

# Keeping up the 'carry on'

## A Trotwatch update on the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)

**D**URING 1994 the rapid growth that the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) had been able to engineer over the previous 18 months first peaked, and then fell back somewhat.

Renewed press interest in April this year pushed the party to claim its membership was now at its highest ever, at 10,000 strong: an advance of 1,500 since it last declared its strength, and now only 5000 short of what they say they need to take down the Tories, given the right demo [see *Carry on Recruiting*, (CoR) pp1-4]. Yet the SWP and the mainstream media share a mutual interest in inflating the significance of the party, even if their agendas differ.

In the context of threatened industrial action by teachers, the press reported this 'growing extremist threat' with alarm. In fact the SWP's industrial strength remains negligible. It's also clear that the SWP has found *itself* threatened by its own rapid growth.

Despite a determination to carry on recruiting the party has not even stood-still in the numbers game. Lacking an obvious recruitment focus, the party has been unable to replace those that drift away or determine to leave its ranks. Because the party is now several thousand stronger than it was in the early 1990s, the absolute numbers lost in the monthly turnover is that much higher – and that much harder to replace in full.

Yet raw numbers are far from the only 'problem'. During the 'dash for growth', the definition of a 'party member' was slackened, to include all those 'around' the party, and those who supported its press. At the same time the door was slung open to all those who 'hated the tories' and were eager 'for a fightback'. The result is a much bigger membership base, but one that is less reliable, less committed, more heterogeneous and – significantly – less easily directed. The leadership recognised that if the new opportunities of growth were not to be wasted, effective 'human resource management' was called for.

Party managers were confronted by two nightmare scenarios. First, that the larger party would factionalise and slide into

ungovernability. Preventing that required the elimination of all obstacles to centralised control, and the removal of party officials whose loyalty was questionable. Secondly, there was a risk that the large numbers on the margins of the party – with less commitment to it – could be lost if unpopular political messages were put out by the centre. The party's numerical gains could be wiped out as those on its fringes drifted away. Preventing that meant avoiding issues that threatened to divide the membership, and offering up instead an easy-to-digest diet of bland anti-Toryism.

The stalling of the recruitment drive may have come as a disappointment to those amongst the SWP's rank-and-file who *believed* the party's 1992 rhetoric. It will though have come as little surprise to the party leadership, around Tony Cliff. They know well from their own history that a sharp rise in membership cannot be sustained indefinitely. What has proved decisive in the past is what happens afterwards.

As its 1992-3 enlargement fizzled-out, the SWP swung – politically and organisationally – sharply to the leftist 'right'. The demand for stability and discipline have displaced the need to keep the door to the party wide open; populism has replaced super-optimism.

The central perspective on which the 'dash for growth' was premised – the theory of the 'upturn' – has been a victim of the changes. The party's politics have also come under considerable stress as its populist obsessions have steered it in the direction of what ever is 'in' – however fleetingly. The party has struggled to simultaneously market itself to essentially incompatible recruitment groups. In contrast, it has chosen to adopt a passive wait-and-see strategy in relation to its central rival in the mainstream marxist left: Militant Labour. Political and administrative control of the party has been further concentrated in the hands of the centre. The expulsion of heretics has continued, confirming the leadership's determination to impose the new order, as well as the existence of internal deviancy. That opposition led the first breakaway group to split from the party's

ranks since the days of the upturn began. That very small splinter has gone on to make common cause with the 'loyal SWP opposition' that exists on the fringes of the parent group. In the Spring of 1995, the SWP began to move gingerly in the direction of a new industrial strategy, though it remained far from clear what the goals of the new workplace policy might be, how it would compare with previous party efforts, or what kind of danger it could conceivably pose to effective workplace action in future. This update looks at each of these issues- and a few more besides.

## *The 'upturn' that never was*

Less than two years after the SWP claimed a growth in its forces could topple a government, the party wasn't simply claiming that this moment had past. The whole episode was wiped from the party's history. In this trotskyist Twilight Zone there was no need to explain away something that had *never happened*.

The politics of the 'upturn' had provided an ideological justification for the party's 'dash for growth'. The new politics of the 'transitional period' provide a rationale for a 'preparatory phase' that is now apparent. Yet, like the 'upturn' it establishes a clear duty on the part of the cadre to embrace discipline, loyalty and hard work. The official strategy now recognises a 'need' to re-organise and rationalise the party's enlarged forces to face an 'upturn' that - in fact - has yet to arrive.

By the Summer of 1994, the miners' struggle of 1992 had become - in the columns of *Socialist Worker* - the dispute 'they dare not mention': even as part of the roll call of recent class struggle. The party had been hard at work deflating the expectations it had encouraged in its drive to boost membership for many months [see *CoR* pp12-19]. This was followed by an interim 'strategy' tested out during the winter of 1993-4, based on 'blaming' union bosses both left and right for snuffing out the miners' struggle. As ever, it was a political mess. Alongside the predictable 'if-only-the-TUC-would-have-led-the-fight' stuff, came a specific attack on NUM leader Arthur Scargill: "for looking at what was going on at the top of the movement, not the sea change among rank and file workers" [*Socialist Review: SR*, Dec 93, p13]. In 1992-3, the SWP had switched back and forth on

the question of whether Scargill was the catalyst for - or an obstacle to - the 'action needed to win' [see *CoR*, pp16-17]. The SWP now decided to blame him for disaster: Scargill had been a timid moderate out of step with a combative rank and file itching for action on his command.

"The problem was not the militancy of the NUM leadership, precisely the opposite. If Scargill had called a general strike in October 1992 it would have been massive" [*SR*, Dec 93, p14]: Scargill's determination to put back industrial action was a product of his 'commitment to TUC officialdom'. Consequently: "Scargill failed because he played by the TUC rules" [p14]. In this rationalisation, it was Scargill's caution had betrayed the 'upturn'.

Scargill's reaction was bitter and angry [*History Distorted, SR* Feb 94]: "As a socialist, I expect my class enemies to deliberately distort historical fact... However I feel sad when a comrade like Mike Simons [the SWP journalist] ... twists the truth to suit his conclusions and this harms our movement's essential learning process" [p16]. Scargill argues both that NUM members and supporters "did not need any 'authorisation' before they occupied pits or colliery premises" [p16], and that: "To have called in October, November or December 1992 for a general strike would have been staggeringly naive and politically incompetent" [p17].

Yet for an astute and experience stalinist hack, Scargill seemed slow to recognise the 'conclusions' that the SWP were really trying to justify. The issue at stake was not the loss of thousands of miners jobs, but the loss of credibility suffered by the SWP and the need to retrieve it.

The party had to provide an explanation for what had become of its 'upturn'. The attack on Scargill allowed the party to claim that a victory *could* have been won: by *unofficial* rank and file action *led* by a trade union boss *in defiance* of the TUC. Although different again from *any* of the lines the party had been selling at the time, the strategy had one obvious advantage: it pinned the blame for the upturn's failure on something - and on someone - outside the party's control. Scargill became the fall-guy for Cliff.

Yet it didn't quite work. The problem with this makeshift solution was that it still implied that an *ideal opportunity* had gone to waste because of poor *leadership*. It was

because the party now wished to go completely into *denial* over the miners and the 'upturn', it now sought to *blank out* the whole episode. As the SWP's needs changed, so strategy was reshaped: though Scargill has yet to be fully rehabilitated.

It took well over a year for the new orthodoxy to fully displace the old. Tony Cliff laid out the new line in a keynote article in *Socialist Review* in February 1995. He began with a new version of recent history: "In the industrial struggle we have had three stages over the past 25 years: the period of upturn [in the 1970s], the period of downturn [the dark days of the 1980s] and now the third stage - a period of transition. Elements of the first and second stages combined together in the present situation." [SR, Feb 95, p16].

With this, the new party perspective - 'the period of transition' - was born. This period is now said to have begun with the miners' strike of 1984-5, and then skips - via the poll tax battle - to the signal workers' pay dispute of 1994.

Of course, at the time the SWP said the miner's 1984-5 strike was taking place in the depths of 'the downturn' [see *Wildcat's How Socialist is the Socialist Workers Party?* pamphlet]. The SWP's contortions during the poll tax struggle are infamous [see, for example, *CoR*, pp29-37]. The SWP's decision to isolate the railworkers' strike as 'significant' is an act of self-justification. It was the first post-'upturn' industrial dispute the party tried to mobilise its forces around. While the SWP made no impact on events, it has chosen to rationalise its high-profile engagement with it: it does so by claiming that the dispute marked a 'turning point' on the industrial front.

The new 'transitional period' orthodoxy now informs all writings in the party press, and is the central premise of the party's new 'activist handbook' *Socialists in the Trade Unions*, published this Spring [Bookmarks, London, 1995]. In its cursory history of British industrial unrest over recent decades, it too cites the railworkers dispute as decisive. Once again there is no reference to the 'government threatening' miners' battle of 1992. Cynical, manipulative, yet - currently at least - systematic.

During the membership drive, the story was that new layers of 'workers' were rallying to the party banner. The validity of the party's claim to be 'on the march' depended on it making in-roads into the

industrial and white-collar proletariat, not on it picking up coachloads of sociology undergraduates. Of course, as the applications flooded in for processing in 1992 and 1993, even party managers were unsure *who* in fact they were getting. Even by the Spring of 1995, the impact that the new intake had had on the class composition of the party was not yet that clear. Only recently has the party begun to test out the make-up of the new members. The SWP is especially keen to test out its 'new strength' in the arena that really matters to it: in the ranks of the official trade union movement.

## *The new industrial 'strategy'*

**T**he SWP's Trade Union Conference, held in Manchester Free Trade Hall in March, represents the first major pro-active party initiative since the 'upturn'. It is not yet clear quite what the party is up to: the SWP is - understandably - evasive about its plans. The obvious question is whether, after a 12 year break, the party intends to relaunch its 'rank and file' trade union front organisation. The party leadership may not yet have decided. What may be making them hesitate is the memory of the party's two previous bids: both marked failures, both subsequently regretted. With the party's press choosing not to mention them, a majority of party members may not even know it's been tried twice before.

Before it became a party in 1977, the SWP was known as the International Socialist group: the IS. It was shortly after the IS's self-styled 'turn to the class' in the early 1970s - an attempt to transform the IS "from being a predominantly student to a predominantly working class organisation" [Callinicos, *International Socialism: IS 17*, Autumn 82, p21] - that the IS first took steps to set up its own union front. The launch conference for the National Rank and File Movement (NFRM) was held 21 years ago, in March 1974, in striking different political circumstances.

That year, Ted Heath's Conservative government fell victim to the second national miners' strike in two years. The Industrial Relations Act - an attempt to stamp out workplace unrest through a stringent set of legal restrictions - was defied, broken, and subsequently repealed. Union density (the percentage of workers belonging to recognised unions) was markedly higher than

exists now. The number of strikes and stoppages - official, semi-official and unofficial - was of a different order. A powerful network of shop stewards existed able to exert considerable plant-level and shop-floor influence, and lead the 'do-it-yourself-reformism' that Cliff identified at the time.

Then IS's hope was that against a background of rising industrial militancy, it could begin to challenge the dominance of the Communist Party (CP) in the left of the union movement. The National Rank and File movement aimed to displace the CP-led Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU). The IS aimed to set up factory cells, and party fractions in the unions of various industries, held together by a network of IS-run agitational papers for each. A broad design was clear: "The rank and file strategy was intended... as a way of achieving unity in action with militants who were not prepared to accept IS's revolutionary programme, but who would fight around specific trade union questions [*ibid*, p23]. The NFRM was intended both to act as a conveyor belt to pull sympathetic union activists closer to the 'party' Cliff was now planning, and as a means to extend the IS's industrial clout.

The problem for Cliff was that the IS's NFRM was little more than a work of fiction. It had no profile and next to no influence: more importantly it had negligible membership.

Within a year, at the leadership instruction, the NFRM was submerged into another IS front organisation: the 'Right to Work Campaign'. In 1977, the IS/SWP attempted to relaunch the NFRM around support for a national firefighters' strike, but this second attempt was equally unsuccessful. A last-ditch bid by the NFRM to rouse its - non-existent - forces in a 'day of action' came to nothing, and sealed the NFRM's fate. In 1982, Callinicos argued that the relaunch bid: "took the SWP dangerously close to ultra-leftism and substitutionism" [*ibid*, p28]. This was no act of heresy, but the party's funeral oration for the NFRM. That year the moribund organisation was officially buried.

The problem - as the party saw it - was the election of the Labour government that the IS/SWP had argued was so important. A 1982 SWP *internal bulletin* statement suggested: "...as soon as the National Rank and File Movement was launched... the conditions which would have permitted it to flourish ceased to exist. The election of a Labour

government took the political edge off wage-militancy, which in any case collapsed due to the Social Contract... . However, when there was a revival of Rank-and-File militancy in 1977, we tried to relaunch the NFRM refusing to recognise the changes in the objective situation." [quoted, Callaghan, J, *The Far Left in British Politics*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1987, p111].

Compared to conditions on the industrial front today, the period 1977-1979 was a period of great volatility and immediate potential. If it is attempting to relaunch a party NFRM, the SWP's argument must be that these worse conditions are somehow more promising for the project. It's hard to see how a 'period of transition' can support a strategy that a period of industrial unrest could not. It's impossible to compare its plans because the party refuses to mention its previous NFRM adventures. It's interesting to remember that the strategy at the height of the 'upturn' was the 'TUC-loyal' one ['the bureaucrats must lead us into battle'] rather than the 'reluctant-independent' one ['we must fight even if the bureaucrats abandon us']. The tensions of the SWP's self-promotion strategy then pitted populism against 'militancy' [see *CoR*, p9]. The tension now is more between credibility and over-reach. The party must demonstrate its 'significance' and test out its real industrial worth, without exposing its real weakness.

At different times the stated goal of the new industrial strategy changes: it may be to build party propaganda and recruitment 'cells', or to 'network' SWP militants, or to build 'independent' rank-and-file-groups, or loyal lobby groups to 'press' the official structures 'for action'. The strategy can of course fluctuate between all of these, depending on what the party thinks the punters want at any particular moment. The general leadership line is that the party is preparing itself now in the lull before the storm. "Above all we have to create a network of rank and file socialists in the workplace. Any individual who plays a small role now will play a massive role when the struggle picks up." [*SR*, Feb 95, p19]. Because of "much higher level of potential" than then, it is crucial that building and preparatory work done now. The effective demise of the CP which organised the rank and file in 1970s, means SWP "will be in a much better position when the upturn comes". Yet the CP enjoyed some real industrial influence, both at the national level among union top brass, and at

the regional and plant level among shop stewards and lay union officials, whereas the SWP enjoys next to none.

The 'best' the SWP can probably hope for [and thus the worst we're liable to have to contend with] is to establish a small number of weak front organisations and party fractions - most obviously among white collar public sector workers, such as UNISON and the NUT. It's hard to see how any such organisation could distinguish itself from the existing 'broad left' (BL) fractions in the unions: which tend anyway to be propaganda organisations of the fractious left, not organisations of workers, and which are generally in a weak state at present. Broad Lefts provide 'caucuses' for left-militants, fight bitterly over slates of candidates for union elections, and pass resolutions. The fortunes of these groups too has slid with the rise of new realism. In the past, BLs have often themselves fragmented depending on the balance of forces within them. Labour leftists, CPers, Militants, SWPers, small time Trots and independent left militants have struggled to sustain effective coalitions, or split. Even given its new size, the SWP is not yet big enough to supplant them all.

## *The union 'scare stories'*

**T**he industrial influence of the SWP is currently being 'talked up' by the party and by the mainstream press. Attention has recently focused on 'extremist left-wing influence' in the three main teaching unions, and in particular the 'power' enjoyed by the SWP within the National Union of Teachers [the NUT]. Press attention began when Labour Shadow Education Secretary David Blunkett was 'mobbed' by a hostile crowd "led by the SWP" as he arrived to address the NUT conference this April.

The SWP pleaded 'not guilty' to the conspiracy charge. "The media reporting of this incident has been a disgrace. What happened has been blown out of all proportion", protested one SWP NUT delegate to the *Independent* ['Another view', Apr 20]. "[T]he demonstration was no 'rowdier' than the daily shouting and screaming done by Tory and Labour politicians in the House of Commons", explained SW, "...At no point did [the demonstrators]... jostle and threaten

Blunkett personally as the press accused them" [Apr 22, p16]. Yet the Blunkett Incident was just the beginning. Within days the papers had 'uncovered' a vast leftist conspiracy, poised to seize control of the NUT from its 'ordinary, decent' strike-fearing members: "Because the NUT's conference is a policy making body, the party [the SWP] targetted [it]... in an attempt to impose its views on the largest teaching union. There is also evidence that its activists encouraged last year's rail strike" [*Times*, April 20, p17]. "One third of the delegates... consistently voted the SWP line" [*Independent*, Apr 19 95, p11].

The narrow conference vote [91,684 to 82,019] in favour of a one-day strike led NUT leader Doug McAvoy to denounce the crazed fundamentalist zealots who had foisted this on his members. The trotskyist threat would be resisted: "There is no doubt that the Socialist Workers Party want to get their hands on the NUT. I am determined that they won't" [*Times*, Apr 19, p1]. MacAvoy appealed to grass roots 'reason', where teachers "live in the real world, not a fantasy world of unachievable aims, impossible goals, unattainable targets... They are not immersed in the self-indulgent deception of permanent and unending revolution". One report wrongly suggested that the SWP's "Rank and File Mobilisation Committee (RFMC)" [they meant the NTFM] has been "relaunched this year". It added, tellingly, that beyond the NUT, this marxist machine already: "wields power in one or two other unions" [*Independent*, Apr 19 95, p11].

From the April events, two things seem clear. Firstly, it's a testament to how much the political environment has changed that a 'leftists pull the union strings' scare story is run in response to such a minimal challenge. At a time of massive and relentless attacks on education provision and working conditions a trade union conference vote, in favour of a ballot for official action months hence, that will culminate - at most - in a single one-day national stoppage can be sold as evidence of 'extremism on the march'. This is a world away from the era of the 'Cowley moles' and 'Red Robbo'. The real 'scare story' evident at NUT conference had nothing to do with the SWP. It had to do with how pitifully little the mass of teachers seem prepared to do in the face of concerted national government and local council assaults on the social wage of education that just keep coming. It's pretty unlikely that the 'Mcavoy versus the SWP' spat was significant in delivering up the sizeable

rejection of one-day strike action in the subsequent ballot. The NUT machine went into overdrive to destroy any prospect of a 'yes' vote: and was then able to 'prove' how 'unrepresentative' and 'out of step' the Conference action call had been. A *pro*-strike, *anti*-trot, *anti*-union position was nowhere in evidence...

Secondly, it's also clear that the SWP will do nothing to downplay press speculation about the extent of its influence and breadth of its organisation, even if it doesn't yet know where its new industrialism is going. Currently, that strategy remains little more than a stunt: a means to test out its new claims of significance. If action erupts again the SWP will doubtless send in the NFRM salesmen.

Within weeks of the launch of the new initiative, the SWP was once again obsessing over leadership elections in union officialdom. The party came out in full support for Bill Morris – standing for re-election as General Secretary for the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU): "the election presents a clear choice – between an independent union promising to campaign for better conditions under Morris or a powerless accessory of the Labour Party under [the main challenger] Dromey". Under the new 'independent' industrialism, it remained: "vital that Bill Morris wins" [*SW*, June 3 95, p5]: confirmation of how little has really changed.

The theory of the 'transition period' can by definition only be transitional. The prospects of an incoming Blair Labour administration will provide the SWP with whatever industrial alibi they decide they need to account for its passing.

## *The problem of 'the party'*

**T**he party's recent reticence in declaring its numerical strength – in contrast to its public monthly reports of two years ago – is perhaps understandable. Yet even given the inevitable losses of the post-miners' lull, the SWP certainly commands several thousand more members than it did before the great push forward.

In times when large scale recruitment seems possible, the requirement is ease-of-access: allowing the party to soak up as much of the recruitment pool it can, as fast as possible. As all barriers to membership are removed, the party's message must become

both optimistic and – in the minds of the intended audience – uncontroversial. Middle ranking party cadre need to be unsettled and overworked, to disorient potential opposition, and prevent 'excess' debate, that might hold back advance. Crucially, the party needs to promise that it can deliver: that rookies have signed up to a party whose time has come.

However, as the 'dash for growth' has slowed to a jog, the needs of the party have changed. Now the priority is to consolidate and stabilise the vastly increased membership base: to prevent it flowing back out again as the political tide ebbs, or fracturing into factions, or becoming too ill-disciplined to be effectively directed from the centre.

Attempts to stabilise the party have led to a few minor problems for its managers. The 'new authoritarianism' evident in the party's power structures, has provided an easy target for hostile forces on the left, and encouraged the first post-upturn breakaway from the party's ranks. Yet SWP apparachiks have not yet encountered serious opposition to their plans.

Two developments are worth comment: first, the continued use of explosions of party rebels; and second, the newly imposed structures that makes flexible, central management of the membership easier.

Before commenting on these changes, one fundamental point about the 'organisation of the party' needs to be emphasised.

In the final section of *CoR*, it's argued that the 'inconsistent' politics of the SWP is not "the real problem". The crucial issues, it says, are: "the *motivation* behind the complete political flexibility that the SWP have chosen to adopt; the *processes* by which party policy is revised and presented; and the *implications* that that has for the Bolshevik analysis of the relationship between party and class that the SWP claims to defend" [p38]. Yet the political cynicism of the SWP – like its elitist structures and its "party-first-and-last mentality" – are only expressions of a deeper 'problem', which the end section of *CoR* only hints at. It's not only a disagreement about with the Trots about means, *but about ends*. It's not that the SWP's leadership 'can't see' the 'conflict' between their revolutionary rhetoric and their capitalist practice, it's that a conflict doesn't exist. The critique in the final section of *CoR* should have extended beyond the specific *processes* of the party to explicitly identify its purpose *as the 'real' problem*. The SWP's goal

is *not* the creation of stateless communism: the point should *not* be to criticise it for acting 'like' a left-wing capitalist force, but to recognise it as *being* one. It is not the *functioning* of the SWP that is the real problem, but its *function*. This must inform the whole critique. The *way* a 'party' chooses to organise is not ultimately what's important. A more 'democratic' or less elitist SWP would remain an anti-proletarian force. The antics of the party are not *in conflict* with its stated aims, but a consistent [if not the only possible] expression of them.

So why bother then to follow the twists and turns of British bolshevism? In the view of *TW*, for three main reasons.

Understanding how leftist rackets operate may help us to assess the kinds of risks they pose in different class battles. Knowing what's at the top of their agendas at any given time can be useful counter-intelligence in the class war. It may help us anticipate how they will seek to cop-opt and derail struggles in the present and future.

Spreading such information helps sound alarm bells, and may encourage good independent militants to steer clear of the Trotskyist trap.

It may also find an echo amongst the many good class militants who languish *within* the citadels of trotskyism. Many militants' 'doubts' often find initial expression in 'organisational' issues, when questions about the elitist relationships of partyism are first raised. Evidence of 'hypocritical' or 'duplicitous' party politics may help reinforce similar doubts, and encourage dissenters to push their critique. Detailing the reality of party organisation and practice may help sow dissension in the ranks, and encourage good militants to get out. Equally, of course, it may have no impact at all...

## *The need to control*

In *CoR* it was argued that the 'open door' recruitment policy, which took no interest in the politics of those it was signing up, increased: "the need for the party's leaders to tighten and centralise political control, the better to 'defend' the party's 'revolutionary' ideas" [p39]. This is exactly what has happened. It is a sign of the confidence of the SWP's bureaucracy, however, that the party has not even bothered to construct a new machinery of

pretence to given the rank and file grunts the illusion that they matter.

The new structure imposed on the party achieves three related ends. It extends centralised control; it divides party branches into more 'manageable' units; and - in between the top and the bottom - it installs all-powerful District Organisers, who are appointed centrally. The handful of expulsions of middle ranking party activists that have taken place since October 1993 does not represent a "purge", but rather the setting of an example. It's intended to send the signal that dissenters will be taken out, rather than ignored. It's proved particularly important to the party to stamp out anything that smacks of an 'independent initiative', outside of centralised control.

The SWP currently operates without a 'democratic facade'. The party could have opted to set up powerless local party councils, and provide slates of docile placemen and women for the membership to unanimously elect to irrelevant commissions. It simply hasn't bothered. It has just imposed a new order that further excludes those at the bottom. For what it's worth, the SWP is currently being run on the same kind of authoritarian lines developed by the British Communist Party once it had become fully Stalinised under Comintern direction.

Party branches have been broken up and sub-divided into smaller units. A comparison between the situation in June 1991 and that in June 1995 illustrates the scale of the break-up. In June 1991, in Nottingham, there were two SWP party branches, in June 1995, there a total of eight. There are currently 36 party branch meetings in London alone. In Sheffield - a key party stronghold - there are now eight branches where there was previously four. In and around Manchester there were up to seven branches, now there are as many as 14. In Edinburgh, two has become six, a situation repeated in Glasgow, and so it goes on. A couple of words of caution: the SWP has not engineered this change everywhere, and many of the new branches may exist as largely 'paper' organisations. That said, a new tactic is apparent.

The growth of the SWP provides a good excuse for the rationalisation of party structure: smaller groups could be more accessible, maximizing member input and local responsiveness. Yet the move has nothing to do with decentralisation, but rather its

opposite: rank-and-file members of the SWP have been pushed further and further away from the locus of power in the organisation. Splitting down groups into smaller and smaller branch-cells, facilitates better political control from the centre, through the agency of appointed local officials. It means that outside of party rallies and engineered public meetings and demonstrations, large numbers of party members never gather together. Separating the membership out in this way increases the importance of vertical lines of communication and control within the party. At the same time it makes horizontal contact and organisation more difficult, and defiance of the centre more visible. Any breaches of party discipline will now tend to be isolated, and more easily easily contained.

## Dealing with the deviants

Since the expulsions detailed in *CoR* [p2], the party's Control Commission [in effect the SWP's internal affairs counter-subversion committee] has dealt with a steady flow of disciplinary cases; *TW* knows the details of two cases only.

In February 1994, the Commission upheld the Central Committee's decision to expel party member Andy Wilson, accused of plotting to launch a "non-party cultural journal" [*Workers Republic*, March 1994, p3]. In July 1994, Chris Jones was expelled by the Commission after being found guilty of a number of charges, centering on his contacts with the Revolutionary Democratic Group, and support for key planks of their SWP reform programme [see *Workers Republic*, October 1994, p2]. The SWP Control Commission is predictably Kafkaesque. Jones remains incensed by the whole process: "The Central Committee rep[resentative] makes accusations in private. To this day I do not know what he said. The CC [Control Commission] witness from the District... gave evidence in secret. I have never been given the charges against me in writing. This has allowed my accusers to vary the charges according to circumstances. ... The procedure would be unacceptable in a bourgeois court or a trade union. In a revolutionary party it is a disgrace." [in *Workers' Liberty* (journal of Socialist Organiser) May 95, pp26-7].

In the days of the upturn, dissenters could be bashed by the bureaucrats for slowness in recognising the 'new

opportunities', and for allowing the 'Tories to get off the hook' [*CoR*, p3]. Now dissidents can be denounced for trying to squander the 'gains' the party has secured, and for action that threatens to push the party back into the wilderness. The SWP is now unrelenting in the pursuit of the enemy within.

The new heavy handedness has proved too much for some. In the early Autumn of 1994, a small splinter group broke off from the SWP, to found the International Socialist Group (ISG). Linked to a similar breakaway group from the SWP's, far smaller, German counterpart, the GIS, the ISG seeks to defend the 'gains' of the IS tradition from the abuses of the current leadership. The ISG's critique of the SWP is simply organisational.

In their founding pamphlet, *Democracy and the SWP*, they explain that the current party regime is in conflict with the commitment to working class self-organisation that the IS tradition 'genuinely' represents. The organisational reform programme advocated by them seeks to overhaul the party structure to bring it back in line with its 'correct' politics. Cliff's political abuses are, say the ISG, the product of bad party organisation. The ISG's preference for *Luxemburgist* Leninism harks back to the pre-1968 era of IS, before Cliff's Bolshevisation drive, pushed the IS into declaring itself The Party in 1977.

The ISG seek to defend "the theories of state capitalism, deflected permanent revolution and permanent arms economy"; which have "helped the SWP to build the largest and most effective revolutionary organisation seen in Britain since the Communist Party of the 20's and 30's" [*Democracy and the SWP*, p3]. The ISG pamphlet does help confirm the miserable state of inner-party life in the current SWP. It suggests that the 'downturn' was dumped in a 'dash for growth' [p17]; though its analysis of the party's 'opportunism' is often inaccurate. The ISG is, naturally enough, opposed to "anarchism" as well as "reformism... Stalinism, and orthodox Trotskyism" [p3], and seeks essentially to save the SWP from itself. The ISG has joined other groups in the small-but-loyal external IS-opposition.

In September 1994, both of the expellees mentioned above spoke at a "Campaign for a Democratic SWP" public meeting at Conway Hall in London. The meeting became the catalyst for a reorganisation of 'forces': which drew the two



external SWP factions [the RDG and the ISG], and some ex-SWP fellow travellers have drawn together in an organised oppositional alliance. A steering committee was set up to press the case "For elected District Committees" in the party. This must, of course, be understood as an intra-Trotskyist transitional demand: the placing of unrealisable reformist demands that expose the bankruptcy of the bureaucrats being lobbied. There are party precedents for this attempt to force *glasnost* upon the SWP machine. In the early 1970s an inner-party faction named FRED (the Faction for Revolutionary Democracy) fought in vain for its reform package, before being liquidated. In May 1995, a second meeting on 'Democratic Centralism, the SWP and the tasks of revolutionaries' brought together members of Open Polemic, the RDG the ISG and the CPGB, to critique the SWP and each other [see *Weekly Worker*, May 11 95, p4]

There is nothing here that need concern current SWP managers. In pointing out the risks in the upturn strategy *CoR* notes that: "Dissent, frustration and power struggles within the apparatus are pushed beneath the surface, only to explode all the more violently later, normally after that new momentum has peaked" [p40]. In the 1970s, the drive towards the declaration of 'the party' led to years of splits and faction fights within the IS. 'The Right Opposition', 'the IS Opposition' and other groups broke away to produce many new left organisations that persist today: including Workers Power, Socialist Organiser, the RCP and the RCG. *As yet* there is little sign of any current threat from major internal ructions. Compared to the state of other left forces, the SWP appears pretty robust.

## *The state of the competition*

**M**ilitant Labour will face a major policy crisis at the next election approaches, as their 'independence' from Labour faces its first substantial test. Down among the small-timers things are little better.

The perilous state of Socialist Outlook is typical of the depression gripping the orthodox Labour left. Outlook is racked by faction fighting [see *Socialist Organiser*, Mar 23 95, for a number of leaked internal documents and faction papers]. Outlook recently lost two top level cadre in defections to Militant Labour [see *Outlook*, Nov 19 94,

p14]. Outlook are a group whose marginal status has only been emphasised by its inability to respond to the threat of the SWP's 'dash for growth'. Outlook's status - as the British affiliate to the largest [and most faction ridden] of the orthodox Fourth Internationals, the USFI [see *Workers News*, supplement, Feb 1995, for a recent - if partisan - study of its slide] - delivers no tangible advantage on the door step or at the branch meeting.

Ten years on from the implosion of Gerry Healy's WRP, the most prominent faction to emerge from the wreckage - the Workers Press group under Cliff Slaughter - has recognised the meagre prospects for orthodox trotskyist partyism in the present, and is looking at ways to widen its appeal: "I think that if we drop the name WRP and adopt a different name, not with 'party' in it, then those who object that that would be a retreat are living in a fantasy world" [Slaughter, General Secretary, WRP, *Workers Press*, Feb 25 95, p7]. Merger talks with the Workers International League (LIT-CI) appeared to have stalled at the last minute, when the "21 point Declaration" with which the 'Liaison Committee' was to be launched could not be published as advertised "due to reasons beyond our control" [*Workers Press*, Mar 11 95].

Even further down the party league table the minute forces of 'midget marxism' march on. The mad-cap Posadist *Red Flag* journal has reappeared; the CPB(M-L) has rediscovered 'national Bolshevism'. Dozens of similar left fractions continue a life without influence or purpose.

Beyond the existing party frameworks, a number of 'regroupment' initiatives are underway: hoping to gel various disparate coalitions of the old and newer lefts. The *Open Polemic* project struggles to draw together the few remaining remnants of British Stalinism into an alliance with a handful of the smaller hard leninist outfits, that can together rediscover the essentials of 'communist orthodoxy'. It has proved a gruelling task, hampered by the existence of a parallel unity project involving many of the old CP fragments, that have no time for 'sects and trots'. Gearing up for local electoral work, Red Action are hoping to bind together an anti-Labour 'left front' that can put the squeeze on Militant Labour. The *Red Pepper* journal and the Socialist Movement provide another axis for the softer non-party left and what remains of the old Benn constituency.

But none of these efforts yet amount to much: further evidence of one fact. Nowhere on the orthodox left is there apparent a significant threat to the SWP's 'hegemonic' project [see *CoR*, pp4-6].

## *Keeping up the Labour vote*

The SWP's recent electoral line has expressed both the party's new-found organisational confidence and the political moderation that is currently bound up with it.

The result has been an unswerving loyalty to Labour, dressed up in a number of guises: as the need to 'get the Tories out'; to keep the Nazis out; and as a means with which to ignore left rivals Militant Labour.

Despite the best of efforts of the Revolutionary Democratic Group (RDG) to 'force' the SWP to stand its own candidates in local elections, so the RDG could campaign for them, the SWP declined to do so. Criticising the "syndicalist tactics" of the SWP, the RDG appealed to them to fill the left electoral vacuum: "The SWP should take the lead in standing candidates. When not standing they should support left-wing Labour and ML [Militant Labour] candidates, who agree to stand on a democratic platform against the corrupt Tory-Labour political system... Relying on Labour will not stop the fascists." [*Workers Republic*, March 94, p1].

The 1993 SWP conference motion committing the party *not* to standing candidates - in yet another series of switches from its contradictory General Election positions in 1992 [see *TW* 1] - is telling. It argued that independent candidacies "would act as a diversion" from real political work and that "[e]lection results would not reflect the real relative strength or influence of our organisation". The final section of the motion, point 6, explains perhaps the more pressing fear for the fiercely independent revolutionaries of the SWP: putting up their candidates "would have made us look like splitters of the Labour vote" (quoted *Workers Republic* March 1994, p2).

In the recent past, the SWP's fear of being 'out-lefted' by rivals meant it always responded to, and usually endorsed, any electoral challenge to Labour that had a profile. Now that the struggle for dominance over the orthodox British left has more and more become a battle between the SWP and

Militant Labour (ML), the SWP has chosen to watch the Grant-led challenge, and wait.

It is counting that Militant's electoral *failures* will lead to burn out (when the SWP can launch raiding parties on its divided ranks), or Militant electoral *successes* will demonstrate the extent of ML's support (and enable the SWP to tune its battle for market share accordingly). The weakness of the SWP in Scotland means it is effectively in no position to challenge SML at present even if it wanted to. Scottish Militant Labour's most recent losses in the April 95 elections to the new unitary Scottish local authorities show that SML are stuck in the electoral doldrums. In 1994, the party ran a *national* 'don't vote for a Nazi' campaign - partly under its own banner and partly through the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) - and steered a straight 'Tories Out' and 'Labour In' line. This was repeated for the local elections in the Spring of 1995.

## *The recruitment double-act*

Two words have guided the SWP's recruitment strategy since the 'dash for growth' pulled up: populism and caution. Yet the SWP has also worked overtime to sustain a 'soft Trot, Hard Trot' double act that enables it to simultaneously recruit the meek and the militant.

The party has gone for 'the popular', and avoided 'the difficult' like the plague. "The SWP has become a sort of omnipresent force: on every demonstration, on seemingly every television news programme; trespassing at Windsor, campaigning at Brightlingsea. It has never been more visible." [*Independent*, Apr 19 95, p11].

The party has moved to market itself wherever the pickings seemed easy: even if that meant joining in with the popular protests against live animal exports at ferry and air ports, and even if that meant leaving that controversial class politics stuff to one side for a bit. The scenes of an "Essex town in revolt" could "show Major what we could do", and "if a town like Brightlingsea can stand up for its rights so can any community anywhere." [*SW* Jan 28 95, pp1-2]. 'People power' for 'animal rights': a good enough basis on which to build the 'proletarian' party...

By April, the party still convinced there were members to be had, had opted for a Criminal Justice Act (CJA) angle on the protests: which allowed them to agitate among

the punters, without compelling them to picket baby calves. At Brightlingsea on April 18, the day exports from the port began again, the SWP (and the RCP) turned up to stage "a separate protest against the Criminal Justice Act" [*Morning Star*, Apr 19 95, p1]. The SWP has retained much more interest though in mobilising around sheep, than it has over the more 'difficult' issues of the 'peace process' in northern Ireland, developments in the European Union or the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The SWP is not about to put the 'socialist' politics of its much increased membership base to such tests. In the current political climate, numerical growth has been won at the cost of political moderation, a shift that has to be sustained if the SWP wants to keep up its numbers.

At the same time, the 'independent' SWP has been agitated in its defence of Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution. "Every vote for the present Clause Four will be a block to Labour's gallop rightwards" [*SW*, Apr 15 95, 4]. The stakes here were seemingly high: "The modernisers are...people who want to break all links with Labour's past as a working class party, to create a party which can manage the market system, only with more humanity and social conscience than the Tories" [*SR*, Feb 95, p9]. With the Clause 4 debate lost, the SWP trod carefully: opting to emphasise the *strength* of the left within the party, the scale on inner party opposition to Blair's plans, and the fact that after the vote: "there are many in the party who still want to see Labour stand out for a different kind of society" [*SW*, Apr 28 95, p16]. As ever, the SWP seeks to declare independence from Labour's leftwing whilst retaining fierce interest in its health. In the Labour leadership election that followed the death of John Smith, the SWP 'vacillated' as ever, before urging its supporters: "to argue without enthusiasm for Beckett, as the candidate most identified with the left" [*SR*, July 1994, p4].

## Party, class and the CJA

**W**ith the poll tax campaign, the SWP switched its analysis to legitimise the recruits it was winning from it. With the campaign against the Criminal Justice Act (the CJA), the SWP has more persistently argued that the groups it is attempting to recruit from are entirely powerless to prevent the provisions of the Act, or of

practically anything else - because, after all, they are not trade unionists.

The party argued that unpopular 'marginal' groups had been targetted as a *cover* to disguise the *real* targets of the attack: trade unions. "At its heart the CJB is a massive attack on organised workers. That is why trade unions are central to the fight against it." [*SW* Oct 15 94, p5]. That this wasn't the particular intention of the ruling class in this case is clear: the vast battery of 'anti-union' legislation put on the statute books since 1979 is not being seriously challenged by workers, and there is no pressing need for the boss class to add to it.

Yet, the SWP have continued to stress the dangers that the Act poses for the trade union movement (to it synonymous with 'the workers'). But, the problem is not, as some critics have it, that the SWP has attempted to 'polarise' the politics of broad campaign, or that it is a distinct organisation with an agenda wider than the repeal of the CJA. The problem is that, in the official campaign element of CJA opposition, the SWP has often been able to effectively pose itself as 'the class alternative' to the politics of lifestylism and fluff.

The single either-or alternative the SWP hopes young CJB militants are confronted with is, on the one hand, a reformist spontaneism that rejects class in the guise of 'libertarianism', and, on the other, a 'revolutionary' opposition that defends 'class politics' in the guise of 'the party'. Because the SWP has been so keen to be identified as the agents of 'class politics' in the official campaign, their antics have at times helped to strengthen the stranglehold of 'fluffiness' over much of the mainstream campaign. Like peaceniks of old, class militants in the CJA field risk being told to "get back [to the SWP] where you belong!".

The Freedom Network's (FN) criticisms of the SWP inevitably endorse the party's 'class credentials'. The nature of those criticisms confirms two things. That reformists can isolate the authoritarian methods of left parties to dismiss all class politics; and, that those same critics can co-opt the methods of libertarianism to give a radical veneer to their 'post-Left' reformism.

A debate between the SWP's Paul Foot and Camilla Berens of the Freedom Network in the journal *Red Pepper* shows how this process works. Berens attacks the SWP in the name of 'autonomy': "It's hard to dance with

the Socialist Workers Party. We welcome their initiative in trying to alert the unions to the dangers of the Criminal Justice Bill, but their insistently narrow view of class, as if everyone who was not organised through the workplace did not matter, has made it difficult to join their coalition. Networkers believe that real change comes when communities of all ages and economic circumstances put their differences aside and act collectively. This is a time for deeds not dogma...

Our society is full of lumbering, outdated systems. The SWP's approach of confining decision-making to a small core group is regressive." [*Red Pepper*, Nov 1994, p35-6]

The cynicism of Paul Foot's defence of the SWP is matched only by its ineptness: "If... a party is controlled by one person, or a small group of people which orders the 10,000 to get on with it, the party would be no better than the oligarchies it opposes. But no socialist party, indeed no party which relies on rank and file resistance, could survive such autocracy for a second. People join the SWP because they want to change the world by acting together. They elect leaders whom they trust. The strength of the party is the conviction of its members. If the leaders lay down ideas and activities which the members find distasteful, the whole process disintegrates." [Paul Foot, *Red Pepper*, Nov 94, p35]. In this miserable leftist debate each side serves the interests of the other: 'libertarianism' is used as a means to reject class politics; partyism is promoted as the emodiment of it.

## Another 'riot act' re-write

In 1990-91 the SWP made much political capital of the Trafalgar Square poll tax riot, as it 'steered left' and pushed a militant profile [see *CoR*, pp33-37]. The Hyde Park CJB riot on October 9 1994 proved more difficult for the SWP to deal with. The problem for the party with the poll tax riot was that it was initially too timid in response to it. The danger with the CJB riot was that the party might alienate its new supporters by not being timid enough.

The SWP's 'solution' was to uncover a police conspiracy to attack a peaceful demonstration that was trying to disperse: "...on the eve of the Tory Party conference, someone in the police decided to stage a riot as

people tried to leave at the end of the demonstration."

The Met had become incensed by an excess of 'fun': "There would have been no trouble at all if the police had let protestors leave at the end of the march. But the police simply could not stand by and see people enjoying themselves."

The lurid coverage emphasised police brutality: "...police batoned protestors to the ground, including journalists"; "thousands of demonstrators trapped in the park were repeatedly charged by the police on horses and riot police"; "[p]olice seemed determined to continue to attack as many protestors as they could late into the evening". Absent from the reports was any mention at all of violence - whether defensive or offensive - on the part of the demonstrators.

To judge from the reports in *SW* the day had been horrific, a disaster: a large crowd of peaceable trade unionists had been set upon by a rampaging police mob as they tried to disperse, and had been bludgeoned into the ground without resistance. The only respite the fighting-socialist-alternative could see, came when: "Police were forced out of the park by the sheer number of demonstrators telling [*sic*] the police to leave them alone, to go home". [all quotes, *SW* Oct 15 94]

In the SWP version of the riot there simply was *no violence* offered by the demonstrators, which relieved the party of the need to have a position on it. This left the SWP on an equal footing with Militant Labour: a seemingly blind 'eyewitness' told *Militant*: "If there was violence from the crowd, I never saw any it. The vast majority of demonstrators were more interested in raving than rioting. A lot of them were young, on the first demo they'd ever attended. They certainly weren't intending to get in any trouble with the police" [Oct 15 94, p2]. Militant agreed with the SWP on how big a battering we took: "[after 5.30pm] The mounted police then grouped in the park and surveyed the thousands of scared and stranded protestors who were trying to get out... Police randomly picked off pre-dominantly non-violent protestors..."

Because the SWP denied any aggressive action on the part of the demonstrators had taken place, the party could not engage with the arguments about the riot taking place *within* the officialdom of the CJB campaign. That became a debate about who was *to blame* for demonstrator violence. The 'libertarian'

Camilla Berens of the Freedom Network blamed poor policing on the day: "By stopping the sound systems, they set up a confrontational situation, which provided an ideal scenario for people to get angry in. Then the police over-reacted and poured in" [*New Stateman and Society (NSS)*, Oct 14 94, p14]. Left Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn demanded a full independent inquiry into the police handling of the march, and 'the disturbances' which he blamed on "police incompetence". "The policing tactics at the end of this demonstration exacerbated the situation, set it all off and from then, it went from bad to worse," [*Morning Star*, Oct 11 94, p1].

Steve Platt, of the CACJB steering committee, thought that: "Certainly there were a few people on the demonstration who were not averse to trouble when it started... But police tactics were almost guaranteed to give that tiny minority their window for violence - and to draw in much larger number of peaceful demonstrators and bystanders who were caught up in the police charges." [*NSS*, Oct 14 94, p14].

The longterm significance of the Hyde Park riot is a matter for debate. Beyond doubt is the fact that the violence in and around the park was overwhelming due to a determination of a large portion of the crowd that conditions were right for an attack on the forces of law and order. If anyone 'started it' on the day, it was our 'mob'.

Clear too was the intention of the police to avoid a major conflict by a gradual stand-down of their forces as tensions mounted. The police faced two problems. First, that their attempts to withdraw only encouraged the crowd's confidence and resolve. Second, that the open terrain of the park made it impossible for the police to win and hold territory. Once charges into the park turned, the crowd retook the ground, and the police were forced to retreat.

Yet, the exemplary events of the Hyde Park CJB Riot cannot disguise the relative weakness of combative class politics in the guerilla war that is now being waged by roads protestors, travellers, squatters and others contesting enforcement of the Act's provision on the ground. Destroying the 'class credentials' of the SWP and their ilk is one of the battles we face.

## *The replacement of Cliff*

**T**he question of who will replace Cliff as leader will become of increasing importance in the next few years. Cliff is now in his seventies, the last remaining power player from his generation of post-War British Trotskyist leaders. Healy is dead and discredited, Grant abandoned and bitter in the wilderness.

Cliff has been the driving intellectual and organisational figure of the Socialist Review-IS tradition since its birth in the 1950s. The 'transitional period' and the tentative new industrialism could prove to be the last great strategies of the Cliff dynasty. The struggle for succession will be a real test of the party's new authoritarianism. Harman, or another of the inner circle, may inherit the throne without difficulty. Alternatively, Cliff's demise could open up hidden fracture lines within the leadership group as 'the great leader's' legacy is assessed. The new structures of the party - with its centrally appointed middle layer cadre, and atomised rank and file - should minimize disruption within the ranks until a new leader 'emerges'. Yet the higher profile of the party, and its own inflated claims of self-importance, increase the pressure to get the handover right, and heighten the risks of getting it wrong.

Currently the SWP is rigidly centrally organised and steering sharply to the populist right. Yet as the party's own history demonstrates, it's just as capable as swinging sharply to the left, when it assesses that this is what sells politically. Faced with an upsurge of class militancy, the SWP is perfectly capable of rediscovering its 'libertarian-luxemburgist' roots. A newly 'federal', 'accountable' SWP could then press workers to 'break from the union bureaucrats', and 'attack Labour'. It's because of this - and its size, flexibility and ability to deploy in force - that it remains important to keep watch on the SWP. ●

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Other useful related material can be found in:

*The Battle for Hyde Park: ruffians, radicals and ravers, 1855-1994*; offers a participant's account of the clashes at the October 9 94 Criminal Justice Bill, and discusses the riot that the SWP denies took place, and other leftists want to apologise for. Importantly, it also uncovers the little known history of class disturbances in the Park from the 1850s to the present day. Available free [though donations are gratefully received] from: Practical History, 121 Railton Road, London SE24 [fax 0171 326 0353]. ●

*Occupational Therapy: the Incomplete Story of the University College Hospital Strikes and Occupations of 1992/3/4*. As part of a detailed account of the recent struggle to prevent ward closures at UCH in London, this pamphlet includes compelling coverage of the repeated efforts of the SWP to destroy effective resistance being organised by hospital workers, and local health service users who occupied threatened wards. It shows how the SWP were complicit in engineering a defeat, they later claimed was a 'victory'. It shows how even in a 'local' struggle involving only 'low level' party officials, the SWP is capable of contributing to defeat. Available for £1 [inc postage] from: News from Everywhere, Box 14, 138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS. ●