist alternative. That is why we call for critical support for Jill Mountford in Churchdown ●

Peter Manson

To help with
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action

■ CPGB seminars

London: Sunday July 11, 5pm - 'The left-socialist revival of the 1930s', using Hal Draper's *The dictatorship of the proletariat from Marx to Lenin* as a study guide.

Sunday July 18, 5pm - 'Trade unions and class', using Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* Vol 2 as a study guide. Call 0181-459 7146 details.

Manchester: Monday July 19, 7.30pm - 'The falling rate of profit and the tendency to crisis' - part 2, in the series on theories of crisis. E-mail: cpgb2@aol.com.

■ Party wills

The CPGB has forms available for you to include the Party and the struggle for communism in your will. Write for details.

■ Socialist Alliance (London region)

To get involved, contact Box 22, 136-138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS, or ring Anne Murphy on 0973-231 620.

■ Support Tameside careworkers

Support group meets every Monday, 7pm, at the Station pub, Warrington Street, Ashton under Lyne.

Donations and solidarity to Tameside Strike Support (Hardship) Fund, 15 Springvale Close, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancs.

■ Defend Public Services

Conference - Saturday July 10, 11am - 4pm, Mechanics Institute, Princess Street, Manchester. Called by the six Tameside sacked careworkers who stood in the local election as 'Defend Public Services'. Unwaged/unemployed - £1; waged - £3; delegates - £5. For details and to book creche places (by July 3 please) contact: Margaret Manning (0161-861 8390), Martin Ralph (0161-707 1584), Liz Taylor (tel/fax 0161-339 2467). Disability access.

■ Border Challenge Fund

The Border Challenge Fund stands for the right of free movement in Europe for all people, irrespective of citizenship or immigration status. Fundraising evening of international dance and music - Friday July 16, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square (nearest tube - Holborn). Tickets £10 (£6 concessions). Enquiries: 0171-251 8708, ext 217. Organised by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants.

Website

Our newly revamped website carries a comprehensive archive section including articles on the Kosova war, Socialist Alliances and the SLP's degeneration. www.duntone.demon.co.uk/CPGB/

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Robertson's loyal opposition, part one

Trotsky's 'class

Revolutionary politics, unlike bourgeois politics, should not be, but often in practice is, a dirty business.

One look at the motley elements who demonstrated against Nato's war over Kosova should be enough to illustrate this. Along with many politically correct left social democratic 'anti-racist' types, and revolutionary leftwing groups that claim to be the purest opponents of racism, there marched supporters of ethnic cleansing, of racist massacres of the Albanian people - Chetniks complete with their insignia - more or less happily, side by side. The leftists concerned cannot have been unaware of the paradox of their coexistence with vicious racists in this 'anti-war' movement - rather in pursuit of 'anti-imperialist' realpolitik, this *de facto* 'red-brown' political alliance was tolerated unprotected by much of the 'far left', from the SWP to the Spartacist League, who were more concerned to draw the line against 'pro-imperialist' Albanians and their sympathisers.

However, the recent war with Serbia is not the subject here: rather it only serves to illustrate the kind of dirty dealing and compromises with socialist and democratic principle that go on in what passes for 'the left' today.

One grouping that often claims to be cleaner than most is the International Bolshevik Tendency. The author of this article was, until a year ago, an active member, but resigned in the spring of 1998 after an attempt to promote discussion of political differences met a response typical of the sectarian left today - an organised boycott of political debate with the apostate member. The IBT's claim to be fundamentally better and more democratic internally than their political parents in the Spartacist League, not to mention the routine bureaucratic witch-hunting of dissidents that goes on in organisations such as the SWP, were revealed to be hollow.

My political differences, which related to criticisms of key elements of the IBT's claim to be a 'unique' Marxist formation, were argued comprehensively inside the IBT in four substantial documents. The response of the IBT leadership was to issue a memorandum demanding that debate on these questions be postponed for a period of around 18 months, and effectively instructing members loyal to the 'traditions' of the organisation that I was disrupting the work of the organisation and therefore should not be debated with.

The IBT leadership told me that: "the comrades who accept the general framework of how we approach politics want to get on with it" (IBT International Secretariat memorandum, April 3 1998).

Given the stated intention of the IBT leadership to "get on with it", I was eagerly awaiting the next issue of *1917*, the IBT journal. But I was in for a long wait. The previous issue (No20) had arrived back from the printers on new year's day, 1998. It was therefore somewhat surprising to have to wait until June 1999 - ie, around 18 months - for the next issue of this august publication.

In the new *1917* there is (sort of) an attempt at a reply to my criticisms of the Spartacists' sectarian distor-

Ian Donovan discusses the International Bolshevik Tendency and the 'Spartacist tradition'

.....
 "The attribution of sinister motives to dissenters takes the place of political discussion, which rapidly becomes an all-out heresy hunt"

tion of the positions of the classical communist movement (of which the Trotskyist movement is part) regarding reformist working class organisations that enter into electoral or governmental agreements with non-working class political groups. Communists have generally condemned those agreements as class collaborationist, and sought to find means to break them, and force the reformists into united action with revolutionaries to defend the interests of the working class. As long as mass parties such as the British Labour Party or the French Communist Party retain the allegiance of substantial numbers of workers who believe that these parties stand for them as a class, revolutionaries have to carefully distinguish between these parties and their bourgeois coalition partners, and seek ways to use electoral tactics to drive a wedge between them.

Such tactics can include the Leninist tactic of 'critical support' for the reformist workers' party, in order to address the working class base of such parties, while for instance standing revolutionary candidates against the bourgeois parties. This is in order to *sabotage* the coalition and force the reformist leaders of the working class to take power alone and administer capitalism in full view of their socialist-minded working class supporters, thereby helping to dis-

pel illusions in the socialist character of such misleaders.

This was the approach of the Trotskyist movement in the 1930s, during a seminal period when popular frontism was a key tactic of the bourgeoisie to protect itself from a revolutionary-minded working class. In the current period, of course, where social democratic and other reformist parties have themselves generally embraced the market and retreated from the claim to stand for the interests of the working class, this position may seem a little distant. But a sectarian position in a period of a stronger working class movement can only be an indicator of a more general malaise in the politics of an organisation, and it is this malaise that my documents in the IBT were aimed at correcting.

The IBT's 'reply' to me is contained in an article entitled 'Weathering the storm', about their 1998 international conference. It is quite remarkable to see an article in a journal that appeared in June 1999, reporting on an event that took place in January 1998: ie, one and a half years earlier. It appears that this 'storm' that the IBT has been metaphorically 'weathering' must have lasted rather longer than most. Perhaps they are not referring to the unfavourable political situation in the aftermath of capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union (this 'storm' has been around for years), but rather their own crisis as an organisation, whose sloth gives new meaning to Bukharin's injunction to "build socialism at a snail's pace".

But what is also remarkable about the IBT's reply to my criticisms of their political tradition, is that out of four documents that I penned on the popular front question, and one on the question of the Socialist Alliances in Britain, the IBT do not quote *one single word* of what I wrote. This fact alone shows the real nature of their polemic and the fear of debate. The IBT's political parents in the Spartacists have a well known record of issuing the most disgusting lies and foul slanders against opponents. But even in their case, it is extremely rare for them to publish a polemic, even against the hated IBT, that does not contain *one single word* of what their opponents have written. Even the likes of Royston Bull - the SLP's former vice-president and publisher of the *Economic and Philosophic Science Review* - have the courage to quote at least *fragments* of what an opponent has written.

This is especially odd since my critique of Spartacist/IBT sectarianism has been widely circulated, has been favourably received by a number of serious elements on the left, and even elements of the IBT's own periphery have acknowledged its historical correctness and orthodox politics. Hence their polemic is very strange, and is obviously not concerned with winning a political argument. In reality, the IBT leadership know full well that in a fully-fledged debate on this question, they would lose - after all, that is why they sought to prevent a proper

internal discussion on this question in the first place. Their reply has another, very different purpose - it is not to win an argument over revolutionary tactics and strategy within the framework of the broad workers' movement. Rather, it is to maintain their 'respectability' in Spartacist circles, to underline that they too are prepared to engage in apolitical vilification of a political critic in order to defend the 'conquests' of their estranged mentor, James Robertson. They are just a bit subtler about it than Robertson's hacks.

The essence of the IBT's alibi for their refusal to allow a proper debate on the criticisms I put forward of the Spartacist 'tradition' is their statement that "Time spent re-inventing the wheel is time wasted".

If anyone should be puzzled by what the IBT mean by this statement, which implies that a democratic internal life where differences can be properly debated is a waste of time (presumably while they get down to the much more important business of *not* publishing a journal for 18 months!), then they might find enlightenment in the following passage:

"The crucial task for Marxists in this period is to carry forward the programmatic acquisitions of the past, which alone provide the basis for recreating a revolutionary, internationalist leadership for the working class. But what steps toward rebuilding such a leadership are open to a small group of revolutionaries today? In our 'Tasks and perspectives' resolution we noted that since our inception our primary objective has been 'to ensure the survival of an anti-revisionist ideological pole within the international Trotskyist "far left"'. The struggle to preserve the thread of revolutionary continuity carried forward by Trotsky's Fourth International after the Stalinisation of the Comintern remains a vital precondition for the selection and training of the revolutionary cadres of tomorrow.

"Maintaining this perspective is not always easy. Our small organisation has not been immune to the pressures created by the setbacks suffered by the international working class in recent years. When the class is in retreat, few workers are actively seeking a revolutionary alternative. Not all comrades have the fortitude or vision to uphold positions that they may intellectually accept to be historically necessary, if at the moment these views are not met with an enthusiastic response.

"The impulse to attempt to escape political isolation and gain influence within broader social layers is powerful but, in a period when opportunities are few, such appetites frequently lead to jettisoning elements of the revolutionary programme. But an authentically revolutionary leadership for the working class can only be reforged with cadres who are willing to tell the truth to the masses, no matter how unpopular it may be, and who are capable of sustaining themselves by taking a long view of history."

So here we have their 'explanation' of why the IBT went into crisis over

the last few years, and why the "authentically revolutionary" majority of their organisation was unable to get a journal out. It was all because of people who had not the "fortitude or vision" to "uphold" views that they "intellectually accept" in "difficult" circumstances. In other words, the IBT are saying that those who like myself left the organisation in disgust at being condemned for attempting to promote political discussion, by a leadership who did not want such political discussion to take place, are moral cowards, who do not have the courage to uphold what they really "intellectually" believe to be true.

What an incredible example of doublethink and intellectual dishonesty! The truth is that the IBT have not succeeded in "intellectually" demonstrating - to me, to others, or even evidently to themselves - that my critique of the Spartacist tradition's sectarian revisionism on the popular front is wrong. If they had, they would by now have produced a properly researched and documented reply that could at least have some chance of convincing unaffiliated militants and historical scholars (or even myself!) that I am wrong. After all, this is no minor or peripheral question, but "the main question of proletarian class strategy for this epoch" (Trotsky). The fact that they are not interested in doing that only proves that the IBT is an organisation that is going nowhere, and certainly is in no sense the historical continuity of Bolshevism.

Behind the IBT's 'explanation' of their internal political crisis stands James Robertson's profoundly anti-Marxist and idealist maxim that "programme generates theory". This aphorism, which in many ways is Robertson's equivalent of Gerry Healy's cracked 'dialectics', serves as one of the chief theoretical bases for Robertson's warped dictatorship in the International Communist League (ie, the Spartacists). It means that, in a Robertsonite or neo-Robertsonite organisation, there can be little or no discussion on fundamental issues that takes as its main point of reference the nature of the external world and the role of material things, people and masses within it. There can be little room for discussion about reality in such a grouping, because reality is what the leader (or at one remove the leader's 'tradition') says it is.

If someone disputes this, the question that immediately arises is not: 'Is what this person is saying true or false in objective reality?'; but rather: 'Why is this person saying these things - what deviant *programme* is he/she fighting for in disputing our interpretation of reality?' Thus the attribution of sinister motives to dissenters takes the place of political discussion, which rapidly becomes an all-out heresy hunt. This obviously must sooner or later become the case in an organisation that upholds such a discourse as its dominant method, no matter how personally benign the actual protagonists may believe themselves to be.

In philosophical terms, Robertson's maxim is anti-Marxist. The question arises - if programme generates theory, what generates programme? Largely, programme (defined as the political *aims* of a current or individual) is gen-

treason'

erated by two things: firstly, an understanding of one's own interests and that of one's fellows (which is itself in large measure a question of one's understanding of the world - hence one could equally say that theory generates programme); secondly, a more general understanding of the way the world operates.

Of course there is a limited truth to Robertson's statement, in that one's class position can (though not necessarily does) determine to a large extent how one sees one's interests and that of one's fellows, but even that does not determine directly 'theory': ie, how one understands the operation of the external world. It is perfectly possible to have an understanding of one's interests, and yet at the same time be convinced that the way the world works is contrary to those interests - which is of course the basis for various forms of historical pessimism.

The proletariat, in reality, needs not idealist aphorisms about how allegedly 'deviant' "appetites" of individuals determine their understanding of the world, but proper materialist analysis of actual social and political conditions, in which *nothing* is above examination and criticism. Rather than Robertson's bizarre cultist maxim that "programme generates theory", we need to uphold the spirit of Lenin's famous statement that "without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement". In this context, the IBT's statement that "Time spent reinventing the wheel is time wasted" is both anti-Marxist and philistine.

In reality, the IBT's reply to me simply repeats old Spartacist quotations on Chile and their position on the Popular Unity (UP) coalition of 1970, which equated the parties of the working class (the Socialist Party, Communist Party, etc) that participated in this coalition government with their coalition partners. The Spartacists stated that any electoral support by leftists to *any* party that participated in UP was "class treason" and that the bourgeois workers' parties that participated in UP had ceased to embody a class contradiction, that their working class component had been "suppressed". Therefore any application of Leninist tactics, such as critical electoral support, or joining such parties in order to fight internally for revolutionary politics and against class collaboration (commonly known as 'entryism'), was a "betrayal" of revolutionary politics.

In my documents, which are available to the socialist public on the website (www.dono.dircon.co.uk/RevTruth), I produced documentary proof that Trotsky himself had explicitly advocated 'entryism' into social democratic parties that were *in power* as part of a popular front (in Spain), and that Trotsky had approved a policy by his French co-thinkers on the question of electoral support that was identical to the policy I was advocating. This does not, of course, prove that Trotsky was right on any of these questions, but it does put the likes of the IBT in a bind. They do not dare to attack Trotsky as an opportunist and a centrist, and accuse him of advocating "class treason", but on the other hand they cannot recommend his method of approaching these questions either. You would

look in vain at any of the material the IBT has produced for any concrete assessment of the historical issues posed here.

Instead, the IBT's reply takes a different tack, and simply becomes a thinly disguised personal attack on myself. The IBT state that the *real* motive for my critique ("programme generates theory" in the classical Robertsonian sense) is that: "Comrade Donovan had been a member of the Spartacist League/Britain in the mid-1980s, after the group had undergone a qualitative degeneration, and he had been a victim of gross abuse at the hands of the SL/B leadership. During his time in the IBT, he periodically displayed a certain subjectivity towards the SL/B." And the article goes on in the same patronising and personalist vein.

Actually, I suffered a very severe illness, that could easily have resulted in my death, when I was a member of the Spartacist League/Britain, that was directly attributable to crimes committed against me and others by the leadership of that organisation. But that did not stop me from joining the IBT in 1995, because at that point I was 'intellectually convinced' of the correctness of much of the historic Spartacist tradition, despite the vile nature of the 'actually existing' Spartacist tendency by that time. The change in my 'intellectual' convictions did not, obviously, come from my involvement in the SL/B, otherwise I would never have joined the IBT at all. The change in my understanding rather came from two years of entry work in the Socialist Labour Party, and the gaining of more experience in real politics, in political work within a real, if shrinking and stunted, political organisation of the working class.

Personalist attacks, which are in reality, though expressed in an underhand manner, similar to the attacks on me as a "fucking nutter" by the Spartacists' Eibhlin McDonald, are the expression of the fact that the IBT has not been able to answer and refute my critique *politically*, by an analysis or negative synthesis of the historical and theoretical material that I wrote.

These issues will not go away and, as soon as there is any renewed leftward movement in society, will rear their heads again, as my material will continue to be available and contradicts in detail the claims of the neo-Robertsonites to represent a 'uniquely correct' Leninist tradition. The falsifications and the quotation chopping say otherwise, comrades!

The accusation of my "subjectivity" towards the Spartacists' abusive and vile treatment of people is not new. Originally, the Spartacists themselves accused me of similar 'deviations', when I fought as a principled oppositionist in the British Spartacist League against its abusive internal regime. This coincidence of characterisation says a lot, not about myself, but rather about the similarity between the IBT and the Spartacists. Because one point that the Spartacists have been able to use quite effectively against the IBT in their generally grotesque and slanderous 'polemics' is that the founding leaders of the IBT, with the partial exception of comrade Harlan, never fought as oppositionists when they were members. Indeed, they were ar-

dent Robertsonites who were purged *despite* their loyalty to the Robertson regime.

Leading cadres of national Spartacist sections, such as Tom Riley and Cathy Nason, authored phoney confessions of terrible deviations to prove their 'loyalty' to the regime even as they were being purged. Looking back at their purge, they later wrote: "The success of the SL/US leadership in conducting the purge in Canada was aided by the extreme organisational loyalty and consequent disorientation of their victims. Knowing the charges to be false, yet continuing to support the leadership and, most importantly, the programme of the tendency, the targets of the attack responded passively in a futile attempt to remain in the organisation" ('External Tendency founding declaration', 1982).

Similarly with the earlier show trial and purge of Bill Logan and Adaire Hannah in 1979. Though they did not sign confessions (the accusations against them were far too serious and terminal for there to be any room for *that!*), 1917 commented on their purge that: "During the trial and the process leading up to it, the accused couple's undiminished loyalty to the Spartacist tendency prevented them from grasping the enormity of the fraud perpetrated against them, and hence from defending themselves as forcefully as they could..." (1917 No9, first quarter 1991).

One could say perhaps that whereas Riley and Nason behaved like Zinoviev at the Moscow trials, confessing to everything in a vain attempt to be spared the executioner's bullet, Logan at least behaved more like Bukharin, and sought to mock his accusers a little. But - and here's the rub - their accusers did not have state power, or any power over them really. These experienced and senior cadre acquiesced in their own purges, essentially from conviction, not compulsion. And they continue to defend their 'executioners', to the extent of denouncing me, for having struggled from a far lower level of seniority to produce a much more deep-going and *political* critique, as being 'subjective'. Well, if that kind of grovelling, estranged cultism constitutes Marxist 'objectivity', then I'll take 'subjectivism' any day. But of course it does not.

The contradictions in the IBT on the question of my critique of Spartacism on the popular front will not go away. Despite the fact that the IBT leadership maintained that the questions I raised were not "current issues" and therefore could not be discussed in their hallowed sect, this issue has produced a howling contradiction in an article in the new 1917 that certainly deals with "current issues". The 'Open letter' from Stephen J, bureaucratically expelled from the Canadian International Socialists, assails the Cliffites for misapplying Lenin's injunction to support the reformist socialists in elections "like a rope supports a hanged man" when dealing with the social democratic New Democratic Party in Ontario province, Canada:

"[former Ontario NDP premier] Bob Rae's government was so hated by working class people for acting like Tories that Layton [a reformist 'left' bureaucrat] wanted to get some dis-

tance from it. But not the IS leadership. Apparently without seeing the obvious contradiction, the leadership document goes on to quote Lenin's famous comment on critical support:

"I want to support [the Labour Party] in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man - that the impending establishment of the government of the [Labour Party] will prove that I am right, will bring the masses over to my side, and will hasten the political death of the [Labour Party] ..."

"The NDP in power had hung itself - the best elements in its base were melting away. Yet *still* the IS supported the social democrats. This is exactly the *opposite* of what Lenin advocated. Instead of seeking to rally some of the thousands of workers who were deserting the NDP in disgust at its betrayals, and direct them to the left into supporting independent labour candidates against NDPers who backed the hated social contract, *Socialist Worker* used its credentials to try to corral leftwing voters for Rae."

This begs the question: if the NDP "hung itself", would the IBT be there to hand them the rope? Not very likely, since the NDP is a rather small social democratic formation that, though it might sometimes be strong enough to aspire to run a province, on a Canadian level is almost *invariably* willing to engage in 'implicit or explicit' agreements with other, larger and of course bourgeois, parties. This was particularly true in the 1980s, when the NDP was one of the most rightwing 'labour' parties, barely identifiable as being social democratic (and not just because of its name), in the international working class movement. Indeed, the 1990 Ontario elections are a case in point of a working class upsurge *forcing* a wretched reformist party, whose *normal practice* is to seek to govern in 'partnership' with ruling class parties, to take power 'alone' (albeit within one large Canadian province).

As the Spartacists' *Workers Vanguard* reported at the time, "In an upset victory that stunned even the winners, the social democrats of Canada's New Democratic Party were swept to power in Ontario on September 6 [1990] ... the NDP catapulted from 19 to 74 seats in the provincial legislature, leaving the Liberals with 36 seats and the Tories with 20 ..." (October 5 1990).

The Spartacists further observed: "The union bureaucrats and their fake-left hangers-on have sought to channel labour militancy into votes for the NDP. Now the NDP is the government of Ontario. Even with such a wimpy social democratic outfit, working people have expectations of the NDP government. Even before taking power [ie, formally taking office after winning the election - ID], the social democrats are

quickly trying to dash these illusions to prove their responsibility to the capitalist ruling class ..." (*ibid*).

It is instructive that this *Workers Vanguard* article on these elections does not even *mention* the text of any Spartacist intervention in the campaign, which took place in the context of a considerable burst of militancy in the labour movement. Indeed, it does not even *mention* whether the Spartacists were in favour of a critical vote for the NDP in these elections or not! The reason is quite simple - the Spartacists had a routine 'No vote to the NDP' position, based on the NDP's habitual coalitionism, and were caught on the hop when the working class forced the NDP to take power in Ontario, with an arithmetical majority in the legislature, without any coalition partners.

The *Workers Vanguard* article was just passive, after-the-fact commentary on an election they had not even bothered to publish any propaganda about, because of their 'routine' view of the NDP, derived from the fact that its leaders generally aspire no higher than being junior partners in a coalition. This is quite remarkable passivity from an organisation that in 1990 had had an organised presence in Canada for nearly two decades. And likewise (but even worse), the IBT have *never even bothered* to write anything substantial on this crucial event in the political life of the proletariat where one of their most important local groups is located (led by cadre with a similar level of experience to that of the Canadian Spartacists), largely again because of their *routinist* view of Canadian social democracy, derived from Robertson's position that it is a betrayal to even *consider* voting for a party that has not repudiated coalitionism *in advance*.

All proportions guarded, given the more limited nature of the working class upsurge, the electoral policy that revolutionaries should have carried out in this situation echoes that so vividly described by Trotsky during the 1936 French elections, and carried out by the French Trotskyists: "The socialists and the communists worked with all their might to pave the way for the ministry of Herriot - at worst the ministry of Daladier [ie, politicians of openly bourgeois parties]. What did the masses do? They *imposed* upon the socialists and communists the ministry of [French Socialist Party leader Léon] Blum. Is this not a direct vote against the policy of the People's Front?" (L Trotsky 'The decisive stage' *Leon Trotsky on France* New York 1979, pp157-8).

But of course, for the IBT, and indeed all those within the Robertsonite tradition, to even *consider* such a policy is "class treason". The absurdity of such a position is obvious to any thinking would-be Marxist ●

Fighting fund

Up and running

July's fund starts well with a couple of donations which were intended to help us make our June target of £400. Thanks to comrades GP (£25) and SA (£20), but you were just too late. Not to worry. Your gifts help get the July fund up and running.

It has also been boosted this week by three regulars in the form of quarterly standing orders. Thanks too to comrade DB, who has committed himself to a *monthly*

order of £5. A little bit can go a long way, and similar donations from just 20 comrades would guarantee us £100 each and every month.

We already have £108 towards our July target. But don't forget: we have a £50 deficit to make up from the last two months ●

Robbie Rix

Ask for a bankers order form, or send cheques, payable to Weekly Worker

Turning the GM tide?

Luke Anderson Genetic engineering, food and our environment: a brief guide Green Books Ltd 1999, pp160, £3.95

In the ideological struggle between environmental conservatives and the sellers of genetically modified organisms, Anderson does not pretend to be neutral. He writes, campaigns and speaks around the country on issues related to genetic engineering, and wants to persuade us to share his passionate opposition to the practice: "This book aims to highlight many of the issues relating to the human, political, and environmental implications of genetic engineering in food and agriculture" (p9).

His hostility to biotechnology does not rest on a Prince Charles-like, woolly-minded call to adopt "a gentler, more considered approach, seeking always to work with the grain of nature in making better, more sustainable use of what we have ..." (*Daily Mail* June 1), although Anderson does end his main text with a quote from Sarah van Gelder expressing such a metaphysical hope - "that the thousands of experiments and millions of choices to live more consciously will coalesce into a new civilisation that fosters community, provides possibilities for meaning and sustains life on the planet" (p121). But most of the book is packed with reports of scientific experiments and rational arguments to persuade the reader that GM food is both harmful and unnecessary. He supports his case with an impressive 11 pages of references from such respectable-sounding journals as *Science* and *Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*.

Anderson begins by explaining simply and clearly what genes are and how the modification process is carried out. Much of the recent press-driven panic about "Frankenstein food" was exacerbated by ignorance - apparently many people did not even realise that normal plants contained genes. Anderson is right to assume that informing people is the way to convince them.

His description of how genes are copied and inserted into the DNA of other species enables him to refute the claim that genetic engineering is simply "the latest in a 'seamless' continuum of biotechnologies practised by human beings since the dawn of civilisation" (p10). Having described the method used to produce and culture GMOs, he is also able to explain how it can give them characteristics neither desired by the manufacturers or admitted to by them.

The presence of genes for antibiotic resistance in most transgenic plants is a simple example of such a side-effect. A more complicated example is the likelihood that disrupting the genome with a foreign insert may alter the pattern of gene expression: "The new gene could, for example, alter chemical reactions within the cell or disturb cell functions. This could lead to instability, the creation of new toxins or allergens, and changes in

nutritional value" (p13). This may have been what was happening in the transgenic potatoes which appeared to poison the rats fed them by Arpad Pusztai (see *Weekly Worker* February 25).

Anderson does not refer to this controversy, but cites an example of fatalities produced by a GM product. The cause of Eosinophilia Myalgia Syndrome, which killed 37 people in the US and left 1,500 with permanent disabilities, was eventually traced to a previously unknown metabolic by-product present at levels of less than 0.1% in the food supplement L-tryptophan, which was produced by genetically modified bacteria manufactured by a biotech company called Showa Denko. The GM product was regarded by the regulatory authorities as "substantially equivalent" to L-tryptophan produced by non-GM bacteria and had not been specifically tested.

Anderson reports (pp17-18) that as soon as a link was suspected, Showa Denko destroyed all stocks of the genetically engineered bacteria, and claimed that the problem was not the genetic modification, but short cuts in the purification process, which they were willing to admit to. The fact that such shocking breaches went on apparently undetected by the US Food and Drugs Agency inspectors supports Anderson's thesis that the desire of governments to create jobs and wealth by fostering the biotech industry with an "attractive" regulatory climate (p97) leads to unacceptable risks.

In chapter two Anderson discusses the possible effects of the traits biotech companies deliberately introduce into their GMOs and use to sell them. These problems - genetic pollution, loss of habitat diversity, transfer of herbicide resistance genes to weed species, poisoning of predator organisms feeding on the pests plants are genetically engineered to resist - have been widely discussed in the press. Anderson's central point is that ecosystems are such complex and dynamic webs of interrelated processes that altering the balance at one point may lead to unexpected and undesirable results at others.

Anderson can be accused of presenting a very one-sided case. Claims by the biotech industry that food products from GMOs may have beneficial effects are hardly discussed except to be dismissed as a ploy "to attract consumers back to the genetically engineered foods they have so far rejected" (p104). His bias against the biotech companies can be excused to some extent, since, while they promise foods with "quality traits" and health-enhancing properties, "Most of the genetically engineered crops already on the market have been designed to be resistant to herbicides or insects." In other words, to provide a quick profit for the manufacturer and tie farmers to the biotech company.

While genetic engineering techniques represent a qualitative break from earlier methods of controlling living things, the use of GM crops in the economic and political relationship between capitalists and 'third world' farmers is a continuation of the 'green revolution', in which food production was increased by replacing traditional crop varieties and farming methods "with a few high-yielding varieties dependent on expensive inputs of chemicals and fertilisers" (p54).

The introduction of GM crops accelerates the existing tendency of agricultural capitalism towards monopolisation. A co-president of Monsanto is quoted as saying: "This is not just a consolidation of seed companies: it's really a consolidation of the entire food chain." As we have argued, the answer is to bring GM technology under social control, so that the advances of science and technology are used for the satisfaction of human needs, rather than for profits. However, the only advice Anderson has is to go back to pre-capitalist farming techniques.

Anderson knows he can do nothing to save peasant and small-scale farming. He laments the fact that "by 1995, of the 100 most powerful 'economies' in the world, 48 were multinational companies, and only 52 were countries" (p86). It is by strengthening the opposition to GM food by consumers that he hopes to change the balance of forces. "Generations that have grown up with DDT, asbestos, PCBs, nuclear energy and BSE are understandably suspicious of official assertions of safety based on a lack of scientific evidence of harm" (p34). He wants to accentuate such suspicions, and thereby encourage people to become involved in campaigning. One notable feature of Anderson's book is the full 10 pages at the end devoted to "resources" - groups to contact, magazines, e-mail information services, and addresses of campaigns to join.

The final chapter of his main text, 'Turning the tide', consists of an upbeat account of the successes of these campaigns, celebrating "the society-wide collapse of support for genetic engineering in foods" (p115). Self-evidently such a crusade against GM food can never defeat capitalism.

It remains to be seen whether Monsanto and other big biotech companies can overcome consumer resistance. For most people at the moment the key question is choice and labelling. They want the option of buying GM-free products. Such matters should not be dismissed. The task of communists is to integrate the demands of consumers into a programme where the product of human labour ceases to be under the control of the market and is returned to the control of the people - organised this time as a revolutionary association of producers ●

Mary Godwin

Nellist and Oddy Approach spurned

This statement by the West Midlands Socialist Alliance, dated June 28, is a reply to the article by Dave Spencer ('A nod and a wink' *Weekly Worker* June 17)

We would like to correct some of the misinformation which is beginning to circulate as to why Christine Oddy stood as Independent Labour and was not part of our list. The details below are a summary of a 'fact sheet' presented and accepted at the first Coventry and Warwickshire Socialist Alliance meeting after the election. The 'fact sheet', and appendixes referred to, can be provided on request.

The Socialist Alliance agreed to start considering standing Euro election candidates at a national conference in March 1998. This was firmed up at the launch conference in September, and at the founding conference this March.

Late in September, the media informed us that Christine Oddy had been virtually deselected by being placed seventh on New Labour's list. As a result, Coventry and Warwickshire Socialist Alliance (CAWSA) agreed to approach Christine and suggest we begin discussions about whether she would like to be considered on our Socialist Alliance list in the West Midlands. Christine informed the CAWSA treasurer that she wanted to remain on the Labour list.

CAWSA had already written to Ken Coates MEP about the Euro elections, mentioning how they had "always enjoyed cordial relations with Christine, and events 'may influence her to move further in our direction'" (Appendix A). Ken Coates replied that he had warned Christine about the way she would be treated by New Labour, "but actually she didn't believe me. I have been trying to talk to her ... if she were to join the list in the Midlands, I would be absolutely delighted" (Appendix B).

The CAWSA newsletter in October-November contained an article expressing fury on hearing that Christine had been deselected, and announcing that "there would be a meeting, open to all Alliance supporters, on November 28 to discuss standing Midlands Socialist Alliance candidates in the Euro elections". It should be pointed out that Christine receives the CAWSA newsletter every month.

CAWSA used their monthly newsletters from November until June to report back fully on all the developments as the West Midlands Socialist Alliance was formed, an electoral programme agreed, finance raised, and candidates selected over a three-month period at three separate WMSA meetings. All the WMSA meetings and their agendas were advertised beforehand in the CAWSA newsletter and through WMSA publicity. Minutes of WMSA meetings were regularly given out at the CAWSA monthly supporters meeting. CAWSA members played an active and positive role within the WMSA, and CAWSA meetings enthusiastically endorsed the decisions being made. Positive ideas for fundraising were put forward and possible election candi-

dates were suggested - but Christine Oddy was not one of them.

The CAWSA supporters meeting on May 10, three days before nominations closed, discussed the final election campaign arrangements, and were informed that £9,000 had already been committed to the printers for the agreed election leaflets containing the candidates' details. The list of eight candidates had now been selected, confirmed at the WMSA meeting late in April. The CAWSA meeting discussed Christine Oddy's sudden and late announcement three days earlier to stand as Independent Labour. Dave Nellist explained how he had spoken to Christine less than a week ago at a Workers' Memorial Day event. She intimated that that she knew Labour were about to dump her, swore Dave to secrecy about her intentions and showed no interest in the Socialist Alliance campaign.

Despite the lack of nominating time now available, and in the knowledge that Christine had made her decision to stand as an independent, a resolution was tabled to approach Christine to see if she wanted to be number one on the Socialist Alliance list. The resolution was overwhelmingly defeated with just two votes in favour. The other participants in the WMSA had already made it clear to us that they had been through an exhaustive election process that would be difficult to change at the last moment, and they were unanimous in their desire for Dave Nellist to be number one. Despite this, Dave Nellist made several attempts to contact Christine over the next two days, and secured the returning officer's agreement that one of our nomination papers could be changed up to 4pm on May 13, but Christine did not return his calls.

After nominations closed, it became apparent that some CAWSA members were supporting Christine Oddy, despite their knowledge of and involvement in the above process. This was disappointing, but we already knew some individual members were voting Green. In the event, Christine's campaign was based almost solely on her record and the appalling way Labour had treated her, although one of her election leaflets spoke of commemorating "the blitz with the participation of the Queen Mother", and "the great day visiting Jaguar with the Queen" (Appendix C). In the light of all these developments, the WMSA officers unanimously endorsed the CAWSA sub-committee decision to post their June newsletter without any reference to Christine's campaign, including the effect it may have had on the Socialist Alliance.

We hope we can all move forward together in building the Socialist Alliance project now the elections are over ●

Pete McLaren, John Rothery,
Dave Nellist, Dave Church,
Dave Griffiths

Storming heaven

Gerry Downing pays tribute to John Toland, an Irish influence on the materialist philosophy of Marx and Engels

“The sun is my father, the earth my mother, the world is my country and all men are my family.”

These are the words of John Toland, spoken 300 years ago this year. As the Irish establishment continues its efforts to modernise its image by curbing the power of the catholic church, it is perhaps time to look again at Toland’s legacy. His pantheism, his philosophical materialism, his republicanism and his internationalism make him a model for post-catholic Ireland. But be warned. Some of his ideas that were seen as so radical and dangerous back then are still far in advance of what would be acceptable to any conservative establishment.

John Toland was born in 1670 in Ardagh in the parish of Clonmany in the Inis Owen Peninsula of Donegal. His family was catholic and Gaelic-speaking. Rumours put about by his enemies in later life that his father was a catholic priest are without foundation. By the time of his death in 1722 he was one of the leading intellectual free thinkers in the world with almost 100 books to his credit. Today he is practically unknown to the English-speaking world, but his books are printed in France, Holland and Germany. He is revered as the founder of modern scientific pantheism, which is a cult religion. His most controversial book *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) drew the wrath of the entire English and Irish establishment on his head. He later became a leading Whig politician and an English republican.

In 1686 Toland converted to the Church of Ireland in order to obtain help in getting an education. He spent three years in Glasgow University and then went to the University of Edinburgh where he got his Master of Arts in 1690. Toland spent a year in Oxford studying Gaelic manuscripts and the outcome was a book *The history of the Druids*, published posthumously in 1726, which explained the reasons for ancient superstitions in Ireland.

When *Christianity not mysterious* was published, and it became known Toland was the author, English MPs and bishops fulminated against him and the book was condemned by the Grand Jury of Middlesex. He fled to Ireland only to meet even more ferocious opposition. The Irish House of Commons ordered the book to be burned by the public hangman in September 1697 and the author to be arrested and prosecuted. Toland was forced to flee back to England. He had good reason to fear for his life. In 1697 a student, Thomas Aitkenhead, was burned to death at the stake in Edinburgh for opposing the Doctrine of the Trinity. Toland had no way of knowing Aitkenhead was to be the last in these islands to die in this way.

What were the political and ideological influences on *Eoghain na Leabhar* (‘John of the books’), as the locals called the studious youth, that wrought such a transformation?

Toland went to study at Leyden in Holland in 1692 and became acquainted with the German philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz. Here he encountered the most advanced thinkers of the age, and he himself blossomed. There was a growing revulsion at the time to established religion in these circles. The Thirty Years’ War, (1618-48) ranged the catholic south against

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“Not very many among the Irish establishment will want to begin on that road again”

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the protestant north of Europe and devastated Germany. Seven million out of a population of 21 million died and the country lay in ruins, politically and physically, from which it took over 200 years to recover. Religion featured very strongly in Cromwell’s war in Ireland and again in the war between James II and William of Orange.

The power of organised religion, and its reliance on ‘articles of faith’ that defied human logic, was seen as the origin of wars and suffering. The enlightenment, begun by the Englishman, Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and really set in motion by the Frenchman, René Descartes (1596-1650), took a new turn and John Toland was a pioneer of that orientation. Toland coined the word ‘pantheism’ and wrote extensively on the new creed. He identified the Dutch Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), as the prime modern pantheist. The French enlightenment materialist philosopher, Baron d’Holbach (1723-89), and others were strongly influenced by Toland. He was a central character in forming the movement that led nearly 100 years later to the French Revolution and the failed Irish revolution of 1798.

It is ironic indeed to see that a defender of Cromwell’s republicanism was one of the sources of inspiration for the biggest revolt against English rule in Ireland. However, if we look at the left wing of Cromwell’s army and the Diggers and Levellers, we will understand the political descendants of these Roundheads were the short-haired Parisian *sans-culottes* of the early 1790s and the Irish croppies of 1798.

Cromwell was defeated by the superior horsemanship of the king’s army in the first stages of the English Civil War. He was obliged to politically mobilise the yeomen, the independent farmers of East Anglia and the Fens: “Give me some men who make a conscience of what they do and I will teach them to sit straight on their horses, and I warrant you they will not be beaten,” he proclaimed. But when he encouraged them to “make a conscience of what they do” they began to develop egalitarian political views, demanding universal suffrage (apart from women and servants!) and even the holding of land in common. They refused to go to Ireland to put down rebellion there. Cromwell savagely suppressed these oppositionists, who took too literally the

promises of the parliamentarians.

Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, supporters of the Commonwealth were marginalised for a period, but the accession of William and Mary and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 partially restored their fortunes. The Tories were now pariahs because of their Jacobite sympathies. Toland became a left Whig.

Dean Swift (of *Gulliver’s travels* fame) and Dr John Locke, the English philosopher, feared and despised Toland for his radicalism. Even Leibniz warned him that he had gone too far when he published *Adeisidaemon* or ‘The man without superstition’ in Holland in 1709. It was banned by papal decree.

However, he certainly remained an *establishment* oppositionist. He did not seek to spread his views among the common people. In 1720 Toland published his book *The pantheisticon*, which elaborated his vision of a new pantheistic religion. As it was written in Latin, even those among the common people who were able to read could not understand it. Toland was not about to summons anyone to the barricades.

He was politically close to the Whig politician, Robert Harley, but denounced him in 1710 for ‘Monkism’ - Monk was Cromwell’s general who sold out and was instrumental in the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Harley became a Tory and his downfall in 1715 is largely seen as the result of Toland’s pamphleteering against him.

But perhaps the one element that most outraged contemporary society was his unapologetic rationalism and his materialist philosophy. He subjected everything, including the deity, to critical appraisal. He gave unrelenting battle to all beliefs in superstition and miracles. He arrived at the conclusion that the universe was god. This was not such a large step for a Gaelic scholar familiar with St Patrick’s breastplate (*Día ar mo lámh dheish, Día ar mo lámh clé* - God at my right hand, god at my left hand, etc) and for a classical scholar familiar with ancient Greek notions of the deity.

However, when he asserted along with Spinoza that thought and being were one substance, the message became alarming. God did not create nature, but nature was god, asserted Spinoza, and Toland agreed. But he asserted against Descartes and also against Spinoza (expelled from the Jewish congregation for his irreverent speculation on the nature of god) that motion was a property of matter itself. God was truly becoming marginalised in this scenario, even if that was not Toland’s intention. He was

falsely accused of atheism. But it is only necessary to see what eventually became of all this philosophical speculation and conflict to see that not very many among the Irish establishment will want to begin on that road again.

Not only was this the stuff that “prepared men’s minds for the coming [French] revolution” (Engels), but it also fed directly into the ideology of Marxism itself. Marx and Engels believed that Spinoza was correct against Descartes. Plekhanov, the Russian Marxist, once asked Engels: “So in your opinion old Spinoza was right in saying that thought and extension were nothing but two attributes of one and the same substance?” “Of course,” Engels replied. “Old Spinoza was quite right.”

Toland came far closer to a materialist and secular philosophy than Spinoza did. His conception that motion is a property of matter is central to dialectical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism. The following conception from *The pantheisticon* is also central to Marxism: “Thought and soul is a property of matter. Thought is a special movement of the brain. The brain is the first cause of the soul, of thoughts and of sensations. Brain, being a highly composite material organ, can produce only material effects. Thus all ideas are corporal.”

In his famous polemic against Herr Eugene Dühring, Engels accuses him of having “arrived at a consciously thinking and acting nature”, thus “standing on a bridge ... from pantheism to deism”. Engels thus acknowledges the progressive development of pantheism against traditional deism. In his book *Grundsätze* in 1843 Ludwig Feuerbach wrote that pantheism was a “theological materialism, a negation of theology, but as yet on a theological standpoint”. Spinoza, he wrote, was “the Moses of modern free thinkers and materialists”. “What then, under examination, is what Spinoza calls ‘substance’, in terms of logic or metaphysics, and ‘god’ in terms of theology? Nothing else but nature,” he affirms. Marx and Engels were very grateful to Feuerbach for his contribution to the development of historical materialism.

Baron d’Holbach, the encyclopedist and atheist, is the clear link between Toland and Feuerbach and Engels. This German-French philosopher was on the left wing of the French philosophers. Like Toland he was the most radical thinker of his age and he had to have his best books published in Holland. Holbach saw the universe as a “deterministic system consisting of an eternal and constant totality of matter and motion”, according to *The Oxford companion to philosophy* (p371). Toland was indeed ‘storming the heavens’ in his thought and posed a huge threat to an English establishment now growing conservative and reactionary, following its two revolutions in the 17th century ●

What we fight for

● Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything.

● The Communist Party serves the interests of the working class. We fight all forms of opportunism and revisionism in the workers’ movement because they endanger those interests. We insist on open ideological struggle in order to fight out the correct way forward for our class.

● Marxism-Leninism is powerful because it is true. Communists relate theory to practice. We are materialists; we hold that ideas are determined by social reality and not the other way round.

● We believe in the highest level of unity among workers. We fight for the unity of the working class of all countries and subordinate the struggle in Britain to the world revolution itself. The liberation of humanity can only be achieved through world communism.

● The working class in Britain needs to strike as a fist. This means all communists should be organised into a single Party. We oppose all forms of separatism, which weakens our class.

● Socialism can never come through parliament. The capitalist class will never peacefully allow their system to be abolished. Socialism will only succeed through working class revolution and the replacement of the dictatorship of the capitalists with the dictatorship of the working class. Socialism lays the basis for the conscious planning of human affairs: ie, communism.

● We support the right of nations to self-determination. In Britain today this means the struggle for Irish freedom should be given full support by the British working class.

● Communists are champions of the oppressed. We fight for the liberation of women, the ending of racism, bigotry and all other forms of chauvinism. Oppression is a direct result of class society and will only finally be eradicated by the ending of class society.

● War and peace, pollution and the environment are class questions. No solution to the world’s problems can be found within capitalism. Its ceaseless drive for profit puts the world at risk. The future of humanity depends on the triumph of communism.

We urge all who accept these principles to join us. A Communist Party Supporter reads and fights to build the circulation of the Party’s publications; contributes regularly to the Party’s funds and encourages others to do the same; where possible, builds and participates in the work of a Communist Party Supporters Group.

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Time to change course

There is increasing concern amongst a section of Socialist Party members regarding the direction of the organisation and the leadership's increasingly authoritarian and arrogant response to those who question them.

An ever decreasing membership, accompanied by an increasing centralisation of finance, has led to a demoralisation at branch level, as many excellent comrades are constantly pressurised to raise finance and recruit at any cost. The mass expulsions of the Liverpool dissidents; the rumbles of rebellion, as evidenced at this year's congress - all paint a worrying picture. How is it that what was arguably Britain's most effective and influential Trotskyist party has eroded to the point where a slide into sectist obscurity is a very real danger?

Full-timers and party loyalists would have us believe that it is 'the objective conditions' that are to blame (insofar as they see anything wrong at all). At best this is undialectical. Reality, as we know, consists of the subjective as well, and the wilful refusal of the leadership to shoulder any of the responsibility is to be deplored.

The roots of the current crisis - for that is what it is - can be traced back

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"Given the current internal regime, I believe that identification would lead to my expulsion"
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to the collapse of Stalinism and the resulting theoretical tornado that ripped through the international left. However many comrades were unaware of the internal tensions that existed until the infamous Militant versus Socialist Party name change debate brought things out into the open. Although the proposal itself was contentious, more so were the perspectives supporting it.

Peter Taaffe's assertion that "There

exists a vacuum to the left of Labour that we can partially fill", and "There is no reason why we cannot build a small mass party numbering tens of thousands, particularly in the next two, three or four years" represented an ultra-left sectarian turn at odds with the needs determined by objective conditions (*Members Bulletin* No18, June 1996). At the same time the leadership's dismissal of "the broad socialist layer of previous periods" as "a very thin layer", and their insistence that "we have to reach beyond this strata to build our forces", because "the main task facing us now is to win support for a socialist programme and for socialist ideas generally", warned of a dilution of the revolutionary ethic and signalled an embrace of opportunism and reformism all at the same time (*ibid*). Quite an achievement!

The tone of the debate also forewarned of the current internal climate. The EC reply to the document submitted by Paul Hearse and John Bulaitis was a vituperative attack unworthy of Marxists seeking the support of the party, never mind the class. Despite the withdrawal of the more extreme formulations contained in the first draft, the version submitted to

members still contained accusations of "distortion", "misrepresentation" and, by implication, dishonesty (*Members Bulletin* No19, September 1996).

Unfortunately this is how the leadership is prone to behave. Comrades who resign are sneeringly dismissed: "A layer of long-standing members have left. A small section of them have tried to blame the organisation for their own inability to come to terms with the political period" (*Members Bulletin* No36, February 1999) - unlike the leadership who, as we will see later, have "come to terms with the political period" by rewriting history (*ibid*). Considering that amongst those who have resigned are comrades of the calibre of Nick Wrack and Margaret Crear - to name just two - this attitude is contemptible.

There can be no question of the leadership getting it wrong. Thus Peter Taaffe can assert: "In Russia and in eastern Europe a pro-capitalist wing of the bureaucracy exists. It is a minority and there is no possibility of a return to capitalism" (*Militant Tendency Stalinism in crisis* p15, May 20 1988); and then follow this up with: "We are the only organisation that has been able to correctly analyse the events of the last decade. We have

successfully analysed the causes and the impact of the collapse of Stalinism" (*Members Bulletin* No36, February 1999).

This refusal to admit errors, this inability to honestly and fraternally debate the way forward, has resulted in the current stagnation of the party. Notwithstanding the sterling work by many comrades at a local level, we have degenerated to a top-down, bureaucratically-centralised, finance-driven entity with an acute, possibly terminal, case of electoralitis, incapable of responding to the challenges set over the last decade and those of today. So much for the general secretary's "red 90s".

I expect comrades will ask two questions: why assume a pen name, and why use the journal of the CPGB rather than our own internal mediums? The reason is simple. Given the current internal regime, I believe that identification would lead to my expulsion; and secondly I believe it is important that more people be aware of the state of play regarding the party.

If my writing stimulates debate and steers us away from our current disastrous course, I will have achieved my goal ●

Pat Strong

SWP's new-found modesty

'Marxism at the millennium' takes place at a watershed time for the left.

There have been fundamental shifts in British and world politics. Over the past two decades the working class has suffered a series of huge defeats. Capitalist hegemony is practically unchallenged. Yet from the left, while there has been self-doubt, in the main there have been no serious reappraisals.

Moreover, this neglect has had its organisational consequences. The 'official communism' of the Stalinites is dying; Healy's cult-Trotskyism is gone; and Taaffe's Militant/Socialist Party is a dwindling, sad husk of its former self. While the Socialist Workers Party is now the largest organisation on the British left, this is more by default, as other organisations have either faded or shattered.

For all except the most absurd Panglossian the working class movement and its revolutionary vanguard is in a parlous, fractured and desultory state. The ideological victories of our common enemy during the Reagan and Thatcher era, alongside the collapse of the USSR, have had their knock-on effects within social democracy. Blairism, and the strange rebirth of liberal England, demands a new approach to politics from the revolutionary left, if we are to turn the corner and put the working class back on the political map.

There are signs that some sections of the left may be moving towards a more realistic appraisal of our fortunes, including the normally hyper-optimistic SWP. Writing in *Socialist Worker* (June 26), leading SWP theorist Alex Callinicos struck a sombre tone: "It is true that there is currently no widely accepted, credible alternative to liberal capitalism. But that is no cause for celebration, but rather, as long as it continues, a source of despair for those who long for something better." Presumably the lack of a "credible alternative" includes the SWP itself.

From an organisation whose cadre, such as Candy Udwin, have intoned faithfully that "there has never been a better time to be a socialist", Callinicos's new-found honesty is refreshing. And although this does not represent some road-to-Damascus conversion for the Cliffites, there is clearly movement underway.

Recent shifts in the Labour Party are the cause of the SWP's unaccustomed modesty. Its self-appointed position as the real conscience of Labour has been badly shaken. Even on May 1 1997, divisions were apparent. So much so that *Socialist Worker's* advice was to vote either Labour or socialist. Despite the obvious hopeless confusion of this message, the paper then went on to claim New Labour's victory as "our victory".

Finally entering the electoral fray

in the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly elections, the SWP's confused turn from auto-Labourism produced the paltry votes to be expected in present conditions. Forced into an electoral bloc as the junior partner in Scotland, the SWP could no longer dismiss the rest of the left as irrelevant.

Even so, the leadership hid its tentative entry into a European election coalition in London from the membership. Arthur Scargill's nomination at the top of the Socialist Labour Party's London list precipitated a crisis which paralysed the SWP political committee for three weeks. Eventually, the SWP withdrew in favour of Scargill's Marie C  leste of an organisation, promising to return for the London assembly elections. We shall see.

At root is the failure of the SWP's programmatic perspectives concerning the election of a Labour government. And on this point the SWP was not alone. Almost the entire British left predicted a "crisis of expectations" when Blair inevitably dashed the presumed illusions the working class had in the Labour Party. As the *Weekly Worker* said at the time, the illusions were not to be found in the class, but in the revolutionary left itself.

As Dave Osler of the soft Trotskyite Socialist Democracy Group admits: "Things are gloomy for socialists, all right. Yet this is certainly not where the bulk of the far left two

years ago were predicting we would be now. There seems little point in dredging up optimistic quotes from the period ... Instead, we need to start looking for some explanations as to why things haven't panned out the way our [sic] theory expected that they would" (*Green Left Weekly* June 23). Comrade Osler should take more time to look at those who *did* expect us to be roughly where we are now.

While there is undoubtedly dissatisfaction and a sullen indifference towards the government from wide sections, while there are no doubt pockets of isolated anger, the SWP must explain why none of this has as yet taken any organisational forms. Although, for the first time, the SWP is owning up that strikes are at the "lowest level since the stone age" (Charlie Kimber), is it seriously explaining why?

We need to temper our Marxist optimism with sober realism. Not 'carry on campaigning' official optimism from a wiser-than-thou leadership eager to keep the troops' morale up. This is no time for sectarian arrogance. We need a new culture on the left which allows for full, open and frank debate with a process of building unity in action. There can be no sacred cows in our debates.

Recently it seemed as though the SWP was calling for open debate on the left. An unsigned, centre page article in *Socialist Worker* said: "We

need serious discussion. To be effective, the left must debate, and at times argue over, the situation we face and the way forward. Without clarity of ideas, we can face further examples of people changing sides when the going gets tough" (June 26). It is a pity that what was presented as a call for debate descended into a hype for 'Marxism at the millennium'.

In its analysis of Labour's June 10 election defeat, *Socialist Worker* said: "What happened at the Euro elections is not just about Tony Blair and New Labour. It is a repeat of what has happened again and again with Labour. In 1945, 1964, 1974 and 1997, working people have elected Labour with great hopes that it would bring change. Yet each time those hopes have been dashed. The length of the 'honeymoon period' has varied, but Labour has always ended up attacking its own voters" (June 26).

While it is fanciful to claim that working people elected Blair with "great hopes", the SWP points to a truth central to Labourism. It is a party of capital. Yet what *Socialist Worker* fails to point out is that every time disillusionment with Labour has led to an electoral shift to the right, to a credible bourgeois opposition.

While at the moment the Tories are not a credible opposition, the left is even less credible. The challenge for us is there ●

Marcus Larsen