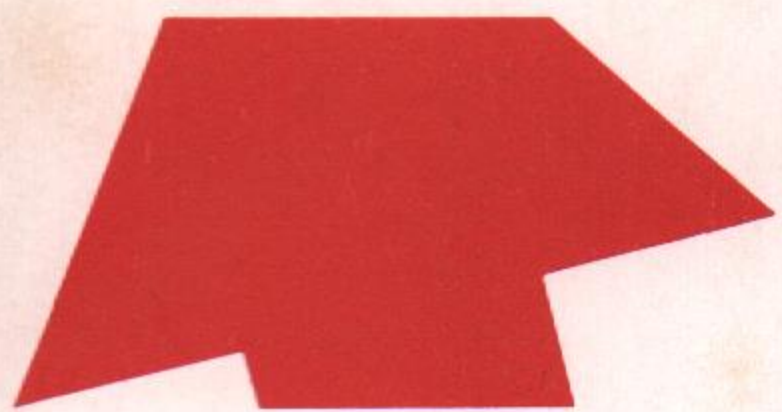




PROLONGING THE DEATH AGONY

Revolutionary Communist Papers No 8

Theoretical Journal of the Revolutionary Communist Party

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Keir Hardie: the founding father of British labourism



fall...

Wilson, Bevan, Mikando, Driberg and Caste. the left in limbo in the fifties



and reconstitution of social democracy

Tony Benn: set to rebuild a traditional social democratic Labour left for the '80s?



THEORETICAL JOURNAL OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY

Revolutionary Communist Papers

Number Eight September 1981

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EDITORIAL

Throughout the 'sixties and much of the 'seventies the far left in Europe was an active and visible force. In March 1977, when *Revolutionary Communist Papers* began publication, the left still spoke optimistically about its potential for growth. And yet today many of the organisations of the 'seventies have disappeared, stagnated or have become virtually indistinguishable from the left wing of reformism. In Britain the Labour Party has become the host for a variety of radical left factions. And significant sections of the Communist Party are talking about closing shop and joining the Labour Party. In France the Mitterand Government has managed to assimilate most of its left critics.

The decline of the radical left is symptomatic of the power that bourgeois labour parties still hold over the working class. It is also indicative of the amorphous, pragmatic character of radical left politics. No matter how revolutionary the rhetoric of the radical left it was simply no match for the reformists when the going began to get rough.

The convergence of the radical left and reformism — best illustrated by the 'Tony Benn for deputy' campaign — was made possible by the theoretical poverty of the radical left. The radical left has never critically examined its

past record to strengthen its ideological coherence. Nor has it ever undertaken a materialist analysis of the politics of the official labour movement.

The British radical left's lack of a conscious assessment of its relationship with the Labour Party has had two negative consequences. First, the left's orientation to the Labour Party has come to be defined almost entirely by tactical considerations. Debates about the Labour Party are debates about whether or not to enter it and whether or not to vote for it. Recently the debates have become narrower still: how to work inside it and how to influence its internal structures and choice of leaders. Second, the radical left's understanding of reformism has become a caricature of Marxism. The standard diet of the radical left is exposés of the life-style of trade union bureaucrats and denunciations of betrayals perpetrated by small cabals of class traitors. This approach could just about handle a Frank Chapple or a Harold Wilson. But when it comes to an austere Ken Livingstone or a man of the people like Arthur Scargill the radical left is lost for words.

The decline of the radical left does not imply the decline of its politics. Inside and outside the Labour Party radical petit-bourgeois politics continues to flourish. The politics of the class struggle has been reinterpreted to mean the defence of the lesser evil: democrats versus fascists, Labour versus the Tories, Labour left versus Labour right. In the ideological and theoretical spheres the class struggle is treated either as a matter of history or is reduced to populist ramblings about community politics, democratising the state or the Labour Party.

This issue of *Revolutionary Communist Papers* aims to set the record straight. Frank Richards' article on reformism and social democracy establishes the historical basis for the reconstitution of social democracy today. It explains the resilience of reformist politics and provides the theoretical basis for the tactics and strategy necessary to combat the labour bureaucracy. Bob Radcliffe's study of British Trotskyism in the 'thirties has more than a historical significance. Fifty years later the radical left repeats and improves upon the errors of the Trotskyist movement in the 'thirties. Not only have the lessons from this period not been learned, but the errors of the past have come to define the politics of the radical left today.

Three months ago a national conference of revolutionary communists decided to launch the Revolutionary Communist Party. To declare a party requires only headed note paper. To build a revolutionary party requires giving the closest attention to ideological and theoretical matters. For the RCP the state of the radical left serves as a vivid reminder of the terrible price exacted by ideological confusion and theoretical myopia. *Revolutionary Communist Papers* has only one objective — to arm the workers' movement with the most developed theoretical expression of its historical task.

Frank Richards

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review of the Revolutionary Communist Party

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PROLONGING THE DEATH AGONY

The rise, fall and reconstitution of social democracy

INTRODUCTION

When Trotsky stated in 1933 that 'there can be no thought, of course, of a serious and protracted regeneration of reformism',¹ he was only repeating a basic Bolshevik proposition. But history proved him wrong. Reformism survived the economic and political crisis of the 'thirties; even the official communist parties became integrated into the capitalist system. During the post-war reconstruction reformist working class parties successfully contained the struggles of the proletariat. Today they stand ready to curb the heightened class conflict unleashed by the recession.

In this article we examine the material and ideological foundation of reformism in the European working class. In doing this it is essential to draw a distinction between the subjective intentions of reformists and reformism as an objective process. Anybody's commitment to reform rather than revolution may be an important individual choice. But whether the reformist option becomes an important political force depends on a number of historically specific factors: the movement of capital, the strength of bourgeois rule, the consciousness of the working class and the balance of class forces. The role of reformism in the relationship between the working class and capital is not static. Through the class struggle social equilibrium is constantly modified as class relations are reorganised.

A section of the working class closely linked to the bourgeoisie is essential for the survival of reformism. This social stratum acts as the medium through which bourgeois class interests are translated into the language of the labour movement. However, it would be wrong to try to pinpoint a particular category of workers as the social basis of reformism. The changing composition of the working class militates against any such definite process of differentiation. Economic standing, for example, is not decisive: better off workers are not necessarily reformist any more than the poor are revolutionary. To understand the social basis of reformism we have to look at the historical process through which the bourgeoisie has forged at least a limited relationship with a section of the working class. Our analysis shows the decisive role the labour bureaucracy has come to play in fostering bourgeois politics among working class people.

There can be no general theories of reformism. The reproduction of capitalist social relations continually changes the terrain of the class struggle; the working class itself is restructured and the balance of class power is altered. Certain features of reformism — working class organisations, traditions and ideology — run through the time span of the imperialist phase of capitalism. This continuity of institutions has blinded the European left to

the changing social environment within which these institutions operate. As a result left-wing theories of reformism tend to be supra-historical generalisations.²

We distinguish three distinct phases in the development of reformism. During the last four decades of the nineteenth century the trade unions and political parties of the working class were established, often with the encouragement of the state. The rise of imperialism out of the era of free competition boosted these working class institutions and led to the second phase of reformism: classical social democracy. The grave imperialist crisis and the intense class struggle in the years 1917-21 ushered in the final, protracted stage. Classical social democracy died. Where social democratic parties were not destroyed they either stagnated or were transformed into agencies of social order. The defeats of the working class through the combined impact of fascism and Stalinism created the potential for the revival of social democracy. In the decade following the Second World War reformism had only a limited role to play. It is only now, under the impact of the deepest capitalist crisis since the 'thirties that the labour bureaucracy is moving to reconstitute a social democratic alternative.

Our aim is not to provide a history of the European labour movement. We select from the history of the working class the key experiences that have shaped reformist politics. Section I deals with the history of the theory of reformism, reviewing the ways in which the left wing of the labour movement has tried to come to grips with the forces of the bourgeoisie in its midst. In Section II we examine the rise of reformism to its apogée in classical social democracy. Section III looks at the defeats of the working class and the role of Stalinism in creating the scope for the regeneration of reformism. Finally we consider the problem of reformism today.

1 L. Trotsky, 'Our present tasks', in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, New York, 1972, p137.

2 Most radical left theories of reformism tend to be a restatement or modification of Lenin's theory. Unlike Lenin they lack any historical specification. As we shall show reformism, defined by its objective of achieving socialism through the accumulation of reforms through the agency of the state, has many social forms.

SECTION I

HISTORY OF THE THEORY OF REFORMISM

Discussions of the problem of reformism began in the revolutionary movement during the middle of the nineteenth century. However, it wasn't until the struggle against reformism became a life and death matter that the need for a cogent theory of reformism became a pressing political priority.

The British disease

In general, nineteenth century revolutionaries took a narrow view of reformism, seeing it as a temporary aberration from the overall development of the international socialist movement. They usually identified reformism as a peculiar deviation of the British labour movement. Marx and Engels both noted the influence of the British labour aristocracy in stifling revolutionary sentiments in the working class.³ Engels linked the narrow self-interest of the labour aristocracy to the successful domination of the world market by British capitalism.⁴ Kautsky linked this view of the labour aristocracy with the sectional outlook of trade unionism. He discerned 'a tendency to develop a spirit of corporative narrow mindedness, the caste spirit of an aristocracy seeking to achieve a privileged position by comparison with their proletarian comrades and at their expense'.⁵

However, Kautsky too tended to restrict his analysis of reformism to Britain, portraying the British working class as a special case. While his own party in Germany was becoming more and more reformist in its outlook, Kautsky could write in 1909: 'Now alas, we only learn from England how not to do things, how a big and strong working class becomes powerless as soon as it loses the spiritual tie which binds the various component parts of the labour movement together, and make of it an irresistible whole'.⁶

The British labour leaders' rejection of Marxism and their clearly expressed adherence to gradualism was in sharp contrast to the formal pronouncements of Continental social democracy. It was thus easy to see reformism as a British disease. However some revolutionaries in the Second International knew that all was not well in social democracy. The left wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was acutely aware of the reactionary character of the reformist wing of the party. Leading revolutionaries like Pannekoek were outspoken in their denunciations of the SPD bureaucracy.⁷ Rosa Luxemburg fought a vigorous battle against revisionism.⁸ But the Second International left could not give its opposition to reformism a theoretical or organisational expression.

Lenin's battle against Menshevism formed the basis for a critique of the Russian variant of reformism. But at this time his view of reformism more or less coincided with that of the revolutionary wing of the Second International. In line with the prevalent approach of the SPD left, he noted the unique development of the British working class, the weakness of British social democracy, the strength of Liberalism and the reactionary character of British trade unions. Thus he wrote in 1906:

'Unfortunately, the British working class movement promises to serve for a long time to come as a sad example of how the labour movement's divorcement from socialism leads of necessity to its becoming shallow and bourgeois in character.'⁹

Lenin's characterisation of the British labour movement was entirely correct – but the phenomenon he was describing was not restricted to Britain.

Despite his limited assessment of the problem, Lenin was not blind to the development of opportunism in the European labour movement. In 1906 he noted the spread of the British disease in his report of the Jena Congress of the SPD:

'It became more than evident at this Congress that even in Germany, where the traditions of Marxism and its influence are strongest, *anti-socialist* tendencies towards "pure trade unionism" of the British, ie absolutely bourgeois type, are developing in the trade unions – mark you, *Social Democratic* trade unions, . . .

'In Germany, as in Russia and indeed everywhere, a narrow trade unionism, or Economism, is linking up with opportunism (revisionism).'¹⁰

In the years that followed Lenin became convinced that the tension between the reformist and revolutionary wings of social democracy could not be resolved within a single organisation.¹¹ But even as late as 1913 he still characterised the social democratic parties as basically socialist. Commenting on another exception – the Australian Labour Party – Lenin insisted that its dynamic was away from Liberalism and towards socialism:

'Naturally, when Australia is finally developed and consolidated as an independent capitalist state, the condition of the workers will change, as also will the *liberal* Labour Party, which will make way for a *socialist* workers' party. Australia is an illustration of the conditions under which exceptions to the rule are possible. The rule is: a socialist workers' party in a capitalist country. The exception is: a liberal Labour Party which arises only for a short time by virtue of specific conditions that are abnormal for capitalism in general.'¹²

The collapse of the Second International forced Lenin to think again about social democracy. Whereas before he saw Liberal-Labour parties as the 'exception' he concluded in 1916 that 'the fact is that "bourgeois labour parties", as a political phenomenon, have already been formed in *all* the foremost capitalist countries'.¹³

Lenin's earlier underestimation of the strength of reformism inside social democracy was widely shared by the international revolutionary movement.¹⁴ This partial understanding of reformism was not due entirely to theoretical deficiencies: before 1914 the reformist content of social democratic politics had not been exposed in practice. When the direction of social democracy and the consequences of reformism became manifest at the outbreak of the First World War a revolutionary critique could advance further.

The Leninist synthesis

Between 1914 and 1916, Lenin and his collaborators developed a major critique of reformism. Lenin's theory of imperialism marked a decisive break with the previous debate. For the first time the discussion of reformism took place on a materialist foundation.¹⁵ Lenin now directly related the emergence of reformism to the period of imperialist expansion. The relative prosperity enjoyed by a section of the working class in the imperialist countries had a number of important consequences:

1 The absence of major wars or revolutions between 1871 and 1914 fostered opportunism which was consolidated through the labour bureaucracy and came to influence significant sections of the labour movement.

2 Economic expansion led to the emergence of a labour aristocracy. The privileged position of this stratum created the basis for its alliance with the bourgeoisie.

3 The labour aristocracy and its allies gained control of the labour movement and used its institutions to win the adherence of the working class to a policy of class collaboration.

4 The extension of bourgeois democracy, the growth of state intervention and the creation of close links between the labour bureaucracy and the state fostered illusions in the character of the bourgeois state.¹⁶

Many radical historians have reduced Lenin's critique of reformism to his analysis of the labour aristocracy. But his identification of the labour aristocracy as the social basis for reformism is only one part of his theory. Indeed, the role of the labour aristocracy had been widely discussed before Lenin's critique. What was most significant about Lenin's analysis was the link he drew between imperialism and reformism. Through imperialist expansion a section of the working class had been drawn into active collaboration with the bourgeoisie. This collaboration was made possible, not through simple bribes, but through state intervention in social and political life. The prosperity brought by imperialist expansion made it possible for the state to create the political framework necessary for the integration of the labour bureaucracy and the establishment of class peace.

However, the labour bureaucracy on its own could not have influenced the labour movement to adopt a reformist outlook. The role of the labour aristocracy was to act as 'vehicles of reformism and chauvinism'.¹⁷ And the road down which these vehicles rolled was provided by the bourgeois labour parties.¹⁸ These parties could play a mediating role because they were not only *bourgeois* labour parties expressing the interests of the labour bureaucracy, but also *bourgeois labour* parties reflecting the immediate concerns of workers. It was through the social democratic parties and the trade union bureaucracies that the alliance between the working class and the bourgeoisie was consummated.

The ruling class consciously set about the task of forging an alliance with the official labour movement. Lenin called this strategy 'Lloyd Georgism': the policy of granting reforms to stabilise the wage-labour/capital relationship.

Reforms of the type instigated by the British Liberal leader Lloyd George were crucial for providing the political and ideological framework within which reformism could flourish. State intervention in the class struggle in the phase of imperialist expansion was a powerful stimulus to reformist illusions about the neutral and even benevolent character of the state. That's why Lenin's writings on the state (particularly *State and Revolution*) are an essential component of his critique of reformism.¹⁹

The consolidation of the position of the labour bureaucracy depended on its recognition of the state. Bourgeois democracy and its institutions assimilated the leadership of the labour movement and created a political framework for stabilising class conflict. Lenin examined this process in detail:

'On the economic basis referred to above, the political institutions of modern capitalism — press, parliament, associations, congresses, etc have created *political* privileges and sops for the respectful, meek, reformist, patriotic office employees and workers, corresponding to the economic privileges and sops. Lucrative and soft jobs in the government or in the war industries committees, in parliament and on diverse committees, on the editorial staffs of "respectable" legally published newspapers or on management councils of no less respectable and "bourgeois law-abiding" trade unions — this is the bait by which the imperialist-bourgeoisie attracts and rewards the representatives and supporters of the "bourgeois labour parties".²⁰

State intervention gave reformism its coherence. Through its relationship to the state the labour bureaucracy guaranteed its survival while the state held out the possibility of new reforms.

The final element in Lenin's critique of reformism relates to class consciousness. The collapse of the Second

- 3 See K Marx and F Engels, 'Review May to October 1850', *Collected Works*, Vol 1, p514. In many ways Marx and Engels' critique of petit-bourgeois socialists such as Owen, Proudhon and Dühring are more pertinent to the elaboration of the theory of reformism. However these trends developed among the petit bourgeoisie and not in the labour movement. As a result petit-bourgeois socialism, despite its ideological affinity with modern day reformism represented a specific pre-imperialist political approach. Once opportunism began to manifest itself as a coherent trend Engels was quick to respond. His devastating critique of the Erfurt Programme of German social democracy provides the starting point for Lenin's analysis of the subject. See F Engels, 'Critique of the Erfurt Programme', in *East Kent Bulletin of Marxist Studies*, No 1, 1977.
- 4 'Engels to Sorge, 19 April 1896', *Selected correspondence*, p570.
- 5 Quoted in M Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the socialist revolution 1880-1938*, London, 1979, p74.
- 6 K Kautsky, *The social revolution*, London, 1909, 'The author's preface to the English translation', piii.
- 7 See D A Smart, *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, Pluto Press, 1978.
- 8 Luxemburg's well-known work *Social reform or revolution* is devoted to an ideological rebuttal of revisionism.
- 9 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 9, p413.
- 10 V I Lenin, *CW*, Vol 9, pp292-93.
- 11 'Various trends have grown up within German Social Democracy and are bursting to get out; inside, the party is seething. Resolute action is imminent here. A conflict between the reformist and revolutionary Social Democrats is inevitable.' Report on the work of the International Socialist Bureau, in V I Lenin, *CW*, Vol 41, p248.
- 12 V I Lenin, 'In Australia, 13 June 1913', *CW*, Vol 14.
- 13 V I Lenin, 'Imperialism and the split in socialism', *CW*, Vol 23, p118.
- 14 In a speech to the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, Trotsky noted: 'During the war and even prior to the war the bourgeoisie kept its mechanism in balance — although this escaped our notice at the time — through the medium of the Social Democrats'. See L Trotsky, *The first five years of the Communist International*, Vol 1, Pathfinder, p181.
- 15 Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capital*, published in 1910 was arguably the most comprehensive account of imperialism from a working class (albeit opportunist) point of view. Yet it ignores the problem of reformism altogether. Rosa Luxemburg's *Junius Pamphlet* (1915), provides a full account of the crisis of social democracy but fails to offer a critique of opportunism and thus draw the political conclusion that a new International was necessary. In contrast Lenin's *Imperialism* analyses the economic roots of opportunism and develops a critique of it.
- 16 The development of these points can be found in the writings of Lenin between 1914 and 1917. Lenin's collaborator Gregory Zinoviev also contributed to the Bolshevik critique of reformism. See their joint *Gegen der Sturm* published in 1916.
- 17 V I Lenin, 'Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism', *CW*, Vol 22, p193.
- 18 V I Lenin, 'Imperialism and the split...', op cit, p117.
- 19 For a discussion on the ideological confusions created by state intervention, see F Richards, 'Revisionism, imperialism and the state: the method of *Capital* and the dogma of State Monopoly Capitalism', *Revolutionary Communist Papers*, No 4, February 1979.
- 20 V I Lenin, 'Imperialism and the split...', op cit, p117.

International expressed 'the desertion of a stratum of the labour aristocracy to the bourgeoisie'.²¹ It was no longer a question of theoretical debate but of a political fight against active collaborators with imperialism.

Hence Lenin argued that there had to be a decisive break between reformists and revolutionaries. Only by building a new Communist International (CI) could class consciousness be given an organisational expression. The CI and a world wide struggle against imperialist politics in the labour movement were vital to purge the working class movement of its decadent leadership.

The Comintern against social democracy

The Bolshevik critique of reformism provided the ideological foundation for the CI. The problem that now faced revolutionaries was how to deal with their social democratic opponents. The resolution of this conflict would be decided not by theoretical speculation, but by the class struggle:

'Neither we nor anyone else can calculate precisely what portion of the proletariat is following and will follow the social chauvinists and opportunists. This will be revealed only by struggle, it will be definitely decided only by the socialist revolution.'²²

The revolutionary upsurge at the end of the First World War seemed likely to end the influence of reformism forever. Between 1917 and 1920 the ruling class was forced to rely on social democracy to preserve its rule; throughout much of Europe social democrats stood compromised before the working class. The main aim of the CI was to hasten the demise of social democracy by establishing new revolutionary parties and forcing a split in the official labour movement. This course of action brought rapid results — mass communist parties sprang up throughout Europe.

However, despite the expectations of many revolutionaries, reformism did not die. Although their influence had been seriously undermined, the social democrats still retained the allegiance of significant sections of the European working class. The Third Congress of the CI in 1921 was preoccupied with the problem of reformism. The result of the discussion at this, and the following, congress was the evolution of the tactic of the united front.²³ The united front tactic arose out of the CI's recognition of the need for a protracted period of struggle against the reformist leadership of the working class. Lenin outlined the problem: 'None of the Communist Parties anywhere has yet won the majority (of the working class), not only as regards organisational leadership, but to the principles of communism as well'. He proposed that the tactics of the Communist International 'should be based on a steady and systematic drive to win the *majority of the working class*, first and foremost *within the old trade unions*. Then we shall win for certain, whatever the course of events'.²⁴

The problem of reformism haunted the CI throughout the next decade. But after 1924 the growing influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy led to the abandonment of scientific analysis in favour of pragmatic speculation. There has been no real development in the theory of reformism since the early 'twenties. Critics of social democracy have either declared reformism obsolete or reduced the problem to the behaviour of a handful of betrayers. Even the most left-wing sections of the working class movement could not go beyond the literal restatement of the Leninist critique.

SECTION II

THE CHANGING FACE OF REFORMISM

The rise of reformism

Britain

Reformism took distinct national roads to its full political development. In Britain, the leading capitalist power, the growth of reformism was intimately bound up with the rise of the labour aristocracy.

The labour aristocracy in its classical sense is the product of capitalism in the period of free competition. The labour aristocrats were craftsmen who were able to take advantage of their skills to protect themselves from fluctuations in the labour market. They could wrest concessions from the capitalists, exercise a measure of control over their work and avoid to a degree the insecurity of employment that was the fate of the mass of the labouring population. Their experience of capitalism was different from that of the rest of the working class. As far as their social position was concerned they were closer to small employers and traders than to the mass of unskilled workers. Throughout most of the nineteenth century they enjoyed virtually exclusive rights to organise along trade union lines. They also gained the right to vote at a much earlier stage than the rest of the working class.

Much discussion of the labour aristocracy is excessively sociological. Most writers tend to emphasise the material standing of the labour aristocracy rather than its position relative to the rest of the working class, other classes and the state.²⁵ As a sociological concept, the labour aristocracy has become an acceptable part of bourgeois analysis.²⁶ But the sociology of the labour aristocracy illuminates only one aspect of the way in which this section of the working class provided the basis for reformism.

The labour aristocracy simply as a group of relatively privileged workers could not play the mediating function required for the operation of reformist politics. To understand this function we have to examine the relationship between the labour aristocracy, the trade unions and the state.

The 'new model' trade unions which emerged in the 1850s were the organisations of the labour aristocracy. These skilled workers' unions used their power to regulate the labour market and restrict entry into their crafts. The new model unions defended sectional privileges against the mass of the working class. They were directed as much against other workers as against the employers, especially as many skilled artisans were 'sub-contractors' employing labourers. Clegg has aptly characterised them as 'primarily associations of contractors'.²⁷

But the new model trade unions on their own could not act as instruments for containing the entire working class. For a start they excluded the majority of workers. And the organisations of the labour aristocracy were also a threat to the employers. Through the control of their own craft, skilled workers tended to limit the employers' capacity to introduce new work practices. During the 1850s and 1860s the labour aristocracy was able to use its power to encroach upon managerial prerogatives.²⁸

The British bourgeoisie was quick to appreciate the problem of unmediated class struggle in its burgeoning factories and workshops: its response was to institutionalise class relations. In the 1860s the ruling class moved to formalise industrial relations by establishing conciliation

and arbitration boards.²⁹ In the following decade the state intervened to provide legal recognition for trade unions, while restricting the scope of strike action through the Trade Union Act of 1871. Subsequent legislation in 1875 and 1876 completed the process of labour's legal recognition. During the 1880s, the economic depression strengthened the hand of the bourgeoisie and many of the arbitration boards disappeared. But in the next decade the institutionalisation of industrial relations proceeded with renewed vigour, incorporating even the new general unions of unskilled workers.³⁰ By the turn of the century the process of integrating the organisations of the working class into the capitalist system was well under way.

Europe

The labour aristocracy was not in fact an exclusively British phenomenon. In Europe it existed in a primitive form. The limited expansion of capitalism led to a slow evolution of the working class on the continent. The sector of skilled workers has barely separated from the petit bourgeoisie. As a result trade unions grew very slowly and tended to be local associations of craftsmen. In nineteenth century France for example, only the printers could afford to pay union dues, strike benefits and afford the cost of union administration.³¹

It wasn't simply the small size of the Continental labour aristocracy that prevented it from playing the role of its British counterpart. The slow development of capitalism limited the social power of the European bourgeoisie. As a result it could not afford to make the concessions necessary to integrate the working class. The relation between skilled workers and capitalists was not mediated through recognised channels and therefore was more violent in character than in Britain. Even in Germany, where capitalism began to develop rapidly the ruling class feared trade unions until the mid 1890s. One far-sighted German observer of English industrial relations who recommended the British approach to trade unionism was denounced violently by his bourgeois colleagues.³²

On the Continent, the absence of mediating institutions gave impetus to the rise of Marxism and syndicalism in the labour movement. Class conflict was direct and the class character of the state stood revealed in its coercive features. But national differences can obscure the fundamental similarity in the development of the European labour movement in Britain and on the Continent.

The trade unions were in all countries the bedrock of the labour movement. This was the case even in countries like Italy, France and Germany where objective conditions and anti-labour laws led to the establishment of socialist parties prior to the formation of unions. In these countries the social democratic parties attempted to stimulate union organisation. Where they failed – for example in Italy – reformism lacked a firm foundation in the working class.

At first sight there seems to be a world of difference between the British unions and the Continental syndicalist combinations. The British unions were conservative and shared the capitalist outlook of the employers. For example, British cotton-spinners invested personal and union savings in cotton mills and skilled shipyard workers did the same. In contrast French syndicalists were radical and did not hesitate to denounce bourgeois society.

The difference in outlook between British and European skilled workers resulted from the different political environments in which they operated. Anti-working class legislation and state repression radicalised Continental workers. Hos-

tility to the state was the norm as most skilled workers saw the state as an instrument of class domination. But the content of syndicalist union activity was strikingly similar to that of British unions. Syndicalists too were vitally concerned with the state of their industry – the difference with British unionists was that they sought to get rid of the bosses and run their own enterprises through co-operatives. Skilled workers in Europe were as jealous of their position as their British counterparts. Until the end of the nineteenth century the French labour movement had no room for female and unskilled workers – even skilled workers in new industries like railways were ignored. The potential for class collaboration was waiting to be realised once capitalist relations had matured.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 For a discussion of this tactic, see F Richards, 'The united front', in *the next step*, No 13, May 1981.

24 V I Lenin, 'Remarks on the Draft Theses on tactics for the Third Congress of the Communist International', in *CW*, Vol 42, pp320-21.

25 Hobsbawm's *Labouring men* remains the best account. Despite its sociological emphasis it also attempts to deal with the changing social position of the labour aristocracy. John Foster's account is more satisfactory on this score. But unfortunately he fails to explain the form through which the labour aristocracy's outlook became institutionalised in the labour movement. See J Foster, 'British imperialism and the labour aristocracy', in J Skelley, ed, *The General Strike 1926*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976. For examples of a narrow focus on the labour aristocracy outside the context of changing class relations, see A E Musson, 'Class struggle and the labour aristocracy, 1830-60', in *Social History*, January 1978, and A Reid, 'Politics and economics in the formation of the British working class', in *Social History*, October 1978.

26 One anti-Marxist historian identifies the labour aristocracy as the top 10 to 15 per cent of wage earners. E H Hunt, *British labour history 1815-1914*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981. Used in this sense the concept of the labour aristocracy means nothing.

27 H A Clegg et al, *A history of British trade unions since 1889*, Vol 1, 1884-1910, Oxford, 1964, p15.

28 R Price, *Masters, unions and men 1830-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p93. This book is one of the most important analyses of class relations in Britain published during the past decade.

29 For an excellent account of this process, see R Price, *ibid*.

30 Collective agreements which regulated industrial relations grew from just over 100 in 1890 to around 800 in 1916. See R Price, *ibid*, p164.

31 F Ridley, *Revolutionary syndicalism in France*, Cambridge, 1970, p17.

32 See G von Schulze-Gaevernitz, *Social peace*, (English translation), Swann & Sonneschorn, London, 1893. He enthused: 'With the legislation of 1871-1876, the reason for that distrust which hitherto had separated the workers from the upper classes, and especially from their employers, disappeared. It is wonderful how rapidly the revolution has since progressed, changing the Trade Unions, once considered a danger to the state, into an important section of the Liberal Party, ever growing in influence'. *Ibid*, pp103-4.

The imperialist epoch brought the decline of the labour aristocracy in its classical form. Technological innovation in Britain destroyed craft-based industry and transformed the working class. The classical labour aristocracy was replaced by a new stratum of skilled workers.³³ Although relatively privileged and socially distant from the labouring masses these skilled workers did not enjoy the secure position of the old artisans. A clear line was now drawn between the upper stratum of the working class and the *petit bourgeoisie* — the skilled workers were unmistakably now a part of the class of wage earners. New technology downgraded skills and undermined the control over the labour market that gave the labour aristocracy its particular social power. Even the most skilled and best organised workers now faced a degree of economic insecurity. But this section of the working class could still defend its interests through its domination of the trade unions.³⁴

On the Continent a similar process was taking place, although at a slower pace. The new group of skilled workers became the leading force in the official labour movement. Between 1890 and 1914 the representatives of the skilled workers in the trade unions and the social democratic parties came to constitute a clearly definable social force — the labour bureaucracy. The labour bureaucracy not only expressed the sectional interests of the skilled workers but it also manifested all the prejudices of *petit-bourgeois* functionaries. In 1915 the bourgeois sociologist Michels commented on the emergence of this bureaucratic layer in the working class:

'There already exists in the proletariat an extensive stratum consisting of the directors of co-operative societies, the secretaries of trade unions, the trusted leaders of various organisations, whose psychology is entirely modelled upon that of the bourgeois classes with whom they associate.'³⁵

The transformation of labour leaders into labour bureaucrats was made possible by the consolidation of imperialist domination over the world market.

Imperialism provided the material foundation for the growth of a relatively privileged section of the European working class. Economic expansion and a relatively stable labour market tempered working class hostility to the capitalist system. And as the position of the European bourgeoisie was strengthened at the head of a system of global exploitation, it could afford to relax its generally repressive attitude to working class organisations. The trade unions in particular gained ever-increasing recognition from the state.

As the empires of the European powers expanded abroad, the trade union bureaucracy flourished at home. The establishment of arbitration boards and procedures accelerated bureaucratisation of the unions. From the 1870s onwards in Britain the union leaders broadened their sphere of activity. No longer simply wage bargainers, they were recognised as spokesmen for the working class over a wide range of issues. Arbitration procedures gave them a special status in the operation of industry with the full approval of the government.³⁶

The most dramatic developments took place in Germany. There the repeal of 'anti-socialist' legislation resulted in a boom in trade unionism. Between 1896 and 1900 trade union membership doubled and passed 600 000 — by 1904 it had reached one million.³⁷ In 1884, the French state finally gave workers the right of permanent legal association. Although the ruling class had long feared and fought the development of unions, within ten years 400 000 workers

were organised into 2200 local unions.³⁸ In the backward parts of Europe, the bourgeoisie lacked the confidence necessary to recognise the right of workers to organise. Italian unions formed a loose federation in 1893 but state repression ensured that it remained weak. State violence and legal obstacles prevented the establishment of stable labour organisations.³⁹ Thus in southern Europe working class action was often violent and the bourgeoisie had major problems in institutionalising relations between capital and labour.

In the leading capitalist countries a close relationship emerged between the unions and the state. The German state emulated the British example and under Bismarck took it a step further. Bismarck promoted welfare measures as a means of containing the influence of social democracy. By the turn of the century, the German trade union movement had turned its back on its anti-state traditions.

The trade union leaders saw state reforms as a means of strengthening their organisations. At the 1896 trade union congress the unions' traditional opposition to labour contracts and procedure was decisively defeated. Three years later at the Frankfurt Congress, the bureaucracy dropped its opposition to participating in municipal labour exchanges and encouraged union officials to enter them on terms of parity with the employers.⁴⁰ In 1902, the Stuttgart Congress supported the participation of trade union representatives in state bodies dealing with social policy.

Throughout the nineteenth century the British ruling class was reluctant to intervene in the sphere of social welfare. But as imperialist rivalries increased around the turn of the century, and the class struggle threatened to assume more bitter proportions, the British bourgeoisie began to emulate Bismarck. From 1906 onwards the state attempted to cushion the harsh effect of the capitalist labour market on the weaker sections of the working class. Lloyd George and Churchill were the most prominent advocates of this course of action. Three measures passed in Parliament — the Labour Exchange Act, the National Insurance Act and the Development Act — sought the co-operation and active participation of union leaders. These reforms were seen as essential for winning the adherence of the labour movement for the status quo. As Churchill told the *Daily Mail* in 1909: 'With a "stake in the country" in the form of insurance against evil days these workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism'.⁴¹ This strategy had the desired effect. Prominent working class militant, Jack Murphy, wrote later how this approach 'changed the relation of the state to the trade unions. The unions were drawn closer to the state by the ingenious means of giving them a share in the administration of the state insurance funds'.⁴²

State regulation of the wage labour/capital relationship had a dramatic effect on trade unionism. In Britain and Germany trade unions became legitimate institutions with full legal sanction. The growing respectability of trade unions boosted membership and encouraged droves of career bureaucrats. In 1898 the German Free Trade Unions had 104 salaried officials, six years later the number was 677 and by the outbreak of the war it was near 3000.⁴³ As unions set up big offices and employed more and more staff, their leaders became more and more closely identified with the capitalist system. When rail workers' leader Richard Bell moved from his union post to high office at the Board of Trade in 1910, it was a sign of the times. Bell had plenty of old colleagues to keep him company. Between 1906 and 1912, 117 active trade unionists were appointed to the Board of Trade. A further 124 received appointments in positions connected with national insurance, 48 went to the Home Office and 85 obtained posts in other branches of

the civil service. Liberal ministers indulged in 'positive discrimination' in favour of union bureaucrats — they were prepared to drop standards and 'sacrifice' the principle of recruitment through exams.⁴⁴

Trade union autonomy

Union leaders abhorred any political action that threatened the capitalist system. Their organisations depended on a stable labour market and state recognition. And although trade unions were important weapons for the defence of working class living standards, as far as their leaders were concerned they were the best possible compromise with the capitalist system. Any action which threatened capitalism also jeopardised union organisation and the union bureaucracy. British, German and other union bureaucrats therefore rejected the involvement of their organisations in political action and insisted on the separation of the economic and political struggles.

The principle of the autonomy of the trade unions from the social democratic parties was raised in different forms throughout Europe. Its most systematic exponents were the German union leaders. At the 1892 trade union congress, one of their leaders, Carl Legien formulated his argument for union neutrality as a declaration of independence from social democracy.⁴⁵

British trade union bureaucrats saw union neutrality as a positive advantage in dealing with the capitalist state. Liberal trade union leader Shackleton told the 1910 TUC conference:

'In the course of our negotiations with the Government from time to time... the advantage has been manifested of having a Trade Union body as distinct from a political body. Our feeling is that if there is not that distinctive Trade Union element we shall always be in the position of fighting the government of the day; and we are desirous of being able to continue our negotiations with any government, apart from the fight that goes on in the country between the three parties.'⁴⁶

Not every labour bureaucrat was as servile as Shackleton, but they generally accepted the same separation of politics and trade unionism.

The principle of union autonomy operated, although in a different form, in countries where the labour bureaucracy was still underdeveloped. In France, where the state had few friends in the labour movement, many workers saw politics as irrelevant to their needs and looked to unions as the prime force for changing society. This syndicalist approach was formally adopted by the CGT, the French union federation at its famous congress at Amiens in 1906. The Charter of Amiens declared the need for trade union 'independence' and rejected collaboration with any political parties.⁴⁷ Despite its radical syndicalist rhetoric the CGT's emphasis on autonomy was not in practice much different from that of British or German trade unionists. In Britain and Germany trade union autonomy meant active co-operation with the state — in France it meant a refusal to take political action and hence a refusal to challenge the bourgeois state.

The politics of the union bureaucracy

With considerable national variations the European labour movement was moving in the same reformist direction. The differences were in the rate at which class collaboration was institutionalised.

State intervention transformed trade unionism. Labour

legislation and the formalisation of industrial relations stabilised union organisation. Trade unions still operated as the first line of defence of working class living standards. But a growing gap emerged between the rank and file and union leadership. Workers sought to defend their living standards whereas the union leadership had to weigh up the effect of industrial action on union resources and organisation. Union leaders sought redress for their members' grievances without jeopardising their own position. They looked to the state to recognise its position and to enforce concessions in the interests of industrial peace. When union leaders reluctantly sanctioned strikes, they were careful that this action should not go so far as to threaten that relationship with the state.

Economic growth gave the labour bureaucracy room to wrest concessions for its members while maintaining close links with the state.⁴⁸ As a result the trade union leadership strongly identified with the state, the nation and the future of industry. And the rise in living standards enjoyed by a considerable section of the working class ensured that the outlook of the union bureaucracy had a strong resonance in the labour movement.

Support for the doctrine of trade union autonomy was widespread in the labour movement. Many workers accepted the restriction of the class struggle to the battle over wages. In practice this meant that the working class had no

- 33 Hobsbawm estimates that this stratum constituted roughly 15 per cent of the British working class. *Op cit*, p284.
- 34 Even the new unions of unskilled workers were led by craftsmen like Tom Mann, John Burns and George Barnes.
- 35 R Michels, *Political parties*, Dover Publications, New York, 1959.
- 36 C E Shorske, *German Social Democracy 1905-17: the development of the great schism*, Cambridge, Mass, 1972.
- 37 The rank and file was in no position to oppose this process. Indeed the establishment of new procedure and arbitration boards often reflected workers' defeats. Price notes they 'were established precisely where the great power that the men wielded over the productive process had been compromised or defeated'. See *op cit*, p119.
- 38 F Ridley, *op cit*, p17.
- 39 See G D H Cole, *The Second International 1889-1914*, Vol 3, part 2, Macmillan, 1956, p713.
- 40 C E Shorske, *op cit*, p14.
- 41 Cited in J Harris, *Unemployment and politics*, Oxford, 1972, p346.
- 42 J T Murphy, *Modern trade unionism*, Routledge & Sons, 1935, p7. Murphy's study provides a clear analysis of the convergence between the labour bureaucracy and the state. He locates the British reformist predilection for nationalisation as stemming from the period: 'The state assumed a new importance to the unions. State socialist ideas spread like wildfire. The demand for the nationalisation of this and that industry became popular'. *Ibid*.
- 43 R Schlesinger, *Central European democracy and its background*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, pp70-71.
- 44 See R M Martin, *TUC, the growth of a pressure group 1868-1976*, Oxford, 1980, p105.
- 45 C E Shorske, *op cit*, p11.
- 46 Cited in R M Martin, *op cit*, pp118-19.
- 47 F Ridley, *op cit*.
- 48 As a result of its decline as a world power, Britain experienced major industrial upheavals in the decade leading up to the war. The First World War put a temporary stop to this process and gave the ruling class a breathing space to reorganise class relations.

particular point of view about anything other than matters concerning living standards. Thus trade unionism, even militant trade unionism, could coexist with a bourgeois social outlook. Bourgeois views, especially on international issues, became influential throughout the labour movement.

An astute German observer commented in 1906 on the narrow trade unionism and broad pro-imperialism of British labour:

'This powerful position of the worker is not dangerous for Great Britain, for half a century of trade unionism and political training has taught the worker to identify his interests with those of his industry. It is true that he opposes the employer in questions of the level of wages, hours of work, etc, but externally he is at one with the employer in all matters where the interests of his industry are concerned. It is not rare for employers' organisations and workers' trade unions to act together on current economic questions. For example, the Lancashire trade unions supported bimetallism until the Indian currency was put on a gold basis; today they are assisting the efforts to introduce cotton cultivation in Africa.'⁴⁹

Schulze-Gaevernitz exaggerated the extent of class collaboration, but nevertheless he was correct to point out the success of trade union organisation in limiting the scope of class conflict.

The formalisation of class relations transformed the relationship between the union leadership and the rank and file. The union leaders' concern for their members was qualified by their interest in sustaining the union machine. For the ruling class a new source of coercion appeared in the struggle against capital. Workers now confronted not only their boss but also regulations and procedures enforced by the labour bureaucrats. Workers who wanted to defend their living standards had now to consider the likely reaction of the union bureaucracy. The assertion of working class power now implied a challenge not merely to the bourgeoisie but also to the labour bureaucracy.

It should be noted that the relationship between the union bureaucracy and the state, although increasingly harmonious, was not free from conflict. Even in the early phase of imperialist expansion working class living standards were always subject to attack and the unions had to fight hard for every gain. Thus, the union leaders could not remain indifferent to politics. Increasingly they became concerned with what went on in Parliament. Trade union autonomy in practice meant, not the rejection of politics but the extension of trade unionism from industrial relations to Parliament. To complete the picture we have to examine the relationship between the economic and political organisations of the labour bureaucracy.

Classical social democracy

Trade unions and socialism

At the risk of being one-sided, it is essential to draw attention to the *common* pattern of trade union development in Europe. The separation of trade unions from socialism and politics – an international phenomenon – had a decisive effect on the evolution of social democracy. As leading Bolshevik trade union spokesman Lozovsky noted in his important analysis of the international trade union movement 'the fundamental question... was the mutual relations between the political and economic organisations of the working class'.⁵⁰

The relationship between trade unions and social democracy is clearest in the case of Britain, where the trade union leaders took the initiative to establish a parliamentary party. They set up the Labour Party to defend

trade union interests in Parliament – to press for the enactment of legislation favourable to the labour movement. The Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and later the Labour Party had the task of pursuing trade union political objectives without undermining industrial relations. One astute bourgeois writer has observed that the LRC took over from the TUC functions 'which carried a high risk of disruption for a body as broad-based as the TUC'.⁵¹ The pursuit of political objectives by trade unions themselves would have undermined the mutually satisfactory relationship between the labour bureaucracy and the state. By divesting their political functions to the Labour Party the trade union leaders removed controversial issues from the union sphere whilst at the same time creating an instrument to push their interests in Parliament.

In Britain the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party was transparent. The leadership of the Labour Party explicitly acknowledged its own roots in the trade unions. Leading Labour politician Ramsay MacDonald wrote in 1908: 'The Labour Party was formed, because Trade Unionism had experienced that a class war led nowhere'.⁵² In other words, politics had to be taken out of industrial relations and channelled through the representative institutions of bourgeois society.

Many historians have identified the formation of the Labour Party by the trade unions as a distinctly British phenomenon, in comparison with most European countries where the social democratic parties sponsored the trade unions. Others have contrasted the 'Marxist' ideology of Continental social democracy to the reformist philosophy of the Labour Party. But in reality there was nothing unique about the British experience.

It is true that on the Continent Marxism had considerable influence over the working class. Marxism corresponded to the political experience of significant sections of the European working class: the underdevelopment of bourgeois democracy, the coercive character of the state. The socio-economic conditions that prevailed in Europe retarded the development of trade unions. The lack of scope for trade union action stimulated the emergence of working class political organisations. One important consequence of this process was the existence of revolutionary tradition and objectives within European social democracy.

However, the later arrival of capitalist expansion and the extension of bourgeois democracy had a considerable impact on Continental social democracy towards the end of the nineteenth century. Increases in living standards, social and political reforms, strengthened reformist ideology within social democracy. The pursuit of immediate gains and short-term goals pushed social democracy away from its pursuit of long-term socialist objectives. And the place in which to fight for immediate improvements was the trade unions. Social democratic politicians began to place greater and greater emphasis on trade unionism; they took an active interest in strengthening trade union organisation and in articulating the interests of the trade union bureaucracy.

In the late nineteenth century the right-wing German social democrat, von Vollmar, glorified the trade unions thus:

'To enable economic and social struggles to be carried out fruitfully and without needless expenditure of strength and sacrifice, it is necessary to replace inexperienced, incoherent masses blindly staggering from passion and excitement to despair, by an aggregate of workers who know what they want, who have a common mind, education and self-discipline as well as the insight into the whole situation requisite in order to estimate accurately the strain entailed upon their strength and the prospects of gain from it. From this point of view an enlightened government should itself

further the trade unionist organisation of the workers, or at least secure to it a minimum of disturbance.⁵³

For von Vollmar the social democratic struggle for reforms meant the further institutionalisation of the wage labour/capital relationship. Working arm-in-arm the social democratic politician and the trade union leader would police the 'incoherent masses'.

German social democracy may have been established before the German unions, but this sequence of events did not prevent the establishment of the division of labour similar to that between the TUC and the Labour Party. Most studies of the SPD show that the growth of its reformist wing paralleled the rise of trade unions.⁵⁴ Between 1891 and 1913 the German Free Trade Unions grew from 275 000 members to 2 500 000 and surpassed even the strength of unions in Britain.⁵⁵ The political consequence – the consolidation of reformism – was the same in Germany as in Britain:

'SPD leaders liked to think that they exercised considerable influence over the politics of union members. To an extent this was true; but the trade unions undoubtedly had a more profound influence over the party, and one that was specifically reformist.'⁵⁶

The division of labour between the union leaders and social democracy worked well in Britain and Germany. However, in France, the socialist parties evolved in a reformist direction with great speed. In 1894 one of the leading French social democrats, Millerand joined the bourgeois Waldeck-Rousseau Government – a regime in no position to make concessions to the working class. Socialist parliamentarians had little to offer the trade unions. In 1900, when numerous strikers were shot down at Chalon-sur-Saône, the socialist deputies split and 16 of them still supported the Waldeck-Rousseau Government.⁵⁷ French workers naturally became suspicious of socialist politicians and trade unionists refused to affiliate with the socialist party. French syndicalism was thus sustained by the underdeveloped character of social democracy. Militant workers looked to the unions to defend their interests and syndicalism flourished. The convergence between the leadership of French social democracy and the syndicalist unions was only consummated when they united behind the bourgeoisie's war effort in 1914.

Socialism and social democracy

Up to now we have examined social democracy from the point of view of its relationship with the trade unions. But social democracy was not simply an extension of the unions. On the Continent in particular, social democracy began as an expression of the anti-capitalist sentiments of the working class. The social democratic programme proclaimed socialism as its objective and all the European parties counted the revolutionary elements of the working class within their own ranks.

Pure trade unionism was only one anti-socialist influence on social democracy. Imperialism created the conditions in which social democratic parties could operate openly and legitimately. The extension of bourgeois democracy and state reforms took social democracy by surprise. For years socialist activists had directed their fire against authoritarian coercion and bureaucratic arbitrariness. The growing success of social democracy in the parliamentary field strengthened gradualist ideology and undermined anti-state views.

Social democracy did not have to renounce its Marxism

or its formal objectives because its successes seemed to be leading to its socialist goals. The fact that socialist politicians had begun to collaborate with bourgeois parties and governments was not seen as antithetical to socialism, but as a pragmatic response to new opportunities. Even revolutionaries could dismiss the involvement of social democratic leaders in anti-working class measures as sordid episodes in an otherwise healthy labour movement.

The growth of reformism was not due to an intellectual crisis in social democracy. The material conditions which allowed for the integration of the trade unions into the capitalist system also house-trained social democracy. Once the social democratic leadership placed day to day gains before its long-term objectives, it became increasingly reconciled with the capitalist system. It came round to the view that the best way to defend the working class was through perfecting the organisation of the social democratic party – not through pursuing the class struggle.

The reformist degeneration of social democracy reflected the growing influence of the labour bureaucracy which was the main beneficiary of state reforms. The party bureaucracy became an important force in its own right. According to Zinoviev, by 1914 the SPD was run by 4100 party officials and 11 000 salaried employees.⁵⁸ At the 1911 party conference over 60 per cent of the 393 delegates were full-time workers for either the party or the trade unions.⁵⁹ The SPD national executive was entirely composed of former labour bureaucrats.⁶⁰ Although the SPD bureaucrats were not wealthy, their social position marked them off from the working class. Guttman's study notes the benefits accrued by the time-servers:

'Economically the position of the social democratic bureaucracy at its lower levels or at the early stages of individual careers corresponded more to that of the 'aristocracy of labour' – than to the middle class proper. Yet long-serving officials and men in the most senior positions were clearly enjoying greater benefits than any manual worker, especially if they also received payment from some public office or from a seat on a parliamentary body. In addition, certain benefits in kind, such as official travel, removed them further from a working class milieu.'⁶¹

49 G von Schulze-Gaevernitz, *British imperialism*, cited in V I Lenin, 'Notebook on imperialism', CW, Vol 39, p450.

50 A Lozovsky, *The world's trade union movement*, London, 1925, p19.

51 R M Martin, op cit, p85.

52 J Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialism and society*, London, 1908, p137.

53 G von Vollmar, 'Social reform in Germany and in France', in R Ensor, ed, *Modern socialism*, London, 1907, p146. Von Vollmar represented the petit-bourgeois class interests which had begun to exert an anti-socialist influence on German social democracy. The influence of the petit bourgeoisie was particularly strong in the French and Italian socialist parties. For a case study of the Italian party, see R Michels, *Il proletariato e la borghesia nel movimento socialista italiano*, Turin, 1908.

54 See C E Shorske, op cit, and W L Guttman, *The German Social Democratic Party 1875-1933*, London, 1981.

55 W Maehl, 'The triumph of nationalism in the German Socialist Party on the eve of the First World War', in *Journal of Modern History*, No 1, 1952, p26.

56 Ibid.

57 A Norland, *The founding of the French Socialist Party 1893-1905*, Harvard, 1956, pp118-19.

58 G Zinoviev, *Der Krieg und die Krise des Sozialismus*, Vienna, 1924, p508.

59 W L Guttman, op cit, p229.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid, p258.

However, the privileges of the bureaucracy cannot fully explain its conservative outlook. The political framework within which social democracy operated forced it to seek the alliance of the petit bourgeoisie. Success in electoral terms could not be attained by working class votes alone. Social democracy therefore sought the votes of the petit bourgeoisie and often played down its proletarian connections to secure electoral advantage. The workings of bourgeois democracy allowed the concerns and views of the petit bourgeoisie to gain a stronghold in social democracy.⁶² Social democracy still proclaimed its socialist goals but it now played down class violence and class politics. In typical petit-bourgeois fashion it appealed to human rather than class objectives. The French socialist Millerand observed:

'Socialism does aim at securing for every human being, by a beneficent and quite natural transformation, these two twin blessings, liberty and prosperity, of which the capitalist regime inevitably robs him. But in thus indicating the end which our party pursues, I have answered beforehand the ridiculous charge, so often made, that it expects its ideas to triumph only by violent revolution.'⁶³

Social democracy rejected 'violent revolution' because class violence spelt doom for the labour bureaucracy and its petit-bourgeois allies.

Social democracy now portrayed state intervention as the main force for socialist transformation. And public ownership of industry was depicted as socialism itself. The ideology of the labour bureaucracy can be most appropriately described as state socialism.⁶⁴ In Ramsay MacDonald's words: 'Socialism could not be defined better than as that stage in social organisation when the state organises for society an adequate nutritive system; and democratic government is the signal that that change is taking place'.⁶⁵

Social democracy's close relationship to the bourgeois state polluted its political outlook. The state as the organiser of the national capitalist class strengthened nationalist trends: social democrats still proclaimed their internationalism but now argued that patriotism and internationalism were compatible. The growth of imperialist competition in the early twentieth century pushed social democrats towards closer and closer identification with the interests of their national capitalist class.

By the end of the first decade of this century leading German social democrats were often hard to distinguish from bourgeois imperialists. Hilderbrand, Schippel and David argued for German rearmament to ensure equality with Britain and France on the world market.⁶⁶ Their French comrades moved in the same direction. French socialist deputies voted for war credits required for the colonial campaign in China. British social democrats were the most abject of all. When a leading Fabian, Sidney Olivier was appointed Governor of Jamaica, the British delegates told the 1907 Stuttgart Conference of the Second International that 'this is one of the most important posts in the colonial service, the salary attached to it being greater than that of most ministers in England'.⁶⁷ Lenin characterised this trend as *social imperialism*. Social imperialism was the inevitable product of social democracy's relationship with the state in the period of imperialist expansion.

Conflicts within social democracy

Social democracy existed in a state of permanent tension. This arose partly out of the division of labour between the trade union and political leaders, which attempted to

restrict the class struggle to basic economic issues. However, reformist politics led to class collaboration in other spheres — support for bourgeois domestic, industrial and foreign policy. The acceptance of bourgeois views on these matters forced reformists to accept bourgeois interests in industrial relations as well. Thus reformist politicians were often forced to line up against workers in struggle. In Italy and France socialist politicians collaborated with anti-working class bourgeois governments. The support of the Italian socialist party for the Zanardelli-Giolitti Ministry, which shot down strikers in the late 1890s created a temporary break between party and the unions.⁶⁸

At the same time the tendency for social democracy to desert to the side of the ruling class was modified by the party's formal commitment to proletarian interests. Continental social democracy in particular was haunted by the contradiction between its formal commitment to socialism and its collaborationist activity. In contrast to the trade unions, social democracy contained within itself a permanent tension between revolutionary and reformist objectives. This problem did not exist for the trade union leaders whose activities were limited to the fight for small-scale, short-term objectives. Social democracy, however, was continuously taking measures which contradicted its long-term goals.

The most important source of conflict within social democracy was the antagonism between the bureaucracy and the mass of the working class. The labour movement reflected the interests of the more privileged sections of the working class. Unorganised, unskilled and women workers were often not part of the official labour movement. Even the highly organised German labour movement could not draw in the whole of the working class. One study of Hamburg contrasts the rich and powerful party and union organisation to the 'extremists', unskilled workers who were 'not adequately represented in the trade unions, co-operatives or party'.⁶⁹

For the most part the contradictions within social democracy remained under the surface before the First World War. With few important exceptions (Russia, Italy and Holland) organisational splits between reformist and revolutionary currents did not take place. Social democracy was able to contain revolutionary elements within its own ranks.

Ironically, the greatest threat to the position of the labour bureaucracy was in Britain. The Labour Party had no mass base and the trade union leadership was forced to carry most of the burden of the mediating role of reformism. In the years leading up to the war the union leadership was increasingly unable to respond to rank and file pressure. Unofficial union bodies proliferated and direct action spread. By the outbreak of the war the organisation of class relations had broken down. One perceptive bourgeois study noted: 'the British problem of political assimilation of working class power could not be resolved without the extraneous stimulus of war'.⁷⁰

The labour bureaucracy could carry out its integrative role because in general it had not been tested before the outbreak of the war. In these conditions social democracy could flourish and become a mass movement. When in August 1914, the socialist parties deserted to the side of the bourgeoisie the tensions within social democracy erupted.

SECTION III

COUNTER-CRISIS SOCIALISM

The collapse of social democracy

The outbreak of the First World War exposed the bourgeois character of social democracy. During the course of the war the labour bureaucracy cemented its alliance with the capitalist class. Social democracy emerged as the central pillar of capitalist stability. Reformist leaders joined war cabinets and the labour bureaucrats in every European country actively backed the war effort of their ruling class. In the name of the national interest they justified the attacks on the living standards of the proletariat and sent thousands of workers to their slaughter.

The prominent role of the labour bureaucracy was vital for the survival of the capitalist system. But it also had the effect of weakening the bureaucracy's influence over the working class. By the end of the war the labour leadership began to lose touch with its base. Forced to carry through the dictates of the capitalist state, the labour bureaucrats became less responsive to working class pressure.

The devastation of war, famine, poverty and disease, and the near collapse of the bourgeois state in a number of countries gave rise to class conflict on an unprecedented scale. The class struggle was particularly intense in countries on the losing side in the imperialist war. The split in social democracy, the emergence of revolutionary organisations and the Bolshevik revolution, added to the ferment into which bourgeois Europe descended. The labour bureaucrats simply lost control over the advanced section of the working class.

The greatest revolutionary upsurge that European capitalism has ever experienced took place between 1917 and 1921. In 1917 the Tsar was overthrown and the world's first proletarian dictatorship was inaugurated in Russia. A strike wave hit British capitalism with a vengeance. In November 1918 the monarchies in Austro-Hungary and Germany collapsed. Workers' councils and workers' militias seized control in Austria and there was a revolution in Hungary. Workers' councils emerged in Germany and by January 1919 the strike wave had precipitated a civil war. This strike movement reached its height in response to the Kapp putsch of March 1920. In May 1920 France experienced its first major industrial upheaval in the post-war period. In September workers occupied factories and seized land in Italy. And three months later a mass strike broke out in Czechoslovakia.

This revolutionary upsurge drastically altered the balance of class power. The capitalist class could no longer enforce its interests in the old ways. The bourgeoisie therefore turned to social democracy to save the day. In the defeated countries the capitalists in their desperation begged social democracy to take over government functions. Reichert, the secretary of the Association of German Iron and Steel Industrialists, persuaded capitalists to support the 1918 social democratic government:

'How can we spare capitalism from the threatening socialisation? Unfortunately, the bourgeoisie as it is in Germany could not be relied upon in things economic-political. We concluded that in the midst of the general insecurity, in view of the tottering of the power of the state and the government, there were strong allies of industry only among the working class and the allies were the trade unions.'⁷¹

The labour bureaucrats proved to be true allies of the

capitalist class. Social democracy took over the government, paid lip-service to the demands of the mass movement and concentrated on neutralising the organs of working class power that were thrown up by the upheavals. In Germany and Austria social democracy sidetracked the mass movement into constitutional reform. The social democrats proposed radical measures — such as the recognition of workers' councils — to avoid even greater mass pressure.

The ruling class went to great lengths to avoid revolution. The German constitution of August 1919 formally recognised the status of works councils. In Austria, the Works Council Act of 1919 decreed the legal recognition of trade union representatives in factories. Even the French bourgeoisie took pre-emptive action. On 12 March 1920, trade unions became legally recognised for the first time.

Thanks to the labour bureaucracy capitalism weathered the storm. In Austria, leading social democrat Julius Braunthal boasted of the restraint exercised by his party over the working class: 'the Austrian working class has had the ability ever since November 1918 to establish its own power, the dictatorship of councils at any time it wishes'.⁷² Even in Britain the labour bureaucracy was essential for re-establishing capitalist stability. In February 1919 Churchill explained his respect for strong trade unionism: 'Trade union organisation was very important, and the more moderate its officials were, the less representative it was, but it was the only organisation with which the Government could deal. The curse of trade unionism was that *there was not enough of it*, and it was not highly developed to make branch secretaries fall into line with the head office. With a powerful trade union, either peace or war could be made'. Tory leader Bonar Law added his gratitude: 'Trade union organisation was the only thing between us and anarchy'.⁷³

Social democracy was strong enough to mislead the working class. However, the counter-revolutionary role it played during this period led to its demise. Millions of workers saw the SPD organising the repression of German revolutionaries. Others saw how the SPD collaborated with the bourgeoisie while workers faced starvation. The emergence of mass communist parties indicated the declining

62 This point is well argued in G Zinoviev, *op cit*.

63 A Millerand, 'The Saint Mandi Programme', in R Ensor, *op cit*, p54. Ramsay MacDonald echoed Millerand when he stated: 'The watchword of socialism is not class consciousness but community consciousness'. J Ramsay MacDonald, *op cit*, p144.

64 F Richards, *RCP*, No 4, *op cit*, pp5-8, contains an analysis of state socialism.

65 J Ramsay MacDonald, *Socialism and government*, London, 1909, p33.

66 W Maehl, *op cit*, p30.

67 Cited in J Lenz, *Rise and fall of the Second International*, New York, 1932, p89.

68 G D H Cole, *op cit*, p715. A similar pattern of development occurred in France.

69 R A Comfort, *Revolutionary Hamburg: labour politics in the early Weimar Republic*, Stanford, 1972, p28.

70 K Middlemas, *Politics in industrial society*, London, 1979, p50.

71 Cited in R Black, *Fascism in Germany*, Vol 1, London, 1975, p253.

72 Cited in R Loew, 'The politics of Austro-Marxism', in *New Left Review*, No 118, p25.

73 Cited in K Middlemas, *op cit*, pp143-44.

influence of social democracy. Throughout Eastern and Central Europe (with the exception of Austria) communist parties became the leading force in the labour movement. In Western Europe, social democracy lost its hegemony over the working class in France and Italy. In Germany the split in the SPD led to the rise of a promising working class communist party. In Britain however the Labour Party managed to pull through fairly successfully.

The collapse of social democracy coincided with the end of the revolutionary upsurge. The communist movement was too weak to lead the working class to overthrow capitalism. The economic crisis which hit Europe in 1920 signalled the beginning of a major capitalist offensive. One setback followed another. In August 1920 the Red Army was halted and defeated, ensuring the isolation of the Russian Revolution. In September 1920 the factory occupation movement of Italian workers was smashed. In March 1921 the uprising of German workers was crushed and the miners' strike in Britain was sold out by the union leaders. From this point onwards the European working class was increasingly put on the defensive.

In organisational terms social democracy was stronger than before. The capitalist class was prepared to help build up labour movement organisations to save its own skin. In government in Germany and Austria, social democracy enjoyed special privileges. But numerical expansion could not disguise the erosion of social democracy's mass base. The SPD bureaucracy grew, but throughout the 'twenties it could not sustain an active mass membership.⁷⁴ In Italy, the sell-out of the 1920 factory occupations by the labour bureaucracy was rewarded with special government recognition. By the summer of 1921 the fascists were on the move and the organisations of the labour bureaucracy were soon in ruins.

The Communist International and social democracy

Two themes dominated the discussions in the early communist movement. By 1921 it had become evident that the revolutionary upsurge had subsided and that social democracy still retained considerable influence in the working class. Trotsky posed the key questions clearly: 'Does development actually proceed even now in the direction of revolution? Or is it necessary to recognise that capitalism has succeeded in coping with the difficulties arising from the war?'.⁷⁵

The response to these questions was generally optimistic. Although the leaders of the CI did not expect any immediate victories, they anticipated that communists would, after a political struggle, succeed in ousting social democrats from their position of influence in the working class. The CI's analysis of reformism drew heavily on the experience of the period between 1917 and 1921. In the opening speech to the Fourth Congress of the CI in 1922, Zinoviev identified the social democrats as the vital bulwark of the bourgeois order:

'Capitalism exists now by the exclusive grace of the social traitors of the Second International. The working class is sufficiently numerous now, and with one sweep of its arm it could sweep away international capitalism, if it were not for the social democrats, who constantly stay the hand of the proletariat when it is ready to strike.'⁷⁶

However, by 1922 the situation was not as volatile as Zinoviev's remarks suggest: a measure of capitalist rationalisation and the defeats suffered by workers restored a degree of social stability not seen in Europe since before the First World War.

The struggle against social democracy dominated the

CI. But its experience of reformism was not sufficiently assessed in the light of day to day events. Trotsky and his colleagues saw the transient boom that followed immediately after the First World War 'as the most important foundation of the current reformist-pacifist era'.⁷⁷ They underestimated the impact that the recession of 1921 had on the working class. The 1921 crisis created large-scale unemployment and forced the working class to retreat. Trade union membership fell drastically and many workers became demoralised.

However, its inadequate theory of reformism was not the most serious weakness of the CI. The working class does not respond to an economic crisis in a simple mechanical way – the decisive factor is political leadership and political preparedness. Unfortunately the communist parties lacked the political maturity and organisational coherence to challenge social democracy. In a sense the break with the Second International had come too late. As Lenin said in June 1921, 'do we not know that the greatest misfortune of the working class movement in Germany is that the break was not brought about before the war?'.⁷⁸

The weakness of the communist parties prevented an effective challenge to the position of the reformist leadership. The political confusion and lack of tactical sense of the German Communist Party (KPD) led to the defeat of its 1923 uprising. This setback was symptomatic of the general loss of drive and direction of the CI.

The rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the mid 'twenties led to the political degeneration of the CI. It transformed the relationship between the communist parties and social democracy. Previously the communist parties lacked the political experience to fight reformism effectively. Now the Stalinist leadership of the International pushed the weak communist parties in an opportunist direction.

Between 1924 and 1927 the CI began to adapt to social democracy. In China and Poland the CI forced the communist parties to subordinate their organisations to petit-bourgeois nationalist movements. In Britain, the Comintern put its faith in an alliance with the labour bureaucracy in the Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee. When the manoeuvres resulted in disaster for the communist parties the CI ordered a new and sudden about turn: the Third Period (following the post-war upsurge and the stabilisation of the mid 'twenties) began in 1928.⁷⁹

The CI leadership now instructed the communist parties that they should break off all links with the social democrats. Denounced as 'social fascists', the reformists were identified as the main enemies of the working class. The new priority was to smash the non-communist parties of the working class: 'class against class' was the slogan of the Third Period.

The acceptance of the turn by many communists reflected their frustration with the resilience of their social democratic competitors. It was much easier to denounce reformism than to fight it. The radical invective directed by the communist parties at social democratic politicians has led to the characterisation of the Third Period as a left turn. This, however, is a superficial assessment of this turn.

In practice, most Western parties failed to implement the uncompromising tactics advocated by the leaders of the Soviet party at the Sixth Congress of the CI in 1928. The French Communist Party (PCF) paid lip-service to the 'class against class' tactics while acting with ambiguity towards the reformists in the 1928 elections.⁸⁰ The Comintern's 'left turn' command ran directly contrary to the evolution of the Italian Communist Party (PCI): it was never carried out.⁸¹

The real dynamic behind the Third Period was revealed with full force in Germany. Despite tremendous oppor-

tunities, the KPD proved unable to deal effectively with the SPD — the tactics of the Third Period were its response. The thrust of these tactics was not anti-capitalist but anti-SPD. In an attempt to outflank the SPD on the left, the KPD put a stop to all united initiatives with the SPD in the unions. But underneath the violent denunciations of the SPD lay pure reformist politics. The tactics which were supposed to transform the unions into 'revolutionary class organisations' were based on demands for higher wages, shorter working hours and improved working conditions.⁸²

The KPD leadership instructed the party to organise campaigns around elementary trade union demands as a means of mobilising the masses.⁸³ The KPD's narrow economic approach was no political alternative to the SPD. An investigation of its intervention in factory councils in 1930 revealed that KPD members in their day to day activities were indistinguishable from their reformist opponents.⁸⁴ One rigorous account of the period comments on the adaptation of the communists to the social democrats behind the rhetoric of the Third Period:

'It is noteworthy... that although the KPD used "radical" language to justify its break with and pressure on Social Democracy, the programmes by which it sought to attract the radicalised masses were basically reformist. That is, at a time when the KPD was attempting to prevent the SPD from acting in a reformist capacity, it offered itself as a more effective substitute for Social Democracy.'⁸⁵

Far from being a left turn the Third Period destroyed the last vestiges of revolutionary politics inside the official communist movement. The communist parties not only failed to combat social democracy but themselves became increasingly reformist in their political outlook. The growth of nationalism within the ranks of the communist parties was the clearest symptom of their degeneration. The Third Period gave new lease of life to social democracy. The CI's tactics undermined the cause of revolution and ensured that social democracy retained the allegiance of substantial sections of the working class. Workers who sought revolutionary solutions were confronted with the choice between reformist social democratic parties and reformist communist parties.⁸⁶

Counter-crisis socialism

The cumulative effect of genuine political mistakes followed by the cynical manoeuvres of the Stalinist bureaucracy gave social democracy a new political advantage. But the social democracy of the inter-war period was qualitatively different from that of the pre-war days.

Imperialism was no longer a confident and expanding system. The survival of capitalism required a major restructuring of industry on both a national and international scale. Despite transient upturns the capitalist system remained in slump through most of the inter-war period. Unemployment became endemic and millions of workers were condemned to year upon year of grinding poverty. There were a number of important events in the class struggle — such as the British General Strike of 1926 — but in general the European working class was in total disarray. State coercion and unemployment dealt a severe blow to trade union power and the unions proved increasingly ineffective in defending workers' interests.

Social democracy itself was very much influenced by the setbacks suffered by the working class. The status of the labour bureaucracy came to depend more on the state than on the working class. Through its use of the social democrats as a transitional measure to restore order after the First World War, the bourgeoisie had brought the labour bureaucracy much closer to the state. As the slump persisted

the labour bureaucrats became more closely concerned with the problems of maintaining political and economic stability. By the 'thirties they had become the most ardent advocates of capitalist rationalisation measures.

The concern of the reformists for the problems of the ruling class was only part of the reason for their approval of capitalist rationalisation. The recession gave free rein to employers to impose wage cuts and redundancies: customary trade union tactics were ineffective in conditions of mass unemployment. The failure of traditional reformist politics led the labour bureaucrats to look to the state for a solution.

The increasing scope of state intervention seemed to confirm the viability of the reformist strategy: even the capitalist class had come to recognise the need for state regulation of the economy. The state was forced to take over the management of sections of industry and encourage the introduction of new technology. The labour bureaucracy saw in this process the solution to the economic problems facing the working class.

The rationalisation of capitalist production altered the composition of the working class. Traditional manufacturing industry declined and white-collar and public sector employment grew: the state itself became a major employer. This process was particularly striking in France where white-collar workers and civil servants became the main social base for social democracy. By the late 'twenties the union of government workers made up almost half of the CGT's membership.⁸⁷ Moreover, public sector workers tended to dominate the key positions in the French labour move-

74 W L Guttsman, *op cit*, p261.

75 L Trotsky, *The first five years...*, *op cit*, p181.

76 'First session, opening of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 5 November 1921', *Bulletin of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, No 1, p5.

77 L Trotsky, 'Perspectives of world development', speech made on 28 July 1924, in *Europe and America*, New York, 1971, p12.

78 V I Lenin, 'Speech on the Italian Question', 28 June 1921, in *CW*, Vol 32, p463.

79 A useful account of these developments is contained in E H Carr, *Foundations of a planned economy 1926-1929*, Vol 3, part I, London, 1976, chapter 68. The move towards the left also corresponded to the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. Having lost control over the Soviet economy the Soviet leadership was prepared to alter drastically its industrial strategy.

80 W A Hoisington Jr, 'Class against class: the French Communist Party and the Comintern', in *International Review of Social History*, 1974.

81 See J Barth Urban, *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party: 1926-1945*, PhD diss, Harvard, 1967.

82 W Ireland, *The lost gamble: the theory and practice of the Communist Party of Germany between Social Democracy and National Socialism 1929-31*, PhD diss, The John Hopkins University, 1971, p99.

83 *Ibid*, p125.

84 *Ibid*, p117.

85 *Ibid*, p148.

86 Trotsky perceived the effect of Stalinism in driving workers back to reformism: 'The destructive policy of the Comintern, supported by the authority of the workers' state, not only has compromised revolutionary methods but also has given to the social democrats, defiled by crimes and treacheries, the opportunity of raising up again over the working class the banner of salvation'. L Trotsky, 'Our present tasks', *op cit*, p136.

87 V Lorwin, *The French labour movement*, p60.

88 M Crozier, 'White-collar unions — the case of France', in A Sturmhals, ed, *White-collar trade unions*, Illinois, 1966, p106.

ment.⁸⁸ Public sector unions inevitably identified their interests with the extension of state activity.

State intervention transformed the relationships among rank and file workers, the labour bureaucracy and the state. The labour bureaucrats became the greatest enthusiasts for state intervention. And social democracy was born again as a force that boasted of its unique capacity to save the capitalist economy. The fear and demoralisation that prevailed in the working class ensured that the labour bureaucracy could consolidate its links with the state without much rank and file opposition. *Gradualism now came to mean not a gradual road to socialism but the gradual transformation of capitalist society.* One consequence of the ever-closer identification of social democracy with the state was its strategy of putting the defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism to the fore. Capitalist reform and bourgeois democracy were the social democratic alternatives to endemic recession and fascism. 'Anti-crisis socialism' came into its own.

Socialism was now defined by reformists as synonymous with the reform of capitalism. The most important consequence of this approach was the *active* involvement of the working class in the restructuring of capitalist relations. Workers who saw the futility of bargaining over wages were won to the strategy of seeking salvation in the enlightened organisation of capital. The labour bureaucracy's political programme was now full of plans to overcome the capitalist crisis which they borrowed from radical bourgeois economists such as Keynes. In 1931, the leading economist of the German trade union federation (ADGB), Wladimir Woytinsky elaborated a programme of public works, commonly known as the WTB plan. As one study of the ADGB records, the WTB plan was later implemented – by the Nazis:

Paradoxically, Hitler's work creation programme, begun after he assumed power, contained some of the basic principles as those of the WTB plan, except it included defence projects.⁸⁹

The most important effect of counter-crisis socialism was to narrow the horizons of the working class. 'Positive action' became the order of the day – but positive action meant capitalist reform. Belgian socialist de Man, the author of the most famous of the counter-crisis plans, appealed for a constructive approach from workers:

The working class movement should abandon its passive attitude towards the economic crisis. It should substitute for its determinist doctrine of crisis... a voluntarist policy having the limited but immediate object of reabsorbing the unemployed and of overcoming the crisis.⁹⁰

The distance travelled by social democracy from its original objectives was well summed up by the leading Belgian left-reformist Spaak. He welcomed the de Man plan, explaining that 'hitherto we have fought *against something*, but now we shall fight for something, for the Plan'.⁹¹

The Popular Front government in France in 1936 demonstrated the disastrous consequences of counter-crisis socialism for the working class. A wave of strikes and factory occupations was channelled into support for a reformist government. The French labour movement soon discovered that planning capitalism could not serve its interests.⁹² Once the working class upsurge was contained, the Blum Government fell and the road was open to reaction.

Anti-crisis socialism could not prevent the final collapse of social democracy. For a period it served a useful ideological role for the bourgeoisie. But the scale of the crisis required measures that were more far-reaching than those proposed by social democracy. The ruling class simply demanded more and more sacrifices and forced the labour bureaucracy to retreat again and again. In the end the employers' offensive required more than the co-operation

of the reformists to keep the working class in check.

But right to the end the labour bureaucracy placed capitalist stability before the interest of the working class. In Italy, Austria and Germany the labour bureaucracy was ready to collaborate with fascist regimes to ensure its survival. Austrian social democracy thwarted working class militias from arming themselves against the imminent fascist takeover.⁹³ The German ADGB had no hesitation about accepting the corporatist framework of the new Nazi regime. In 1933, after Hitler's accession to power it participated in the Nazi-sponsored May Day parade. To save its skin the ADGB was prepared to transfer its special relationship with the SPD to the Nazi party. In the last issue of its journal the ADGB wrote in glowing terms about the Nazi-sponsored May Day parade:

'We certainly need not strike our colours in order to recognise that the victory of National Socialism, though won in the struggle against a party which we used to consider as the embodiment of the idea of socialism (SPD), is our victory as well; because today the socialist task is put to the whole nation.'⁹⁴

A day later the entire leadership of the ADGB was arrested and the German trade union movement was annihilated.

Social democracy wanted to save capitalism but in the conditions of the 'thirties the survival of capitalism required the destruction of working class organisations (or at least their emasculation). In Britain where social democracy was not wiped out (as it was in Germany and Austria) and where it did not lose its working class base (as in France and Italy), it made a gradual transition into an overtly pro-capitalist Labour Party. The labour bureaucracy was further incorporated into the capitalist system during the Second World War and emerged as one of the most respected institutions of British bourgeois society.⁹⁵

The collapse of social democracy did not however lead to the emergence of a revolutionary movement. The European working class was exhausted and defeated; Stalinism discredited revolutionary politics and reformist communist parties took the place of disintegrating social democratic parties. The defeats of the inter-war period led to the liquidation of Marxism. In the absence of a realistic revolutionary alternative a whole generation of workers failed to learn the lessons of their own defeat: this is the legacy of the 'thirties that still haunts the working class movement today.

SECTION IV

THE PROBLEM OF REFORMISM

The European left has failed to analyse the specific conditions which have given rise to the modern labour movement. The institutional continuity between today's working class organisations and those of the first 40 years of this century obscures the reorganisation of class relations since the Second World War. Those who label the parties which now claim workers' votes in Europe 'social democratic' risk losing sight of the class dynamic which these parties express. Nor is the repetition of quotations from Lenin and Trotsky much help. To understand working class politics today we have to move away from a narrow focus on changes within political institutions and examine the changing material context within which labour parties operate.

Social democracy was the product of working class struggle which gave organisational expression to the anti-capitalist aspirations of the proletariat. Lenin was prepared to support the affiliation of the Labour Party to the Second International even though it was a party not 'really independent of the Liberals' on the grounds that it was 'the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a class conscious policy and towards a socialist workers' party'.⁹⁶ Can we view the labour parties of today in the same light?

Prior to the Second World War, social democracy became detached from its working class base and came to rely for its survival on the capitalist class. The social democratic parties that arose after the war were no longer the product of working class struggle. In Austria and Germany the new socialist parties were the creation of the victorious imperialist powers. The USA and Britain both played an active part in re-launching the German trade union movement. In France and Italy the socialist parties were mere shells supported in the main by the middle class and the petit bourgeoisie. The imperialist powers have co-operated in fostering social democratic organisations throughout the post-war period. Most recently the socialist parties in Portugal and Spain have both benefited from imperialist tutelage.

Even in Britain, where there was the greatest continuity in the organisations of the official labour movement, things had changed. During the Second World War, the integration of the labour movement proceeded at every level from the cabinet office to the joint consultative committees on the shop floor. In November 1946, *The Times* boasted of how the bourgeoisie had tamed the unions:

'the long and painful transition from barricades to the board-room has at length been accomplished, and today the TUC exerts its influence not so much through strikes and demonstrations, as through reasoned arguments before an independent arbitrator or an industrial court — or in the Cabinet Room. It is a far cry from Tolpuddle to Transport House.'⁹⁷

This was not merely a quantitative advance in incorporation. The official labour movement had virtually become a government department.⁹⁸

The establishment and acceptance of bourgeois-dominated labour organisations was one measure of the defeats suffered by the working class. Another indication of the scale of the problem was the persistence of the labour movement's attachment to imperialism. British workers celebrated Britain's victory as if it was their own — not even recognising the defeat of their class.

In most of northern Europe the labour bureaucracy faced little working class pressure. It succeeded without much difficulty in imposing its revamped organisations on the working class. However in Greece, France and Italy, the intensity of the class struggle prevented this course of action and the Stalinists were called upon to fill the breach left open by the collapse of social democracy.

Stalinism and the working class

Stalinism influenced the European working class in two main ways. First, the sordid record of the Stalinist bureaucracy discredited revolutionary politics. The ruling class used the Soviet Union as a negative example of revolutionary politics. Anti-communist ideology in the official labour

movement gave the ruling class a remarkable degree of influence over the proletariat.

Second, Stalinism acted as a brake on the forward movement of the working class in countries where social democracy could no longer play this role. The bourgeoisie allowed communists to join the post-war coalition government in France and Italy. Radicalised workers turned to the communist parties as a revolutionary alternative to social democracy, only to be betrayed. In their activities the communists had become indistinguishable from the social democrats.

The communist parties reformulated the old state socialist programmes in their 'national roads to socialism'. Stalinist parties in government were invaluable for the bourgeoisie. In Italy, the PCI argued for its *politica produttivista*, the suspension of 'political strikes', a wage 'truce' and the maintenance of factory discipline.⁹⁹ In France, the PCF pursued the same course. It was no empty boast when Varga, a leading theoretician of the official communist movement, claimed in 1947 that: 'In all the countries of the European continent the communists are taking part in the government and are playing a leading role in restoring the economies of their countries'.¹⁰⁰ The 'leading

89 G Braunthal, *Socialist labor and politics in Weimar Germany*, Hamden, Connecticut, 1978, p65.

90 H de Man, 'Socialism and planning', in G D H Cole and H de Man, *Planned socialism*, issued by the New Fabian Research Bureau, Pamphlet No 25, London, December 1936, p26.

91 Cited in *The Communist International*, No 12, 1934, p482.

92 For a bourgeois economist's assessment of counter-crisis socialism in action, see M Kalecki, 'The lessons of the Blum Experiment', in *The Economic Journal*, March 1938.

93 M Kitchen, *The coming of Austrian fascism*, London, 1980.

94 Cited in G Braunthal, op cit, p81.

95 For an analysis of this process, see the five-part series, 'The war and the working class', in *the next step*, Nos 8-12.

96 V I Lenin, 'Meeting of the International Socialist Bureau', *CW*, Vol 15, p235.

97 *The Times*, 2 November 1946.

98 For a discussion of this development see M Freeman's forthcoming article on the British working class and reformism.

99 D L M Blackmer, 'Continuity and change in post-war Italian communism', in D L M Blackmer and S Tarrow, eds, *Communism in Italy and France*, Princetown, 1975, p31. The role of the Soviet bureaucracy in influencing this development and its relationship with Western communist parties falls outside the scope of this analysis. See F Richards, 'Stalinism, the Communist Party and the RCG's new turn', in *RCF*, No 1, March 1977.

100 E Varga, 'The general crisis of capitalism', *Labour Monthly*, January 1947, p56.

role' of the PCF was spelled out by its leader Thorez in 1947:

'thanks to the working class the country has recovered in two years, whereas five years were needed to achieve the same result after the last war, although the difficulties were less.

'The great merit of the working class of our party is that we, the Communists, were the ones who went and told the working class what had to be said. . . In October 1946 prices had reached 851 and wages 417. This means that there has been a 50 per cent reduction in the real purchasing power of wages compared with 1937.'¹⁰¹

In the short-run Stalinism helped capital to regain firm control over the working class. The long-term impact was equally important – Stalinist politics helped reconcile the aspirations of workers with capitalist reconstruction. Anti-capitalist sentiments were contained by radical policies of reform. The Stalinist parties took their place as part of the post-war labour bureaucracy.

Post-war capitalism and the working class

The defeats of the working class were not only important in facilitating the creation of a new framework for working class politics. They also paved the way for the restructuring of capitalist relations and for the restoration of profitability. The neutralisation of the working class allowed the unhindered pursuit of imperialist war, the establishment of an American-dominated equilibrium on the world market, the raising of the rate of exploitation and the introduction of new technology. The long post-war boom began.¹⁰²

The post-war boom further weakened anti-capitalist politics. Although the expansion of capitalism was uneven, living standards in general rose and unemployment fell. By the early 'fifties the class struggle in Europe was at its lowest ebb in the twentieth century. In most countries working class militancy could be contained with only a selective use of coercion.

The most significant feature of post-war capitalism has been the massive extension of state intervention in economic and social life. Government regulation and ownership of industry and welfare measures created a rapidly expanding social stratum dependent on state patronage. State intervention provided the labour bureaucracy with new opportunities for expansion and a growing social base.¹⁰³

State intervention strengthened reformist notions in the labour movement. The post-war boom was not seen as the product of imperialist war and working class defeats but as the result of government policy. The loyalty of workers to their state grew even stronger. The class struggle was organised around the state. Its objective was not to smash the state but to make it more democratic, to reform it further.

In the 'fifties and 'sixties the conflict between labour and capital did not assume a political form. Working class militancy grew but it could be contained with relative ease.¹⁰⁴ The polarisation of the labour movement between a revolutionary and a reformist wing that prevailed through much of the inter-war period simply did not exist in post-war Europe. In its place a remarkable class consensus developed. The ruling class had no need of reformist parties to police the working class. Under little pressure from workers, the labour movement parties became more pre-occupied with extending their electoral influence in the

middle class. Nominally socialist parties began to lose their inhibitions about embracing bourgeois politics. They declared emphatically that they were not class but people's parties. In 1958 the Austrian socialist party adopted a new non-Marxist programme and declared that it had 'developed from a party of wage earners into a party of all who work'.¹⁰⁵ A year later the German, Swiss and Dutch parties took the same step. In 1960 the Swedish party boasted of its classless orientation: 'The fight for equality, begun by the workers, has become a broader struggle for equal treatment of all citizens, men and women'.¹⁰⁶ The communist parties joined in too and one party after another declared adherence to broad class alliances.¹⁰⁷

Many on the left commented on what they saw as the right-wing drift of reformism.¹⁰⁸ But the declaration of people's parties and the movement of these parties away from the working class had little to do with the traditional function of reformism in mediating in the class struggle. In general, class relations could be maintained through co-operation between state and unions, and reformist politics had become irrelevant. They simply undertook the adjustments necessary to boost their middle class vote.

The controversy inside the British Labour Party over Clause Four between 1959 and 1960 was not a debate between left and right-wing reformists. The 1957 Labour Party conference gave a massive vote of support to the policy document *Industry and society* which expressed the party's pro-capitalist and class collaborationist outlook:

'The Labour Party recognises that, under increasingly professional managements, large firms are as a whole serving the nation well. Moreover, we recognise that no organisation, public or private, can operate effectively if it is subjected to persistent and detailed interventions from above. We have, therefore, no intention of intervening in the management of any firm which is doing a good job.'¹⁰⁹

Left and right were united in support of the efficient operation of the 'mixed economy'. The Clause Four debate was not about the commitment of the Labour Party to British capitalism – that was unquestioned – but about the control of the trade union bureaucrats over the party.

The trade union leaders recognised that the Labour Party's claim as an alternative party of government rested on its ability to win working class acquiescence to its policies. Given the relative weakness of British imperialism, and the likelihood that the measures required to preserve it might prove unpopular with workers, Labour's links with the working class were an important asset. The TUC did not mind Gaitskell's public relations exercises among the middle classes – as long as he did not try to burn the party's bridges with its trade union constituency. So Clause Four remained and Labour emerged as a progressive capitalist party with an ineffectual left wing as a feeble reminder of its reformist heritage.

The demise of reformism did not mean that class relations were left to the free play of the market. On the contrary the wage-labour/capital relationship was more organised than ever before. A whole network of institutions – state and para-state bodies, special arbitration boards, national economic councils – supervised class collaboration.¹¹⁰ Throughout Europe thousands of union representatives sat on bodies involved in economic affairs, medical and accident insurance, pensions and unemployment insurance.¹¹¹ Industrial relations in particular became institutionalised – incomes policies, national wage agreements and complicated arbitration procedures became the norm.

Economic expansion and full employment weakened capitalist control over the labour market. Bourgeois indus-

trial relations – and welfare – policies were a response to this situation, rather than concessions to working class demands. Thus governments of diverse political colours – Labour, Conservative, Christian Democrats – pursued essentially similar policies. The most right-wing bourgeois politicians – Macmillan, Adenauer and De Gaulle – were as committed to consensus policies as the staunchest labour bureaucrat.

Traditional social democracy became extinct. The bourgeois state dealt directly with the trade union bureaucracy through a complex system of class collaboration. Working class militancy and class collaboration coexisted relatively harmoniously in circumstances of unprecedented political stability.

Labour parties still called themselves 'social democratic' but their social character had changed. The British Labour Party, for example, was still a party based on the working class, it was not a working class party. In fact Lenin had already made this point in 1920:

'Of course, most of the Labour Party's members are working-men. However, whether or not a party is really a political party of workers does not depend solely upon a membership of workers but also upon the men that lead it, and the content of its actions and its political tactics. Only this latter determines whether we really have before us a political party of the proletariat. Regarded from this, the only correct point of view, the Labour Party is a thoroughly bourgeois party, because, although made up of workers, it is led by reactionaries, and the worst kind of reactionaries at that, who act quite in the spirit of the bourgeoisie.'¹¹²

In 1920, despite its reactionary politics the Labour Party was forced to voice the aspirations of its proletarian constituency. It played a reformist role in its attempt to harness these aspirations to the reform of the capitalist system. The interaction between the party and the working class was the most important element in defining its political direction. By the 'fifties this was no longer the case. In the conditions of the post-war boom the Labour Party became almost entirely responsive to the requirements of capital. Because of the prevailing social consensus and the liquidation of class politics, it could do this and still maintain its working class base.

The European left took a narrow view of these developments. The persistence of labour parties was interpreted as demonstrating the continuity of reformism: instances of trade union militancy were portrayed as potential threats to reformism. The specific manner in which class relations were organised was ignored. Thus at the onset of the crisis – precisely when reformism began to have a new relevance – it was declared obsolete. Tony Cliff wrote in 1971:

'For revolutionaries the key change is this: the Labour Party is no longer a reformist party in the sense that it still was in the 'fifties and even the early 'sixties. It is committed to the 'modernisation' of British capitalism in conditions which effectively exclude the possibility of serious reforms and which demand the curbing both of real wages and of social expenditure.'¹¹³

In reality precisely the reverse is the case: in the 'fifties and 'sixties reformism had little role to play. It was in the 'seventies, when working class living standards were under attack, that reformism became an important political force once more. The radical left was totally unprepared for this development.

The phenomenal growth of the labour bureaucracy as a result of state intervention provided the social foundation for the revival of reformist politics when the boom came to an end. The trade union bureaucracy had never ceased to play its mediating role in the class struggle and, unlike the radical left, was well prepared for the capitalist crisis of the 'seventies.

The onset of the recession forced the bourgeoisie to re-organise class relations. It had to hold down wages, raise unemployment and cut social services. The labour bureaucracy did its best to ease the transition. Labour institutions had sufficient credibility to win the acquiescence of the working class to capitalist austerity measures. From 1973 to 1978 a class truce prevailed without any major shift in class relations. In France and Italy, Eurocommunism emerged in response to the crisis. PCI leader Berlinguer made a virtue out of austerity and indicated his party's readiness to take on the responsibility of governmental office. The main form that class relations assumed was the *Social Contract* – an agreement between the labour bureaucracy and the government that exchanged working class sacrifices for the promise of future prosperity.

Through the mid 'seventies a degree of ambiguity prevailed in class relations. The absence of any realistic revolutionary alternative ensured that bourgeois counter-

101 Cited in F Claudin, *The communist movement from Comintern to Cominform*, London, 1975, p343. Togliatti, the leader of the PCI, need not have feared being outdone by Thorez. Togliatti stated in January 1947: 'In the last years no political strike has taken place in Italy. . . . This is a country where the unions have signed a wage truce, a pact which is unique in the history of the working class movement, because it determines a maximum wage, not a minimum one. . . . This is really the striking and absurd feature of the economic situation in which we live; it is the working class and the unions who are giving the best example and are taking all the necessary steps to preserve the discipline of production, order and social peace'. Cited in B Salvati, 'The rebirth of Italian trade unionism 1943-54', in S Woolf, ed, *The rebirth of Italy 1943-50*, London, 1972, p197.

102 This point has been discussed at length in revolutionary communist literature. For a theoretical reflection of the boom in the labour movement, see F Richards, *RCP*, No 4, op cit.

103 In Britain, almost the entire expansion of the TUC since the war has been due to the increase in its affiliated white-collar membership. A significant proportion of these are public sector workers. See G S Bain, *The growth of white-collar unionism*, Oxford, 1970, p25.

104 During this period the greatest threat to bourgeois rule came from the colonial wars of liberation.

105 Cited in J Gyford and S Haseler, *Social democracy: beyond revisionism*, Fabian Research Series, No 292, London, p15.

106 Ibid.

107 The programme formulated at the PCI's Eighth Congress in 1956 followed the pattern of the classless orientation of the socialist parties. See S Hellman, 'The PCI's alliance strategy and the case of the middle class', in D L M Blackmer and S Tarrow, op cit.

108 See for example T Cliff, 'What makes right-wing Labour tick', in *Socialist Review*, June 1957.

109 *Industry and society: Labour's policy on future public ownership*, London, 1957, pp48-9.

110 K Marshall's interesting study of trades councils shows the wide-ranging state bodies which have links with this labour movement institution. *British trades councils*, RCP discussion document, 1981.

111 H Wilensky, *The welfare state and equality*, London, 1975.

112 V I Lenin, 'Speech on affiliation to the British Labour Party', *CW*, Vol 31, pp257-58.

113 *International Socialism*, No 48, June/July 1971, p1.

crisis policies went largely unchallenged in the labour movement. It was sufficient for the socialist and Eurocommunist parties to formulate a labour movement version of these policies to get militant workers to accept them.¹¹⁴ But while workers broadly accepted the policies of their leaders for saving the national economy they drew back when they realised their consequences in falling wages, rising redundancies and deteriorating services. The trade union bureaucrats too could not remain indifferent to the impact of the recession on the working class.

The ruling class approach also contained a degree of ambiguity. The vast edifice of industrial relations institutions and quangos which had served capitalism so well in the post-war boom had also strengthened the official organisation of the labour movement. But the structure of class collaboration had become a top-heavy burden on a crisis-ridden bourgeoisie. However, the ruling class could not simply dismantle these institutions without provoking a major confrontation with the labour movement. And this was something that the capitalists wanted to avoid.

The result was that the ruling class and labour bureaucracy continued their collaboration. When austerity began to take its toll the main job of the labour bureaucracy was to educate workers in the realities of capitalism and to curb unofficial militant action.

Two contradictory forces militated against the continuation of this arrangement. First, the recession has forced the bourgeoisie to step up its attacks on the working class. The institutions of industrial relations and the strength of the official labour movement now became a serious obstacle to the bourgeoisie in its drive to reorganise class relations. And second, the severe effects of the recession on the labour movement called into question the traditional methods of class integration. The 'winter of discontent' of 1978 signalled the end of an era of unprecedented class peace in Britain, for example.¹¹⁵

In 1978 the bourgeoisie began to dismantle integrationist institutions in favour of more direct forms of class domination. Important anti-union measures were implemented in Britain, France, Italy and Spain.¹¹⁶ The bourgeoisie was assisted in its attack by the cumulative impact of the recession — unemployment represented a severe threat to trade union organisation. The labour bureaucracy was forced onto the defensive.

The ruling class has not abandoned collaboration with the labour bureaucracy. In France it has recently accepted Mitterand's socialist government. What the ruling class wants to do is to weaken labour movement organisation in order to establish more favourable terms for collaboration. Thus the Thatcher Government has moved fast to weaken the unions and stamp out unofficial action, but it has stopped short of threatening the position of the union bureaucracy itself.¹¹⁷

The disintegration of the traditional institutions of class collaboration has had a major impact on the working class. While in the short run it may induce passivity and demoralisation, it forces workers to look for new political solutions. The decline of trade union activity shifts attention to the political sphere.

From the point of view of the labour bureaucracy things cannot go on in the old way. Unemployment threatens the social base of the labour bureaucracy and provokes working class anger: it forces labour leaders to look for new solutions. The success of the socialist party in France, the reactivation of the left wing of the SPD in Germany and the Benn campaign in Britain are symptoms of this search for new solutions.

The requirements of the bourgeoisie for more direct forms of class domination and of the working class to

defend its basic interests create the basis for the reconstitution of reformist politics. However, *the same forces that have stimulated the reconstitution of reformism also create the conditions for a more profound political differentiation within the working class — for the emergence of a revolutionary movement.*

The political forms in which social democracy will be reconstituted remain uncertain. Labour parties that have long ceased to involve active workers and have developed close links with the state and the ruling class are not the most adaptable of institutions. At present the labour parties are undergoing a considerable degree of tension in their attempts to secure their relations with the working class. In France, the PCF, the traditional party of workers, is fast losing out to its socialist competitor, both in the electoral and industrial fields. In Italy, the PCI and its union organisation face pressure from hitherto insignificant socialist forces. In Germany, the SPD is so bureaucratised that even its mild-mannered left wing has become a problem of major proportions. The British Labour Party has already proved incapable of containing its right wing. The emergence of the Social Democratic Party is symptomatic of the Labour Party's difficulty in making the transition into a new reformist party. The attempt of the Labour left to elaborate a genuine social democratic alternative has caused the greatest upheaval that the party has ever experienced. The further evolution of these parties depends not on the intentions of labour politicians but on the class struggle.

The old parties of the working class are in a state of flux because the recession has put the reconstitution of reformism and the political differentiation of the working class on the agenda. Unfortunately the European radical left has opted for a course of action which can only *hinder* the advance of the working class. The left claims to be building a revolutionary movement. How? By the devious method of assisting the reconstitution of social democracy now, with the aim of bringing about the political differentiation of the working class at some time in the future. In France the left has virtually suspended independent operations and liquidated itself in its praise of, and support for the Mitterand Government. In Britain the radical left is either inside or trailing alongside the Labour Party. Indeed the British radical left under the leadership of Tony Benn has become the leading force in the campaign for the reconstitution of social democracy.

For revolutionaries the alternatives are clear. The choice is between helping to consolidate social democracy or assisting the political differentiation of the working class. The radical left claims to be doing both, but in reality is working for the revival of social democracy. A revolutionary alternative has to be advanced now to ensure that the polarisation of the working class takes place between pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist politics — not between two varieties of bourgeois politics. An unrelenting struggle against social democracy is vital to strengthen the working class for its battles today and in the future.

Frank Richards

114 See T Allen et al, 'The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class', in *RCP*, No 3, July 1978, pp27-44.

115 The sharp decline in militancy indicated by recent strike statistics appears to contradict this point. Simple trade union militancy is, however, a crude indicator of the class struggle: union militancy in the recent past coexisted with class peace. Moreover the decline in trade union militancy contains the potential for political conflict.

116 For an analysis of this process, see 'Breaking new ground', editorial in *the next step*, No 1, December 1979.

117 See 'Which way forward for the labour movement?', special 10-page supplement in *the next step*, No 15, August 1981.

Discussion article

BRITISH TROTSKYISM, SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE ENTRY TACTIC: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE 'THIRTIES

INTRODUCTION

In their early years British Trotskyists never numbered more than a couple of hundred people at most. To today's observer, their movement at first sight appears dominated by a bewildering series of splits, a myriad of different organisations and a dozen or so personalities who changed their allegiances almost yearly. Why then should revolutionaries bother to analyse the work they did? Didn't the '57 varieties' of Trotskyism of yesteryear wield even less influence than they do today, and, if so, what's the point of discussing them?

The answer is simple. At present socialists claiming the mantle of Trotsky are entering the Labour Party in droves.¹ And today's 'entrists' don't simply justify their actions by invoking Lenin's recommendation (in 1920) that British communists should affiliate to the Labour Party; they also summon Trotsky in their defence. Because Trotsky advised his followers to enter the Labour Party 45 years ago, they argue, it's right to go in now.

One justification for working in the Labour Party today has recently been well made by *Socialist Organiser*, the paper of the Workers Socialist League.² In a polemic against the Socialist Workers Party's pamphlet *The Labour Party: myths and realities* – a lengthy SWP apology for staying outside the Labour Party – WSL member Stan Crooke takes issue with SWP leader Duncan Hallas for 'trying to prove that leftwingers in the Labour Party can make no significant impact and are wasting their time'. Crooke says that labour leftwingers of Stalinist or social democratic persuasion have:

'failed not because they were in the Labour Party but because of their own political inadequacies, ultra leftist in the case of the people influenced by the CP, reformist in the case of the 'softs'.

Hallas says nothing about another sort of leftwinger: the Trotskyists in the Labour Party in the 'thirties.²

It is true that Hallas says nothing about pre-war Trotskyism. Yet Crooke 'says nothing' about the fact that pre-war Trotskyism failed to make a significant impact on the Labour Party. While Crooke may not want to ask why they failed, we do.

Though Trotsky favoured the entry of revolutionaries into reformist organisations in the 'thirties, this does not imply we should favour it now. Indeed:

'It is because we cherish...revolutionary traditions that we must vigorously protest against the view that by using one of the slogans of a particular historical period the essential conditions of that period can be restored. It is one thing to preserve the traditions of the revolution, to know how to use them for constant propa-

ganda and agitation and for acquainting the masses with the conditions of a direct and aggressive struggle against the old regime, but quite another thing to repeat a slogan divorced from the sum total of the conditions which gave rise to it and which ensured its success and to apply it to essentially different conditions.

'Marx himself, who so highly valued revolutionary traditions and unsparingly castigated a renegade or philistine attitude towards them, at the same time demanded that revolutionaries should be able to *think*, should be able to *analyse* the conditions under which old methods of struggle could be used, and not simply to repeat certain slogans.'³

A critical examination of the early phase of the British Trotskyist movement provides useful lessons for revolutionary communists today.

SECTION II

THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH TROTSKYISM

The international scene

The British Trotskyists formed a particularly weak contingent of a movement which, though it arose worldwide, was generally weak itself. There are good reasons for this.

The Communist International was formed in the wake of unrest that spread through the workers' movement after the First World War. Inevitably a number of petit-bourgeois political currents gravitated towards it. This was even more the case with the International Left Opposition, the body Trotsky formed – as a faction of the CI – in 1930. Thus Trotsky's metaphor of 'cleansing' the ranks of the ILO was not a literary, but a political one.⁴

The first two years of the ILO were marked by several important defections back to the camp of Stalinism. In Austria, France and Germany a number of leading figures in Opposition circles went over to the Soviet bureaucracy.⁵

1 See 'Full circle', *the next step*, No 15, July/August 1981.

2 'The point is to CHANGE it', *Socialist Organiser*, 30 July 1981. The new WSL is a fusion of the old one and the International Communist League. It is submerged in the Labour Party.

3 V I Lenin, 'Against boycott', *Collected Works*, Vol 13, pp39-40.

4 See L Trotsky, 'The International Left Opposition: its tasks and methods', *Writings 1932-33*, Pathfinder Press, 1972, and especially pp55-6.

5 L Trotsky, 'Serious lessons from an inconsequential thing', *ibid*, pp91-3.

The British Opposition movement was less dominated by petit-bourgeois intellectuals, but it had other problems. In America and France, Trotskyism had emerged as a force to be reckoned with in 1928. In Germany, the United Left Opposition had been formed in 1930. In Britain, by contrast, Trotskyists were only expelled from the CP in 1932. Unlike James Cannon, Max Shachtman and Martin Abern of the American Opposition, the major figures in the CPGB's dissident 'Balham Group' — Reg Groves, Stewart Purkis, Harry Wicks and Henry Sara — did not enjoy key leadership positions.⁶ Nor was this all, as the British Trotskyists themselves came to recognise:

'We need to take into account a factor which distinguishes the English Party from other European parties. In this country the struggle within the Communist International produced no conflict within the British Party. None of the documents of the Opposition was made available to English Communists. The Party leadership was able to stifle the discussion with ease and the English Party members' knowledge of the struggle of the Opposition was gleaned exclusively from the resolutions of the Party leadership. Here of course is expressed the political backwardness of the British proletarian movement.'⁷

All these factors conspired to retard the development of British Trotskyism. It was not surprising, therefore, that the actual break from the CP was made largely unconsciously.

Break-out in Balham

The Balham Group first began to part company from the CPGB Central Committee in the run-up to the party's Eleventh Congress, held in Leeds in November 1929. Groves and the London district organisation together with Newcastle and Manchester, headed an attack on the CC for its tardiness in applying the CI's new, Third Period line. He was already disturbed by 'growing Russian party control over the international movement'.⁸ By August 1931, however, he had rejected the Third Period and was in correspondence with American Trotskyists over forming a British section of the ILO. Contrary to their advice, he refused:

'we made it clear to the Americans that we were not prepared to set up a Left Opposition Group in Britain. We went along with them on much, such as the restoration of full inner-party democracy in the national sections, a diminution of the Russian command of the Comintern, and a recovery of the communism of the founding fathers. And we were deeply shaken by Trotsky's powerful indictment of Comintern policy in Germany, based as it was on the formula that social democracy and National Socialism were 'varieties of fascism', or, in Stalin's words 'not opposite poles but neighbours'; by Trotsky's warnings of the disaster that would follow for workers in Germany, Russia, and throughout the world if that policy was persisted in; and by his call for a principled united front of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party to check and defeat the Nazis. All these things we would raise in the party and fight for, but as members, not outsiders.'⁹

Though reassured that the ILO itself intended to operate in the CI 'as members, not outsiders', Groves' resistance to moves towards some form of organisational independence continued.

In November, Trotsky advised his British followers to go independent. He also suggested that publishing the ILO's documents on the CPGB's previous adaptation to the Labour Party in the Anglo-Russian Committee would be 'the point of departure for a British left wing'.¹⁰ This was a significant suggestion, given that Groves and his allies were by this time mostly motivated by disgust with the CPGB's hostile attitude to the Labour Party; but it was a point that was to be ignored.

The Balham Group only began publishing at all in May

1932, and none of the nine issues of the duplicated broadsheet *The Communist* it put out contained an article devoted to the CPGB's earlier right-wing period (1925-27).¹¹ Events had taken it on a different course. The MacDonald crisis of summer 1931 had prompted mass unrest and the Balham Group, less than a dozen strong but shortly to be joined by Hugo Dewar,¹² found itself, in the full knowledge of the Central Committee, holding outdoor meetings all over south west London with the Tooting and Clapham branches of the Independent Labour Party.¹³

During his visit to Britain in December 1931, Max Shachtman warned the Balham Group not to regard itself as being in purely a private fight with the leadership of the CP. It was not a matter of Trotsky's arguments merely 'coming in handy', and attempts to not appear as Trotskyists would not stave off punitive measures from the Central Committee. Shachtman proved right. Following criticisms of King Street throughout the spring on 1932 — over its trade union policy, its position on the rise of fascism in Germany and on Japan's invasion of Manchuria, and over issues related to internal democracy within the CP¹⁴ — threatening letters from the party secretariat began to be received. Despite the fact that the CP was already moderating its Third Period policies, it regarded collaboration between one of its most active branches and the ILP as dangerous. So when, in the summer of 1932, the Balham Group came out against the CI's support for the pacifist-led World Congress Against War,¹⁵ the King Street hacks seized their chance. On 17 August Groves and Wicks were expelled, and more expulsions soon followed.

The Balham Group campaigned for readmission, painting the words 'Not National Socialism but World Revolution' outside the Latchmere Baths, Battersea, when the CP held its congress there in November. To no avail. After a short, ill-prepared struggle, what was now the British Group of the ILO was out in the cold.

The work that wasn't done

Almost at once the cracks began to appear. Wicks, Purkis and others attacked Groves for his conduct inside and outside the Group,¹⁶ and more importantly for his rejection of the need to publish theoretical articles by the ILO. They bluntly noted:

'The foundation meeting of the British Group was lamentably unconcerned with politics. It was marked by a vigorous determination to get a Left Opposition Group set up in Britain at all costs; and also by the absence of any attempt to ensure political unity on the basis of a Left Opposition platform. . . . It was everyone's duty to ensure that the meeting was united not only on personal grounds but on political: *this was not done*.'¹⁷

They observed that: 'The work of the British Group is hampered by the British party's almost complete ignorance of the substance and history of the Trotskyist controversy'. This was something Groves himself conceded; but his view was that party members found:

'their difficulties and their first questionings of party policy when working in the unions, the factories, and among the unemployed. . . . When we took upon ourselves the responsibility of building a British Section of the Left Opposition we did not thereby form just a translation bureau.'¹⁸

Groves' concern to connect the formal theoretical positions of the ILO to the practical tasks of the day was well-founded. But his sneers about 'translation bureaux' and his general behaviour displayed an anti-internationalist, ill-disciplined spirit.¹⁹ On the other hand his critics, while correctly concerned with the British Group's ideological

fragility, contributed little to overcoming this in the pages of *The Communist*. Thus the stage was set for further disputes.

Rapid developments on the international front did not make internal consolidation any easier. In March 1933, the month of Hitler's victory and the collapse of the German Communist Party, Trotsky began to move to the position that the ILO could no longer work within the CI. By June, however, international working class reaction to the CP's betrayal in Germany was such that Trotsky could argue that the ILO should orientate itself towards the new, centrist²⁰ organisations that had sprung up to the left of orthodox social democracy. What appeared as a tack in the direction of organisational independence for the ILO was succeeded by what appeared as a bold move towards close work with centrist groups. Then, in July, Trotsky called for a definitive break from the CI and the construction of a new International. In the space of four months the world situation had forced him to make major adjustments in the ILO's line – adjustments that were difficult for an inexperienced cadre in Britain to assimilate.

Trotsky's greetings to the British Group's new, printed monthly paper, *The Red Flag*, showed that he was aware of the political incoherence of his British supporters. He urged them to make a thorough assessment of the record of the CP:

'A critical examination of the policy of the British Communist Party during the last eight or ten years constitutes a most important task in the education of the Left Opposition itself. You should study the official publications of the party throughout this period carefully, digest them, and reveal the party line on the main strategical problems: its attitude towards the Labour Party, the trade unions, the Minority Movement; the colonial revolution; the united front policy; the ILP; etc.

'Along with the new printed publication, you have at your disposal a hectographed (excellently hectographed!) bulletin, *The Communist*. It would be extremely desirable to devote the greatest possible space in this publication to an examination of the policy of the British Communist Party along the lines indicated above, and also to a discussion of controversial questions within the Left Opposition itself. While persistently striving to widen our influence among the workers, we must at the same time concentrate on the theoretical and political education of our own ranks. We have a long and laborious road ahead of us. For this we need first-class cadres.'²¹

Trotsky's advice was not followed. *The Communist* devoted very few of its pages to the CP. This was a missed opportunity, for a rigorous critique of British Stalinism could have strengthened and unified the confused and disparate Trotskyists. This was a task of some immediacy. Of all the centrist groups on the international scene at the time the ILP was the closest to world Stalinism.²² So when, shortly afterwards, a section of the British Group entered the ILP the absence of a critique of Stalinism ensured that its efforts there had only a limited impact.

quotations from the British Trotskyist movement of the 'thirties which are not accompanied by a reference in the footnotes derive from it. As Archer notes, Groves (1908-) and Purkis (1885-1969) were on the London District Committee of the CPGB at the time of the expulsions and had written articles for *Labour Monthly*, 1929-30; but this was a far cry from being in the national leadership of the CP. Both had only joined in 1927. Harry Wicks (1905-) had been elected to the Executive Committee of the Young Communist League in 1926 but had barely completed three years at the so-called 'Lenin School', Moscow, before the expulsions took place, even though he had disagreed with his Stalinist instructors on Trotskyism while there. Though he had joined the CP in 1921 and thus had a long experience in the communist movement, being on the EC of the YCL was not a top position. By 1929, at least, the YCL was 'almost non-existent': see Groves, *The Balham Group*, Pluto Press, 1974, p20. Groves and Wicks were employed by Russian Oil Products, which was part of the CPGB bureaucracy's burgeoning system of employment agencies. Purkis was a railway worker. Henry Sara (1886/7-1953), like Wicks, was a CP member of long standing: he was a lecturer, and the originator of the important *Sara-Maitland Papers* (now held, like most documentary material on pre-war British Trotskyism, at the University of Warwick).

- 7 R Groves, 'The British Section of the Left Opposition of the Communist International: notes on the differences existing on the EC', letter to the International Secretariat of the ILO, 3 February 1933, in the *Sara-Maitland Papers*, MSS 15/3/1/28.
- 8 R Groves, op cit, p27. The 'Third Period' line denoted the view that social democracy was now 'social-fascist' – socialist in words, fascist in deeds.
- 9 Ibid, p47.
- 10 L Trotsky, 'The British elections and the communists', *Writings 1930-31*, p347.
- 11 *The Communist* ceased publication in early 1934. Copies of it are held in the *Sara-Maitland Papers*.
- 12 Dewar (1908-) was in the Tooting branch of the CP, a member of NUSDAW and a delegate to both Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Councils.
- 13 R Groves, op cit, pp41-42, 52. The ILP was still in the Labour Party at this stage.
- 14 The Balham Group favoured workplace-based organisation more than the trade unions as a means of prosecuting the class struggle, and invoked Lozovsky, chief of the Russian Red International of Trade Unions, in its defence. On Germany, it castigated the Central Committee for ignoring Hitler's advances. On Japan too it criticised the CC for neglecting 'the menace of war'; indeed it was because it joined with the Clapham ILP to form the influential South West London Anti-War Committee that King Street got so upset. On internal democracy, the Group opposed the appointment (as opposed to the election) of the London District Committee, called for discussion on Germany, and advocated the holding of a party congress as soon as possible. In addition, it came out in favour of local Trades Council initiatives over the unemployed rather than the CP-controlled National Unemployed Workers' Movement. R Groves, op cit, pp54-56, 59-60.
- 15 The CPGB had an equivocal attitude to implementing the Third Period right from the beginning: see H Dewar, *Communist politics in Britain*, Pluto Press, 1976, pp96-100.
- 16 Groves was accused of factional manoeuvres inside the Group, and of appending names of people he had not consulted to leaflets of the South West London Anti-War Committee. See 'Statement from members of the 1931-1933 Committee of the British Group of the Left Opposition', 18 April 1933, in the *Sara-Maitland Papers*.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 R Groves, 'The British Section. . .', op cit.
- 19 Though Groves attended an international meeting of the ILO held in Paris in early February 1933, he appeared to take a cynical attitude to the proceedings there. Archer, op cit.
- 20 'Centrism' denotes vacillation between Marxism and reformism.
- 21 L Trotsky, 'Greetings to *The Red Flag*', *Writings 1932-33*, pp236-7.
- 22 L Trotsky, 'The Stalinist turn', *Writings 1935-36*, p129.

6 The 'Balham Group' at first merely meant the Balham branch of the CP. The term only acquired a different connotation after the expulsions by King Street. This point is made by John Archer in his PhD thesis *Trotskyism in Britain: 1931-1937*, Polytechnic of Central London, 1979. We would like to express our sincere thanks to comrade Archer for the personal assistance he has given us in our research for this article. His thesis represents a remarkable piece of research: in this article

SECTION II

THE FAILURE TO COMBAT THE ILP

Why Trotsky favoured entry

One of the few positive political developments of the early 'thirties was the movement of left-wing workers away from social democracy. This gave rise to the formation of new, radical socialist parties in a number of countries. Trotsky wanted to ensure that the Left Opposition did its utmost to influence these:

'The International Left Opposition faces a new task: to accelerate the evolution of the left socialist organisations towards communism by injecting its ideas and its experience into this process. There is no time to lose. If the independent socialist organisations remain in their present amorphous state for a long period of time, they will disintegrate.'²³

The Independent Labour Party, which left the Labour Party in 1932, was one such independent socialist organisation. It offered the British Trotskyists an important audience.

The ILP was collaborating with the Stalinists, but, according to Trotsky, could complete its 'movement from reformism to revolution from an empirical to a theoretical basis'. To achieve this required 'a firm grasp of the revolutionary theory of the capitalist state, a correct evaluation of social and economic forces, adequate information of the movement of revolution and reaction outside Great Britain, and a definite plan of the revolutionary course within Britain – a plan flexible in detail but rigid in principle'. It also needed a correct answer to 'the most important question of proletarian policy in Great Britain... the liberation of the workers from the reactionary influence of the trade union bureaucracy'. Despite and because of their small numbers, their 'fear of malicious criticism of the Stalinists' and their feeling that the ILP might fall apart at any moment, it was the duty of all the British Trotskyists to enter it. They had to try to transform its revolutionary majority into a truly Marxist party – even though it was mostly petit-bourgeois in social composition.²⁴

Trotsky argued that, because of an 'odd combination of historical conditions', members of organisations like the ILP were 'much more amenable' to the ideas of Bolshevism than the sections of the CI. In Britain the objective conditions had more than once pushed hundreds of thousands of workers towards the CP, but its leadership had been capable only of 'disillusioning them and throwing them back'.²⁵ The ILP on the other hand was much more able to articulate the anti-capitalist sentiments of workers: it therefore became the target of Trotskyist activity in Britain.²⁶

The first of many splits

Trotsky made his recommendation in September 1933. By this time the British Group, now titled the Communist League was about 40 strong, and largely working class in composition. It had branches in both Balham and Hackney, and was selling about 1000 copies of *The Red Flag* a month. In the debate over entry into the ILP it became clear that a minority, mainly consisting of younger, unemployed members in East London, favoured entry: if the tactic

succeeded, it argued, the CL would be able to count its members in thousands 'in a matter of months'.²⁷ The majority, which was more experienced and based mainly in South London, disagreed. In its view Trotsky was too sanguine about the quantity and quality of the ILP's members. It would be easier to influence it 'by leaflet, by paper, and by lecturing to branches, and by joint discussions' from the outside rather than by branch work on the inside. Dropping independent activity and stopping the publication of *The Red Flag*, as Trotsky suggested, would, the majority felt, 'be a definite loss in one direction for a probably gain in another'.²⁸ In addition, a quarter of the British Trotskyists were still in the CP, making transfer to the ILP difficult; entry would allow access to only three or four London ILP branches at most; and the ILP would be suspicious from the start.

In December 1933 the CL decided by 26 votes to 11 not to enter the ILP. The minority which included Denzil Harber,²⁹ announced that it would follow Trotsky's advice, enter the ILP and be responsible to the International Secretariat of the ILO. The majority, which included Groves, Wicks and Sara, remained outside the ILP.

British Trotskyism had undergone the first of a hundred splits in a debate where political issues had been overshadowed by narrow tactical considerations.

No match for the revisionists

Inside the ILP the minority constituted itself as the Marxist Group. After a period of consolidation it announced its intention of 'helping the ILP along the revolutionary road'³⁰ and, in November 1934, began openly publishing *Bulletin of the Marxist Group in the ILP*. By the time of the national conference of the ILP, held at Derby in Easter 1935, the Trotskyists' influence was at a peak. The MG had 100 members, branches in East London, Clapham and South Norwood, and – shortly afterwards – CLR James in its leadership.³¹

But the MG failed to transform the ILP into a revolutionary party. Little more than a year later Trotsky urged his British followers to leave the ILP, which he condemned as a 'dying corpse' and join the Labour Party.³² What happened?

The MG was built on liberal organisational principles: it never limited membership to Trotskyists, and attempts to form an inner core of cadre committed to Bolshevik politics foundered. Moreover lack of organisational firmness was compounded by political confusion. The MG could not offer the members of the ILP a coherent political alternative to their leaders. It didn't even offer a critique of the ILP's reformist counter-crisis programme. Nor did it show that the ILP's programme was itself merely a variation of the Labour Party's programme of economic reforms.

In the mid to late 'twenties international social democracy went through an important transformation. The protracted economic crisis of the period and the dilemma between outright revolutionary methods of struggle and outright reformist betrayals meant that the programme of social democracy had to be revised. What emerged was a commitment to using the state to plan capitalism out of its difficulties and a lot of militant rhetoric about how the working class would benefit from this. In other words, what emerged was an early version of the Keynesian-nationalist Alternative Economic Strategy of today. The ILP played a major role in shaping this strategy, a fact which the MG completely neglected.

In 1926 the ILP produced a major policy document called *The living wage*. It argued that the root of the economic crisis in Britain lay in the restricted consumption

of the working class and that the only way to overcome it was to establish family allowances and minimum wages in all industries. Firms which refused to pay such wages were to be nationalised and so was the Bank of England – in order to expand credit.³³ This package of bourgeois political economy and reformist measures was later adopted, in different forms, by the TUC, the Labour left grouping known as the Socialist League, and eventually by the Labour Party itself.³⁴ It was never seriously opposed by any section of the British Trotskyist movement. Even in the ILP, the very creator of British ‘anti-crisis socialism’, the MG did not oppose it.

What the MG did oppose were the positions the ILP leadership took on international issues. In particular, it advocated workers’ sanctions – blacking, etc – against Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, and attacked ILP leaders like Maxton and McGovern for their implicit reliance on League of Nations sanctions. This was necessary, but, as Trotsky noted, insufficient:

‘On the question of the League of Nations, on the role played in it by British imperialism, and on the ‘peaceful’ policy of the Labour Party, the *New Leader* has perhaps carried the best articles in the entire labour press. But a single swallow does not make a spring. . . . It is comparatively easy to take a ‘revolutionary’ position on the question of war; but it is extremely difficult to draw from this position *all the necessary theoretical and practical considerations*. Yet this is precisely the task.’³⁵

Like Trotsky, pre-entry issues of *The Red Flag* criticised the ILP for its preoccupation with forms of organisation like workers’ councils, for its collaboration with the CPGB, and for its ambiguous attitude to the Stalinist Comintern and the prospective Fourth International; but they contained only one article on economic matters and no critique of the reformists’ economic perspectives.³⁶ Nothing changed with the MG’s *Bulletin*. It castigated the pacifists for their unwillingness to ‘dig themselves into the trade unions’ and involve themselves in the class struggle. And it called on workers to be ‘educated in the need not to rely upon “police protection” against fascism, but to defend themselves’.³⁷ But these revolutionary formulae remained largely abstract slogans.

Without a clear analysis of the state socialist underpinnings of the ILP the MG was bound to run into trouble. This it soon did, over its attitude to another state socialist organisation: the Labour Party.³⁸

Confusion on the ILP, confusion on Labour

For some time the MG upheld the classical tactic of the united front in relations between the ILP and the Labour Party. As late as December 1934, the *Bulletin* could argue: ‘we support social democracy in order to destroy it’. However by June 1935, in an internal MG document called *Perspectives on the working class movement and the future of the ILP*, Harber was nurturing illusions that the Labour Party could be democratised: ‘so long’, he argued, ‘as the Labour Party continues *under its present form of organisation*, there is no prospect of the rank and file giving any revolutionary direction to the party’ (emphasis is ours). The notion that it was possible to democratise the Labour Party and push it in a revolutionary direction had a long history on the British left.³⁹ Now the British Trotskyists came under its influence.

In the November 1935 General Election the majority of the MG reversed its earlier decision to vote Labour and withdrew critical support. This was in Trotsky’s view incorrect, given that, despite its reactionary standpoint on Ethiopia and the impending world war, the Labour Party

was no more social-patriotic than it had been before.⁴⁰ It was also enough to make Harber, together with Ted Grant, Charles van Gelderen, and a sizeable minority of the MG quit the MG and the ILP for the Socialist League in the Labour Party, leaving James effectively in control. The

23 L Trotsky, ‘The left socialist organisations and our tasks’, *Writings 1932-33*, p274.

24 Ibid, pp276-7, ‘Whither the Independent Labour Party?’, *Writings 1933-34*, p55; ‘An interview with C A Smith’, *ibid*, pp61-2; ‘The ILP and the New International’, *ibid*, p74; ‘Principled considerations on entry’, *ibid*, pp86-7; ‘How to influence the ILP’, *ibid*, p71; ‘The lever of a small group’, *ibid*, pp124-5.

25 L Trotsky, ‘The left socialist organisations. . .’, *op cit*, pp277-8; ‘Whither the ILP?’, *op cit*, p56.

26 Trotsky misread the revolutionary potential of the ILP. Writing from afar and lacking any direct contact with the class struggle in Britain, his overestimation of it was understandable. In the ‘thirties the ILP was very radical; the propaganda contained in its paper, the *New Leader*, had more in common with today’s *Socialist Challenge* or *Socialist Organiser* than with the pre-war Labour left. On international questions the ILP often took an anti-imperialist stance far to the left of the CP.

27 N Allen, ‘Statement on the ILP and the possibility of transforming it into a Marxist party’, *Sara-Maitland Papers*, MSS 15/3/1/18, 5 October 1933.

28 ‘Notes for discussion of ILP question at National Committee meeting’, 5 October 1933, in *ibid*, MSS 15/3/1/49.

29 Denzil Harber (1909-1966) had joined the CP in 1929, visited the Soviet Union, been appalled at what he had seen and joined the ILO in 1933. He had read Russian at the London School of Economics.

30 *Controversy*, discussion organ of the ILP, June 1934, p10.

31 C L R James (1901-) was born in Trinidad and worked for the *Manchester Guardian* as a cricket correspondent.

32 L Trotsky, ‘The Dutch Section and the International’, *Writings 1935-36*, p366; ‘Interview on British problems’, *ibid*, p377.

33 See B Pimlott, *Labour and the left in the 1930s*, CUP, 1977, p61.

34 See S Norton, ‘On the road to war’, part 2 of the series ‘The war and the working class’, *the next step*, No 9, January 1981, on the TUC, and S Norton, ‘Slump socialism’, part 3 of the same series, *the next step*, No 10, February 1981, on the SL and the Labour Party.

35 L Trotsky, ‘The ILP and the Fourth International’, *Writings 1935-36*, p134.

36 See *The Red Flag*, issues 1-6, May-October/November 1933, and particularly No 5, September 1933, in the *Sara-Maitland Papers*.

37 See *Bulletin of the Marxist Group in the ILP*, issues 1-7, 3 November 1934 – 25 November 1935, and particularly No 2, December 1934.

38 Trotsky too tended to underestimate the importance of fighting the ‘plans’ of left social democracy for overcoming the capitalist crisis. He correctly assessed the reactionary content of these plans but ignored the influence they could have on a demoralised and insecure working class. As a result he advocated forcing the left reformists to implement them and exposing their vacillations when they failed to do so. See ‘Revisionism and planning’, *Writings 1933-34*, p194, and also ‘The Belgian dispute and the de Man plan’, *Writings 1934-35*, p213; ‘From the CGT’s plan to the conquest of power’, *ibid*, pp230-31; and ‘Once again, whither France?’, *Leon Trotsky on France*, Monad Press, 1979, p109.

39 See M Freeman, ‘A Labour Party for our time’, *the next step*, No 15, July/August 1981.

40 ‘Once again on the ILP’, *Writings 1935-36*, p198. Trotsky also noted that the ILP’s London division only gave critical support to Labour Party candidates who opposed League of Nations sanctions. In his view this provoked the illusion that the pacifist Labour left was superior to the social-patriotic Labour right. *Ibid*, pp198, 200.

British Trotskyists had split again — and once more it was over a tactical question.

In *The present position in the ILP and how we should react to it*, written for the internal consumption of the MG just after Easter 1934, Harber had said:

'It is essential that comrades (especially newer comrades) should read not only the writings of Leon Trotsky on current problems, but also the basic works of Marx and Lenin. We cannot hope to work successfully in the ILP so long as the majority of our comrades are not clear on questions of theory.'

Unfortunately the MG paid only lip-service to theoretical development. It could not provide a critique of the ILP's domestic policies and its analysis of reformism was weak and one-sided. As a result it vacillated over critical support for the Labour Party, split on the issue, and then went into decline. Unchallenged from within, the ILP survived long enough for James and his comrades to stay in it long after Trotsky had urged a break. Meanwhile the focus of the British Trotskyists shifted to the left of the Labour Party. There too, however, they made only temporary gains.

SECTION III

THE FAILURE TO COMBAT LABOUR

Revolution via a fresh party

After the Communist League minority had departed for the ILP in December 1933, the CL majority began to move towards the left of the Labour Party and the newly-formed Socialist League. Retaining its name and *The Red Flag*, it at first applied the united front tactic to the Labour Party in a classical fashion. In a leaflet put out on the occasion of the spring 1934 by-election in North Hammersmith, the CL said:

'We must place the Labour and trade union leaders in the position where they must fight or reveal their impotence to their followers. We believe that they, like their German counterparts, will not fight. The majority of the organised workers are of the opinion that they will fight. There is only one way to show who is right. That is why we are prepared to support the Labour candidate.'⁴¹

However at about the same time Groves, after the London County Council fell into Labour hands, took a rather different view. He argued that loyal Labour Party workers had to keep 'a closer watch on, and a firm grip of' their leaders, and that the party had to be 'equipped anew by the establishing of a new leadership' ('not in the formal sense, but by securing everywhere groups of workers to whom the rank and file will increasingly look for guidance'). As for indicating that Labour would not fight, Groves did no more than refer to the doubts workers had on this.⁴²

In effect Groves was calling for what, earlier, Harber had only hinted at: the democratisation of the Labour Party as a means of bringing about revolution. In October 1934 the CL clearly stated its new-found conviction that a Labour government could bring socialism:

'While not concealing its conviction that the British capitalists will not surrender their power without serious resistance and while constantly urging preparation to break that resistance, the League is assisting to bring about a Labour government...[and]...to secure that the Labour Party is pledged, in definite terms, to carry through when returned ameliorative measures for immediate relief; the removal of all anti-working class legislation and to measures

which will lay the foundation for the socialist transformation, the nationalisation of the banks and the main industries, with workers' control, within a specified period; the reorganisation of the armed and police forces on a democratic basis, placing socialists in key positions; the abolition of the House of Lords and the Monarchy and the freeing of all subject peoples within the Empire.'⁴³

For Lenin and Trotsky the purpose of the united front tactic was to reveal to the masses the inability of their leaders to fight for socialism. The CL, on the other hand, never mentioned this. It was inadvertently strengthening the socialist credentials of the Labour Party.

After October 1934 *The Red Flag* ceased publication: it reappeared in a new series on 1 May 1936 as the organ of the Marxist League — a loose association of Groves, Wicks, Dewar and other members of the old CL majority. By then Harber was in the Labour Party, which was undergoing a major revival. There was no love lost between Groves and Harber, who had been on different sides in the original CL split. Harber had just formed the Bolshevik-Leninist Group in the Labour Party, and was publishing *Youth Militant* in the Labour League of Youth (forerunner of today's Labour Party Young Socialists); and it was his group that was making the most headway.⁴⁴

The most substantial document produced by the B-LG was written — for internal consumption — in September 1936.⁴⁵ Because it is probably the most comprehensive document of British Trotskyism in the 'thirties, it is worth quoting at length. Titled 'On the work of the Bolshevik-Leninists in the Labour Party', it shows that the B-LG had still to follow through the logic of Harber's earlier hints about democratising the Labour Party:

'As Bolshevik-Leninists we enter the Labour Party for one reason alone — to make contact with the masses of politically conscious workers and to gain supporters from among them for the formation of a Marxist party and a Fourth International. We can have no illusions as to 'capturing' the Labour Party, and transforming it into a Marxist party. Our task is to win from Transport House and reformist ideology as many workers as possible within a certain period of time.

'A *minimum* requirement may be stated, namely that within a year some hundreds of Labour Party workers are ready to form with us a new party when the moment comes. If a year's work by a group reaches less than this, then the step of joining the Labour Party has failed to bring the necessary results.'

The document then goes on to deal with a problem that the British Trotskyists persistently ignored — reformist ideology:

'Careful work requires accurate knowledge of the difficulties ahead. The main difficulties are here outlined.

'In the first place there is the reformist ideology of the rank and file of the Labour Party, deep and widespread, combined with that empiricism which makes for contempt of theory and neglect of study.

'To deal with reformist ideology, it is important to know when to approach the minds of reformist workers 'obliquely', that is in a tactful manner, and when to employ 'shock tactics' with a blunt presentation of a problem. . . . There are two dangers here. . . . One is that too much tact takes the edge off an argument. . . . The other . . . is that too blunt or too aggressive presentation of an argument repels reformist workers irrationally, and closes their minds to our ideas.'

And there it stops. Two paragraphs, one about its strength, the other about the need not to be too soft or hard about it — this was the sum total of the Trotskyists' analysis of reformism. They were back where they started. They had slogans and demands aplenty, especially on the CL's Popular Frontism and the danger of imperialist war. But they had no independent outlook on the substance of Labour Party politics.⁴⁶

Three splits sideways, three steps back

Trotsky urged the MG to enter the Labour Party in July 1936. He saw the growth of the Socialist League, the Labour left of the time, as an indication of the potential for raising revolutionary politics. In November 1936 a national meeting of the three Trotskyist organisations in Britain was held; but it failed to overcome the divisions in the movement.

Given the general confusion on Labourism common to all three groups it was not surprising that unity on a principled basis proved impossible. Unity on another basis, however, soon proved forthcoming. Without any accounting for its past history, the MG left the ILP. After Socialist League chief Stafford Cripps capitulated to the Labour Party leadership on the question of war and dissolved his organisation in May 1937, the ML went into decline; eventually, in the summer of 1938, its leading members – Groves, Wicks, Dewar and Sara – joined the MG to form the Revolutionary Socialist League.⁴⁷

Meanwhile the B-LG continued on its own way. In July 1937 it changed its name to the Militant Group and began to publish *The Militant* (*Youth Militant* became incorporated in this). At its August 1937 national conference it was joined by Jock Haston and Gerry Healy from Paddington and Bradford respectively. In November 1937 it changed its name again to the Militant Labour League; but no sooner had it done this than, in December 1937, about a third of the organisation, including Grant, Haston, Healy and Sid Bidwell walked out after an obscure quarrel with Harber and others.⁴⁸

Haston and his comrades formed the Workers International League and published *Youth for socialism* and *Workers International News*. They refused to go along with what was left of Harber's group when, at the instigation of James Cannon and the International Secretariat of the newly-formed Fourth International, it fused with the Revolutionary Socialist League late in 1938. The RSL split in a matter of months, James and his old MG comrades refusing to enter the Labour Party and establishing *Workers fight*, Harber & Co resuming *Militant*, reviving *Youth Militant* and staying in the Labour Party as the MLL.

CONCLUSION

By the outbreak of the Second World War the British Trotskyist movement was in fragments. It is difficult to identify political issues of any substance at the roots of all its splits. However the real failure of British Trotskyism was not an organisational one. All the Trotskyist groups failed to evolve a critique of the programme of the Labour Party. James recognised this failure at the time: 'we have had difficulty in England', he said, 'with advocating a Labour government with the necessary reservations'.⁴⁹

British Trotskyism 'failed' in the 'thirties because it could not develop a coherent alternative either to radical reformism (the ILP) or to left-reformism (the Socialist League). But matters do not end in 1939, for the legacy of the preceding years is very much with us today. Post-war Trotskyists have never examined the contribution that the entry tactic made to building a revolutionary party. They have posed the pragmatic question of whether or not new recruits can be won, but that is about it. Worst of all, entrism has become an end in itself. Even when sections of the radical left quit the Labour Party in the 'sixties they did so merely to enter new organisations – the students' movement, CND, or the women's movement. Entrism became a substitute for building an independent revolutionary party.

In practice the tactic of entrism has developed into a strategy. Moreover, the blurred boundary between entrists and entered has found its reflection in political diffuseness on the part of the former. Today, Labour Party entrists serve as a radical contingent of the Labour left. Whereas Trotsky ridiculed those who thought that the Labour Party could be democratised, *Socialist Challenge*, *Socialist Organiser* and *Militant* preach this prejudice every week.⁵⁰

The interpretation the old British Trotskyists put on entrism – and, indeed, on the united front – has left its imprint on the radical left. Of course we cannot blame Groves, James, Harber and others for radical left politics today. But unless we settle accounts with the past we will not go forward in the present. The struggle for Trotskyism in the 'eighties is also a struggle against the British Trotskyism of the 'thirties.

Bob Radcliffe

- 41 *Five communist reasons for voting Labour*, leaflet, spring 1934.
- 42 'Vienna and the London elections', *The Red Flag*, Vol 1, No 8, March-April 1934, p1.
- 43 'The Communist League and its immediate programme', *The Red Flag*, Vol 1, No 11, October 1934, p4.
- 44 Of the three Trotskyist organisations operating in Britain, only Groves' ML refused to send a representative to the 29-31 July 1936 First international conference of the Fourth International. Though at this time the ML called for 'Marxist leadership' in the working class, it repeated the old nostrum of economism, that 'such a leadership... arises out of the day to day struggles of the workers'. To the old CL's October 1934 programme it now appended the need 'to compel the Labour Party in the House to give more aggressive voice to the demands of the workers' and 'to press for the organisation of the unemployed by the TUC': see 'Aims and objects of the Marxist League', duplicated sheet, in the *Sara-Maitland Papers*, MSS 15/4/1/5. In October 1936 Harber reported the situation in Britain as follows: the B-LG was selling 800 copies of *Youth Militant* an issue, had 60 members in London and small groups in Norwich and Sheffield. The MG had 40 members in London and more in Liverpool, Glasgow, the North East, Yorkshire and South Wales, and sold 1800 copies an issue of its organ, *Fight for the Fourth International*. The latter was published almost monthly from October 1936 to November 1937.
- 45 *Sara-Maitland Papers*, MSS 15/14/1/10. The author is Robert Williams, whose identity is unclear. Archer does not mention the document.
- 46 Williams identified the 'second great obstacle' to the spread of the B-LG's ideas in the Labour Party as the bureaucracy in Transport House. He went on to observe: 'We are obliged to fight the bureaucracy mainly in the local parties, and there constitutional procedure and routine business are the strongholds of the local bureaucrats... Routine business is a favourable method by which local bureaucrats avoid controversial political questions; meetings are often filled up with details of socials, dances, whist drives, sports days and petty municipal questions... They are in fact an expression of the real nature of the Labour Party, which is primarily a vote-catching and dues-collecting machine, canalising the class feelings of workers into channels of futile parliamentary procedure'. This last point was certainly to his credit. Williams concluded: 'We seek unity but not unity with blinkers on. It is Transport House that is threatening to split the party through collaboration with Tories. We shall join with those who prefer to split away in the direction of socialism, rather than unite in support of the capitalist class'.
- 47 James Cannon helped here. The RSL was also joined by the Edinburgh branch of the De Leonist Revolutionary Socialist Party (a remnant from 1921); this consisted of workers who had come to Trotskyism by their own efforts following the victory of fascism in Germany.
- 48 Archer gives an account of the details of this.
- 49 C L R James to Trotsky, 'On the history of the Left Opposition', *Writings 1938-39*, p266.
- 50 L Trotsky, 'The ILP and the Fourth International', *Writings 1935-36*, p142.

THE STATE WITHIN THE STATE

An appreciation of G E Zinoviev's **Der Krieg und die Krise des Sozialismus**

Der Krieg und die Krise des Sozialismus
(The War and the Crisis of Socialism), Vienna,
1924

The collapse of the Second International at the outbreak of war in 1914 showed how the social democratic parties had identified with the interests of the imperialist nation states. It was a result, as Lenin put it, of 'the victory of opportunism and of the national liberal-labour policy in the majority of European parties' (*Socialism and War*, 1915). But how and why had the political movement of the European working class taken the side of imperialism?

Lenin's writings of this period prepared the ground for a scientific understanding of this phenomenon. But his critique of social-chauvinism was limited because it referred almost exclusively to the evolution of the British labour aristocracy. Zinoviev's study, written between 1914 and 1916, fills the gap. By examining the most prominent social democratic party, the German SPD, it shows how the consolidation of reformism was intricately related to the growth of the trade union bureaucracy and bourgeois parliamentary politics. Zinoviev's work demonstrates how the labour bureaucracy developed a distinct social and political standpoint and became a pillar of bourgeois society.

This book is the most penetrating analysis ever written of pre-First World War social democracy. Although the German Social Democratic Party possessed a strong and articulate left wing, it took Zinoviev, a member of the Bolshevik party, to expose its inherently reactionary character. This fact itself is significant: today as in Zinoviev's time there is no lack of 'criticism' of official labour politics. But such criticisms are ineffectual because they too rest on reformist premises, are influenced by opportunism and reflect an unhealthy attachment to the existing institutions of the working class which time and again have proved inadequate. What justifies a review of a book written almost 70 years ago is that this conservatism still prevents a realistic appraisal of the character of social democracy and modern bourgeois labour politics.

Parliamentary socialism

The most important theoretical chapter analyses 'The social roots of opportunism'. It is a study of the social forces which pushed working class politics in a bourgeois direction. Zinoviev identifies two influences on the SPD which led to its integration into the state: the trade union bureaucracy and electoral opportunism.

The point he makes about the trade union bureaucracy is that its distinct outlook and interests derive not from its position in the labour market (as was the case for the classical British labour aristocracy) but from the power it gains from its position at the head of the working class organisations. The cultivation and preservation of trade unions — within the confines of the capitalist labour market — is the union bureaucrat's narrow objective which subordinates the wider political interests of the working class.¹ Zinoviev further shows how, once the conservative influence of the trade union leadership had pushed the party into the framework of parliamentary reformism, electoral pressures drove it to adapt to the outlook and interests of broad petit-bourgeois layers and become a *people's party*. Other more recent historical studies of the SPD confirm the correctness of this analysis.

Bourgeois at birth

From the outset the SPD was only in a very limited sense an independent party of the working class. Like most continental socialist parties it was in origin a creation of the petit bourgeoisie. In the early 1860s the middle classes in the anti-Prussian states of southern Germany sought to win working class support in their fight against Bismarck's drive to unite the country under Prussian domination. Workers Associations were formed on the initiative of Liberal politicians. In Prussia itself, Ferdinand Lassalle's General German Workers Association (ADAV), founded in 1863, attempted to persuade the Bismarck regime to concede an extension of suffrage and freedom of association by supporting its expansionist aims.

The nascent German working class movement was divided along lines which reflected the belated and unresolved conflict between feudalism and bourgeois liberalism: on one side, Lassalle's ADAV and on the other, the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SAPD), formed by August Bebel and Johann Baptist von Schweitzer in 1869 after it became evident that the bourgeoisie had no interest in a consistent fight against Prussian absolutism. Both wings were dependent on rival factions of the bourgeoisie.

In 1875 the split in the German labour movement was healed. At Gotha the SAPD and the Lassalleans united. With the unification of Germany under Prussia, the cause of national and liberal opposition to Prussian hegemony which previously shaped the young labour movement had vanished. The Gotha Programme adopted as the platform of the united SAPD however reflected the continued hold of petit-bourgeois politics among its leaders.

Marx and Engels were extremely critical of this programme. They pointed out that it contained not an ounce of

working class politics, but a mixture of fainthearted liberalism and the turgid state socialist theories of Lassalle. Marx's polemic against the Gotha Programme drew particular attention to the fact that it had a narrow, national standpoint and that this would prevent a systematic struggle against the bourgeoisie.² The Gotha Programme didn't represent a break with bourgeois tradition. Rather the new SAPD stepped into the vacuum created by the desertion of the middle class to Bismarck to advance the cause of social and political reform within the Prussian state.

The SAPD therefore had no more roots in Marxism than the British Labour Party. It was by birth a bourgeois labour party. Although Marxist literature formed a significant part of its theoretical and ideological heritage, and had close personal ties with its leaders, its politics remained opportunist. The conservatism of the party leadership was consolidated by the growth of the new social forces Zinoviev investigated in his study.

Party of the bureaucrats

Outside events, not the party leadership, were responsible for the adoption of more radical policies by the end of the 1870s. Anti-working class repression reached a peak with the adoption of the Anti-Socialist Law by the Reichstag in 1878, and the SAPD was forced to organise and conduct propaganda in conditions of illegality. This repression intensified workers' hatred of the state and their identification as a class. Marxist ideology became a force among the advanced sections of the German proletariat, a development that was reflected in the emergence of a radical left wing in the party.

The conservative leadership, however, managed to retain control. During the period of the Anti-Socialist Law from 1878 to 1890 trade union membership grew from 50 000 to 300 000. This strengthened working class organisation, but it also strengthened the bureaucracy which soon became the principal conservative force in the SPD and the working class. In 1891, Carl Legien, the first modern German trade union bureaucrat, reorganised the movement into one centralised federation under the control of his general commission which thenceforth pursued a systematic policy of partnership with the Prussian state.

The party was transformed into the political servant of the trade union leadership. Legien's aim was to increase his role as mediator between capital and labour. To this end the state had to be persuaded to lift restrictions on trade union activity, to introduce social policies and to formalise the participation of labour representatives in administering them. The parliamentary party, as the representative of labour within the political sphere, became the agency through which the bureaucracy put pressure for these changes.

This transformation of the party found its reflection in the party's name. At its 1891 Erfurt Congress, the SAPD became the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), dropping the tag 'workers' which had expressed its formal allegiance to the working class. With the change of name the party leadership indicated that it aspired to be a non-class party of reform.

The change of name indicated the changing social roots of the party. Modern bourgeois society provided social democracy with a base of support which permitted it to develop a degree of independence from the working class, despite the fact that the proletariat formed the bulk of its membership and its electorate.

Bourgeois reformism

The corollary of this development was that the party itself became increasingly dependent on the state, which it saw as the agency for reform. A mutual interest emerged which speeded up the process. The bourgeoisie recognised the need to integrate the working class politically and to institutionalise its domination over the working class. Bismarck, the founder of modern social policy, recognised at a very early stage that the working class was a social force he could not ignore. During the 1860s he attempted – with a fair degree of success – to use the working class against his middle class opponents. Then in the 1880s the fierce repression directed against the political emancipation of the working class was accompanied by certain reforms designed to neutralise opposition. Given that social reform was also the main objective of the SPD, the channels through which the leadership was drawn into co-operation with the state opened up quite naturally.

Throughout the period of the Anti-Socialist Law the party led a virtually schizophrenic existence. Its members and press suffered fierce prosecution whilst its representatives in parliament negotiated social reform and economic policy. The issue most hotly championed by SPD delegates was opposition to the proposed tariffs on food imports – a measure which aroused resentment from broad layers of German society.

Whilst its rank and file organisation was in chaos, parliamentarianism provided a means through which the SPD could gain influence. Illegality reinforced this trend. It increased the independence of the SPD's parliamentary wing because this was for the time being the only legally functioning section of the party.

The reward was overwhelming. The party enlarged its electoral base significantly. In the Reichstag elections of 1878 it gained eight per cent of the vote, in 1887 10 per cent, in 1890 20 per cent, and in 1893, the first election after the end of the Anti-Socialist Law, 23 per cent.³ The party changed its attitude to parliament too. Up to the early 1890s official party policy, reflecting resolutions of the First International, was to use parliament as a rostrum for propaganda and to oppose all bourgeois bills. But electoral success led the SPD to discard these principles. By the end of the decade, the SPD even joined regional state governments and formed coalitions with other bourgeois parties.

Electoral opportunism provided the SPD with another prop of support: the petit bourgeoisie. This social stratum was a significant force in backward German society, and the flabbiness of German Liberalism after 1871 made the SPD into a natural focus for the expression of urban and rural petit-bourgeois interests against big capitalists and feudal landlords. As Zinoviev explained:

'This was the strength as well as the weakness of German social democracy. The strong point was that the SPD became the only people's party, that all dissatisfied people sought its aid, that almost the entire democratic section of society flocked to its banners. The weakness was that the petit-bourgeois fellow travellers introduced political corruption, irresolution and bourgeois mentality and all the other features characteristic of the layers between the two big classes into the party. Socialism was infected by opportunism.' (p 485)

Zinoviev provided detailed statistics to illustrate the increasing sway of the SPD's petit-bourgeois 'fellow travellers'. They show that by 1903 up to 50 per cent of SPD voters in major towns were non-working class and that 30 per cent (1 million) of its total electorate were petit-bourgeois. Party officialdom, as he shows, also began to be permeated by

this layer.

As long as the preservation of the immediate interests of both workers and petit-bourgeois appeared to coincide there was little tension within the SPD. The Reichstag elections of 1903 were the climax of the SPD's early career as a people's party. With three million votes it became the strongest party in parliament, a success which reflected its support among middle strata. But this support depended upon the projection of the party as a national force, one that could be relied upon to serve the interest of the German nation.

Social-chauvinism

The ephemeral character of the SPD's fellow travellers was exposed in the subsequent elections of 1907 when the bourgeoisie set out to win back the middle layers by depicting the SPD as traitors to German imperialism. The demagogic tactic was very successful – the SPD suffered a humiliating defeat. In the aftermath the real character of the party was revealed. Party leaders decided that the lesson of defeat was to regain the middle layers by projecting a more strident patriotic image and curbing the anti-militarist activities of revolutionaries like Karl Liebknecht and the youth wing of the party. The accusation that it lacked patriotism was rejected as slander by party orators and writers up and down the country.

By 1912, the bourgeoisie was dismayed to find that the middle strata had returned en masse to the social democratic fold. Some perceptive commentators, however, noticed that the election result was a small loss compared to an infinitely more significant achievement – the SPD had committed itself to the cause of imperialism. Ruedorffer, an ultra right-wing diplomat and politician, commented:

'If international socialism succeeds in separating the worker from the nation and making him a mere member of his class, then it will be victorious. The means of pure coercion which the state in that case would be forced to apply to control him would in the long term be untenable. However, if socialism fails to achieve this the ties which link the worker to the organism we call nation will survive, even if only unconsciously. The victory of socialism is impossible as long as these ties remain – and it will face certain defeat if they are found to prevail over those of class.' (Ruedorffer, *Grundzeuge der Weltpolitik*, 1914, cited in Zinoviev, p503)

Ruedorffer was proved correct in 1914 and many times since. Unfortunately this grasp of the significance of internationalism for class politics has rarely been equalled in the labour movement.

Building a revolutionary party

The scientific merit of Zinoviev's study is that it clearly analyses the twin forces which lie at the root of social-chauvinism – the trade union bureaucracy and the petit bourgeoisie. The first drove the SPD in the direction of pragmatic adaptation to bourgeois society; the second completed the degradation of the party into a vehicle for chauvinism and other forms of bourgeois ideology. His analysis shows that by allowing these influences to grow and prevail the party bred a working class leadership whose interests began to coincide with the interests of the ruling class. He demonstrates that this process is not the result of evil subjective intention or simple material self-interest, but that it originates in the narrow pragmatic outlook of reformist labour politics. Its source is in essence political. This is the most important message of his book.

There is a conclusion which Zinoviev did not spell out, although his analysis clearly points to it. The way to overcome the destructive influence of opportunism is to construct a party which is committed to fight for the independent interests of the working class. This means taking on the labour bureaucracy. Only then can a real struggle for power be waged. Those who have drawn the lessons should join us in building the RCP.

Sabena Norton

- 1 See F Richards, 'Prolonging the death agony: the rise, fall and reconstitution of social democracy', in this issue of *Revolutionary Communist Papers*.
- 2 K Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', in K Marx and F Engels, *Selected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973, p323.
- 3 Franz Osterroth and Dieter Schuster, *Chronik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, Vol 1, Bonn, 1975, passim.

A GREEK TRAGEDY

Marion Sarafis, ed, *Greece: from resistance to civil war*, Spokesman Books, Nottingham, 1980, pp142, pbk £2.95.

All the major protagonists in the Greek civil war have an interest in covering up the facts about this disastrous event for the Greek working class. British soldiers shot Greek workers to consolidate the position of Greek royalists and fascists and thus make the region safe for imperialism. Stalin and his Greek followers stabbed the working class in the back to preserve their fragile unity with imperialism. And everybody involved tried to bury the evidence which would have shown up the roles of the leading parties in this sordid affair.

Greece: from resistance to civil war is a collection of papers given at a seminar at the London School of Economics. Although it only touches the surface it provides a useful insight into the way the experience of the Greek civil war remains the key issue in Greek politics.

In Nazi-occupied Greece the resistance movement (ELAS) was dominated by the Greek Communist Party (KKE). Like the resistance in Yugoslavia, ELAS managed to defeat the Nazis without the intervention of the Allied armies. But the Western allies saw the growing authority of ELAS in Greek society as a threat to imperialist interests. Britain in particular was determined to prevent the emergence of a potentially hostile regime in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the notorious secret agreement of October 1944 Stalin agreed with Churchill that Greece should become a part of Britain's sphere of influence. There was only one small obstacle to the realisation of this agreement: the workers and peasants of Greece, mobilised under the banner of ELAS.

One myth that still persists about the Greek civil war is that Stalin played the key part by betraying ELAS to the British through his deal with Churchill, and by refusing to

give the resistance movement any support during the Battle of Athens in December 1944. All this is true. But the defeat of ELAS cannot be simply attributed to the manoeuvres of the leadership of the international communist movement in the Soviet Union. The decisive factor in the defeat of ELAS was that it put its trust in the communist party in Greece. Even before Stalin signed the agreement, the KKE had voted to form a Government of National Unity with Greek royalists, Nazi collaborators and social democrats at a conference in May 1944 in the Lebanon.

Stalinist betrayal was not peculiar to Greece: Stalinist-led resistance movements throughout Europe were prepared to ignore the aspirations of the working class and hand power over to the Allies. The main difference in Greece was that when KKE delegates took back the Lebanon agreement it was rejected by the ELAS rank and file.

The British knew that the situation was precarious so they pushed ahead in 1944 with their plan to integrate ELAS into a national army officered by British and Greek reactionaries. Despite widespread opposition, by August the ELAS leadership gave this plan its blessing. In October 1944 ELAS joined the Papandreou Government in inviting British troops to enter Greece.

The arrival of the British troops had a radicalising effect on the rank and file of ELAS. The KKE had to work overtime to prevent any incidents that might provoke the British:

'KKE considered some of the radical democratic reforms initiated by EAM-ELAS with deep mistrust and called to order all those who tried to accelerate the process of social transformation. Particularly, it opposed all activities that might result in conflict with Great Britain.'

Demonstrations and protests led to the shooting of unarmed ELAS supporters by the police in Athens on 3 December 1944. This precipitated the *Dekemvriana* – the Battle of Athens – that began the civil war between the British army and the Greek reactionaries on one side and ELAS on the other. Stalin backed up the British and demonstratively sent his ambassador to deal with the imperialist-backed puppet government. The KKE once more capitulated and under the *Varkiza* agreement handed over ELAS' arms to the British.

The British took over control of Greece:

'Accused of common crimes for every act of political resistance made under the occupation, thousands of men and women were imprisoned, deported, shot by the [Greek] fascists – their opponents of yesterday. Under the shadow of British legitimacy gangs of militia turned without restraint upon the former partisans and without formal proceedings "liquidated" the militants and fighters of EAM-ELAS.'

Repression has been a consistent feature of Greek 'democracy' ever since.

The ELAS rank and file, despite its heroic record of struggle and strong sense of social justice, was defeated because it accepted the premises of the KKE's politics. It had rejected the Lebanon agreement because of the inclusion of monarchist and fascist collaborators in the National Government – not because it was a government of the bourgeoisie.

Once the Battle of Athens exploded into a civil war the KKE leadership doomed the resistance movement to defeat. British and American imperialism faced a movement whose leadership did everything possible to contain the struggle. The papers presented to the LSE seminar diplomatically ignore the sensitive period between 1947 and 1949. The story of the Greek civil war still remains to be told. Only those who are committed to the interest of the Greek proletariat and are prepared to challenge Stalinism could ever produce such a study.

Andrew Clarkson

THE BELATED RISE OF FRENCH 'SOCIALISM'

R W Johnson, *The long march of the French left*, Macmillan, 1981, pp345, pbk £8.95.

When Francois Mitterand won the Presidency of France in May sales of this book soared. It wasn't hard to see why: Mitterand's victory came as rather a surprise to Britain, and people hoped to find in Johnson's lengthy tome an explanation for it. They were to be disappointed. Though the author's research was clearly comprehensive and his writing for the most part a pleasure, his conclusion was that the French left had little hope of beating Giscard.

Johnson got it wrong because his book is only partially scientific. What he argues is as follows: Today's PCF is a child of the Resistance and owes much of its immediate post-war electoral success to the rural support it built up through the *Maquis*. However, the advent of De Gaulle and the Fifth Republic (1958) brought it difficulty. While it was committed to what Johnson loosely calls 'class politics', De Gaulle gained almost unanimous support for a national supra-class approach. The General's establishment of the Presidency also prevented the PCF from playing the blocking role it had enjoyed in the crisis-ridden parliaments of the Fourth Republic. Lastly, the industrialisation of France that De Gaulle pushed through ensured that the PCF's base in the countryside declined as people moved off the land, into white-collar jobs... and into the Socialist camp.

May 1968, Johnson continues, was thus an end, not a beginning; an exception, not a rule. Through it the workers got syndicalist methods of struggle out of their system and made a determined bid to escape from the political ghetto and be recognised as a legitimate force in modern French society. Mitterand benefited from this process, Marchais was hurt by it. Previously a declining party composed of rural schoolteachers and little else, the SFIO was transformed into the PS, gained itself mass support and even began to emulate the PCF by setting up workplace cells (*sections d'entreprise*). By contrast, the PCF was ghettoised – left playing a 'tribune' role ('standing up' for the working class rather than actually attempting to get into government) on terrain which made such a posture appear pointless and outdated.

Johnson completes his thesis with a look at the PCF's 'defensive mobilisation' in the 'seventies. Because the PS was more in tune with the times, he says, the PCF was bound to come off second best in the *Union de Gauche*. It met a dilemma: it could either throw off its orthodox-Stalinist, pro-Soviet heritage and so run the risk of becoming indistinguishable from the PS, or it could hang on to its traditions, and so meet with greater unpopularity. Either way, both 'soft' and 'hard' wings of the PCF agreed that the central problem facing it was maintaining an independent existence.

Despite their differences, Johnson suggests, Giscard and Chirac were always prepared to unite against the left.

But the PCF was not always prepared to unite with the PS — too much 'unity' could wreck it. In other words, it was the equivocations the PCF had over Mitterand that determined whether or not Giscard would ever go: 'the crisis of French Communism thus became the central fact of political life' (p280). PCF attempts to overcome that crisis by furious membership and factory cell drives failed. Vigorous campaigns among steelworkers and farmers against Germany and the EEC also brought little by way of votes.

So, Johnson contends, the more the PCF declined, the more hostile it had to be towards the PS. And the more hostile it was, the less chance there was of left unity — the only formula that could beat Giscard. The long march of the left promised to be a march without end. Much of what Johnson says is obviously correct. But events have shown his forecast to be erroneous. What is missing from his analysis?

France, as Johnson himself notes, industrialised late. This meant that for a long time its working class was small, its trade unions weak and its labour bureaucracy virtually non-existent. Thus while, at the turn of the century, classical social democracy took root in Britain and Germany, social democracy in France was feeble and had little base in the working class. What did have a base was syndicalism, a petit-bourgeois, anti-political tendency founded on the atomised, artisanal nature of French industry. It was syndicalism which gave the revolutionary majority of the SFIO a proletarian constituency when, in 1920, it went over to the Communist International and formed the PCF.

The PCF soon evolved as an amalgam of syndicalism and Stalinism. The working class identified with it, not the SFIO which, as Trotsky rightly described it, was 'the party of the new middle estate' in the 'thirties. However the days of the PCF were numbered. If France industrialised properly, the material basis for syndicalism would vanish; if the degenerate character of the Soviet bureaucracy ever became apparent to the masses, the PCF's hero-worship of Stalin would be a liability; and if the working class grew a trade union bureaucracy might emerge, one strong enough to provide the SFIO with solid support.

As it happened each of these three developments took a long time to mature. The Nazis' wartime rape of France retarded the growth of industry,¹ while the nationalisations of 1944-7 did little to increase industry's weight in the economy.² The working class remained isolated and looked on the USSR as its only friend for more than 20 years. The union leaders, having forced the bosses to concede the principle of free collective bargaining in the Matignon agreements of 1936, found it rescinded in the downturn that followed the collapse of the Popular Front — and rescinded it stayed for decades, effectively denying them a role as mediators between employer and employed. No wonder the PCF's vote stayed constant year after year.

After a time, however, the chickens began to come home to roost. Having got France out of Algeria and into the EEC, De Gaulle attacked the working class so ruthlessly that industry expanded at a prodigious rate.³ The Grenelle agreements that followed May 1968 allowed the bourgeoisie both to step up capital accumulation and to begin the process of house-training a labour bureaucracy.⁴ With these two pressures and Mitterand's visceral anti-Sovietism too, the PCF was bound to decay.

Johnson's treatment of the economic background to the PCF's current decline is weak. A more thorough survey would have shown that the relatively high growth

rates France exhibited in the 'seventies were sufficient to seal the fate of the PCF, but not sufficient to prevent the French bourgeoisie's longstanding crisis of leadership from coming to a head. Thus it was only logical that the PCF fall in with Mitterand on the second ballot in May, just as it was only logical that Chirac oppose the corrupt Giscard regime. For these reasons the long march of the left could come to an end after all.

Johnson's biggest mistake, however, is neither his superficial political economy nor the false election predictions that follow from this. *He deals with the question of the trade union bureaucracy inadequately.* He observes that, following the defeat of the left in the elections of March 1978, CFDT leader Edmond Maire met Prime Minister Raymond Barre for discussions on a minimum wage and on industrial conciliation boards; that the CGT began to distance itself from the PCF at about the same time, and that both unions have been losing members hand over fist. But he draws no implications from this.

Though the implications are clearer now, they were already evident when the book was written. The unions can only survive by tying themselves more and more firmly to the state and cutting such links as they have with the PCF (or certainly with its residual syndicalist methods). This is what, more or less, they have agreed to do under Mitterand — which is why the bourgeoisie is not too fussed about his victory. What we are seeing today is not just the demise of the PCF, historic though that is, but the rise of what is in France an altogether unprecedented phenomenon: 'classical' social democracy, a social democracy based on the institutionalised leadership of the trade unions.

James Wood

- 1 A Milward, *The new order and the French economy*, OUP, 1970.
- 2 W C Baum, *The French economy and the state*, Princeton, 1958.
- 3 French industry grew at an average of 6 per cent a year, 1960-70 — twice as fast as Britain, and faster even than West Germany. It is a pity that Johnson, whose exposés of the PCF are generally witty and to the point, should congratulate it for 'creditable consistency' on the Algerian question (p52). The PCF's shameless denial of self-determination for Algeria only fuelled reaction in France: it was not 'consistent' at all.
- 4 Johnson calls the union/*Patronat* wage deal struck in the Grenelle agreements 'extremely handsome' (p60). In fact it was one of the factors which helped French industry sustain a growth rate of more than 3 per cent for most of the 'seventies' — higher than West Germany's again. Johnson is all too fond of representing defeats as victories. Thus we find that 'the record of *tripartisme* [1944-7] remains impressive' (p24) and that 'Stalin made the best deal he could get at Yalta' (p25). It is phrases like these that make his use of the term 'Trotskyites' even more suspect than it would normally be.

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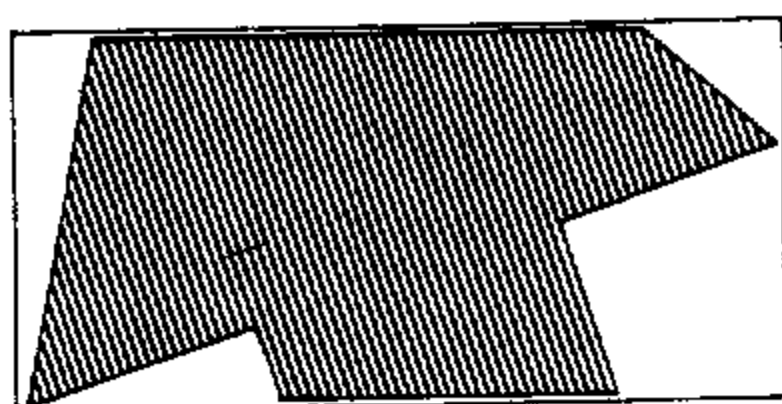
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