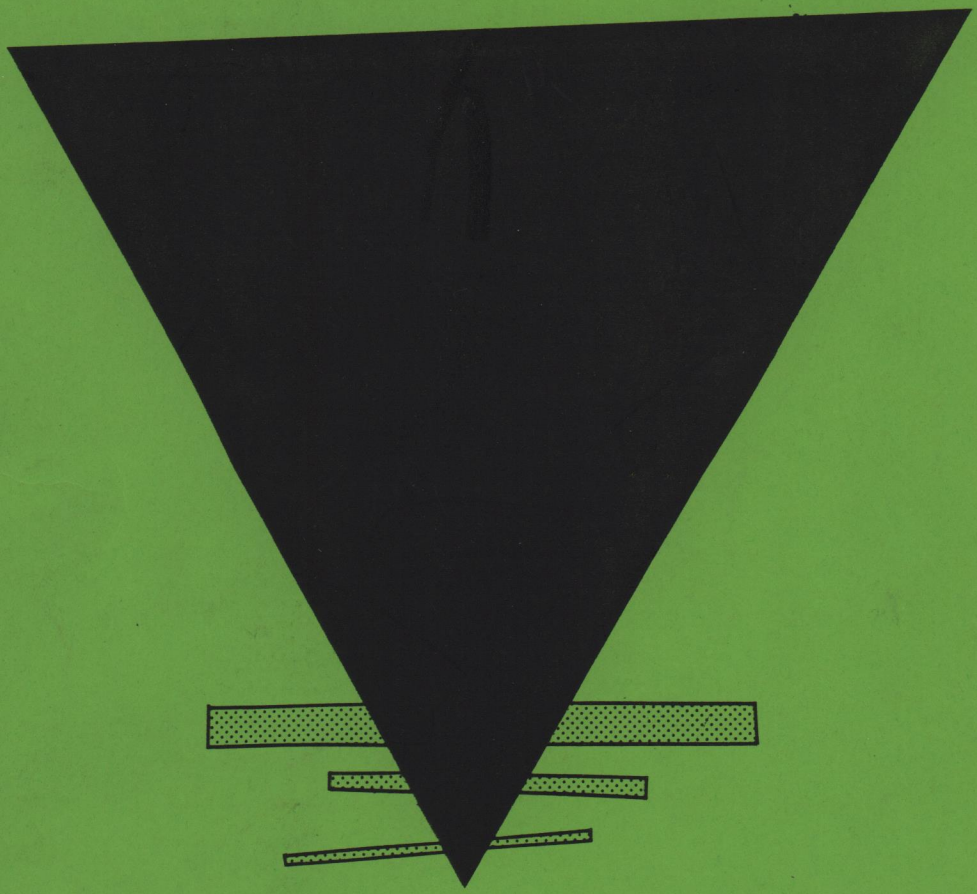
TROTSKYIST DISCUSSION BULLETIN



No.1

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WHAT IS CENTRISM?
THE POLITICS OF SOCIALIST VIEWPOINT
PARTY BUILDING IN THE PRESENT PERIOD

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INTRODUCTION

The documents contained in this first issue of Trotskyist Discussion Bulletin, are a contribution to the open discussion initiated by the Workers Revolutionary Party following its expulsion of Gerry Healy.

Workers Power has never hidden the fact, in the course of the open discussion, that it regards the history of the SLL/WRP as a history of centrism. That centrism, in our opinion, stemmed from the programmatic collapse of the Fourth International during the period 1948-51. Against this analysis some WRP comrades have objected to the use of the term centrist. Reference has been made instead to the 'contradictory' history of the WRP, or to the subjective revolutionary intentions of rank and file members. Some WRP members have construed the label centrist, as an insult, a charge that writes off their personal contribution to the struggle to build a marxist movement in Britain. The first document in this bulletin takes up these points. It is an analysis of centrism as a concept developed and used by revolutionary marxists since the first world war. It rescues the term as a scientific, marxist category. It demonstrates precisely the contradictory nature of centrism.

A key question for WRP members is whether any of the groups that originated in their ranks, constituted a revolutionary break from Healy's centrism. The second document in this bulletin looks at the contemporary politics of a group that originated in the WRP, namely the Socialist Group. This group was expelled from the WRP in 1974. For a period it was known as the Workers Socialist League. Its present title dates from 1984. The document traces the rightward trajectory of this group since the late 1970s and demonstrates the real dangers that a failure to break from centrism holds.

The third and final document published here was originally addressed to the Workers Internationalist League in 1983. This group broke with the WSL of Thornett and Matganna after the Malvinas War. However it emulated some of the most negative features of the old WSL - particularly with regard to party building, the subject of this document. In so doing it sealed its fate. It was shortlived, fragmenting rapidly. Some comrades formed other groups (the Revolutionary Internationalist League and Red Youth), others retreated into purely local or sectional politics. A promising opportunity to break with centrism and achieve principled regroupment was missed. In the light of this the warnings raised in the document and the call for principled regroupment are apposite for WRP members today.

We hope these documents will stimulate discussion. They do not exhaust the subjects currently being studied and debated by WRP members and others in today's "crisis of the left". We intend to take up other important political questions - The Method of the Transitional Programme, Dialectics and Method, the Politics of Pierre Lambert and his British supporters in the SLG, and more - in future issues of this bulletin.

WORKERS POWER MAY 1986

W H A T I S C E N T R I S M ?

> "One may state it as a general rule that antipathy toward the concept centrism, and toward all further subdivisions of centrism is typical of tendencies that are either centrist themselves or have not yet finally freed themselves from their intellectual amorphousness."
>
> Trotsky Writings 33/34 p169

Two attempts have been made so far to draw up a political balance sheet of the WRP's degeneration. Despite the sharp disagreements of Hunter and Banda over the history of the FI, one thing unites them: an "antipathy toward the concept centrism".

This is not unique on the British left. Whilst the word "sectarian ism" is generally bandied about as an insult, the term"centrism" is seldom heard. Militant, for example, refer to all their political opponents as "the sects". The SWP in turn characterises Militant as "revolutionaries with centrist tendencies". The RCP refer to us all as the "radical left".

In recent years the WRP itself worked with only two political categories: "dialectical materialist" and "police agent". Before this, the International Committee characterised its rival , the USFI as "Pabloite revisionist". The Thornett group and its former international affiliates were similarly unwilling to call degenerate Trotskyism "centrism", unless of course it was "centrism with special features".(GBL Theses on the Crisis of the FI 1979)

For us, on the other hand, an understanding of the FI's history, and of the fragments which today clutter the ground between reformism and revolutionary communism is impossible without understanding centrism and its different subcategories.

Can we define Cemtrism?

Trotsky's writings on centrism in the mid-30s contain the most developed understanding of centrism, its different features, stages of development and laws of motion. Yet, whilst Trotsky wrote in 1935; "the concept of centrism has a precise meaning in a Marxist dictionary"(Writings 35/36 p 153) he also warned repeatedly about the difficulty of positively defining centrism.

He wrote, for example, that centrism "is characterised to a much greater extent by what it lacks than by what it embraces" (Writings 33/34 p232). This is because "centrism", like every Marxist concept, embraces a process. It is not a motionless category. Outside of metaphors, there is no "Marxist dictionary". For this reason, Trotsky wrote, any general definition of centrism:

> "of necessity always has a conjunctural character"
> Trotsky Writings 33/34 p 233

We must however start with a provisional definition of centrism. For WORKERS POWER centrism is a current which stands between reformism and revolutionary communism, often borrowing from both or vacillating between the two, or confining its revolutionism to theory and its reformism to practice. It is also essentially a transitional phenomenon, moving either towards or away from Marxism. Paradoxically, its transition can be swift or it can take the form of years of ossified, motionless centrism. Unlike reformism and Marxism centrism has no historic class basis, but it has, nevertheless material roots in the class struggle itself.

We think the whole FI collapsed into centrism between 1948 and '51, and that the split of 1953 which formed the IC, was an incomplete break with cetrism. Unlike Banda, who says the IC "fought Pabloism with Pabloism" we prefer the more scientific formula: they fought centrism with a different kind of centrism.

We have explained this indetail elsewhere. The task of this document is to develop an understanding of centrism, by looking at the historical development of the concept itself.

As Trotsky wrote in 1940:

> "Dialectical thinking gives to concepts by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretisation, a richness of content and flexibility."
> Trotsky In Defence of Marxism New Park p65

Whilst centrism entered the Marxist lexicon after 1914, it was explained with the greatest "richness of content and flexibility" by Trotsky in the 1930s. The degeneration of two internationals was the material premise for this. The degeneration of yet another - Trotsky's Fourth International - calls for even more "dialectical thinking" on the subject of centrism. We can rise to this task only if we reconquer the gains of understanding embodied in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky on centrism.

The Second International

The concept centrism was first developped in relation to the Marxist "centre" of the Socialist International after 1914.

From the end of the 19th Century the main conflict in the 2nd Intenational was that between "orthodoxy" and "revisionism". Bernstein, the chief revisionist attacked the Marxist goal of a revolutionary transition to socialism. He argued that capitalism had become more stable, and that the struggle for social reforms within capitalism had to replace the 2nd International's formal commitment to abolishing it.

Against Bernsteim, "orthodox" Marxism was defended by a number of writers, and most consistently by Karl Kautsky, the main theoretician of German Social Democracy. The problem was, however, that the Trade Union and Parliamentary right wing of the 2nd International was perfectly willing to stand by "orthodox" Marxism in theory, whilst being thoroughly reformist in practice.

Trotsky wrote of Kautsky's orthodoxy:

> "Kautsky untiringly defended the revolutionary essence of Marx and Engels doctrine, although the initiative in repelling revisionist sallies was often taken by the more decisive elements (Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Parvus). In the political arena, however, Kautsky made total peace with the Social Democracy in the form it had acquired, never commenting on its profoundly opportunist nature and never responding to the efforts to make the party's tactics more resolute. As far as that went the party, ie the ruling bureaucracy also made peace with Kautsky's theoretical radicalism."
> Trotsky Portraits Political and Personal (1922) Pathfinder p31

The nature of the right wing's committment to orthodox Marxism was summed up in the famous comment of Ignaz Auer to Bernstein: "My dear Ede the sort of thing you ask for is not done by passing a resolution; one does not say it, one does it." (H Grebing History of German Labour Movement p 82)

Prior to the outbrak of the first world war the weakness of th Kautskyite "centre was that was able to defend orthodoxy, but not apply it consistently in practice. The emergence of Imperialism, the threat of war, the appearance of revolutionary crises all demanded that revolutionary Marxism develop a new kind of programme, different to the Maximum and Minimum programme of Social Democracy, and a new kind of party, based on class combat and with disciplined organisation, as opposed to the electoral broad church of the Socialist Parties.

Marxism developed these new tools partially, seperately and one-sidedly before 1914, often with the "centre" taking a more or less correct position in the debates. However when war broke out in August 1914 the whole of the "centre" sided with the social chauvinists. Under pressure from the left and the right

the Kautskyite "centre" vacillated between the two. At the anti-war conferences of the left - Zimmerwald and Kienthal - the centre sought to reconcile the left with the old reformist bureaucracy. Clearly the concepts "orthodox" and "revisionist" were no longer adequate to describe the conflicting political tendencies, or to understand the betrayal of the centre.

The war, "drew a balance sheet" on the leaders of the 2nd International. It required the Marxist left to evolve a new characterisation of the Kautskyite centre. This characterisation was put into place by Lenin, alongside the other key elements of the communist programme for the Imperialist epoch, at the end of the war.

Writing in 1917 Lenin described three distinct tendencies within the labour movement: the social chauvinists, the revolutionary left and the "centre". Referring to the third group, Lenin outlined the fundamental features of Kautskyite centrism:

> "Historically and economically speaking they do not represent a seperate stratum but are a transition from a past phase of the labour movement - the phase between 1871 and 1914, which gave much that is valuable to the proletariat, particularly in the indispensable art of slow, sustainedd and systematic organisational work on a large and very large scale - to a new phase, a phase that became objectively essential with t e outbreak of the first imperialist world war, which inaugurated the era of soc al revolution."
> Lenin Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution p44 Progress

He continued:

> "The Kautskyans , the "centre" , are revolutionaries in words and reformists in deeds; they are internationalists in words and accomplices of social chauvinists in deeds."
> Lenin ibid

Two important points spring immediately from Lenin's initial understanding of the concept centrism. First, he sees it as a transitional phenomenon, from one kind of politics to another. Secondly, he tries to explain its material roots in history and the class struggle. These two qualities, discovered in Kautskyanism by Lenin, were to form the basis of the later, more generalised concept of centrism.

It is important to note also, that in dealing with Kautsky and co., labelling them centrist, Lenin is not simply lumping them together with the social chauvinists. Neither is he insulting them. He describes their contribution as "valuable", despite their inability to adapt Marxist orthodoxy to the new epoch. In the same way when we describe the SLL/WRP as "centrist" we are not implying that it could not make correct and "valuable" criticisms of Pabloism, nor that its history of intervention in the class struggle should be "written off".

What we are saying is that even at its point of origin, the concept centrism better describes the process of degeneration of Marxism toward reformism - a process that was to be repeated several times after Kautsky - than the labels "orthodox" and "revisionist". It does so because , in the 20th century, Marxism is not a series of truths and theories to be defended against bourgeois professors and systematically explained to the working class: it is a guide to revolutionary action. In our epoch working class leaders no longer stand or fall by their ability to read "Capital" to the masses, but by their programme. Centrism encompasses better than any other concept the process of programmatic degeneration which was a feature of Kautsky, and was to be a feature of the Stalinist Comintern and the post war FI.

1917 to 1923

To describe the emergence of Kautskyite centrism is not to exhaust the subject of centrism and the 2nd International. Towards the end of the war a

different kind of centrism emerged - the centrism of the masses. Under pressure of defeat and extreme privations masses of workers in Europe were pushed away from their old social-chauvinist political leaders in the direction of the newly founded Comintern. Often too, a section of the old leadership was likewise propelled leftward by the pressure of the newly radicalised masses.

Rather than fading away, as might be implied from Lenin's original definition of centrism, centrism was renewed by the leftward urge of the workers. Centrist parties, and centrist factions within parties now emerged. The Comintern leaders saw them correctly as both an expression of and an obstacle to the movement of large numbers of workers towards communism.

In combat with such forces, the Comintern developed the concept of centrism from a specific characterisation of Kautsky (one of the earliest centrist formations in this period was the USPD led by both Kautsky and Bernstein!) to a more general concept. In particular the Italian "maximalists" of Serrati and later the Frossard-Cachin tendency within the French Communist Party were characterised as centrists.

Summing up the period of the Comintern's programmatic struggle with leftward moving centrism, Trotsky wrote, in March 1923:

> "After the war, an irresistible leftward movement set in amongst the working masses.....the genuine revolutionary section of the working class was unable in the space of a few months either to find or educate new leaders. And it must be recognised that during its initial years the CI had many sections headed by some leaders who were revolutionary but inexperienced and not firm enough; and by others who were semi-revolutionary and eternally vacillating but posessing considerable authority and political aptitude.....the qualatitive sameness of the politics of Paul Levi, of Frossard and the rest shows that involved here are not at all peculiarities inherent in any specific situation - which of course must be carefully taken into account - but a wholly internationalist tendency in the spirit of left centrism, which is prepared to adopt the external ritual of the CI, to swallow 21 and more conditions without a grimace, but all on the sole condition that everything go on exactly as before."
>
> Trotsky Balance Sheet of the Completed Period
> First 5 Years of the Comintern Vol2 p334 Monad.

With the crystallisation of a revolutionary communist programme and International, also came the crystallisation of "centrism" as a concept describing a whole series of tendencies with the same essential features. Like the centrism of Kautsky , the centrism of 1917 to 1923 also had its material roots - in the transition of the masses from reform to revolution. As with Kautsky, this centrism was not just derided and written off: over and above attempting to win the masses and their leaders away from centrism, Trotsky recognised the "political aptitude" of the leaders, as well as their political ineptness.

The defeat of the revolutionary wave after the first world war had the effect of stabilising the mass movement. Where organised centrist currents continued to exist seperately from the Second and Third Internationals they did so by virtue of their marginalisation from mass pressure.

However the defeat and stabilisation post 1923 also, in an indirect way provided the conditions for the emrgence of yet another form of centrism: with different material roots to that of the 2nd International but exhibiting many of the same features. This form of centrism emerged from the Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern itself.

The Centrist Comintern 1923 - 35

Even before 1923 the Comintern's sections committed centrist errors. It is very important to understand the qualitative difference between these mistakes

and the systematic centrism of the Comintern after 1923. As we saw above, it was necessary to incorporate leftward moving centrist elements into the early Comintern. Later, even before 1923, the ECCI itself presided over centrist vacillations, such as that of Zinoviev and Kun on the question of the"revolutionary offensive", and the mistakes of Levi in Germany.

Despite this however, we describe the period of the first four congresses of the Comintern, from 1919 to 1923, as a healthy, revolutionary period. Why? Because in this period the Comintern was creating a revolutionary programme against which centrist errors could be judged, and a leadership capable of judging them. The revolutionary legacy of the early Comintern is thus embodied in the theses and resolutions of the first four congresses and in the work of the Comintern sections in this period.

After 1923 a qualitative break occured. Starting with the German events of 1923 the Comintern leadership a a while became seriously disoriented. Between 1924 and 1925 the Comintern endorsed ultra-left, adventuristic "putsches" in Germany, Bulgaria and Estonia. At the same time it also developed bureaucratic and opportunist pacts with non-proletarian forces (eg. the foundation of the Peasant International). This right wing tendency increased and was consummated with the disastrous adaptation of the British CP to the TUC Lefts" in the 1926 General Strike, then in the liquidation of the Chinese CP in the Kuomintang, which led to the crushing of the Chinese Revolution in 1927.

Following this defeat, and the expulsion of the Trotskyist opposition, the Comintern again veered left, inaugurating the "Third Period". This again combined strident ultra-leftism (where Social Democracy was equated with fascism and the United Front rejected) with accomodation to certain right-wing and bourgeois democratic figures; in the case of Germany even to right wing national chauvinism.

The end result of the "Third Period" was the defeat of the German proletariat at the hands of Hitler, and the rise of fascism. This in turn provoked a new opportunist swing in the Comintern's line. First of all in France, then as a generalised tactic, the Comintern elaborated the Popular Front strategy. The rise of fascism made necessary for Stalinism an alliance with so called "democratic" capitalist parties, and with capitalist countries where "democracy" held sway. Because this involved the conscious and open betrayal of the workers of the "democratic" countries - such as the Stalin Laval pact of 1935 which endorsed the "defence and security" of French Imperialism - the Popular Front policy signalled the end of the Comintern's centrist period. Its evolution into a counter-revolutionary, reformist international was complete, and its self-liquidation in 1943 already inevitable.

The Trotskyists , who formed the only consistent opposition to the Comintern's centrism, were able to pin-point the material roots of this centrist evolution in the state- and party- bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. The 1936 theses on "The Evolution of The Comintern" outlined this understanding:

> "The two methods adopted by the Comintern for handling the masses - on the one hand, unprincipled adaptation to existing circumstances and the bourgeois democratic and petty bourgeois reformist parties, and on the other the sudden unprepared appeals to the revolutionary instincts of the masses - have their roots in the social position of the Soviet bureaucracy (the Comintern bureaucracy being its obedient appendage). Owing to its social character, the Soviet bureaucracy inclines towards adapting itself to the priveleged and exploiting sections of Soviet society (Kulaks, intellectual strata, labour aristocracy). However as soon as the development has reached a critical point, where these strata become so powerful socially that they threaten the bureaucracy's position of political privelege, the latter saves itself only by an appeal to the masses."
>
> The Evolution of the Comintern <u>Documents of the FI</u> p 119-120 Pathfinder.

For this reason Trotsky adopted the label "bureaucratic centrism" for the

Comintern in the period 1923 - 1935. Although originating in the vacillating petty bourgeois interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, Comintern centrism exhibited all the classic features of previous centrist groupings. It vacillated between reformism and revolutionism, violently swung between ultra-left and right opportunist errors, elevated Leninism into a rigid orthodoxy whilst departing from it at every turn. Like previous centrist formations however it also contained competent leaders, was able to make correct criticisms of reformism, syndicalism anarchism; it educated cadres in Marxism and provided thousands of heroic martyrs for the revolutionary cause.

As well as illustrating yet another type of centrism, the Comintern contains other valuable lessons. The tactics of the International Left Opposition toward the centrist Comintern passed through different stages, taking account of the qualitative phases within the Comintern's centrist evolution.

Throughout all the defeats which the CI presided over, through all the left and right zig-zags, and even despite their official expulsion in 1928, Trotsky and his followers remained loyal to the Comintern. They argued this was necessary as long as the possibility of <u>reforming</u> the Comintern existed. They argued that the existence of masses of subjectively revolutionary workers, particularly in Germany, within the CPs, offered ... the possibility of a return to the revolutionary programme elaborated in the first five years, under the pressure of the masses. Following the defeat of the German workers in 1933 Trotsky abandoned this perspective. <u>Not</u> simply because of the defeat itself, but because no section other than the ILO criticised the Comintern's errors from a revolutionary standpoint. With the destruction of the KPD, the Comintern's biggest section outside the USSR, the CI was un-regenerable from within. From July 1933 Trotsky argued for the creation of a <u>new</u> International.

It is important to understand here that Trotsky's break with the CI did not come at the point it became centrist; neither did he declare for a new International because the CI had "crossed class lines" in the manner of the 2nd International in 1914. The break occured because the Comintern had proved itself incapable of being reformed from within. It was unredeemably centrist. This fact has important implications when we come to look at the FI after the war.

<u>1933-1938 Trotskyism vs Centrism</u>

The task of building the Fourth International was made especially defficult by the need to combat the various shades of centrism which now existed. On the one hand there remained the Comintern, on the other there were elements of the "right opposition" who had been expelled from the CI in the "Third Period" and who had - because they too were centrists - made some correct criticisms of the Comintern. As well after 1933 there occured yet another mass movement of the Social Democratic workers towards the left, under the threat of fascism and during severe economic depression. This in turn created centrist formations within and on the fringes of the 2nd International: the followers of Pivert in the French SFIO, a section of the British ILP, Muste in the USA etc.

Faced with such a panoply of centrism, Trotsky was driven to write in 1934:

> "For a revolutionary Marxist the struggle
> against reformism is now almost fully
> replaced by the struggle against centrism."
> Trotsky <u>Writings</u> 33/34 p235

In the struggle against centrism of the mid 1930s Trotsky further concretised and developed the Marxist understanding of centrism. This mature conception, outlined in the writings of the period as well as in the day to day tactical relationship of the MFI (Movement for the Fourth International) to various centrist groups, is extremely useful to us today.

In his article "Centrism and the Fourth International", Trotsky outlined the general features of centrism as it existed in 1934. Despite the difficulties outlined before of precisely defining centrism, it is worth quoting this passage in full. It will strike a chord immediately with any critical observer of the British left, and of the SLL/WRP tradition in particular:

"a. Theoretically, centrism is amorphous and eclectic: so far as possible it evades theoretical obligations and inclines (in words) to give preference to "revolutionary practice" over theory, without understanding that only Marxist theory can impart revolutionary direction to practice.

b. In the sphere of ideology centrism leads a parasitic existence. It repeats against the revolutionary Marxists the old Menshevik arguments (Martov, Axelrod, Plekhanov), usually without suspecting this. On the other hand, its main arguments against the right it borrows from the Marxists, that is first of all from the Bolshevik-Leninists dulling however, the sharp edge of criticism and avoiding practical conclusions, thereby rendering their criticism meaningless

c. A centrist readily proclaims his hostility to reformism, but he does not mention centrism. Moreover he considers the very definition of centrism as "unclear", "arbitrary", etc; inother words centrism does not like to be called by its name.

d. A centrist, always uncertain of his position and his methods, views with hatred the revolutionary principle: state what is. He is inclined to substitute for a principled policy personal maneuvring and petty organisational diplomacy.

e. A centrist always remains in spiritual dependence on rightist groupings and is inclined to cringe before those who are more moderate, to remain silent on their opportunist sins and to cover up their actions before the workers.

f. The centrist frequently covers up his dawdling by refering to the danger of sectarianism, by which he understands not abstract propagandist passivity (of the Bordigist type) but the active concern for purity of principles, clarity of position, political consistency and organisational completeness.

g. A centrist occupies a position between an opportunist and a Marxist somewhat analogous to that which a petty bourgeois occupies between a capitalist and a proletarian; he kow tows before the first and has contempt for the second.

h. On the international arena, the centrist distinguishes himself if not by blindness then by shortsightedness. He does not understand that in the present epoch a national revolutionary party can be built only as part of an international party. In the choice of his international allies, the centrist is even less discriminating than in his own country.

i. A centrist sees in the policy of the Comintern only "ultra left" deviations, adventurism and putschism, ignoring completely the right opportunist zig-zags (Kuomintang, Anglo-Russian Committee, pacifist foreign policy, antifascist bloc etc)

j. A centrist swears readily by the policy of the united front, emptying it of its revolutionary content and transforming it from a tactical method into a supreme principle.

k. A centrist readily resorts to pathetic moralising to cover up his ideological emptiness; he does not understand that revolutionary morality can be formed only on the basis of revolutionary doctrine and revolutionary policy

Under the pressure of circumstance, the eclectic centrist may accept even the most extreme conclusions only to retreat from them afterwards in practice...."
Trotsky Writings 33/34 p235-236

Notwithstanding its latter-day period of sectarian isolation, who can fail to see in these lines the SLL/WRP? Who either can fail to distinguish the character traits of the Thornett Group, the SLG, the Spartacists in Trotsky's pen-portrait of centrism?

In addition to this general definition of centrism we also find Trotsky exploring , in the 30s , some of the "further subdivisions" of centrism which are also important for an understanding of today's centrism:

a. left and right centrism
Under the pressure of the masses some of the Social Democratic leaders were prepared to step out of their reformist garb and put on the clothes of centrism. In his 1934 Manifesto "War and the FI" Trotsky drew a distinction between "masked reformist or right centrists" and the "left centrists who are distinguished in turn by a great number of shadings".

Trotsky exposed the right centrists (Such as De Man) as wanting to drag in the defence of the fatherland "under the cover of a socialist plan". Whereas the left centrists "arrive in words at the denunciation of the defence of the fatherland. But from this bare denunciation they do not draw the necessary practical conclusions." (Writings 33/34 p 311)

b. the direction of centrist formations
On top of the characteriration "left" and "right", Trotsky also carefully distinguished between leftward and rightward moving centrism. This is crucial, since a concept which encompasses transition would be useless if it didn't have a sub-category which told us the direction of transition. As Trotsky wrote:

> "In front of each centrist group it is necessary to place an arrow indicating the direction of its development from right to left or from left to right."
> Trotsky Writings

In turn the ability to distinguish between leftward and rightward moving centrism dictated the tactics the FI adopted towards the various groupings. For example Trotsky bitterly criticised the POUM of Spain which was the result of Nin and Andrade's evolution away from Trotskyism. He did not flinch from a split with Nin, and advocated the formationa of an independent nucleus in Spain. Towards the American Workers Party of A J Muste however - a leftward moving organisation - the Trotskyists carried through a tactic of fusion. "We took a liberal and conciliatory attitude on the organisation questions, reserving our intransigence for the question of programme", wrote Cannon of the CLA's fusion with Muste. (History of American Trotskyism p181)

c. the centrism of the masses and "ossified" centrism
Trotsky often contrasted the spontaneous and temporary centrism of the working class with the systematic centrism of the leaders and of small groups. He wrote , in the war manifesto for example: "For the masses centrism is always only a short transition stage". The consciousness of the working class evolves rapidly and under fire; its centrism, its uncertainties are very quickly put to the test.

On the other hand , despite the fact that centrism is essentially a transitional phenomenon; it is possible for centrist tendencies to exist for prolonged periods, provided the class struggle doesn't confront them with a decisive choice between revolution and counterrevolution; defeatism or chauvinism etc.

As early as 1925 Trotsky had described this type of centrism , with regard to the British ILP:

> "The main feature of socialist centrism is its reticence, its mediocre half-and-half nature. It keeps going as long as it does not draw the ultimate conclusions and is not compelled to answer the basic questions set before it point blank.....as a rule centrism is most typical of small organisations which precisely through their lack of influence absolve themselves from the need to provide a clear answer to all questions of politics and bear practical responsibility for this answer. Just such is the centrism of the Independent Labour Party."
> Trotsky Where is Britain Going? p112 New Park

He returned to the subject of "ossified" centrism again in 1935 in more general

terms:

> "In our epoch there are to be found a good many circles in various countries that have aquired a Marxist programme, most often by borrowing it from the Bolsheviks, and who then turned their ideological baggage into a greater or lesser degree of ossification."
> Trotsky Writings 35/36 p154

The concept of "ossified "centrism is important in our analysis of post war Trotskyism. It is an apparent contradiction in terms: a transitory phenomenon frozen by objective circumstances in its process of transition. However, neither for us nor for Trotsky does this contradict the essential feature of centrism - ie that it is a process of change from reform to revolution or vice versa. Neither is such a phenomenon unknown elsewhere in Marxist theory: one immediately callsto mind the dictatorship of the proletariat as it exists today in the USSR: frozen, blocked in its transition to socialism.

Trotsky wrote of the ILP, which had assumed office in the Labour government of 1924,

> "From the very moment that centrism became a political force it had to pass beyond the bounds of centrism, that is either draw revolutionary conclusions from its opposition to the Imperialist state or openly enter its service. The latter of course is what happened."
> Trotsky Where is Britain Going?

In this instance the ILP's prolonged centrist existence came to a close when it assumed power.

However, returning to the ILP which by 1932 had become again a distinctly centrist current (it had split with the Labour Party) , Trotsky wrote:

> "The bureau suffers the fate of all centrist organisations in times of acute class struggle; it is destroyed by the release of centrifugal forces within itself....History could not arrange a better demonstration of the correctness of our understanding of centrism."
> Trotsky Writings 35/36 p207

Unlike the masses' centrism, which is always transitory, it is possible for small organisations to exist as centrist currents relatively "ossified", stabilised by their isolation from the class struggle. However when decisive questions are posed in action such forces must complete their evolution either in the manner of 1923 (by crossing class lines) or in the manner of the 1930's (when the ILP's centrifugal forces propelled a section towards the FI).

The concept of centrism

We have reviewed at length the history of the concept centrism. So much has been lost or given away by the post war epigones of Trotsky that such a review is absolutely necessary before we attempt to employ"centrism" as a tool to understand the degeneration of the Fourth International. Inthis way we can make analogies and comparisons , but avoid the dangers of "complacent" and "facile" comparison referred to by M. Banda.

Let us sum up what we mean by centrism:

1) Centrism is a political current in transition between reformism and revolutionary communism.
2) It can emerge from either Marxism or reformism and travel in either direction.
3) Insofar as it exists seperately from these two currents, centrism borrows from and vacillates as between both, always blinding and obstructing the political development of the working class.
4) Centrism cannot exist forever in this state, however where material circumstances absolve it from practical responsibility for its politics , centrism can exist in a prolonged "ossified" state.
5) Centrism has no historic roots in either the bourgeois or proletarian classes.
6) It is necessary to understand the different phases, types , and directions of centrism in order to operate Marxist tactics towards it.

Now let us turn to the FI after Trotsky's death: the subject of many words from both Banda and Hunter, but not a great deal of "dialectical thinking".

The FI, from Trotskyism to Centrism

Mike Banda was correct to warn against facile analogies in his article "27 Reasons....". How often have we heard the Mandelites winge, during yet another "unity" drive: "when did we commit our August 1914?" But we cannot abandon analogies and comparisons; only complacency.

The problem with Banda's document, to date the most critical account of the post-war FI to emerge from the WRP, is that it fails to distinguish between the various stages of the FI's degeneration. It is not much more than a list of crimes committed not only by the IC and IS, but also the post war FI, the FI after 1940, and in the case of Cannon, apparently as early as 1934/5. What is missing is precisely the concept centrism and an understanding of its different sub-species and phases.

We believe that the FI in 1938 was the one and only revolutionary party. Whatever the mistakes made by the constituent groups of the MFI, whatever mistakes made after 1938 - and there were some during Trotsky's lifetime - the FI was a revolutionary organisation precisely in the same way as the early Comintern: by virtue of its programme and the existence of a leadership which embodied that programme, put it into practice, checked the errors and vacillations of its members against this programmatic criterion.

The outbreak of war disoriented the FI as did the murder of Trotsky and some of his most capable followers by Stalinism and Fascism. Cannon commited centrist errors on the proletarian military policy, and the two French and British sections mirrored each other in opportunist and sectarian application of the programme of revolutionary defeatism.

By 1944 however, at the International Conference, the FI was able to reorientate itself on a revolutionary basis. It set about reconstructing an international leadership and intervening in the post war upsurge. In the maelstrom from 1938 to 1948 the FIs revolutionary programme was a beacon to the workers of the world. Whatever mistakes it made in this period it was fundamentally revolutionary.

After 1948 however, the FI again became disoriented. It had failed to revise its perspectives to take account of the post-war political stabilisation of stalinism and imperialism. As a result it saw in the Tito-Stalin split and the Cold war only a confirmation of the old perspective of imminent collapse, imminent revolution - correct in 1938, but no longer accurate ten years, and a world war, later.

Based on a perspective that saw first Tito and then Mao as "no longer Stalinist", that saw the Yugoslav events as a slightly imperfect proletarian revolution, and that predicted the imminent War / Revolution, the Pablo leadership of the FI revised the Marxist programme. The lack of time to build real Trotskyist parties, the necessity of long term deep entry into Stalinist and petty bourgeois movements, the possibility of an epoch of "workers governments of workers parties" ie Tito style social overturns, all were enshrined in the Yugoslavia resolution of the FI's 1951 Congress.

Unlike the Comintern the FI had never been in reality a mass organisation. Its strength lay in its programme alone. The utter negation of Trotskyism which it adopted in 1951, and the fact that no tendency or section correctly criticised the Yugoslav Resolution, signal the passing of the FI decisively into its centrist phase. From then on it would have been necessary to form a faction, conduct an open fight for leadership and not to flinch from a split and the formation of a new international organisation.

It is undoubtedly correct to label Pabloism centrism. Whilst proclaiming allegiance to Bolshevik-Leninism it accomodated voraciously , first to Stalinism and then to petty bourgeois nationalism. Whilst in posession of the banner of the Fourth International it also projected long term entry into the parties of the dissolved Comintern. It was, in conformity with Trotsky's definition, "Amorphous and eclectic", it "substituted for a principled policy, personal maneuvring and petty organisational diplomacy". It "remained silent on the opportunist sins" of Tito and Mao, and "covered up their actions before the workers". In transforming the entry tactic and the workers government demand into strategic aims, Pabloism embodied to the letter Trotsky's dictum:

> "A centrist readily swears by the policy of the united front, emptying it of its revolutionary content and transforming it from a tactical method into a supreme principle."
> Trotsky see above p7.

If it is correct to call Pabloism centrism however, is it not true that the IC split with that centrism in 1953? Yes it split with "Pabloism" but not with centrism. The IC never criticised the 1951 Congress resolutions which were the programmatic basis of "Pabloism". If Pabloism was "revisionist" then the "orthodoxy" of the "Open Letter" and "Under a stolen flag" was the orthodoxy of a Kautsky, a Zinoviev. It covered up rank adaptation to Bevanism in Britain and to Social Democracy in France. The insult "liquidationist" aimed at Pablo disguised the liquidation by Healy of British Trotskyism into the Labour left. And by 1964 the SLL was working with a perspective every bit as catastrophist as that of Pablo's 1951 prognosis.

The 1953 split, as we have said before, occured simultaneously too early and too late. It occured without a principled fight within the International, and was largely prompted by the breakup of the international non-aggression pact that substituted for democratic centralism in the FI. On the other hand it occured long after the critical resolution on Yugoslavia was passed at the '51 Congress.

One objection to this analysis which often arises is the following:"if you are quick to abandon the FI, to call for the formation of a new International after 1951, how do you explain its existence as a centrist current for 35 years. Is not centrism only a transitory phenomenon?"

The answer to this has two sides, both completely in accord with Trotsky's definition of centrism.

We describe the fragments and splinters of the FI as "ossified" or "petrified" centrism, ie centrism which by virtue of its isolation from the masses can remain in limbo between reformism and communism. The possibility and precedent for such a development is outlined in Trotsky's writings on the ILP, in both early 1920s and mid 30s, reviewed above. To the question, how can centrism become "stable" in such a way, we answer; in the same way as reformism and stalinism after the war: on the basis of the most gigantic economic growth in world history under capitalism , and on the basis of the defeat of the revolutionary upsurge after 1944.

On the other hand, such centrism cannot remain stable forever. After two decades of relative stagnation the splits and disintegration suffered by the centrist currents in Britain in the heat of a new period of crisis testify to this. Under the pressure of key events it is possible for "ossified" centrism to dissolve in either direction. The example of the LSSP in Sri Lanka whose historic "August 1914" occured in 1964 when they entered the Bandaranaike government proves this. So, conversely,may the WRP, in its future orientation.

The SLL/WRP as centrism

We have outlined elsewhere our criticisms of the SLL/WRP. That it "made mistakes" is , fortunately not in dispute. The question still at issue however is: what was the character of those mistakes. The answer to this question is linked fundamentally with the question of the WRP's future.

By trying to prove the SLL/WRP was centrist we are not implying that the whole history of the organisation must be written off; we are not attempting to deliver the WRP the ultimate insult; neither are we simply trying to "stick a label" .. on the WRP. Lenin and Trotsky' s understanding of centrism was able to encompass its positive as well as its negative elements.

When the SLL/WRP criticised Pabloism, built strikes and shop stewards organisations, defended Trotskyism agaisnt "state capitalist" theories etc they were fighting a necessary fight ; they were on the right side of the battle lines, but fighting with inadequate political weap ons. That is why the fight agaist "Pabloism" evolved into a criminal slander campaign, that is why the fight against "liquidation" ended up with the assertion that no revolution ary party was needed in Libya etc.; that is why the ATUA became a sterile and sectarian shell; that is why the SLL itelf ended up with a form of state capitalist analysis of Cuba.

The alternatives ' .to understanding centrism as the root of the WRP's political crisis - still not resolved decisively six months after the expulsion of Healy - were demonstrated graphically in the original Banda/Hunter exchange. For Banda the FI's demise was the product of totally subjective factors; the inadequacy of the cadre etc. Hunter was right to label this a "bad men" theory of history. For this , however, Hunter substituted a "bad circumstances" theory. The FI's degeneration was seen as the inevitable result of adverse objective conditions. The boom, the isolation from the masses, the strength of stalinism and reformism mean for Hunter that "we made mistakes but we could have done it no other way". Both positions are fundamentally one sided and un-dialectical. Both are fatalistic.

The concept centrism on the other hand is profoundly dialectical. It allows us to see the material roots of the past mistakes without endowing them with "objective" inevitability. It also allows us to characterise the stages of the FI's degeneration in a way not attempted by Banda. It allows us to understand wh en and how quantitative mistakes become qualitative centrism and how centrism itself, posed in practice with vital questions, must make another leap -either back into the camp of the proletarian revolution or into the camp of its enemies.

The WRP, posed with such vital questions during the miners strike, entered into a period of political crisis still not ended. The key to projecting a revolutionary future for the WRP , for resolving positively its centrist period, lies in the re-elaboration of a transitional programme for today's class struggle. One of the most vital pre-requisites for this is a scientific understandidng of the WRP's past as centrism.

Centrism is th concept which devel oped in the epoch of revolution, in the epoch of transitional programmes. It developed to cope with the reality that a correct understanding of Marxist "orthodoxy", of economic theory, even of the materialist dialectic was no guarantee of programmatic correctness. As a concept it developed historically, as we have outlined. It developed, like all human thought "post festum" - after the event. This incidentally explains why the charge that we call Lenin or Trotsky "centrist" before 1914 is completely unfounded. To measure the leaders of the past against programmatic yardstick which could only exist in the present would be completely anti-Marxist.

However with the post-war FI it is a different matter. In the case of Pablo; in the case of Cliff and Grant, Mandel and Cannon,in the case too of Healy, Banda, Hunter and co. the "yardstick" already existed. It was the Transitional Programme and the whole history of Trotsky's fight with Stalinism and Reformism. The task we face is to re-erect it, re-elaborate it for today. We cannot do this unless we understand how it was possible for these leaders to proclaim allegiance to that programme in words and systematically negate it in deeds. In this lies the burning importance of"the concept centrism" and its "fu rther subdivisions" for the current debates in the WRP.

THE POLITICS OF SOCIALIST VIEWPOINT.

The Healy leadership of the WRP left a trail of individuals and groups who were bullied, beaten and eventually bureaucratically excluded from the WRP for the 'crime' of raising political differences. Political argument with oppositions was cut short by denouncing them as agents of another group, the police, or of both.

The most significant opposition dealt with in this way was that around Alan Thornett, expelled in December 1974. It is to be welcomed that the bureaucratic method of dealing with Thornett and supporters is being repudiated by the post-Healy WRP. The way is cleared to WRP members making a political estimate of Thornett's politics as part of the open discussion.

Most WRP members will not have followed the political evolution of this tendency since 1974. We think it worth while studying the Thornett group's critique of the International Committee as well as its method of work in the British labour movement. We do so not because we recommend it to WRP members but because at the moment a political vaccuum exists in the fragmented WRP. A process of rethinking issues and re-education is in process. During it real dangers exist for the WRP. In essence the danger is that a partial critique of the WRP/IC tradition will lead the WRP into a repetition of earlier mistakes. Rejection of Healy's latter-day sectarianism **could** lead to an embrace with opportunism. The history of Thornett's group is a graphic illustration of this danger becoming a reality. **Socialist Viewpoint**, the Thornett group's magazine, is permeated with opportunist politics.

After the expulsion from the WRP the majority of the two hundred comrades hounded by Healy formed the Workers Socialist League (WSL). Eleven years later Thornett's group is considereably smaller. Six years of publishing **Socialist Press** (1975-81) followed by three years of cohabiting with Matgamna (1981-84) have witnessed this grouping - particularly from the late 1970's - lurch from crisis to crisis.

After the split with Matgamna the group re-emerged in late 1984 as the Socialist Group. It has subsequently published 12 issues of the journal **Socialist Viewpoint.**

THE FI AND THE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME

In the period 1974-75 the main plank of Thornett's opposition in the WRP was the claim that in the late 1960's and early 1970s the SLL/WRP abandoned the use of the Transitional Programme in the class struggle. From first hand experience of the BL plant at Cowley, Thornett realised the utter bankruptcy of the SLL's maximalist demands based on rampant 'economic catastrophism' and scenarios of imminent military coups.

Yet within Thornett's call for a 'return to the Transitional Programme' there were two major flaws. First, the idea that Trotsky's 1938 programme was a self-sufficient guide to the interventions of a group in today's class struggle. The new problems posed since the programme was written received scant attention from the WSL. Secondly, the idea that the SLL had applied this programme correctly before the sectarian degeneration. In 1979 these errors were amplified and their consequence made clear when the WSL wrote the **Poisoned Well** - their contribution to the history of the Fourth International.

This document correctly recognised that the 1953 split in the FI was primarily an organisational one, not based on clear political differences. Yet its grave weakness was to associate the political problems of the FI with the triumph of 'Pabloism'. While not the product of one man, Pabloism was **"a method . . . which has . . . an objective material source"**. In particular **"it reflects the ideological approach of the petty-bourgeois"**. This simplistic view, of course, fails to examine scientifically the stages and forms in which the Trotskyist programme was distorted and revised. Crucially the WSL abandoned the use of the marxist concept of **centrism** and, by stages, replaced it with the idea of a 'world family of Trotskyism".

It was argued that Pabloism - marginalised from the class and dazzled by Stalinism's expansion - misled the FI into abandoning the 1938 programme. However, the various fragments of the FI that emerged from the 1953 split - including so called Pabloites like the Mandelite **International** group in Britain today - continued to 'oscillate' around the Transitional Programme. The task the WSL therefore set itself was not to **combat centrism**, but to win the oscillating fragments back to the 1938 principles that they formally adhered to. This could be achieved through continuing the international Committee's supposed tradition of 'orienting to the working class'; that is repeatedly stressing the importance of the social composition of the party and counterposing it to programmatic correctness. Thus, in their dealings with the Moreno/Lambert unity circus in 1980/81, they soft-pedalled their criticisms of these charlatans because, after all, their organisations contained

quite a few workers, and it 'oscillated' around the TP.

Against this we repeat Trotsky's maxim - programme first! After all, the Cochranite faction in the SWP(US) was proletarian and liquidationist. The LSSP in Sri Lanka was a mass workers' organisation and entered a popular front. Lora's POR (Bolivia) had the backing of many Bolivian miners, but that organisation still managed to capitulate to the nationalist MNR in 1952. The WSL were true heirs to the IC's use of **workerism** to cover for bankrupt politics.

The WSL's analysis led them to create a false dividing line to be set up between 'Pabloism' and anti-Pabloism. This was enshrined in the founding document of the Trotskyist International Liaison Committee (TILC) in 1979, the WSL's attempt to reconstruct a Trotskyist International. This document stated:

> **"We critically defend those forces - initially in the International Committee - that took, however partially and inadequately, a stand in defence of the task of constructing** independent **Trotskyist** parties . . . "

But as we have shown elsewhere (See **Death Agony of the F.I., Workers Power** No. 80 and 81.) This was plainly not a feature of the International Committee. Healy's gross opportunism in **Socialist Outlook** and after that around **Tribune** gives lie to this.

In turn, the regeneration of the Fourth International and revolutionary regroupment could thus take place simply on the basis of a common affirmation that the Transitional Programme is correct, a shared commitment to apply it and a declaration in favour of 'independent Trotskyist parties'. The staging or, or intervening in 'open conferences' of the oscillating fragments was the TILC's method of rebuilding a revolutionary international. It failed because it did not face up to the fact that open conferences with the centrist fragments of the FI are no substitute for the difficult but necessary task of programmatic re-elaboration. This alone can cut through the web of centrist confusion. It will expose the hollowness of centrism's oft-repeated claims to 'stand-by' ('trample on,' they should say) the principles of the Transitional Programme.

With the WRP Central Committee now committed to holding a similar 'open' pre-conference later in 1986, there is a danger that this approach will be repeated. WRP members need to be reminded of the catastrophic consequences that this approach has had for Thornett's group, before they contemplate a re-run.

THE SPLIT BETWEEN PRINCIPLES AND TACTICS

Workers Power criticised the founding document of the TILC, **The Transitional Programme in Today's Class Struggle**, because it confined itself to 'revolutionary principles' and was content to leave to the future their 'tactical' implementation. This was fatal.

A programme and its 'principles' are tested in struggle. Major tactics cannot be separated from principles, perspectives and strategy. It is one thing to agree on what the Workers Government tactic means 'in general'. But how should it have been **applied** in Portugal (1975), Chile (1973). Reformism can be cursed by all manner of centrists in the abstract - but what about the concrete application of the revolutionary critique with regards to the British Labour Party and its left-wing.

It is one thing to agree on the nature of trade unions under capitalism and the need for communist leadership within them. But what lessons are to be drawn from the **experience** of the SLL's ATUA or the SWP's Rank and File Movement. What form does the united front take in the unions? Haziness on such a question can - and has done - lead to uncritical support for left bureaucrats. Differences of 'tactical application' in key questions reveal differences of political method. Systematic differences over key tactics expose differences of programme. They expose the dividing line between centrism and revolutionary marxism.

Having rejected Healy's slavish adaptation to Qaddafi, do the WRP members now envisage inviting Ernest Mandel to an Open Conference to hear him agree with Cliff Slaughter to 'stand by' the First Four Congresses of the Comintern, the Transitional Programme and the theory of Permanent Revolution? How ludicrous this would be given that in South Africa, and to name but the most recent example, Nicaragua, Mandel has shamelessly abandoned in practice the programme of Permanent Revolution.

The formation of the TILC on this profoundly mistaken method was to be followed by the fusion of Matgamna's International Communist League (I-CL) and the WSL in 1981. Thornett broke off discussion with Workers Power in favour of agreeing to 'abandon sectarianism'. That is, he was as mesmerised as Matgamna by the Bennite movement in the Labour Party and wanted a piece of the action. Thus he was prepared to agree to differ over the application of principles to such issues as Afghanistan, Poland and Ireland. We predicted that such differences could not be buried and that the class

struggle would split the misbegotten new WSL apart.

The Malvinas war erupted in 1982. Small matters such as the nature of imperialism, the characterisation of Argentina as a semi-colony (or not) - the 'general principles' - that had been left on the table at the time of the fusion started to blow the TILC (1983) and the new WSL (1984) apart. The failure to put politics first led to an episode that has demoralised cadre who wanted to be revolutionaries, and left the Thornett group much weaker than it was in 1974. Unfortunately, to-date Thornett and his co-leader John Lister, have learned very little from this episode. They subsequently insisted that:

> **"it was a principled fusion between two groups . . . between which there were no programmatic and theoretical differences which could not be contained in a single organisation, providing a healthy democratic regime could be established." (SV 1)**

The failure of the fusion is put down entirely to Matgamna's 'bad faith', his 'cynical manoeuvring' and abuse of their democratic rights. All this was perfectly true - what is more having experienced it first hand in the ICL. Workers Power **warned** the WSL of what was likely to happen. But it is a statement of bankruptcy to admit that if they had been in a minority in a healthy organisation they would loyally write for and sell a paper (**Socialist Organiser** - sponsored by the WSL) which openly espoused social-pacifism in the Malvinas war, capitulated to British imperialism, and declared itself on one occasion to be a Bennite paper!

THE POST-SPLIT PERIOD

Socialist Viewpoint was launched six months into the NUM's Great Strike. How did Thornett and co. measure up to the challenge it provided for a revolutionary organisation? How well did **Socialist Viewpoint** apply its grasp of the role of Trotskyists in a momentous trade union struggle which constantly threw up urgent political tasks?

At first glance there were many aspects of their analysis and perspective which Workers Power shared; the criticisms of the war of attrition approach of the NUM leadership (i.e. 'General Winter will come to the rescue'), the role of the TUC in helping isolate the NUM from the rest of the labour movement, the support for wives support groups, the call for a General Strike against sequetration and the anti-union laws.

Nevertheless, the key strategic problem facing the NUM and those who supported them was this. Given the need for industrial solidarity action as the key to victory for the NUM and given the TUC's treacherous role, how could the necessary solidarity action have been generalised and sustained. Workers Power had a consistant approach to this problem from day one of the strike. Despite Arthur Scargill's intransigence, his refusal to concede to the NCB's demands, his refusal (for the first six months) to give the TUC any control over the strike - Scargill remained **essentially** a left trade union official **with all that that entailed.**

His chosen weapons of struggle were to urge, cajole and browbeat other trade union officials into delivering support. By diplomatic deals and backstair manoeuvres he attempted to get around the roadblock of the TUC. He failed.

He did so because he refused to break the rules of the game governing relations between trade union officials. He refused to go over the heads of the other union leaders by organising and appealing to their rank and file membership directly. At best he gave an occasional nod and a wink.

More importantly, we did not need to wait for the miners' strike to be defeated to realise Scargill's limitations. History provided us with a very similar one with regard to Arthur Cooke in the strike in 1926. Moreover, on a host of occasions, Scargill had demonstrated his political character in previous struggles while Yorkshire President. He was a militant, perhaps the most militant **left reformist.** Hence, the essential priority of revolutionary communists was to build a militant minority movement. That is an organisation of rank and file miners rooted in each pit and connected up across the coalfields with the necessary authority and political programme to go beyond Scargill's leadership when necessary, to take the control of the strike out of the hands of any section of the NUM bureaucracy that backslided. The absence of such a movement left the best militants fatally reliant on Scargill.

The existing NUM left was not such an organisation. As we said in our pamphlet **Where Next For The NUM?**

> **"Since the formation of the NUM the left has generally organised itself as an electoral machine gearing to securing posts for left officials. We must break with that tradition. We need a movement that mobilises the rank and file as more than electoral fodder. It must be able to hold all officials to account and act independtly to initiate struggle and change."**

Thornett's group renounced this perspective. While they made sound criticisms of Scargill they

refused to intervene to organise the rank and file to go beyond him. They **confined** themselves to urging a change of course upon him: **"The NUM leadership remains determined . . . but needs to rise to the new situation."** (SV 2)

Thornett at the Mineworker Defence Conference in February 1985 voted **against** resolutions which outlined a rank and file perspective and then blocked with the NUM bureaucracy in a floundering situation where elements of a rank and file opposition **existed**, but needed organising.

Against this perspective **Socialist Viewpoint** fetishised the call for a Recalled TUC Congress after October 1984 as a way of breaking the logjam. Appeals to the General Council were scorned as useless, but in its place they wrongly believed that the pressure of the rank and file sympathy for the strike could make the Congress dominated by trade union officials, the same men who had ensured that no real solidarity was declared to the NUM after September 1984, would as if by magic, respond to the NUM's call for action.

Socialist Viewpoint believed that the main task in the strike was to shift the TUC in the belief that if the TUC were forced to call action in support of the NUM the rank and file trade unionists would be more than willing to follow that lead. The poor response to the TUC's Day of Action in 1981 indicates how false a view this is. Only the activity of the rank and file on the ground, pitting its weight against TUC reluctance and media hostility, could have made sure that a General Council call was responded to.

Secondly, Thornett's group failed to realise that the chance of pushing a re-called TUC to the left - given the make up of the delegates - precisely depended on a rank and file network in place and applying the necessary pressure on the delegates.

The real solution - that of organising the NUM members to act as an army of propagandists and agitators in the workplaces of other trade unionists across the country to win them to direct action, was lost on **Socialist Viewpoint**. They refused to advocate this road because it would have meant incurring the wrath of the NUM leadership and make them break with their role as left advisors/critics of Scargill.

The Great Strike at least proved the hollowness of **Socialist Viewpoint**'s claim in its first issue that:

> **"We see the fight for Trotskyist politics taking shape . . . (not) simply tailing behind this or that 'left' talking trade union or LP dignitary . . . "** (p.1)

This quote together with the experience of the 1984/5 strike indicated that the political method of Thornett's group has not changed since the early years of the WSL. At that time their strategic slogan was (inherited in part from the SLL) 'Make the lefts fight'. We criticised this slogan because it falsely differentiated between demands on the left leaders and the right to whom they are tied. It implies a necessary **stage** of left leadership. Worse, when the **'lefts' do** fight, the WSL trailed along behind them, happy to accept the reformist limits of that struggle even if heroically pursued, as in Scargill's case.

Since the end of the strike **Socialist Viewpoint** has uncritically followed behind Scargill in his attempt to ward off the attack from within and outside the NUM from the right. In the February issue Thornett now contends that Scargill **"represents the best class struggle traditions of the strike"** and that **"Grouping like the Yorkshire Miners Campaign Group need to be built and extended"**. Given that all evidence suggests that this group is precisely the exclusive broad left type of electoral machine that brought Scargill to prominence in the NUM and not a genuine rank and file group; given moreover, that genuine groups of rank and file miners have existed (National Rank and File Miners Movement) but which **Socialist Viewpoint** have not built or even supported, the implications are clear. **Socialist Viewpoint** prefers to continue to adopt the role they chose during the strike.

Other indications of **Socialist Viewpoint's** essentially rightist course have been plentifully supplied by various contributers to the magazine. Nor can these contributions be excused as individual viewpoints. The first issue of the journal declared: **"Socialist Viewpoint is the shopwindow for our politics"**. One exhibit in this window was a piece on Greenham Common:

> **"In September Greenham asked ten million to make a miracle happen. Weird language, but if that's what it takes to break us out of our stupor, so what?"** (No. 2)

So what? Marxists don't believe in miracles, that's so what. We prefer the plain language of revolution to the weird language of mystics and peaceniks. We say only revolution can put an end to imperialist war. **Socialist Viewpoint** has carried over the pacifist politics that it learnt inside **Socialist Organiser**.

The once proud domination by the Thornett group of the unions at Cowley has ended. **Socialist Viewpoint** have explained this in terms of the general shift to the right and the betrayals of the bureaucracy. Both have certainly played their part, and nobody would belittle the impact of these

factors. But the Thornett group's trade union policy has also played its part. The Thornettite policy in Cowley has always been based on sharing leadership at a steward's level with 'friendly lefts'. For years the key 'friend' was Bob Fryer. He was implicated in a number of sell-outs but was exempted from sharp criticisms by the Thornett group because of their alliance with him. Eventually, however, they did move against him. Instead of politically criticising his increasing accommodation with the TGWU bureaucracy, **Socialist Viewpoint** merely reported him "**as running out of steam**". (No. 11) Not surprisingly they chose to support Ivor Braggins as his replacement. Here was a man with plenty of steam. After all he was "**part of the far-left**".

However, alliances concluded on the basis of someone's general views, rather than on a hard and fast commitment to a common programme of action are dangerous indeed. And so it proved. After 2 years as convenor Braggins went over to the right. **Socialist Viewpoint** do not see themselves as being in anyway responsible for this. In fact their manner of supporting 'lefts' - i.e. of making alliances of convenience rather than of specific action with them - paves the way for convenors to move right unhindered. In fact **Socialist Viewpoint** empirically recognise this problem but do not see any need to change their policy:

> "The emphasis had to be in strengthening the trade union structures in the plant and rebuilding the shop steward's movement. Agreement at that level, however, meant very little in practice since it could be interpreted as meaning almost anything". (No. 11 - our emphasis)

Precisely because this emphasis could mean anything revolutionaries did not have to agree with it. They needed to give it a content. That content should have included measures to ensure total rank and file control over stewards and convenors via mass meetings (a form of organisation that the Thornett group have always been suspicious of simply because on certain occasions bureaucrats have manipulated mass meetings). It should have included precise policies on pay and conditions.

Instead of advancing such a fighting programme the Thornettites merely repeat a few transitional slogans (particularly 'open the books') but do not advance a form of rank and file organisation, a form of leadership accountable to the rank and file, capable of carrying such slogans into life. Instead they conclude self-defeating pacts with the likes of Braggins.

The miners' strike, the peace-movement and work in Cowley all reveal the opportunist strand that has, since the early 1980s, become dominant in the Thornett group. It is an opportunism that blinds them to the rotten politics of others. It led them to characterise the clearly rightist **Socialist Organiser** at the time of fusion:

> "as a political and organisational focal point of the most determined fighters in the Labour Party." (SV No 1)

It has now led them to greet the Mandelite split from **Socialist Action** namely **International** as "**a break from opportunism**". It will actually lead them into an abandonment of their increasingly formal 'anti-Pabloism'.

The International Committee never broke from the liquidationism espoused by Pablo. This fact led Healy - despite denouncing the revisionists as agents of imperialism - to make repeated overtures to Mandel and the USFI. As late as the winter of 1970/71, Healy wrote a document called **The Need for joint discussion between the IC and the US**. He insisted that the differences with these agents of imperialism (as they were once called):

> "**are by no means as sharp as they were with Shachtman in 1948.**" (**Fourth International** Vol. 1 No. 7)

He proposed an open conference and declared:

> "We are more firmly convinced than ever that there is a basis for such an approach." (ibid)

The manoeuvre - for that is what it was - never came to anything and before long Hansen was being called an FBI agent. However, Healy was right about the narrowness of the differences and Thornett took him at his word. He emulated the USFI's penchant for the role of left critics - to Been in the Labour party during the marriage with Matgamna, to Scargill in the unions following the divorce. Moreover, despite authorising during a left phase, the description of the USFI, as a 'poisoned well' Thornett has, on several occassions, come close to jumping down it.

Rumoured fusion discussions with the Mandelite **International** group suggest that he is hankering to take that plunge once again, perhaps via a joint takeover of Labour Briefing.

To **Socialist Viewpoint** members and supporters who do not wish to end up in the USFI and to the WRP, we would argue that the possibility of revolutionary regroupment does exist. But it must be on a clear **programmatic basis**. They must reject the idea that all we need to develop on the left is a political culture that allows a unified organisation to tolerate differences of enormous scope. This is an insult to the working class. It needs a combat party, one steeled in struggle, clear where it is going. Socialist Viewpoint's centrist self-doubt merely indicates they have no confidence in their own right to exist as a distinct political tendency. We would urge comrades disturbed by this to assist in establishing, as a priority, honest discussions, with the objective of real regroupment, with **Workers Power**.

INTRODUCTION TO FIGHTING PROPAGANDA GROUP DOCUMENT.

This document was written in the spring of 1983. At that time there was a severe crisis in the Workers Socialist League (WSL). The WSL was a product of a fusion between Sean Matgamna's International Communist League (ICL) and Alan Thornett's WSL. Workers Power criticised the unprincipled basis of this fusion (see article in this bulletin on Thornett and WP 21 and 23). We predicted its failure.

The Malvinas war caused a severe crisis in the WSL. The Matgamna section - citing the 'selfdetermination' of the Falkland islanders, refused to defend Argentina against British Imperialism. In addition they maintained that Argentina was not a semi-colonial country. Thornett went along with the dual defeatist line up till the point that Britain's war fleet sailed for the South Atlantic. A small group of Thornett's WSL membership led by Peter Flack adopted the same position as Workers Power and effectively forced Thornett into opposition to Matgamna.

From the outside Workers Power tried to assist in the theoretical and programmatic clarification of this group's fight against Matgamna and to settle with Thornettism. This document was part of a discussion bulletin we produced aimed at this.

The political tradition of Thornett and the WSL since their expulsion from the WRP had been marred not least by its shallow attachment to building the 'mini-mass party'; that is, the belief that a small group of revolutionaries with little base in the working class can equip itself with all the organisational and political paraphenalia of a revolutionary party (weekly paper, women's and youth papers, inclination for agitation to outweigh propaganda).

In addition, a damaging split in the old WSL in 1978 which helped form the British section of the iSt (Spartacists) left a deep psychological phobia of the notion of a 'fighting propaganda group' in the minds of many WSL comrades who remained behind after that split. Indeed, in the short, fruitless discussion between WP and WSL in 1980, Thornett, Lister and Richardson used every opportunity (as they have since) to caricature WP's view of the tasks of party building in the present period, as no different to that of the iSt. We wrote this document to overcome these political prejudices.

It goes without saying that many WRP comrades too have a one-sided view of the tasks of party-building. Before the split with Healy the WRP was almost an apparatus without a membership, a financial empire without a cadre. The party was a shell. Today part of the perspectives discussion in the WRP inevitably hinges around what kind of organisation is the post-Healy WRP. A conscious understanding of the place the WRP occupies within a fragmented revolutionary left and within the organisations of the working class is a pre-requisite for any positive regroupment on the left today.

MAY 1986

PARTY BUILDING IN THE PRESENT PERIOD: THE TASKS OF A FIGHTING PROPAGANDA GROUP.

In numerous discussions with WIL comrades it has been made clear that many of you oppose the notion of a 'fighting propaganda group', a term we in Workers Power use to describe our organisation. There are two reasons why this hostility to a name is not altogether surprising in the WIL. First, there is the fact that the iSt have for a long time used this term themselves. Recently, John Lister has put this fact to quite definite factional use against us in his pamphlet on the iSt. In that document the term 'fighting propaganda group' is made synonomous with the iSt brand of crazed sectarianism. We also know that having suffered two damaging splits as a result of iSt activity the old WSL leaders have constantly avoided confronting Workers Power's political criticisms by lumping us with the iSt because of the use of the same label.

Secondly, gut reaction against the term's implications flows from the practical political experience of a majority of WIL comrades. You come from a tradition which has always been complacent about the degree of ideological degeneration within international Trotskyism. From Thornett's 1974 split with the WRP, the old WSL has leaned on a series of programmatic positions inherited from pre-war Trotskyism - insufficient themselves to chart a course through to-day's class struggle. This led to an emphasis upon a crude and mainly organisational approach ('build the party') to revolutionary politics. A weekly 'mass paper', youth and women's paper, supposed 'mass work' in the unions; these were all props for Thornett in his ill-fated venture to rebuild a 'healthy' SLL. The WSL neglected or even refused to recognise the need for programmatic re-elaboration and cadreisation. The result was programmatic and practical bankruptcy, the loss of members and the fusion with Matgamna. Thornett is now reduced to a 'faction' in the WSL of around 50 strong. By any standards the loss of at least two-thirds of its members suggests that the WSL's history is no success story.

Your hositility to the term 'fighting propaganda group', however, still leaves us far from a solution to the real points at issue; namely, what is the **content** of this term? What does it imply for the practice, tasks and priorities of a revolutionary organisation that considers itself to be Trotskyist? When you were a faction in the WSL and shortly afterwards we had reason to hope that many of you rejected a return to the old mini-mass party approach and had recognised its bankruptcy. Indeed, it was this rejection, together with agreement with large parts of your split platform, that led us to propose fusion discussions with you. You have subsequently rejected this offer more than once, but this does not allow you to escape the dilemma that confronts you. Since the split your artificial distancing of yourselves from Workers Power, your lack of publications and activity indicates that you want to postpone a choice for as long as possible. But the problem will not go away. Comrades, which political positions do you stand by, which do you reject? What tasks do you identify as urgent? Which priorities will you set? How will you justify your separate existence on the international left? You cannot let superficial hostility to a name - 'fighting propaganda group' - get in the way. If you finally agree to set out with us, or alongside us, to achieve similar goals and can come up with a better short-hand term for your ogranisation then we would be glad to adopt it. At the moment we are afraid that you have retreated, that you are less convinced than ever on the tasks that lie behind the name. It is for that reason that we set out here a short exposition of our understanding of party building in the present period.

This issue is by no means an academic one. It is now a burning political question for your immediate future. You are a tiny grouping. Why should any worker, youth, student or any black or gay activist join you rather than the SWP, WRP, Militant, SL, WSL, RCP etc? "Because of our politics - because we are better than all the rest", you will reply. True as that may be, you will have a hard job proving it to them. You will need more than you own individual excellence as militants in youth or trade union work, more than a few leaflets to convince them. The more you pursue campaign work and strike tactical agreements for united action at the expense of political demarcation, the more will militants feel that there is no real justification for the variety of organisations that exist and no principled reason for your own existence as a separate group. If this is not to happen then it is clear that you will need good and plentiful supplies of printed material explaining your politics and attacking those of your rivals. You will need to make sure that every comrade is well able to explain your politics, carefully and patiently, especially since most people will not even listen to you at first, let alone be convinced by what you have to say . . . They will argue: "You are too small, not a national organisation, or not a serious 'alternative'". You will be getting somewhere when they ask you to explain your political differences with other groups. This painfully slow process cannot be skipped over. Indeed, both Sean Matgamna and Alan Thornett shared a belief that it could. In Matgamna's case it was by liquidationist manoeuvres in the Labour Party. In Thornett's case, blinded by the fact that a group of his followers held leading stewards'

positions in Cowley, the old WSL imagined that this represented the WSL's mass leadership and all that was needed was to extend it throughout the country.

Both these views in their own way were different sorts of liquidationism. Impatience is the mother and father of opportunism. To adopt 'mass party' methods of recruitment and norms of activity when you are only a small group is self-defeating. The members live on false hopes and false perspectives in the constant state of excitement necessary to keep them ferociously active for 24 hours a day. Constant, that is, until their morale, their health or their will to go on collapses. They do not have the time to politically develop themselves into good propagandists and critical and alert members of their own group. Cadre-training is neglected. A real mass communist party can recruit workers in large numbers because they had a varied and frequent party press that these workers had read over a long period, and knew the party's policies from. Such a party has a cadre (an officer corps), a hierarchy of leaders from branch and workplace up to national level that provide a framework for this recruitment. Any revolutionary party, not least the RSDLP/Bolsheviks, and for example, the SWP(US) in the 1920s and 1930s, has to go through distinct stages of growth from an ideological current, to a propaganda group, to a cadre party, to a mass party of the proletarian vanguard. Marx, Lenin and Trotsky all participated in and led grouping in these stages - in Trotsky's case twice over!

Of course, the dividing lines between these different forms of organisation (or different stages in the same organisation's growth) are not fixed absolutes. There are obviously transitional stages which combine features or tasks of different types of organisation. Yet distinctions do exist. For example, if Workers Power were only a group of, say four or five people who could not operate in a larger organisation it would be inevitable that we would be no more than an ideological current. Opportunities to intervene in the class struggle, as a group rather than as indiviuals, would be extremely rare. Fashioning out a distinct range of positions on programmatic and theoretical questions that had caused this acute isolation would be an obvious first priority. Indeed although we have accomplished much in this regard (eg **The Degenerated Revolution; The Death Agony of the Fourth International; Permanent Revolution No 1.**) we still have much to accomplish. For example, a re-elaboration of our understanding of the imperialist epoch and its political consequences. Ideological currents, in essence, strive to rekindle or keep alive an essential body of politics which has been almost completely marginalised. Historically, one could say that **inside** the USSR in the 1930s Trotskyism was reduced to this status as a result of persecutions and physical annihilation.

We believe we have passed beyond this stage. Our faction struggles in the IS and the I-CL ensured that we emerged as a propaganda grouping. Such a step at least presupposes a nationally organised nucleas of cadre, capable of organising systematic work within the working class. A programme, a perspective and a body of tactics are required for this. Theoretical and programmatic re-elaboration continues but each successive gain is concretely applied and tested in the class struggle by a core of trained propagandists and agitators.

Through this work it is possible to assemble the basic nucleus of the cadre party. By this we mean an organisation which includes in its ranks an important fraction of leading rank and file militants in the workers movement. Size alone is not enough to mark the transition from one stage to another. Let us remember that Trotsky called the CPGB in October 1922 a **"successfully functioning educational and propaganda society, but not a party, capable of directly leading the masses"** when it was over 2,000 strong. Clearly, what counts is the **representative** character of the party. How embedded in the heart of the rank and file of the working class is it? How authoratative is it, measured in terms of positions held in the key unions and workplaces? Considered in this way we would certainly be correct to call the Cliffites to-day (3-4,000 strong?) a 'propaganda society' and a bad one at that! It would be more accurate perhaps to call the early CPGB a cadre party since its social composition and the number of proletarian leaders in its ranks far exceeded that of to-day's SWP(GB).

Finally, the transformation of the cadre party into a mass revolutionary party must come only with the rising revolutionary situation itself (as with the Bolsheviks in 1914-17). Its continued existence as a real mass formation is incompatible with a stable capitalist state and its existence as a party with a large minority of the working class active in its ranks must rise and fall with the success or otherwise of the revolution itself. The fate of the mass CP's in the Comintern after the defeats in the wake of the First World War is a clear example of this. Workers Power aims to become a mass revolutionary party but it would be a foolish mistake to start acting like one now. Rather, we recognise reality. We are at the stage of being a propaganda grouping - a fighting propaganda group.

When we say we are a fighting propaganda group, we mean that we have to combine propaganda circle work with polemical interventions (what one of you once scornfully called 'going to other group's meetings'). You will discover that once the novelty of a new split has worn off, few will come to your own meetings. If there are more at other groups' meetings, then only a **real sectarian** will not intervene there. You may daydream about addressing not "a few left-group members in a pub room, but the **masses**". Try it. Where? How? In which organisations? And with what politics? If they **are** mass organisations and not pretences (like the vast majority of LPYS and LP branches or many non-workplace TU branches, for example), then only in periods of intense struggle will a revolutionary militant get a serious hearing for his/her distinctive politics, and even then often only on the matter in hand.

Your own isolation and smallness is a function of the disintegration and confusion that exists on the left to-day, unless you happen to think the collapse of the WSL was an accident or a product of wilfull people. You cannot ignore it. You must address it. The chief weapon that you will have to do this will be your paper. From various discussions it appears that you are aiming for a large circulation, agitational (yet infrequent) paper. Whatever else it is, we are assured it will be very 'different' from **Workers Power**. Some in the WIL have scorned our paper for its polemical and 'heavy' content. But comrades, polemic is important when revolutionists are faced with competition from centrists and reformists. It is one method of combatting these mis-leaders. It is the tried and trusted method of raising the revolutionary banner. The emphasis we give to polemics, as we have often repeated, is a function of the **stage** we are at. We do not claim originality on this score. When Lenin and Trotsky led organisations that were in a similar position to the one we face they too laid great stress on the polemical and programmatic content of their papers.

Take a look at Lenin's **Iskra**, for example. This was not aimed at the whole Russian working class, or the masses in general. For this purpose, leaflets were used in their thousands by the various circles, just as we use **Red Pulse** and our **Longbridge bulletin**. Rather, **Iskra** was aimed at the several thousand RSDLP members and sympathisers; the class conscious vanguard and the most advanced workers, in a situation where ideological confusion was rampant. Economism was gaining ground everywhere. Bernstein's ideas were finding roots in Social-Democracy via the 'Legal Marxists'. Lenin was thus determined to forge programmatic unity through polemic in his paper, **in front of the working class.** As Lenin said (CW4 p326)

> **" . . . we wish particularly to emphasise our opposition to the view that a workers' newspaper should devote its pages exclusively to matters that immediately and directly concern the spontaneous working-class movement, and leave everything pertaining to the theory of socialism, science, politics, questions of party organisation, etc, to the periodical for the intelligensia."**

Lenin had to wage a fierce fight against Plekhanov over the question of having polemics in a workers vanguard newspaper. This is how Lenin posed it: (CW 4 p.236)

> **"We do not reject polemics between comrades, but, on the contrary, are prepared to give them considerable space in our columns. Open polemics, conducted in full view of all Russian Social democrats and class-conscious workers, are necessary and desirable in order to clarify the depth of existing differences, in order to afford discussion of disputed questions from all angles, in order to combat the extremes into which representatives of various views, various localities, or various 'specialities' of the revolutionary movement inevitably fall. Indeed, we regard one of the drawbacks of the present day movement to be the absence of open polemics between avowedly differing views, the effort to conceal differences on fundamental questions."**

We do not think that this period belongs to the memory of archivists, to a period in which all the tasks were accomplished with no need for us to return to them. The revolutionary movement is a living, developing movement. It leaps forward and suffers reverses, making it necessary to go over certain tasks again. The Bolsheviks final victory was followed by defeats, fascism in much of Europe. By the 1930's Lenin's "Iskra period" was posed anew for Trotsky and his followers. Cannon, for example, explicitly drew analogies with the tasks of the Trotskyists in 1931 and those of Lenin in 1900. They were even **more acutely** posed then, according to Cannon:

> **"The American communist movement, including all of its factions, represents far less a political force than did the Social Democratic movement of Russia during the early Iskra period. And in view of the disintegration into factions it cannot justly be said that it is more united. If the Social Democrats of Russia at the time constituted a disunited propaganda body, no more can be said for our present movement." (The Left Opposition in the US 1928-31. p.331)**

Now Cannon can hardly be called a 'passive propagandist'. He was a vital link between the small group of American Trotskyists and the American working class. He also understood **stages** of party--building. When he launched the **Militant** in 1929 (with more supporters than the WIL has and better working class implantation) he did not call it an 'agitational' paper and scorn the need for a focused propaganda paper. His method was far nearer to ours. As he was to recall in 1950:

> **"We did not pretend, when we started 'The Militant', that we were producing a great mass paper, simplifying everything to the lowest common denominator. On the contrary, our paper was devoted to the education and re-education of the vanguard militants of the Cmmunist movement. It was primarily a cadre paper, the educator and guide of cadres. The people who hold the party together and keep it going in all kinds of weather. The people who never quit, who never float down the stream like dead fish, but swim against the current no matter how rough it may be. That is the meaning of 'militant', and that was the meaning of the paper we started to represent such people."** (Speeches for Socialism p267-68)

It may not be very pleasant to have to face up to it but the situation today is analogous. The defeats of the working class in and after the Second World War, the disintegration of the tiny Trotskyist vanguard - organisationally and politically - demand of us to-day the fulfillment of the same type of tasks that Cannon faced in the 'dog days' of the Left Opposition, and that Lenin faced in the Iskra period. Of course, we will not have to go over exactly the same ground, or over the same debates necessarily. Lenin's Iskra carried all the debates in the Second International; on crisis theory, the mass strike versus constitutionalism, etc. Some of these questions will not be disputed to-day. On the other hand, Cannon's **Militant** had to defend 'Permanent Revolution' against the 'democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants'. The SWP(US)'s degeneration requires us to go over this ground once more, as Doug Jenness' latest outburst shows. On a vast array of programmatic positions the 'Trotskyist' movement has splintered and in doing so has falsified the revolutionary programme. This movement differs wildly in its respective interpretations of Stalinism, Permanent Revolution, Reformism etc. We believe we have to **forge** unity in open debate. Again, Lenin; (CW4 p.354)

> **"Before we can unite, and in order that we may unite, we must first of all draw firm and definite lines of demarcation. Otherwise our unity will be purely fictitious, it will conceal the prevailing confusion and hinder its radical elimination."**

The only alternative to this path comrades, is pretending that the other groups don't exist, yet denigrating and slandering them behind their backs. Thus the road of avoiding 'sectarianism' (i.e. polemics) leads straight back to real sectarianism - lies and malicious gossip (i.e. "they're all middle-class, they don't do any work"). Comrades who have been around for any length of time will have experienced this in the Cliffite, Healyite or Grantite sects. They get away with it for years because of their size and sealing off their members from the groups they slander. With a tiny group of a couple of dozen this can't work for longer than a few months.

We have argued, then, that polemical and educational debate over disputed questions in the paper is **fundamental** to our present situation and to the life of a propaganda group. Does this mean that a small group cannot relate actively to the working class and its struggles? Not at all. Yet it has to relate as it can and to whom it can. A **fighting** propaganda group is not a grouping of abstract or passive propagandists. These types (like the historic Bordigists or today's iSt) do not determine their propaganda priorities from the questions posed objectively by the class struggle. They abstain from activity for fear of the compromises and concessions they believe that real life will demand from their fossilised and, in fact, dead principles. A 'revolutionary' who renounces tactics in the name of abstract principles, is as useless as the opportunist who sees principles as so much baggage obstructing nimble tactics.

We are guilty of neither error. We conduct ourselves as both propagandists and fighters in the workers movement. We have often repeated examples of the work to you; the Steel strike, the Peoples marches, the strikes at Ansells and Plansees, the health strike, the recent steel strike in Sheffield, etc, etc, etc. In all of these cases and more besides, we have worked hard to win the struggles and win adherents to communism. In each case we aim to work in the same manner. We begin from the workers' actual struggle **itself**. This means that we do not **counterpose** a sectarian fetish (i.e. the 'Russian Question' a la iSt, or the RCP's crude front campaigns) to the struggles as they arise. No, all our efforts are bent towards winning the particular struggle.

Yet we do not leave the struggle as we found it. First, in discussion with leading militants we outline a strategy to win the particular struggle. This we do by active involvement, propaganda and agitation. Our bulletins have taken up not only the tasks of the day (e.g. the organisation of a picket) but also the broader class-wide questions (e.g. the nature of trade unionism or the trade union bureaucracy).

Through a process of intervention - in which we not only 'teach' ourselves, but listen, learn and correct our errors - we aim to discover the best militants and to try our best to win them to revolutionary communism. Concretely, this may be done, as at the Plansee occupation in 1981, by raising Ireland through active solidarity with the hunger strikers. Self-selection and rejection takes place this way. Recruiting and training communist cadre out of workers means fashioning a Trotskyist response to all aspects of oppression and exploitation. It does not mean recruiting (like the WSL or the SWP) narrow, 'specialist' activists and leaving them at that. This reduces a revolutionary organisation to an unstable coalition of syndicalists, gay activists, black activists, feminists etc. All of this at the present time inevitably means the selection of the few. We do not hand out Party cards because someone is kind enough to buy our paper twice running or attend a public meeting. Nor, however, do we abandon people who will not - or cannot - make the leap immediately or directly. Rather, we aim to build a periphery of supporters and contacts who can take our propaganda into wider layers, confident that renewed struggles will draw in more contacts and allow for the old ones to make the transition to membership.

What is distinct about the work we do in the working class is that it is focused communist work aimed at achieving definite goals. Thus our work in the Health strike (1982)was aimed at winning the strike by organising the rank and file (through a stewards' movement), to challenge the bureaucracy. We were modestly successful in this because we had done years of work preparing for it. We produce a bulletin, **Red Pulse**, which makes communist propaganda in the hospitals. We built a city-wide stewards organisation in Sheffield. We help produce a stewards' bulletin in one of the hospitals. We carry out this type of work in or around other workplaces as well - car plants, steel plants, mines and so on. Our propaganda is aimed at the best militants.

The class struggle work of a fighting propaganda group has to be exemplary. This is for two reasons. First, a propaganda group does not have the forces or the resources to intervene in **all** class struggles. In his pamphlet against the iSt, Lister once again polemicises dishonestly, suggesting that exemplary work equals sectarian intervention in selected struggles rather than integration into the 'mass struggle'. However, the WSL could never carry on real mass work. It could never integrate itself into the mass movement everywhere and all at once. It tried desperately and has collapsed. We, on the other hand, are realists. We cannot do everything. So we select vital areas of the class struggle and intervene in them to show an example of what we would do in more cases if we had the forces. The second reason why our work has to be exemplary is because it has to demonstrate to militants how communist activity in the class struggle differs from and is superior to the activity of the centrists and reformists.

Once again, we make no claim to originality here. Do you think that when the American Trotskyists in the mid-1930s intervened in the class struggle they did so in anything but an exemplary fashion. They could not, and did not, want to do otherwise. Take the Minneapolis strikes of 1934, for example. This was not simple 'mass work'. It was a planned intervention, consciously seeking to set an example. In 1934 Cannon made this point forcefully by comparing the Minneapolis strikes of a few thousands with a textile workers' strike of ½ million. The Trotskyists could not intervene effectively in the textile strike. Yet they used their work in the Minneapolis strike to show what was needed in the textile strike. Cannon concluded:

> **"What miracles will the workers in the great industries be capable of when they forge a leadership of the Minneapolis calibre."** (New International September/October, 1934)

This method of work bears little or no resemblence to Lister's slanders or the expressed prejudices of some WIL members. It is a method that will, without a doubt, bring advanced workers into our ranks. Indeed, it is already doing so. At the same time, the fake mass work of Thornett and company will, if you try and reproduce it, lose you members while not gaining you any mass influence.

Apart from work in and around individual disputes we work within any existing rank and file or democracy grouping where these are not merely fronts for other organisations. Our goal here is to create a real organisation of rank and file militants in those workplaces and unions where we are placed. Of course, we would neither exclude those 'left' officials who declared for a fight against the right, nor would we base our strategy on building around them. The SWP(GB) and the SL commit one or the other of these errors. The old WSL had a strong inclination (gained from Healy's ATUA) to turn such organisations into occasional rallies that rubber stamp the party line. The Matgamna line is now clearly set towards the 'new broad lefts' (i.e. centred upon left labourite officials). Both Thornett and Matgamna, however, are limited not least by their Stalinophobia - a differential hostility to Stalinist officials as opposed to social-democrats - quite unjustified politically, despite the greater bureaucratic thuggishness of the former.

In the Labour Party we are in favour of, and have participated in the struggles over, democratic rights. We are for 'left' united fronts on specific issues. But we are absolutely opposed to the attempt to build a **political tendency** bridging communism, centrism and reformism. We are for building a revolutionary tendency in the Labour Party without any hope (and therefore not fooling workers with this false perspective) of a step-by-step transformation of the LP. This is not primarily because we will artificially split from the LP (though we don't give any oaths to the LP members until the sociali st millenium, either.) It is because a revolutionary communist current is only tolerable within a reformist organisation when either, (a) it is so insignificant that the bureaucrats can ignore it, or (b) the mass base of the party is so radicalised that the bureaucrats dare not expel it. Between these two situations lies the norm of struggle; i.e. witchunt, expulsions, consolidation of an independent revolutionary organisation, re-entry of a new fraction, and so on. The work is, and must be clearly subordinate to work in the unions, which are the bedrock fighting organisations of the working class (however bureaucratised) and are schools for socialism under capitalism.

This is our actual record comrades. Examine it closely. Decide whether or not you agree with it. Do not get hung up on the objection to the phrase we use to describe this stage of our work - the fighting propaganda group. If you do not agree with it, then we would like to discuss with you your alternative for a group of 30 or so comrades, and your recipe for building yourself into a sizable organisation. Look as well at the record of our propaganda, our paper, books, journals and pamphlets. If you disagree then tell us and others in writing were you disagree. What alternative programmatic positions would you prioritise over the ones we have chosen?

We explain our record to you to dispel prejudices in your ranks and to relate the positive contributions we have made. This is **not** to say that in our years of growth and consolidation from a faction to a group we have not made mistakes. You will find us the most honest group on the left in Brtain when it comes to admiting and correcting errors. Nor are we saying that we know it all and have nothing to learn. Comrades from other spheres of activity and from different political traditions have much to offer us. We can expand and develop our resources and improve our propaganda and agitation through such contributions. Our own develpment is far from complete. However, we are firm in the belief that we have a head start on every other group in Britain because we are on the right road. We understand the tasks that other groups consciously turn their backs on. We are confident that we will grow at their expense accordingly.

By recognising the fact that your development, if it is to be in a communist direction, must follow the same road, you would be taking a major step forward. By fusing with us on a principled basis you could help speed up our progress along this road. The alternative you have to this course is not good. Frenzied activism with an infrequent agitational paper (a contradiction in terms) without a clearly defined body of politics will destroy you. Twenty to thirty people cannot sustain that type of intervention. You may end up with a group, but it will be a clique, held together by personal loyalties and perhaps by a particular sectarian fetish that serves as a cranky hall-mark. But it will not be loyalty to a political programme. The consequences of all this is a membership pitifully trained and even scornful of education. Finally, this inevitable consequence in its turn becomes a necessity as the leadership requires ignorant members to swallow a succession of shallow and contradictory perspectives.

Alternatively you may end up back in the arms of Thornett. This would be a pity, but as we have pointed out to you before, it would be the logical consequence of your refusal to break with him politically. A final, sad option for all of you might be to simply drop out of political life. This, too, would be a pity. To lose comrades who once promised a break with centrism is not something we relish. For all these reasons, comrades, we say to you, **change course.** Turn to Workers Power. Open discussions with us and prepare the way for a principled fusion before the other grim alternatives engulf you.