

CONFRONTATION

Frank Richards

MARXISM IN OUR TIME

Mike Freeman

THE ROAD TO POWER

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Living Marxism

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Editorial: Living Marxism *Sabena Norton* 1

Marxism in our time *Frank Richards* 4

The road to power *Mike Freeman* 32

Reviews 90

Living Marxism

As Marxists, we are only too well aware of the stagnation of Marxist theory and of the irrelevance of much of what goes under that title to everyday life. Our aim is to challenge this state of affairs and to contribute to the revival of Marxism as way of understanding and transforming contemporary society. Our success will depend on others as well as upon ourselves.

Marxist theory cannot be developed in isolation. It depends on a critical engagement in the class struggle and the evolution of the working class movement. It also requires interaction among Marxists in Britain and internationally and the revival of a long lost culture of debate and polemic.

Paradoxically, at a moment when the capitalist system stands exposed as an irrational and archaic form of social organisation, Marxism appears more widely discredited than ever before. In the West this is largely attributable to the recent triumph of reactionary ideas. The right-wing ideology which has come to dominate the political world of Washington, London, Paris and Bonn over the past five years has also penetrated intellectual life. Universities and other institutions of higher education, which long prided themselves on their intellectual independence and vitality, are now at the service of the status quo. They no longer even attempt to keep up the pretence of autonomy from the establishment.

The triumph of reaction has had a devastating effect on radical thought. It has become fashionable for left-wing thinkers to display their erudition by discovering new inadequacies in Marxist thought. Others simply repeat criticisms made long ago by apologists for the existing system. The commemoration of the centenary of Marx's death in 1983 turned into an occasion for proclaiming the demise of Marxism.

The common theme of radical commemorative speeches and articles was that Marx had been a great man, but his ideas were now 100 years out of date. A special issue of *Marxism Today* featured comments by various celebrities on what Marx meant to them. Almost all replied 'not much', and the overall impression was of a man who had become merely a historical curiosity. The only person who appeared to have any real appreciation of Marx was the right-wing journalist Peregrine Worsthorne: 'It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which the writings of Marx strengthened Conservatism, by making one aware of the nature of the proletarian danger and the need to combat that threat by all means fair and not so fair.' (*Marxism Today*, March 1983)

In his cynical way, Worsthorne expresses a fear of the working class that is real enough among the supporters of the British establishment. This is why the right has such a highly sensitive perception of class relations. It is also why right-wing authors have a more profound appreciation of the importance of theory and ideology than most left wingers.

The problems of modern society cannot be resolved in the realm of theory. But if theory is precise and clear it can throw light on these problems and hence serve as a guide to action. Theoretical clarity is essential to counter the influence of reaction and to give a conscious direction to the struggles of the workers' movement. Of course theory itself can only develop in relation to experience. The simple act of contemplation can produce only the arbitrary speculations of an individual, which are of little social significance.

As Marxists we believe that only those who participate in the anti-capitalist struggle can aspire to the name of Marxists. Only through interaction with the experience of the working class can problems be properly formulated and questions adequately resolved.

Confrontation is directed at the 'practising' Marxist. At the same time, we are only too well aware of the philistine activism that has long prevailed on the left in Britain.

The narrow activist approach invites easy answers and simplistic formulations. We have no wish to degrade Marxist theory by lowering it to the level of inane prescriptions. Clarity of purpose and conscious understanding cannot be achieved through ready-made formulas. On the contrary, working class activists are entitled to discuss theory which makes no concessions to vulgar prejudice. The Marxist project requires the highest standards if it is to express fully the complex relations and rich experience of everyday life. Marx expounded the method and set the standards — it is up to us to live up to them.

The first issue of *Confrontation* outlines the theoretical and political tasks facing Marxists in the eighties. The article by Frank Richards attempts to establish the foundations for the future development of Marxist thought. Mike Freeman explores the problems facing Marxist politics in the eighties and outlines the Revolutionary Communist Party's approach towards resolving them. We welcome comments and criticism of these articles and we urge our readers to adopt an active relationship with the journal. Although *Confrontation* is the fiercely partisan journal of the RCP, we are keen to promote debate with opposing viewpoints and we invite contributions from any section of the workers' movement.

Sabena Norton, June 1986

Marxism in our time

Over the past 15 years Marxism has come under considerable attack by theoreticians and academics in the West. Anti-Marxism has always been a favourite preoccupation of the right-wing intelligentsia. But in recent years many commentators who describe themselves as socialists have joined the fray. The trend has been most striking in France, where formerly left-wing intellectuals have issued fierce diatribes against the Marxist tradition. Marxism has become distinctly unfashionable on the Left Bank of Paris — and elsewhere too.

The concept of 'post-Marxism', now much favoured by left-wing thinkers, reflects the widely held view that the irrelevance of Marxism is now beyond controversy. There is a growing consensus on the left that little, if any, of Marx's theory is useful for understanding contemporary society. Post-Marxist theoreticians point to changes in the appearance of capitalist social relations as proof of the defects of Marx's *Capital*. Some argue that changes in the structure of the working class mean that the whole concept of class struggle has lost its validity; others, that Marxism is 'classist' because of its emphasis on the working class as the primary agent of social change.¹ Meanwhile key elements of Marxist politics, especially the theory of the state and of the dictatorship of the proletariat, are increasingly regarded as absurd.

Only one of 19 contributors to a recently published collection of articles on the crisis of social democracy tries to present a Marxist critique of reformist politics.² The rest regard that crisis as final proof that Marxism is out of date. In a concluding article, Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman argue for 'revolutionary reformism' as the only viable path to political change, and go on to dismiss revolution as a mindless fantasy.

To substantiate their argument, Miliband and Liebman reduce all the subtlety of the Marxist project to a familiar level — that of caricature. For the two writers, Marxism consists of nothing more than this:

'The building and nurturing of a "vanguard" party, highly organised on "democratic centralist" lines, involved in daily class struggle at the point of production and at all other points of tension in capitalist society, with the expectation that capitalist crisis must ultimately reach a point at which it will become unmanageable, as a result of which it will no longer be possible to contain popular anger....At that point, a revolutionary situation will have come to exist, which will make it possible for the "vanguard" party to seize the moment and lead the working class towards a seizure of power. The bourgeois state will be smashed, and replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat...'³

Such cynical 'summaries' of the entire Marxist canon are now so commonplace among left-wing theoreticians as to serve as an excellent substitute for reasoned argument.

It is interesting that the anti-Marxist industry rarely considers theoretical issues. Its energies are directed against Marxist politics, while statements on fundamental matters of theory appear only as an afterthought. This approach sums up contemporary anti-Marxism. It represents a political reaction against the consequences of Marx's ideas, not a scientific critique of the theory itself.

There are many causes for this political reaction against Marxism. The most important ones are the demise of the radical petit bourgeoisie since the early seventies, and the fragmentation of Western Stalinism. The implications of these developments will be discussed further in a forthcoming issue of *Confrontation*. Here our aim is to discuss their effect on theoretical questions and in

particular, to examine what has become known as the 'crisis of Marxism'.

Our concerns are unashamedly partisan: we wish to show the immediacy and relevance of Marx through a critique of his critics.

The crisis of Marxism

Exhortations about the need to update theory in line with current circumstances hold a central place in the anti-Marxist pantheon. Yet the most striking feature of anti-Marxist criticism is its lack of originality. Today's anti-Marxist scholars only repeat points first raised by revisionist thinkers at the turn of the century. The words have changed — we are in the age of the 'new middle class', of the end of 'corporate class consciousness' and of the 'second industrial revolution'. But otherwise little is written which cannot be found in the works of the German revisionist Eduard Bernstein and the Austro-Marxist school. Marxism has its roots in the nineteenth century, but so do the criticisms laid against it today. What, then, really lies behind them?

Theoretical disputes cannot be fully grasped on their own terms. For example, the recent growth of hostility towards the Soviet Union and Stalinism is not the result of new conceptual breakthroughs. Not long ago, the people who now denounce the Kremlin as a menace to civilisation strongly supported it.⁴ So what has happened to change their views? It cannot be that the Soviet Union has become more repressive and authoritarian. Compared to the terror of the thirties the Soviet Union today looks positively liberal. We have the paradox that, while it kept a dutiful silence under Stalin's reign, the European left now objects to comparatively trivial forms of repression. What explains the shift in left-wing attitudes is not new facts about the Soviet Union, but changes in the left-wing intelligentsia itself.

The capitalist crisis and the decline of traditional working class organisations have thrown radical thought into disarray. The collapse of trade unionism and the profound crisis of identity of the social democratic and Stalinist parties together express the growing irrelevance of traditional collective solutions to the problems

created by world recession. The more such solutions lose credibility, the more convincing individualistic responses appear. Europe has witnessed a growing individualisation of its left-wing intelligentsia. In the political sphere this has brought about a marked shift to the right. Even intellectuals who proclaim themselves socialist boast about being 'independent' and 'non-aligned'. From such a perspective Marxism, with its emphasis on collective struggle, appears as an archaic and even alien ideology.

The course taken by Marxism over the past century has always been conditioned by changing class relations and social development. As a general rule, periods of sharp class antagonism have stimulated interest and support for Marx, while periods of stability have encouraged criticism and attacks. This pattern was already evident in the decades preceding the rise of imperialism, decades in which Marxism achieved considerable influence in the working class. Bitter class conflict and the overtly anti-working class character of the nineteenth-century state appeared to vindicate Marx. However, the subsequent period of prosperity and reform instilled a critical attitude to his theory. In this period Marxism attracted the scorn of a new breed of reformist politicians and was substantially revised by many of its supporters. It was only when an era of revolution opened up with the October Revolution in Russia that Marxism once again began to influence significant sections of the European proletariat.

In addition to the barbs that were naturally thrown against it by the ruling class, Marxism has always faced a challenge from within its own camp. The tendency to revise Marx is proportional to the strength of bourgeois ideology in the working class at any given period. Marxism is open to revision because it is not a closed and defined philosophy. New developments require fresh analysis and Marxist theory has to evolve alongside the changing forms of social relations. Marx himself ridiculed those who expected theory to provide ready-made answers for all time. He lampooned Proudhon and other utopian socialists for 'hunting for a so-called "*science*" by means of which they want to devise *a priori* a formula for the "solution of the social question", instead of deriving their science from a critical knowledge of the historical movement'.⁵

Marxism is not a philosophy or a ready-made system of thought. Neither does it provide an abstract method of investigation which can simply be applied to new phenomena. Marx's famous criticism of Lassalle was directed precisely against just such an attempt to apply dialectics as a ready-made schema. Writing of Lassalle's efforts in the realm of theory, Marx observed:

'He does it like a schoolboy who has to prove in his exercise that he's got his "essence", "appearance" and "dialectical process" down pat. When the schoolboy has mastered the dialectical method, one can be sure that nevertheless he will be able to conduct this process of thought properly only according to the prescribed recipe and in the sacred forms....He will learn to his cost that to develop a science by criticism to the point where it can be dialectically presented is an altogether different thing from applying an abstract ready-made system of logic to vague notions of a system of this kind.'⁶

The open and changing character of Marxism follows from the close relationship it assigns to *understanding* and experience. For Marxists *practice* has a central place in theory because understanding comes from man's interaction with nature.

Marxism cannot be developed in isolation from the class struggle. To become an adequate instrument for that struggle, it must interact continuously with social relations. Revolution exists first as a theoretical possibility. Its fulfilment is found in the class struggle, through a process of continuous interaction between theory and changing social conditions. The result of this process is *conscious activity*. The problem of theory in and of itself is foreign to Marx. It is through social experience that understanding develops. Writing of the labourer, Marx notes that 'by thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature'.⁷ Likewise man's consciousness 'not only reflects the objective world' but, as Lenin pointed out, 'creates it' as well.⁸ We can now understand the meaning of Marx's oft-quoted remark: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it.'⁹ Marx does not counterpose practice to theory, as is often believed. Rather, he is asserting the fundamental premise of his theory of knowledge: that to interpret the world requires changing it. Academicism is antithetical to Marxism — which is why

there can be no such thing as 'academic Marxism'.

What gives Marxism its revolutionary significance is its evolving character and its dynamic relationship to social change. Unfortunately even those who describe themselves as Marxists have tended to lose sight of this. Too often, they have ignored the vital task of developing Marx's theory in line with changing social conditions. Instead they take the results of his inquiry as fixed and then attempt to reconcile them with reality. Such 'orthodox' efforts turn Marxism into dogma and make it vulnerable to revisionist attack. For the revisionists themselves present the results of Marx's analysis as his theory and counterpose it to new social conditions to demonstrate its irrelevance. Thus orthodoxy and revisionism in different ways express the same problem: the failure to develop Marxist theory.

Bernstein pioneered the method of contrasting fresh realities to Marx's 'predictions'. He observed that from 1880 to 1900 the bourgeois state had begun to be more responsive to democratic pressure, that capitalism experienced a period of stable growth, working class living standards improved and a new middle class was in formation. Bernstein counterposed this 'new reality' to Marx's theory of capitalist crisis to show that the latter had become irrelevant and dated. In anticipation of contemporary criticisms of Marx he argued that 'social conditions have not developed to such an acute opposition of things and classes as depicted in the *Manifesto*.'¹⁰

For today's academic Marxists the further passage of time confirms the redundancy of Marx and of the historic mission he assigned the working class. Writing in *Marxism Today* Stuart Hall recently observed that 'the Marxist conception of socialism was grounded in an earlier grasp of the historic tendencies of capitalist development.' According to Hall time has undermined the theory and the historic mission it assigns to the working class:

'What we are here referring to is therefore more than the collapse of the traditional historic agencies of change. It is the erosion of the cultures of work, economic organisation, social and sexual identities in which the left, in an earlier era unreflectively was rooted. It is therefore necessary to ask, on what new actual forms of social life is socialism's conception of the

future rooted or grounded today? The answer is by no means obvious.¹¹

Like Bernstein, Hall turns historical change into an argument against Marxism. But Marxism would not be Marxism if it did not presuppose change and the emergence of new forms of social organisation.

The revolutionary significance of Marxism

Marxism is a total theory and any attempt to isolate certain of its components is bound to give rise to distortions. It is the dialectical materialist method as developed by Marx which provides the key to an appreciation of his theory. Marx's conception of history was materialist — but not in the sense in which this is conventionally understood. Marxist materialism recognises that material reality evolves on the basis of a dialectical relationship between society and nature. This relationship (which Marx called the social relations of production) is governed by social laws which are independent of man's will. Marxism is an attempt to come to terms with these laws with the precision of science.

The distinctive, revolutionary content of Marxism flows from its understanding of the relationship between material reality and subjective consciousness. Marx recognised that relations of production throw up 'definite forms of social consciousness'. He remarked: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.'¹² In other words, the relations of production give rise to specific ideas, ideologies and so on. This view has been much misunderstood in subsequent debates about the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructure'. Academic Marxists have tried to argue that ideas are autonomous or 'relatively' autonomous from the social relations of production and speculation abounds about the degree to which the base determines the superstructure. This approach — which reflects the narrow preoccupation of contemporary Marxism with ideology and culture, as opposed to real social and historical trends — presents a break with the Marxist understanding of the relationship between reality and consciousness.

For Marx the base-superstructure problem did not exist. There is no duality here which has to be reconciled. Marx discusses 'definite forms of social consciousness' existing in unity with their content — the social relations of production.¹³ But Marx shows that forms of consciousness cannot be directly derived from their social content. They can only be grasped by an analysis which uncovers the mediating links between social relations and consciousness. Marx's theory does not provide a formula for solving this problem, but an approach which must be developed through specific analysis. In his treatment of legal ideology in *Grundrisse* Marx observes: 'The really difficult point to discuss here is how relations of production develop unevenly as legal relations.'¹⁴

The problem is not to divine the general relationship between base and superstructure. This merely invites abstract philosophical speculation. The problem is to look at each particular social relation in all its specificity, and in all its forms. This becomes clear in Marx's remarks on art:

'To examine the connection between spiritual production and material production it is above all necessary to grasp the latter itself not as a general category but in *definite historical* form.... If material production itself is not conceived in its *specific historical* form, it is impossible to understand what is specific in the spiritual production corresponding to it and the reciprocal influence of one on the other.'¹⁵

Marx's achievement was to make clear the historically specific nature of social phenomena. For Marx, the task of scientific inquiry was to show how different social determinations interacted in different ways at different times. Only in this way can theory comprehend society in movement.

Since every form of social organisation is historically specific, it follows that it is also *transient*. Every social order is in flux and at a certain stage gives way to a new one. Marx appreciated that the materialist dialectic was an 'abomination' to the bourgeoisie for precisely this reason. Materialism highlights the change which lies at the core of social development. As Marx put it, materialism 'regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature no less than its

momentary existence because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary'.¹⁶ For Marx change comes about through the evolution of social relations of production. At a certain stage the growth of the productive forces comes into conflict with the existing social organisation, leading to its displacement. The displacement of the old society occurs once this conflict becomes acute enough for society to become conscious of its impasse. In Henryk Grossman's succinct phrase, change requires the 'slow maturation' of both 'subjective and objective factors'. Hence Marxism combines 'evolutionary and revolutionary elements in an original manner to form a meaningful unit'.¹⁷ Beyond a certain point gradual evolution leads to a sudden, major social catharsis. Revolution is the necessary culmination of the evolutionary process and the class struggle becomes the engine of social transformation.

No system collapses by itself. Revolution requires the intervention of a revolutionary class. But revolutionary struggle is not a chance incident: it is the outcome of the pressure created by material conditions. Once it begins the revolutionary class itself becomes an objective factor in history. This relationship is the basis for the unity between theory and practice. In changing history, the revolutionary class changes itself.

Marx's uniqueness consisted in putting communism on a scientific basis. He demonstrated 1) that capitalism, like every other form of social organisation, is transient 2) that, at a certain stage, capitalist relations of production would act as a brake on the development of the productive forces and 3) that only destroying this brake could guarantee human development. For Marx communism was not a utopia but a stage in historical development whose foundations were already laid within capitalist society. As Marx argued, unless the possibility of communism is already contained within the existing society its realisation depends on faith alone: 'If we do not find in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then attempts to explode it would be quixotic.'¹⁸

The reforming of Marxism

Today virtually every Marxist text is prefaced by a self-conscious disowning of 'vulgar materialism', 'fundamentalism' or 'reductionism'. At first sight it is not at all clear why such denunciations of orthodoxy have become so popular. For while left-wing academics are no strangers to vulgarity, materialism is distinctly out of fashion. Even a superficial survey of new Marxist texts reveals a strong inclination towards idealism and a positive distaste for materialism. What, then, do the polemics against vulgar materialism really represent? And why are they always associated with injunctions that we rethink the fundamentals of Marxist politics? To give an accurate answer we need to see how the twentieth century has moulded Marxism — how, above all, Marxism was affected by the Russian Revolution and its degeneration and by the failure of the European revolution.

The highpoint of Marxism

The period 1917-24 can be considered to be the highpoint of Marxism. The social upheaval of these years gave a profound stimulus to the development of Marxist theory. The most outstanding innovations were made by the Bolsheviks, but this was also a vital phase for the development of important theoreticians like Lukács, Gramsci, Korsch and Grossmann.¹⁹ The Russian Revolution and the problems thrown up by the creation of a new society generated debates which were rich in theoretical content.

Nonetheless there were serious problems. Especially outside Russia, the world's first successful overthrow of capitalism caught the international revolutionary movement unawares. As a result, Marxist theory often lagged behind events — a problem which played a major part in the defeat of the European working class in the twenties. In the Soviet Union the pressure of events forced the Bolsheviks to concentrate on keeping a grip on practical problems. There was little time left for theoretical elaboration.

Marxism's prestige among the international working class was unprecedented. But there were early signs that the defeat of the European revolution would create tensions in the Marxist camp.

Predictably the most serious blows came from the reformists. Social democrats loathed revolutionary violence and greeted its defeat in Europe as a vindication of their point of view. The success of the Russian Revolution could not be denied. But it could be dismissed as an aberration, arising out of the peculiarities of Eastern society, which showed that a similar denouement was simply not on in the civilised West. Thus Karl Kautsky's major work of the period portrayed October as a negation of Marxist principles. For him Russia was too backward economically even to dream of building communism:

'The Bolsheviks are Marxists and have inspired the proletarian sections coming under their influence with great enthusiasm for Marxism. Their dictatorship, however, is in contradiction to the Marxist teaching that no people can overcome the obstacle offered by the successive phases for their development by a jump, or legal enactment.'²⁰

Kautsky ignored the international dimension of the Russian Revolution and wrote it off as a product of exceptional national circumstances. In counterposing Western to Eastern experience, Kautsky did something else too—he anticipated one of the central themes of what today is called 'Western Marxism'. At the time, Kautsky's arguments were demolished by Lenin and Trotsky.²¹ But as the European working class went from one setback to another, Kautsky's views gained wider assent. Even committed Marxists were disoriented by the defeat of the European revolution and the subsequent revival of reformism:

'The West stands still.... The German proletarian movement, languishing in the same swampy morass the entire land is in, leaves its endless crises without the struggle to transform them. Every putsch in Germany goes under, while every idea shoots beyond reality, without influence, almost without meaning.'²²

Written in 1924, Ernst Bloch's epitaph summed up the intellectual climate which prevailed as Marxism began to disintegrate.

The Stalinisation of Marxism

As October withered and fascism grew, sporadic despair over the impasse faced by the revolutionary movement gave way to more systematic attempts to reinterpret Marxist theory. Stalinism, which transformed Marxism into an apologia for the bureaucracy, played a critical role in this process. But the initial impulse for questioning Marxism came from Western Europe. European Marxists became increasingly preoccupied with the causes of working class defeat. Attention began to focus on the resilience of the capitalist system and of capitalist ideology. Hit by a succession of reversals, Marxists began to lose sight of the revolutionary potential contained in the contradictory social relations of capitalism.

With pessimism mounting, theoretical work was more and more pursued outside the context of political struggle. Increasingly, Marxist intellectuals acquired the role of passive commentators. Testing ideas in practice, an activity essential to the development of a transformative theory like Marxism, tended to give way to literary meanderings. Marxist theoreticians became aloof from the class struggle — although Gramsci and Lukács were two honourable exceptions to this trend. Separating theory from the class struggle inevitably led to a loss of direction. Marxists began to react to events and to substitute impressionism for methodical scientific inquiry. It was understandable that they should want to explore the failure of revolution. But instead of situating it in historical perspective, Marxists began to take the problem of working class consciousness as alpha and omega. The greater their obsessions with this problem, the more loosely did they root it in the surrounding material conditions. As years passed, ideology and the bourgeois state came to be regarded as agencies whose power knew no constraints.

Gramsci was a transitional figure who made a considerable contribution to Marxism. Early on, his writings gave a mature, persuasive account of why the revolutionary movement had been able to move to the seizure of power in Russia — and why, in Europe, it remained at a much more primitive level. Gramsci noted:

'The determination which in Russia was direct and drove the masses into the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is

complicated by all these political superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917.²³

Gramsci pinpointed the problem that reformism presented in the advanced capitalist countries. His elaboration of this problem was very much in line with the issues discussed in Lenin's writings on the tactic of the united front. Lenin argued that the initial overthrow of capitalism was easy in Russia, but that it would be 'more difficult for Russia than for the European countries to *continue* the revolution and bring it to its consummation'.²⁴ Like Lenin, Gramsci recognised that the spread of state-sponsored organs of class collaboration in Europe resulted in relations between workers and capitalists there being more mediated than in Russia. Reformism therefore acquired particular strength in the European labour movement. This recognition led Lenin to give top priority to the struggle against reformism — an approach endorsed by Gramsci.

However, when this struggle failed to turn out favourably, Gramsci began to exaggerate the power of reformism. The survival of reformism in fact had little to do with its intrinsic strengths. It was rather a tribute to the ineffectiveness and inconsistency of the challenge mounted against it by the European communist movement.²⁵ Gramsci's one-sided interpretation of the problem showed that his theory too began to be coloured by isolation and pessimism. That is why, as Mussolini consolidated his rule, Gramsci's writing acquired a pessimistic tone. In his *Prison Notebooks* a fixation with culture and ideology leads Gramsci to separate politics from material relations. Gramsci's famous comparison of East and West shows how much he was overawed by the power of the Western bourgeois state:

'In Russia the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed.'²⁶

For Gramsci the 'sturdy structure' of Western society narrowed the scope for revolution. He began to advocate a more long-term approach. That, sooner or later, such an analysis was bound to give rise to reformist conclusions was shown by Gramsci's discovery of the virtues of 'passive revolution'. Still, Gramsci himself warned of the danger of 'historical defeatism'.²⁷ It was left to others to draw out the reformist implications of his theory, particularly after the Second World War, when the search began in earnest for an 'alternative model' to the Russian Revolution.

Gramsci lived and died a Marxist, but his theory eventually lost sight of revolution. Although symptomatic of a wider malaise, his influence on Marxism in the late twenties and in the thirties was limited. In that period, Marxism was much more severely emasculated by the Kremlin, which derived immense authority in the international working class movement from its inheritance of 1917.

In the hands of the Stalinists Marxism became a turgid series of definitions, each of which could always be recast to meet the changing political requirements of the Soviet bureaucracy. The degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Stalinisation of the Communist International led to the destruction of Marxism as a living force. It still existed, but only in a thoroughly perverted form.

Today it is fashionable to talk about the crisis of Marxism. But in fact Marxism never recovered from the blow it was dealt by Stalinism. Generations of workers and intellectuals learnt their Marxism from Stalin — and understandably ended up rejecting the theory as irrelevant. A handful of Marxist theoreticians survived, but only as marginal figures. Stalinist intellectuals on the other hand tended to absent themselves from the perils of political involvement and retreat instead into the search for personal fulfilment, theorising about history, psychology and aesthetics. Marxism existed only as bureaucratic dogma or as professorial pastime. Its emancipatory role had become a thing of the past.

Post-war Marxism

When people discuss the crisis of Marxism today what they are really talking about is the crisis of *Stalinist* Marxism. Stalinism turned Marx into a doctrinaire who could provide fixed answers and 'truths' for all time. The results of Marx's scientific inquiry were set in stone while those insights which betrayed the revolutionary thrust of his theory were revised. But Stalinist Marxism met the fate that awaits all dogmas. It began to disintegrate as soon as changing material conditions exposed its incoherence and artificiality.

The chief cause behind the crisis of Stalinist theory was the post-war boom. This contradicted Stalinist thought in all essentials. Instead of its predicted inevitable collapse, capitalism experienced an unprecedented era of prosperity. Before Stalin died, only minor theoretical modifications were permitted to accommodate this unexpected turn of events. But after he was gone—and particularly after Khrushchev denounced him at the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956—the dam burst.²⁸ On the left, the ensuing ideological chaos was generally interpreted as a crisis of Marxism. People who knew Marxism only in its Stalinist form regarded the collapse of the intellectual and political authority of the Stalinist bureaucracy as an indictment of Marxism itself.

A new dimension opened up in the crisis of Marxism. The East-West problem which had already created so many difficulties for Marxists in the inter-war period, now assumed a new form. No longer was it simply a question of accounting for the failure of the Western revolution. It also became necessary to account for Stalinism. And, since Marxism had long been synonymous with Stalinism, the pressure to abandon Marx himself became immense. The boom stifled Marxism. Growth, stability, the extension of state involvement in social and economic life and marked improvements in working class living standards appeared to confirm the irrelevance of a revolutionary perspective. This period saw the most thoroughgoing attempts to revise Marxism and to transform it into a schematic sociology. Stalinist theoreticians 'updated' Marxism until virtually every component of the original theory was defined out of existence.

Had the post-war boom continued, Marxism would have become an object of historical curiosity. But its demise was halted by social upheaval in the West. In the late sixties the boom began to falter and mass industrial militancy erupted, signalling a revival of class conflict. The renewed manifestation of the tendencies towards stagnation inherent in capital also precipitated a crisis of bourgeois ideology and a radicalisation of the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia. This period saw a flowering of Marxism. But it was a Marxism that had still not cut its links with the Stalinist heritage. This post-war Marxism displayed a number of features which we shall now look at.

The separation of theory from the class struggle

Marxist theory became uniquely academic. Virtually all Marxist theoreticians of the post-war era were professional academics with no experience of or inclination toward political struggle. This isolation is well-known and many academic Marxists themselves have regularly issued calls to unite theory with practice. Ferdinand Claudin's *Some reflections on the crisis of Marxism* warned that it could 'eventually be converted into an academic discipline, without much influence on practical struggles for the transformation of the world'.²⁹ In fact Claudin only summed up what had already happened.

Academic Marxism was not merely an unfortunate product of historical circumstance. It also reflected the social position of the radical intelligentsia. Rudolf Hilferding was the first to contend that you can be a Marxist in theory, but not in practice.³⁰ Following him, Western Marxists began to talk about the 'autonomy' of theory. This approach found its most consistent advocate in the French Stalinist academic Louis Althusser. Althusser coined the presumptuous term 'theoretical practice' to justify the contemplative existence preferred by contemporary Marxist theoreticians.³¹ Henceforth every intellectual with a mouth or a pen could boast an involvement in theoretical practice. The fact that this absurd notion was taken seriously revealed just how much Western Marxism had been dragged through the dust.

Autonomy of theory meant that subjective inclination became the guiding principle in theoretical development. As a consequence

even genuine theoretical breakthroughs remained arbitrary and inconsequential, as they were not tested through interaction with the class struggle. Thus a number of Marxist intellectuals who made positive steps towards retrieving the revolutionary content of Marxism—for example, Elmar Altvater and Lucio Colletti—ended up renouncing their views.³²

New Left Review editor Perry Anderson's well-known *Considerations on Western Marxism* provides a fascinating display of what happens once theory is given autonomous status. After pages and pages of examples detailing the separation of Marxism from working class politics and bemoaning this phenomenon, Anderson's 'Afterword' defends...academic Marxism. In an enviable choice of phrase, Anderson proclaims: 'There will thus always remain an inherent scissiparity between knowledge and action, theory and practice, for any possible science of history.'³³ Not surprisingly, he then goes on to reject every important theoretical conquest of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky.

Anderson explains the gap between theory and practice by arguing that, in Stalin's heyday, Marxist intellectuals had two choices: they could knuckle under, join the Stalinist parties and 'retain a certain nominal level of contact with the life of the national working class'; or they could be prophets in the wilderness, shorn of any 'anchorage within the social class for whose benefit theoretical work in Marxism alone has ultimate meaning'.³⁴ This may have been roughly what happened, but it was not a choice a revolutionary Marxist could accept.

Once Marxism ceases to interact with society it ceases to be Marxism. The introduction of practice as a central criterion of logic was the starting point for the development of Marxism as a distinct theory. Marx observed:

'Already with Hegel, the absolute spirit of history has its material in the masses, but only finds adequate expression in philosophy. But the philosopher appears merely as the instrument by which absolute spirit, which makes history, arrives at self-consciousness after the historical movement has been completed. The philosopher's role in history is thus limited to the subsequent consciousness, for the real movement is executed

unconsciously by the absolute spirit. Thus the philosopher arrives *post-festum*.³⁵

Theory separated from the making of history can be no more than after-the-event commentary: an *opinion* that cannot be tested or developed in the light of social experience. Theory of this kind may yield a few insights about the past, but cannot anticipate trends or shape the future.

As Lukács argued, to rise above the level of abstract opinion, theory, 'if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfilment in practice', must develop an 'organisational arm'.³⁶ A Marxist theoretician has no choice but to be a Marxist politician, to ensure that the struggle for theory yields organisational consequences. Yet this is the course that professional Marxists have always avoided. What is more, their separation of theory from practice has important political consequences. Their theory ceases to be a transforming one — it blends with reformism. Ultimately it reflects the old reformist separation of the final goal from the existing movement. Such theory, like the Sunday sermons on socialism beloved of classical social democracy, has no practical consequences. The theoretician becomes reconciled to the movement as it is.

Note that celebrating the autonomy of theory also allows Marxist theoreticians to declare their 'independence' from everyday political life. Just as Althusser disclaimed responsibility for French Communist Party leader Georges Marchais, so every autonomous intellectual distances his theories from the more objectionable practices of his party-political mentors. This freelance Marxism is evident in all the major British theoretical journals from *Marxism Today* to the *New Left Review*.

The rejection of materialism

Unanimity prevails among academic Marxists about the need to reject historical materialism. With working class revolution contained since the inter-war period, Marxists now meditate on spiritual matters. In place of research into the accumulation of capital, they dabble in film and linguistics. Materialism — 'vulgar', 'crude' or 'simplistic' — has become an object of derision. The

disdain for what is an essential organising principle of Marxist science is not simply the product of a theoretical misunderstanding. It is a response to the strength of bourgeois ideology in the post-war period, which has led to a basic lack of conviction in the potential for revolutionary change.

Professional Marxism is so mesmerised by the power of ideas that it can lapse into the irrational. The Frankfurt School, which reduces social analysis to radical Freudianism, expresses this trend most vividly.³⁷ But the Frankfurt School has only drawn out the logic of anti-materialism in a particularly extreme form. A recent article by two highly respected Marxist academics claims in all seriousness that Western Marxism has defeated historical materialism.³⁸ Such is the force of anti-materialist prejudice in the academy that dissidents feel powerless to resist. Cohen, the author of a confused defence of historical materialism, concludes a subsequent piece in terms which recall the recantations of medieval heretics:

'I have come to think more critically about historical materialism. I have not rejected it, but I have doubts about it. I have also been involved with many others in investigations which seek to preserve what is good in it and eliminate what is bad.'³⁹

Picking and choosing is the preferred procedure of Western Marxism. Usually what is chosen are the peripheral aspects of Marxism and what is thrown out is its revolutionary content.

The idealist trajectory of Western Marxism was most clearly marked out by Althusser and — indirectly — by Gramsci. Althusser fragmented Marx's theory, breaking up the dialectical inter-connections between concepts. He abstracted concepts like forces and relations of production from their context so as to examine them in all their autonomy. In Althusser's work politics is severed from economics. Virtually every aspect of social life takes on a life of its own. Ideology in particular is elevated into a discrete independent force.⁴⁰

Althusser's Marxism-as-Thesaurus appeals to the non-dialectical imagination. The confidence with which he defines forces and relations of production stands in sharp contrast to the caution exercised by Marx. Marx noted that the dialectic between these

concepts was one 'whose boundaries are to be determined'.⁴¹ The definitional approach was alien to Marx precisely because concepts only acquire meaning in relation to each other. Wrenching concepts out of context deprives them of the ability to throw light on the dynamic of social relations. Such procedures represent a break with the Marxist method and a reversion to pre-Hegelian philosophy.

Today many Althusserians have explicitly rejected Marxism. But in the seventies the Althusserian school was the dominant form of Marxism. This was not because its founder produced profound theoretical insights. Indeed Althusser's writings reveal an often embarrassing incomprehension of basic Marxist categories.⁴² Rather, Althusser's reinterpretation of Marxism trivialised Marxist concepts, so that they became consistent with bourgeois theory — became, in other words, a ready-made model. Althusser inspired a resurgence of radical bourgeois idealism. It was because of this that he attracted a profusion of followers to the method of 'theoretical practice'.

The rediscovery of Gramsci in the seventies is more easily explained. Gramsci provided academic Marxism with the authority of an authentic revolutionary. His virtue was that he was dead, so that just about any position could be attributed to him. Althusser himself claimed Gramsci's mantle, modestly intimating that, to his knowledge, Gramsci was the only theoretician 'who went any distance on the road I am taking'.⁴³ Another Marxist professor expressed his affinity to Gramsci like this:

'He ascribed to superstructural activities a primary role in Marxist theory. Following in Lenin's footsteps Gramsci defended the primacy of political practice. Lenin however did not analyse the theoretical foundations of such a practice. It was Gramsci who developed the theory of politics and thus founded a Marxist science of politics.'⁴⁴

Thus transformed into a theorist of 'politics', a courageous revolutionary now serves as a model for the separation of theory and practice.

Theories of impressionism

Having dropped historical materialism, Western Marxism dissolves into the pre-Marxist duality of philosophical conjecture and empirical science. Its analysis of social phenomena is empiricist. In the absence of a materialist framework, theory becomes unable to grasp general social trends. Instead the surface appearances generated by capitalist society become the point of departure and the limit of investigation. Thus Western Marxism pursues autonomy to the bitter end. Phenomena are analysed in isolation from each other and the *unique* and *special* features of the object of investigation are stressed at the expense of underlying social relationships. Thus, instead of representing real society in movement, theory becomes a series of pigeon-holes.

This empiricism is not immediately apparent in the writings of the Western Marxists. Many of their works are heavily philosophical, dealing with 'methodology' rather than empirical investigation. But the problem with abstract methodology is that it remains external to the object of investigation. In place of the historical materialist method, which uncovers the inner links behind surface phenomena, we find only tired universals. Objects of inquiry are forced into abstract definitions. As a result theory becomes unmediated, incapable of embracing the points of transition between it and the object of study. This explains why there is such a separation in the works of Western Marxists between chapters on method and chapters on facts.

Ultimately such abstract schemas must yield to the real world, for a changing reality provokes changes in theory. As a result theory becomes unstable and impressionistic. No sooner is one proposal advanced before a 'self-criticism' is published. Impressionism becomes the guiding principle of theoretical development, scientific integrity is jettisoned, and arguments are made, thrown out and forgotten at a dizzying pace. The British academics Hindess and Hirst are the most grotesque example of this trend: they used to publish a new theory every year.

The West is good — the East is bad

All Western Marxists follow Kautsky's verdict that October 1917 was an unseemly departure — a product of unparalleled Eastern circumstances from which there is nothing to learn about revolution in the West. The very term 'Western Marxism' is a reaction against Soviet Marxism. However Western Marxists wish to distinguish themselves not only from Stalinism, but from the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism. A recent text on the origins of Western Marxism notes:

'A non-Western Marxism has dominated the history of Marxism this century: to speak of *Western Marxism* is to speak of the overwhelming impact exerted upon Marxism itself by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its subsequent development. Not only did a Marxist revolution *not* take place where it was supposed to (Europe 1917-23) but the Marxist ideology that resulted from this paradoxical set of circumstances — Soviet Marxism — came to prevail in the West as well as Russia.'⁴⁵

Such resistance to 'Eastern' Marxism can take an openly chauvinist form. One British academic recently took it upon himself to remind readers that Marxism is 'after all a Western body of thought, originally formed in the context of Western intellectual tradition in philosophy and social sciences'. He added: 'Western Marxism, from this point of view, is simply the mainstream of Marxist thought; communist orthodoxy a deviation, if not an aberration, engendered in peculiar social and historical conditions.'⁴⁶ Keeping the abomination of Leninism at arm's length from European universities has become a key theme in Western Marxism and indicates its reactionary thrust.

Western Marxists often flaunt an almost pathological hatred for the Russian Revolution, portraying it as the source of all the left's problems. According to Claudin the October Revolution opened up a theoretical crisis in Marxism.⁴⁷ Others have gone further, blaming Lenin for Stalinism and — in a splendid twist — slotting Marx himself into a rogues' gallery of 'un-Western' thinkers.⁴⁸ Despite its strong anti-Eastern thrust, however, Western Marxism cannot conceal its origins in Stalinist theory. This is particularly apparent in the Eurocommunist current, which explicitly acknowledges its debt

to Bukharin, Dimitrov and Togliatti. It may be an irony, but the role played by these leading Stalinist thinkers in the destruction of Leninism strikes a sympathetic chord among Western Marxists. Repelled by the *consequences* of Stalinism, Western Marxists remain a product of it.

Denunciations of the East are complemented by applause for the West. European Marxists depict Western bourgeois democracy as a launching pad for socialism. Santiago Carrillo, the father of Eurocommunism, argues that 'it is logical that the communist and socialist parties of the developed capitalist West should establish, not just their tactics, but their entire strategy on the basis of the democratic process'.⁴⁹ The delight with which Western Marxists regard Western society indicates that their theory has become an ideology of bourgeois order. It is not only against revolutions in the past (1917) but also in the present and the future. In the writings of Althusser the class struggle is reduced to 'conquering combat positions' inside the bourgeois state.⁵⁰ All Western Marxists object strongly to class violence and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The term 'insurrectionist model' has been coined to caricature the struggle for working class power.

Marxism has become a philosophy of bourgeois democracy. Poulantzas, whose scathing attacks on 'vulgar Marxism' have been celebrated in centres of educational excellence across Europe, is a fervent advocate of the apologetic doctrine of bourgeois liberalism:

'It is necessary to take sides. If we understand the democratic road to socialism and democratic socialism itself to involve, among other things, political (party) and ideological pluralism, recognition of the role of universal suffrage, and extension and deepening of all political freedoms, including for opponents; then talk of smashing or destroying the state apparatus can be no more than a mere verbal tack.'⁵¹

Utopianism

Western Marxism represents a reversion to utopian socialism. Its antipathy to historical materialism has produced a theory incapable of identifying the contradictions in the capitalist system which provide the material basis for a new society. Western Marxists

explicitly assert capital's potential for unlimited economic expansion and accept that there are no material forces at work which might necessitate its overthrow. Carrillo argues:

'Formerly we Marxists thought that, when a certain ceiling was reached, the capitalist system would become an almost insurmountable obstacle to its own development. But practice has shown that, one way or another, the law of human progress breaks the strait-jacket of the social system.'⁵²

Western Marxism is characterised by an almost religious belief in the prospects for capitalism. A recent contribution notes that Marx's theory of capitalism 'cannot be saved'. It continues:

'Many socialists would now concede that nothing can match capitalism as a stimulant to progress in productive power, but nevertheless favour socialism since they think that somewhat slower productive progress is a reasonable price to pay for better use of productive power at every stage.'⁵³

The reactionary implications of this approach are apparent. Socialism is desirable even though it is less productive than capitalism. This back-to-the-land philosophy turns socialism into a purely ethical question. It becomes a moral ideal which has no grounding in the real relations of production. Western Marxists have no inhibitions about aligning themselves with utopian socialism. A recent *New Left Review* collection of articles on the arms race called for a 'reworking of the principal traditions of socialist thought' and concluded that the 'resources of...utopianism will need to be drawn upon and developed again, if socialism is to confront with any realism the universal threat of a military explosion that would annihilate every class'.⁵⁴ It is not surprising that, having abandoned materialism, Western Marxism should discover its roots in the pre-Marxist utopianism of the early nineteenth century. But while the utopian socialists of that era sought to anticipate the future, Western Marxists flatter themselves on their modernity by looking forward to a future rooted in their rediscovery of the past.

Marx and Engels were not contemptuous of the utopian socialists. They praised their vision and moral courage, and pointed

out that the utopians could not transcend idealism because during their lifetime the material force for revolutionary change was still in its infancy. That was the working class. Its entry on the stage of world history turned socialism into a real possibility and provided the stimulus for the development of Marx's scientific theory of human liberation.

A hundred years on, Western Marxism has degenerated to the point where self-inflicted blindness prevents rational insight into the material foundations for social change. It is not surprising that the denial of the revolutionary role of the working class forms a central theme in the writings of Western Marxists. Throughout Europe, Marx is accused of a naive faith in the historic mission of the proletariat. In Britain *Marxism Today* has pioneered the pluralistic non-class approach to social change. The separation of theory and practice which has been a key feature of post-war Marxism has opened up a gulf between theory and class struggle. This must be bridged by a struggle to retrieve Marxism for the working class.

Those who want to re-establish Marxism as a revolutionary science must be prepared to settle accounts with the past. Marxism cannot simply be reasserted — it has to be developed in relation to the contemporary environment. Our first task is to engage the various revisionist forms of Marxism in an ideological struggle. This is necessary to clear the air and reconstruct the revolutionary content of the theory. But debate will not be enough. The experience of the past has shown that theory must have organisational consequences if its role as a revolutionary science is to be fulfilled.

Frank Richards

Notes

- 1 E Laclau and C Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, London 1985, p181.
- 2 E Mandel, 'Marx, the present crisis and the future of Labour', in R Miliband, J Saville, M Liebman, L Panitch eds, *Socialist Register 1985-86, Social democracy and after*, London 1986. Mandel is the only author represented here who argues in defence of Marxism.
- 3 R Miliband and M Liebman, 'Beyond social democracy', *ibid*, p483.

- 4 The pioneer of this approach is J Ellenstein. See his *The Stalin phenomenon*, London 1976. Since the publication of this work Ellenstein's condemnations of the Soviet system have become increasingly vitriolic.
- 5 K Marx to JB Schweitzer, 24 January 1865, in *Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence (MESC)*, Moscow 1975, p165.
- 6 *MESC*, op cit, pp94-95.
- 7 K Marx, *Capital* Vol 1, Moscow 1970, p173.
- 8 VI Lenin, 'Philosophical notebooks', *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol 38, Moscow 1960, p217.
- 9 'Theses on Feuerbach', *Marx-Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, Vol 5, Moscow 1976, p8.
- 10 E Bernstein, *Evolutionary socialism*, New York 1972, p xxv.
- 11 S Hall, 'Realignment for what?', *Marxism Today*, December 1985.
- 12 K Marx, *A contribution to the critique of political economy*, Moscow 1979, pp20-21.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 K Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1973, p109. On this point see the excellent discussion in Chapter 4 of II Rubin, *Essays on Marx's theory of value*, Detroit 1972.
- 15 K Marx, *Theories of surplus value* Part 1, Moscow 1968, p285.
- 16 K Marx, *Capital* Vol 1, op cit, p29.
- 17 H Grossman, 'The evolutionist revolt against classical economics', Part 2, *The Journal of Political Economy*, No 6, New York 1943, p519.
- 18 K Marx, *Grundrisse*, op cit, p159.
- 19 The first significant contribution in this respect was Lenin's 'Philosophical notebooks', *CW* Vol 38. Other important contributions were K Korsch, 'Marxism and philosophy', in *Marxism and philosophy*, London 1972, and G Lukács, *History and class consciousness*, London 1968. In the field of the Marxist critique of political economy, Henryk Grossman made important innovations, although his major work was not published until the end of the twenties. See his *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des Kapitals*, Frankfurt 1967.
- 20 K Kautsky, *The dictatorship of the proletariat*, Ann Arbor 1971, p140.
- 21 See VI Lenin, 'The proletarian revolution and the renegade Kautsky', in *CW* Vol 28, op cit and L Trotsky, *Terrorism and communism*, London 1975.
- 22 Cited in A Arato & P Breiner, *The young Lukács and the origins of Western Marxism*, London 1974, p184.
- 23 A Gramsci, *Selections from political writings 1921-26*, London 1978, pp199-200.
- 24 VI Lenin, 'Notes on "Left Wing" communism', *CW* Vol 31, p64.
- 25 On this point see F Richards, 'The rise, fall and reconstitution of social democracy', in *Revolutionary Communist Papers* No 8, London 1981, pp 13-16.
- 26 A Gramsci, *Selections from prison notebooks*, London 1971, p238.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p114.
- 28 F Fűredi, *The Soviet Union demystified*, London 1986, pp63ff.
- 29 F Claudin, 'Some reflections on the crisis of Marxism', *Socialist Review* May-June 1979, p138.

- 30 Hilferding noted: 'It is therefore false to suppose, as is widely done...that Marxism is simply identical with socialism. In logical terms Marxism considered only as a scientific system, and disregarding its historical effects, is only a theory of the laws of motion of society. It is quite possible for someone who is convinced that socialism will triumph in the end to join in the fight against it.' See R Hilferding, *Finance capital*, London 1981, p23. This view has been endorsed by a typical representative of the British radical intelligentsia, Alan Jones. Writing in the now defunct Trotskyist *Red Weekly* he observed 'Marxist theory is not the same as Marxist politics. It is possible to combine brilliance in the first with renegacy in the second' (21 April 1977). *Red Weekly's* successor *Socialist Action* shows that Alan Jones was too modest. In fact it is possible to combine renegacy in both.
- 31 See L Althusser, *For Marx*, New York 1969, p12.
- 32 Altvater's articles are published in the German journal *Probleme des Klassenkamps*. See the collection of Colletti's essays in L Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: studies in ideology and society*, London 1972.
- 33 Yes, I too had to consult a dictionary to discover the meaning of scissiparity. See P Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London 1979, p110.
- 34 *Ibid*, p44.
- 35 K Marx & F Engels, 'The Holy Family', in *MECW* Vol 4.
- 36 G Lukács, *History and class consciousness*, op cit, p299.
- 37 On the Frankfurt School, see M Jay, *The dialectical imagination*, Kingswood 1976.
- 38 A Levine & EO Wright, 'History and forces of production', in *New Left Review* No 123, p48.
- 39 GA Cohen, 'Forces and relations of production', in B Matthews ed, *Marx 100 years on*, London 1983, p125.
- 40 L Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatus', in *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, London 1977.
- 41 K Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1973, p109.
- 42 His 'Preface to *Capital*' (in *Lenin and philosophy*, op cit) shows that Althusser has no inkling of the basic concepts of the text. Marx pointed out that *Capital* Vol 1 is a study of the general features of capitalism. Althusser states that it is a study of 'the capitalist mode of production' (p76). Since he does not grasp the logical construction of *Capital* and its derivation of one concept from the other, Althusser suggests his readers 'put the whole of Part One aside for the time being and begin your reading with Part Two'. He argues: 'In my opinion it is impossible to begin (even to begin) to understand Part One until you have read and reread the whole of Volume One, starting with Part Two' (pp79-80). Marx, of course, would have argued that it is impossible to understand *Capital* unless you begin at the beginning.
- Althusser's philistinism is revealed by his empiricist grasp of the concepts of *Capital*. There are many examples of this. For example he argues that the theory of surplus value is one 'which proletarians will understand without any difficulty, because it is quite simply the scientific theory of something they experience every day: *class exploitation*' (p80). This naive view of Marx's *Capital* is unfortunately shared by many of Althusser's academic Marxist colleagues.
- 43 *Ibid*, p131.

- 44 L. Salamini, *The sociology of political praxis: an introduction to Gramsci's theory*, London 1981, p12.
- 45 A. Arato & P. Breiner, op cit, p xi.
- 46 T. Bottomore, 'Sociology', in D. McClellan, *Marx: the first 100 years*, Fontana 1983, pp116-17.
- 47 F. Claudin, op cit, p137.
- 48 In France a whole school of thought — the 'new philosophers' — has converged around this theme. Many of them sport ex-Marxist credentials. Régis Debray, the former hero of the new left, informed the British public of his recantation of his former adherence to Marxism, saying: 'My reputation in Britain is a bit false, I think. They still take me for a man of the left....In politics, well, I suppose I am, but in my philosophy it is different. It is not that I feel I have been deceived or betrayed, but I have been surprised. I am surprised that Marxist societies which say they believe in scientific socialism are as much, no, even more religious than the ones they replaced.' See the *Guardian*, 4 June 1983.
- 49 S. Carrillo, *Eurocommunism and the state*, London 1977, p155.
- 50 L. Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, op cit, p140.
- 51 N. Poulantzas, 'Towards democratic socialism', in *New Left Review* No 109, May-June 1978, pp83-84.
- 52 S. Carrillo, op cit, p34.
- 53 G.A. Cohen, op cit, pp128-30.
- 54 *New Left Review* ed, *Exterminism and Cold War*, London 1982, pp vii-viii.



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The road to power

Despite the deepest and most sustained recession for half a century, the forces preparing to resolve the crisis of the present system by building a better one remain marginal. The recession has brought famine, chaos and war to the third world, and industrial decay, mass unemployment and falling living standards to the West. In all advanced capitalist countries economic decline has provoked offensives by employers and governments against the working class. The unions and the traditional parties of the labour movement have met with a series of setbacks and a marked drop in influence. The old labour movement and the left are in retreat, demoralised and confused. Yet nowhere has a current emerged which can claim the allegiance of a substantial section of the working class for a strategy of revolution.

The Revolutionary Communist Party was formed in May 1981 for urgent reasons: to build a revolutionary working class organisation in Britain. Since then it has grown steadily in size and influence. We now have a network of branches in every major city in Britain and, since April 1985, a weekly paper — *the next step*. The RCP has won a national reputation, particularly for its campaigning work on Ireland, racism, and the oppression of women, and also for its distinctive stance in the trade unions.

In the wake of a number of major events — the Falklands War of 1982, the 1983 general election, the 1984-85 miners' strike, the British/American air-strike against Libya in April 1986 — the RCP has gained a wider recognition for its independent stand. We have also attracted considerable hostility from the traditional left. The party's programme, *Preparing for Power*, published in May 1983, contained our assessment of the economic and political crisis of capitalist society. It put forward our blueprint for a move from the defence of the immediate interests of the working class towards the replacement of capitalism with a system of planned production. The RCP's annual summer schools, also called *Preparing for Power*, have gained a broad audience for anti-capitalist debate in Britain.

The RCP has emerged as an organisation with the potential to change the shape of British politics — the first stage towards founding a new society. Here we outline how we intend quickly to realise that potential.

1. Crisis, war and the necessity of communism

America's recasting of the world order after the last war provided the framework for sustained, if uneven, expansion. Then, throughout the West, state intervention in manufacturing, credit and welfare smoothed the way for growth. Even certain third world nations — the newly industrialising countries — were able to benefit from global capitalist expansion. Now, however, the world recession confirms that the methods used to stabilise the capitalist system over the past 30 years no longer work.

The West has been plagued by declining profitability, leading to cutbacks in investment and output, particularly in manufacturing industry. The more mature capitalist nations — Britain and Belgium in the old world, the USA in the new — have suffered badly compared with the more dynamic economies of Japan and West Germany. The newly industrialising countries have been plunged into debt and political instability, while more impoverished third world states have been pushed over the edge into mass starvation.

Falling profitability has compelled employers to cut wages and governments to reduce public expenditure. It has put the credit system under great strain, creating worldwide financial tension as Western firms go bankrupt and third world debtors default on loans. It has also unleashed intensified competition over trade, sources of raw materials and third world markets. Western leaders are forced into incessant diplomatic efforts to prevent economic rivalries from spilling over into political and ultimately military conflict. The most menacing consequence of falling profitability is the rush to rearmament, both conventional and nuclear. This is now common to all the Western powers.

Over more than 10 years of recession, each successive upswing has proved more superficial and each downturn more profound. Each year between 1973 and 1985, inflation in Western Europe averaged 9.5 per cent, unemployment 6.5 per cent, and GDP growth only two per cent. Such a prolonged 'stagflation' is without precedent. In Britain the problem is specially acute: over the same period, inflation averaged 12 per cent, unemployment nearly eight per cent and growth little more than 1.5 per cent.¹ All forecasts now predict that there is worse to come. Various devices — consumer credit, re-stocking, rationalisation — have slowed the drift to slump, but none has restored profitability. Only foolish establishment politicians now see light at the end of the tunnel, or promise a return to past glories. Mass joblessness is the universal prospect for the foreseeable future.

The recession reveals the re-emergence of fundamental, though long dormant, tendencies towards capitalist collapse. Marx described the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as 'in every respect the most important law of modern political economy'.² Falling profitability is a result of increasing productivity under the social relations peculiar to capitalism. The drive to raise the exploitation of labour by improving productivity leads the capitalist class to replace workers, the sole source of profit, with machinery, which cannot by itself create new wealth. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall exposes how, under capitalism, the development of the

productive forces is impeded by the social relations of production. It creates within the system a basic momentum in the direction of breakdown.

A number of tendencies counteract the tendency towards capitalist collapse. The rising mass of profit that results from heightened exploitation can temporarily offset the fall in the rate of profit. But a rising absolute *mass* of profit cannot compensate for the inexorable decline in the *rate* of profit, as the proportion of capital expended on machinery and raw materials to produce this profit increases at the expense of capital invested in living labour.

The imposition of longer hours, lower wages, faster work rates — methods of upping the rate of exploitation while avoiding investment in machinery — can increase the rate of profit. Cheapening the costs of machines, raw materials and energy can do the same. Trade, the export of capital, credit, the centralisation of capital through mergers and takeovers: all these can put off the day of reckoning. Yet there comes a point at which these counteracting tendencies are impotent. At this point accumulation halts and crisis intervenes. The events of the past decade are an eloquent vindication of the Marxist theory of crisis, and a telling answer to all those who have dismissed it as behind the times.

Capital's failure to develop the forces of production in a systematic manner and its inherent tendency towards crisis reveal that it is merely a passing phase in the evolution of mankind. Even in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the heyday of capitalism, the trends towards collapse were already evident. Marx showed that, when capital came up against its inbuilt barriers to expansion, it had no option but to modify its own laws by resorting to forms of organisation of a 'transitional' type — transitional to a different way of organising production. He identified the rise of joint-stock companies, the credit system and monopoly corporations as signals that capital could no longer raise productivity in the traditional manner.

Capital could only continue to grow by overhauling structures of ownership and control in the direction of wider social involvement. Marx considered the emergence of joint-stock companies as 'the ultimate development of capitalist production' which revealed the

'necessary transitional phase towards the reconversion of capital into the property of associated producers'.³ Another significant indicator of the inability of private capital to advance under its own steam was the growth of state intervention in the economy.⁴ Such measures revealed, not the transcendence of capitalist relations, but the fact that the system was reaching a dead end. They revealed that communism was not only possible: it was a necessity.

The emergence of powerful working class movements in the major capitalist countries made it possible for mankind to make the transition from capitalism to communism. Born out of and brutalised by capitalist society, the proletariat had little stake in the system. As a class, workers had everything to gain by ending wage slavery and establishing a society in which production was organised for need rather than for profit, and classes and oppression were no longer necessary.

In the period around the First World War Lenin developed Marx's analysis of capitalist decline. He saw the contemporary transformation of capitalism into imperialism as the opening of a transitional epoch. A more and more integrated world economy was characterised both by the advanced capitalist countries' export of capital, and by their quest to carve the planet up at each other's expense. Within the imperialist camp, free competition was replaced by monopolistic competition and state intervention. These mechanisms however could only postpone, not prevent, the tendency towards capitalist collapse.

For Lenin the imperialist epoch was a period of stagnation and decay, one overshadowed by the growing ineffectiveness of the tendencies counteracting the falling rate of profit. The capitalist class is obliged to use directly political means to regulate production and to discipline the working class. The fate of the system now depends on the success, or otherwise, of such tactics. For capitalism, self-destruction is not inevitable: rather, destruction will result from the conscious will of the working class. If the capitalists can manage to contain the revolt of the working class and restore profitable production at our expense, the system can stagger on and even undergo a revival. It is up to the working class either to overthrow the capitalist system or pay the price for the resolution of its crisis.

The characteristic features of twentieth-century capitalism have been the turbulent alternation of periods of boom and slump and the coexistence of dramatic extremes of wealth and poverty. One of the central mechanisms that has enabled the system to survive is war. There have been wars among the imperialist powers, wars in the third world and continual bouts of warfare between the capitalists and the working class. Wars have regulated superpower rivalries and have redrawn the boundaries of Western influence in the third world.

The mass devastation caused by the two world wars paved the way for a thoroughgoing restructuring of capitalist production, particularly in the countries most directly affected — Germany and Japan, France and Italy. It is worth noting that the past four decades of 'peace' have been the bloodiest ever. Apart from the two global conflagrations preceding it, more people have been killed in the 120 wars since the year 1946 than in any time in history.

Today's recession again puts a world war on the agenda. In its early stages, the Western powers have already begun to savage the third world. Britain has sent its task force to the south Atlantic, the French have sent troops to Chad, the USA has invaded Grenada and interfered extensively in Central America. The British/American air-strike on Libya follows extensive meddling by the West in Lebanon and in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East.

Mounting economic skirmishes between imperialist states prefigure outright military conflicts. The capitalist system knows no other method of resolving differences. Washington, Paris, London, Bonn, Tokyo: all will stop at nothing to secure the profits on which their survival depends. In this sense the nuclear and hi-tech conventional weapons of modern capitalism present little that is novel. They have simply made genocide a more efficient business.

The capitalist class is also preparing to go to war against the working class. In every capitalist country the trade unions are under attack from the state and the employers. In every country workers are being forced to accept sacrifices to bail the system out. The longer the recession lasts, the greater will be the sacrifices demanded.

The working class has been here before. Last time, what began as wage cuts and redundancies wound up in Auschwitz and Dachau, the firebombing of Hamburg, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and the death of 30 million people. Early in the imperialist epoch, the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg posed the alternatives facing the world as socialism or barbarism. The same alternatives, even more starkly counterposed, face us again today.

2. The legacy of past defeats

Despite more than 10 years of recession, Western capitalist societies have remained remarkably free from internal upheaval. Despite everything, there has been only a muted response from the working class. Trade union membership and militancy have everywhere declined and the unions have become more and more defensive in face of unemployment and aggressive management tactics. The failure of strike action to protect jobs, working conditions and living standards has strengthened conservative trends in the working class.

The miners' strike was the biggest working class challenge to the employers' offensive anywhere in the capitalist world. However, its defeat exposed the inability of the labour movement to beat the bosses of the eighties with the tactics of an earlier era. In all Western countries, trade unions have gone through similar reversals, leading to a degree of exhaustion among their members. Likewise, the political parties that represent the working class have taken a more moderate, right-wing trajectory.

The labour movement has not really given the capitalists too much cause for concern. More serious threats have come from ethnic minorities (Britain and the USA), separatist movements (Spain, France), middle class urban guerrillas (West Germany, Italy, Japan, USA) and, in the peculiar case of Britain, from the internal colonial problem of Ireland. Indeed the relative quiescence of the working class has made a significant contribution to the West's success in containing resistance from other social forces.

The slow development of the recession, its uneven impact on the

working class, the fact that it follows 30 years of steady expansion and stability: all this contributes to the absence of large-scale revolt. Stretching from the early twenties to the late forties, the defeats of our movement have left a legacy decisive in its impact on the working class of the seventies and eighties. The contrast between the periods immediately following the two world wars this century illustrates a crucial shift in working class consciousness.

1918 and 1945

The First World War sparked a wave of revolutionary unrest across central Europe. In 1917 the Tsar was overthrown in Russia and the world's first proletarian dictatorship was established. In the following 18 months the Austro-Hungarian empire collapsed and working class insurrections took place in Austria, Hungary and Germany. In 1920 industrial action swept France, while workers seized land and occupied factories in Italy. Even Britain and the USA were not immune from working class eruptions.

In the aftermath of the First World War enfeebled employers faced workers inspired by the Bolsheviks and organised into an international communist movement. The war had failed to settle the inter-imperialist disputes that had precipitated it. Britain had defeated Germany's challenge to its pre-eminence, but only at enormous cost. The USA was strong enough to bail Britain out, not so strong to take over its role as world leader.

In the West the capitalist class survived the post-war upsurge. Yet the class struggle raged for the best part of two decades, against a background of slump and continuing rivalries among the big powers. Britain and America, the stronger capitalist countries, rode out the storm without having to resort to systematic terror against the working class — though violent state repression proved necessary in both countries. Among weaker capitalist countries, however, the capitalist class had to resort to ever more desperate and barbaric methods. These culminated in the rise of fascism and military dictatorship in eastern and southern Europe and Japan, the wiping out of working class organisations, the murder of militants and the slide into war once again.

For the capitalists, the Second World War was the cathartic

preface to a period of unprecedented stability in both domestic and foreign affairs. The influence of anti-fascism ensured that the British and American working class gave its full support to the war effort, both in industry and on the battlefields. Once victory was won, all the parties of the working class in the West celebrated it as their own, going on to play a full part in the arduous reconstruction that followed.

These developments marked the nadir of the labour movement. In 1918, workers had realised that their participation in war had been a mistake. In 1945, after even worse butchery, the labour movement failed even to recognise that it had been defeated.

The USA came out on top. The war paved the way for 30 years in which the class struggle remained at low ebb, and in which relations among the major powers were for the most part cordial. Over the body of a defeated and largely silent working class, the post-war boom took off.

The only significant threat to the new order came from national liberation struggles in the third world. The USA could do nothing to stop the revolution in China in 1949, but partly frustrated a parallel explosion in Korea. It crushed resistance in Latin America, but failed to hold on to Cuba. After the rout of the French in Vietnam in 1954, the USA took over responsibility for Western interests in south-east Asia, a responsibility which drove it to kill millions before it was forced out in 1975. As for western Europe, it followed in the USA's footsteps. The French fought a major colonial war in Algeria before they withdrew in 1960, leaving more than one million dead. The British fought insurgents in Malaya, Aden, Cyprus and Kenya. After prolonged guerrilla struggles, the Portuguese were finally expelled from Africa in 1975.

The fact that the imperialist powers were fairly secure at home gave them considerable scope to impose the terms on which decolonisation took place. Only when the imperialist powers were defeated outright — in Vietnam, Algeria, Angola and Mozambique — were there serious domestic repercussions. Why were workers in the metropolitan countries unable to shape post-war history? How can we explain the bitter twist from 1918 to 1945? To answer these questions we need to examine the two major political influences on

the working class movement in the twentieth century — social democracy and Stalinism.

The first betrayers: social democracy

Social democracy was the first mass international working class movement. It emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century as the culmination of three decades of trade union and political organisation in Western Europe. It was strongest in the countries where capitalist development had given rise to a fairly stable working class — Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, and Holland. It reached its heyday in the years of imperialist expansion leading up to the First World War.⁵

The social democratic parties were strongly influenced by Marx, and their programmes expressed a commitment to the overthrow of capitalism. Yet, as time passed, the scope of their day-to-day activities narrowed to protecting the interests of the trade unions and winning piecemeal legislative improvements in factory conditions and welfare reforms through parliament.

The intercession of the state in conflicts between employers and workers had a formative influence on social democracy. In the years around the turn of the century, governments in the more stable capitalist economies began to establish a legal framework within which the trade unions could operate. They sponsored collective bargaining between management and unions, encouraged arbitration and conciliation in industrial disputes, and promoted welfare reforms. Bismarck's regime in Germany pioneered this approach, but Britain and the USA soon became adept in it.

State intervention encouraged the emergence of a distinct layer at the head of the labour movement, one which had a material interest in mediating class antagonisms. The steady growth of workers' organisations gave rise to a substantial number of officials employed in full-time administrative jobs in the labour movement. The labour bureaucracy, a section of the working class movement which looked to the state rather than to the rank and file to safeguard its position, became an influential social force.

Given that the labour bureaucrats' first ally, the capitalist state, depended on investment abroad and the super-exploitation of its

overseas colonies, the leaders of the labour movement inevitably adopted an imperialist outlook on questions of foreign policy. They duly helped to popularise this chauvinist outlook in the working class movement.

While the labour bureaucracy grew ever closer to the capitalist state, it still had to take heed of the anti-capitalist aspirations of the mass of the working class. For most workers, life meant ceaseless toil in poor conditions, poverty-line wages, insecure employment and swift reprisals for stepping out of line. For workers, therefore, the purpose of joining unions and socialist parties was the replacement as rapidly as possible of the capitalist system with a more favourable regime. The sizable revolutionary wing of international social democracy reflected the strength of anti-capitalist sentiment. The left was led by personalities of enormous stature: by Luxemburg and Liebknecht in Germany, Pannekoek and Gorter in the Low Countries, and Lenin and Trotsky in Russia.

Up to 1914 social democracy contained the tensions between right and left, between bureaucracy and rank and file. However, the outbreak of war forcefully revealed how far the bureaucracy had come to identify with the establishment. The capitulation of the socialist parties to the military initiatives of their ruling classes resulted in the disintegration of social democracy and the slaughter of millions. The bureaucracy's success in delivering working class support for the war reflected the widespread influence of its chauvinist perspective.

The revolutionary wing of social democracy had underestimated the grip of chauvinism on the movement and had been reluctant to force its differences with the right to a split. For the left, 1914 was a profound setback. It was everywhere reduced to a persecuted minority in the early years of the war. While opportunist sections of the left — particularly in Britain and Germany — opted to oppose the war on pacifist grounds, Lenin and the Bolsheviks upheld the proletarian internationalist line: they insisted that each section of the international working class movement should work for the defeat of its own ruling class. At the same time the left began to recognise that the betrayal of social democracy made new

organisations, and a new international essential for the working class.

As the war continued, carnage in the trenches and the militarisation of life at home spread disillusionment throughout the labour movement. The prominent role of representatives of the socialist parties and the trade unions in war cabinets and special committees to promote the war effort discredited the labour bureaucracy in the eyes of many workers.

The Russian Revolution in October 1917 provided the stimulus for leading sections of the working class to break from the old organisations and form communist parties, united, from 1919 onwards, in the Communist International.

The leaders of social democracy were now called upon to defend their beleaguered capitalist sponsors against a mounting working class challenge. In Austria and Germany, where national defeat destabilised the old regimes, social democracy played a decisive role in channelling working class unrest into appeals for constitutional reform. The labour bureaucrats did not shrink from helping the state to crush the revolutionary movement. For this the ruling classes were grateful. They rewarded the bureaucrats for their services by extending trade union recognition and ratifying the status of social democratic parties.

The openly reactionary role of social democracy ensured that, throughout central Europe, the communist parties became the leading force in the labour movement. Only in Britain, where the ruling class was victorious in the war and the labour bureaucracy less compromised in the eyes of the working class, did the social democrats retain the allegiance of the most influential sections of the working class.

The young communist movement proved too weak to overthrow the system. In the deteriorating economic conditions of the early twenties, the revolutionary upsurge subsided and the capitalist forces regained the initiative. In August 1920 the Red Army was defeated and the Russian Revolution isolated. In September the Italian factory occupations were smashed; by the early months of 1921 a workers' uprising in Germany had been crushed and the strike by British miners sold out. Mussolini's march on Rome in the

summer of 1922 marked the emergence of fascism as the final solution of a desperate ruling class. The era of defeats had begun, only to be confirmed by the abortive uprising by German workers in 1923.

The impostors: Stalinism

The early communist parties were characterised by political confusion and tactical ineptitude. Their leaders hailed mainly from the old social democratic left. Some were strongly influenced by syndicalist and anarchist ideas; most underestimated the durability of reformism and the need for coherent policies and strong organisation to overcome it.

The early communists combined revolutionary enthusiasm with a lack of experience of deploying different forms of organisation and tactics. This weakness was the focus of recurrent criticism made of the European parties by Bolshevik leaders at gatherings of the Communist International. The disastrous defeat of the German Communist Party in 1923 was the price it paid for its political immaturity. It revealed a general loss of drive and direction in the Comintern. More and more the working class movement was pushed on to the defensive.

The rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the mid-twenties led to the political degeneration of the Comintern. It transformed the relationship between communism and social democracy. The communist parties had previously lacked the political experience to deal with reformism. Now the Stalinist leadership pushed them in an opportunist direction. The strategy of 'socialism in one country', formulated by Stalin to legitimise bureaucratic policies inside the Soviet Union, encouraged communists in China and Poland to subordinate their organisations to petit-bourgeois nationalist movements. In Britain the Comintern urged the Communist Party to put its faith in an alliance with the labour bureaucracy in the Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee.

The disastrous outcome of these manoeuvres led the Comintern to declare a sudden about-turn. In 1928 it instructed the communist parties to break off all links with the social democrats and go on all-out war against them. In practice the so-called 'Third Period' line

was scarcely implemented. Everywhere, virulent rhetoric against the social democrats was combined with day-to-day adaptations to their reformist approach to trade union and national politics. As a consequence the revolutionary potential of the communist parties was destroyed and they became increasingly reformist in their outlook and activities. The Comintern's tactics discredited the communist parties and gave social democracy a new lease of life.

The communist parties' descent into reformism became complete in the Comintern's mid-thirties switch to the policies of the Popular Front. The Kremlin's strategy of forming alliances with 'peace-loving' imperialist powers against 'aggressive' ones, and the European communists' urge to form alliances with middle class parties against fascism, meant that patriotism and class collaboration became the order of the day. Communists in Britain, France and the USA became as moderate as traditional reformist parties; indeed, in their enthusiasm to display their national character and to renounce any commitment to the distinctive interests of the working class, they often appeared more right-wing than the social democrats. Under the banner of anti-fascism the Stalinist communist parties abandoned the anti-capitalist struggle indefinitely.

In the thirties the labour bureaucrats became the most ardent advocates of state efforts to overcome the Depression. State-sponsored rationalisation measures would reinforce the standing of the labour leaders and also provide some relief from mass unemployment and wage cuts. Reformist counter-crisis programmes based on state control of industry and state provision of services persuaded workers to take an active responsibility for the restructuring of capitalist relations. Socialism was redefined to mean nationalisation, government planning and the welfare state.⁶

The social democrats wanted to save capitalism, but in the thirties its survival required more drastic solutions than they envisaged. In the more insecure capitalist countries — Germany, Italy — it required the destruction of working class organisations. In France social democracy lost its working class base and in Britain the world's most servile labour bureaucracy was fully integrated into the capitalist system. In the USA the corruption of the labour

bureaucracy and the repression of militants proved sufficient to enable the establishment to contain the working class.

In the thirties Leon Trotsky attempted to rally what remained of the revolutionary forces against the betrayals of social democracy and Stalinism. In his 'Transitional Programme' of 1938, Trotsky emphasised that the hallmark of the imperialist epoch had become the contrast between the readiness of the objective conditions for revolution and the relative immaturity of the political leadership of the working class:

'The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.'

Yet the feeble forces assembled around Trotsky proved unable to turn the tide. Most were destroyed in the Second World War and Trotsky himself was assassinated by a Stalinist agent. The movement survived only as isolated groupings incapable of developing a revolutionary strategy for the post-war world.

By the late forties Western imperialists were in a strong position to rebuild their system. From Japan through Europe to the USA, workers' organisations were cowed and in disarray. Social democracy and Stalinism had blackened the ideals of socialism and communism in the eyes of many workers. The consolidation of the stagnant bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union provided a negative example of the consequences of socialist revolution and the attempt to build a communist society. In the Cold War of the late forties and early fifties, the ruling classes of the West used this propaganda weapon to powerful effect.

'Never had it so good'

After the Second World War the ruling classes in the advanced capitalist countries adopted a policy of close collaboration with the labour bureaucracy. In Germany the Allies set about restructuring the unions and the social democracy just as much as every other aspect of German society. In Britain trade union leaders became cabinet ministers, members of the boards of nationalised industries and were given knighthoods. They joined with establishment

politicians in pursuing government by consensus, and, at every level of society, consciously tried to suppress polarisation along class lines.

Given the quiescence of the working class after the late forties, social democracy had little role to play. Conservative governments became the norm. Meanwhile, as it grew more remote from the working class, social democracy became increasingly reliant on middle class voters. The establishment saw the working class only in industry; and then only through the prism of the trade union bureaucracy. From national to workplace level trade union officials were integrated into structures for bargaining over wages and conditions and resolving conflict.⁸

The working class was effectively excluded from politics: its only form of activity was trade union militancy. The left, in both social democratic and Stalinist parties, survived either by reducing its ambitions to the level of the workplace, or by moving away from the working class and taking up the concerns of the liberal middle classes. The major effect of the post-war division of labour between the old labour movement parties and the unions was to depoliticise the working class movement even further.

Between the late forties and the early seventies two generations of workers became used to steadily rising living standards and virtually full employment. Thus when politicians reassured people that the recession was only a temporary downturn, they were in general believed. The remarkable scale and duration of the post-war boom transformed working class attitudes to the capitalist system. Up to the thirties, workers' universal experience was of insecure employment, constant hardship and grinding poverty. By the sixties, most work was less arduous, cleaner and safer, jobs were fairly easy to get and wages allowed workers to buy cars, houses and holidays abroad.

Though exploitation intensified as productivity increased, capitalism lost some of its harsher features and workers gained confidence in the system. Before the war, many were ready to believe that the only way to get a decent life was by getting rid of the

capitalist system. Twenty years after 1945, almost everybody believed that capitalism was there to stay. The vast majority were concerned to make the best of an imperfect system; the notion that it should be overthrown was consigned to the lunatic fringes of society.

In post-war Britain Marxism, to all intents and purposes, was dead. In the pre-war years it had been liquidated as a force in the labour movement. It had survived the era of defeats only in grossly distorted forms, as a preoccupation of eccentric academics and as a set of sterile dogmas among isolated radical groupings. It was not surprising that, when the system headed into a new slump and the employers launched a political offensive on the labour movement, workers were ill-prepared to respond.

3. The rise of the Revolutionary Communist Party

Founded in May 1981, the RCP's pre-history evolved out of the impact of the recession on the British left. The burst of strikes which lasted from the late sixties until the return of a Labour government in 1974 was the immediate response of the working class to the employers' attempts to overcome their problems by holding down wages and denying trade union rights. It enabled the left partially to overcome the isolation it had suffered as a consequence of the post-war boom.

The left from boom to crisis

In the fifties and sixties the left was dominated by a clique of radical Labour MPs around individuals like Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot and the weekly paper *Tribune*. The Labour left had little contact with the working class, though it expressed a strong nostalgia for the earlier traditions of the labour movement. It generally respected the authority of the union leaders over matters of immediate concern to the working class. It also went along with the Labour leadership's open endorsement of capitalist economic policies, as outlined, for example, in the influential policy document

Industry and society in 1957.

Dropping domestic issues, the left concentrated on international and humanitarian ones. The setting up of the Movement for Colonial Freedom in 1954 provided a forum for a paternalistic approach to the third world; that of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958, an arena for revulsion against the Bomb. True to form, the Labour left never questioned the right of British imperialism to exploit the third world, nor its right to use conventional weapons against the peoples of Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, or Aden.

In the sixties the activities of the traditional left were complemented by those of the 'new left'. The new left was younger and more radical, but its concerns remained largely ethical — the horror of nuclear arms and the Vietnam war — and its social base middle class. Meanwhile, though many workers were active in the workplace, few showed much interest in wider political involvement.

The onset of the recession and the anti-working class attempts of successive governments to improve the flagging competitiveness of British industry triggered an avalanche of trade union militancy. For the first time in decades the labour bureaucrats came under pressure. The establishment looked to them to deliver labour movement acquiescence to austerity — but workers looked to them to protect living standards.⁹

The crisis of the labour bureaucracy led to a modest revival of the left. At the same time a new generation of more radical trade unionists won high office in some influential unions — Jack Jones in the transport workers', Hugh Scanlon in the engineers' and Lawrence Daly in the miners'. In the wave of strikes and mass demonstrations against the Tory incomes policies and labour legislation laws of the early seventies, a number of left groups flourished on the fringes of the Labour Party, though most of their recruits hailed from the student milieu. The Labour left itself grew in size and confidence and linked up with radical elements in the trade union leadership — a development unique in the post-war period. Even the moribund Communist Party revived to connect up

the Labour left with a burgeoning layer of militant lower-echelon trade union officials.

It was in these conditions that the 1973 conference of the Labour Party adopted the 'left alternative economic strategy', a radical counter-crisis programme rooted in the reformist schemes of the thirties. While Harold Wilson offered the establishment the austerity of the social contract, Tony Benn promised workers 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families'. Even though it remained securely confined within the framework of Labourism, the left began to articulate a muted anti-capitalist sentiment for the first time since before the war.

Outside the Labour Party a number of far-left groups, mostly originating from the fragments of the Trotskyist movement, expanded rapidly. Identifying with trade union struggles, they managed to broaden their base with some working class members — though these did not stay long. The far left expressed a revolutionary temper, but failed to recognise that, behind the flying pickets, occupations and demonstrations of the era lurked a Labourism which went no further than the measures required for the immediate defence of living standards.

Workers experienced the consequences of Labourism after the election of Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1974. While Wilson and, after April 1976, Callaghan persuaded workers to take responsibility for the crisis and accept pay restraint in return for welfare reforms, they cut both pay and welfare. The result was the sharpest fall in living standards for a generation.

To achieve its objectives, the Labour government extended the status and privileges of the labour bureaucracy. By building up the institutions of class collaboration Labour persuaded the union leaders to endorse austerity policies. Labour passed a series of laws safeguarding the status of union officials and gave them hundreds of top-level quangos in which to be consulted by politicians, civil servants and industrialists. At the same time as unemployment doubled and troops were used against striking fire service, council

and hospital workers, the prestige of the TUC reached new heights. Lower down the hierarchy, full time shop stewards and convenors walked tall, as trade union membership rose to an all-time peak in 1979 and closed shop arrangements multiplied everywhere.

Workers soon became disillusioned with the Labour government. The strikes of the 1978-79 'winter of discontent' reflected the widespread sense of betrayal. However, workers' bitterness after four years of Labour government amounted only to a rejection of the consequences of the government's policies, rather than a rejection of Labourism itself. The social contract led to a convergence between the traditional Labour left and the far left outside the party. Wilson and Callaghan upheld the kernel of the left's alternative economic strategy — cooperation between capital and labour in a scheme of national economic recovery. They dispensed with both its more unrealistic aspects and those who, like Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, proclaimed these enough to provide the government with a useful left-wing cover in its early days. The Labour left was too weak to take on the party leadership directly and, once its counter-crisis programme had been implemented, could not escape blame for what subsequently transpired.

Alternative economic strategy, Labour left and far left were all casualties of the Labour government. As trade union militancy plummeted, the Benns and the Heffers became isolated as rank and file resentment at anti-union policies grew. So it was that, when the winter of 1978 came, the Labour left was nowhere to be seen. Only when Labour lost office in the following year did the party's radicals come into their own.

The trauma of the general election defeat paralysed the party leadership and the right wing. In the eyes of many trade union leaders Callaghan and Healey were responsible for Labour's defeat. For the left this was an opportunity to increase its influence. So long as the union leaders busied themselves in attacking the party leadership over the electoral debacle, the left could make some headway. Hence although the left was as isolated as ever from the working class movement, intra-party wrangling gave it space

to expand its influence.

For the far left the pattern was similar. It had been disoriented by the social contract, as the anti-Wilson trade union revolt it had anticipated had failed to materialise. To many militants the social contract seemed the most plausible political solution on offer — and the groups of the far left had failed either to criticise it effectively or put forward a convincing alternative. They had simply dismissed it with glib phrases about a 'con-trick' and had called for more of the same sort of industrial action that workers had already experienced as ineffective. By the end of the seventies the far left was back where it had started. It had rapidly lost the membership and influence it had gained in the early part of the decade. Its rank and file trade union groups had disintegrated. Under the cover of various campaigns (against the National Front, against Cruise missiles), it retreated from trade union activity and returned to its traditional base among students and the middle classes. In the early eighties its campaigns to democratise the Labour Party and elect Benn as deputy leader showed that whatever basis there had been for work independent of social democracy had vanished for good.

The origins of our party

The RCP tradition emerged out of the left in the mid-seventies. Inside the International Socialists, forerunners of today's Socialist Workers' Party and the most influential of the far-left groups of the time, a current calling itself the Revolutionary Opposition developed a basic understanding of the inadequacies of radical left politics. It focused both on the left's overestimation of trade union militancy and its underestimation of the need to overcome the influence of Labourism and the wider ideological legacy of past defeats. The Opposition was duly expelled from the International Socialists and out of it, in 1974, was formed the Revolutionary Communist Group.

The founding statement of the RCG, *Our tasks and methods*, published in 1975, set itself three interrelated goals — developing a programme, forging a vanguard section within the working class,

and establishing a revolutionary organisation.¹⁰ This embryonic revolutionary left set about an indispensable task of self-instruction in Marxist theory and conducted a conscious struggle against the rest of the left as it strived to create the basis for a workers' party. At the end of 1976 the pressures of isolation pushed the leadership of the RCG in an opportunist direction back into the radical left swamp. A resolute section of the RCG resisted the influence of the conservative mood of the late seventies and formed the Revolutionary Communist Tendency.¹¹

The RCT continued the process of theoretical development and cadre training vital to the establishment of a revolutionary party. The RCT was the result of a political struggle within the British left, but it did not reflect any significant trend in the working class. It remained small and marginal, unable to exert any significant influence on the course of British politics. The launch of the RCP in 1981 marked the beginning of a turn from a process of largely internal consolidation towards an attempt to intervene more directly in the class struggle.

The RCP tradition emerged through a political struggle around two themes. The first was the necessity for the working class, as the class that aspired to rule society, to assert its interests independently from other social forces. The whole purpose of forming a working class party was to give the clearest possible expression and leadership to the independent interests of the working class. The second theme was the central importance of promoting an anti-imperialist outlook in the working class. Given the historic influence of chauvinism over the British labour movement it was vital to cultivate a spirit of hostility to all manifestations of nationalism, racism and militarism in British society. For the RCP, internationalism was not a question of expressing moral indignation over events in distant countries, but a matter of urgent political significance for the class struggle at home.

The RCP's insistence on these two themes marked its supporters off from the rest of the British left from an early stage. It meant that we questioned assumptions that the left had long taken for granted,

emphasised issues which it downgraded or ignored entirely, and refused to support other positions or initiatives which it regarded as mandatory. Let's look at some of these controversies more closely.

Working class independence

● class collaboration and narrow anti-fascism

One of the most basic disagreements between the RCP and the left concerns our different appraisals of the history of the working class movement. The left has long celebrated the Second World War as a victory over fascism, and has regarded the Popular Front alliances of the thirties as a model for its contemporary campaigns.

For the RCP, by contrast, the Popular Front marked the abandonment of working class independence which paved the way for the catastrophe of the Second World War. By treating fascism as an alien evil rather than as a product of capitalist society in crisis, the Popular Front separated resistance against fascism from the struggle against capitalism. Instead of mobilising the working class to get rid of all forms of capitalist domination, it meant unity with middle class and pro-capitalist parties to preserve the existing forms of exploitation and oppression against an even more repressive system.

The Popular Front restricted the working class to defending one method of capitalist rule, parliament, against another — fascism. Among the Allies, it had made working class militants more zealous even than the capitalists in their desire to prosecute the national war effort. Class collaboration under the banner of patriotic anti-fascism was responsible for finally extinguishing the revolutionary spirit kindled in the international working class movement after the First World War.

The rise of the National Front in Britain in the seventies provoked renewed discussion of fascism, and of how to fight it. The British left revived the Popular Front approach. It depicted the NF as an evil menace to established society and launched an all-class alliance — the Anti-Nazi League — to fight it. By labelling the NF as 'Nazi' and associating it with Hitler's Germany, the left sought to revive left-

wing patriotism to fight a right-wing variety. The wider problem of British racism, and the support that racism enjoyed among all the main political parties, was passed over in a campaign to destroy a tiny and marginal far-right grouping.

One of the first revolutionary communist pamphlets, *Under a national flag*, was a polemic against the narrow anti-fascist approach.¹² It pointed out the consequences of Popular Front politics in the thirties and warned of the dangers of class collaboration and nationalism. It emphasised that the problem of racism could not be reduced to the NF, and that its influence could only be combated through challenging chauvinism throughout British society, particularly in the labour movement. While the entire British left acclaimed the Anti-Nazi League as its most imaginative departure for years, the RCT emphasised the need for workers' direct action against racist attacks and for a campaign against state controls on immigration.

● **nationalisation: a balance sheet**

Another clash between the RCP and the left arose out of diverging perspectives on nationalisation. In the thirties, as we have seen, the Labour leadership redefined socialism to mean state ownership of key industries and services. After the war it nationalised coal, civil aviation, gas and electricity, the railways and the canals, and iron and steel. It also set up the National Health Service and broadened social security arrangements. These measures of state intervention were warmly welcomed by the left. 'The first session of the Labour government's parliament', announced a jubilant *Tribune* in 1946, 'did more revolutionary things to this country than the first three years after the 1917 Revolution did for Russia.'¹³ Since then the left has always looked back wistfully to the Attlee government, and upheld its nationalisation measures as a blow for socialism which should be defended and, at the earliest opportunity, extended.

Yet in reality there was nothing socialist about Attlee's regime. It merely introduced such measures of state intervention as were necessary to speed up post-war reconstruction, rationalise chronically inefficient industries (coal, steel) and overhaul outdated services (rail, hospitals). Similar policies were pursued by post-war governments of every complexion in other capitalist countries.

Workers in nationalised industries soon discovered that state administrators proved no different in practice from capitalist employers. They shed labour to cut costs (notably in coal and steel), maintained poor working conditions (especially in public services) and held down wages across the board. Workers who relied on publicly-provided health care or housing met chronic delays, poor service and shoddy facilities. Moreover Attlee proved more than willing to turn out the troops on workers taking strike action.

The left's sentimental attachment to past nationalisation has had negative consequences for the class struggle in the present. In every conflict in the public sector the unions' loyalty to state ownership acts as a serious obstacle to defending workers' interests. For example, in the 1984-85 pits strike, the left in practice followed the National Union of Mineworkers in advocating the *Plan for Coal*, a scheme drawn up between government and union 10 years previously, as the basis for a settlement. Yet the *Plan for Coal* called not only for higher output from Britain's mines, but it committed the NUM to the measures to raise productivity, the redundancies and the pit closures necessary to make British mining profitable.¹⁴

For the RCP, it was vital to challenge the class collaboration and loyalty to state ownership codified in the *Plan for Coal*. No other course would enable the miners to succeed in defending jobs. Nevertheless, the rest of the left regarded the *Plan for Coal* as irrelevant to the strike and allowed its influence to go unchallenged.

In the public services it is a similar story. Here the left uncritically endorses the union leaders' limited schemes of resistance to government plans to put services out to private tender. But, in their determination to keep hospital and local services in the public sector, union negotiators have been prepared to accept job losses, pay cuts and drastically worse conditions. Keeping the private firms out safeguards the position of union officials to a degree, but that of their members not at all.

For the left, it is axiomatic to defend nationalisation and to oppose privatisation. For the RCP, the question is: does state ownership benefit the working class? We have argued that the labour movement should leave it to the capitalists to decide how they want to run their industries and services. Our only concern is

that, in both public or private sectors, workers' interests are safeguarded. For the left it has long been an issue of principle to oppose the sale of council houses. But the only principle for the working class is to get the best available housing at the lowest possible cost — private mortgages included.

Middle class left wingers who work as salaried professionals in the state sector may identify strongly with public housing, hospitals and transport. But working class people who work for the low paying councils, health authorities and bus and rail networks, or who have to rely on the cut-price services they provide, have no such prejudices.

● **bureaucracy and rank and file**

For the RCP, the influence of the labour bureaucracy has long been critical in undermining the political independence of the working class. Since its rise in the early years of this century, the bureaucracy's ranks have been swelled by officials at all levels of the unions, from national officers, to regional and local organisers, and, after the Second World War, by full time workplace shop stewards and convenors.

State-encouraged recognition of trade unions and legal support for the closed shop have boosted membership and ensured a substantial income for the major unions. The system by which employers check off union dues directly from wages and pay them directly to union head offices has helped to boost the financial security of the unions, as well as strengthening the links between the employers and the union leaders. Government subsidies for union education have, with the high salaries and expense accounts enjoyed by top-level negotiators, made the labour bureaucracy a breed apart from the rank and file.

The fact that such a state-sponsored elite exercises political control over the official labour movement has always been a matter of central concern for the RCP. The labour bureaucracy fosters class collaboration and subservience to the capitalist state throughout the working class movement. Because of this we have continually emphasised the importance of workers ending the influence of this parasitic layer and taking control over their own organisations. We have focused in particular on the need for workers to abandon the

institutionalised closed shop and assert their own authority over union membership in the workplace. We have also campaigned for a return to the system of workplace collection of union dues. This would do much to restore the crucial connection between union representatives and ordinary union members and would make officials more accountable to the rank and file.

We have also recommended that control over strike action should be taken out of the hands of the officials. The form of working class control will differ in different circumstances, but it will generally involve mass meetings, rank and file strike committees and delegates who are immediately accountable to the strikers.

These demands are anathema to the British left which has long operated in the shadow of the labour bureaucracy. The left always reduces the problem of the bureaucracy to the activities of a few corrupt or politically spineless individuals. Its response to betrayals of particular trade union or Labour Party leaders is always to call for their replacement with more radical individuals of a higher personal calibre. The left never asks why the same cycle keeps on repeating itself.

In the seventies, when tensions between rank and file militants and trade union functionaries were running high, the left would often make stinging criticisms of certain leaders and even establish radical grass roots organisations in the unions. But now that rank and file resistance has declined, the left has become more circumspect and has moved much closer to the bureaucracy. Hence it has reacted to RCP demands to strengthen rank and file independence with the same hostility as the bureaucrats themselves, equating these criticisms from a working class perspective with establishment attacks on the unions. In practice the left is drawn into backing the bureaucrats' defensive manoeuvres to protect their own position to the detriment of the rank and file. This difference in outlook came to a head in the miners' strike.

In the miners' strike the demand for rank and file control took the form of the campaign for a national ballot in the early weeks of the dispute. The union leadership refused to sanction this, the NUM's traditional way of embarking on strike action, because it feared it might lose the vote. For the RCP, a campaign around a national

ballot was the only way both to challenge the collaborationist strategy of the union leadership and to win majority backing for an all-out national stoppage. Yet for the rest of the British left this approach was heresy. Following its established deference to the bureaucracy, the left put more faith in Arthur Scargill, a radical bureaucrat, than it did in the working class.

The result was a divided and ineffectual strike, one which ended up with militants blaming their defeat on fellow miners who returned to work, rather than on the disastrous strategy of the union leadership. The fact that the left endorsed every detail of the bureaucrats' strategy meant that demoralisation about the very future of the working class was bound to follow. If the strategy and tactics of the bureaucracy had been directly challenged from the beginning, as the RCP proposed, at least some clarification of the need for an independent rank and file approach would have occurred. At best, the miners could have been united around a programme which could have forced substantial concessions from the coal board and the government.

• **building an alternative to Labour**

Ever since the formation of the Labour Party at the turn of the century, the British left has walked in its shadow. The Communist Party was founded in 1920 to destroy Labour's grip over the working class movement, but soon lost sight of this objective and drifted into the endless series of tactical manoeuvres towards the Labour Party that have become the central focus of left-wing debate in Britain ever since. Once the left in practice gave up trying to build an independent working class party by displacing the Labour Party, then the field was set for arid disputes about alliance, entry, or critical support.

In the late seventies left-wing groups could be found supporting all of these positions. The Communist Party favoured a long-term strategic partnership with Labour, and Militant and other Trotskyist remnants had burrowed deep into its constituency organisations. The Workers' Revolutionary Party and the Socialist Workers' Party and others had abandoned entrism but still favoured critical support for Labour at election time. In 1978, as discussion of the impending general election opened, we published

Who needs the Labour Party?, a pamphlet which recommended workers to abstain from voting Labour.

We argued that the urgent task was to build a working class alternative to Labour. Calling for a vote for Labour — no matter what qualifications were added — could only confirm workers' loyalty to a party that played a decisive role in destroying the independence of the working class.

'Any support for the Labour Party, no matter how 'critical', undermines the development of a class conscious current in the labour movement that could challenge the reformist leadership of the working class. Asking advanced workers to support Labour critically is asking them to do what they are already doing. What they require is an independent programme that can challenge the Labour Party. This programme can only be developed in total opposition, both political and organisational, to this party.'¹⁵

We campaigned for abstention at the polls, but our proposals had a wider purpose. *Who needs the Labour Party?* concluded by declaring that we would intervene in the elections 'around issues which highlight the interests of the working class as a whole and which further the development of class independence'. It particularly specified the questions of Ireland and racism. The political independence of the working class was the central objective which the RCP carried forward through a direct electoral challenge to the Labour Party in subsequent by-elections and local council elections. The publication of *Preparing for Power* provided a clearly defined platform for RCP candidates in the 1983 general election.¹⁶ It also provided RCP branches with the opportunity to challenge local Labour candidates to come out in favour of a basic set of working class policies. The left has criticised the RCP both for standing aloof from the contest of 1979 and for running candidates in subsequent elections. In fact our position has been as consistent as that of the left. It has unswervingly supported the Labour Party, while we have proclaimed the need to build an alternative working class party, not in the future but in the present. Our changing electoral tactics reflect our growing capacity to offer an organisational as well as a political expression to the independent interests of the working class.

Proletarian internationalism

Our tasks and methods had argued that 'winning the mass of workers to a position of proletarian internationalism is an essential part of winning the class to a revolutionary position, especially in Britain where nationalism and chauvinism are deeply rooted in the labour movement.'¹⁷ The promotion of an anti-imperialist outlook in the working class movement has remained a central focus throughout the history of the RCP.

● Ireland

Ever since the current conflict erupted in Northern Ireland in 1968 and the troops invaded in 1969, the left has bowed to the strength of anti-Irish prejudice in British society and kept a low profile on all matters relating to the Irish War. It has generally taken an interest in Ireland only in response to two broad categories of events. First, the left has responded to particularly lurid instances of British repression — the Loyalist/RUC pogroms in 1969, internment in 1971, Bloody Sunday in 1972, episodic revelations of torture and terror in the late seventies, the use of plastic bullets, and the hunger-strikes of 1981.

In these instances the left has generally appealed for British standards of justice and fair play to be observed, and has called for the government to introduce reforms in its methods of administering its oldest colony. A long series of campaigns — the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Solidarity Campaign, the Anti-Internment League, the Troops Out Movement, the International Tribunal on Britain's Presence in Ireland, the H-Block/Armagh Committee — have restricted their horizons to mobilising all concerned people to plead for less barbarous forms of imperial rule.

Second, the left has responded to incidents of republican resistance, especially when they have involved bombings in Britain. Aldershot in 1972, Guildford, Woolwich and Birmingham in 1974, a series of attacks in London in 1981, the Regents Park and Hyde Park bombings in 1982, the Harrods bomb at Christmas 1983 and the Brighton Grand Hotel bomb in October 1984 — all these have been condemned by the left. Its condemnations have taken different forms, from the outspoken chauvinist diatribes of Labour Party and trade union leaders, through attempts to apply Trotsky's polemics

against 'individual terrorism' to the republican movement, to criticisms of the IRA's selection of non-military targets. In practice, however, the consequence has always been the same: to deny the right of the Irish people to fight for national freedom against British domination.

From the start the RCP has insisted on the basic demands 'Troops out now' and 'Self-determination for the Irish people'. When constitutional measures, such as the recent Anglo-Irish agreement, have been introduced by the British government, we have added the slogan 'No British solutions' to our basic demands. Our aim has been to mobilise working class resistance to the British state's occupation of Ireland. Given the strength of the view that the British state has a civilising mission around the world and can play a progressive role in Ireland, as at home, it is vital to deny Westminster any right to interfere in the future of Ireland.

Hence we have been obliged both to criticise the opportunist approach of left-wing initiatives, and to conduct anti-imperialist solidarity work through our own campaigning organisation, the Irish Freedom Movement. Founded in 1982, this has since expanded to become the leading Irish solidarity campaign in Britain with a nationwide network of activists.¹⁸

The sharpest clash of views between the RCP and the traditional left on the Irish issue has surrounded the question of the IRA's armed struggle. We give our unconditional support to the struggle for Irish freedom, no matter what form that struggle takes. We support it irrespective of whether the republican movement adopts electoral or military tactics. Our insistence on this arises from our recognition of the strength of chauvinist hostility to the Irish struggle in Britain, not least in the working class movement. Any criticism of IRA tactics, or concessions to establishment propaganda about terrorism, can only reinforce the influence of nationalism and undermine anti-imperialist solidarity.

Over the past 15 years the failure of the British left to challenge popular prejudices on the Irish issue has given the establishment considerable room to manoeuvre in dealing with resistance in Ireland. This was particularly apparent during the 1981 hunger-strike when the government faced considerable international

pressure, but faced little challenge to its ruthless line at home. The left's capitulation to the pressures of chauvinism has not merely left the Irish people isolated from their potentially most powerful ally. It has also given the British state a useful propaganda weapon against the working class. By raising the bogey of IRA terrorism, the ruling class can pull British society together and divert attention away from political problems at home.

● **Immigration controls and racist attacks**

Racism became a major social force in Britain in the seventies. The recession meant that immigrants who had been brought into Britain in substantial numbers from west Africa, the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent in the fifties and sixties were now surplus to requirements. Immigration laws ratified the inferior status of black people, justifying their exclusion from the country and a system of restrictive internal controls. The authorities recognised that the existence of a significant black population excluded from full participation in British society constituted a potential source of instability. Racist propaganda, which characterised all young blacks as 'muggers', legitimised mounting police repression. As prejudice against blacks grew into a systematic force, discrimination, harassment and physical attacks became commonplace.¹⁹

The left recognised racism as a problem, but had no conception of organising working class resistance against it. It preferred either to focus on extreme manifestations of racism, such as the National Front, or to ignore the issue entirely. Left-wing anti-racists looked to the state to act against discrimination and against racist violence. As a result, most anti-racist activists were, by the late seventies, incorporated into a network of community relations councils, local authority race advisory committees and police monitoring quangos, all set up by the state to contain conflict generated by the growing intensity of racial oppression.

When young blacks revolted against the police in a number of inner-city areas in 1981 and in sporadic riots in subsequent years, the left generally kept silent in the face of the media barrage about black 'criminality' and turned a blind eye to government measures to contain black resistance. Some left-wing MPs echoed

establishment prejudices and endorsed state repression.

The RCP has challenged the left's surrender to the pressures of racism in two main ways. First, we have attacked the state's right to divide and regulate the working class through immigration laws. We have emphasised the way these regulations help to popularise the notion that blacks, rather than the capitalist system, are to blame for high unemployment and bad housing. By appealing for working class opposition to all immigration controls we have highlighted the need for workers to unite *against* state-sponsored racism, rather than pleading *for* the ruling class institution that enforces racism to take action against it.

The left has always equivocated about calling for the total rejection of Britain's own pass laws. Instead it has tried to reconcile the irreconcilable through the call for 'non-racist' immigration controls. By contrast, the RCP has always held that rejecting the right of the British state to regulate immigration is the only way the working class can begin to take an independent stand in defence of the rights of black people.

The second focus of RCP anti-racist work has been organising physical defence, by working class people, of blacks subjected to racist attacks. In 1979 we founded Workers Against Racism in East London to deal with the mounting racist attacks in that area, and we went on to set up similar groups around the country after the 1981 riots. The object of Workers Against Racism is to mobilise working class communities to take action to stop the menace of racial violence. This approach has met with some success in London, Bradford and elsewhere. However the campaign aims to do much more than simply isolate and intimidate hardline racists. Its most important objective is to build a working class culture of militant hostility to racism and chauvinism.

The Workers Against Racism approach is poles apart from the police monitoring and accountability committees on which most left-wing anti-racists now sit. These look to the authorities and to the police to deal with racist attacks — by the eviction of racist families, the surveillance and prosecution of known racists, and the banning of racist marches and meetings. For Workers Against Racism, this approach is not only ineffective, but actually

strengthens the authority of the state to do what will always be its first priority: interfering against black people and genuine anti-racists.

The police have no interest in clamping down on people who carry a little further the sort of racist activity the police carry out in uniform. They have, however, every interest in gaining intelligence on the black community and in winning wider assent to their right to interfere in the affairs of the working class. Workers Against Racism takes a different approach. By putting the initiative in the hands of working class people — black and white — it creates a basis for class unity against the racists and against the racist state.

● **the war drive in perspective**

Nato's December 1979 decision to base US Cruise missiles in Europe provoked an upsurge of protest throughout Western Europe. It also provoked sharp disagreement between the RCP and the rest of the British left.

For the left the key problem was the threat of nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union. In Britain the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament drew special attention to the dangers of continuing in a subservient relationship to the USA: the siting of US Cruise missiles here, CND argued, turned Britain into a sort of a fixed US aircraft carrier in the front line of any East-West conflagration in Europe. The call for the British government to renounce unilaterally its nuclear weapons and to refuse to accept US Cruise missiles, galvanised the British left in the early eighties.

For the RCP, the key problem lay elsewhere — in the fact that the recession made it imperative for all the Western powers to tighten their grip on overseas raw materials, markets and investments. The immediate threat to Western interests came from anti-imperialist movements in the Middle East, Central America and southern Africa. The longer-term danger of war came from disputes among the imperialists themselves. In the early eighties these were largely confined to squabbles over trade, but required increasingly frenzied diplomatic efforts to contain them.

The declining economic power of the USA, for 40 years the enforcer of the world imperialist order, is the major factor in destabilising international relations. All the Western powers are

preparing for war in the third world — and, if necessary, for war with one another. Thus, though East-West conflict remains a source of instability, it takes second place to the tensions in the imperialist camp. Indeed the USA has deliberately magnified East-West friction as a means of holding together the Western alliance, keeping it under its control and promoting anti-communist prejudice.

Given mounting Western intervention in the third world and spiralling inter-imperialist rivalries, the RCP argued that the fight against war had to have a clear anti-imperialist direction. We criticised CND's narrow focus on nuclear weapons. It made no sense trying to persuade the imperialist powers to drop one sort of weapons in favour of another — the issue was to get rid of the imperialist powers. Moreover, the whole obsession with East-West nuclear weapons distracted attention from the West's increasing use of conventional weapons in the third world. Finally, the portrayal of Britain as oppressed by the USA fuelled a narrow anti-Americanism in which Britain, a declining but nevertheless rapacious imperialist power, was exonerated from its actions in Ireland and elsewhere.

The RCP's analysis has been fully vindicated by events. Whereas there has been no use of nuclear weapons since 1945 and no serious threat of war with the Soviet Union, the Western powers have been on the rampage in other areas over the past five years.

The USA has invaded Lebanon and has given its support to wiping out the Syrian air force. With British backing it launched a murderous air-strike on Libya. It has built up a massive rapid deployment force for use anywhere in the Middle East, approved South Africa's incursions into Angola, Mozambique and even further afield, sponsored state and guerrilla terror in Central America, and overpowered Grenada. Britain has attacked Argentina, given extensive support to adventures in the Middle East as well as carrying on its own squalid war in Ireland.

At summit meetings, 'international terrorism' — a media-manufactured scare designed to unite the West against third world insurgency — is the only area of common agreement. While the left has tried to build an anti-nuclear, anti-American campaign, the RCP has set about forging an anti-imperialist movement. During

the Falklands War we took the lead in mobilising support for Argentina against Britain. The left bowed to the wave of British jingoism, calling either for economic rather than military sanctions, or for the condemnation of both sides. But for genuine anti-imperialists there could be no wavering.²⁰

Britain was determined to show a country still dominated by imperialism that it would tolerate no challenge to its authority. Whatever their reservations about Britain's actions, the major imperialist powers, notably the USA, endorsed Whitehall's efforts to put Argentina in its place. Calling for the defeat of the task force was not a popular move, but it placed the RCP firmly in the tradition of proletarian internationalism. It showed the working class that the only way to fight against war was to fight the enemy at home.

The same issues came to the fore once again over Libya. The left's response revealed how far its hatred of America had led it to paint British imperialism in sympathetic colours. The left's main complaint was that complicity in the air-strike had confirmed Thatcher as Reagan's poodle, making a more independent British military policy more essential than ever. Left wingers called for US bases in Britain to be closed down; it never occurred to them to demand that Britain should cease operations in Cyprus, Oman and other parts of the Middle East.

Goaded on by the British establishment, left-wing disarmers have so much made the adequate defence of Britain their own cause that they now applaud conventional weapons. These are in fact the main area of military spending today, as well as the fastest growing one. The left's patriotic and elaborate schemes for non-nuclear, alternative defence today include conscription. But the 'defence' of an imperialist power means the sinking of the *Belgrano* and the bombing of Tripoli. If we are to prevent a global conflagration in the future, it is vital that we build an anti-imperialist movement in the present — one that opposes every aspect of British militarism, from Fortress Falklands to the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

4. The vanguard party

The organisational form of the RCP is determined by the requirements of building an anti-capitalist workers' party in Britain in the eighties. Any attempt to build a revolutionary party must take account of the fact that workers have not responded to the effects of the recession as a class. The narrow range of responses so far — from defensive trade unionism to the open acceptance of establishment solutions to the crisis — reflects the longstanding depoliticisation of the working class. Let's look more closely at the impact of the recession on the labour movement.

Fragmentation

Over the past 10 years the capitalist class has moved away from the methods of industrial collaboration and consensus politics that prevailed in the post-war period. Employers have more and more rejected the mediating services of trade union officials, choosing instead to take on the working class directly. The series of anti-union laws passed by the Tory governments in the early eighties has both stirred up public animosity against the unions and allowed employers to use the courts to clamp down on industrial action.

The employers' success in a series of set-piece confrontations with major unions — steelworkers, civil servants, hospital workers, railworkers, printers, miners — has disoriented the labour bureaucrats and created confusion among workers. In a climate of economic insecurity generated by industrial collapse and mass unemployment, the bosses have exposed the complacency of the post-war labour movement.

Abrasive management tactics have shocked trade union officials long used to the polite procedures of consultation and negotiation. The labour bureaucrats' survival strategy is to make any number of sacrifices on their members' behalf, so long as they are reserved some role — no matter how menial — in the new order. This approach makes unions even more an adjunct of management and even less responsive to workers' demands. It also leads to conflict among unions as each one tries to do sweetheart deals with employers in particular sectors. But today's splits in the TUC are not merely bureaucratic squabbles: they reflect deeper political

divisions in the working class itself.

Workers have polarised in their responses to the recession. Some have rallied to defend established organisations and practices against the bosses, reacting to attacks on jobs, wages and trade union rights with displays of militancy along traditional lines. Though industrial action has sometimes been violent and prolonged, it has generally been conducted within the familiar post-war framework of trade union activity. And, despite considerable determination and resilience on behalf of the rank and file, strikes of this kind have nearly always been unsuccessful in achieving their objectives in the new climate created by the recession. Yet a militant minority of workers has remained faithful to the unions and to Labour. Indeed, the pressures of establishment attacks and growing isolation have strengthened many militants' loyalty to the official labour movement.

On the other hand, a growing body of workers has responded to the employers in a way which discloses a basic scepticism about the traditional organisations of the labour movement. The ineffectiveness of the trade unions and the Labour Party in defending working class living standards has created widespread disillusionment. This is reflected in declining trade union membership rolls and strike figures, and in the electoral defeats of the Labour Party in 1979 and 1983. The continuing attachment of militants to the outdated institutions of Labourism appears to many as a desperate clinging on to a past made obsolete by the recession.

Through the mounting setbacks of the early eighties the Labour Party has failed to present itself as a credible political alternative for the working class. Its revival under Neil Kinnock's leadership is more the result of Tory unpopularity and the lack of credibility of the SDP/Liberal Alliance, than an indication of enthusiasm for Labour. The lack of working class confidence in Labour's programme remains profound. This is a particularly acute problem for the left — its roles in the miners' strike and the campaign against rate-capping in local government have left it divided, discredited and isolated.

Loss of faith in the official labour movement has pushed many workers away from collective organisation towards individual

solutions to the problems thrown up by the recession. Workers in declining industries have preferred to go for voluntary redundancy and take their chance on the job market, rather than put their trust in campaigns of resistance run by discredited union officials. Workers in the building trade, for example, now accept that unions cannot help protect jobs and conditions; hence many have given up their union cards and gone on the lump. A growing fatalism has led to a greater openness to company unionism, and a willingness to transfer electoral allegiances to the openly middle class Alliance parties.

Many commentators have drawn attention to recent structural changes in the working class: the decline of manufacturing, the rise of services, the effects of new technology, long-term mass unemployment, the increase in part-time and temporary work. The division between the employed and the unemployed, and the fact that workers in jobs have managed to maintain their living standards over the past decade, are certainly significant developments. However these factors are of secondary importance. The key issue is not the restructuring of the labour market, but the process of political fragmentation that is taking place.

The fact that collective organisations and methods no longer appear to offer a practicable way of defending jobs or living standards is the decisive factor in making workers susceptible to establishment propaganda. This allows the government and the courts and the media to interfere and influence the affairs of the labour movement. Thatcher's propaganda success on the issue of trade union democracy is a striking illustration of this trend.

The real problem for the working class is not the demise of the old labour movement. The trade union leaders have failed to defend workers' interests and have cynically manipulated militancy to protect their own positions. Over the past decade, even the more radical forms of Labourism have served to demoralise rather than inspire resistance. Workers' rejection of traditional militancy and Labour Party politics reflects an unconscious recognition of the irrelevance of Labourism. The problem is that this has taken place without a parallel process of ideological clarification. Hence the crisis in the labour movement emerges as a conflict between

commitment and indifference to basic class organisations. It has not yet led to widespread questioning of the politics of Labourism.

Class unity

To build a revolutionary party it is necessary to tackle the deepening rift within the working class by putting forward policies which can unite workers against the system. This is the objective of the RCP. For the traditional left, the unity of the working class means unity on the terms of the labour bureaucracy. Hence it endorses the methods of trade union leaders and Labour politicians whose first concern is the survival of their own institutions. The left continues to support the labour bureaucrats, even when — as in the miners' strike and in local government — their policies deepen divisions in the working class and frustrate anti-capitalist initiative.

The RCP aims to expose the divisive consequences of bureaucratic unity and to put forward policies around which the most politically active workers can mobilise others. In the miners' strike, for example, we criticised the narrow Labourist strategy and the bureaucratic tactics of the NUM leadership. We called for a campaign around a national ballot to unite the miners behind an anti-capitalist approach. While NUM leaders and the left dismissed moderate miners in Nottinghamshire and elsewhere with contempt, the RCP emphasised that the success of the strike depended on putting forward a strategy that could win their support.

The lesson of the miners' defeat was that the unity of the miners could not be achieved on the basis of the old policies and methods. The split in the miners union was not an isolated event. The consolidation of company union methods in the electricians' and engineering unions, the growth of scab unions among ambulance-men, nurses and teachers shows that the NUM split anticipated wider trends. The working class movement cannot be rebuilt by clinging on to the institutions of the past in the style of Arthur Scargill.

A new working class leadership must relate both to those workers who keep faith in the old ways and those who have become cynical and demoralised. The individualistic responses of the more passive workers often reflect an instinctive understanding of

Labour's impotence. There is a strong tendency, reinforced by the left, for the more active workers to blame the setbacks they have experienced on the more passive workers. Militants condemn their mates for their lack of guts and for succumbing to television and the popular press. But right-wing influences have only gained strength because workers have already had enough of the old union and Labour leaders.

The problem for activists to tackle is that the bureaucracy's failures have allowed backward sentiments to flourish. The blame lies not with Fleet Street, but with the old methods. The way forward lies, not through doggedly pursuing bankrupt strategies and castigating those workers who are reluctant to follow them, but through adopting a different approach. This means consistently putting forward policies which relate to militants' determination to fight; it means giving this determination a sharper anti-capitalist edge. In turn, that will enable activists to put forward tactics which can draw other workers into action.

The heightening class struggle inevitably gives rise to complicated and confused conflicts. Industrial action may take a narrowly sectional form or have a largely token character; it may be an ill-judged reaction to management provocation. It may begin, like the dispute at Poundswick school in Manchester, as a legitimate defence of trade unionists at work, and then turn into a reactionary campaign to enforce tighter discipline in the classroom. Workers may take strike action to demand that their employers sack a racist worker, setting a dangerous precedent for the victimisation of militants, as happened, for example in Islington council in 1985. Whatever the form taken by the class struggle, revolutionaries must unearth its anti-capitalist content and reformulate workers' demands to draw this out.

Because anti-capitalist policies put the interests of the working class first, they provide a logical basis for unity. In today's recession, Labourist policies aimed at preserving the doomed institutions of a privileged section of the working class appear to many workers increasingly illogical. In the miners' strike the RCP held up the importance of defending all jobs irrespective of the local or national profitability of the industry. For its part, the NUM made much of its

commitment to profitable and expanding pits and to preserving the archaic committees for negotiation and collaboration with the bosses. The apparently more extreme policies of the RCP provided a more coherent basis for uniting the moderate Notts miners with the more militant areas than did the Labourist policies of the NUM leadership.

Why did the RCP's line in the miners' strike fail to win wider support? Our weakness was that at the beginning of the miners' strike we had no member employed in the pits. We lacked the resources to mount an intervention in the dispute on the scale required to have a decisive influence. In short, we were not in a close relationship with a vanguard section among the miners which could have won wider influence for anti-capitalist policies in the crucial early stages of the strike. Every major event in the class struggle reveals the urgency of creating a vanguard in the working class. Since this is central to the RCP approach to building a revolutionary party, it requires further consideration.

Party stages

The demise of the official labour movement is a temporary setback to the working class. It exposes the organisational and, above all, the political weakness of the working class and makes workers vulnerable to the employers' offensive. The result has been a series of setbacks in recent years, from which the left has generally drawn pessimistic conclusions. Left wingers argue that, given the present crisis of the labour movement, it is unrealistic to do more than dig in and cling together to preserve what is left of the old organisations. In the view of the RCP this attitude is based on a confused analysis and leads to a suicidal perspective.

The left's defensive strategy confuses the crisis of the labour bureaucracy with the problems confronting rank and file workers. The frailty of the official labour movement does create short-term difficulties, but it also has the positive effect of calling into question the relevance of Labourism. Indeed for the first time in more than 60 years workers have experienced directly the fruitlessness of the Labour approach. This experience can provide important lessons about the need for a major political reorientation.

The left's strategy is suicidal because it seeks to preserve institutions that have already failed. The unions and the Labour Party have been proved ineffective in defending the working class. Confusing the collapse of the official labour movement with the problems facing trade union activists is dangerous. It means that working class interests take second place to those of the bureaucracy.

Far from drawing pessimistic conclusions, the RCP looks upon the present period as one of tremendous potential. The decay of Labourism has led to a quest for new solutions and a willingness to consider an alternative form of working class politics unique in living memory. Today, for the first time since the Second World War, it is possible to win a real hearing for anti-capitalist ideas. It is with this positive assessment of the prospects for revolutionary communism that we set out to build a working class party.

Labour's descent and the search for new answers provide the preconditions for building a revolutionary movement. But they provide no guarantee of success. The traditions of the past weigh heavily on the modern working class: workers will not automatically flock towards a revolutionary organisation when they become disillusioned with Labourism. Moreover, the absence of a coherent anti-capitalist outlook in any section of the working class means that a revolutionary party must be built in stages.

In the *vanguard party* stage, we aim to deploy our limited resources to win over a core of the most politically motivated workers to a strategy of revolution. In the subsequent *mass party* stage, we will be able, through this leading section, to influence wider and wider layers of workers. The prolonged depoliticisation of the working class makes it impossible for a newly emerging revolutionary organisation to relate directly to the class struggle. Given the balance of forces in the labour movement and the dead weight of tradition, even the most militant working class revolt comes under the influence of Labourism. Any attempt to build a revolutionary party without a systematic struggle against the existing outlook of the working class movement must inevitably fall prey to this influence. That, indeed, is the lesson of the past failures of the British left.

The fate of would-be revolutionaries who attempt to rally millions with their demands is either to be rejected out of hand or to be interpreted as a radical variant of Labourism. In the former case anti-communist prejudices are confirmed and the aspiring revolutionaries are condemned to stand impotently at Speakers' Corner for decades. In the latter, Labourism — the central barrier to the creation of a revolutionary party — is reinforced rather than undermined. These left wingers are held spellbound by the party they started out trying to overthrow. All they do is provide a constant infusion of youth, energy and radicalism into a party that is otherwise dying on its feet.

For the RCP the road to mass influence lies through the most politically motivated section of the working class. Through a dialogue with the most active workers, we aim to create a coherent force able to respond to all issues from the point of view of the working class as a whole. It is essential to train a vanguard if the limitations of narrow militancy and sectionalism are to be overcome. A vanguard exists in a dynamic interaction between the party and the mass of the working class. Through its capacity to give a lead to other workers in struggle, it can mediate between the currently small and isolated forces of revolutionary communism and the mass of the working class.

The vanguard does not exist at present — it has to be created. It cannot be identified in any particular social, occupational, or geographical area, or among the followers of any existing party. The recession has fragmented the working class, but has not yet restructured it in any systematic way. The vanguard will reflect the heterogeneity of the modern working class. It will be made up of workers with diverse occupational backgrounds and experiences — manual and white collar, male and female, black and white. This new layer of workers will be defined not sociologically, but *politically*: by its genuine commitment to the overthrow of capitalism.

The form of organisation appropriate to building a vanguard in modern Britain is the propaganda party. The RCP is such a party. What does this mean in practice? How is it different from other left-wing parties?

A campaigning party

Despite the fragmentation of the working class movement and the general shift to the right, there are signs of an awakening political consciousness among a substantial minority. Inner-city riots, the miners' strike and general disgust with the Thatcher government have given rise to a wider questioning of the system and a deeper hostility to the British establishment and its repressive forces.

Thatcher has conducted a series of political campaigns that have challenged the narrow preoccupations of the labour movement: campaigns on law and order, international terrorism, sexual morality, educational standards, trade union democracy and on race. In the short term, these have strengthened reaction and have benefited the government by diverting the public's gaze from unemployment and attacks on workers' rights.

But by putting ruling class propaganda forward in such a forceful manner, the government has made an equally forceful working class response that much more likely. When Thatcher bracketed the miners with Argentina, labelling them 'the enemy within', she ended a long British tradition of keeping politics out of the workplace. The Tories' use of the Falklands Factor revealed the confidence of the British establishment in winning a political battle against a labour movement strongly imbued with chauvinist prejudices. But it is a high-risk strategy. Thatcher's very determination to politicise industrial conflict could yet unseat her.

When the IRA attempted to blow up the leadership of the Tory Party at the height of the miners' strike, there was little sympathy among the miners for the establishment's attempts to drum up an anti-Irish response. Similarly, Tory efforts to smear the miners with allegations that they received funds from Libya, while achieving some success in isolating the miners from wider support, rebounded against the government in the mining communities. Again, anger at Britain's involvement in the bombing of Libya indicated the strength of anti-militarist sentiment in Britain. The left channelled instinctive sympathy with the Libyan people in a narrowly anti-American direction, thus letting Thatcher off the hook. However, the scale of the initial popular fury showed the potential for developing an anti-imperialist response to Western military

intervention in the third world.

Building a revolutionary movement depends on exploiting the present conjuncture in British politics. The RCP must connect with each outbreak of anti-capitalist indignation and re-orient it into coherent resistance against the capitalist system. This demands not only that we put forward a clear anti-capitalist line, but that we draw out the organisational consequences of our independent working class approach.

For the RCP it is not enough to point the way forward for the struggle against capitalism in ideas alone. We have to provide practical organisation that shows the direction we want to give to the workers' movement. Our perspective begins from the need to fight for the interests of the working class in the present. Hence, while our party looks forward to building a new society, it starts out from the measures needed to defend workers' living standards and rights in the struggles of today.

For more than half a century the British left has worked within a framework established by bureaucrats. The left puts its resources into mobilising for the TUC's occasional demonstrations about unemployment or public spending cuts. It works within campaigns sponsored by the labour bureaucracy (CND, the Anti-Apartheid Movement). And it can be relied upon to support the Labour Party at election time. The left supports the miners and every other group of workers in struggle on the terms dictated by the union leadership. It also skirts round issues which the Labour leadership would rather avoid: immigration control and racist attacks; abortion rights; Ireland and British imperialism in general.

We cannot accept such a narrow purview. To do so would consign us to the left's fate — that of being but a pressure group on the labour bureaucracy. At a time when the interests of the working class and the policies of the bureaucracy collide more violently than ever before, accepting the authority of the official labour movement means going against the urgent needs of the working class.

The RCP has set out to build a new working class party. That requires propaganda and activity which shows what must be done in practice to advance working class interests. It also means setting out

to undermine and destroy the still preponderant influence of the labour bureaucracy. A direct challenge is needed to Labourism in all spheres of political life — in the workplace, in the unions, on the streets and at the polls. Only by presenting the politics of Labourism and the independent politics of the working class as a sharp choice between rival party organisations is it possible to win workers from the side of the bureaucracy to that of the revolutionary movement.

To draw out the organisational consequences of independent working class politics, the RCP has sponsored a number of campaigns — around Ireland, racism, women's rights and international issues. These campaigns have a number of objectives. They offer solidarity with oppressed sections of society. They persuade the working class to identify with every threat to the British establishment. They aim, too, to neutralise ruling class propaganda on the question of democratic rights.

The British establishment is skilful at manipulating public prejudices against the oppressed. Through this technique it can win wide backing and turn potential threats to its system into a source of legitimacy and strength. The media depict Irish freedom fighters as terrorists and young blacks as criminals; in so doing, they justify measures of repression which affect the whole of society. Establishment propaganda is also effective in fomenting divisions within the working class movement, to the extent that Irish people and blacks come to be regarded as enemies rather than allies. For the RCP, challenging these smears and redefining the terms of the discussion generated around them is a vital part of developing a working class response to oppression in capitalist society.

Pro-family propaganda helps push women into the roles of wife, mother, dutiful daughter and all-purpose carer. This not only compensates for welfare cuts, but also bolsters the family as a source of authority and discipline at a time when the stability of society is under threat. In every major industrial dispute the employers and the media play on family pressures to divide the working class and push strikers to return to work. Campaigning in support of women's rights and fighting to ensure women's untrammelled participation in social, economic and political life is vital if we are to deprive the ruling class of a powerful ideological weapon against the

working class.²¹

The campaigns sponsored by the RCP aim to unite the working class in a political challenge to the capitalist state. The working class cannot be united, nor a vanguard forged, in the sphere of trade union struggles alone. Class objectives can only be achieved through fighting for an anti-capitalist perspective on other conflicts which are just as vital. The current strength of the British ruling class derives in no small part from its ability to dictate terms on these. The success of the RCP in building a revolutionary movement will depend much on our ability to do the same.

Theory and propaganda

To create a vanguard we have to exert a decisive influence over the ideas that prevail in the working class movement. We need to promote a climate of theoretical discussion and debate conducive to the complete overhaul of the ideology of the labour movement. This means developing Marx's critique of political economy in relation to both national and international events. It demands a rigorous assessment of the balance of political forces in society, and in particular of the obstacles to revolutionary advance within the labour movement.

Over the past decade we have made some important theoretical breakthroughs on the evolution of the crisis, imperialism, reformism and the Soviet Union. The results of this work are contained in our journals and books; but much more remains to be done. In the struggle to redirect the politics of the working class, the fight for theoretical supremacy, through open debate and polemic, will be central. Regular issues of *Confrontation* and more ambitious goals for our summer schools will be specially relevant. Our aim is to develop Marxist theory and to involve working class activists in argument about our analysis and the policies that flow from it.

As a propaganda party, we devote much of our resources to organising around the written word. Through propaganda, we test our revolutionary theory in the class struggle. The intention is to target the most politically active workers, explain our ideas convincingly, and motivate them to get involved in the revolutionary movement. To do this our propaganda must

assimilate the experience of the working class and challenge the existing outlook of even the most militant workers.

Our weekly paper, *the next step*, aims to present working class politics in a way that is attractive and accessible to workers who are looking for political answers. This requires that the editorial board of *the next step*, through the party and its journalists, stays in close touch with active workers and knows exactly what they are thinking. The purpose of our paper is to connect with workers' experience and perception of political problems and win them round to our policies. Good journalism, graphics and photography are of great importance in ensuring that the paper seizes our readers' imaginations and engages their interest.

Our paper is also designed to convince workers of the relevance of RCP politics. This means projecting a clear line, one with real immediacy to the class struggle. Our politics must be presented logically, in a way which does not assume agreement or simply assert the RCP position. To be convincing, *tns* must sharply challenge all the prejudices that act as a barrier to the development of workers' political awareness. Hence polemics against influential trends in the working class movement are of the utmost importance. We aim to achieve the clearest counterposition of RCP politics to the prevailing forms of establishment ideology in the labour movement. We cannot lose sight of the fact that we are trying to communicate Marxist politics to a readership for whom Marxism is as yet an alien ideology.

The strategic objective of the RCP is to build a vanguard party. But a strategy is not something that can be taken out on to the streets. The function of the RCP's activities is to provide a practical implementation of our strategy in the class struggle. The weekly paper has a vital part to play in promoting, animating and organising activities which give a clear shape to anti-capitalist politics.

This role of the paper — that of an organiser — has two aspects. The first is to provide the most politically conscious workers with a clear propaganda lead. This means overcoming the influence of Labourist notions, and pointing a clear way forward through the immediate manifestations of the class struggle to the broader anti-

capitalist aims of the working class. Second, we want to provide active workers with a means of overcoming their isolation, with policies that can unite wider groups of workers in the course of the immediate struggle. This is difficult, because our policies will appear unrealistic as long as no vanguard exists to fight for them. But we are obliged to try to influence the class struggle now, even before a vanguard has been created. The only way we can advance is through the struggle to forge a vanguard itself.

Activity

A revolutionary party requires more than good arguments to extend its influence. To make headway, we have to show that revolutionary politics can be effective and can produce results. This is why the RCP has always sought to ensure that, whenever possible, its policies acquire an organisational expression. Our political opponents regard our struggle for leadership of today's struggles as unrealistic or even sectarian. Yet Marxist politics cease to be Marxist politics unless they take a practical form.

The British left restricts itself to calling for support for struggles that are already taking place, and to exhorting the leadership of the labour movement to take more radical action. In effect this approach acknowledges that the left has nothing distinctive to contribute to the working class movement. For the RCP, activities are a way of demonstrating the practical edge of Marxism and of persuading workers that it is both possible and necessary to fight in a new way in the here and now.

In the early days of the RCP, most of our activity was organised directly around our propaganda — selling it, holding meetings to promote and discuss it. But if we are to extend our influence, we need to supplement this with more direct initiatives. In the past, the RCP engaged primarily in activities which were either artificial or reactive. *Artificial* activities were protests or pickets on issues which we identified as important, even though others did not. Activities around the Prevention of Terrorism Act or deportation cases were instances of this sort of work: they had an exemplary character — they were individual examples of a broader kind of action which we considered appropriate but lacked the resources to deliver.

Artificial activities can create a certain public profile for us on a particular issue. The problem is that they generally fail to attract or involve people because they do not key into their immediate concerns. Hence, however correct the slogans on our placards, they are of limited value in building a vanguard party.

By contrast, *reactive* activities are those organised in response to issues or events which are of immediate general concern. Instances here are demonstrations against the invasion of the Falklands, Beirut, Grenada or Libya; against particular atrocities in the Irish War or a wave of racist murders. Because people are spontaneously interested in these forms of activity, it is easier to attract support for them. The problem is that these sort of activities often do not have much of a politicising effect on the people engaged in them. Participating in an RCP protest over Libya may well not turn liberal outrage into consistent anti-imperialism.

It is important for the party to react to events, but it is often difficult to give reactive activities a clear revolutionary edge. Hence merely reactive activities, while they raise our profile and draw people towards our events, can only play a limited party-building role.

The most important form of RCP activity must, therefore, be of an *interventionist* type. This means initiatives which connect with real concerns in the working class movement, and which actively redefine issues in a way that takes the struggle forward and promotes a wider anti-capitalist point of view. It is this sort of activity which will be crucial for the extension of our membership and influence in the working class.

Our campaign against the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers is a good example. In March 1985, at the end of the pit strike, many miners — especially militants — were worried about the spread of scab unionism. They were worried, too, about the complacent response of the union leaders, whose conduct of the strike had already caused general unease. The campaign run by *the miners' next step* group against the UDM connected with these fears. At the same time, however, it challenged the narrow 'defend the NUM' attitude that prevailed among militants, by redirecting the struggle against the UDM into a campaign against the class

collaboration of the NUM bureaucracy.

This sort of interventionist activity aims to turn workers' distaste for scab unionism into a wider challenge to the policies of the labour bureaucracy. It is these, after all, which have allowed openly anti-working class organisations to gain ground in the first place. By bringing the party into a more direct relationship to the class struggle, interventionist activity can help accelerate the emergence of a working class vanguard.

Organisation

The RCP has adopted that style of internal organisation which best enables us to achieve our political objectives. We begin from a recognition that there are different levels of political awareness in the working class. To arrange the dynamic interaction between party and class that is essential if both world-historic and immediate goals are to be met, we have adopted the organisational principles of democratic centralism.²²

The early development of the RCP was achieved largely through a process of consolidation among a small group of individuals. Recruitment took place in a fairly random way, and much of our growth was based on intellectual conviction and personal commitment. The party achieved a relatively high degree of internal education, training and collectively imposed discipline. These methods allowed us to expand steadily and raise our overall political level. But they were one-sided; they carried with them the dangers of reinforcing our isolation from the class struggle, and of encouraging routinism.

The party has subsequently embarked on a strategy of growth through a process of external intervention. This is not so much a substitute for the earlier approach as a development from it — an attempt to counteract its one-sidedness. A higher level of resources and overall political development now allows us to test our theory in the class struggle. Today we can reach out and fight for leadership in the working class movement. This forces each of our members and supporters to take responsibility for implementing our perspectives, and to take greater account of their practical consequences.

Democratic centralism is a mechanism for assimilating the

experience of the working class into the party. Democracy is vital to ensure the maximum openness of the party to active workers and to their perceptions of the class struggle. Without it, individual preconceptions will dominate, and our collective awareness of the destiny of the working class fall into disrepair. That is why discussion and debate are vital: they ensure that experiences are shared, that common lessons are learned and that personal initiatives are coordinated.

To be genuinely democratic, discussion must be highly informed, not only by the sort of knowledge to be gained from books — though that has an important place — but also by active involvement in the class struggle. Debate inside our organisation must reflect the dialogue between the party and the wider working class movement.

Democratic centralism is also a mechanism for transcending the limitations of individual experience. It is the responsibility of the party's centralised leadership to ensure that it is actively engaged in transforming individual into collective consciousness. The role of political leadership is to keep pushing the party forward to achieve the highest possible expression of working class interests. This demands setting up a chain of command, a division of labour and a professional apparatus.

The object of this structure is to make sure that the party's intervention in the class struggle is under clear central direction and that arguments are carried through to their conclusion. A revolutionary party has no place for discussion for its own sake or for debates with no result. The party leadership is responsible for striking the right balance between central control and local initiative in the overall development of the party.

The structure of the RCP corresponds to the demands of democratic centralism. The highest decision-making body of the party is its national conference. This elects a political committee as the leadership of the party which, though accountable to it, is responsible for carrying out its perspectives between conferences. All other party committees and national and local organisers are appointed by the political committee. All party members work under its discipline.

Members are admitted to the party when, on the recommend-

ation of a local branch, they are judged by the political leadership to have an adequate understanding of our programme — and to have shown a commitment to fighting for it in practice. Membership of the RCP is not a commitment in the abstract or the dedication of a particular amount of time or energy. It is the acceptance of personal responsibility for a role in the future of the working class movement.

International

The RCP aims to establish communism in Britain and throughout the world. It is axiomatic in the Marxist tradition that, given the development of an international division of labour under the capitalist system, communism can only be won on a worldwide basis. Hence the working class revolution must be an international one, and the revolutionary party in Britain must be part of a revolutionary international. The degeneration of the first four attempts to create such a body means that we must make a fresh start.²³

An international, however, cannot be simply proclaimed or organised by committee. It must be forged in a political struggle to develop a programme for the international working class. Although the RCP is currently confined to Britain, we have devoted some resources to distributing our propaganda abroad and to following closely developments in the working class movement in other countries. Yet, while we are keenly building up contacts overseas, at present we have no formal links with any other organisation.

For the RCP, the first stage in building a revolutionary international must be to develop the internationalist aspect of our work in Britain. The next stage is the development of links with working class organisations in other countries and, where possible, joint activities on issues of common importance — such as, for example, racism in Europe.

5. Real freedom

People sometimes ask us to detail our 'vision of the future'. For the RCP, any attempt to do more than outline the form of a future society would be speculation. Since the future cannot be predicted, visions of it are inevitably based on the past. The utopian socialists of the 1830s harked back to rural idylls and, in the 1890s, William Morris indulged in fantasies about a return to medieval craft guilds. Similar forms of radical escapism remain popular today. Our conception is of a future literally beyond our wildest dreams, in which social life will for the first time overcome the limits of scarcity and develop unhindered. What is our vehicle for reaching this state of affairs? A dictatorship exercised by the proletariat over all other classes.

The first article in our party's constitution describes our aim as 'to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in Britain with the objective of realising communism throughout the world'. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a transitional phase between capitalism and communism, during which the working class will rule society. In this period the workers' regime must eradicate generalised want, and at the same time make sure that the working class stays in power — if necessary by physical suppression of attempts to restore capitalist rule.

The term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' strikes horror into the hearts of the employers and their apologists. By presenting it as an anti-democratic and coercive form of society, they have succeeded in pressing the official communist movement to eliminate the concept from their programmes. Yet the dictatorship of the proletariat will be the most democratic and liberated form of society in human history.

For the first time the majority — the working class — will rule over the minority of capitalists and their allies. Compared with the various forms of capitalist tyranny, from parliamentary democracy through military dictatorship to fascism, the proletarian dictatorship will mark a tremendous leap forward. It will represent an advance towards real freedom for the whole of society, not merely for a privileged section. As in any class society, there will remain an element of coercion. But whereas in capitalist society the

state's repressive forces contain the mass of society on behalf of the ruling elite, the proletarian dictatorship, acting on behalf of the masses, will coerce only representatives of the capitalist minority who try to win back their right to exploit and oppress us all.

What will be the advantages of communist society? The main one will be that it will break out mankind's productive potential from the ties that bind it down under capitalism. Communist society will be based on the conscious allocation of the labour-time of society, instead of the indirect and chaotic organisation of work that now takes place through the capitalist market. Planning will be made possible by the combination of workers' control and workers' management of the economy. Workers' control is achieved by the workers' state taking over industry and services from the capitalists. Workers' management is much more difficult, for it means the central regulation of economic affairs through the active involvement of the working class at local level.²⁴

Communism will allow the development of the productive forces of society beyond the constraints imposed by capital. By abolishing the struggle for basic necessities — a struggle common to nearly everybody today — it will open whole new vistas for the expression of individuality. Under the proletarian dictatorship, social advance will end exploitation and class antagonism. Women will be freed from the burdens of family life imposed within capitalist society. Personal fulfilment will for the first time come within the reach of millions.

Unlike the capitalist state, a proletarian one will create the conditions for its own disappearance. Once economic development has met a certain level and the threat of capitalist restoration has been eliminated, the workers' state will become a purely administrative body.

What guarantee is there against the degeneration of the proletarian state into a bureaucratic dictatorship along the lines of the Soviet Union? Making a revolution in an advanced capitalist country would give us a much better start than the Bolsheviks had in Russia. Ensuring that the revolution is international in its scope is essential to allow the new society to take advantage of the global division of labour already established under capitalism. Apart from

these objective factors, the only real guarantee is a subjective one—the vigilance of the working class.

It is up to every worker to accept responsibility for the fate of the revolution and to make sure it is not betrayed. Communists can offer no guarantees for the future, for it lies in the hands of the working class. But we already have, before our eyes, a guarantee that capitalism brings permanent mass unemployment, growing poverty and escalating military conflict.

Some point to the loss of personal freedom involved in joining the RCP and the struggle to build a communist society. But how is taking a share in getting rid of capitalist domination and in making a new society a loss of freedom? The rulers of the Western powers boast about the 'free world', but it is one in which millions are free only to starve, languish on the dole or serve as cannon-fodder in round after round of barbarism. The only freedom that means anything today is the liberation that can be achieved through overcoming petty individualism in the collective struggle of the working class to overthrow the tyranny of capital. That struggle opens the way to a society in which freedom can be a reality for everybody.

Mike Freeman

Notes

- 1 *Barclays Review*, May 1986.
- 2 K Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth, 1973, p748. For further discussion of the Marxist theory of crisis in RCP literature, see *The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class—a Marxist analysis of the crisis and reformism in the labour movement*, Revolutionary Communist Papers No 3, July 1978, and *World in recession*, Revolutionary Communist Papers No 7, July 1981.
- 3 K Marx, *Capital* Vol 3, London 1959, p437.
- 4 See *Revisionism, imperialism and the state: the method of capital and the dogma of state monopoly capitalism*, Revolutionary Communist Papers No 4, February 1979.
- 5 See *Prolonging the death agony: the rise, fall and reconstitution of social democracy*, Revolutionary Communist Papers No 8, September 1981.
- 6 See *Slump socialism: the depression, the war and the working class*, RCP discussion pamphlet, 1983.
- 7 Trotsky, *The death agony of capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International: the Transitional Programme*, London 1970, p4.
- 8 See M Freeman, *Taking control: a handbook for trade unionists*, London 1984.

- 9 See *The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class*, op cit.
- 10 *Our tasks and methods*, Revolutionary Communist Reprints No 1, August 1979.
- 11 See documents on the split within the Revolutionary Communist Group, Revolutionary Communist Papers No1, March 1977.
- 12 See F Richards, *Under a national flag: fascism, racism and the labour movement*, London 1978.
- 13 *Tribune*, 8 November 1946.
- 14 On the RCP's intervention in the miners' strike, see F Richards, *The miners' next step*, London July 1984, and M Freeman, *Our day will come: the miners' fight for jobs*, London 1985.
- 15 M Freeman and K Marshall, *Who needs the Labour Party?* London 1978, p33.
- 16 *Preparing for Power: the programme of the Revolutionary Communist Party*, London 1983.
- 17 *Our tasks and methods*, op cit, p11.
- 18 See *The Irish War: the Irish Freedom Movement handbook*, London 1985.
- 19 See Workers Against Racism, *The roots of racism*, London 1985.
- 20 See M Freeman, *Malvinas are Argentina's*, London 1982.
- 21 See K Marshall, *Moral panics and Victorian values: women and the family in Thatcher's Britain*, London 1985.
- 22 The development of the RCP's approach to questions of organisation owes much to the traditions of the Bolshevik Party and in particular to VI Lenin's pamphlet *What is to be done?*, in *Collected Works* Vol 5 written in 1902. We have also been inspired by G Lukács' essay 'Towards a methodology of the problem of organisation' which was first published in 1922 and is included in the collection *History and class consciousness*, London 1971.
- 23 See F Richards, *The question of the international*, Revolutionary Communist Reprints, August 1979.
- 24 See F Füredi, *The Soviet Union demystified: a materialist analysis*, London 1986.



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REVIEWS



The rise and decline of British Stalinism

Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1927-1941*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 1985, pp338, pbk £6.95.

In 1985 the Communist Party of Great Britain split into rival factions. The traditionalist wing centred around the party's daily paper, the *Morning Star*, established itself as the Communist Campaign Group. The Eurocommunist-dominated party executive committee expelled dozens of *Morning Star* supporters (including the paper's editor and deputy editor and leading union officials such as Ken Gill of AUEW-Tass), before the formation of the CCG. The executive now publishes its own weekly *7 Days*. Smaller factions like *The Leninist*, *Straight Left* and *Proletarian* litter the landscape, underlining the divided state of British Stalinism.

The Communist Party now faces its greatest crisis. The executive has threatened disciplinary action against the CCG dissidents.¹ But few British Stalinists have the stomach for a wave of expulsions. The party's paper membership of 12 771 at the last count is only 521 above the 1937 level. Worse, many of today's members are demoralised, elderly and inactive. Thus the rival factions have opted for an uneasy coexistence, while they feud over the future of the party.

The Eurocommunists, comparing the rise of their glossy monthly *Marxism Today* to the decline of the *Morning Star*, accuse the traditionalists of a dogged fixation with macho trade unionism, a failure to come to terms with social change and disdain for 'new

social movements'. Their opponents reply that the 'Euros' downgrade the class struggle, abandon Marxism and promote blatant anti-Sovietism. The controversy reiterates themes already well-established in Stalinist debates on the Continent.

Today all European communist parties — with the possible exception of the resilient Italian PCI — are in an advanced state of decay. Most have either split or are riven by factions. The contending wings of Stalinism each blame this impasse on the misguided tactics of their opponents. But the real cause lies deeper. The publication of the third volume of the official history of the British party, covering the period when the party embarked on the road which led to its current crisis, provides a useful opportunity to examine how and when the rot set in.

The Stalinisation of the Communist Party

In 1924 Stalin unveiled the doctrine of 'socialism in one country', asserting that socialism could be built within the borders of the Soviet Union. The new strategy confirmed that the Soviet leadership had abandoned the project of world revolution. This turn was the starting point for the degeneration of the Communist International. It encouraged the consolidation of national reformist trends in communist parties outside the Soviet Union, and legitimised the transformation of the International into an agency pursuing Soviet foreign policy objectives. Trotsky made a far sighted assessment of the implications of the strategy of socialism in one country:

'If socialism can be realised within the national boundaries of backward Russia, then there is all the more reason to believe that it can be realised in advanced Germany. Tomorrow the leaders of the Communist Party of Germany will undertake to propound this theory....The day after tomorrow the French party will have its turn. It will be the beginning of the disintegration of the Comintern along the lines of social patriotism.'²

Trotsky's verdict drew out the logical conclusion of Stalinist strategy. The European parties began to evolve along national reformist lines, as each lowered its horizons to the narrow objective of gaining recognition in the established political system of its home state.

Even before its Stalinisation, the British party had gone further than most in adapting to reformism. The exceptional power of British Labourism and the weakness of the British Marxist tradition ensured that the revolutionary phase of British communism was shortlived.

In the early twenties the Communist International recommended that communist parties should form tactical alliances with social democratic parties, around limited practical demands to defend the working class against the employers' renewed offensive. The United Front tactic was designed to expose the inability of social democracy to pursue such demands consistently, and thus to counter the resurgence of reformism. But in the hands of the British party, the United Front became a formula for blurring the distinctions between reform and revolution.

In 1925 the Communist Party launched the National Left Wing Movement to implement the United Front. The movement declared that its objective was to 'secure the adoption by the Labour Party of a militant socialist policy in place of its present policy of compromise with capitalism'.³ This statement, quoted approvingly by Branson, reveals the party's plan to transform rather than defeat the Labour Party. It shows how, even at this early stage, the Bolshevik approach to overcoming reformism had a negligible impact on the British Communist Party.

The Stalinisation of the Communist International, and the suppression of the revolutionary Left Opposition within the Soviet Union, met little opposition among British communist leaders. The ease with which the British section of the International adapted to the shift in Stalinist policy underlined the party's immaturity. This problem was a product of the party's scant experience of political struggle, and of the pressure of Britain's reformist tradition. It was reinforced by the Stalinisation of the International. The Communist Party leadership responded favourably to a policy which confirmed its own reformist inclinations.

Branson's apologetic party history reflects the worst features of the British Stalinist tradition. She neatly deploys the techniques of deliberate agnosticism, euphemism, innuendo and distortion to concoct a eulogy to patriotic communism. The book's most striking

feature is its lack of interest in the practical effect of communist policy on the fortunes of the working class movement in the turbulent years under review.

Branson kicks off with the so-called Third Period from 1928-33, when the Comintern rejected all contact with reformist parties and branded social democracy as 'social fascism'. She describes it as an example of the 'extreme sectarianism...to which Marxists have been prone ever since Karl Marx himself fought against it'.⁴ Branson rejects the disastrous policies of the Third Period, but for reasons which suit the purposes of the modern Communist Party. Equating the reactionary policies of Third Period Stalinism with left-wing sectarianism has its uses for the Communist Party, which habitually uses the charge of sectarianism to denounce its left-wing opponents. But this sleight of hand obscures the real meaning of the Third Period.

The Third Period was not a sectarian aberration, but the first stage in the evolution of Stalinist patriotism. From the late twenties onwards the foreign policy of the Soviet Union was directed towards reaching an accommodation with the imperialist powers. This encouraged each of the national communist parties to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards national prejudices in their own countries. The more sectarian features of the Third Period aimed to consolidate the grip of the Stalinist bureaucracy, in the face of the threats of internal dissent from Trotskyists and external competition from social democrats.

Stalinist patriotism evolved further under the subsequent Popular Front policy of the thirties. The communist parties were then encouraged to form uncritical anti-fascist alliances with reformist and bourgeois parties, to help defend the Soviet Union during the build-up to the Second World War. Branson's prejudices blind her to the continuity between the two phases of Stalinism.

Branson's critical spirit is satisfied with regurgitating the familiar contrast between the sectarian form of Third Period Stalinism and the non-sectarian form of Popular Front politics. But the author fails to consider the nationalist political content of Stalinist policy in both phases. This ensured that the interests of the working class were subordinated to the requirements of Soviet foreign diplomacy

under both the Third Period and the Popular Front policies.

The German working class was the chief victim of the Third Period. The Stalinists' disastrous 'social fascist' approach disarmed the working class and played a decisive role in the victory of the real fascists. The first victim of the Popular Front period was the Spanish working class. The Stalinists restrained Spanish workers in order to preserve the Popular Front, which allowed the fascists to win the 1936-39 Civil War. The next victims were more than 30 million workers around the globe, killed in the imperialist slaughter of 1939-45 under the banners of anti-fascist unity. While Branson eloquently describes the German disaster of 1933, she is reticent to comment on those which rained thick and fast between 1936 and 1945.

Branson's partial amnesia is easily explained. British Stalinists were not particularly prone to the affliction of Third Period sectarianism. Branson correctly notes that the 'social fascist' line encountered resistance at all levels of the British party and was only implemented half-heartedly. But she fails to explain this phenomenon. Whereas the German party implemented the 'social fascist' line in a desperate bid to thwart its eclipse by the rival Social Democrats, British communist leaders responded unenthusiastically to a policy which ran counter to their orientation towards Labourism.

If Third Period sectarianism was a plague British workers were spared, Popular Front chauvinism was one they suffered in abundance. Branson's preference for the latter reflects the deep roots this trend was able to strike within British Stalinism.

Patriotic communism

In 1938, Trotsky reviewed the course that the Communist International had taken in the preceding decade:

'On the one hand, it lives on the subsidies of the Kremlin, submits to the latter's commands, and, in this respect, every ex-communist bureaucrat is the younger brother and subordinate of the Soviet bureaucrat. On the other hand, the...growth of the communist parties in recent years, their

infiltration into the ranks of the *petit bourgeoisie*, their installation in the state machinery, the trade unions, parliaments, municipalities, etc, have strengthened in the extreme their dependence on national imperialism at the expense of their traditional dependence on the Kremlin.⁵

The Popular Front policy was adopted at the seventh congress of the Comintern in 1935. It confirmed the substitution of patriotic reformism for revolutionary internationalism. Stalin had tentatively initiated this step with the doctrine of 'socialism in one country'. Now it had matured into a comprehensive universal strategy.

The impulse for this move came from two sources. European communist leaders, reeling from the defeats and isolation of the early thirties, were desperate for a break with Third Period policy and for a return to the United Front tactics of the mid-twenties. At the same time, the Soviet Union was preoccupied with defending itself against imperialist attack in the impending world conflagration. These were legitimate concerns. But the solutions Stalinist leaders came up with were even worse than the earlier horrors of the Third Period.

The new shift showed that diplomatic manoeuvre had become the preferred method of Stalinist policy. Instead of relying on their capacity to mobilise the working class, Stalinist leaders looked to the imperialist establishment and the middle classes to help counter the military threat to the Soviet Union and the isolation of the communist parties. Under the Popular Front, a shared desire for 'peace' with the class enemy rallied all sections of the International behind the banner of patriotic communism.

The policy of 'peaceful coexistence' substituted a strategy of long-term coexistence with imperialism for the traditional Bolshevik diplomacy of temporary tactical compromise — a policy the young and isolated Soviet state had been forced to adopt after the revolution. In initiating this break with Leninist orthodoxy, Soviet leaders hoped to break down any political barriers to the formation of a military alliance with France, Britain and the USA. The Moscow bureaucracy regarded such an alliance as its only guarantee against the threat of invasion by Germany and Japan.

The Popular Front turn, backed up by an elaborate revision of

Lenin's theory of imperialism, lent ideological coherence to social patriotism within the European parties. It cleared the way for rejecting the Marxist approach of uncompromising hostility to the bourgeois state. Stalinists began to consider bourgeois democracy in a positive light and became more closely involved with state institutions. Under the Popular Front, the distinction between communism and social democracy began to disappear.

Stalinists postponed socialism to the distant future and relegated the proletariat to the role of a pressure group lobbying the establishment to adopt 'progressive' imperialist policies. National chauvinism was allowed to flourish and the 'defence' of the capitalist nation became a legitimate objective of communist policy.

Given Branson's enthusiasm for the Popular Front, her treatment of the period is predictably uncritical. It comes as no surprise to see her declare that communist support for the Franco-Soviet military pact of 1935 'did not imply any illusions concerning the imperialist nature of the French government', nor did it 'damp down the class struggle as the Trotskyists alleged'.⁶ Readers who have a fleeting familiarity with European working class history will know that the French Communist Party demonstrated its support for French 'democracy' by sabotaging a major strike wave in 1936, giving the Marseillaise and the Tricolore pride of place at Communist gatherings, refusing to back Algerian nationalists against a state ban under the Popular Front government, and so on. In short, the French Stalinists so demobilised the French working class that by 1939 a proto-fascist government was bold enough to take power, ban the Communist Party and smash the working class movement. But Branson generously sweeps over such unfortunate events.

Branson's account of relations between the British Communist Party and the Labour Party in this period is equally selective. She refers to a letter to the Labour leadership of November 1935, in which the communist leadership coupled its appeal for affiliation to Labour with a pledge to 'work loyally' within the Labour Party on 'all current electoral and other campaigns', while maintaining its 'revolutionary standpoint'.⁷ But she omits to mention this, far more significant, passage in the party's 1938 congress resolution on

Labour Party affiliation:

'The Communist Party pledges itself to do everything in its power to mobilise the people behind every campaign of the Labour Party in order to secure its maximum success. The Party will help to strengthen the Labour Party throughout the country, particularly in those backward areas where the strengthening of the Labour Party is decisive for the development of the people's movement....The Communist Party declares that it fully accepts the constitution of the Labour Party, asks for no special privileges, and will abide by all decisions of Labour Party conferences, accepting at all times the same obligations and enjoying the same rights as all other affiliated organisations.'⁸

Given that publicising this resolution could reinforce the already widespread suspicion that there is no political justification for the Communist Party to survive outside the Labour Party today, Branson's omission is all too understandable.

The Communist Party grew rapidly through the late thirties. Membership increased from 5800 in December 1934 to 17 756 in July 1939. Its influence grew in unions in the engineering, aircraft, building and textile industries, on the railways and in the mines. Rank and file communists were engaged in activities which involved considerable courage and tenacity — fighting in Spain, leading street fights with the fascists, organising rent strikes and industrial battles. But the leadership's support for British 'democracy' meant that the party made no direct challenge to the domination of the capitalist class. And, when the drive towards war began under the guise of 'defending democracy', it ensured that workers seeking a way out of the imperialist slaughter could not expect communist support.

The legacy of defeat

If the formation of the Communist International was a product of the wave of radicalism that swept across Europe and beyond at the end of the First World War, the Stalinisation of the International was a product of working class retreat under the impact of the defeats of the early twenties. Stalin's theory of 'socialism in one

country' gave coherence to a defeatist and opportunist mood which took hold of communist leaders as the revolutionary wave ebbed. It paved the way for the degradation of communism into a reactionary, bureaucratic doctrine.

Today's European communist parties are the product of an era of class peace, ushered in by the defeat of the international proletariat, and consolidated by Stalinist class collaboration. Stalinism owes its survival to the political immaturity of the working class movement — a problem which the Stalinists themselves played a major role in creating. The defeats of the inter-war period created an environment in which European Stalinism was able to play a mediating role in the conflict between capital and labour.

Having gained a foothold in the mainstream of establishment politics during the war, the communist parties were ready to abandon the last remnants of their association with Leninism. Branson speaks for the entire British party when she says that the communist movement attained 'maturity' during the Popular Front era. Nevertheless...

'It was not until the war was nearing its end that the British party began to face up to the fact that the mechanical application of Soviet experiences and methods to Britain was actually an un-Marxist and un-Leninist approach. From then on, extra-parliamentary action ceased to be seen as an alternative to parliamentary action: on the contrary, it was realised that the way forward must involve a combination of the two.

'The object must be to transform and democratise the state machine, and to change the parliamentary system, not to "replace" it. So began work on a different concept: that of a British road to socialism.'

In order to reap the rewards for its wartime service in defence of Britain, the Communist Party was keen to 'face up to' the need to disassociate itself from outlandish ideas like 'replacing' capitalism. The party welcomed the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, which relieved it of Soviet interference and allowed it 'at last', as Branson admirably puts it, to emerge as an 'independent' party 'responsible to itself alone'.¹⁰ The adoption of *The British road to Socialism* in 1951 signalled the party's desire to become like any other reformist outfit.

But today the Communist Party is paying a heavy price for its adaptation to reformism. Having helped bring about the defeat of proletarian internationalism within the working class in the period Branson describes, the party suffered the inevitable consequence. The Labour Party strengthened its grip on the labour movement, while the Communist Party began the decline to its present status of an irrelevant sect. Despite issuing frequent reminders that it is not a 'ginger group', the Communist Party has long resigned itself to the role of a loyal opposition chorus on the left flank of the Labour Party. The one remaining difference between its programme and that of the Labour left has been the Stalinists' insistence on calling patriotic reform policies 'Marxist'.

Over the past few years, the decline in traditional trade unionism and the disintegration of the left has had serious repercussions inside the Communist Party. Comparing the 'buoyant' and 'confident' mood of the working class in the early seventies with today, party industrial organiser Pete Carter recently remarked that 'the fall in trade union membership, anti-trade union propaganda and laws, linked to the political advances of Thatcherism have all changed the situation radically.'¹¹

Eurocommunist Carter now tries to keep the show on the road by projecting the party as a matchmaker between the various fragments of Stalinism and Labour's soft left:

'There is an urgent need for this tendency to assert itself. Important in this respect is the Labour Coordinating Committee, and a whole host of personalities like Bickerstaffe, Sawyer, Knapp, Livingstone and Blunkett. This is still an emerging group with problems of cohesion and coherence, and lacking in confidence, but crucial to winning the centre ground of the trade union movement.'¹²

Carter's search for an alliance with a selection of time-served careerists and bureaucrats is a measure of the Communist Party's present desperation. There is a cruel logic behind the Eurocommunists' drift to the right. For example they understand that undemocratic practices in the unions have enabled the Thatcher government to pose as the defender of union democracy. On this as on every other issue, the Eurocommunists capitulate to

bourgeois ideological pressure:

'Ballots look like being here to stay. The question is whether the left can grasp this nettle, change its ways of working and secure the kind of approach by the trade union movement that can win the public to the movement's causes.'¹³

The hardliners have poured scorn on the Euros' capitulation to the right, their endorsement of wage restraint, condemnations of 'macho' trade unionism and acceptance of British membership of the EEC. But the hardline alternative is hardly more appealing. It consists of a tired reassertion of the turgid principles of patriotic trade unionism: the 'alternative economic strategy' of the early seventies, import controls, nationalisation and little-England opposition to the EEC. All the Communist Campaign Group can think of is steering the left back to where it was a decade ago:

'Turning to the wider labour movement, the CCG will do its utmost to ensure that the key proposals of the alternative economic strategy are once again incorporated in Labour's campaigning programme and election manifesto. In particular it will join with other progressive left activists, including those inside the Labour Party, in demanding that there is no return to any form of wage restraint, that re-nationalisation and extended nationalisation of key sectors of the economy are once again made a top priority, and that there is a firm reaffirmation of the commitment to withdraw Britain from the Common Market.'¹⁴

British Stalinism has become so inextricably entwined with Labourism that even its crisis only echoes the disintegration of the Labour left. Adaptation to Neil Kinnock or regurgitation of Tony Benn's faded dreams — these are the only options British Stalinism has to offer.

The forms taken by the crisis of European Stalinism vary according to national conditions. Yet the underlying cause is the same. The British Communist Party is paying the price for helping prop up reformism over the past 60 years. Now that a new era of class confrontation threatens to destroy the basis for the collaborationist policies of the past, the party's long road looks like it is coming to an end. To write a proper history of the CPGB

Branson would have to confront the root of the party's crisis: social patriotism. Her apologetic history confirms that some people will always prefer to remain in ignorance.

Paul Flowers

Notes

- 1 7 Days, 16 November 1985.
- 2 L Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, New York 1970, p72.
- 3 N Branson, p7.
- 4 Ibid, p29.
- 5 L Trotsky, 'A fresh lesson', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39*, New York 1974, pp70-1.
- 6 N Branson, op cit, p243.
- 7 Ibid, p151.
- 8 *For peace and plenty: report of the fifteenth congress of the CPGB*, London 1938, pp148-9.
- 9 N Branson, op cit, p108.
- 10 Ibid, p336.
- 11 *Marxism Today*, March 1985.
- 12 *Marxism Today*, April 1986.
- 13 7 Days, 21 December 1985.
- 14 Communist Campaign Group, *Which way for Labour?*, CCG pamphlet, April 1986.

A flawed critique

Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The retreat from class: a new 'true' socialism*, Verso, London 1985, pp202, pbk £6.95.

Ellen Meiksins Wood, a Canadian professor of political science, has written a useful critique of the school of academic Marxism closely associated with Eurocommunism. She notes that the advance of reaction under Reagan and Thatcher has encouraged a new intellectual attack on Marxism, the effect of which is ultimately to deny the possibility and necessity for the overthrow of capitalism.

She identifies the separation of politics from economics, the contention that the class conflict generated by workers' subordination to capital has no necessary relationship to the struggle for a new society, as the central theme of the new revisionism. Indeed some of the radical critics of Marxism examined by Wood go so far as to conclude that, because the working class is committed to winning a better deal out of the present system, it is most unlikely to lead the anti-capitalist struggle.

The strength of Wood's critique is that it reveals a basic grasp of Marx's analysis of capitalist society which is singularly lacking among most academic Marxists. She explains that under capitalism the distribution of social labour takes place spontaneously through the operation of the law of value, and that the state plays no direct role in the regulation of economic life. Hence the political institutions of capitalist society appear to be above the conflict between classes that arises from the economic sphere.

The separation of politics from economics gives the state an appearance of neutrality, even though it is the ultimate enforcer of capitalist relations. Struggles in the economic sphere — trade union disputes — appear to have no relation to political conflicts over issues such as women's rights, racism, or war. Wood rightly identifies the failure to appreciate that the apparent autonomy of the political sphere is inherent in capitalist society as a key weakness of academic Marxism.

Wood labels today's academic Marxists as the 'new "true" socialists' after Marx's characterisation of the utopian socialists of the 1830s, who regarded socialism as the outcome of the spread of progressive ideas rather than the result of the class struggle. The new revisionists share the old utopians' disdain for a working class apparently more concerned about winning higher wages than getting involved in wider political issues. Indeed when it comes to women, blacks or war, many workers seem to adopt backward views. Hence the radical academics put their faith for the future in the liberal middle classes and their progressive democratic values. They consider that these ideas, if properly presented, can win the support of a majority of reasonable people, irrespective of their class background.

Gavin Kitching, for example, considers that 'the construction of socialist societies and a socialist world will take a very long time (probably centuries) and that an essential prerequisite of such a world coming into being is a high degree of material prosperity and a citizenry of considerable skill, knowledge and intellectual sophistication.' He concludes that 'the central task of the left in the current situation is to help restore boom conditions as quickly as possible.' For Kitching, workers lack the sophistication required to build socialism, and working class action is not merely irrelevant, but a barrier to the measures needed to revive the capitalist economy.

Wood argues with conviction for a Marxism which recognises that the working class is the only viable agent of social transformation. She points out that there is no direct path from democracy to socialism. Democracy is limited by the requirements of capital, and the class struggle will inevitably reach a stage where

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the workers' movement is forced either to recognise the need to overthrow the capitalist state, or to accept the restrictions it imposes on society. While the capitalist state can grant formal rights to all its citizens, social inequality will persist as long as the capitalist class owns the means of production. All rights granted by the state remain provisional and restricted, and the coercive power of the most democratic state is always ready to be used if the capitalist order comes under threat.

So far so good. However, when Wood comes to consider the questions of fascism and dictatorship, she abandons her earlier insistence on the necessity to recognise the relation between politics and economics. Here she considers that 'a case can be made for the principles of the Popular Front and a corresponding ideological strategy in which the continuities between liberalism and socialism take precedence over the discontinuities.' Wary of the consequences of this position, Wood pleads that she is not falling into the trap of putting the defence of democracy before the fight against capitalism. She acknowledges 'the risks of a strategy that seems to suppress class struggle, subordinate the interests and independent action of the working class, and postpone the struggle for socialism'.

But Wood cannot have her cake and eat it. She cannot reconcile her approval for the Popular Front against fascism and her polemic against the separation of politics from economics, of which the Popular Front is a classical example. Most of the theoreticians against whom this book is directed — Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst — trace their intellectual origins to the international communist movement in its Popular Front phase. In the late thirties the Stalinists reduced the choice facing the working class to capitalist democracy or fascism.

The Marxist view that fascism was the outcome of capitalist social relations was abandoned, together with the strategy of fighting fascism by struggling to overthrow capitalism. The result of separating political forms from the relations of production which gave rise to them was disaster for the working class movement. It is a pity that, after going so far in revealing the weaknesses of the

revisionists, Wood ends up succumbing to them.

The area where Wood appears to have the greatest difficulty is in establishing the exact relationship between the conflict between workers and their employers and the struggle for socialism. She clearly recognises the need for some sort of working class political organisation which aims to destroy the existing state machine and institute a regime based on workers' power. She also accepts that workers will not spontaneously come to an awareness of the historic role of the working class through their involvement in workplace disputes. Such struggles reveal the possibility of a united workers' movement, not its inevitability. Realising this potential requires the conscious intervention of political leadership in the class struggle. Wood rightly criticises left-wing organisations which abdicate the responsibilities of political leadership and give a low priority to theoretical matters.

Yet Wood fails to draw the organisational conclusions of her own critique. She writes as a political scientist working in a university, rather than as a scientific politician engaged in the class struggle. She is critical of the electoralism and consensus politics of the British Labour Party tradition. Yet she endorses the views of British intellectuals such as Perry Anderson and Ralph Miliband, both of whom have rejected the Leninist project of building a revolutionary workers' party as irrelevant to the British working class.

Wood's analysis of the new revisionists contains many insights and it makes stimulating reading. But, like many of her colleagues on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*, she has yet to escape from the tradition she seeks to attack.

Keith Tompson

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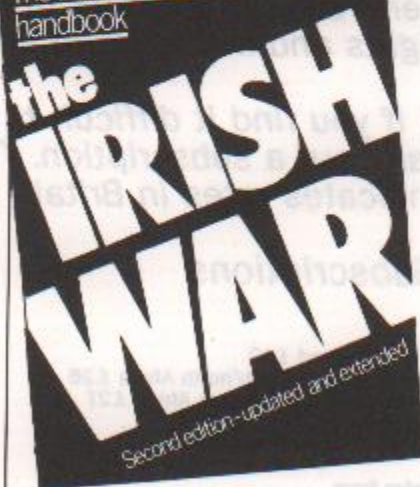
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