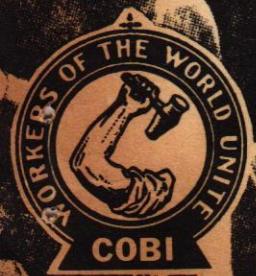


Proletarian
BROADSIDE 1



THE CRACK-UP



15p

BOARD STUDY

THE CRACKUP



IS: rout of a rearguard protoparty

The International Socialists, once the whizz-kids of the revolutionary left, face their biggest crisis. Membership has fallen sharply and the sales of Socialist Worker, the I. S. weekly, are reported to have slumped to 12,000. At least two factions within the movement have split from it recently, and the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian recently reported that a further faction, the "I. S. Opposition", had called for a crisis conference.

The Opposition faction has not, to our knowledge, made public its views of the problems which have beset I. S. recently, but it appears they have criticised the formation of a clique within the leadership, a general lack of internal democracy and failure to accept the realities of the situation. All these criticisms appear to be true, but if the I. S. Opposition is saying nothing more than that then it is failing sadly to get at the roots of the I. S. illness. Given the principles on which the movement was founded, all these diseases were inevitable. This pamphlet, by studying the works of Tony Cliff, the premier I. S. ideologue, shows why.

Of course many of the I. S. Opposition were in at the movement's birth, and held important posts within it. It is reported that their most recent document, for example, was signed by Roger Protz, for many years the editor of Socialist Worker, and John Palmer, another leading member who, ironically, is the European Editor of the Guardian (we wondered who coined the slogan "No to the bosses' Europe"). Since the errors in the I. S. position were there at the beginning, these people must have been party to them and, like I. S. itself, they will rapidly find themselves on the scrapheap of working class history unless they undertake severe self-criticism. But because I. S. is the biggest and most apparent of the movements of the revolutionary Left, it attracted many people who, though new to politics, had at least a general commitment to the working class and to the goal of socialist revolution. In fact, even now, I. S. has some 2,900 members. Now, a revolutionary

organisation with clearly defined goals, an unmistakably revolutionary programme

and 2,900 members, each with a solid grounding in scientific socialism and prepared to sacrifice everything for the revolution, would strike terror into the hearts of the ruling class (the Socialist Labour Party, the only such organisation which Britain has ever seen, managed to cause considerable concern during the early part of this century, and its membership was never more than a meagre few hundred). But I. S. scares only the least astute of the ruling class. As this pamphlet shows, it is weak-kneed, compromising with reformism all along the line. And it disdains revolutionary theory, the idea that man must understand his material environment if he is to master it. Their policy of admitting to the organisation anyone who merely sympathises with it, without regard to their understanding of scientific socialism, means that the organisation is neatly split into its theoreticians, who do nothing but make policy, and the activists, who just do the dirty work. No prizes, of course, for guessing the category that working-class recruits fall into.

Thus the formation of a clique was inevitable in IS, and we can only be surprised at the wonder which seemingly intelligent people seem to express at it.

The 2,900, then, have little idea of what they are fighting for, or why, or how they are to fight for these uncertain goals. Inevitably they lack conviction and dynamism. Inevitably, the turnover rate is high.

IS is frequently under attack from other Left groups because of its "opportunism", but few of them get close to understanding the problem.

At the root of IS opportunism lies a confusion between strategy and tactics. A revolutionary organisation needs to form a strategic plan -- what we call a communist programme -- to jolt the working class out of its reformist rut

and lead it to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and, ultimately, to the goal of international communism. Such a programme is formed scientifically, by Marxist analysis of economic and social conditions and the historical experience of the international working class. Tactics are derived from the strategic plan and are so designed that they make the maximum possible contribution towards its achievement. But, like the Mensheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia, IS has no strategic plan, no communist programme. Instead it believes that such a plan can arise from a series of tactical situations. But this side of the revolution, every tactical situation must result in compromise, what IS calls a "sell-out", or defeat.

There are at least three big mistakes that IS makes here:

1. To build a strategic line based on compromise is to build reformism.
2. Disillusion rapidly sets in when "revolutionary" goals are fixed for individual struggles and they are never realised -- because they never can be.
3. If the strategy derives from the tactical situations, these situations inevitably tend to take the form of a reply to a bourgeois initiative. In the end, IS is left opposing for opposing's sake, whining about "betrayals" and waiting for a new situation to arise -- the only way that its members' interest can be kept alive. (By contrast, tactics which derive from a communist strategy put the working class on to the offensive, and encourage the assertiveness vital to a future ruling class. You can find out more of what we mean by this by reading Proletarian no 3).

IS is bound to flit from cause to cause, if only to keep itself alive, for in each of these causes its failure, its political bankruptcy, is soon revealed. Hence the high turnover of IS members, the cynicism within its ranks, the schizophrenia.

Spontaneism and opportunism go together -- abstractly they are a result of obsession with current moods, struggles and tactics and indifference to long-term tendencies, goals and strategy. Hence IS members are

involved in diverse activities, which are taken up or dropped at will. IS rarely makes it clear to the working class why certain issues are taken up and others not, nor why one issue suddenly displaces another as the priority.

In the six months up to March 1976 IS has called successively for "the big claim", "absolutely no redundancies" and the "right to work". With the same disregard for integrated, strategic work, it has gone through Chile, Portuguese and Spanish campaigns, leaving demoralisation and cynicism in its wake.

Following with its nose the twists and turns of the class struggle, jumping from one bandwagon on to another, and not providing a comprehensive revolutionary orientation to the struggle. IS floats like a butterfly, and it stings like one.

But COBI believes that I.S. contains many people who could be of immense value to the working class in its battle for emancipation. Read this pamphlet. If, at least in broad terms, you agree with the points made in it, contact us. Where groups of I.S. dissidents show interest, we can arrange open discussions. Now read on.....

The significance of IS

IS claims to be the revolutionary organisation in the British Isles, and its claims must be studied seriously. Any organisation making such claims has to be judged by its analysis of the present critical situation, and by the strategy and tactics it advocates for socialist transformation. IS is a very leader-dominated organisation, and in this pamphlet the three main texts by Tony Cliff on the class struggle are examined as representatives of the IS position. These texts are Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards (written with Colin Barker in 1966); The Employers' Offensive. Productivity Deals and How to

Fight Them (1970) and The Crisis Social Contract or Socialism (1974).

This pamphlet will argue that there are extremely serious shortcomings in the IS position, which can be labelled economist and reformist.

But Cliff himself uses these labels, though he does so in a way which is narrow and confusing. So we will have to make it clear what these labels mean in the Marxist tradition.

Political debate is at a pretty low level in Britain and few people who call themselves socialists really understand the scientific theory first stated by Marx and Engels. Because of this unhappy state of affairs it is very easy for people to sound revolutionary when they talk and write, when really all their shouting just hides the fact that they are trotting out the same old reactionary rubbish that Lenin and many others exposed as nonsense long ago.

First principles for revolutionaries

On the surface, IS's claim to be a revolutionary organisation seems formally justified in that it probably accepts the basic first principles of revolutionary Marxism. These are

1. Capitalism is in crisis because it has a built-in contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces. By that we mean that each worker is just a cog in the wheel of a mighty social force -- production. But though production is social, the ownership of it is in private hands -- either the hands of the capitalists themselves, or of the state, representing the capitalist class as a whole.

2. In the long run there is no way out of this crisis, but the capitalist class can find a way out of it in the short term, depending on whether they have enough strength in the political and economic class war and on the hold that their

way of looking at the world has over the working class.

3. The state is an instrument of capitalist class domination, constantly stepping in to make sure that conditions are kept right for capitalist production and exploitation.

4. The workers will not be able to take power and reorganise society to meet their needs unless the present form of state is destroyed and replaced by a workers' dictatorship.

5. Although this has to be done, it adds up to a very big job because of the hold that capitalist ideology has over the working class. This ideology is constantly generated by the process through which capitalism circulates goods (advertising and its handmaiden, the press and TV) and by its facade of liberalism and democracy (Parliament and all the phoney freedoms that go with it, such as the worker's 'freedom' to sell his labour power to the highest bidder -- if there are any bidders!)

6. In Britain capitalist ideology goes right to the roots of the way that the trade unions and Labour Party are built.

7. The only way to fight that ideology is by a revolutionary party vigorously fighting on Marxist lines and for Marxist goals.

8. Such a party must be based on the industrial working class but must overcome the divisions -- of trade, sex, race, etc -- within it. It needs a revolutionary programme and to be internationalist in outlook and organisation.

9. Such a party does not yet exist in Britain.

So far, so good.

The problem is that Cliff never really says what we've just outlined. Not clearly, anyway. The Marxist concepts which these principles are based on are not the ones he uses in his analysis, or what passes for his strategy and tactics. As we shall see, the rag-bag of ideas he uses is a confused mixture of half-digested Marxism at best at worst it boils down to household economics and

the ethics of the man in the corner shop. What follows is a summary of the 1974 text, and it shows this muddle-headedness. The framework and the detail of the earlier texts do not differ greatly from the most recent. Occasionally there are differences in emphasis and we will point these out where we consider them to be important.

The crisis: how Cliff sees it

International capitalism in the 1950s attained relative stability through constant expansion in world trade, itself the result of post-war reconstruction and increased state intervention. (IS calls this stage of capitalism the "permanent arms economy", the successor to imperialism, which was the highest stage but one -- Kidron. Capitalism and Theory, ch 6).

Capital gets more concentrated and centralised as firms join forces and big ones push out the smaller fry. State ownership of capital increases too, so the minimum size for a competitive production unit gets very large and the turnover period of capital very long -- it takes an increasingly long time for profits to come out after investments are put in. This means that capitalist firms and the state need to have plenty of confidence in the future if they are to invest at all -- otherwise they can't feel sure of getting a "reasonable" return.

Thus, they turn to planning, so they can be sure of costs in the one area where they can control them -- wages. So, from the early 1960s, internationally and in Britain. Governments and industry have been working all out to impose systematic wage restraint -- wage freezes, incomes policies, productivity bargaining, "social contracts" and anti-union legislation.

In Britain at least, a strong shop-floor movement began to negotiate what became known as "wage drift".

By the 1960's the situation that made these changes possible had disappeared. World

competition increased, there was an international cutback in arms spending, price inflation got a lot worse with the help of monopoly control of raw materials, the size of investment required to ensure profitability got bigger and the resistance of workers, from whom the finance had to come, increased.

This state of world capital (it is difficult to disentangle the confused interweaving of world capital and British capital in Cliff's analysis, and this is a serious criticism for someone who calls himself an internationalist) is made worse in Britain by the acute unevenness between industrial sectors and by Britain's dependence on world trade.

This has meant continued balance of payments and sterling crises, stop-go policies of deflation and inflation, and now, to cap it all, "stagflation" -- inflation coupled with stagnation.

These are the effects of the declining rate of profit. "Like all investment in the past, these huge sums have to come from the workers. But today, as more and more money needs to be spent on investment in plant and machinery compared with wages, it becomes more and more difficult for the capitalists to extract from workers the minimum sums that are necessary. Squeeze as he might, what the capitalist gets out of workers as surplus is a smaller and smaller amount compared with the constantly growing size of his total investment -- his rate of profit falls."

(Profits do tend to decline, but explaining that is not half as simple as Cliff makes it out to be. He takes his figures from "British Capitalism, Workers and the Profits Squeeze", by Glyn and Sutcliffe. On top of that, Cliff talks about falling profits, but that doesn't stop him talking too, about high profits, frenzies of speculation, foreign investment floods and escalating waste. This doesn't fit the rest of his thesis and he puts it all down to "irrationality", which is a handy way to describe something you can't understand or explain).

Since 1965 British governments have been forced to intervene to guarantee profits.

Thus we have seen the prices and incomes policy, the national plan, productivity bargaining, "social contracts" and so on. These policies are introduced under the pretence that they are essential for maintaining living standards and full employment, are progressive in maintaining the welfare state and are fair to the unorganised and the lower paid. But their real aim is to increase profits at the expense of wages, and to cripple or smash the power of the shop steward, and ultimately the unions themselves "A capitalism that suffers from permanent and deepening crisis is incompatible with trade unionism" (1974, p111). Arguments that any kind of wage restraint will lead to raised profits and hence higher investment, price stability, economic growth and increased standards of living are false, because

1. Countries like Germany have high wages but low inflation and that proves that in Britain high wages do not cause inflation (here Cliff misses out the whole question of the use of "guest workers" in Germany).
2. If profits rise, investment in industry will not increase. If new machinery is installed it is under-used and usually all that increases is speculation and foreign investment.
3. Higher wages are always passed on in higher prices, but higher profits do not result in lower prices, thanks to monopoly pricing.
4. Rising prices and foreign investment prevent any balance of payments benefits.

Overall, wage restraint does not make for increased growth of living standards: "The wages that a worker loses he never sees again" (1966, p26). The capitalist class are the only beneficiaries and the claim that the lower-paid and the unorganised might benefit is a myth. Wage earners as a whole are on an escalator, with the strongly organised setting the speed for the weak. Any kind of wage restraint makes the working class as a whole pay for the wasteful greed of the crisis-ridden capitalist system. The working class must and will refuse to take responsibility for the crisis. "Tightly organised groups at the centre of the system are not going to be scared"; "anything that raises wages at a cost to

profits is fair to the workers, anything that raises profits at a cost to wages is unfair". (1970, p161). The distribution of income and wealth is grossly biased in favour of the capitalist class and its retainers, and the bias is growing.

The political and ideological framework of capitalism has changed and the change has been particularly acute in Britain. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the economic and political levels of capitalism -- the bosses on the one hand, the government on the other -- were, and were clearly seen to be, separated. Today state capital has transformed economic struggle into political struggle and the neutral state in the hostile and repressive state. The Government is now a boss, and it acts like one. In this context, both reformism and economism have become impossible: the institutions that are imbued with these ideologies, the Labour Party and the unions, are now unable to win reforms, and the state unable to grant them. Consequently, it becomes clear as day to the working class that the state is not for all "the people", but just for the capitalist class. So, too, they see that the Labour Party and union bureaucracy (along with any group still fostering reformist illusions, like the Communist Party) are reactionary: "The Labour Party can no longer be thought of as a party of reforms, but managers of capitalism." "With inflation roaring along, workers' resistance to restraint will be adamant, and many of the ideological ties that bind them to the system will be stretched to breaking point" (1974) "Labour will fail," and "this time round workers will know more about what is going on" (1974.) However, since the war the state has won won over the trade union bureaucracy to betray the interests of the class and repress rank and file militancy. Their role as negotiators of the terms of employment and their status as highly paid administrators make them the last bastions of economism and reformism (Cliff defines economism as a belief in the independence of economic reality from political reality, and the commitment to purely economic struggles. He defines reformism as a belief in reforms from

above' from leaders or the state, and a commitment to parliamentary democracy. According to this formula, the Labour movement in Britain has never been economist, since from Chartism through Lib-Labourism, the TUC and the Labour Party, it has been tied to different but coherent political positions. This nonsense is attacked more thoroughly below). The emerging rank and file movement must therefore make the union bureaucracy its main target. "All the national union leaders take it for granted that they operate within the system . . . that they can only operate successfully if the system itself enjoys success . . . accept the separation between industrial and political struggle" (1974, p130) (Nothing could be further from the truth -- for the last two years union leaders have been putting their politics before their industrial struggle. Despite a lot of squealing they all swallowed the £6 limit as a way of keeping the Tories out and maintaining the Labour Government in office).

"The new rank and file movement would have to forge a clear policy towards the trade union bureaucracy . . . from putting pressure on union leaders to action in spite of these leaders . . . raising hard and sharp the question: who owns the unions and who should own them?" (1974, p156).

But despite all this reformism is now politically redundant. There is no middle way for British capital to keep the system going. Socialism is the only alternative to the iron heel. "Out of the coming struggles a new leadership will emerge from below. Socialism will come in from the cold." Or "they break the back of the workers' organisation in the factories . . . that will be the day of the fascists" (1974, pp111 and 157).

If you accept this analysis of the present situation, you have to accept the enormous urgency of building a revolutionary vanguard to coordinate and lead the class in these struggles to the death. "The need grows to locate the industrial struggle in a political context" (1974, p158). The rank and file movement, must be built around clear militant socialist demands directed at the union

bureaucrats and the state. It also must constantly pose the question of production for whom, of who gets what and why. He says it must "avoid empty formalism, organisational shells substituting for real action" (1974, p156); "Mass meetings in every area . . . to plan united action . . . building solidly-based local committees that cut across sectional boundaries and create real unity of purpose" (1974, p156) "Of course, such a programme (he is talking about a revolutionary socialist programme) cannot offer more than general contours; the real flesh and blood of a programme can be given only by the struggle of the workers themselves" (1970, p222). "Real moves towards unity can be made . . . not at the point where offensives are prepared, but where defences are raised". "Out of the shop stewards' organisations will rise a new socialist movement" (1966, pp105 and 134)

Marxist concepts and petit bourgeois ideology

There is no automatic guarantee that use of Marxist concepts leads to correct revolutionary analysis and strategy. There is nothing wrong with Cliff's simplified use of words if it makes for clear and correct propaganda, and can be translated back into scientific terms without loss. This is not the case with Cliff, however. He continually departs from Marxism, as if it can be ignored as a plaything for armchair radicals, irrelevant for "real action" in a "real world" where everything is cut and dried.

He puts all the emphasis on the "critical" aspects of Marxist concepts, and then (like all petit-bourgeois thought from Proudhon on) uses them to sound off like a preacher. So there is no analysis of contradiction in his writing; only an outraged sense of the conflict between "the way things are" and "the way Cliff thinks they should be." He sees the world as a B movie, baddies against goodies. But Marxist concepts are not critical

because they produce self-righteous indignation. They are critical because they provide the basis for an understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist system. Without understanding these contradictions revolutionaries will not be able to overthrow capitalism

In the Marxist tradition capitalist economy, for example, is understood in the following way (here we have simplified things a bit):

Capital is self-expanding value, which means that it tends to reproduce what it needs to keep going -- the plant and machinery, labour force and legal framework. Capitalist production is a dual process, producing goods which, though useful, are made not primarily because of that, but because they can be sold in the market.

Production operates in a structure of two divisions of labour, that in manufacturing and that in society. It is the fact that the capitalist production process combines these two divisions of labour in producing commodities of this two-fold character which lies at the heart of the contradictions of the system.

The law of value operates "behind yet through" the members of the system to coordinate and reproduce the different departments of production and the social relations of production. Under the rule of capital, the production process combines dead and living labour power to produce surplus value, distributed as profit, interest and rent. Expanded production requires capitalisation of surplus value, increased outlay on constant and variable capital. The organic composition of capital tends to rise, generating the long-run tendency of the rate of profit to fall. The central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production is that between the productive forces (now increasingly socialised) and the relations of production, especially bourgeois property rights.

Contrast this theoretical outline (which is not self-sufficient; it merely tells us what to study and how to study it) with Cliff's one-sided framework. With Cliff, complexity is replaced by transparency, contradiction by antagonism, reproduction by crisis and breakdown, use value by waste, law of value by competition,

surplus value by profit margins (rent is excluded).

Slightly elaborated, the Cliff framework shows that workers and management are implacably opposed, cooperation is impossible, that workers' struggles have eroded management control at its most vital point, that these struggles are the expressions of the workers' innate socialist consciousness, that the production process is merely the site of the struggle over the distribution of the product into profit and wages, that capital accumulates only through wage cuts, speed-up or redundancy, that profit margins tend to fall but can, in unproductive and privileged spheres, keep on rising, that the distribution of income and wealth is becoming more and more viciously unequal that consequently the antagonism between capital and labour is increasingly implacable.

Yes, capitalism in the main, in our period and in Britain is like this. But it is not only like this (there are contradictions, there is unevenness) and it is not obviously so.

It is precisely the complex detail of our period which must be studied by revolutionaries. It determines how we fight and how well we fight, whether we like it or not. It must be understood.

Cliff's one-sided picture allows a simple short circuit into moralism. The following examples are taken from the texts, and at random from the IS newspaper, Socialist Worker.

Socialist revolutionary logic . . . argues if the country is in great economic crisis, it is not the fault of the workers. It is not the workers of Britain who exchanged millions of pounds into marks, yen, francs or dollars. It is not the workers who exported capital by the thousands of millions. It is not they who speculated in the commodity market or bought office blocks only to keep them empty. Why should workers pay the cost of the capitalist crisis? (1974, p127)

Who owns the unions? And who should own them? Should they be the property of their 11 million workers or of the tiny handful of union bureaucrats?

They (meaning militants) must reject the notion that workers have any responsibility

for the competitive position of the employer -- as socialists we oppose competition in industry, either nationally or internationally. They must announce for all to hear their conviction that workers have a right to drastically improved wages without any productivity concessions (1970, p217)

In the long run higher wages will always be passed on in the form of higher prices, to protect the rate of profit, but there is no countervailing tendency in capitalism which pushes up wages together with higher profits or higher prices (1966, p47)

On the Ryder report on the car industry:

Beeching wrecked the railways, and the rest of public transport was run down. They (Rootes) and British Leyland handed profits away to shareholders and directors, leaving the workers with antiquated, obsolete machinery.

The sun (newspaper) . . . continues to spread the lie that the workers are to blame in an effort to conceal the incompetence, greed and stupidity of managements obsessed with the need to make a profit (SW, Jan3, 1976)

Capitalism, in these and many similar descriptions, is seen to be manned by moral agents, responsible for subverting or perpetuating it, the guilty and the guiltless, the baddies and the goodies. Marxist study of the laws of capital, which shows capitalism as a material force driving men into certain courses of action, and the working out of a strategy to destroy it, give way to condemnation and exhortation. Political struggle to wrest control of the productive forces from the capitalist class, its state and its supportive institutions gives way to mere ideological (albeit vehement) polemic. A casual indifference to the ways capital reproduces itself, of price, profit and wage formation, of how the state and ideology operate and through what institutions, makes for a curious but familiar mixture: voluntarism and fatalism offensive and defensive moral rhetoric, intransigent pessimism and baseless self-confidence. Vote Labour/Smash the Labour Party; Abolish Wage Slavery/

Fight for the Right to Work Attack chauvinism/Vote against the EEC.

Reformist at root

Politically, the most dangerous effect of Cliff's would-be analysis is the underestimation of the strength of reformism in the organisations of the working class in Britain. The consequent absence of any coherent strategy to fight it (Rank and file rhetoric against union bureaucracies does not add up to such a strategy, needless to say. All it adds up to is saying that there's nothing wrong with the unions that a change of leadership wouldn't put right) effectively constitutes compromise with reformism, becoming a kind of reformism itself.

A narrow notion of reformism as "reforms from above" and "gradual socialisation by stages", combined with a simple view of what forms the economic base and the political and ideological superstructure in society, tells Cliff that reformism is dying, is politically irrelevant and obviously so.

According to Cliff, everything is becoming clearer to the working class as they experience the system in crisis: the essence of the state, the Labour Party, the union bureaucracies, the Communist Party, revolutionary logic and reformist logic. This kind of false optimism leads to tailism, the idea that a revolutionary organisation has no need to give a lead, but should take its lead from the working class, like a tail being wagged by a dog.

IS sees its role merely as one of pointing out what is already obvious to those of good faith who can see, and it regards Marxist theoretical development and education as an unnecessary waste of time.

But already, in 1976, such a view is obviously and absurdly false. It is incapable of explaining the success of Labour's £6 pay limit policy at Blackpool in September '75, except as a deviation from what "should have" happened, as a betrayal, a conspiracy.

IS collapses into compromise with those, such as Wedgewood Benn, who constitute merely the left wing of the bourgeoisie, voting against wage restraint and demanding piously, and from the state, a return to free collective bargaining and protectionism.

Perhaps the IS slogan for '76 and '77 will be, along with sections of big capital, "Restore differentials", or, with Tribune and the CP, "Buy British"?

In fact, of course, Cliff's heart is unconcerned with the Blackpool charade. Instead it lies with the rank and file on the shop floor, traditionally truculent and contemptuous of politics "Over our dead bodies", "It's not our bloody system". Both in the 1966 text and that of 1974, this "bloody-mindedness" is the "embryo" of socialism, a deep urge to control, according to Cliff. But this worship of spontaneity is the essence of economism.

The truth is that reformism is deeply rooted not just in trade union leaders, but in trade unions themselves, and Cliff fails to appreciate this.

Reformism, broadly speaking, is capitulation in practice to capitalist institutions and bourgeois ideology. Now, there are traditional reasons why British trade unions, with their fragmentation, craft traditions and Labour Party ties, might appear to have more potential to rid themselves of reformism than is actually the case. There are 300 unions for a labour force of 22 millions, 111 unions affiliated to the TUC embracing 10.4 millions. This appearance fosters the illusion that a movement working within the existing trade union structure (shop stewards combines in 1966, rank and file in 1974) can revolutionise the consciousness of the members and smash reformism. But it is not a question of more or less reformism.

The capitalist system constantly fragments and divides the working class. It fragments and divides because in big-scale machine industry no one person or group of persons by themselves produce goods. Instead, each specialises in one aspect of production. So in a car plant you have the fitters, the paint shop, the testers, the welders and so on. But though they

are all divided among themselves in this way, they are completely dependent on each other, part of a socialised production unit. Each group of workers is really just as vital as every other, because if one fails to do its job, the whole unit eventually has to stop.

Trade unions emphasise these divisions in the working class. Industrial unions, which COBI proposes, would stress working class unity, by organising workers according to the industry they work in not the trade which is their specialty. And such unity is the first, necessary step on the road to seizing power.

The contradiction between the divisive and the unifying aspects of industrial work must be faced by revolutionaries. Trade unions are defensive institutions painfully adapted by the class to that system. Their function is to negotiate the terms of employment, not destroy the wages system itself. As long as trade unions remain the predominant organisers of the class, then the class is bound and subordinated to that function. Big pay claims, "no redundancy" demands, defence of restrictive practices by any union, and fighting for free collective bargaining for all unions, provides an "escalator for the class" as a whole only exceptionally, and then only indirectly and unconsciously. On the contrary, big claims do not worry or threaten union leaders one iota. They can shrug their shoulders, if pressed, and ignore them - - and they do. Such struggles effectively mean capitulation to bourgeois ideology, which divides the mass into distinct and competing interest groups, and sabotages the consciousness and the advance of the class as a revolutionary class. That is reformism.

Under the rule of capital the existence of the working class requires and implies a class of capitalists. No amount of rhetoric can overcome that fact. That is precisely why the interest of the working class can be realised only by the abolition of all classes. That is communism.

Reformism is the politics and ideology of backing, in various ways and forms,

working class interests within, and as defined by, the capitalist system. This is fighting for the working class on capitalism's home ground, or what Lenin called the "bourgeois politics of the working class".

Rank and file v. industrial unions

Cliff's analysis and strategy is reformist, and no amount of redefining reformism as "reforms from above" or "gradualism" no condemnation of union bureaucrats, or exhortation of the rank and file can hide that. Original sin does not attach to bureaucrats per se, neither is the rank and file intrinsically pure. They are both merely roles within the union structure, two sides of the same coin. In fact the real rank and file in the unions are massively reformist, while Cliff's militants are increasingly the active core of official trade unionism, neutralised by reformism. The last hundred years of working class history, in which Chile is an outstanding milestone, show that the struggle between reformism and communism is an absolutely fundamental one. Reaction and counter-revolution depends on and stems from the confusion between them. This struggle cannot be conducted on the ideological level alone, because reformism is so strongly entrenched in the institutions of the class. And that is all that the rank and file tactic of I. S. actually amounts to, working within the present trade union structure to replace the leaders and their policies by fighting leaders and fighting policies. It is like trying to transform a professional army into a worker's militia just by propoganda among the soldiers or by making the officer's mess more democratic. Revolutionaries agree that the Labour Party (followed by its lap-dog the C. P.) is the organisational expression of reformism in the working class, so to work only within the existing trade unions, which at every level reflect the strong organisational bonds with the Labour Party, is to compromise with reformism. The I. S. Rank and File Conference is made

up of delegates from existing trade unions, therefore reflects the trade and craft consciousness, the divisions and economism

on which they are based. It is merely a pale left alternative to the TUC, reduced to a negative ideological role. No attempt to politicise (via 'transparent' issues) existing union branches, union executives, trades councils, can be successful in creating that socialist consciousness, that self-confidence, and those organisations without which socialist revolution is impossible. We need to develop forms of organisations based on the strength of the working class - its unity - not duplicate the weaknesses (from a revolutionary point of view) of British trade unionism. We must challenge, through these organisations, the ties of the trade unions with the Labour Party and the C. P., since it is these ties which are a conveyor-belt of reformism. The best form of organisation in current capitalist conditions is the Industrial Union

In all three texts Cliff touches on industrial unionism, the cornerstone of the industrial strategy of the Socialist Labour Party, which provided the core militants of the first shop stewards' movement on the Clyde Clyde during World War I. Going along with the hackneyed verdict of Labour and CP historians Cliff dismisses that experience as syndicalist.

The charge of syndicalism against the Socialist Labour Party, however, could not be more illiterate or further from the truth. In chapter 4 of William Paul's pamphlet "Scientific Socialism -- its Revolutionary Aims and Methods" (on sale now as a COBI reprint), Industrial Unionism is discussed as the constructive plank of a total communist perspective, supported by the revolutionary party, an independent press and educational programme. Industrial Unions are not designed to stand on their own as the charge of syndicalism insinuates. Yet they are essential for mobilising the industrial proletariat on class lines, for the economic tasks of the revolutionary struggle.

"Industrial Unionism is the only form of economic organisation that is in keeping with modern industrial development. It is not the outcome of any kink, nor is it the child of any agitator's imagination. It draws its

strength from the present method of organised industry, and it shows Labour how to offer the greatest resistance in the struggle against Capital".

"By bringing together such armies of workers all labouring cooperatively for the world's markets, Capital by its mechanism proved that all labour is social labour, and what is even more, that it is international social labour All these things are meaningless to modern reactionary trade unionism. While Production is now in its industrial phase, sectional trade unionism is still in its century-old trade and craft phase. The result is that trade unions are only able to define what a trade or a craft is by making artificial lines of demarcation, which are as stupid and unscientific as the leaders themselves. The consequence is that unions dissipate more energy fighting each other than they do in fighting Capital".

"Trade unionism cannot function within the modern factory or industry. And being functionless, it is dying from atrophy. but institutions do not pass away when their missions have been fulfilled. They struggle to live, and they exist functionless and fossilised."

"Industrial Unionism. contends that industrially organised labour can play a great part in the social revolution by holding the means of production while the political organisation destroys the capitalist state which has the armed force of the nation behind it."

A syndicalist view? Rubbish.

All revolutionaries pay lip service to the goal of destroying the wages system. Yet British trade unions are constructed mainly around the struggle over the distribution of the 'National Income' to specific grades, skills, trades. They are also uneven as regards sex, age, race and region. They conform to the myth of bourgeois economists that wages are determined by the marginal productivity of labour (i.e. the contribution each skill makes to the final product), and are completely entangled in bourgeois notions of justice which that myth entails. So obviously class relations are completely distorted by the trade union structure --- and the antagonisms and divisions that plague it allow the TUC, the Labour Party, the State, and even the capitalist class

itself to appear as neutral referees, upholders of the national interest. British trade unionism cannot provoke or reveal the class character of the State, as I. S.

pretends. That State is allowed to appear as the national interest precisely because the working class is divided against itself. Neither the ideology of reformism nor that of the national interest exist simply as fictions -- they have a material basis in the forms of economic and political class struggle, and that basis itself has to be destroyed.

So, if I. S. continues to dodge this vital issue if it does not work towards the building of industrial unions, (which is implicit in its Rank and Fileism, but never fought for) then all its practical activity (in shop-stewards movements, right to work committees, even housing and solidarity struggles) must be ineffective. Trade unions do not have the muscle or even the determination for these struggles. This does not mean that all participation in trade unions should end tomorrow (dual membership suggests itself) nor that struggles over wages, conditions redundancy etc. become irrelevant. It means that these struggles cease to be central, that they are subordinated to the revolutionary goal of smashing wage slavery itself.

"The battle for immediate remedies can become a battle for the end of the capitalist system" (Paul Foot, SW Jan 10, '76).

Yes -- but only with appropriate organisations and fighting strategy. There is no automatic continuity between the two, ever. In Britain the time of decentralised wage bargaining is over. Everyone knows (Right and Left) that the trade unions will be rationalised.

We must make sure it is on our terms -- against reformism, for the revolution.

Facing both ways

Cliff would caricature this revolutionary strategy, clear revolutionary organisations and ideology of fighting reformist structures in all fields as empty formalism -- "organisational shells substituting for real action".

He prefers to keep within the narrow circle of trade union struggle despite what

Marxist analysis clearly tells us. The truth is that Cliff seems not to know what industrial unions actually look like -- the NUM and NUPE are fighting approximations -- and does not admit that any determined rank and file line requires the building of industry-wide organs to be successful.

Rank and filism in IS is a token gesture, rhetoric to be indulged in for as long as it maintains its unhappy attitude to the trade unions, half in/half out, defending and attacking at the same time.

Why is it that IS is so frightened of being one inch in front of the mass, why does it patronise its prejudices, why is it so economist, so tailist, so weak-kneed?

Uneasy and inconsistent towards these prejudices and their organised expression, IS degenerates into reactionary compromise with both. For IS to attack

Labcur Party (even this is not uncompromising) yet toady to the existing union structure (under the pretence of revolutionising it) is patently inconsistent.

Look again at the web of organisational links between the two (the political levy is not the least significant or objectionable).

Blackpool '75 is and always will be the exact expression of these twin pillars of reformism,

"social contract" mark 1 and mark 2, and we can expect mark 3 and 4.

The CP grovels and fawns before both pillars, but at least its line is consistent.

"The irrelevance of CP policies is bound to increase," Cliff announced in 1974.

The boot is on the other foot as reformism holds the present stage and the compromisers in its grip.

Rearguard party

The reason for the economism, tailism and reformism of IS is to be found in its view of the party, with a "leadership analagous to that between a strike committee and the workers on strike, or a shop steward and his mates" (Party and Class, Cliff et al, p42).

This view is not even an incompetent mish-mash of Lenin, Trotsky and

Luxembourg (the writers discussed in Cliff's essay).

By contrast, Lenin says "(this idea of) economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance" (Lenin, What is to be Done, p 69). "In fact the ideal leader, as the majority of the members of such circles picture him, is something far more in the nature of a trade union secretary than a socialist political leader . . . in a word, every trade union secretary conducts and helps to conduct 'the economic struggle against the employers and the government'. It cannot be too strongly maintained that this is still not social democracy (by which Lenin meant revolutionary socialism -- COBI) that the social democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people (Lenin *ibid*, p79).

Another favoured expression of IS is that "militants must raise theory to the level of practice. It is quite obvious why such a leadership should feel no responsibility, indeed no competence, to elaborate a serious revolutionary strategy based on Marxist analysis. It is quite obvious that IS actually chooses to be tailist and weak-kneed.

The absence of such a strategy has been demonstrated in this 'broadside' in only one, albeit major, respect, the collapse of the rank and file tactic into reformism. One cannot however ignore his vacuous idea of the party programme and the functions of the party. In "Party and Class" Cliff also states that "the role of the Marxists is to generalise the living, evolving experience of the class struggle, to give a conscious expression to the instinctive drive of the working class to reorganise society on a socialist basis". It's obvious that for there to be anything worthwhile generalising in these experiences, these instincts must be of the right revolutionary kind. (In general no revolutionary should take such instincts for granted. And in the British Isles today Cliff's assertion is irresponsible and absurd. It clearly ignores the evidence produced by Marxism, about Capitalism in general and British Capitalism since the war, that in the absence of a mass

revolutionary party, bourgeois ideology reigns supreme over the working class.)

"And why, the reader will ask, does the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of least resistance, lead to the domination of bourgeois ideology? For the simple reason, that bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, that it is more fully developed, and that it has at its disposal immeasurably more means of dissemination" (Lenin *ibid* p42).

Generalise from what? -- that 'socialist instinct' to keep Britain out of the EEC? Cliff would be generalising from a deeply chauvinist and protectionist experience. And the Miner's strike of 1973? -- a militant but defensive struggle against the erosion of miner's living standards over the last 50 years. Cliff doesn't romanticise reality, but creates a fanciful illusion that socialist instincts are flourishing, that revolutionary crisis is just around the corner (or is it here, or has it passed -- if only the subjective will existed etc etc. A big IF). Cliff argues as if, somehow, worker's instincts 'grow over into' revolutionary instincts, as if defensive battles 'grow over into' offensive battles. But we know this isn't so -- Yes, workers can be won in numbers to a communist position, but there remains the most bitter antagonism between reformist consciousness and communist consciousness. Especially over the central pivot in the communist position -- the dictatorship of the working class. To gloss over this antagonism is to compromise. And compromise means reformism.

This rearguard position which Cliff assigns the revolutionary party, behind the working class, is justified by Cliff by contrasting the conditions in Russia in 1917 with conditions in contemporary Capitalism. "From the much higher cultural level of the workers in the industrial countries than in Russia, their greater self-reliance and organisational habits, and the relatively greater social homogeneity of the mass of toilers..... one may deduce that.....the unevenness in consciousness of the masses will be much smaller than it was in Russia" (Party and Class p40). So he maintains that unevenness in consciousness in backward Russia generated a vanguard party substituting itself for the working class, whereas the

working class in advanced Britain does not need such a vanguard.

This is just not true -- one must be an economist and an evolutionist to think that consciousness is determined by the backwardness or the forwardness of the stage one is at. In fact, unevenness is not a passing phase, but a general law of history. Cliff goes on to say that the party must strive to become a mass revolutionary party embracing "wide differences of strategy and tactics (which can and should exist) in the revolutionary party". (*ibid* p 42).

How very nice -- but how does the party determine where its going, if anywhere, and how does such a party recruit? Around a coherent revolutionary programme? -- No, the programme can only offer general contours, Cliff says, worker's struggles providing the flesh and blood (1970 p222). So members are recruited who feel the vaguest sympathy with this vacuous programme, and are immediately immersed in those programme-producing struggles. What do these militants impart to those struggles, and through what strategic framework are the lessons learned? -- only an earnest conviction in this threadbare programme, soggy ideological slogans and 'demands' which expose, clarify, politicise. I. S. recruits and sloganises, recruits (and repels) by sloganising. Now I. S. has begun to recruit around its mass paper, "Join Socialist Worker in the struggle for Socialism". Is the revolution to be led by Socialist Worker Supporters, weaned on a paper which, like the one Lenin attacked 70 years ago, "keeps on repeating the same thing over and over again, things we have long known, read long ago" (Lenin *ibid* p73)?

Lessons of our time

I. S. cannot pronounce the word 'theoretician' without a sneer. "The party.....should not invent tactics out of thin air, but put as its first duty to learn from the experience of the mass movement and then generalise from it" (Party and Class p42).

No revolutionary is arguing for such invention, but he does insist that tactics must be grounded in strategy, and strategy

must be grounded in marxist analysis of the changing concrete conditions. And indeed Cliff himself is not learning from the experience of the present mass movement (there isn't one) but repeats parrot-fashion the lessons of another age (1900-1920), and lessons which were wrongly learned.

"Therefore (says Cliff), one cannot but agree with Rosa Luxemburg when she wrote in 1904 -- 'the main characteristics of the tactics of the struggle of Social Democracy are not invented but are the result of a continuous series of great creative acts of elementary class struggle. Here also the unconscious precedes the conscious, the logic of the historical process comes before the subjective logic of its bearer'" (Party & Class p 42).

Reading this in 1976, one cannot but agree that Luxemburg and Cliff are guilty of the deepest irrationalism, advocating a blind worship of spontaneity which we wait for and by which we are swept. This, and similar quotations (e.g. the masses are more revolutionary than the party, and the party more revolutionary than the machine) are dangerous nonsense when applied to Britain today. Here the most pervasive aspects of working class practise and ideology are economism, reformism, and quietism. And racialism and nationalism are not far from the surface. They are part of Capitalism's superstructure which are not going to be swept away or dispelled by tides of history --

they must be fought systematically, ruthlessly. By the marxist party.

Organisations lacking a strategy rooted in marxist theory always resort to moral rhetoric to bridge the gap between the dismal present and the only half-believed-in future. In I. S. this shows itself in repeated confusion between offensive and defensive

periods. They want desperately to take the offensive, yet they continually hide behind defensive positions (Vote Labour, Defend the Trade Unions, Make demands of the State). This is no way to win the battles ahead. "Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement". I. S. positions are clearly devoid of marxist theory, and the political consequences are predictable.

Very briefly and in conclusion. In 1966, 1970, and 1974, Cliff and I. S. were misled by the post-war boom, welfare provision and state planning to badly over-estimate the strength of working class organisation and socialist ideology in Britain. With this, they under-estimated the persisting strength of reformism. And consequently, to an absurd degree, they romanticised the prospects of a revolutionary solution to Capitalism's present crisis. I. S. is left facing this debacle with redundant analyses and rhetoric on its hands, without the theoretical equipment to rectify its 'mistakes'. But of course the mistakes are not accidents -- they are the inevitable effect of the lack of the same theoretical equipment. They will happen again.

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* WHAT IS THE COMMUNIST ORGANISATION IN THE BRITISH ISLES? *

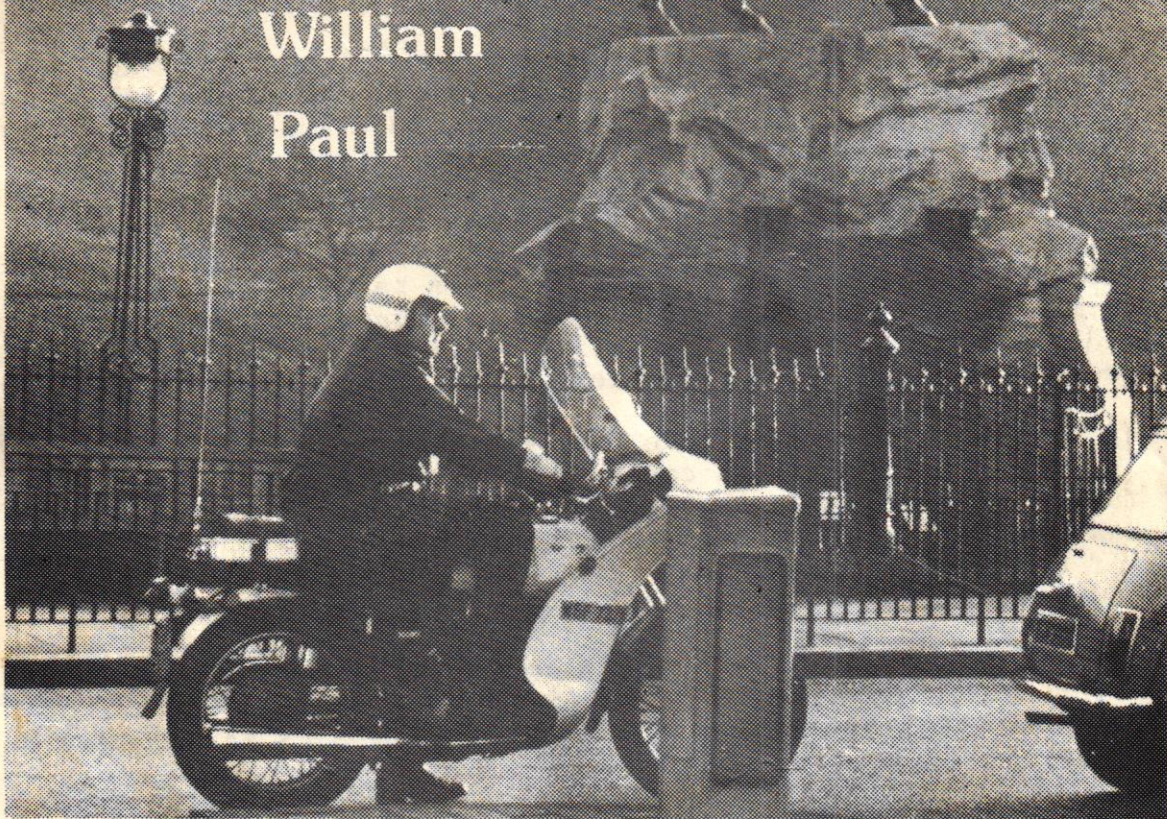
1. COBI is a Marxist-Leninist collective, formed on 1st January, 1974, in secession from the British and Irish Communist Organisation, now become revisionist. Its purpose is to integrate Marxist-Leninist theory with the concrete conditions prevailing in the British Isles, and guided by this concrete development of Marxism-Leninism, to promote the development of communist politics among the working class. It aims, through its activities, to help bring about political and ideological conditions in which the formation of a new communist party will be a meaningful step in the development of communist politics as a link in the chain of proletarian internationalism.
2. We take the natural economic unit of the British Isles as the area of our organisation and oppose any attempts by bourgeois or populist nationalism to fragment working class organisation within the above economic unit. We resolutely base ourselves on the proletariat of the whole British Isles without exception. As a European state develops we shall extend ourselves accordingly.
3. In terms of the development and strength of its economic organisation, the working class of Britain is second to none in the capitalist world; its political and ideological development is, however, much less advanced. In particular it lacks its own political party. Without such a party, a real communist party, it will be unable to decisively defeat the capitalist class, build socialism and advance to communism.
4. The history of the struggle to build such a party in the British Isles has been largely one of failure. The conspicuous exception to this was the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain, whose emblem COBI has adopted and whose valuable experience we intend to assimilate.
5. A major reason for this failure has been the inability of revolutionaries in the British Isles to make a complete break with capitalist ideology; their failure to break with the pragmatist outlook of the British capitalist class has led them to underestimate the importance of the Marxist-Leninist theory of scientific socialism. Without the guidance of this theory there can be no communist politics.
6. For these reasons COBI takes as its immediate tasks: the application of communist theory to the conditions of the British Isles, and ideological struggles against opportunist distortions of communism, such as modern revisionism and Trotskyism.
7. COBI demands the maximum ideological unity amongst its members. All members, in addition to engaging in practical work, must improve their understanding of scientific socialism and contribute to the ideological struggle. Nobody will be admitted to full membership of the organisation unless they have demonstrated their commitment to class struggle and their understanding of scientific socialism.
8. To supplement the efforts of its full membership, COBI encourages a wider group of associate members to work in cooperation with it.

For full elucidation of these premises see Proletarian No.1, and if you wish to know more about COBI contact:

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