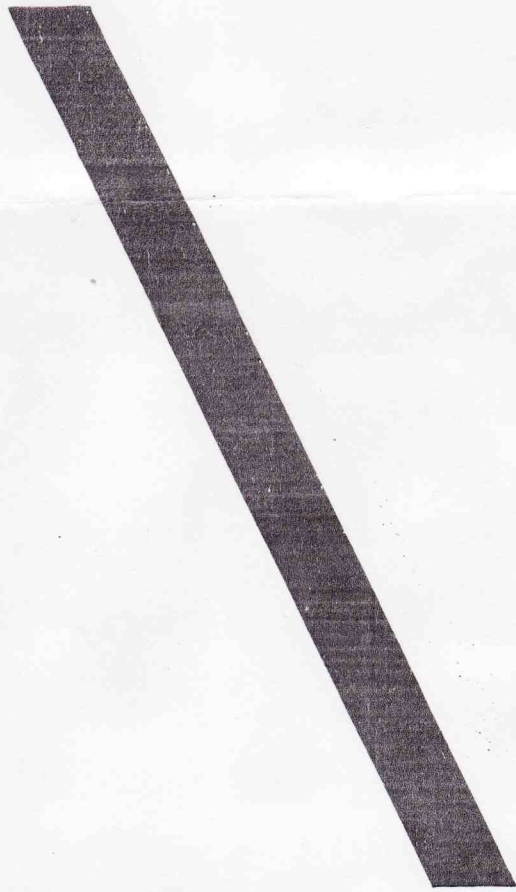


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THE STRUGGLE FOR A REVOLUTIONARY PROPAGANDA GROUP



REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST TENDENCY

The crisis and the working class

World capitalism has entered the greatest crisis it has known since the Second World War. Since 1973 in all capitalist countries the working class has suffered an absolute decline in living standards. Even in the most developed capitalist economies - Germany, the United States, and Japan - unemployment has reached levels between 5% and 9%. While prices have risen continually at rates of up to 20% a year, the working class has been called on to exercise wage restraint. The attempt to solve the crisis of capital has been carried out at the expense of the working class. Workers have paid the price by a drastic reduction of living standards, which is only paralleled by the setbacks suffered in the 1930s and during the war.

In Britain, one of the weaker advanced capitalist countries, the impact of the international crisis has been particularly severe. In order to establish the preconditions for profitable production, British capital must be restructured on a massive scale. Capital requires even higher levels of unemployment and further cuts in wages if this process of restructuring is to succeed. The minimal gains that the working class achieved through the expansion of social services made possible by the post-war boom have become a luxury that the bourgeoisie can no longer afford. Cuts in public expenditure, on housing, health and education represent a major attack on the working class.

In order to carry through this programme of austerity the bourgeoisie seeks the acquiescence of the working class. The bourgeoisie does not argue for its programme on the basis of its own class interests, instead it presents its strategy as being in the interests of all - the 'national interest'. The labour movement has not been able to counter the 'national interest' arguments. The dominance of reformist views has led the working class to accept the Social Contract and to seek a future solution within the framework of the capitalist system. Without understanding that the crisis of capital can only be solved at the expense of the working class there can be no proletarian alternative to the policies of the trade union bureaucracy.

The past 12 months have seen the most extensive reduction of working class living standards for thirty years. This setback, which is often ignored by sections of the left, has not passed unnoticed in The Economist:

'The 7% by which the past year's 10% increase in earnings fell behind its 17% increase in prices represents the biggest recorded fall in the average Briton's real disposable income for over a hundred years: worse than anything that happened in the 1930s.' (The Economist, 3 September 1977, p10)

Unemployment, now at over 1½ million, has reached the highest level since 1938. But, as the bourgeois press indicates, this is only a drop in the ocean for the requirements of capital. Although quite hopeful that

'...profits are likely to continue to rise throughout this year as the growth of labour costs and of manufacturers' buying prices has continued to moderate...' (Financial Times, 15 September, 1977, p30)

the Financial Times makes it very plain that the present level of profits provides an insufficient basis for the renewed growth of production:

'Industrial production has continued to decline in recent months and now stands at a lower level than a year ago.' (Financial Times, 14 September 1977, p1)

The Bank of England has no illusions about industrial recovery or North Sea oil bonanzas. It ruthlessly spells out the precondition for restoring profitability:

'In essence, the immediate outcome is likely to depend on the degree of restraint displayed by the unions in the exercise of their influence over the wage and price level and on the effectiveness of resistance by employers to excessive wage increases.' (Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin, September 1977, Vol 17 No 3, p297)

The clarity with which the Bank of England perceives the interests of the capitalist class stands in marked contrast to the posturing and the confusion which characterised this year's TUC. After a week of muddled controversy the TUC committed itself, not to the defence of working class living standards, but to their 'orderly' reduction.

The working class may oppose the trade union leadership over specific issues, but at this stage it does not question the general political premise that underlies the leadership's policies. Because of its political weakness the working class is unable to challenge the arguments of trade union bureaucrats. Hence, despite its organisational strength, its courage and militancy, the working class has been unable to advance an independent political response to the capitalist assault.

The struggle for working class independence

In order to build a revolutionary movement, Marxists must begin from an objective assessment of the working class movement today. During the past year, workers have fought a number of important trade union struggles. The militancy and determination of the working class has been demonstrated by a number of protracted strikes, the most notable being the Grunwick dispute.

These struggles have not succeeded in defending the workers involved against wage reductions, breach of trade union rights or threats of economic sanctions by the government. This failure is not due to a lack of combativity but is a necessary result of the continued ideological dependence of the working class on national interest arguments, clearly expressed in the policies of its leadership. By its very nature reformist trade unionism - based on the acceptance of the capital-wage labour relationship - poses absolute limits to the defence of the working class. It can never achieve more than what is possible within the framework of capitalist exploitation - in the crisis this must ultimately mean defeat.

The working class can not defend itself until it begins to recognise that capital itself poses an absolute barrier to the realisation of its interests. In fighting against the Social Contract workers necessarily confront the state and the legal norms established by the processes of bourgeois democracy. In order to take up the struggle against the state the working class requires the political independence which it must develop on the basis of a Marxist understanding that its interests are irreconcilable with those of capital.

Today any struggle against the Social Contract implies a challenge to the Labour Government. The dominance of reformism in the workers' movement allows the Labour leaders to argue 'if you attack us you'll bring the Tories into power'. Given the political weakness of the proletariat this argument is still a powerful one. Even struggles which receive massive support, such as that at Grunwick's, can be defeated by the labour movement's fear of challenging the Government. Behind the reluctance of the trade unions to tackle Grunwick's lies the fear of upsetting the Labour Government's electoral appeal. We should not be surprised at the news that APEX 'recognises there are no tactics available for winning the dispute that are not either illegal or damaging to the electoral chances of the government' (The Times, 23 September 1977). This sharply indicates the limitations of militant trade unionism against the assaults of the capitalist class on basic trade union rights.

Even the mass solidarity shown at Grunwick's cannot defend the working class as long as workers do not break from the premise of reformism. It is the task of revolutionaries to combat effectively the ideological and political attacks of the ruling class. In order to defend the Grunwick workers it is necessary to show that in the crisis the fight for basic trade union rights must challenge the 'national interest'.

The response of the working class to the Grunwick dispute expresses both the strengths and the weaknesses of the movement today. On the one hand trade unionists have provided an outstanding example of working class solidarity. On the other hand this solidarity lacked the political basis for a clear rejection of the 'now is not the time' arguments of reformism. Revolutionaries must have answers to these arguments.

The workers' movement is in ideological disarray. In order to defend its interests it needs not only its own trade union organisations but a strategy that is politically independent from the views of the bourgeoisie. A Marxist understanding of the crisis is needed to lay the basis for an independent working class response. Through demonstrating that socialism is not merely a possibility, but an absolute necessity for the defence of the proletariat, Marxist politics shows that there is no working class solution within capitalism — and poses the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The need for the proletarian dictatorship cannot just be declared. A working class vanguard, armed with a Marxist programme, is necessary to demonstrate the link between the daily experiences of the working class and the necessity for proletarian power. This vanguard does not yet exist. Militancy in itself does not provide the basis for revolutionary leadership. The task of revolutionary communists today is to struggle

systematically for Marxism within the workers' movement. Taking up the day to day experiences of the labour movement, revolutionaries must pose the practical relevance of Marxist theory. In this way the experience of struggle will become experience that is consciously understood. Through this struggle for ideas in the working class the basis for the development of a Marxist vanguard will be established.

The left has shown its inability to carry forward - or even recognise - the task of training a vanguard through ideological struggle. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) presents a programme which reinforces the belief in a solution to the crisis which can benefit the working class while simultaneously solving the problems of capital. Hence it can argue:

'What is needed is the alternative programme advanced by the communists and others on the left which would shift the balance of power and wealth away from big business in favour of the working people, improving living standards, cutting inflation, creating jobs, at the same time as it opens the way to socialist change.' (Morning Star, 5 September 1977, p1)

The CPGB's Left Alternative Strategy reinforces the utopian assumption that the capitalist state can and will be forced by mass pressure to eliminate the unpleasant features of capitalism. Therefore it believes that the government can increase wages, cut unemployment and lower prices at a time when the objective requirements of capital demand the exact opposite. The CPGB offers the working class no more than a radical version of capitalist policies. Grossly misjudging the grave consequences that capitalist-reflationary policies will have for the working class, the CPGB applauds them as its own:

'For reflation to be lasting and on anything other than a very mild scale it must involve government policies which challenge the ability of big capital to rule the roost...Were the government to do that, reflation could be full-scale and lasting, in the interests of the working people.' (Morning Star, 27 September 1977, p1)

The organisations of the radical left, such as the International Marxist Group (IMG), the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), and the Workers' Socialist League (WSL), who claim to be revolutionary, have not been able to provide answers to the political questions facing the working class. The radical left does not start from a materialist understanding of the contradictions of capitalist production, but from its immediate appearances. Hence it responds in a pragmatic fashion to day to day events and is unable to base its strategy on a clear Marxist foundation. Today the radical left is unanimous in putting the blame for the defeats of the past years on the shoulders of the trade union leadership. Since it does not have a correct assessment of the political development of the working class, it never asks why workers accept the politics of the leadership and allow themselves to be betrayed. Rather than struggle to build an alternative leadership - a working class vanguard - the radical left advances a strategy of denunciations and asks for more action. Every militant strike confirms the radical left's prejudices about an impending 'fight back'. The radical left refuses to admit that the working class does not yet have the political independence to resist betrayals.

These prejudices sometimes take on grotesque proportions. Thus the WSL could present the strike of 3000 British Leyland toolmakers in March 1977 as

'A Blow Against Wage Control...Bitter hostility to the treachery of their bureaucratic leaders is sweeping the workers' movement, throwing into balance the continued existence of the 5% pay limit which was never accepted by the membership and is now preserved only by dictatorial measures exercised by increasingly discredited fulltime officials.' (Socialist Press, 16 March 1977, p1)

Lacking a materialist analysis of today's conditions, the WSL in typical idealist fashion explains reformism through the subjective motives of trade union bureaucrats. The problem of reformism is reduced to 'treachery' and 'dictatorial measures' - all that is needed is a new leadership. In this vein, following the TUC, Socialist Press ran the headline 'AUEW - New Leaders Are Needed!'. Whilst there can be no doubt that the working class needs a new leadership, it is not enough to pose the problem in the narrow terms of a replacement of traitors. This is to grossly underestimate the task of developing the political understanding in the working class which could provide the foundation for a new class leadership.

The real problem, to which the WSL never addresses itself, is the political weakness of the labour movement, not the betrayals of the bureaucracy. It is important to understand that Scanlon and other reformist leaders are a product of the activity and historical development of the working class. Scanlon's fiddling of the AUEW vote stems from his reformist perspective and not from his subjective inclinations. If Scanlon were just a manipulator then he would pose little threat to the working class movement. The real problem is that Scanlon, even today, represents the views that dominate the membership of his union. As long as there is no independent alternative to the reformists and left reformists in the working class movement there will be more Scanlons.

The inability to grasp this basic political problem is clearly demonstrated by the IMG. By way of an assessment of the TUC it can devote an entire front page of Socialist Challenge to the pathology of betrayal in the person of Hugh Scanlon. The IMG does not even care to mention that more than half the TUC membership agreed with Scanlon and hence voted for continuation of the 12-month-rule. Thus they can continue:

'The real feeling at the TUC - rather than that manufactured by Scanlon and the other lackeys of the most right wing Labour Government since the war - gives the green light for trade unionists up and down the country to immediately begin the fight to regain the wages they have lost over the last two years... The opportunity is there for a fighting unity of all those willing to struggle against the right wing policies of the Labour Government and the scabbing trade union bureaucrats.' (Socialist Challenge, 7 September 1977, p3, our emphasis)

The IMG projects its own 'real feeling' onto the working class. Indignation at the manipulation of the trade union bureaucrats is its strong point. Unfortunately the IMG's political analysis is not so strong. The IMG's 'green lights' bear little relationship to the real world. It has failed to comprehend the experience of the working class over the past years, and hence can only offer more of the same. It seeks 'fighting unity' without having struggled to establish the ideological basis for that unity.

The British working class and Ireland

The failure of the British labour movement to respond to Britain's imperialist domination of Ireland demonstrates that the working class has not yet achieved political independence. The acceptance by the labour movement of the 'national interest' arguments has meant that it has never questioned the right of the British state to oppress the Irish people. The absence of an alternative working class perspective allows Labour and Conservative governments alike to pursue a common policy in the interests of imperialism.

Marx repeatedly emphasised the political importance of the Irish question for the development of the British working class. The central point he was making, which is still relevant today, was that the struggle for the self determination of the Irish people was inseparable from the struggle for working class independence.

'It is the special task of the Central Council in London to make the English workers realise that for them the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation.' (Marx - Engels Selected Correspondence, Moscow 1975, p.223.)

And further, the English working class

'... can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy on Ireland most definitely from the policy of the ruling classes.' (ibid, p.216)

Marx's approach is still not understood by the British left today. The CPGB, for example, recommends a strategy for the working class which seeks to reform the Six Counties through the agency of the British state. On 25 August the Morning Star proclaimed:

'What the people of Northern Ireland want to hear is..... speeches from Westminster announcing democratic reforms and an end to repression.' (Morning Star, 25 August 1977)

And further:

'This is the key to peace and progress and it is held by Premier Callaghan.' (ibid)

The CPGB poses Britain's domination of Ireland, not as a consequence of the changing requirements of British imperialism, but as the result of various policies. Instead of demanding the immediate withdrawal of British troops and self determination for the Irish people, the CPGB actually asks the representative of the British state to continue political and economic domination of the Six Counties, but in a more humane form.

By seeking legislation which would undermine the domination of Ireland by British imperialism, the CPGB betrays its illusions in the neutrality of the state. The reactionary result of this approach is to reinforce the dominant conception that the capitalist state can defend the interests of the working class.

The radical left cannot provide an alternative to the CPGB. It raises the question of Ireland not on a revolutionary basis but by imagining that an anti-imperialist movement can be built on the existing consciousness of the working class. It fails to understand that unless the Irish question is

posed as a challenge to reformist views in the movement there can be no effective support for the struggle of the Irish people. Unable to counter the views of left reformism and the CPGB, the radical left is reduced to moral outrage at the consequences of military occupation.

Real solidarity with the struggles of the Irish people must go beyond exposure of the killing, torture and other forms of violence which British imperialism employs in the Six Counties. Real solidarity can only be based on a struggle against British imperialism in this country. A precondition for this solidarity is the winning of workers away from the dominant national chauvinist views on Ireland.

The IMG's approach to solidarity has no revolutionary content. Since it cannot carry out an effective campaign around the demand 'Troops Out Now', the IMG appeals to humanitarian sentiments. It seeks to mobilise support through such gimmicks as the International War Crimes Tribunal. This method of work does not have to meet the obstacles that the struggle against anti-Irish chauvinism in the labour movement involves. However, such publicity stunts cannot lead the working class to understand its own independent interest, nor can it defend the liberation struggle in Ireland.

A narrow focus on repression actually reinforces illusions in the state. The confusion of approach is evident in the recent report from the IMG-supported National Labour Movement Delegation to Ireland:

'The Delegation also found that the past inactivity of the labour movement in Britain in relation to the Irish question has been a contributory factor in the success of governments at Westminster, both Tory and Labour, in the policies of opposing the establishment of majority democratic rule in Ireland as a whole. This Labour Movement Delegation therefore calls on the British Government to implement immediately the military, political and economic withdrawal of British imperialism from Ireland.' (Report, National Labour Movement Delegation to Ireland, 1977, p.20, our emphasis)

The recognition in the report of the failure of the British labour movement to challenge the policies of the British government is merely formal. The report does not draw the conclusion that the political basis for an anti-imperialist movement has yet to be established. Ignoring the real problems, it is content to call on the government to act against its own interest.

When it comes to trade union struggles the abstract nature of the left's calls for more militancy may be accommodated within the framework of trade unionism. However wider political questions, such as that of Ireland, cannot be encompassed within that framework. This is why the radical left is incapable of building the foundation for an anti-imperialist movement on the question of Ireland.

... and Fascism

The radical left's failure to advance its politics on the basis of class independence is further confirmed by its approach to the National Front (NF). On this issue the immediate dangers of the radical left's opportunism becomes apparent.

Working class unity

From the inability of the movement to take up such questions as fascism and Ireland from the standpoint of working class independence, Marxists must draw clear conclusions. Revolutionaries must confront the reformist views of the labour movement, and in doing so combat the apparently militant views of the left. Calls for 'more militancy', 'for a 'class struggle left wing', 'generalising the struggle', and so on underestimate the task of defending the proletariat. Unless the political basis of the existing activity of the workers' movement is transformed, struggles will only have partial results and may reinforce divisions in the labour movement.

The short-cut approach of the radical left does not even begin to recognise the political problems facing the working class. The IMG, for example, seeks to overcome the political fragmentation of the left by ignoring it. Bob Pennington, IMG National Organiser, writes:

'In our view it is a catastrophe that so many competing groups exist on the revolutionary left. We think that in most cases there is no justifiable reason for this.' (Revolutionary Socialism, IMG Publications, 1977, p30)

The IMG is not even able to pose the question of unity in a Marxist fashion. It provides no political explanations as to why 'so many competing groups exist'. It fails to understand that the existence of dozens of organisations is an outcome of the absence of a Marxist tradition in the working class. The ideological fragmentation of the left thus finds an organisational expression. The IMG sees the symptom of the left's degeneration as its cause.

The IMG's 'unity campaign' is consistent with its inability to see the need for transforming the ideological basis of working class action. The political basis for unity does not exist. The unity campaign can only lead to blurring differences and thus runs counter to the essential task of political clarification.

As revolutionaries we must fight to establish the unity in the workers' movement necessary for its struggles against capital. This unity can only be forged through a struggle for a programme - a programme which demonstrates the independent interests of the class as a whole and serves to unify the various sections of the proletariat. Through the development of a programme a vanguard will emerge that approaches all issues from the needs of the class as a whole. It is this struggle for a programme and the vanguard that provides the basis for working class unity.

A central component of any attempt to forge working class unity is the campaign against the views of opportunist trends that must reinforce the existing divisions within the working class. From our standpoint the IMG's 'unity campaign' runs counter to the needs of the movement today. It has a fictitious character which obscures the necessary tasks facing the working class. Lenin wrote against the IMG of yesterday:

'...unity cannot be decreed, it cannot be brought about by a decision, say, of a meeting of representatives; it must be worked for...

Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation, otherwise, our unity will be purely fictitious, it will conceal the prevailing confusion and hinder its radical elimination.' (VI Lenin, Collected Works vol4, p354)

Whatever its intention, the IMG's 'unity campaign' can only hinder the elimination of political fragmentation in the working class.

The revolutionary propaganda group

The struggle against reformism and opportunism today will only attract the most advanced elements of the movement, those who have already come to question the abstract approach of the left. It is necessary to win these sections to a Marxist position and train them as revolutionaries. The radical left can only pay lip-service to the need for a leadership. Because it underestimates the political struggle to create a leadership its needs are served by 'ready made' revolutionaries. Thus the SWP assures potential recruits that nothing will change when they join.

'...a member of the SWP is someone who supports our politics and organisation among the people they meet every day.' (Socialist Worker, 17 September 1977, p4) and moreover,

'This definition of membership has nothing to do with going out "eight nights a week and twice on Sundays", nor attending regular meetings of geographical branches.' (ibid)

There is something else which 'this definition of membership has nothing to do with'; it has nothing to do with developing a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

The SWP's approach to its membership is indistinguishable from that of present day social democrats. Since it neglects the task of political struggle in the labour movement it does not require a membership trained in Marxism. The SWP does not expect its members to provide a leadership to the working class that is trained in an understanding of revolutionary politics, it simply asks them to be more militant than before. Having rejected the task of training a Marxist cadre (the SWP doesn't even want to see its members regularly) this organisation can play no role in the development of an independent working class vanguard. The SWP's contempt for its own membership stems from the same opportunist method of work as the IMG's quest for unity on the cheap.

The Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) rejects the opportunist politics of the radical left: its inability to struggle for working class independence, its failure to develop a programme adequate to today's conditions and its neglect of the task of training a cadre capable of relating Marxism to the experience of the working class.

The tasks which the RCT has set itself have to be confronted by all revolutionaries. In today's conditions the instrument through which a

Marxist movement can be built is a revolutionary propaganda group. A revolutionary propaganda group must be capable of arguing for and developing Marxist positions in relation to the concrete issues which face the working class. Through developing revolutionary propaganda on key questions it is possible to transform the experience of the labour movement into a conscious experience. This will provide necessary lessons for the training of a proletarian vanguard.

Unless the strategy of revolutionaries is closely related to the development of a programme and the training of a vanguard the basis for an independent working class movement will not be established. This strategy can only be carried out by cadres who have been trained in scientific Marxism. Through the conscious work of a propaganda group the means are provided for assessing the experience of the working class and giving that experience a political direction.

Developing Marxism to provide the raw material for revolutionary propaganda, advancing Marxism to combat the dominant reformist views in the movement - such are the practical tasks which will build a solid basis for revolutionary activity. In this way Marxism will be established as a living force in the working class.

Sabina Norton
Keith Thompson

October 1977

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