

REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

Revolutionary Socialism

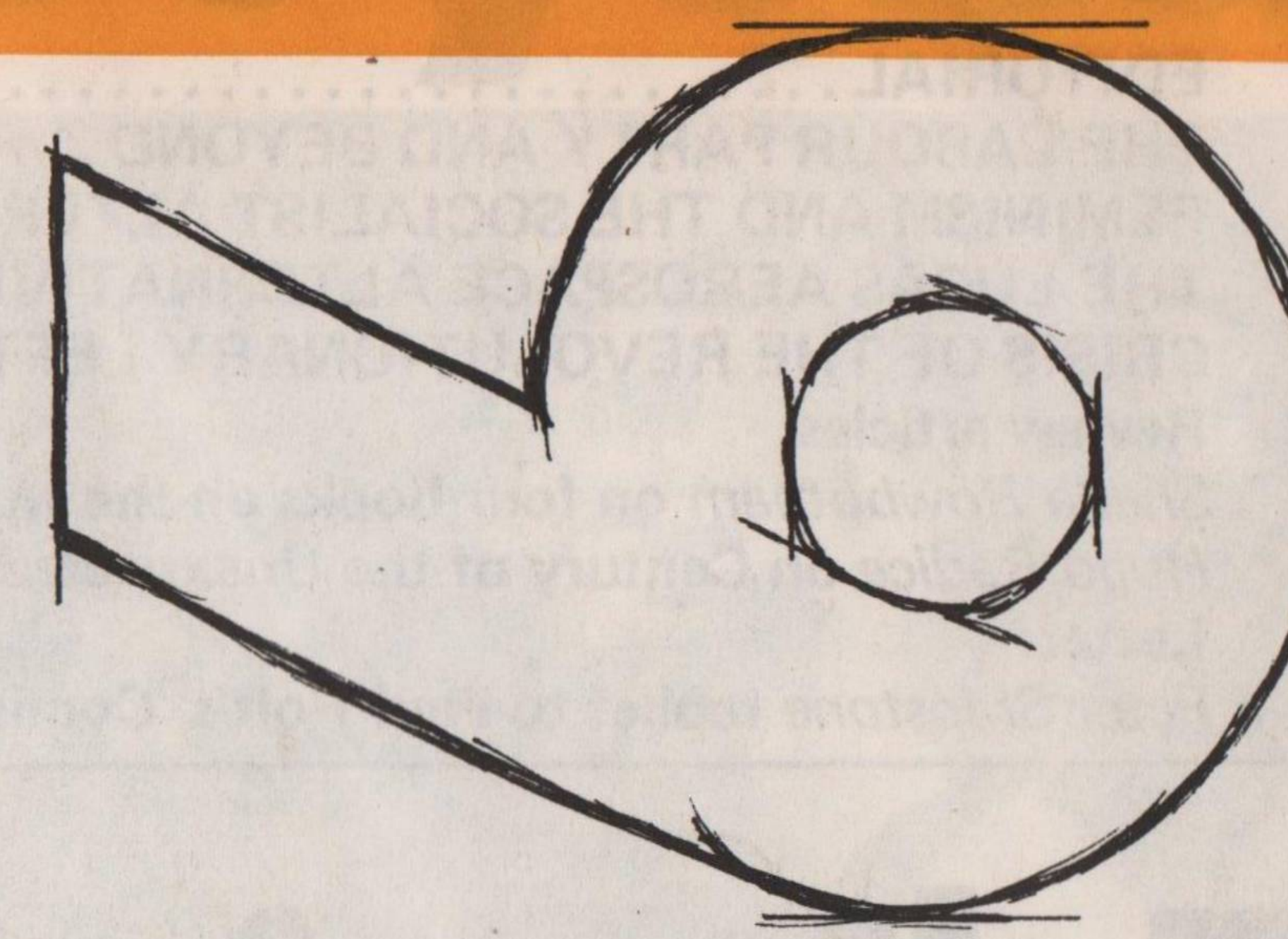
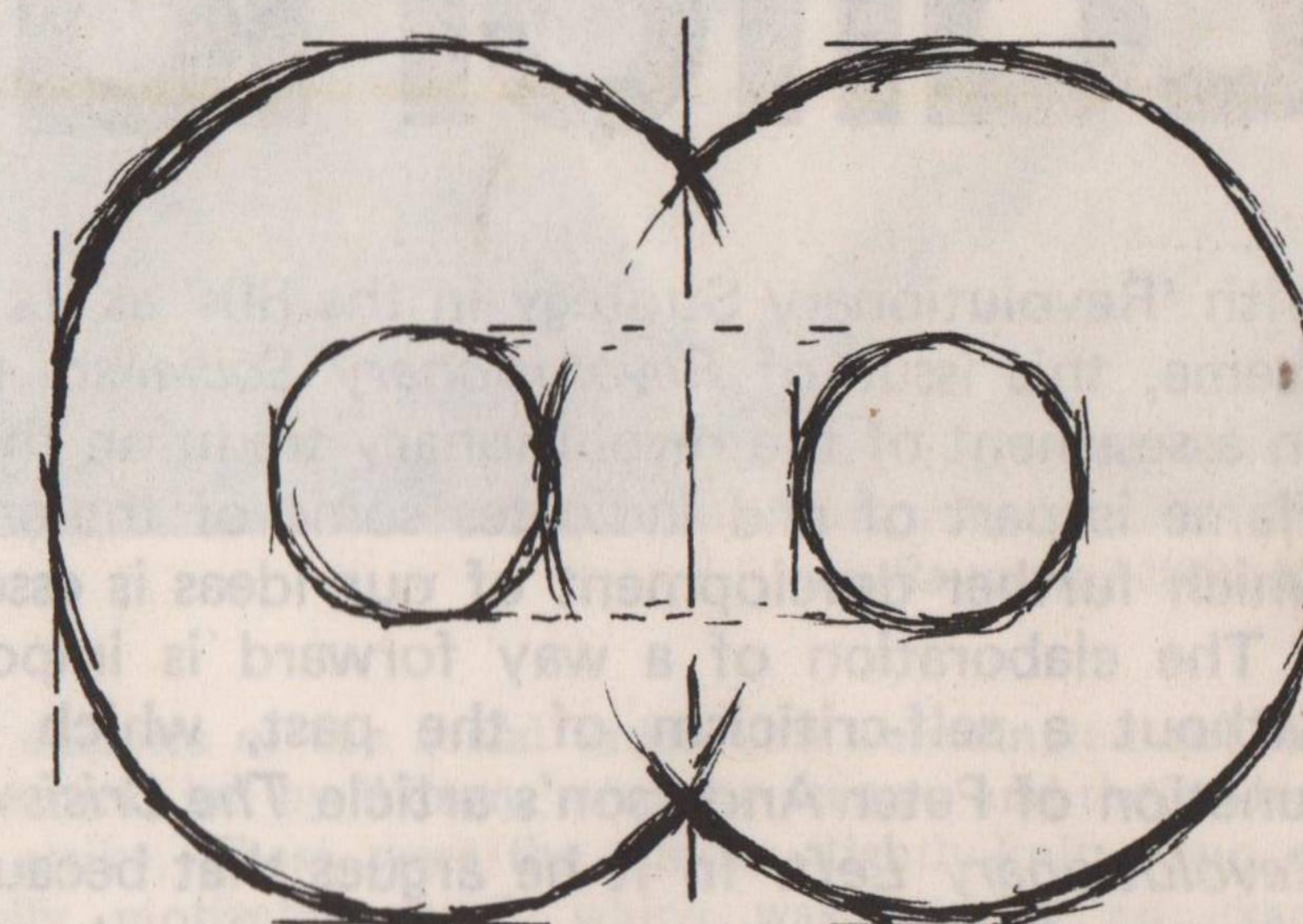
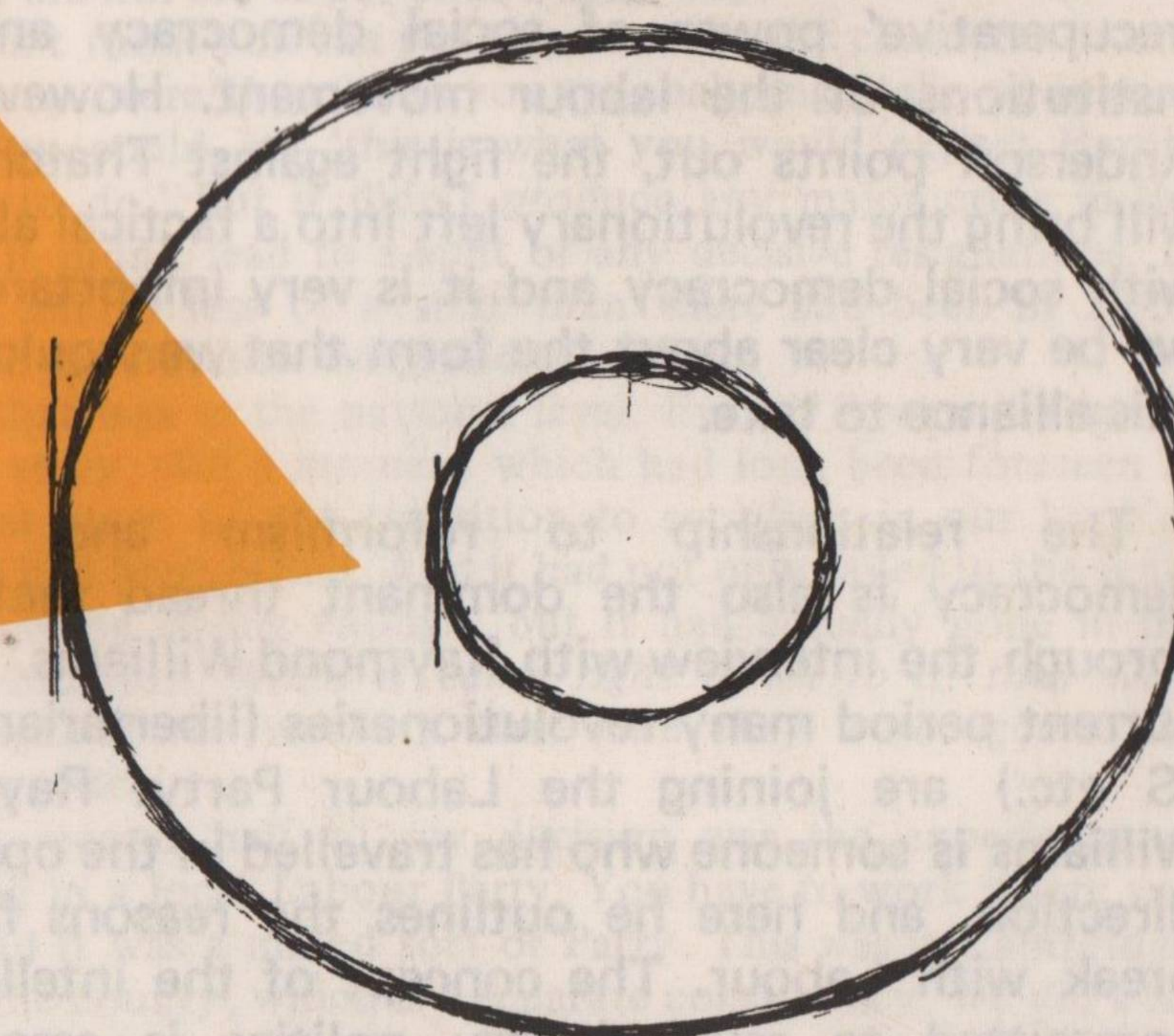
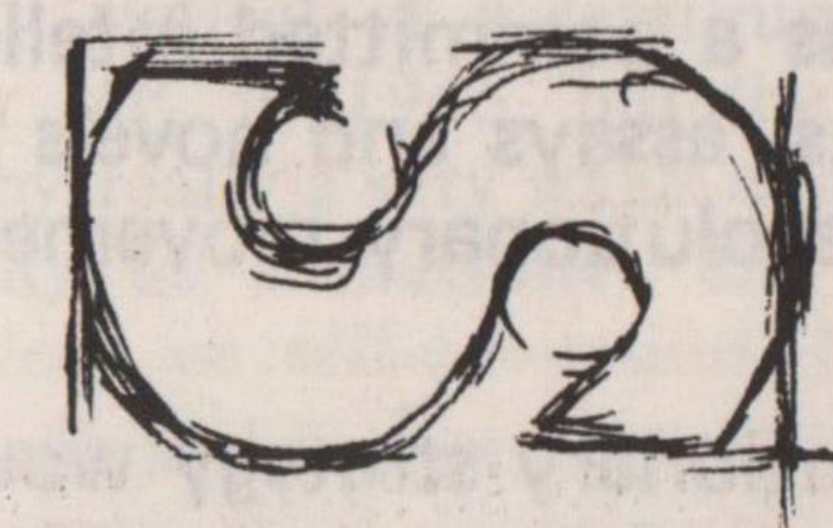
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LABOUR PARTY
WORKERS' PLANS
SOCIALIST FEMINISM
THE LEFT IN EUROPE

INTERVIEWS:

MIKE COOLEY

RAYMOND WILLIAMS



Revolutionary Socialism

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Editorial

With 'Revolutionary Strategy in the 80s' as its major theme, this issue of *Revolutionary Socialism* begins an assessment of the revolutionary tradition that Big Flame is part of and indicates some of the areas in which further development of our ideas is essential.

The elaboration of a way forward is impossible without a self-criticism of the past, which is the function of Peter Anderson's article *The Crisis of the Revolutionary Left*. In it he argues that because we exaggerated how near to revolutionary change we were, we were unable to reckon with the 'recuperative' power of social democracy and the institutions of the labour movement. However, as Anderson points out, the fight against Thatcherism will bring the revolutionary left into a tactical alliance with social democracy and it is very important that we be very clear about the form that we would want this alliance to take.

The relationship to reformism and social democracy is also the dominant thread that runs through the interview with Raymond Williams. In the current period many revolutionaries (libertarians, ex-IS etc.) are joining the Labour Party. Raymond Williams is someone who has travelled in the opposite direction, and here he outlines the reasons for his break with Labour. The concept of the intellectual committed to revolutionary politics is associated largely with Sartre. As this interview reminds us, we have in Raymond Williams a committed intellectual 'of our own' whose books, essays and novels are of great importance to the revolutionary movements of Wales and England.

An assessment of revolutionary strategy would be incomplete without an awareness of the key role played by feminism and the women's movement. As Wendy Clarke makes clear in her article the relation-

ship between the women's movement and the revolutionary left is a stormy one — not helped by the insistence of many socialists that feminism is a force to be subsumed under the wider umbrella of socialism. In rejecting this, Clarke argues for feminism and socialism to be seen as two movements on equal footing with each other. Her article also makes clear the need for a swift response to the anti-women policies of the current Tory government.

A key element of revolutionary strategy is its perspective on workplace organising. The interview with Mike Cooley takes up the issue of alternative plans. In describing the development of the Lucas Aerospace Combine and the alternative plan, he makes clear that the value of alternative plans lies in the contribution they make to shop-floor organisation — a subject covered more fully in our recently published *Organising to Win*. In terms of the subjects of revolutionary strategy, this issue of RS makes no claim to be all inclusive. In particular, it contains nothing on anti-racism and anti-fascism,* on the struggle in Ireland and on an international perspective — we intend to take up these subjects in future issues.

The main theme of the next issue of RS will be socialism and feminism — the last date for articles is August 10th. We welcome contributions on that theme and responses (which can be short) to articles in this issue.

Beginning in the autumn, we are planning to hold a series of discussion meetings in London on articles that appear in *Revolutionary Socialism*. At the first meeting on October 13th, Raymond Williams will be introducing a discussion on the Labour Party. To find out more about these meetings, write to us at Big Flame, 27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1.

Over the next few months we shall also be holding meetings with a view to establishing a wider editorial collective and advisory group. Anyone interested in participating in this is welcome to write to us at the same address.

*See the Big Flame pamphlet *The Past Against Our Future* on this subject.

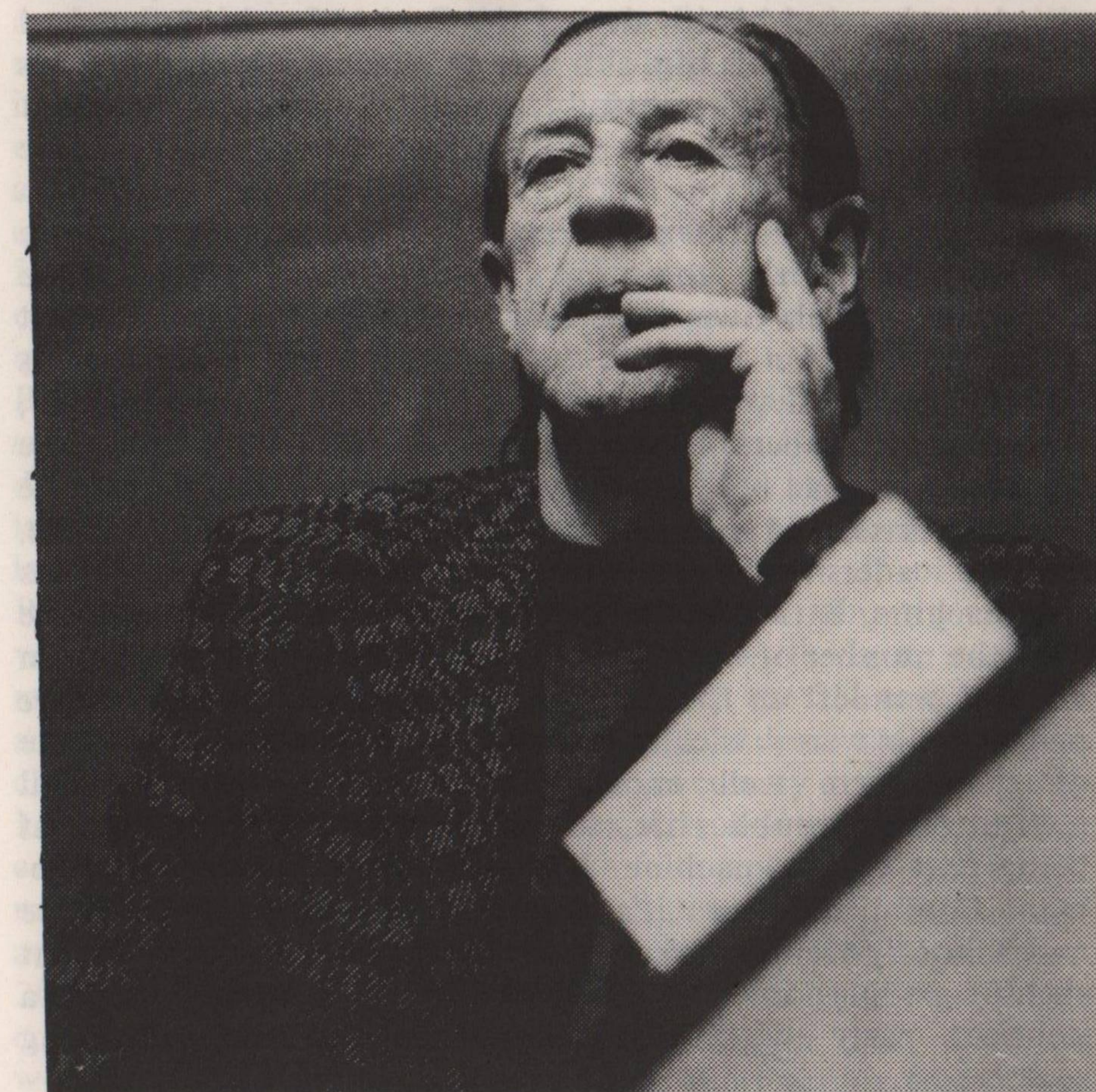
The Labour Party and Beyond

An Interview with Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams has been active in politics since the 1930s. Born and brought up in Wales, he first campaigned for the Labour Party when canvassing for Michael Foot in the 1935 General Election. He has had a long association with the Labour Party, and became an active member in his local constituency when he moved to Cambridge to take up a job at the University in 1961. As he explains below he resigned from the Labour Party in 1966 because 'when it came right down to it, they (the leadership of the Party) were more against the working class than they were against the existing order.'

In 1967/8, he then contributed to, and edited with E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall, the *May Day Manifesto*, described in his own words as 'an attempt to bring together existing socialist positions and analyses as a counter-statement to the Labour government's policies and explanations.' Together with an overall assessment of the Labour Party, the political opportunities and problems of this and similar local, non-party initiatives are the main theme of this interview by Peter Anderson and Martin Steckelmacher.

Williams is the author of many books including *Culture and Society*, *The Long Revolution*, and *Keywords*. His most recent is *Politics and Letters* (NLB £12.75), a series of interviews carried out by the editors of *New Left Review*. Drawing on his own experience and ideas, he highlights many of the problems that have faced the left wing movement since the war. Expensive, but well worth a read and place on the shelf of your local library.



Raymond Williams

BF: To start with, what made you finally decide that the Labour Party and social democracy wasn't a possible way forward; and what has it felt like to make this decision in a period when many who have been active in revolutionary politics since 1968 are going the other way?

RW: Well I don't want to say that any of them are wrong. They must try it out — it's very different in different places. All I would say is this — that the decision I made in 1966 was on two levels. One was the national level and the other was a result of the experience of working in a local Labour Party. To take the national level first. This was a period when a Labour government had at last achieved the conditions which I'd been brought up to foresee as the critical point of breakthrough: a peacetime parliamentary majority which would last five years and a programme of reform built into the manifesto. It wasn't meant to be a full transition to socialism but it was meant to be a decisive period. After the election, though, it seemed to me that the character of the modern Labour Party, at the level of the leadership and its interlock with the social order, was very clearly shown. It was quite clear that the leadership of the Party had passed into the hands of people who not only wanted to play along with capitalist society, but who were basically concerned with defending it against the left. This was a very serious conclusion to come to, because it went against all the assumptions I'd grown up with — that basically *because* the working class voted for it in majority, the Labour Party was a party in the interests of the working class. The dramatic event which precipitated this for me was the almost simultaneous occurrence of the seamen's strike and the sterling crisis. The sterling crisis was being deliberately aggravated by financial interests in the City; there you had an absolutely clear case of a test for even a social-democratic government. The seamen's strike was a totally justified action by people who had been working in very bad conditions, while the sterling strike was the classic capitalist ploy against a left government.

The enemies of the social order who were singled out for public attack, led by Wilson, were the seamen and the leaders of the strike. These were the famous 'tightly-knit group of politically motivated men', which was actually an exact description of the city speculators — though Wilson and the cabinet did not see or act on it in this way.

I don't think you can put this down to the character of one leader any more than when you are analysing Stalin or anyone else. You could say 'this is what you would expect Harold Wilson to do.' But it didn't produce any major crisis in the Party; it didn't lead to a split or any decisive resignations. In fact it led to less of a split than there had been in 50-51 between the Bevanite wing and the others.

So that was at the national level. Even if it wasn't the end of the story, still a moment which had long been foreseen as the first stage of the transition to socialism in our kind of society had been tested. And it had not only failed in the sense of not being strong enough, but it had actually gone in the other direction. *When it came right down to it, they were more against the working class than they were against the existing order.*

The second half of my decision was the experience of working in a local Labour Party. You have to work where you live, and it was a mixed sort of Party. This was in Cambridge-shire, the county, which is a separate constituency. We did a lot of joint things with the city Party, which because of the university is obviously a pretty untypical one. But the county is fairly typical of a semi-rural constituency. It once had a Labour MP, in 1945, but the machine was now being kept going by really a very small number of people. And it was seen primarily as a machine. The difficulty of getting political education, or self-education, going was really quite serious.

My wife and I ran a paper, a little monthly magazine for the constituency. That experience taught me a lot. At first it was very encouraging. At that level of the Labour Party people have a sense of natural loyalty to the Party, but there's an

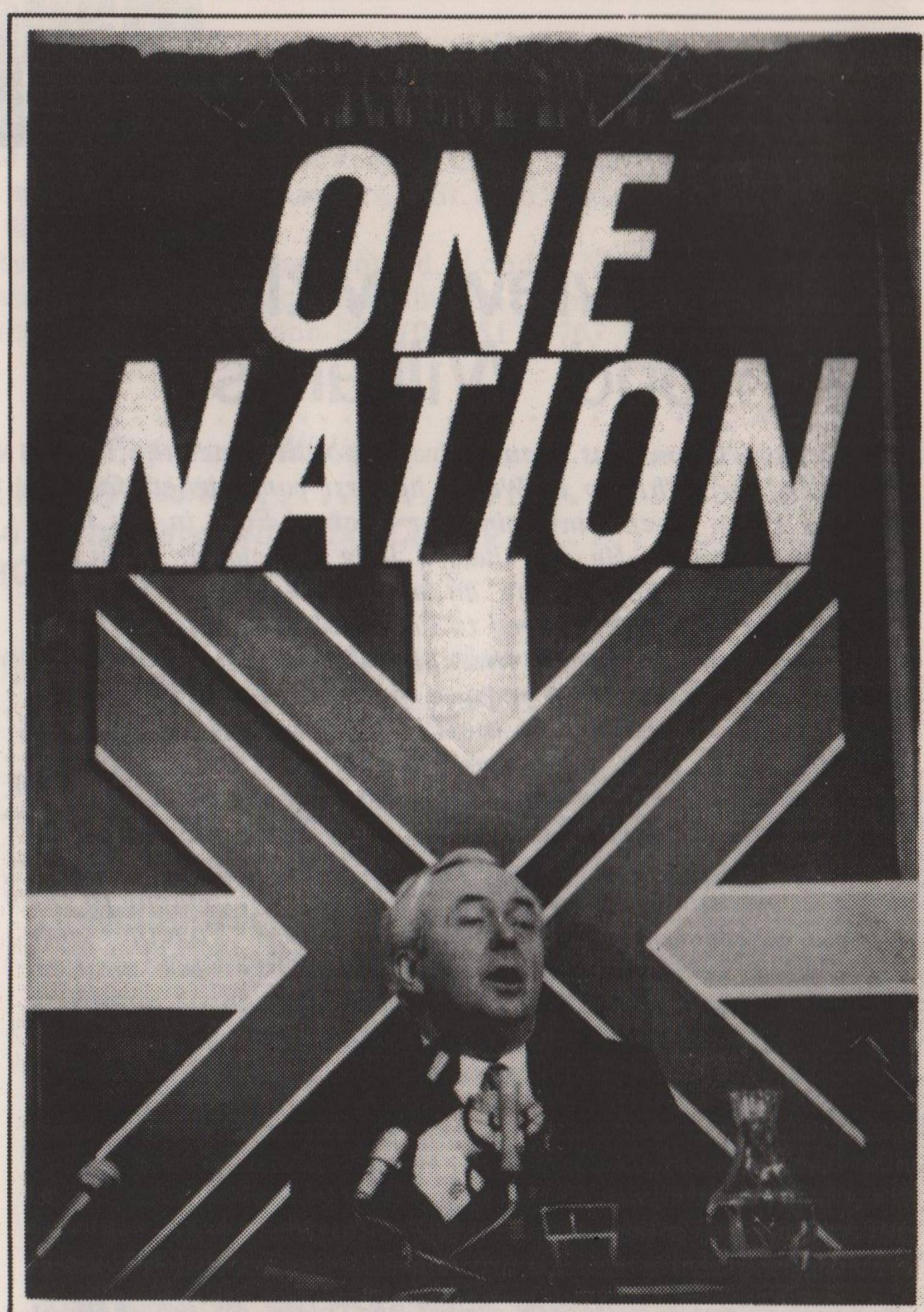
absolute famine of ideas, and there are so many unanswered questions. Initially, when we tried to make this little periodical a place where things could be discussed, people were interested. There was no problem of censorship or conformity to the line. But as it developed, we began to get the message back from the offices of the Party. I remember one man in particular who had gone to a regional conference full of some of the ideas we were developing; for example, about housing and how to develop a different policy of running council estates etc. He got the message that the Party was not pleased with that kind of thing. What depressed me was not just that he got told that — it happens in any party machine — but the degree to which he used his loyalty to the Party, the thing that had kept him going all his life, as a way of closing down a bit of his mind. What he said, regretfully, was 'Well, if the Party won't approve of it, this probably isn't the sort of thing we should be doing.'

In some Constituency Parties, I know, very active autonomous work goes on, where people tackle these problems in their own area, on their own. But at the point where the relation between this and the party policy comes up, there's a real problem of loyalty, especially in the older, traditional members of the Party. In this way, I think, the Labour Party had been assuming a traditional loyalty from the working class, and a few sympathisers from the middle class, and the leadership was abusing this in the name of loyalty to the machine. It turned out to be a dwindling asset. Since the war, the number of members has steadily shrunk, so that often all that was left as the nucleus of a constituency party were people who were basically just running a machine. And some of them were well enough integrated, into the general institutions of public life, to get a certain kick out of just being part of the machine. If you watch a General Management Committee when it's nominating Justices of the Peace and school governors, you can see that these are a different sort of people, and it's a different sort of activity, from a political party which is seriously interested in changing society.

So I made the decision then, and at the time it seemed to me necessary to try the alternative of the Manifesto, of bringing together different groups, particularly as there were so many independent groups of various kinds to the left of the Labour Party, and these were very isolated. It was a situation where all the problems of tactics were being separately discussed by small isolated groups, in and out of the Labour Party. So the time had come to see if there was any possibility of movement in the situation, to get some different kind of framework of association, which wasn't tied in the same way. **BF:** There may be the possibility now for a project in some ways similar to the May Day Manifesto. Could you say something about what you thought were the strengths and weaknesses of that experience?

RW: The strength was that it began to provide a much more horizontal left than tends to be the case with national organizations, which are nearly all vertical and which tend to occur mainly in London and one or two other places. It's a process of building relations of personal confidence amongst whole series of people who know that they can deal with each other honestly at a local level. Now this did happen for a few years, of course with different results. I worked in a Left Club and a Left Forum, in which there was the whole range from the Labour Party through all the groups on the left. We stayed in our own organizations, if we had any, but still we had two common purposes. First, to keep in touch with each other because there were a lot of campaigns in which we could work more effectively together. Secondly, to learn to avoid the easiest reaction to political difference, especially in this generation, which is that the most available enemies are those on the left, that other group or fraction which is competing for the same few members. Of course this still went on, but if they're not just a label but people you're working with you can be more rational about it. The very fact that we knew each other meant that there were personal relations which modified our ideological differences, or started to get beyond them.

I think that the weakness was this: that there do come certain issues where it is not just a matter of how you interpret



1917 or Kronstadt, or even the more significant general choices between a future based on workers' control or centralised planning, but which are about what you do in the immediate present. In the case of the Manifesto groups, such an issue was the 1970 General Election. Do you work for the Labour Party? Do you have independent candidates? Do you work for Labour although you are 'really' against them? Do you say you'll vote for them, but that you'll fight them the next day? All the variants came out, and on that the Manifesto split. Of course that is the weakness because it isn't like a party: it's a looser alliance.

But all I can say is that this idea keeps being thrown up, because it does correspond to that reality, especially outside the big centres, where there are simply not enough people to sustain all the different tendencies at the local, horizontal level. People get isolated, or they drift out altogether, or they simply relate vertically to the central organization. And when you consider, in spite of the political and social predominance of London, the actual distribution of population in the country it is clearly wrong that all lines should be drawn to London.

BF: Could you say something about recent developments in the Labour Party itself? It seems, for example, that Benn and his supporters have formulated a much more coherent alternative economic programme and strategy than the left in the Labour Party did in the sixties.

RW: This is entirely true and I can see the impulse for left people to go back into the Labour Party in the way that I noticed my friends doing — and it affected me too — between 1961/2 and 1964/5.

If you take the two things the left has been fighting for in the Labour Party, I think one is very important and needs unqualified support: the democratization of the Party. That's a condition of the thing working at all and there's no point in getting into the local Labour Party unless the lines from there to the conference, and from the conference through to the programme, and the relations between constituencies and MPs, are got right in the way that the left is proposing.

The Labour Party

The other is the package of economic measures which the left is fighting for as a sort of socialistic way out of the crisis. These involve, in fact, very tight centralised controls. They have been thought through at very much an administrative level, as actions which the central government would take. They would in my view collide immediately with a whole body of popular needs, assumptions and habits. The only possible condition which could sustain a rigorous economic programme like that would be a measure of popular support on a scale we haven't seen since the period immediately after the war. It would require a very high level of real social discipline. Secondly it would need very firm action against the wreckers from the other side, from the Right, who would be using every conceivable means to sabotage it. What I'm then saying is that we would need a popular mobilization on a really big scale to sustain this kind of programme; and what worries me about the left proposals is that they are mostly at a technical level — how you direct or manage this or that — and not about the level of popular mobilization. This would be a quite different thing from the democratization of a rather weak and sketchy Labour Party. It's not just democratizing inside the party; it's really finding out where the majority of people are, and about how we could mobilize real social forces — not just administrative bodies — behind that sort of programme. I don't think that this sort of thinking has yet really begun, and I think this is because what is being offered is — to use the term a bit generally — a Fabian kind of programme. It is what a body of economic analysts have seen as a possible answer to otherwise insoluble economic problems. But given the experience of the last 25 years, and the way that our society has gone, I would hate to see a situation in which a body of socialist planners were meeting the full weight of these difficulties without more protection than the fact that they'd got a parliamentary majority; and the pretence that these political problems wouldn't be difficult seems to me to help nobody.

So, once again, democratization is not just a question of democratizing the Party. It really does mean reaching out to, and thinking about, new kinds of organization which are

capable of popular decision making. Once you say *that*, you have passed out of the area of mainstream Labour thinking. You are into the area of autonomous groups and the best parts of the independent left, who have been concerned with building real organizations in actual communities and places of work. If you don't have such organizations, the left programme is either a paper programme which would quickly fail, or at best it would be a bureaucratic programme with a very contradictory political result.

Well, if that is the danger, what is the answer to it? One answer is to say 'get into the Labour Party and make sure it's not bureaucratic and so on.' I think an equally good answer is that people should stay just where they are, if they're in organizations which are learning and building this sort of autonomy. Because if there isn't that sort of movement at the community and workplace level, it would be perfectly possible for a so-called left Labour programme, which had failed to organize actual local and workplace organizations, to become quite quickly their enemy.

BF: What I take it you're saying is that an implementation of socialism in this country requires a fusion of centralized with decentralized initiatives, and that this fusion at a political level is represented by the relationship between these autonomous local initiatives and the left of the Labour Party.

RW: Yes, I am saying that there is a fundamental problem, which, for all the changed circumstances, looks to me still much as it did in the sixties. If you say the channel for our aspirations is the Labour Party, and if you stay in that channel, the very things which are necessary to correct this Labour tradition of centralised experts and directors of the economy, would be neglected in favour of the centralized mechanisms which again and again destroy local autonomy and initiative. The most valuable experience of the last 15 or 20 years has been the experience of collectives and workers' control groups, and of people organizing in their place of work, and of people discussing ideas and learning from their own enterprises. For these are the people who've been learning



The Labour Party

the actual and possible forms of popular democratic control.

The other way of putting it is this: you could once hope to rely on these old type social-democratic parties, with a good heart and plenty of experts to organize the changes. You could do this when the margins were relatively wide, when you could have a bit of this and a bit of that, parts of this policy and parts of that. But if, as the Labour left itself is saying – and I've no reason to doubt them – the economic crisis is that bad, then there's hardly any room left to manoeuvre or compromise. I wouldn't give the left economic policy as now outlined 12 months politically, if all that had happened was that it was centrally administered, even by the most capable people, because you would quickly get the situation of the planners against the people which wouldn't even have the institutional back-up of Eastern Europe to make it last. It would get defeated.

So even in its own interest, I would have thought that the Labour left ought to want people who find meaningful activity in other groups to stay doing just that, because it may be the most important thing they can do.

BF: Given the power of the media and the power of the mechanisms of persuasion of contemporary capitalist society do you not think that it's tremendously difficult to see a numerical or actual majority being continually in favour of radical change? I suppose Chile, in that sense, is quite optimistic because there, despite the tremendous media control, there was continuing and growing support for the Allende regime in the 1970-73 period.

RW: I think this is right. Of course the party, any party, any organization has always got to be aiming for majorities. There isn't a future, except on the right, where it could happen, for the small, tightly disciplined vanguard organisation which can just take state power and then, at a stroke, reverse the nature of the institutions. This hasn't seemed to me a possible option in the sort of society we live in since the beginning of this century. Almost by definition, the only hope of left parties is in aiming for majorities, and temporarily getting them, and of course hanging on through difficult periods; hanging on, with a really effective base, with a large number of people who

really are prepared to hold firm, as people did to an extraordinary extent through those years after the war when there were much more severe shortages than there are on the horizon at the moment. There was then this sense that is was right to share, and that it was right to work together; and that although a bit of minor fiddling didn't matter, there was very strong disapproval of and hostility to people who were really trying to cheat on others. People held together. That kind of morale is a crucial thing for carrying through a transition and if you don't have it, the paper programmes of the organisation or the party are neither here nor there.

BF: Presumably that morale and that feeling was connected first to the whole war effort and also to some existing socialist traditions in the working class. In his book, *What Went Wrong?*, Jeremy Seabrook argues that this kind of socialist culture has actually disappeared and that the consumer economy has broken those kind of feelings. Do you think it still exists or is it possible for a socialist movement to recreate that feeling of solidarity and collectivity that will be needed to weather the difficult periods?

RW: You have to take very seriously the argument that it has been broken up. After all, a lot of very powerful people and institutions went about breaking it up and trying to teach a different ethic, and no doubt they have had a lot of success. On the other hand it does strike me – if you see how certain particular communities respond to certain threats – that people are still capable of self-organization over a much wider range of issues than the traditional political ones. The obvious example is environmental issues, where it is very impressive. But the degree of self-organization and initiative that still come out in strikes, for instance, is still very inventive and energetic. So, although modern working-class communities are not what the old ones were, one shouldn't idealize the old communities and suppose that solidarity just came in with bad housing. It had to be built all the time. A lot depended on the sense that there really was something that people were fighting for. It's really when we learn, as in the poor old communities where people had no option but to learn, that the only way in which we can make things better is collective-



ly, that the ethic builds up, and it starts to flow. I could quote you, from all through the 19th century, disappointed people saying that the workers only think now about individual advantage and consumerism, in exactly the same way as you hear now. It's always an ebb and flow. It matters crucially whether there's a realistic programme that's meant to be, and visibly is, in the common interest, or whether it just seems an abstract programme which the latest gang is trying to impose without consulting you, and without giving you the continual power to affect the decisions they take.

BF: I would have thought that of all the crimes that one can lay at the Labour Party's door one of the most serious is the way that they've actually discredited ideas of collectivity and solidarity; for instance, Callaghan's announcement that he would be the first person to go through a picket, as well as a more general going-back on some of these fundamental ideas. There's no doubt that they actually paved the way, not only at the level of economic policy, but also ideologically for Thatcherism.

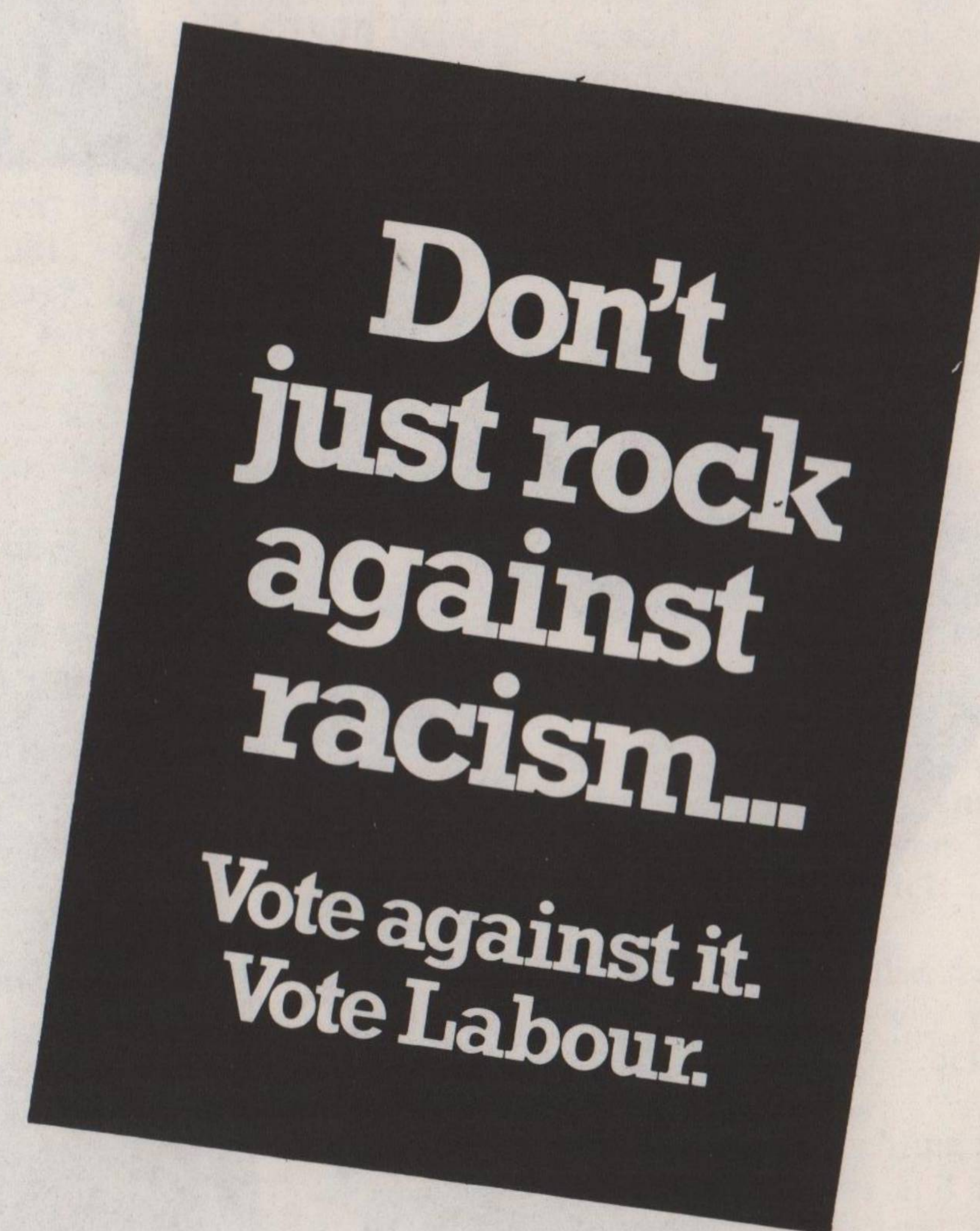
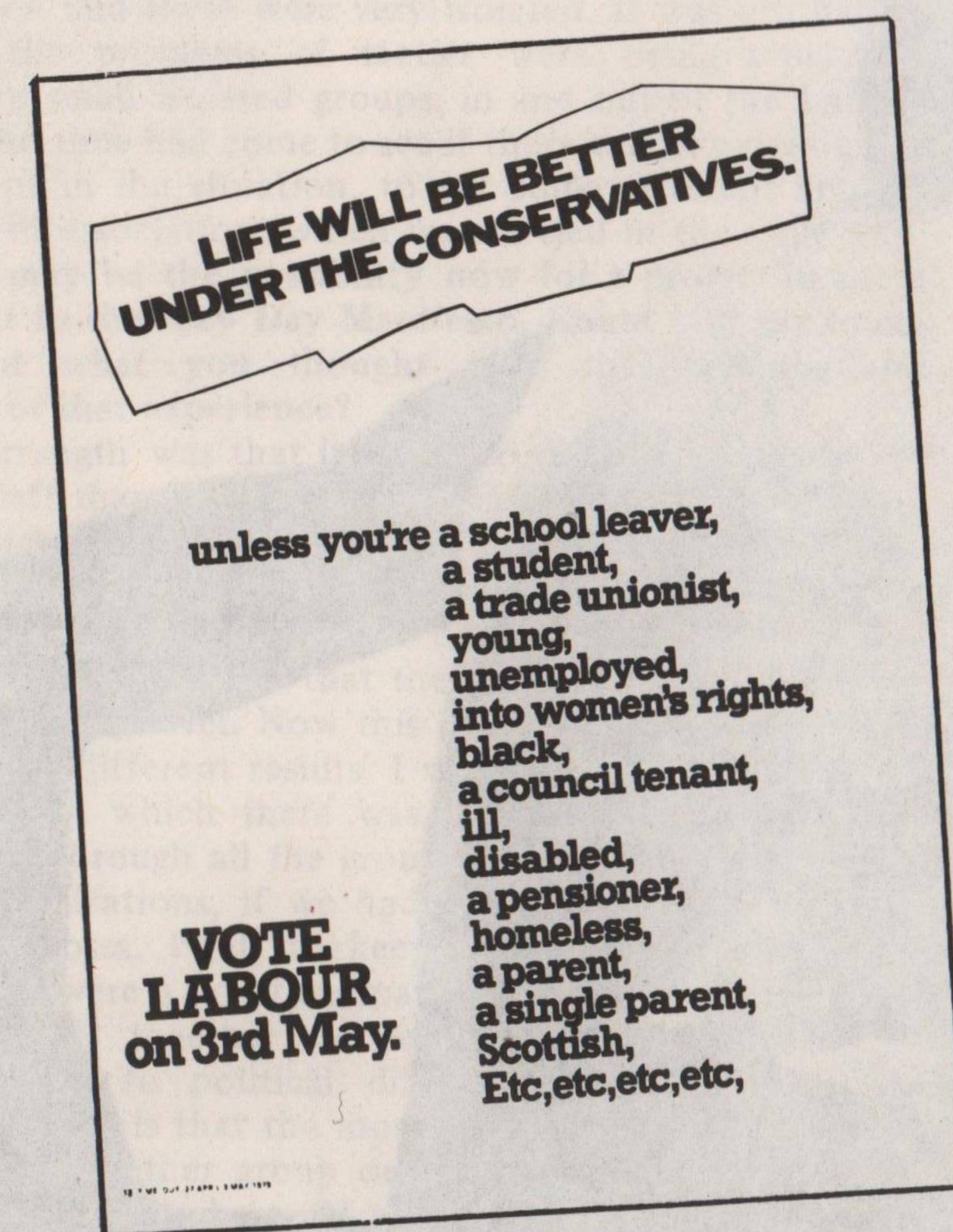
RW: Yes, we have to look at the genuine elements of popular aspiration and resentment which the right has tapped recently. If we don't see this, we don't see anything, because that was the most significant aspect of the Tory victory in 1979. The resentments about bureaucracy, rule by officials and so on were perfectly reasonable. There were aspirations even at the level of housing, where there was absolutely no reason for the Labour Party to avoid the experiment of, for example, the self-management of a council estate by its tenants, of people just wanting to improve their own house in their own way, or to make their own rules about their pets or lodgers or whatever. This built up such a head, given all the other economic difficulties, that you got the paradox that a really authoritarian-minded party, like the modern Conservative Party, could actually be identified, by some working people, as the enemy of their enemies, and as the channel of some of their aspirations which the left in power had discarded.

Now all that has happened. But what has equally happened, and on a scale which is certainly greater than anything I know in modern popular history, is an extraordinary self-organization by collectives, groups and campaigns of every kind. I would say that there are more people involved in that sort of activity now than in any earlier period I know of. The trouble is that it doesn't have any national focus. It doesn't have any way in which people can support each other in these different kinds of fights. So they are very easily localised, or diluted over time, or fragmented or contained and so on.

But then look ahead. There is a good possibility in the 1980s of an actual vacuum occurring in British political life.

The very generalization of all those aspirations and resentments to build a Tory majority will be a self-cancelling thing. There is no possibility that their kinds of measures can diminish those resentments or meet those aspirations. There will then occur, as has often happened in recent political life, a situation in which people go out to vote *against* something rather than *for* something else. They will get rid of the people they identify with the recent management of society, and of course, there's always a party not too different from the one just going out. But now, in the mid-80s, the old kind of Labourism is going to find very little room. The Labour left are absolutely right to say that only a very tough programme would be adequate to meet the kind of crisis we can expect at the end of this period of Tory government. So there will be a vacuum in the sense that the possibility of new kinds of power within this kind of system, indeed the initial stages of something politically quite different, will be there. But – and this is the point I was trying to make earlier – if it is just a matter of a democratized party machine plus a set of technical economic proposals, it won't last long, and then the real trouble will start, with the vacuum being filled from the Right.

To confine politics to a centralized political party then seems less and less a reasonable option. But equally to confine politics to these other movements which don't have a sufficient focus to gain real power at the centre, where there are always real enemies who have to be defeated or contained, that's also a major problem. Our problem is then how we can link the needs and energies of autonomous groups to the needs, which in any foreseeable future will be there, of central machinery for the allocation of resources. Most notions of the autonomous group assume that either you get a grant of resources, or that you raise certain resources. But once you consider real economic activities, you know you have to insist on collective provision. This is where the whole tradition of socialist thought lies, but collective doesn't, indeed mustn't, mean managed centralism. There does seem to be an absolute divide between the notion of the autonomous group and the notion of centralized planning machinery. But I think the theoretical-practical problem to solve, and fairly quickly, because it may be on the cards politically within the next ten years, if things go well, is how to build new collective relations and build them practically. Because the autonomous groups can clearly only operate in a whole society within a framework of democratic means of the allocation of resources. And yet this framework must never replace, or try to replace, economically or politically, the real groups, the real society, which it has to serve. I believe we can solve this. I believe we have to solve it. And we should start, at every level, as we mean to go on.



The Labour Party presents a radical face: Propaganda like these full page ads appeared in publications such as *Time Out* and *The Leveller* during the May 1979 general election campaign.

Feminism and the Socialist Alternative

Wendy Clarke

This article is an attempt to evaluate from a socialist feminist perspective the impact and importance of the women's movement – not only how feminism has affected the lives of women over the last decade, but also how it has contributed to, altered and been assimilated into the political landscape.

Sometimes it seems almost pointless to try to integrate feminism and socialism into a homogeneous theory and practice, because of the many basic antagonisms between the development of feminism and male dominance, as well as capitalist exploitation. However, it is also clear that we must continue to argue for the best elements of feminism to be included in our ideas about socialism, to remain clear and positive on the need for an autonomous women's movement and to recognize that the autonomous women's movement is central to revolutionary strategy and the development of socialist alternatives.

The article argues that socialists should take more responsibility in examining what they can learn from feminism and the women's liberation movement rather than bemoaning the lack of socialism in the women's movement. Feminists and socialists are going to need to find more positive ways of working together in the coming decade if all our small gains are not to disappear in the face of the Tory onslaught.

The emergence of the women's liberation movement as a political force in the late 60s has had a fundamental effect on British life and politics over the last decade. The economic and political climate in which the early women's liberation movement blossomed – a period of boom and political optimism, when we acted as if anything was possible, and that international capitalism was being shaken to its foundations – has obviously vastly altered. But the women's movement has proved itself to be an enduring political and social force. It is international and feminist ideas have taken hold with women all over the world. The women's movement, in Britain, although changed since the early heady days of sisterhood, has endured successive governments, attempted appeasement and co-option through such measures as the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, and is now faced with a Tory onslaught of increasing ferocity.

The movement has widened out, developed in different directions, and means different things to different women. In the organised women's liberation movement there are differing tendencies, and women involved in the



Victory in the Equal Pay dispute at Trico in 1976 (Chris Davies, Report)

movement concentrate their energies on different and less obvious aspects of women's oppression. But as well as those women who consciously and actively define themselves as 'women's libbers' there is a whole movement of women outside the loosely organised network of women's liberation movement groups. Women on strike for equal pay, women fighting for the right to be in a union, women who leave their husbands/lovers because they are no longer prepared to be battered and sexually abused, lesbians insisting on their right to define their own sexuality, women, like nurses, challenging the notion and acceptance that they are low paid because their caring dedication to the job should be enough. The ways in which women are trying to break out of the restriction which capitalism and male domination erect around our lives are varied and infinite. Women are no longer hidden from each other nor from history as before.

Thousands of women's lives have changed through an involvement in the women's movement. Many thousands more have been affected by the ideas of equality and women's liberation, even though they would not necessarily regard themselves as part of the women's movement. But despite all this, women's position has not improved. Women are still unequal and oppressed. Some changes have been made, some concessions won, but the battle is far

from over. We must try to take the gains and insights developed in the 70s into the new decade and strengthen and consolidate them.

The capitalist system and successive governments have shown their ability to coopt and defuse the struggles of women, and subtly restructure the system and initiate changes in women's position in response to women's demands. The introduction of the Equal Pay Act is an example of this complex inter-relationship. Equal Pay has been a demand of militants and feminists for over a century. The TUC has had it as one of its aims for nearly a hundred years. Yet it was not until the mid-60s that it became a political and economic option which was taken up – not only by militant workers like the women in Fords in 1968, but also by the government. The Labour government wanted to involve more women in the workforce at a time of expansion and a relatively tight labour market, in which women, particularly married women, were identified as the new source of labour and the fastest growing section of the workforce. But the government did not just see equal pay as a means of improving women's status at work because of an objection to the sexual division of labour and women's inferior status within that. They also saw it as a way of making capitalism function more effectively and competitively. Barbara Castle's opinion was 'This is a bill designed not only to end injustices but to

stimulate efficiency. As long as women are paid below their economic value there is no incentive to put their work and abilities to their best use. Sweated labour is a soporific to management, not a stimulant.'

Employers, however, interpreted the Equal Pay Act differently and had plenty of time before its implementation to work out ways of restructuring their workforces so that women no longer worked in jobs directly comparable to men's. This has led to an even greater segregation and stratification of jobs so that women's work cannot be directly compared to men's. And when thousands of women in a multitude of workplaces throughout the country did try to enforce the law in their own factories, they often had to go out on strike to get anywhere. Women's consciousness of their own worth and their rights under law gave substance and focus to their anger and frustration, but all too often the male workers blocked attempts to improve conditions. And the government's changes in industrial procedure effectively channelled legitimate grievances into individual not collective action, by forcing complainants to make individual representation at tribunals.

So unfortunately it is not as easy as making demands for equality and getting them, nor is it as simple as hammering against the wall of capitalist oppression and exploitation to make it fall down. But one of the most vital contributions that feminism has made to the attack against the existing social order, is to delineate areas in which it is essential and valid to organise, arenas which had previously been deemed non-political and irrelevant. The women's movement politically legitimised the experiences of those traditionally written off both by bourgeois political parties and the left. Women's experience is important. Theory built on that experience and the development of a feminist politics are essential to any notion of revolutionary change, and cannot be ignored.

The women's movement has, by posing as central the question of women's oppression, laid bare the division between men and women. In uncovering this, and reclaiming our experiences as politically valid, the theory and practice of autonomous organisation has emerged as the essential method of overcoming and challenging these divisions. The examination of men's power over women has revealed the concept of patriarchy, the history of women's oppression and the fight against it, and the inadequacy of traditional Marxist theory. The importance of women's personal and subjective experience of oppression and exploitation, the anger and the pain, have developed as powerful weapons in the process of reclaiming a self-identity and existence, challenging the former abstracted differentiation between the personal and the political.

Women and Marxism

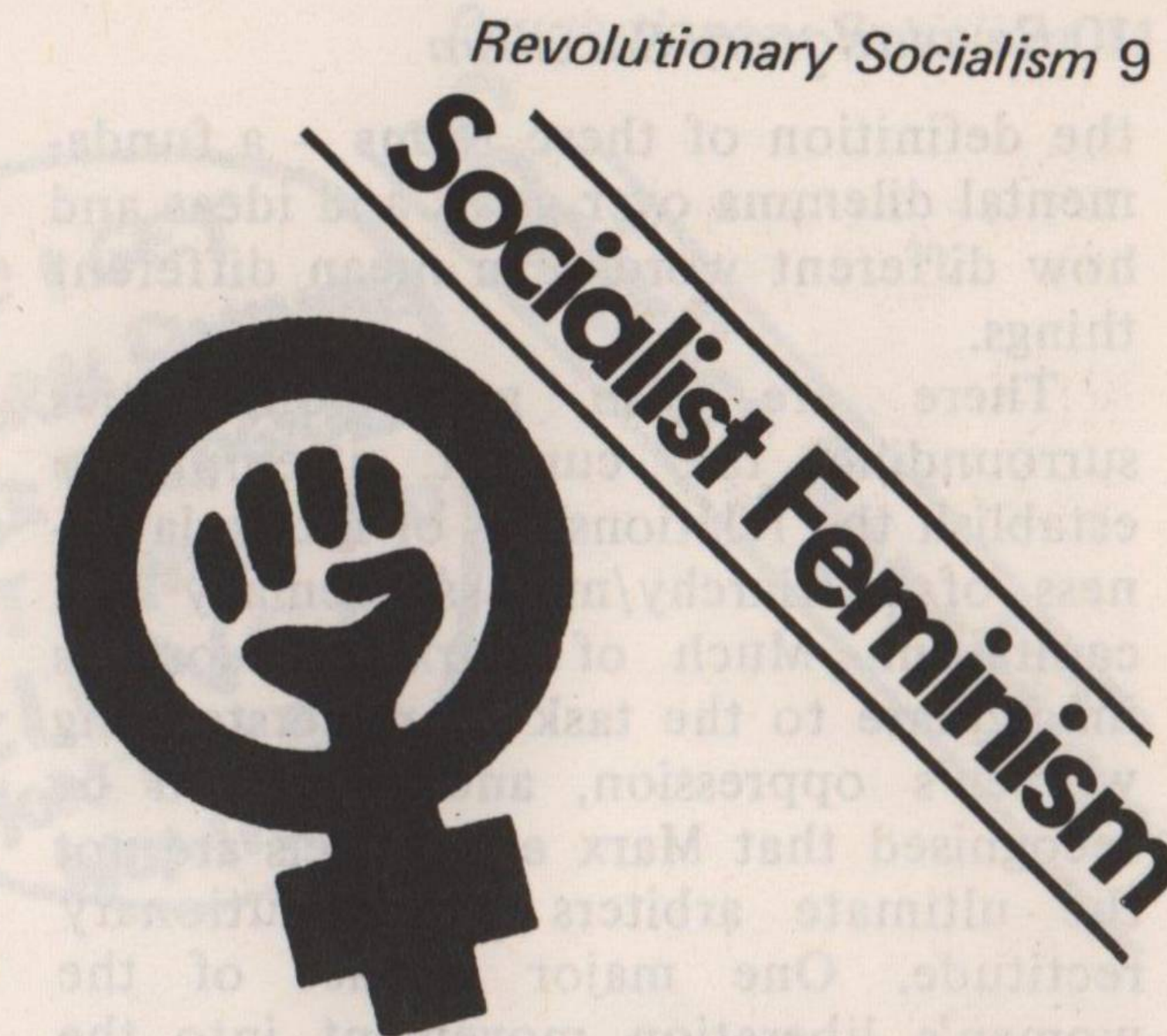
For many women the changed consciousness that the women's movement has brought about has resulted in an

involvement with the left or with socialist politics. The origins of the women's movement were closely related to other political traditions, particularly libertarianism, flourishing in the late 60s, so there has always been a relationship between feminism and socialism. But the relationship has often been uneasy and unequal – 'marriage' and 'courtship' are words currently used to describe the often traumatic relationship.

There is a substantial belief in the notion that women's liberation cannot be achieved without socialism, and socialism cannot be achieved without women's liberation. But then we are stuck – what kind of socialism, what does women's liberation mean? And how are we to achieve either? What is the relationship between autonomous movement and party? What kind of women's movement do we want?

To many women there seems to be no necessary link between feminism and

socialism – precisely because there are many feminists who do not believe that Marxism or socialism enriches or clarifies their experiences and actions. Equally there are socialist women who do not recognise the validity of feminism, but they are no less a part of the socialist movement because of that. There is of course much possible disagreement about



July 1977: Jayaben Desai argues with senior police officers on the day of the first Grunwick mass picket (Andrew Wiard, Report)

the definition of these terms – a fundamental dilemma over goals and ideas and how different words can mean different things.

There are also great difficulties surrounding the current attempt to establish the relationship, or interrelatedness of patriarchy/male supremacy and capitalism. Much of Marxist theory is inadequate to the task of understanding women's oppression, and it should be recognised that Marx and Engels are not the ultimate arbiters of revolutionary rectitude. One major impact of the women's liberation movement into the realms of Marxist debate has been to point to the one-sidedness of Marxist analysis, focussing exclusively on the question of production and ignoring the issue of reproduction. This does not just mean the actual biological process of procreation and birth, but the question of the reproduction of the future workforce – nurturance, socialisation, education and the reproduction of the social relations in which capitalist production operates. It means that Marxist discourse has omitted a section of theory which cannot be tagged onto it as an afterthought.

Since Marxist theory has, until the intervention of feminists, ignored a detailed examination of the interrelation of production and reproduction, the subordination of women and the ways these have changed historically, it has been partial and incomplete. And this has inevitably affected the political practice and strategy of sections of the left – leading at its worst to a gross economism. Most of Marxism is an *economic* analysis of capitalist production, although it does provide some pointers towards ways of understanding outside of the purely economic. The major concept which has emerged from the work of the women's liberation movement to begin to grapple with the question of the subordination of women is of the necessity to look at the history, and mechanisms of enforcement, of men's power over women as a *separate and distinct* phenomenon from capitalism's oppressive yoke. By and large this has been defined as patriarchy, although there is much dispute as to the validity of that term (literally meaning rule of the fathers) for present-day male dominance. There are probably as many different understandings and definitions of patriarchy as there are political persuasions in the women's movement (see Veronica Beechey's article 'On Patriarchy' in *Feminist Review* No. 3). While it is clear that we do not know enough to offer any definite analysis of the origins of women's oppression, nor the precise mechanisms which maintain it now, we must still begin to unravel the tangled relationship of capital's and men's oppression of women.

Marxism and patriarchy

Marxists from Marx and Engels onwards have been aware of the sexual (and racial) division within the working class, and pointed to this as an obstacle to the development of a united anti-capitalist offensive. Engels' solution,

which is the one still advocated by many Marxists today, has been to encourage women to enter the labour force offering the wage as a passport to liberation. What this perspective fails to realise is that oppression by gender, race and age *precedes* entry into the labour force and therefore determines what happens to those who enter it, what place in the hierarchy they fill, what type of job they do, and how much they earn.

The interrelatedness of sex, gender and class oppressions are complex. Their precise manifestations emerge in different forms at different times. There are biological differences between men and women; there is a sexual division of labour; there are marked differences in expected social behaviour and the socio-economic and political rewards (and relative status). But these manifestations are not inflexible, they are not ahistorical absolutes; they can change, they can be

manipulated. The constant is that women's status is inferior. For example, in this country doctors are paid more than nurses and have a higher social standing. The majority of doctors now are men, the majority of nurses women. But in the USSR where the majority of doctors are women the status and pay of the profession has altered from the days when it was a male preserve, and is now much lower relative to professions in which men dominate. Another example: in early 19th century Britain bricklaying was often a woman's job but in a gradual process of excluding women from some 'heavy' work, men organised in skilled unions and specifically excluded women (and children) from them, as a way of attempting to push wage rates up. By excluding women and children from some waged work men claimed higher wages on the basis of the need to support a family. This contributed towards changes in



Sue Shearer, a member of 'Women in Manual Trades', on a building site at the Elephant & Castle, London, where she works as a carpenter (Carlos Augusto, IFL)

family structure as the economy changed into a more fully-fledged capitalism. This happened at the expense of women, whose realm was defined as home and hearth, and whose role was defined as housewife, mother and her husband's possession.

It's not just status differences in the workplace or the family which have been examined by feminists. More fundamental is the questioning of assumed gender definitions, and the breakthrough in challenging the 'natural' femininity of women and the masculinity of men. As Liz Mackie's cartoon says 'If I get my feminine instincts biologically, who are you to tell me what to do as a woman?' Femininity and masculinity are socially constructed, learned sets of behaviour attached to different biological entities – there is little that is 'natural' about either. Within the constraints of socially acceptable gender roles the whole of both women's and men's sexuality is distorted – and any change in society which attempted to reorganise relations between and amongst the sexes on an equitable basis would require a revolution of an astonishingly wide-ranging nature. A change in the ownership of the means of production seems easy compared with a change in social and sexual construction and reproduction of women and men! But it is just as necessary before any kind of liberation can be achieved.

In a recent article in the *New Statesman* (Feb. 1 1980) Barbara Taylor and Sally Alexander make an assessment of the usefulness of the socialist feminist concept of patriarchy, which summarises neatly some of these points:

The concept of patriarchy points to a strategy which will eliminate not men, but masculinity, and transform the whole web of psycho-sexual relations in which masculinity and femininity are formed. It is a position from which we can begin to claim for political change precisely those areas of life which are usually claimed biological or neutral. It allows us to confront not only the day to day social practices through which men exercise power over women, but also the mechanisms through which patterns of authority and submission become part of the sexed personality itself – 'the father in our heads,' so to speak. It has helped us to think about sexual division – which cannot be understood simply as a byproduct of economic class relations or biology, but which has an independent dynamic that will only be overcome by an independent feminist politics. Finally it has allowed us to look past our immediate experiences as women to the underlying processes underlining and shaping that experience, for like class, sexual antagonism is not something which can be understood simply by living it: it needs to be analysed with concepts forged for that purpose. The theories which have developed around 'patriarchy' have been the first systematic attempts to provide them.

If the concept of patriarchy has been used by the women's movement as the

Liz Mackie



Socialist Feminism

'tool' to begin to pick the lock on the door which holds us in subordination, then the autonomous women's movement has provided the power and structure that has wielded the 'battering ram'.

Autonomous organisation

Whatever disagreement there is in politics and policies between different tendencies in the women's movement one thing is agreed – and that is the necessity of autonomous organisation, of organising against our oppression separately and independently from men, of trying now to take control ourselves of every aspect of our lives. Disagreements abound as to how far, if at all, sex and class oppression and exploitation feed into and off one another, but one thing is clear: sexual oppression is not just another aspect of economic class oppression. *All* men benefit from women's oppression for however exploited they may themselves be, there is always a woman lower in the hierarchy providing some service which *materially* and psychologically enriches his life.

Women's liberation is more than changing your consciousness, it's about being able to change the power relations which dominate our lives. To do this, we have to rediscover our power, redefine our lives and develop our politics. Essential to this is an autonomous women's movement. It is our power base, and it is only from this power base that we can begin to make changes. No one else can (nor will) do it for us. Not the revolutionary party, not the state, not willpower. To be able to participate in the political process we had to find some kind of power and we had to find a self-identity which was not the weak version of inadequacy we had been taught to live with.

The way through this was to recognise the importance of the personal experience of oppression, the pain and frustration and havoc that this wreaked with our lives. The assertion that the personal is political does not mean that however an individual acts personally can

be justified politically (though some people have chosen to hide themselves behind this slogan). It is an insistence of feminists that the subjective experience of living in a male dominated capitalist society results in a justified anger and resistance to oppression and exploitation. It's a demand to recognise women's subordination as a day to day lived reality, the fight against which is valid and political, not irrelevant and individual.

The women's movement not only introduced the notion that the personal is political, but also began to redefine the whole arena of what had traditionally been seen as legitimate concerns to discuss and organise around. Sexuality, male violence, abortion, contraception, childcare, marriage, the family, the structure and functioning of the welfare state, the control of our daily life. Some of these ideas and concerns had been raised within the new politics of the student and anti-Vietnam war movements and libertarianism, but they came to maturity and gained a wider audience with the emergence of the women's movement. It is essential that they retain a prominence in our politics in the 80s, for the greatest strength that any fight against the existing social order can have is to show to people that life can and should be different to how it is now, and that it's possible to organise collectively to change it. Not just as waged workers in trade unions, but as consumers, as housewives, as tenants, as wives and mothers and lovers and sisters and daughters, as users and workers in the welfare state, as women.

Sexuality

We have been so effectively colonised and alienated from our bodies and our sisters that we experience guilt and shame, and feel that it is *our* fault when we are abused and assaulted.

The exploration of sexuality and women's lack of control over our bodies opened up for the first time in a mass

way, an awareness of just how colonised women were — not even able to control our own fertility or sexual expression. The struggle for the full implementation of the 1967 Abortion Act, for improved contraceptive provision and against the various proposed bills to restrict access to abortion, turned what had been a taboo subject, and one which had proved inimical to earlier socialists, into a mass movement. Organised around the slogan 'A woman's right to choose', the campaign for abortion has reached thousands of women and has clarified for women how little choice we have over our lives — and just how isolated and privatised our sexual experiences are. For the first time numerous women have been able to talk to other women of their experiences at the hands of back street abortionists, or of sexual harassment or rape.

Sexuality and abortion have obviously been the concern of earlier feminists and socialists, and their campaigning has been one of the reasons why limited provision has been made for women's needs within the welfare state. Stella Browne, an active socialist-feminist, was involved with organising a group of feminists within the Labour Party in 1924 called the Workers' Birth Control Group. They wanted birth control and abortion to be provided by the state. They campaigned for nursery provision, a national health service, maternity provision, better housing, legal changes regarding divorce and separation. They looked for inspiration particularly to revolutionary changes then taking place in Russia.

Some of these demands have now been met. All forms of contraception are available free on the NHS (although plenty of people still don't realise this). There is a limited provision for abortion under the '67 Act. Women have maternity allowances, social security benefits, a still largely free national health service, and improved divorce laws. We have the Employment Protection Act, the Equal Pay Act, the Sex Discrimination Act. But this hasn't been enough. Basically, the post-war capitalist state has been modifying itself so that some of women's demands could be met and incorporated within the system. The establishment of the welfare state managed to integrate changes in attitudes to women within its social planning and use them to its own advantage. Smaller more mobile family units suited the needs of post war economic development. Sex without procreation became acceptable and a distorted form of sexuality was openly promoted to encourage the consumer goods boom.

We now have a women's movement which those of us who have developed through it almost take for granted. But there have been feminist movements in the past which have arisen and disappeared. How can we ensure that the same does not happen to our women's liberation movement? Is it happening already? There has not been a national women's conference since 1978. Conferences are certainly not the be-all and end-all of the women's movement,

and part of the problem is the success and diversity of the movement. Whereas in the early days of the movement conferences were gatherings of relatively small numbers of the initiated and committed (and were rightly criticised for being elitist) conferences of 3,000 women are confusing and alienating.

The outlook today

This article has attempted to point out some of the essential contributions which the women's movement has made to the political area in which Big Flame and many socialist feminists situate themselves. The Tory onslaught has to be seen not only as a monumental assault on the working class but very specifically a denial of everything that the women's movement stands for. And it's not just the Tories. The last Labour government should never be let off the hook for paving the way for the Tories' policies, and by being so bankrupt that the electorate saw the Tories offering us something new and radical. Yet the whole Tory policy of public spending cuts and the dismantling of the Welfare State (nurseries, free school meals, maternity grants, family planning clinics) rests squarely and firmly on the assumption that women will cope with the extra workload at home for free. It is from the women's movement, with the backup of the left, that this has to be confronted.

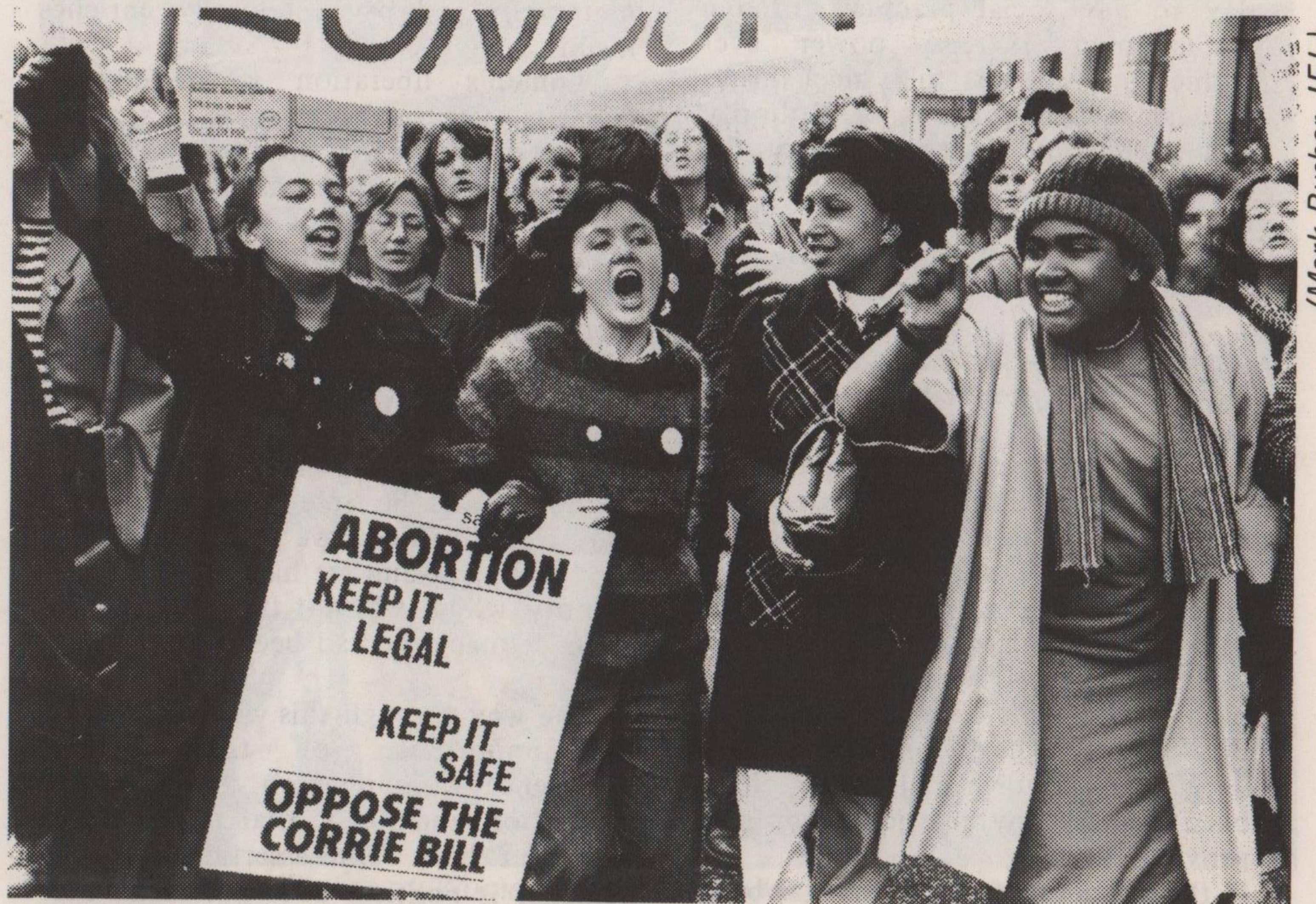
We are not yet, and never will be, in a situation where the revolutionary left can substitute itself for feminism. That is the function of an autonomous women's movement. Patriarchy and capitalism are twin evils and they have, at times, to be fought with different weapons and tactics. But where patriarchy and capitalism coincide, so there do feminism and socialism meet. Socialists can and must have a role to play in supporting and organising around feminist issues, and instead of worrying why the women's movement is not socialist the concern



should be — why is socialism not feminist? An organisation like Big Flame could not exist without the autonomous women's movement to constantly act as a reminder of the need for a feminist politics, and many of the ideas outlined in this article were formative for the type of politics and organisation on which Big Flame has sought to develop. But let's not kid ourselves. The 1980s are going to be tough for feminists and socialists, and we will be under pressure to abandon some of our positions in the face of the Tories' pressure. But the autonomous women's movement and its political and organisational integrity can only be abandoned or challenged at our peril.

Reading list

- Veronica Beechey: 'On Patriarchy', *Feminist Review* No. 3, 1979
 Elizabeth Wilson: *Women and the Welfare State*, Tavistock, 1977
 Heidi I. Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', *Capital and Class*, no. 8, Summer 1978
 Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism*, South End Press, 1978
 Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments*, Merlin, 1979
 Sheila Rowbotham, 'Patriarchy', *New Statesman*, Dec. 21/28, 1979
 Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'In Defence of Patriarchy', *New Statesman*, Feb. 1 1980



The NAC/TUC demonstration against the Corrie Bill in October 1979

The Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan

An Interview with Mike Cooley

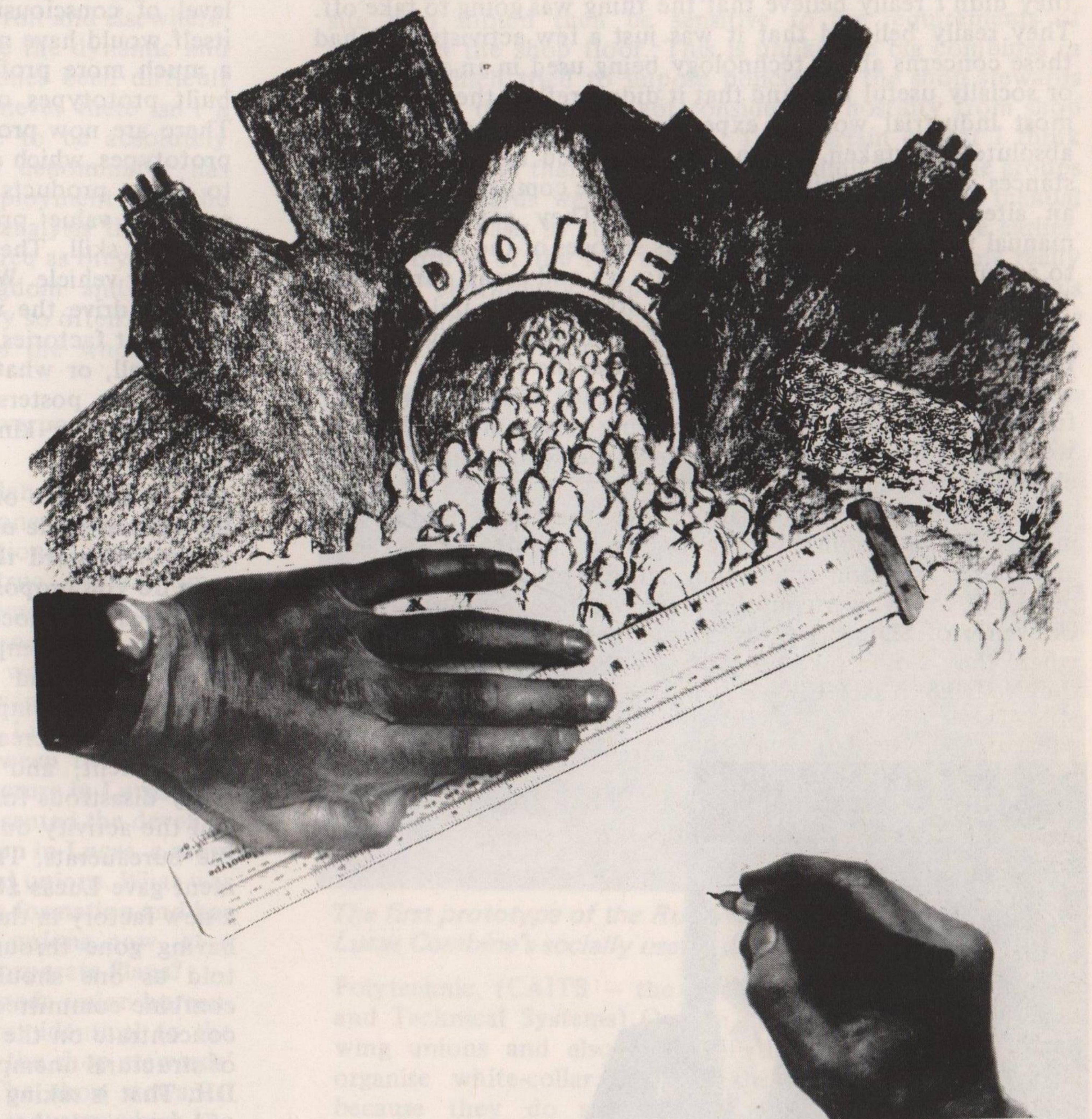
For the trade union movement the seventies ended with defeat and demoralisation. Amongst the revolutionary left, particularly within the SWP, discussion has centred on the nature and extent of the 'bureaucratisation' of the shop stewards movement. However the seventies also witnessed important positive initiatives from within the stewards movement which are the subject of the following article.

In the mid-seventies the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards Committee launched a campaign round its own workers' plan, which sought to act as a tool for mobilising the entire workforce on the need to fight to produce socially useful products. The struggle of the Lucas Aerospace workers has inspired others in Britain and other countries to adopt a similar strategy and also provoked controversy among the left. Mike Cooley, who is a member of the Lucas Aerospace Combine, describes the ideas behind the plan and some of the many problems involved. The interviewer is David Harding.

DH. I'd like to start by asking you to say something briefly about the nature and history both of the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee and the development of the Alternative Corporate Plan within Lucas Aerospace.

MC. Well I feel the Plan can only be properly understood against the background of the restructuring of British industry at the end of the 1960s. The then Labour government suggested that it would be in the national interest and in the interests of individual corporations if they were to be enlarged and then nationalised so that you didn't get duplication of effort and research, and so it gave millions of the taxpayers' money through the Industrial Reorganization Corporation to set up vast corporations like GEC. Weinstock, the managing director of GEC, brought together something like 260,000 workers and within 18 months he had reduced that to 190,000. Weinstock was able to do that because he succeeded in setting one factory against the other and one group of workers against the other. So it could be said that we learnt through the negative example of what happened at GEC.

We could also see the inability of the existing trade union structures to cope with a multi-union, multi-site, multinational company. They were divided into districts, and in crafts, and management played ducks and drakes with them, set one against the other. So we started to build our Combine Committee so that this could not be done to us. There were



very important developments like getting our own newspaper so that each site knew what the other one was doing and so on but we were not able to build a Combine quickly enough to prevent a very serious defeat in 1971 in the Willesden factory in London. We'd occupied it for about six weeks and the morale of the workforce had begun to decline because we were campaigning for the same old right to work, on the same old products in the same old way and younger workers could see no future in that and they could get jobs elsewhere. Some of the older workers had seen that in all the other battles against unemployment the workforces were defeated. So although we'd occupied the place and were very militant, in a traditional sense, we were defeated because on the sixth weekend the morale had declined so much that the factory wasn't occupied and the company brought in a demolition group and tore the roof off. Now, out of that negative experience a tremendous discussion started about what we should be doing and somebody asked a very simple question. They said why can't we use all the skill and ability we've got to meet all the social needs we can see about us? Those social needs are absolutely glaring in an advanced industry like ours. We're making the generating equipment for Concorde for example yet our manual workers live in communities where old age pensioners are dying of hypothermia. So the gap between those two is enormous and it was therefore firstly necessary to set up a trade union

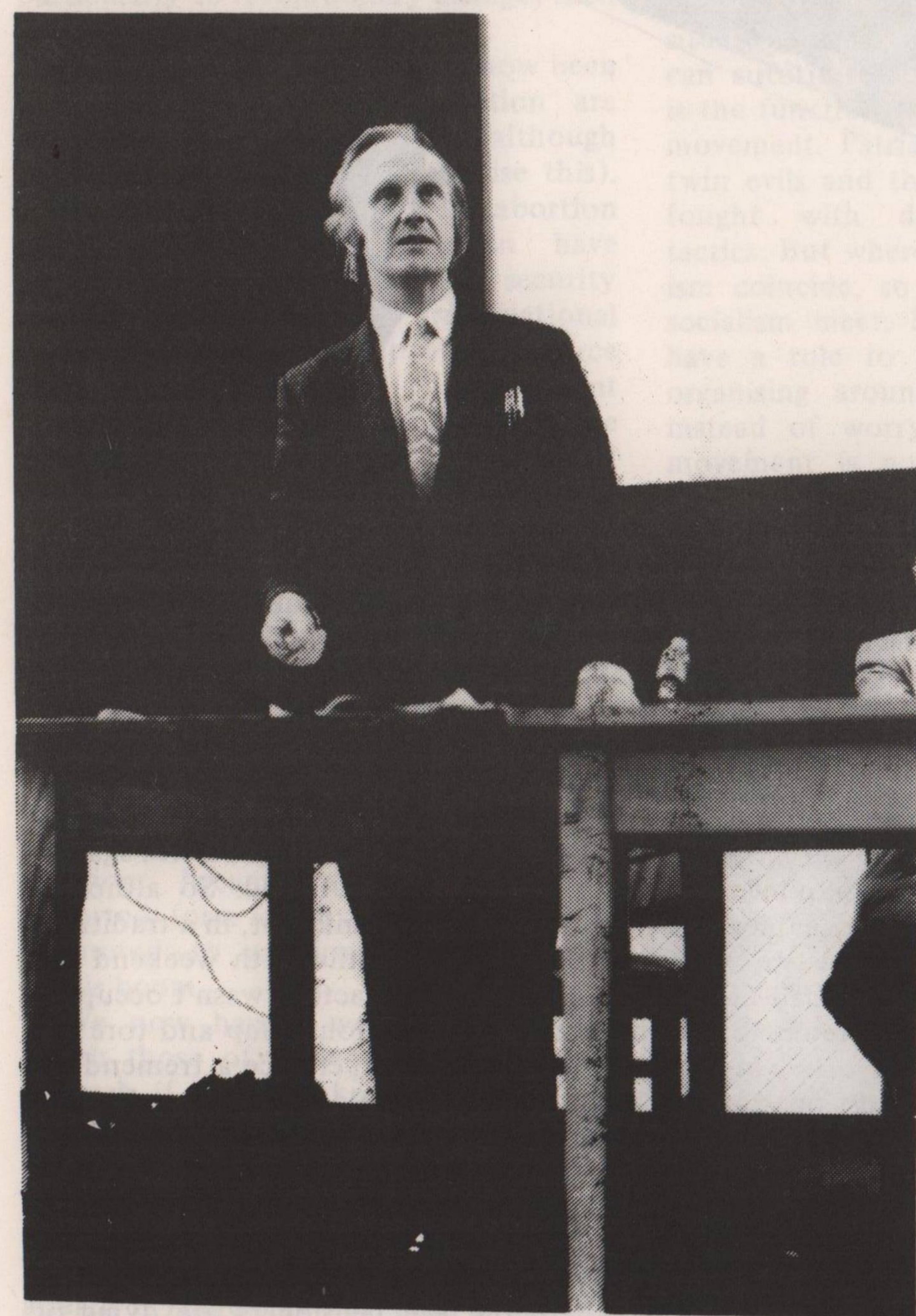
Workers' Plans

organization which could be a vehicle for the Corporate Plan and secondly to have this concept of linking people's roles as producers and as consumers.

DH. Can we look at progress you have made in the implementation of the Corporate Plan since 1975 and at some of the specific struggles that you have had, against redundancies, in some of the Lucas Aerospace plants. First of all how has the Lucas management reacted to proposals in the Plan and attempts to implement them?

MC. Well I think they reacted at about three levels. Firstly they didn't really believe that the thing was going to take off. They really believed that it was just a few activists who had these concerns about technology being used in an appropriate or socially useful way and that it didn't reflect the reality that most industrial workers experienced, and in that they were absolutely mistaken. Second, having failed to create circumstances where the thing died of itself the company then set up an alternative Combine Committee. They got a group of manual workers who were used as stooges of the management to set up an alternative combine to try and break our one up. Third, they tried to involved the official trade union movement against us by saying we were an unofficial body and that they couldn't negotiate with us because the full time officials wouldn't allow it. At the same time they were saying to the full time officials, if this kind of thing gets going all the links we have with you will be broken, the whole thing will be chaotic and so on.

At a direct industrial relations level they have tried to sack many of the leading people of the Combine. They even arranged a situation where they said that one of the security people at the Wolverhampton plant had been assaulted by the Convenor of Shop Stewards. They were going to set up a trial where they would take his job away from him. More recently they've tried to sack Ernie Scarborough.



Mike Cooley (photo: CAITS)

DH. What have you achieved?

MC. The specific things we have achieved are first, we've demonstrated beyond any doubt the ability of so-called ordinary workers to decide what products they should make, how they should make them and in whose interests they should be made. And so much so that they've seen through the whole myth of hierarchical management. As one of the Burnley workers put it: we've discovered that management is not a skill or a craft or a profession but a command relationship, a bad habit inherited from the army and the church. A very high level of consciousness coming through. And I think that in itself would have made the Corporate Plan worthwhile. But in a much more profound sense it means that we have actually built prototypes of the products that we are talking about. There are now products in existence, true they are mainly as prototypes, which demonstrate that you can so use technology to devise products for their use value and not just for their exchange value: products that conserve energy, materials, and enhance skill. The most important of these, I think, is the road/rail vehicle. We're now building a coach body onto it and plan to drive the vehicle round to the different towns where we've got factories, park it in the market place, or outside the town hall, or whatever, and have inside it a series of slides, video-tapes, posters where people can come in and discuss with us what our kind of technology could mean to their community.

DH. In the face of the reaction from management and from the official trade union structure what is your current strategy to push forward the implementation of the Corporate Plan? How do you propose to overcome this blockage?

MC. Well the blockage became more complicated two years ago when the company tried to close down two factories, one in Liverpool and one in Bradford. As a result of all the publicity the company agreed to intervention by the Labour government to create a tripartite meeting with the unions, the management, and the government. In our view that was really disastrous for us because that took the whole campaign and the activity out of our hands and placed it in the hands of the bureaucrats. The end result was that the Labour government gave Lucas £8 million of the taxpayers' money to build a new factory in the Liverpool area. So our main strategy now, having gone through all the political hoops that everybody told us one should go through, is to concentrate on big combine committees in other groups throughout the country, concentrate on the grass roots which experiences the problem of structural unemployment day by day.

DH. That is taking the struggle beyond the specific experience of Lucas into other companies such as Vickers, Thorn etc?

MC. Yes, because we believe that the Corporate Plan strategy, as a strategy, is appropriate to any industry or any community; if they simply look at their own resources, facilities and skills and they link them with the needs of that community.

DH. Are you also saying perhaps that the experience of Lucas shows that at the level of one individual plant it is very difficult to implement an alternative plan, given a hostile management, and that you need a more global political approach?

MC. Yes. Well, firstly I think it is inevitable that the management structure will be hostile to us because the value systems are entirely different. But I agree completely with you. In our view as we said right on page one of the Corporate Plan there can be no islands of social responsibility in a sea of depravity. We've done what we did to demonstrate the ability of people to do it and any other group of workers in our view could have done it. So we think it is absolutely central that it be spread out and we've never felt we could do it in isolation.

DH. I want to ask two questions about the ability of the Combine Committee to maintain the support of the base over the years since 1975. Given the difficulties since the plan was published was it not difficult to sustain the dynamic of discussion, of organization, over the period? And at the more fundamental level of redundancy struggle you mentioned the closures in several plants. Has the Combine Committee been able to avoid the sort of closures and redundancies management wanted to impose?

MC. Firstly I think the dynamic has been maintained for a number of reasons. One is that the problems we identified as the growing problems in technologically advanced society have got significantly worse since we produced the Corporate Plan and the need for this sort of thing seems to us to be greater now. The second thing is that the interest outside Lucas, including international interest in the Plan has really caused Lucas workers to realise that they are handling something which is incredibly important. All the interest, all the other people writing about it, who were beginning to take up similar ideas including in the United States, in Detroit and elsewhere, has reinforced the need to try and increase the dynamic and maintain the involvement. But it has at times been difficult and frankly it becomes very difficult whenever there isn't a direct threat of unemployment. I'd have to be absolutely frank and say that the lowest common denominator has always been the primitive fear of unemployment and the degradation that flows from it. But our analysis that there would be continued attacks on the workforce as they tried to cut back production in the United Kingdom and expand abroad has been proven to be correct. Every so often they try to close some factory which restimulates the whole thing again.

DH. And in the specific example of the Liverpool plant were you successful in opposing redundancies?

MC. Since we've produced the Corporate Plan we've been able to prevent the company sacking even one Lucas worker directly. It's probably the only multinational, multi-union company in the country where that is true. Several times they've tried to close plants and we've been able to prevent them because we have a level of consciousness now amongst the workforce which will do that. Though we are not able to cope with natural wastage we have prevented them from closing either the Bradford factory or the Liverpool factory.

DH. Can we look at the relationship between the Combine Committee and the official trade union structure in Lucas. The formation of the Combine Committee represented the development of a parallel structure of representation in Lucas, a more embracing structure than that of the official unions. What was their reaction to the Combine Committee's formation and has that reaction changed, given that many unions now, at a national level, support the general idea of Corporate Plans?

MC. Well I think that the reaction of the trade union bureaucracy to the Combine Committee is almost identical to the reaction of the trade union movement to the shop stewards' movement at the turn of the century. The shop stewards' movement represented an objective need in industry which the trade union movement was not catering for. Once the workers themselves at the point of production began to meet that need they were met initially with hostility. Then the attitude seemed to be to try to incorporate them and in many ways they're now institutionalised within the trade union movement. I think that's what we're witnessing with the Corporate Plan. From the onset the TUC said it agreed with the Corporate Plan and with this idea of socially useful work. Indeed they produced a film about it as part of their shop stewards' training programme. But the individual unions perceived it as a threat to their authority and many of them were openly hostile and that hostility wasn't limited to the right wing unions. It was strong from some of the left wing unions who also have notions of narrow hierarchical control. Quite early on the T&G accepted the Corporate Plan as its policy. It issued a booklet in relation to defence conversion where the majority of the book is based on the Corporate Plan. What we notice now is that some of the individual unions are setting up what they call 'Combine Committees' which means that they have an umbrella organization which covers members in their union only in the plants throughout the whole of the country. This in our view has the danger that it will fragment at the combine level the situation which is bad enough at a plant level. In fact in some ways it's making things worse.

DH. What is the relation of plant shop stewards to the Combine Committee over particular defensive struggles?

MC. Well the Combine Committee provides them with a sort

of framework in which everything which goes on at all the other plants is immediately conveyed to them. When they get into difficulties support is mobilized even on issues like wages. If a group is locked-out on wages then we prevent work coming in from that factory and so on. So it's an enormously supportive organization for their own individual struggles and it has deliberately ensured that it has no powers other than that of persuasion. It can only recommend things to each site and therefore it's got to be very sensitively tuned to the requirements of individual shop stewards' committees on each site who should then be sensitive to the requirements of people on the shop floor. This is unlike the big combines in the 60s which tried to impose policies on the shop stewards throughout the sites and got considerable hostility from shop stewards in individual factories. To a certain extent I think we've overcome that, although I freely admit that some groups of shop stewards were turned against us partly on a manual versus staff basis by the company — the point I made earlier. The attitude of the full time officials to the Combine really differed enormously from union to union. The T&G officials will do everything possible for us. One of the national officers is now on the advisory centre we set up at North East London



The first prototype of the Road/Rail Vehicle — one of the Lucas Combine's socially useful products (photo: CAITS)

Polytechnic. (CAITS — the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technical Systems) On the other hand some of the left-wing unions and also some of the right-wing ones which organise white-collar workers are quite scathing about it because they do see it as somehow undermining their authority. In my view I think it should be regarded as a logical extension of the trade union movement as it stands.

DH. Can I ask a clarifying question here. We've talked about the relation at plant level between the Combine Committee and the official unions. How is that relationship structured?

MC. In every plant there should be a joint shop stewards' committee which represents all the unions on that site. And that shop stewards' committee should send two directly elected representatives to each quarterly meeting of the Combine. In addition to the two representatives it is encouraged to send as many observers as possible because we believe that small elites are the incubators of corruption. Communication is maintained by the paper, by regular services which are provided like on wage bargaining, on new technology, on health and safety issues, on pensions and so on.

DH. Let's shift to a different area. The Lucas Aerospace Corporate Plan focuses its attention on a particular type of product — what you have called socially useful products. To what extent though, within the Plan, do you look at and attempt to develop a strategy for, first of all, control of the production process? And secondly to what extent have you looked at the production process in terms of new technology currently being introduced and the wide implications of that technology for the nature of the labour process and for future employment?

MC. In the original Corporate Plan we made the point about the need to link hand and brain, the idea being to release all the tacit knowledge and creativity of people on the shop floor

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which modern Tayloristic production techniques destroy. Now we haven't been able to force a position where any of the Plan's products is mass produced in Lucas or produced in any quantities. Heat pumps have been produced only as prototypes. So therefore there hasn't been the opportunity to test out in practice a different labour process, much as we would like to do that. We have operated a different labour process both in drawing up the Corporate Plan itself and also in making the prototypes. For example, the road/rail vehicle which is quite a complex piece of mechanisms. No rarified mathematical analysis was done for that at all. We used the common sense, the experience and the tacit knowledge of workers by asking them what size they thought an axle should be and we made the axle that size and in fact it worked because these people have spent a lifetime making, bending and twisting axles. We were able to democratize the whole decision making process, within the product design, the product planning and the product manufacture. So at a very small embryonic level when we were producing the prototype, we changed the nature of the labour process. Now we're putting forward a proposal to the company at the moment, in a collective bargaining framework for a new factory in the Liverpool area to produce heat pumps. We've got them running as prototypes and we have involved architectural students and others in so laying out the factory as not to reproduce the kind of hierarchy and control that exists in modern industries — to get real integration of workers by hand and by brain.

The whole question you raise has become much more significant in the last six months where the company is attempting to introduce significant pieces of new technology, computer aided design techniques, electro-chemical machining, numerically controlled machines, and so on. At the moment we're just starting to draw up a Corporate Plan on new technology where we're going to go through this same process again of involving the workers in all the factories in a tremendous discussion, getting their ideas and so on. And in the meantime we're imposing a moratorium on all new technology. It yet remains to be seen how successful we'll be in doing that but at least we're raising the issue that workers should not have the new technology in until they've had a chance to analyse the consequences and begin to put forward a new proposal. I might add that in doing that we're only reflecting what the TUC in Australia has done. It's put a moratorium on all new technology for five years until it can examine the consequences.

DH. Have you at any time during your attempts to implement the Plan presented Lucas Aerospace management with an integrated formula which includes not only the 'socially useful' products but also aspects of the production process, the question of control over it?

MC. No, we haven't done that yet. We've fought initially on the basis of the socially useful products. That would be a significant breakthrough. If we could then get that we would do the second stage. But of course in our day to day working, on the conventional products, we exercise a significant amount of control over the pace at which we produce, what the rates are, and so on.

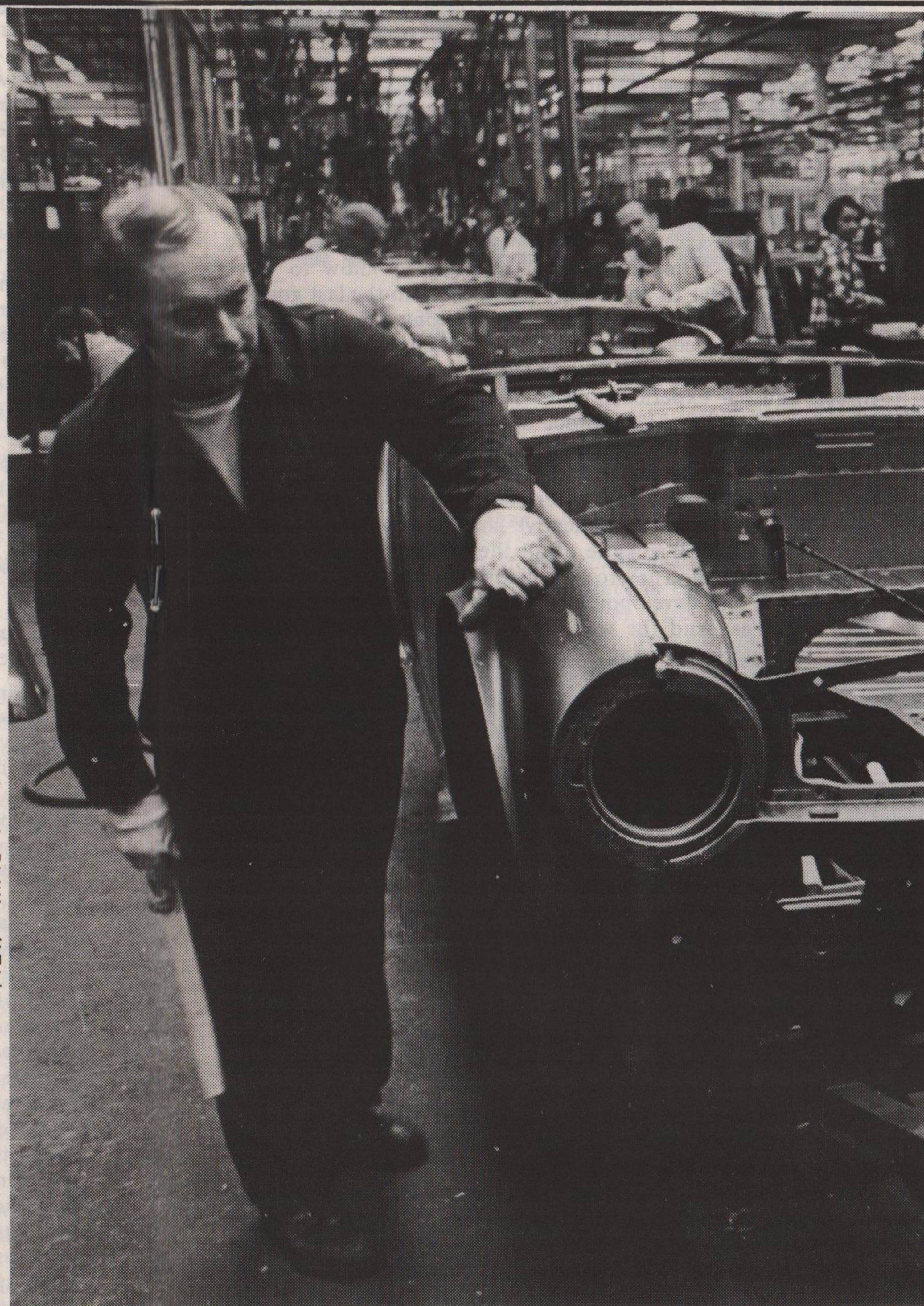
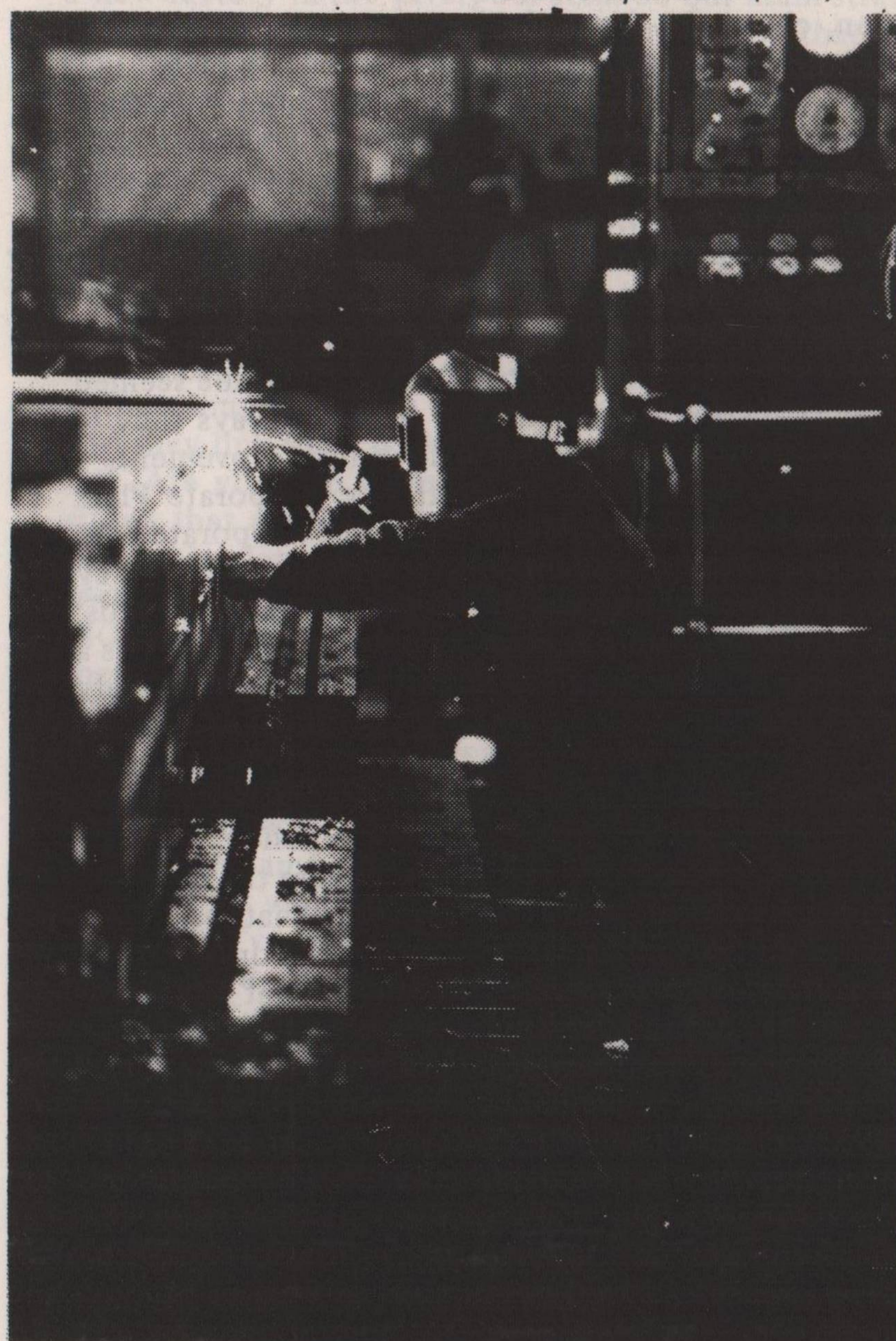
DH. Can you give us an idea — if we look at examples of socially useful products such as the heat pump, the road/rail vehicle that you've mentioned — of the form of production process you would be arguing for in the implementation of that aspect of the Corporate Plan.

MC. Really, I think we regard management as we now know it as moribund and superfluous, just a command relationship, and what we would really like to see is a self-managed form of factory in the way in which we self-managed the whole production of the Corporate Plan itself or the way in which we self-manage the Combine Committee with all its finances, its newspaper, and everything else. We feel that it would be wrong to leave the final decisions on what parts are produced in factories and how they're produced to those locked into the factory situation. We think it's vitally important that they should be reflecting the needs of the communities in which they're based. But we're by no means clear how that element

'We were able to democratise the whole decision making process, within the product design, the product planning and the product manufacture. So at a very small embryonic level when we were producing the prototype, we change the nature of the labour process.'

Workers at British Leyland, Speke (right) and Vickers, Scotswood (below). How can Alternative Plans prevent closures of plants like these?

Laurie Sparham (IFL)



is going to be brought in. We've attempted quite unsuccessfully now, on five occasions, to get discussions going in communities about how factories should be run and how they could be involved in it.

DH. What you've just said implies a radical challenge not just to the 'function of management' but to the whole structure of social relations within the company, the whole question of who controls what in a capitalist framework. Does that not produce a fundamental reaction from a company such as Lucas Aerospace, from any company enmeshed in capitalist relations of production?

MC. Yes, sure. It's been absolutely hostile. There is one development going on when one talks about the reaction of management. It would be true to say that at the level of management which represents finance capital, that level has been absolutely hostile. These are the people deciding whether they will invest in Brazil or South Korea or elsewhere. But at the level of management which represents industrial capital, people who like to see things made and produced and so on, as distinct from fiddling with paper money, we found a very receptive audience amongst those kind of people, many of whom incidentally would lose their job if the factories were closed down in any case. So I wouldn't want to generalize too much about management as a whole, I'd have to draw the distinction between technical management and division managers, often closely linked into communities, where the kids are at school, where the factories are and who would themselves be in serious difficulties if there were closures.

DH. To what extent do you feel the need to look for a new strategy now around the Corporate Plan and its implementation? You've talked earlier about having gone through all the hoops, about the move by the company now to introduce a whole wave of new technology with serious consequences for both jobs and the labour process, and you've now outlined above the radically different nature of the production process

you would ideally like to see. How do you then see your strategy in the next year?

MC. One avenue that some people see is identifying some products and then campaigning for new factories to be built to produce them. That would be one area; I don't think that is going to take us very far because the company will try to exercise ownership over the products and so on. I don't see any point in being involved with the government much longer, either the present one or the one we had previously. At present, there is brewing a major confrontation between workers and Lucas management over on whose terms new technology will be introduced.

DH. That will be a defensive struggle but on with links to the approach to production processes which is in the Corporate Plan?

MC. Yes, and it will be offensive to the extent that we've got very clear views about how new technology might be used. For example, the telechiric devices which were mentioned in the original Corporate Plan, devices that mimic in real time the motions of a worker going through a skilled labour process but do not objectivize the human skill or diminish the human being. So we won't just be saying you can't have this in the new technology unless you pay so much. We don't see it in narrow economic terms. We will be proposing ourselves alternative means of production which we would like to see introduced. So it will, as you say, on the one hand be defensive but on the other hand we will be also attacking from the other side in proposing our own forms of new technology. But I don't think we will be able to do much more in isolation. We can only move forward if other combines develop in other companies.

DH. Many of the products you've put forward in the context of the Lucas Corporate Plan relate to areas such as health, public transport. One of the aims of the Combine Committee is to break with a narrow economic view of the union struggle or with its location in particular plants. What has been your experience in working with, and organizing with, workers in other sectors?

MC. In the case of designing factories like the heat pump factory we've been able to work with architects and architectural students and so on. But I think the most fruitful field so far has been with the public service unions and with the health service unions. We've had meetings with a medical panel we've set up where doctors, nurses, auxiliary workers in hospitals, all work together in an integrated team where they can identify requirements in the health services and we can very often quickly find technological solutions to those. The only barrier is an economic one or a political one or something else. So that has worked fairly well but it's still at a very embryonic stage because unfortunately there is still an enormous division between people as producers, that is their life in factories, and people as producers, their life in the communities.

In the case of the public services unions, they have been inviting us to their weekend schools, we've had a whole series of speakers at conferences they've organised to talk about ways of fighting the cut-backs and linking in directly. But again that is still at a very embryonic stage: the Corporate Plan has only been going for about four years in its present form and it takes a long time to change political attitudes and organizational ways of behaving, particularly with traditional hierarchical ways of doing things that you often get in Labour or left movements. We've been trying to form new organizations as we've made new links; it's inevitably been a fairly slow process.

DH. Do you see, in the future, yourselves linking in with say health workers in a struggle over implementation of Corporate Plans on Lucas? How would you see that sort of joint struggle operating?

MC. We hope that we can make far greater use and far greater involvement with trades councils. In our view that's a completely underestimated form of trade union organization so we're putting a lot of emphasis on that at the moment. And we would like to see a situation where, for example, if a hospital is being closed down for lack of equipment, the health workers in that hospital would come to local factories and say 'this is the hospital where you and your family will

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have to go if they're ill,' and that the local factories should be involved in direct action with them, including strike action, to maintain those hospitals and if necessary appropriating part of their time and maybe equipment in those factories, waste materials or whatever, to produce machines or equipment which the hospital workers need.

DH. Do you have any experience to date, in Lucas Factories where the Combine Committee is active, of workers taking action outside the factory in these wider struggles?

MC. Oh yes. There was a meeting in Burnley, a town hall meeting, where 300 people came along from the community to define community needs and so on. There were long discussions about that and the Lucas workers have been helping them for example to improve housing, conserve energy and materials. In some of the local struggles around hospitals our shop stewards have played a leading role with nurses and others in their area. So all that is developing, though quite slowly.

DH. Do you see the need to develop structures that go beyond those that exist at this moment, such as the trades councils you mentioned, to meet these wider struggles? It seems to me that historically, and I'm not sure that this is necessarily so, trades councils have always been very wary of taking an active role in cross-union struggles. Certainly as they are constituted at the moment trades councils have shown themselves very weak precisely in the sort of area of struggle you've been talking about.

MC. I think in some ways that's a reflection of attitudes within the individual unions which make up the trades councils. Unions are very very possessive of their own patch and they are deeply ridden with economism. And that economism grew stronger at a time when Britain was a great imperialist nation, where the metropolitan working class could probably screw a bit more out of the metropolitan ruling class — although I'm not suggesting that the British working class were ever 'living it up'. But they didn't have to be as political as the workforce in other nations. Also I think in many ways the political dynamism was sapped by social-democratic ideas through the Labour Party and elsewhere or if it was encouraged it was often by small left wing groups, the CP or those others who behaved in a very, very arrogant way towards the working class; instructing them what to do, telling them how to go about it and so on.

So I do see the need for new structures. I'm by no means clear what type of structures they should be. Clearly they will have to be political to transcend the narrow economism of the trade unions but I hope that they can avoid all these mistakes that were made in the past, these terrible mistakes about the role of leadership and so on. We've seen in developing the Corporate Plan and all that has flowed from that the importance of leadership being more catalytic and enabling, where you keep your most dynamic elements at the base rather than sending them up into the superstructure; where the base is always correcting and purifying the superstructure, rather than a small elite taking things over at the top. So yes, I see the need for new structures but if it is to be a political organisation it must involve masses of people and its political ideas should be put over in a catalytic way rather than an authoritarian way.

DH. I want to look at a final area of discussion. We now have a new Conservative government whose industrial policy is radical in a very right wing sense, and could prove to be one of the most reactionary we've seen for a long time. To me it would seem that the climate created by this government and its policies is a very negative one for implementation of Corporate Plans in a factory faced with closure or threat of redundancies. Two or three years ago under the Labour government there was at least always that possibility of state intervention to give a certain room for manoeuvre — time and money for restructuring, reorganizing, to produce new products, within a Plan structure. In the present political situation the state clearly has no intention of offering that sort of room for manoeuvre. Does that not make for a much bleaker outlook for the Corporate Plan strategy in the next few years?

Can I ask you also more generally about what you see as the basic relationship between the Corporate Plan movement

and the state. Do you see it, if not as a necessity, than at least an advantage, something to work for, to have a state structure which operates in a reformist way, and will intervene directly, financially, to offer a certain room for manoeuvre to firms in crisis that could facilitate implementation of Corporate Plans? You said earlier that you had exhausted governments, wanted nothing more to do with them. Would you still hold to that if for example there were a left reformist government in power in England?

MC. Well firstly, as far as the present government is concerned certainly, outwardly, it's very aggressive towards the trade union movement. It's still difficult to know to what extent they differ in any substantial way from the last government in relation to their attitude to big companies. The other government had certainly a softer approach when there were redundancies and so on, but it was still governed by market forces, and our experience under the Labour government was they never gave us any direct support. There was a lot of sympathy but it always ended short of actual help. There were pious statements in the House of Commons and so on, and I detect that the Thatcher government is still in many ways planning industry in an indicative sort of way. They haven't got rid of the NEB in spite of all the political assertions that they would do so. They're still making massive funds available for research and development, so they're not leaving it to free market forces. And the whole tendency internationally is to have the state intervening. Now I can see the need for a state that is sympathetic but the real danger is that that would be the kind of state that existed in Sweden say for 40 years where workers, in my view, are absolutely passive, where when there's a problem they always look for the next representative to deal with it for them, where they're incorporated into the thinking of the government and they always see the solutions as within the framework of government. I think we're looking for something far more democratic and outgoing although we recognize that there must be a state which reflects that. But we don't for example believe that if large sections of British industry were nationalized in the way that the Bennites and others suggest that would necessarily make it more socialistic. We believe very much in what James Connolly once said that if nationalization *alone* meant socialization the hangman would be a socialist because the hangman is nationalized as well. We need a very different state structure to make that sort of thing possible and I don't see a future Labour government doing that very well.

For example we have always recognized the need for the state to intervene in medical care and we think it was a very, very important development in Britain that a Labour government took medical care to a large extent outside the framework of market forces. This was profoundly important. We feel there are whole other areas, including parts of manufacturing industry where the main concern should be the use value of products rather than their exchange value and that was what was significant about the National Health Service.

So certainly we support that kind of development but in practice the dangers have been that in implying that they were going to do that with large sections of British industry and restructuring it the last Labour government succeeded in conning the trade union movement and its leadership in particular into accepting 1.5 million people out of work. Now had that been done under a Conservative government I'm sure there would have been an outrage. I can recall 15 years ago people saying that there would be a confrontation between the government and the unions if we ever got half a million people out of work. We've now got 1.5 million and it was the Labour government that was able to con people into that.

So whilst I'm not taking a sectarian view and saying that we don't welcome intervention, I'm trying to make the point that intervention by the state itself, even under a Labour government, won't get the kind of thing we want. It's going to require radically different policies and in my view those policies will only ever be fought through and sustained and supported if masses of people at the factory level and the community level are involved in ensuring that they're implemented in their interests. And that they're part of the process, rather than a small elite, even a left wing elite in the Labour government, doing it by proxy on their behalf.

Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe

Peter Anderson

That there is a crisis of the revolutionary left in Europe is crystal clear. No doubt there are different opinions on the degree of this crisis, but few revolutionaries would deny that most of their expectations formed in the 'golden age' in the years after 1968 have not been fulfilled. The way we see it, the revolutionary left as a whole is in crisis — over and above that, the way each tendency within it is experiencing this crisis is specific. And this determines how we will proceed in this article: to first start with the causes of the general crisis and then look at how they have affected our tendency in particular.

Of course, this article is mainly concerned with events that happened in England. There will always be dangers about generalizing the argument to other countries since in each country the strength of social movements is different as is the implantation of the revolutionary left in relation to them. Also, the role of the institutions of civil society (e.g. the church) is different in the countries of Northern Europe and those of Southern Europe.



Workers at the Lip watch factory at Besançon, France, who occupied their factory in 1973 to prevent its closure.

Reasons for the crisis of the revolutionary left

1. An erroneous analysis of the capitalist crisis — From 1945 to the present has overall been a period of growth and expansion for capitalism. And there is no doubt that this has taken all revolutionaries by surprise. The following quote from Mandel in 1946 is a fairly typical reflection of what was expected to happen:

*'There is no reason whatever to assume that we are facing a new epoch of capitalist stabilization and development. On the contrary, the war has acted only to aggravate the disproportion between the increased productivity of the capitalist economy and the capacity of the world market to absorb it.'*¹

After the second World War, revolutionaries continued to expect a period of revolutionary turbulence similar to the one that had followed the first World War

in 1918-21. And some have still not realised even after 35 years that though capitalism cannot avoid crises, it is always on the cards that the system is able to use the crisis to restructure itself and lay the foundation for a new period of growth. Whether or not it is able to do this depends on the result of its political struggle with the working class. It is even possible that it will be able to use the coming period of the 'new technology' to begin a new period of growth —

International

though this will have to be with different mechanisms of social control than are used at present. What is clear is that we must radically break with a mechanistic/deterministic Marxism which sees socialism as being ushered in by capitalism when productive forces reach so high a level of development that they can no longer be contained by the relations of production. There is nothing inevitable about this process: it depends on the working class, which is itself a productive force, being able to impose a political defeat on its class enemy.

2. The continuing hold of reformism

Our inability to assess correctly what was happening to contemporary capitalism had disastrous consequences for our strategy. In particular, it made us unable to understand the relation that institutions like the trade unions, the social-democratic and the Communist Parties have with the working class vanguards we wanted to work with. Our analysis of reformism, which we incorrectly saw as exterior to the working class, argued that reformism's hold over the working class derived from its ability to deliver material goodies and that when the material goodies ran out, the hold would weaken.² And this inadequate analysis meant that we were totally unprepared for the fact that when (in 1974) the economic recession came and the flow of material goodies ceased, the hold of reformism was in no way diminished. In fact, the hold of the trade union leaderships over the rank and file was greater in this period of recession (1974 to the present) than it had ever been in the period 1968-74, which was a period of tremendous rank and file militancy at a Europe-wide level (May '68 in France, Hot Autumn in 1969 in Italy etc) and, not surprisingly, a period of exceptionally fast growth of the European revolutionary left. Since 1974, European politics has moved to the right and this rightward moving period has been a difficult time for social democracy and for the labour movements — and for the revolutionary left. And this should lay to rest the theory that a period of retreat for the labour movement and social democracy (and the Communist Parties) means a period of opportunity for the revolutionary left when it can fill 'the political space' vacated by social democracy in retreat. The period 1974-79 shows us that no such space exists — that in a period of recession, class vanguards with few exceptions accept the arguments of social democracy that 'in the national interest a government of austerity is necessary.'

Certainly, the rightward shift of politics in the 1974-79 period needs explaining. Here we have only time to identify one of its components: the ability of the political right to appropriate for itself 'freedom of the individual' as against totalitarian state interference. By a clever technique, the bourgeois media have been able to put it across that 'gulag' equals 'USSR' equals 'social democracy' equals 'too much

power to the trade unions' etc. And social democracy has been left with an economic programme of more state intervention in the economy in a period which has clearly proved the limits of Keynesianism and the inability of a capitalist government to avoid a recession by demand management when public opinion is for less state intervention. Social democracy, which had come to stand for the belief that as long as the cake gets larger, everyone could get larger slices, faces very serious problems in a period where there was no economic growth. In Great Britain, where the unions have considerable political independence from the political representation of social democracy (the Labour Party),³ the result of workers coming to understand that bigger slices were a thing of the past was a wave of militant strikes against the Labour government (winter 1978-79), followed by a general election (May '79) in which more workers than ever before voted Conservative, especially the more highly paid skilled workers. In other countries, where the political control of social democracy (and the Communist Parties) is tighter, the falling off of working class support has not been so marked. Even so the Communist Party vote was down from 34% to 30% in the Italian general election in June 1979, and in France and Spain and left-of-centre political forces are not gaining ground. In



none of these countries has the revolutionary left gained from this erosion of social-democratic support — on the contrary, the rightward shift has weakened the revolutionary left as it has weakened social democracy.

There are two very important lessons to be learnt from this co-incidence of our decline with that of social democracy. Firstly, it is no longer possible to argue that the working class is reformist just because a reformist leadership controls a rank and file that is constantly pushing for militant action. And so any 'exposure' politics that is orientated towards exposing the reformist leadership is bankrupt. We have to recognise that there is a reformism of the rank and file, who realise that they have something to lose in a period of capitalist crisis. Economic studies have shown that there is often a connection between wage militancy and unemployment rates — not surprisingly, the higher the unemployment, the less keen workers are to confront management — they are influenced by the knowledge that their job may be at risk. In the same way, revolutionaries have often made the point to other workers that a job is not theirs to sell, but all militants

know that if the terms are right, at every workplace, there will be many workers ready to apply for voluntary redundancy or redundancy payments — and there is a direct connection between redundancy payments and the lack of fights against factory closures. As well as having a material component, reformism also has an ideological one — and this has tended to be overlooked by the revolutionary left.

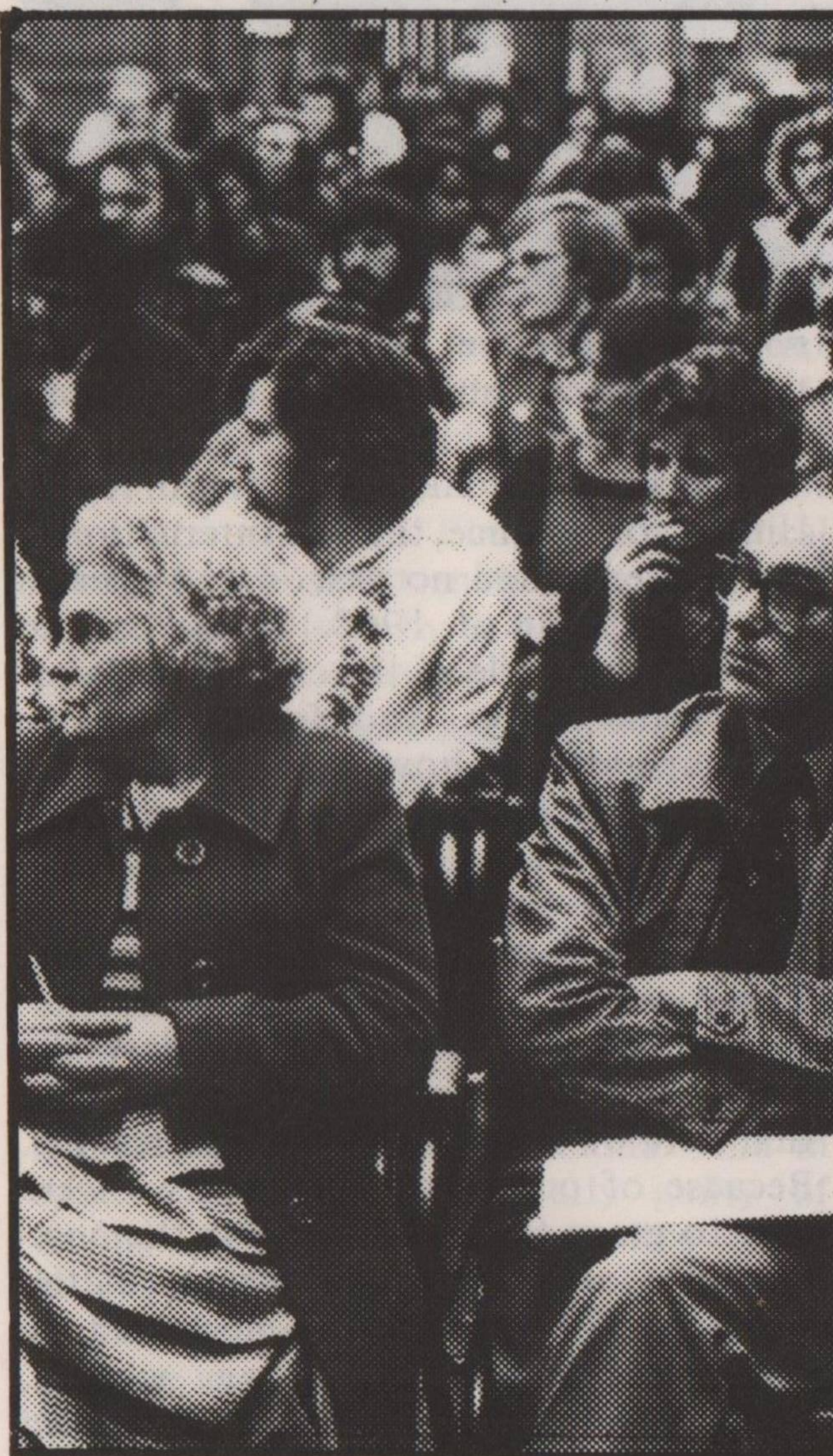
Secondly, it is the case that rank and file are quite likely to stay with reformism in the absence of a credible revolutionary alternative. The revolutionary left's alternative lacks credibility on two counts: organisationally — which is a chicken and egg situation since there is no way of getting bigger except by recruiting, and politically — in that we do not seem to have much to offer. Our wave of the revolutionary left developed in a period of economic boom and therefore did not have much to offer by way of solutions to economic crises. The period of our political development ('68 — early '70s) was characterised by wage militancy and we got by with demands of 'higher wages', 'equal rises for all', 'abolition of the lowest wage scales' etc. When the recession came, we were theoretically and politically unprepared and all we could do was oppose all attempts to make the working class pay for the crisis so the slogans we used were 'no cuts in public expenditure', 'no closures', 'no redundancies' etc. and to workers who asked us what our way out of the crisis was, our answer was that the capitalists had made the crisis and it was their problem — it was nothing to do with us. We couldn't see that this was a totally inadequate response — after all, working class people were experiencing in their everyday lives the results of inflation, the recession, structural unemployment — and our response was that it was nothing to do with us! Not surprisingly, many workers, including some of our sympathisers, turned to left Labour and the Communist Parties who argue that there is a way out within capitalism for the working class and had one on offer, i.e. the alternative economic strategy of left social democracy. In the crisis, our response was defensive. Since we did not allow ourselves a radical solution to the crisis, the only perspective open to us was defence of working class interests. This meant, in general, support for nationalisations and more state intervention at a time when many working class vanguards were developing much more sophisticated attitudes to these solutions. For instance, the revolutionary left opposed any hospital closure without demanding any change in the NHS at a time when radicals in the health service were seriously questioning the way the NHS had been operating and were coming round to the view that the fight against the rundown of the NHS had to include a fight for a preventive (as opposed to curative) medical service. Though we couldn't see it, our militant defensive

strategies were located on the same terrain as social democracy — we were unable to break with it.⁴

There is little doubt that the current economic recession is not temporary. There are enormous possibilities for revolutionaries in this period but only if we break with some of the articles of dogma closest to our hearts. Before we offer solutions to the crisis, we would be well advised to understand its nature.

3. 1968 — Excessive optimism

No doubt, the roots of the European revolutionary left, especially its Trotskyist wing, go back further than 1968. But for all of us the year was an important one. The Tet offensive in Vietnam was conclusive proof that U.S. imperialism could be defeated and May '68 in France was a clear indication that a pre-revolutionary situation can rapidly come about even in what looks like a stable, 'advanced' capitalist economy; the 'Hot Autumn' in Italy the following year confirmed our giddy expectations. Not surprisingly, many currents in the revolutionary left (including Big Flame) took up positions in which we assumed that it would be no big deal to smash the hold the organs of social democracy had over the working class and replace them with organs of dual power i.e. soviets etc. In one sense our optimism was justified; after all, 1968 was a great year from the point of view of class struggle. It did mark a radical break with periods of post-war reconstruction and the Cold War that had preceded it. It did show that the hold that links the trade union leadership and the rank and file can be broken in a period of intense class militancy. And it did show that political links can be built between vanguards of the industrial working class and radicalised sectors of



the new social movements (e.g. the worker-student assemblies in Turin in 1969).

But because we had little understanding of how the societies we were living in worked — we were unable to put the achievements of 1968-69 in any historical context. For an understanding of contemporary capitalist society, we relied on our knowledge of Russia in 1917 — and so an ultra-left fantasy was constructed. Since institutions like the Duma (parliament) and the trade unions had been swept aside by working class vanguards asserting their autonomy in 1917 — so the vanguards we were building links with would assert their autonomy and sweep aside today's parliament and trade unions.⁵ We failed to understand that in Western democracies there is a consensus behind institutions like parliament and the trade unions that was totally lacking in Tsarist Russia. And so our concept of the vanguard worker autonomous (independent) from any of the institutions of the society he or she lived in was nonsense from the start. It was as if we thought someone could grow up in England today and not be affected by the values put across by the schools, the media, the political parties etc. We overestimated the degree to which we ourselves had been able to break with the values of bourgeois society and assumed that everyone else who wanted to could. And, of course, this ultra-left cult of spontaneity and autonomy was less misleading in a period of rank and file militancy. It was after 1974 when the recession began to bite that our ultra-leftism really began to cost us dear.

4. The liability of workerism

Because the revolutionary left developed in a period of militancy by industrial workers, it did not feel the need to question some fundamental Marxist beliefs about who are the vanguards. Implicitly or explicitly, it was taken for granted that those who would lead the class struggle would be those sectors (i.e. miners, dockers, engineering workers) of

the working class that had in past struggles taken a vanguard role. And, of course, events like the miners' strikes in Britain in 1972 and 1974 were seen as a confirmation of our expectations. And so we tended to forget how little some of the key ideas of the post-1968 period squared with our ideas of who were the vanguards. In an attempt to affirm their proletarian credentials, many revolutionary organisations (e.g. Socialist Workers Party, Lutte Ouvrière etc.) denied the fundamental role students played in the events of France in May '68 and, even, the key role played by unskilled line workers in the militancy that spread through the car plants of Europe in the late '60s. And, of course, this attempt to forget our own history was so successful that it made us totally unprepared for the fundamental achievements of the women's movement which radically brought into question not only our concept of revolutionary organisation but also our concept of what issues are politically important — women put on the political map issues like abortion, rape, battered wives, the sexual division of labour and many others. Of course, an organisation like *Lotta Continua* is an obvious exception to this generalisation — it did at least at a theoretical level recognise the importance of those sectors of the working class whose involvement in class struggle is a defining characteristic of the post-68 period (i.e. women, prisoners, the unemployed, state and local government employees etc.) but *Lotta Continua* was unable to translate these theoretical insights into organisational terms — this led to the violent confrontations between feminists and industrial workers at the 1976 Rimini conference which caused the disintegration of the organisation.⁶

5. The poverty of theory

What is striking is the theoretical vacuum in which the practice of the revolutionary left has developed over the last years. Of course, there are good reasons for this vacuum — above all, the split between theory and practice of



Marxism as a result of the defeats suffered by the working class movement throughout Europe in the 1920's. The result of this disastrous split has been that whilst Marxist academic theorists continue to develop mainly irrelevant theory in the universities, revolutionary groups operate on a pragmatic day to day basis without asking themselves the fundamental questions revolutionaries need answers to. Fundamental questions like 'who is the working class?' 'What is the nature of the contemporary capitalist state?' remain unasked and the best work being done on these issues certainly does

not come from within revolutionary groups.⁷ The result of this theoretical impoverishment has been that not only has the revolutionary left had no adequate strategy for the issues that it is involved in but also that it has been unable to see the importance of some of the key political issues of the last ten years; e.g. racism, sexism, national autonomy, energy policy were all issues that were forced onto the attention of the revolutionary left. For instance, most of the revolutionary left was taken totally by surprise by the struggles of the national minorities for liberation

(e.g. the Basque Country, Corsica, the North of Ireland) that are such a central part of the political struggle in Europe today (though an adequate analysis of the role the Common Market is playing in building capitalist integration inside Europe could have lessened the surprise). In Britain, although most of the groups claim to be Leninist and therefore can be expected to have a satisfactory position on self-determination — in practice, most groups have given little more than token support to the struggle of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland and not even token support to Welsh and Scottish demands for regional autonomy.

The Crisis of Our Tendency



In the first part, I have looked at factors that affected the crisis of the revolutionary left as a whole. In this second part, I want to look at the specific ways in which the political tendency of which Big Flame is part experienced the crisis.

Our political tendency is referred to as 'soft Maoist'. All the groups involved in the tendency came out of the political space created by the May '68 events in France and the 'Hot Autumn' in Italy in 1969. What these events showed us was that revolutionary change could come very suddenly without anyone predicting it. Our tendency which included groups like *Lotta Continua* (Italy), OCT (France), PRP (Portugal), KB (Germany) was never very structured. There were informal visits from one group to another, translations of each other's publications and a shared theoretical reference to the new Italian Marxists like Panzieri, Tronti and Negri.

A brief summary of the views that the

groups in the tendency held would include:

— A positive assessment of the Chinese revolution and of the Cultural Revolution in particular. What we got from this 'Chinese Connection' was a firm belief that subjective factors can override material conditions. Mao's theory and practice was seen as a break with a tradition of Marxism that saw socialism as only being on the agenda in countries with developed forces of production. We accepted the belief of the Chinese Communists that it was possible to begin to build socialism even where there was a low state of development of the productive forces.

— A belief that important sections of the working class wanted revolutionary change. We saw the revolutionary process developing as a qualitative extension of workplace militancy. We remained trapped in an economic perspective which underestimated the need for a

political offensive of the working class that would mobilize more than just its industrial sector.

— The idea that history began in 1968. Unlike, for instance, the 4th International, our tendency had no past — we began on the high point of 1968. So we had no sense of the cycle of the class struggle: of its ups and downs. And, for example, we were unaware of how the institutions of social democracy had managed to recuperate waves of militancy in the period after the first and second world wars. (The Communist Parties too in the later case.)

— A conception of the working class (the proletariat) that was much wider than that held by other revolutionary currents. Because of our lack of dogma, we were able to grasp the roles played in the post-68 cycle of struggles by sectors of the working class traditionally neglected by the revolutionary left — e.g. women, youth, immigrant workers, unskilled

('mass') workers, prisoners, tenants etc. Of course, as could be expected in our theory and practice we 'bent the stick' too far to the point of sometimes seeing the established, white, skilled section of the working class as a conservative force and we also failed to resolve the fundamental problem of how to build ongoing structures out of struggles that are violent and sporadic; after each prison mutiny, you were organisationally back where you started.

— We over-estimated the *tactics* of struggle and tended to only be interested in struggles which had employed 'new' tactics i.e. sabotage. More traditional struggles such as unionization, were neglected.

— We were the first part of the revolutionary left to be affected by the demands and ways of organising of the women's movement, the gay movement etc. Inside our organisations this meant a struggle against the cult of leadership and the search for less alienating ways of organising meetings — an understanding of the need for childcare if women were to be able to participate in the life of the organisation. It also meant that we rebelled against a Marxist tradition that saw no connection between political activity and personal life and we firmly believed that it was possible and important to challenge the level of personal relationships between socialists before the seizure of state power. Like many feminists, we were not prepared to accept that personal liberation had to be deferred until after the revolution. Though we accepted the obvious fact that islands of socialism cannot be built in a sea of capitalism we did (and do) think it possible for revolutionary socialists to develop ways of organising and ways of living that are 'pre-figurative' (i.e. that in some way look like what life will be like within a socialist society). We were not prepared to accept that revolutionary politics was a 'sacrifice' and we expected from our political activity a certain degree of personal satisfaction.

It should be clear from even this brief summary of our political tendency that it was likely to prove vulnerable and fragile when faced with the political climate of the late 1970's. Firstly, a political tendency whose international perspective was characterised by a positive attitude towards the Chinese revolution was bound to be seriously affected by events in China since the death of Mao. Groups like Big Flame, the OCT and *Lotta Continua* had for a long time been critical of Chinese foreign policy but we had taken the easy way out and seen it as an aberration in no way connected to Chinese internal policy. At the same time, we under-estimated the crucial lack of proletarian democracy in China. And in some cases, we were clearly guilty of having a double standard, like being indifferent to the repressive policy towards women and sexuality of the Chinese government — a policy we would have violently attacked if put forward by

a Western government. There has been no consensus in the response of the groups of our tendency to the rightward shift in China — the OCT (France) and PLS (Belgium) have taken up Bettelheim's position that since the defeat of the Gang of Four there has begun the restoration of capitalism in China, and in Big Flame, while there is agreement that socialism is no longer being built in China, there is disagreement as to how permanent the defeat will be.⁷ Whatever we end up calling China, it is important that we

communities, we were not able to oppose this forced repatriation.

Our lack of historical knowledge meant that we underestimated the strength of reformism and the attraction it would continue to exercise over workplace and community militants. As it becomes clearer that revolutionary struggle in advance capitalist countries is very much a long-term business, many activists are abandoning the revolutionary left for social democracy (in Britain, the Labour Party) which they see as



'We're taking our health in hand' (L'Étincelle)

learn from our over-optimism of the past that socialism cannot be built without the institutions of socialist democracy (workers and peasants councils etc.) and that in a situation where party and government are indistinguishable, there is bound to be an erosion of grass-roots democracy.

No doubt, our tendency would have been able to weather the difficulties of events in China if they hadn't coincided with a reflux of the struggle in Europe and the consequent fatigue of many of our members. Our political perspectives were tinged with voluntarism ('optimism of the will') and ultra-leftism, the heady mixture left us totally unprepared for the process of recuperation of the victories of the post-68 period. In fact May 68 was itself successfully converted by the unions and the French Communist Party into a 15% wage rise. Then, the factory delegates that were thrown up by the rank and file militancy during and after the 'Hot Autumn' were incorporated into the union structures, campaigns for abortion on demand had partial victories in laws that made abortion legal in certain circumstances. In other struggles we were not strong enough to threaten the right-wing offensive; for example, since 1975, the French and German government have been sending back to their country of origin thousands of migrant workers — although, in some cases the revolutionary left had good contact with the immigrant

protection against the right-wing trend in European politics. Though, of course, this process of revolutionary socialists making their peace with social democracy is not a new phenomenon.

Theoretical unpreparedness

Like the rest of the left, our tendency



was theoretically unprepared for the post-1974 downturn of the struggles. But because our expectations were so much higher, the downturn was all the more painful. There are tendencies on the revolutionary left that have been small and isolated for years — it is rapid growth that would come as a shock to them. But organisations like *Lotta Continua* which had a membership of over 10,000 after five years of existence had a sense of being part of a 'mass struggle.' Because of the extremely rapid growth and a sense that revolution was 'on the agenda', their militants kept up a level of political activity that could not be maintained in the long term. The leadership was able to keep getting this level of activity by consistently over-estimating the possibilities of revolutionary change in Europe⁹ — and of course, when the bubble burst, it burst sharply. Militants dropped out of revolutionary politics by the thousands and there was a 'crisis of militancy' that decimated the groups of the revolutionary left, including those of our tendency¹⁰.

Party and movements

The crisis of militancy hit our tendency head on because of the belief (see above) our members held that political activity and personal liberation had to go together. And the leaderships of our organisations refused to take account of this belief and to find a 'cruising speed' for political activity that did not depend on endless calls for 'one last effort' and have the consequence of militants burning themselves out. It is also true that our tendency was most affected by the growth of 'movement' politics that is characteristic of revolutionary politics in monopoly capitalist countries. We correctly argued that it was important to put class before party and we insisted that our members do long-term systematic work in the different united fronts and campaigns — and we did not make a fetish of the organisation.

But if you push the 'class before party' position to an extreme, the party seems redundant.¹¹ Hard-line Leninist organisations do not have these problems. Since they recruit on the basis of 'the party directs the struggle', there is less chance of their members coming to question the need for a party. But all the groups in our tendency (the most extreme example is *Lotta Continua*) have had a 'movementist' faction that wanted to dissolve itself in the class and its movements. At the same time, the groups have also a 'Leninist' wing arguing for more centralisation and the giving of a higher profile to the organisation — sometimes this tension can be synthesised, in other situations like with the OCT it leads to a succession of splits towards the movement and towards more Leninist formations (i.e. the Fourth International) until there is not much left of the original goal of a creative fusion of the two currents.

Not surprisingly, there is no evident solution as to how to resolve this contradiction — after all, it has deep roots in the revolutionary movement. On the other



The steel employers' headquarters at Longwy, France, after being sacked by workers fighting proposed redundancies (photo: Helen Bamberger, Gamma)

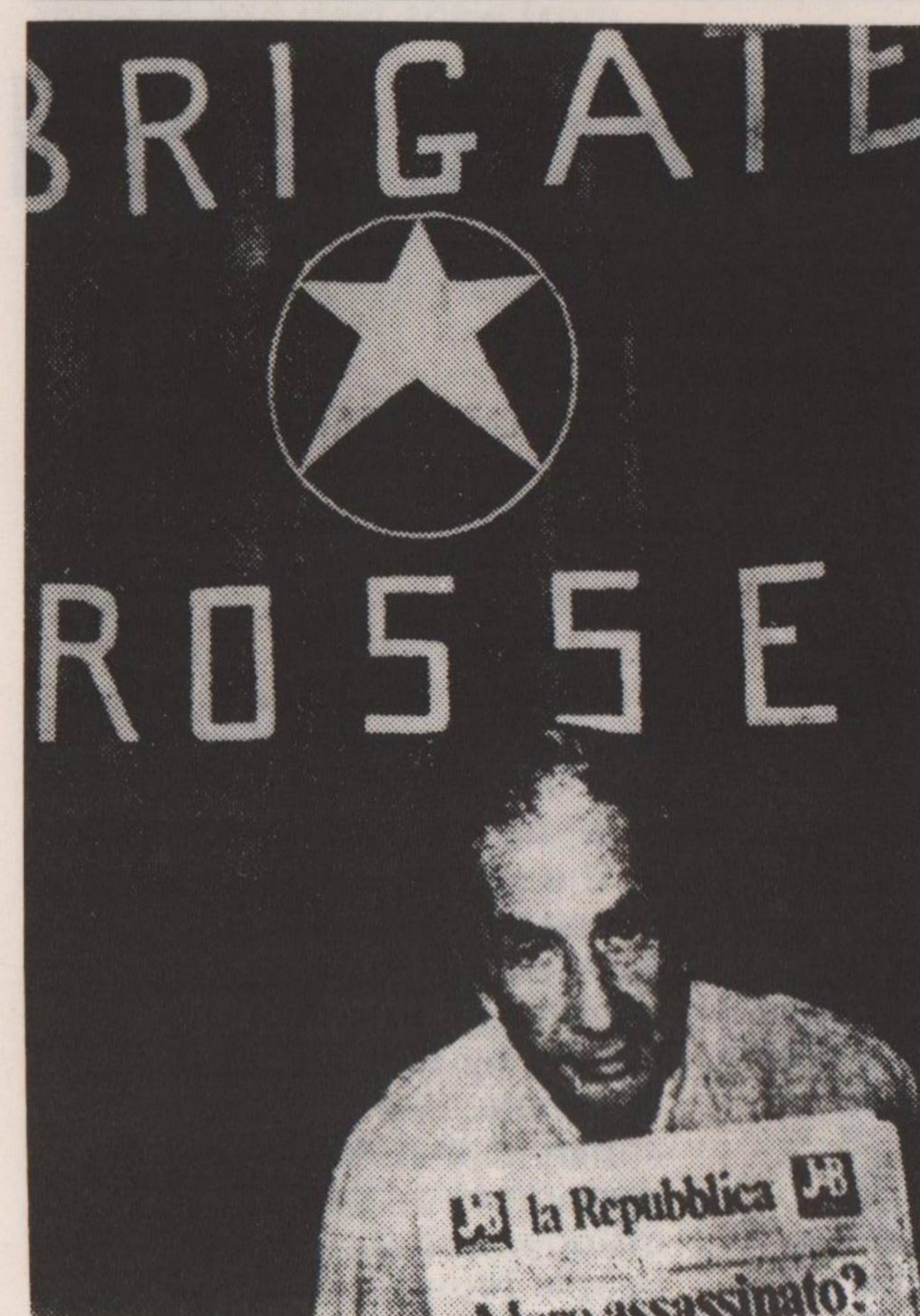
hand, its solution is essential since classical Leninist organisations are not able to appeal to key sections of the revolutionary movement (i.e. many socialist feminists, black militants etc.¹²) and movement politics is bound to be limited in its working class orientation and in its ability to develop the degree of discipline and organisation necessary to stabilise the victories made — and without this process of stabilisation, all gains are temporary. And although we must continually learn from the class and the movements — we should have no illusions that the class or these movements are either homogeneous or politically united. Inside every political movement (including women's movements) there are revolutionary, revisionist and reformist tendencies which reflect key political differences. A revolutionary organisation must understand these differences and insist that its members inside these movements fight for the tendency which the organisation thinks is correct.

On many occasions, groups in our tendency have failed to recognise these differences and have acted as if the movements were homogeneous — and thus have failed to give their members inside these movements any guidance. Not surprisingly, the response of many of the members is 'of what use is the organisation to me?' It goes without saying that the increasing divisions inside the working class (as it comes to include more and more intermediate strata) and the growing proliferation of political movements and single-issue campaigns pose fundamental problems for revolutionary organisations. Unlike the Trotskyists who tend to make light of these divisions, our tendency sometimes seem to believe that the more proliferation the better — 'let the hundred flowers bloom!' Between these two extremes, some middle way must be found which accepts these divisions (but not as inevitable) and which constantly tries to find issues which move in the direction of unity and recombination.

'Terrorism'

No doubt on many occasions governments have invented 'terrorists' in order to crack down on revolutionary organisations. But it is also true that our tendency, because it recognised the violent nature of class oppression under capitalism has always refused to condemn those sections of the working class whose response has been violent. And, on occasions, groups like *Lotta Continua* were not clear enough on the difference between mass working class violence and the elitist violence of those (e.g. the Red Brigades) who took it upon themselves to act violently for the class. It should be clear that a situation like that of Italy where the Red Brigades have become important actors on the political scene poses enormous problems for the revolutionary left. On the one hand, it has to avoid the lies and slanders of the Communist Parties who call the Red Brigades 'fascist provocateurs', on the other hand, any move to express solidarity with them invited an immediate confrontation with the state. One cannot feel confident about giving advice of what to do in such a situation.

Throughout this article, we have referred to a political tendency that includes revolutionary groups in different countries; this notion of a tendency should be seen as something loose and unstructured. Until quite recently, the links between the different groups were very informal. We would read each other's publications and exchange visits on our holidays. Big Flame's closest links were with *Lotta Continua* — we translated many of their publications and participated in a cadre school *Lotta Continua* organised for our members in 1975. It is probably true to say that the revolutionary movement in Italy was a reference for all the groups in our tendency — and we were disorientated by the collapse of *Lotta Continua* in 1976 and the more gradual disintegration of *Avanguardia Operaia* from 1976 onwards. Contacts between the different groups remained very ten-



tative in the 1970-78 period which is not surprising given that we all rejected the Fourth International model of international links without having any clear idea of what to put in its place. Each of the groups recognised the specificity of their national experience and, certainly, this led them to a rejection of the idea of a democratic centralist International.

In fact, what brought the groups together in a more structured way was the need to develop a European co-ordination over the elections to the European Parliament which were to take place in June 1979. Since it was an

electoral intervention, the co-ordination included groups that are outside our political tendency — for instance, it included centrist forces like the French United Socialist Party (the PSU). Elections are not a happy terrain for revolutionaries¹³ and in many ways it was unfortunate that our coming together occurred over the European elections — especially given the indifferent attitude of working class vanguards to them. Fortunately, the co-ordination did not allow itself to be over preoccupied with the European elections and has now begun to discuss some of the key issues facing our political tendency in the current period, and also concentrate on more practical issues like the international rank and file co-ordination of Ford workers.

A difficult period

It should be unfortunately clear that these discussions take place in a period of retreat of our political tendency. The disappearance of *Lotta Continua* and the severe crisis being experienced by the OCT and Proletarian Democracy (an organisation formed in 1978 out of a merger of the majority of *Avanguardia Operaia* and a minority of the PDUP-Manifesto) show the problems that face those of us whose politics have developed out of the mass struggles of 1968. The current political situation in Europe, which is one of a right-ward shift in almost all countries, demands of us that we make a sober assessment of what we can and cannot do. This assessment must contain a critique of some of the ultra-left positions that were an integral part of our tendency — many of them have

in any large numbers.

6. As is to be expected, Chris Harman in his article in *International Socialism* 4 dismisses the idea that any other social strata apart from the working class can be involved in the revolutionary process. For instance, *Avanguardia Operaia*'s belief that peasants can be a revolutionary force inside the proletariat is dismissed as 'populism.' (Harman in *International Socialism* 4, p.62-63.) For personal accounts of the effects of Rimini see *Dear Comrades*, Pluto Press, 1980.

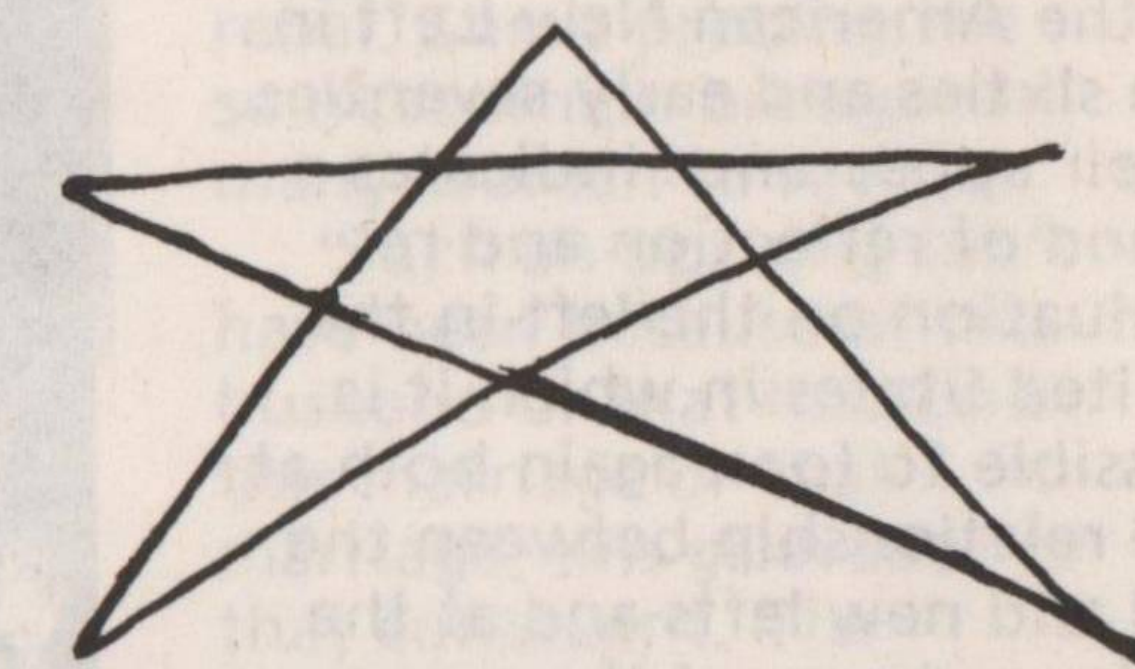
7. Take for instance the debate over the 'new working class' started by Serge Mallet and others. It is quite clear that the decreasing number of industrial workers, the increasing number of service and state-sector workers is changing the composition of the working class and this must have consequences for revolutionary strategy, but these key questions (and others) are not being discussed in revolutionary groups who, in the main, prefer the security of 60 year old dogma. Also see, for example, the very rich debate on sex and class inside the theoretical wing of the women's movement and in the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists).

8. A recent pamphlet published by Big Flame, *The Century of the Unexpected*, puts forward the view that China, like the USSR, is 'state collectivist.' It is a discussion document to further the debate inside and outside of Big Flame.

9. See for instance *Lotta Continua*'s uncritical attitude towards the MFA in Portugal in 1975 in an interview with Otelo which we translated in our pamphlet *Blaze of Freedom*.

been discussed in this article. But, at the same time, we must avoid the very real danger of becoming too accommodating to reformism and social democracy. There is a great temptation that as we become older and more mature that we come to see political positions that we have held as 'youthful follies' — this is part of a process that hits individuals and organisations as they desire to be more 'legitimate' and acceptable within bourgeois society. At all times, we should remember that revolutionary socialists cannot be comfortable inside capitalist society — if they are, there is bound to be something wrong with what they are doing politically.

In the current period, there are many occasions where it will be correct for us to work alongside reformist forces — i.e. in defence of bourgeois rights, the trade unions etc. And where possible (i.e. over abortion in this country) we must fight to develop situations where this joint work is done on our terms. But, we should always be clear that, at the end of the day, the goal of social democracy (including its left variant) is very different from ours. We don't agree either on the nature of the socialist society we are fighting for or on the way to fight for it; they believe in a gradual, peaceful transition to socialism — we don't.



FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted in Paul Thompson and Guy Lewis, *The Revolution Unfinished? — A Critique of Trotskyism*, Big Flame pamphlet.

2. If we classify both social-democratic and Communist Parties as reformist, we also recognise important differences between their respective relation to the working class. In fact, in countries like France the existence of both a large socialist party and a large communist one gives reformism even more room for manoeuvre; it can always provoke a (false) polarity between them as it did in 1978.

3. In Great Britain, unions are organised by trade and not by political affiliation as in France and Italy. Although many unions are affiliated to the Labour Party, this link is in no way an organic one. Certainly, it cannot be compared with the link between the French Communist Party and the CGT union.

4. In Big Flame, we have always been aware of the limitations of this wage militancy-defensive unionism cycle. Our pamphlet *Labouring Under the Tories — or a Socialist Alternative* is a clear statement of this position. Fortunately, there seems to be amongst revolutionary socialists a growing awareness of the need for a positive alternative.

5. E.g. the autonomous assemblies in Italian workplaces with their perspective of 'we are all delegates.' A different but connected perspective was that of 'self-help' health, food co-ops, free schools where revolutionaries set up parallel institutions to the existing ones. Even if they were successful, these parallel institutions were not able to involve the working class

10. This decimation has not been so pronounced for Big Flame — we have managed to grow slowly over the last few years. This is probably because firstly we started small and secondly many of the battles of feminism were fought early on in England. Though it should be clear that no organisation can have the arrogance to think that it has 'solved the demands of feminism' — since there is always a tendency (and more) for revolutionary organisations to settle for male-dominated structures and ways of organising — constant pressure from feminists is necessary to prevent these 'relapses.' And it is always possible that at a certain time women comrades do not find this the most useful way to spend their political energy. See the article '1968 — Ten Years On', *Revolutionary Socialism* 2.

11. This point is also made in a very interesting document called 'Our Political Current' by a faction in the OCT that has just joined the Fourth International.

12. See for example the constant problems the SWP is having with its black (Flame) and women's (Women's Voice) wings. Within these wings there are constant demands for political independence which are rejected by the leadership of the SWP.

13. Big Flame's position on elections is that revolutionaries cannot afford to be absent from them — though we do not see electoral work as an over-riding priority. It is for this reason that we are involved in 'Socialist Unity', an electoral alliance that includes the Fourth International. Our position on elections is very different from that of the SWP who see standing candidates in elections as a total waste of time for revolutionaries.

The Women's Movement and the American New Left

Sheila Rowbotham

Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: the Roots of Womens Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1979

ed. Dick Cluster, *They Should have served that Cup of Coffee: Seven Radicals remember the sixties* South End Press, Boston, 1979

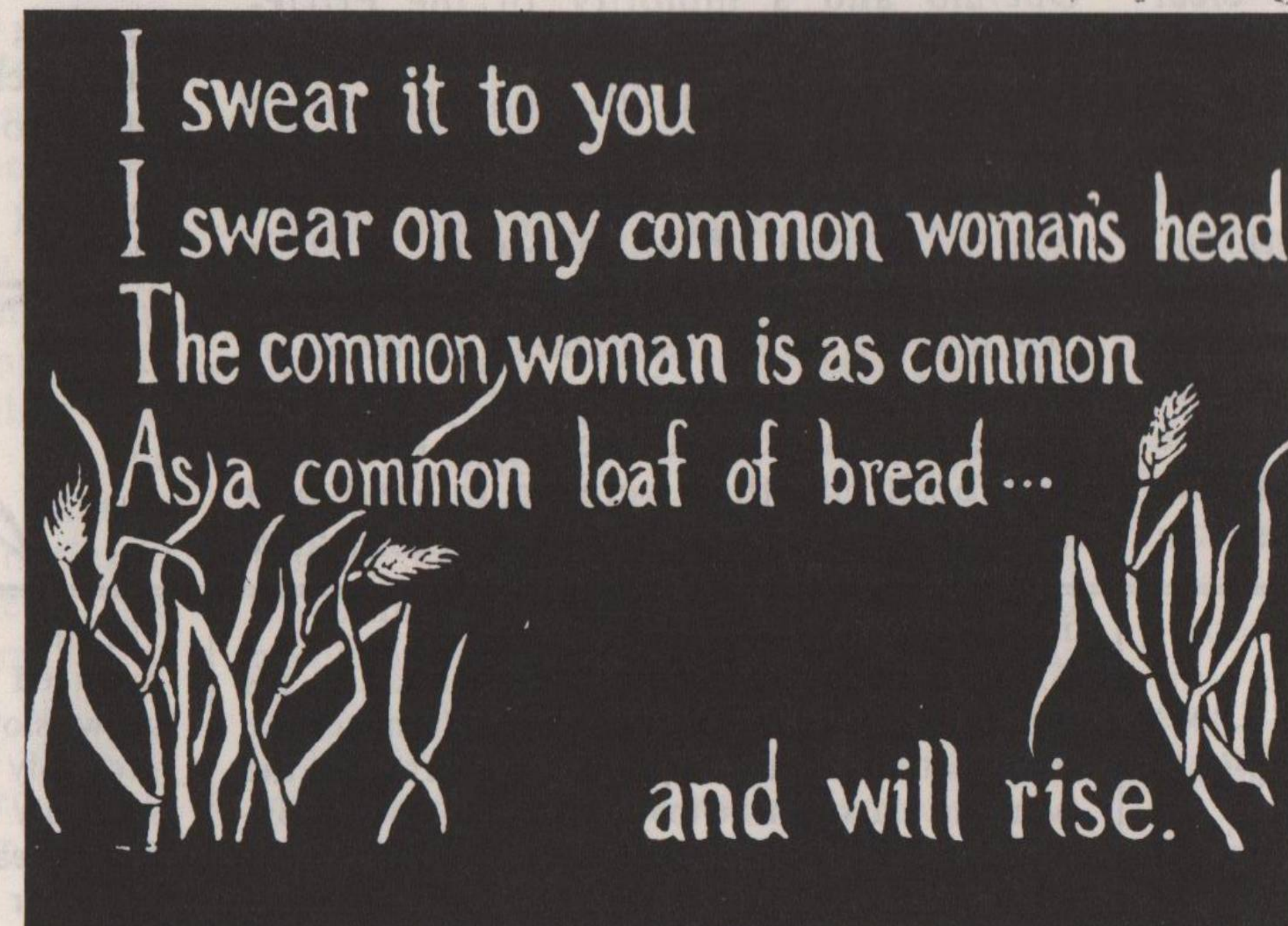
ed. David Talbot and Barbara Zheutlin, *Creative Differences: Profiles of Hollywood Dissidents*, South End Press, Boston, 1978
Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning Questions*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1979

All four of these books describe the emergence, growth and fragmentation of the American New Left in the sixties and early seventies. Their appearance indicates a mood of reflection and re-evaluation on the left in the United States in which it is possible to look again both at the relationship between the old and new lefts and at the various phases of the new left. Sufficient time has passed to search for the sources of feminism and see the problems the Black Panthers or the students confronted. The benumbing pain of all those splits, between generations, between black and white, men and women, gay and 'straight', left a kind of paralysis. As some of the pain recedes the stories begin.

Sara Evans traces the origins of the new feminism of the womens movement back to the Civil Rights movement. Of course she is aware of the longer term reasons for a womens movement, like the development of the government and service sector of the economy which pulled women into jobs outside the home, the transformation in the circumstances of sexuality brought about by changes in contraception and commitment to smaller families. American women confronted a new interpenetration of public and private spheres in the fifties. The challenge to women's public role comes at the juncture of job and home.

Already by 1960, before Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, and before the formation of the National Organisation for Women (NOW) there was evidence of dissatisfaction among middle class women, 'the problem that has no name.' But as she points out these general changes do not explain,

'the mystery of how a few young women stepped outside the assumptions on which they had been raised to articulate a radical critique of women's position in American society.'



She takes us back to opposition to segregation in the southern YWCA and radical Methodist existentialists in the fifties, witnessing at 'the prophetic edge' of history, asserting that Christianity was not only a faith but a life, as early influences on the sit-ins, freedom rides and the formation of the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC). The courage of the black and white women already involved inspired the young students who came from the north in the Freedom summer of 1964. They also came into a movement which already asserted direct action, freedom, equality, non-hierarchical forms of organising and possessed a tremendous moral courage. But it was not enough simply to be good and brave. 'The

same women who explored new skills and grew in self-respect also experienced a cultural undertow of expectations that they would perform traditional feminine tasks.' Also the arrival of young white women, 'heightened the sexual tension that runs as a constant current through racist culture.' While some inter-racial relationships were warm and caring in others an insulting romanticism, a longing to exonerate guilt combined with sexual exploitation and a notching up of conquests over the forbidden white womanhood. The new generation of young black women activists who joined SNCC in 1964-5 took the same political risk as men

adherence to direct participatory democracy. When people got together to talk they could discover the social basis of their problems. The task of the organisers was to make it possible for them to meet. But it was unclear what part radicals should play in the subsequent process of realisation and action. Problems of leadership and hierarchy were not solved merely by saying they were not there. It soon became apparent that hidden leaders were more difficult to dislodge and that some people found it easier to participate than others in large angry meetings. It was actually harder for women to take part in the new left than the old. In the '40s and '50s there had been a recognition of 'the woman question' and a commitment to developing local women leaders which was not present in the mid '60s new left.

There was moreover a shift in the idiom of new left politics. Sara Evans writes, 'The new left had begun by raising the "feminine" values of co-operation, equality, community and love but as the war escalated, FBI harassment increased, and ghettos exploded, the new left turned more and more to a kind of macho stridency and militarist fantasy.'

So when women organised teenage girls or welfare mothers their achievements were dismissed. Sexual liberation was expressed in male heterosexual terms. 'Girls say yes to guys who say no' was a slogan of draft resistance. Attempts to raise 'male chauvinism' were swept aside in the vortex of black anger and white middle class guilt. At a radical conference in Chicago William Pepper patted Shulamith Firestone on the head and said, 'Move on little girl; we have more important issues to talk about than women's liberation.' This was to prove quite an historic pat.

In the apparently spontaneous growth of the womens movement new left friendship and political networks were in fact vital and Sara Evans uncovers this process of connection in the early days of American radical feminism. Women

consciously tried to shed old theories and start anew from experience. This contributed to the creativity and openness of the early movement and enabled it to involve many women outside the new left. But it is worth noting that the faith in following feelings was in fact a characteristically American idea and that the organisational form of the small group in which consciousness could be raised by being shared had several religious and political precedents. There were the witnessing sessions of the Methodist Church, Vietnamese womens meetings, the practice of the SDS and the Chinese 'Speak Bitterness' meetings. New movements can break with the past but they carry something with them too. Women explained feminism came out of 'the discrepancy between the movement's egalitarian ideology and the oppression they continued to experience within it.' But they did not bother to add what seemed too obvious to mention that the various phases of the new left,

'created new arenas — social space — within which women could develop a new sense of self-worth and independence.'

Only ten years ago it would have appeared inconceivable that women would lay claim on the experience and ideas of the new left so successfully that the historical connection between the two would be effectively obscured.

Personal Politics is a timely reminder of the short span of political memory.

They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee is a series of accounts by seven radical of the '60s. Again the Civil Rights Movement is crucial and the title refers to the historical implications of the refusal to serve blacks in the segregated South. John Lewis says of the movement in the late '50s and early '60s:

'We talked in terms of our goal, our dream being the beloved community, the open society, the society that is at peace with itself.'

Bernice Reagon, who became a political song leader, learned 'a sense of power' in Civil Rights. She tells how the context of everyday culture, songs, prayers, assumptions about leadership, were transformed in the process of struggle. She believes like Sara Evans that the Civil Rights Movement

'born not just Black Power and Black

revolutionary movements but every progressive struggle that has occurred in this country since that time.'

The problems of hierarchy and structure, of cliquishness, of sustaining political involvement, of how to deal with either the state's fire-power or co-option through

seventies. The competitive nature of the film industry, the problems of organising either as craft workers protecting privileges or as feminists demanding individual advancement in a male-dominated career-



Black Panthers Party rally, New York, 1970 (Howie Epstein)

reform appear in the stories of the Black Panthers and the lesser known League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, as well as in the student and anti-war movement. The pain of political differences and splits which only express half-truths, the tension between autonomy and separatism and difficulty combining and transforming race and sex consciousness in a new definition of socialism are the themes of the socialist feminist contributions from Ann Popkin and Leslie Cagan.

The focus of *Creative Differences* is more specific.

For it consists of interviews with men and women who work in the Hollywood film industry. Their dissidence ranges from the blacklisted writer Abraham Polonsky's marxism to the feminism of Lynda Calhoun who tried to organise secretaries in the early

structure, the extent to which radicals can work within the system or expand the minority context of alternative culture, the role of visible figures projected by the media, the effect of radical movements on the portrayal of blacks or women are among the themes discussed. While they appear most intensely in this peculiar manifestation of dreams on the cash nexus they have been more generally evident in the communication industry as a whole and in new left discussions of culture.

Alix Kates Shulman's novel *Burning Questions* takes us back to the fifties. She describes her main character Zane growing up in the suburbs of the midwest in the McCarthy era. What makes a rebel out of such circumstances? A Trotskyist Aunt Louise, who believed some things were more important than happiness is

certainly a great asset. (Is this the first Trotskyist aunt to be portrayed in literature by the way?) In the late '50s Zane deserted the midwest to arrive in Greenwich Village, a rosy cheeked eighteen year old treasuring any traces of urban pallor. She lived with a beat poet but married a nice law student. Aunt Louise came to the wedding 'in the same space shoes and tweed suit she wore for birthdays, picketing and other public occasions.' Ricky and Zane had two babies, 'the rebel crawled back into her cave' while a new radical generation surrounded her. When one appeared as her bearded baby sitter Zane suddenly experienced desire again. 'how unseemly is lust in a mother.'

This was Zane's journey towards the women's movement. Her story is wryly told and she is not a political symbol, 'what possible good can come of a false image, however positive?' But be warned. This is no case history. Alix Kates Shulman is not simply concerned with the making of an individual rebel. She is probing the sources which brought so many women to say no.

'Such an uprising can't have been because of this husband or that husband, this marriage or that marriage, this grievance or that complaint. The particular husband is beside the point. In fact, I've probably been one of the lucky ones — but that's no reason to accept things as they are.'

The final sections on the women's movement read more awkwardly. The various phases of the movement are perhaps still too close for fiction. But Zane's tribute to her lover Faith communicates change and constancy:

'When passion toppled (as it will) trust remained. And something else as well: knowledge.'

And of her women's group she writes,

'Years passed since our tiny band, full of passion and hope had known how to work together like a fist folding into each other like five squeezed fingers to deliver a single well-aimed blow. Nowadays, instead when we gathered to talk we spread ourselves as wide as a hand and ticked off each finger as a separate point of view.'

Marx, Alix Kates Shulman reminds us, warned that we should not 'draw the magic cap down over our eyes and

ears as a make believe that there are no monsters.'

She writes, 'To have been stung more than once by unwarranted optimism, to have fallen for our own propaganda, is quite inexcusable. Not that I ever (thank god!) committed any of those irrevocable excesses like disowning a son or robbing a bank as some I know did. But still, indulging my fanatical tendencies as if one moment was forever I allowed myself to believe we had it won when it was perfectly obvious we hadn't.' These reflections upon the American left of the sixties and early seventies, no longer simply the good and the brave, speak across the silence of the McCarthy era to meet Abraham Polonsky's comment on the old Communist Party left of the 1930's and 40's.

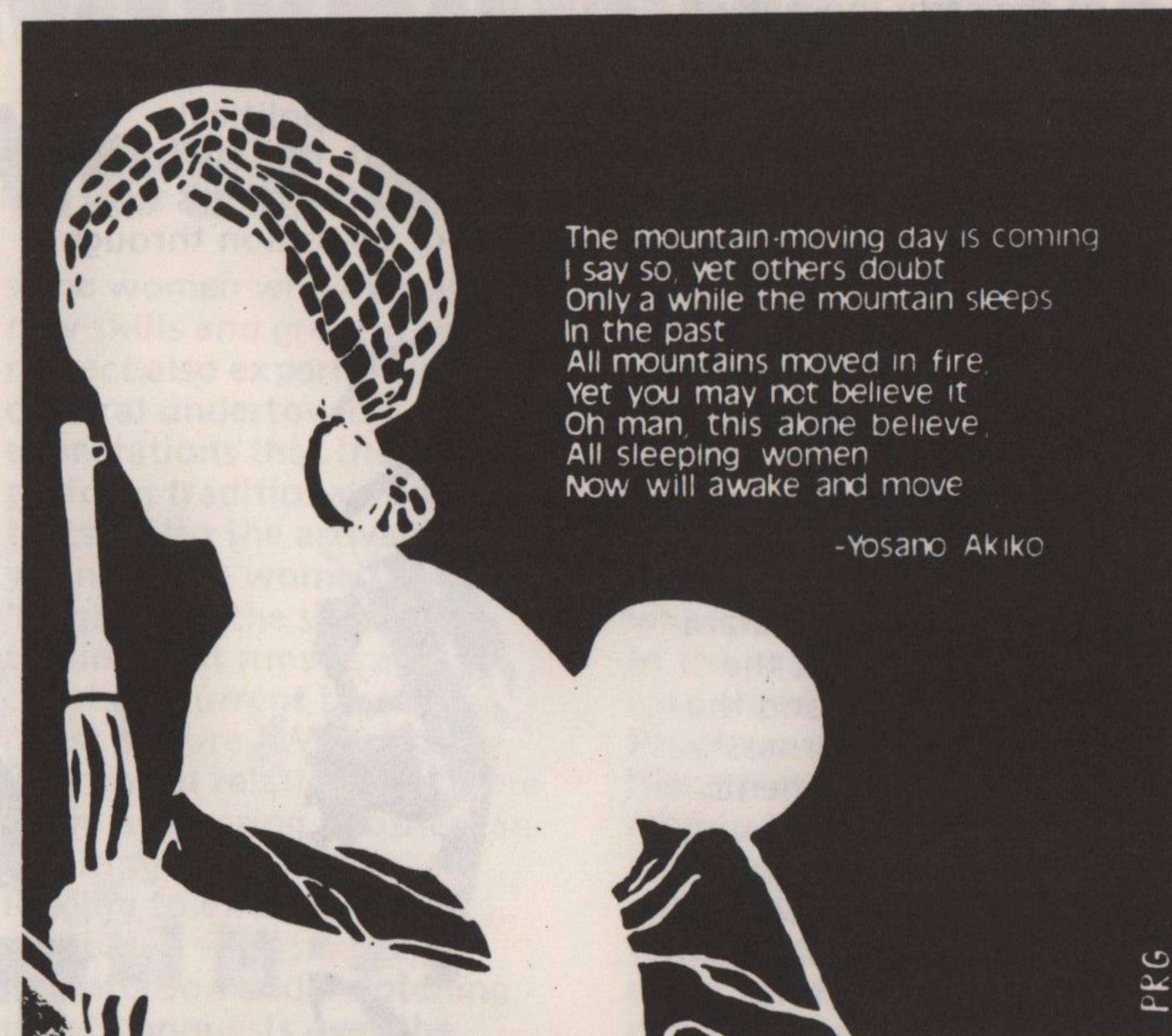
'In the real world of events, only those who have

never committed themselves to anything can take satisfaction in never being wrong.'

I was left wondering about the effectiveness of the McCarthyite repression. Clearly the external traces of socialist ideas and organisation went into retreat and in this sense Civil Rights was indeed the 'burning struggle.' But hints of various kinds of resistance in the fifties come through in all these books. Black parents protest against segregation in Southern schools, Ross Parks sparks off the bus boycott in 1955. Martin Luther King or Methodist existentialists communicate moral rebellion. White mothers take young red diaper feminists-to-be on anti-racist pickets and demonstrations for traffic lights to prevent children from being killed. The indefatigable Aunt Louise

makes her external compromises but transmits to her niece an inner realisation that 'There was nothing

inevitable about the life we lead,' and that 'Understanding is the first step.'



Letter

Coming up for Air: A Reply to 'Coming Down to Earth'

Dear Editorial Collective,

I was very disappointed at the trivial treatment of a very serious subject in Paul Holt's article in RS 4 about daily life. He throws around assertions and 'facts' without a scrap of evidence and sometimes plain wrong (for example, there were more than *three* Libertarian Newsletters). He plucks groups of people out of thin air, such as 'older revolutionary feminists' or 'those who still do politics' and claims to know what they thought in the mid seventies and what they think now. He constantly sets up straw men, then knocks them down. At the end he proceeds to put Big Flame on a pedestal.

I want to say something about the main fault with the article, from which most of the other mistakes flow. That is, Paul fails to put the Libertarian Movement in its *general class context*, without doing that no wonder he feels so personally guilty and no wonder his descent from the clouds back 'down to earth' is such a painful one.

The seventies weren't just a period where libertarians had 'ideas' that led them (us) to try and live a different way. It was a period of severe crisis for capital's new method of ruling and exploiting the working class. This method relied on promising the working class a future within capitalism with full employment, education and the welfare state. At the same time black immigrants and women workers played an important — if temporary — role in the workforce while the state, operating as a 'collective capitalist' extended the methods of production of the factory to social institutions like schools, housing estates,

hospitals, nurseries.

By the time the post war boom came to an end, because of the struggles of workers and peasants in Third World countries, the growing strength of the national bourgeoisies of those countries, and the recurring problems of the capitalist system, the *crisis* was now being fought on *every* level. Why should women and black people have to lose the relative power they had won through the opportunities of the boom? Why should school be a place of discipline and bullshit? Why should an impoverished sexual life be accepted as standard? Why should tower block life — nowhere for the children to play, the only contact with the neighbours being when they complain about your TV — be tolerated? Why should production line work at Findus or Fords be the norm?

Through most of the last ten years, Big Flame has realised that the new forms of working class struggle from these new conditions is the starting point of working class and, eventually, revolutionary organisation. Women-led protests about housing, playspace or traffic are central to building class unity. The events of Trico and Imperial Typewriters were not flukes but signs of the times, both good and bad. The significance of the public sector in terms of raising issues about health-care, prevention of class origins of illness, well-woman clinics is a reflection of the state of modern times.

And it was within these battles over every area of social life in the background — struggles that have been uncertain confused but sometimes victorious — that one strand of the revolutionary movement did try and come to some understandings and make some gains.

I suppose the reason why I was so annoyed with Paul's article is because my experience from 1972-1976 was initially in a libertarian collective and later still working with a lot of the same people with similar principles. But we were never naive enough to see 'our personal, social and sexual lives at the centre of the revolutionary stage'. The politics of our own lives was important and we were involved in sharing money, our sex lives and doing therapy to a limited extent but there was always an attempt to relate to 'other people's struggles.' For example encouraging the struggle against work through the claimants union, involved with an 'unsupported mothers group', squatting, housing, rent strike, up against the law activities, work with various strikes, including those of Asians in that period. And later, an important squat setting up a Women's Aid refuge.

My criticisms of that period are massive, absolutely massive. For example, the 'base group' we set up at one of the local factories in '73 was an incredible failure. But it must be said that, unlike Paul's article, our failure wasn't to just focus on ourselves or the movement of people like ourselves. In fact, the straw that broke the camel's back — ending our collective — was events that took place around the 1974 miners' strike.

But all that is another story. And it's a story worth writing. *Beyond the Fragments* has re-opened a lot of this discussion — I'd be more than happy to co-operate on the writing of something on the 'social and sexual dimension of class struggle.' Any takers?

Peter Shipstone

Review Article

The Theory of State Collectivism

Hugo Radice

The Century of the Unexpected

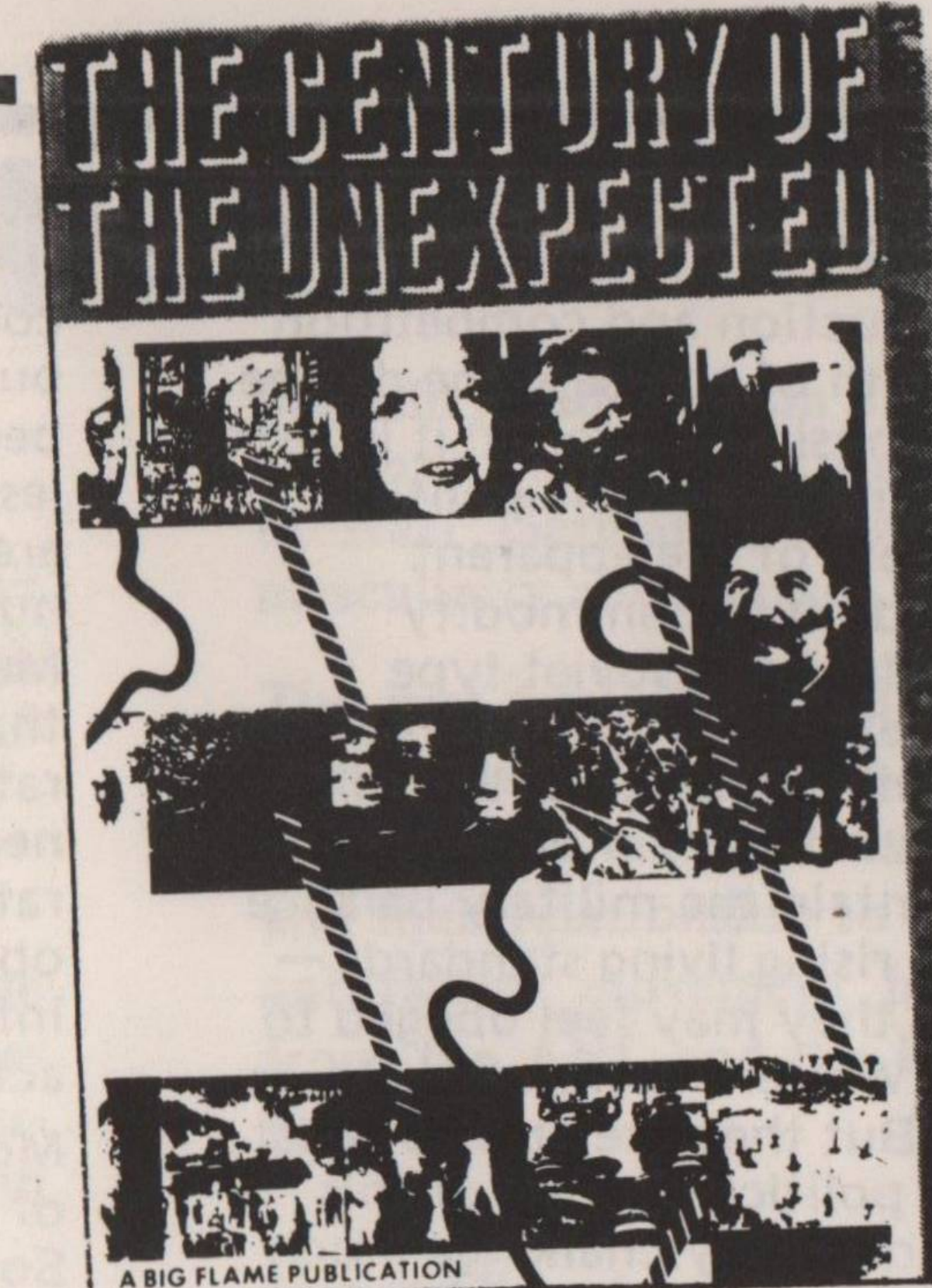
by John Fantham and Moshe Machover (Big Flame, 1979, ISBN 0 906082 02 1, £0.65)

The central proposition of this pamphlet is that the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, the Asian and perhaps also the African 'socialist' countries are neither capitalist nor socialist, but rather exhibit a new mode of production which the authors call **state collectivism**. 'New class' theories of Soviet-type societies are not of course very new: in the 1940s they were advanced by ex-Trotskyists such as Burnham and Schachtman, in the '50s by Dijas and in the '60s by Kuron & Modzelewski (among others). But for many years debate on the British left was frozen into a fruitless dialogue between the 'state capitalism' school of the IS/SWP (Cliff) and the 'degenerated workers state' view of the Trotskyists (Mandel), with the occasional intrusion of Maoist views (Bettelheim).

The Century of the Unexpected is part of a new wave of new class or agnostic writings, which has included the work of Carlo, Melotti and the Critique group in the West, and Bahro and Rakovski in Eastern Europe. It is particularly useful because F&M have provided a clear, coherent, brief and above all accessible account. I ought to make it clear right away that I share their basic criticisms of the more established theories; as a sympathiser, I don't intend to defend these theories, since this will no doubt be done vigorously by their adherents. I'll begin by summarising F&M's own theory, in isolation from their criticisms of other theories, and then go on to look at some of the vulnerable parts of their analysis which may be open to counter-attack.

The central proposition is that a new mode of production — state collectivism — has developed as an alternative or parallel historical path to capitalism, for countries which find that the path of full capitalist development is blocked by their subordination and under-development within the capitalist world economy. Thus, F&M reject explicitly the dogmatic Marxist conception of a unilinear sequence of modes of production (primitive communism — patriarchy — slavery — feudalism — capitalism — socialism). The historical role of state collectivism is to carry through industrialisation by the authoritarian development of the material and social forces of production, where this has been blocked by the nature of subordination to imperialism (economic disintegration, weak national bourgeoisie, exploitation of resources, etc.) State collectivism is thus in principle historically progressive: only in the special case of the Soviet Union did its establishment involve a counter-revolution against a dictatorship of the proletariat, against a transition to socialism. Nevertheless, like all other historically known modes of production, state collectivism engenders and reproduces basic contradictions, structured in class conflict, which cannot be resolved without a social revolution and the establishment of socialism.

The ruling class under state collectivism centres on the bureaucratic administration which controls the extraction and utilisation of the surplus product. This it does through a centralised, hierarchical system of economic command, reinforced by a monopoly of the means of political and social organisation and expression.



F&M do not equate this with Stalinism, which arose from the particular counter-revolutionary origin of state collectivism in the USSR.

In the 'progressive' phase of state collectivism the primary task of **extensive** industrialisation is accomplished — not without many difficulties, but without creating insuperable contradictions. Once it is accomplished, however, the basic goal of the ruling class — increasing the production of use-values — comes up against real barriers, which are very clear in the economic difficulties since the early '60s in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Effective planning for **intensive** industrialisation, involving not the replication of existing industries but continuous innovation and structural change, is blocked by the rigidities of bureaucratic pseudo-planning, the lack of incentives for workers, permanent conflict between central planners and enterprise managers, etc. Underlying these problems are the guarantees of full employment, which removes the major indirect weapon of labour discipline available to capitalists, and the overriding aim of the bureaucracy to maintain its class power. In the end, there must be either a jump to the parallel mode of production, capitalism, or to socialism; either one implies the overthrow of the existing relations of production and of the state.

Finally, the implications for socialists in the West are that Soviet expansionism (being primarily defensive) is fundamentally different from capitalist imperialism; that state collectivist revolutions in underdeveloped countries should receive qualified support because they bring historically progressive regimes to power; but that state collectivism has nothing at all to offer in the advanced capitalist countries.

The role of the Party

The first point to note is that F&M say very little about the role of the Party. This may be because of an understandable desire to focus on the socio-economic 'base' rather than the political 'superstructure'. Yet, just as F&M tentatively suggest in relation to the concept of class, it seems that in Soviet-type societies a base/superstructure distinction cannot be applied in the way that, despite modern sophistries, still underlies most Marxist analyses of capitalist societies. This emerges very clearly in the work of Dijas, Bahro and Rakovski. The Party plays a vital role in integrating the ruling class, maintaining its unity, and providing flows of reasonably reliable information between rulers and ruled; every social action is political, and all politics is contained in and by the Party. The continuing crisis in Poland illustrates this very clearly. This aspect of the system, as analysed by Rakovski and others, fits easily into F&M's framework.

Competition with capitalism and the 'laws of motion' of state collectivism

But there is another and more serious weakness. While F&M's criticisms of the orthodox Trotskyist position seem adequate (and again are common to most new class theorists), their criticism of the 'state capitalism' position is not so secure. As they point out, there are two main lines of argument offered by those who say that Soviet-type societies share some variant of the capitalist mode of production.

The Maoist position (Bettelheim, Nicolaus) argues that workers are alienated from their product and from each other, and thus exploited in the accepted sense. But it also argues that at least tendentially the ruling class is a bourgeoisie: the separation of enterprises from each other means that central planning increasingly gives way to the operation of market forces (the economic reforms), and so the ruling class comes to accumulate surplus value, and not merely amass surplus product. This, as F&M point out, is wildly at variance with the evidence.

But before developing this point, let's turn to the other state capitalist line of argument, that of Cliff (most recently restated by Binns & Haynes). In this view, the law of value is imposed externally on the USSR, which can be seen in essence as a single enterprise competing in the

capitalist world economy. This view is traced back to Bukharin, and like every other view to Lenin. Although there is nothing inherent in social relations within the USSR which forces the ruling class to be capitalist, in order to compete with private capitals on the world market it too has to accumulate capital and strive for increases in productivity, for the extraction of surplus value. In this view, therefore, the shift from extensive to intensive industrialisation is really of necessity the same (not just similar) as a shift from the extraction of absolute surplus value in capitalism (by the prolongation of the working day, cuts in subsistence, increased labour force participation rates and faster work-pace) to the extraction of relative surplus value (by increased productivity through mechanisation).

F&M's very sketchy answer is twofold. First, they say that many social formations have been much more closely integrated into the world capitalist economy without actually exhibiting a capitalist mode of production, particularly ones with certain precapitalist modes of production. But these pre-capitalist modes have been steadily eroded through time. Their survival (or even growth in the case of the East European 'second feudalism') has only continued so long as the predominant capitalist interests in the world economy could extract more surplus value by trading or plundering a share of the surplus value extracted by the methods peculiar to those pre-capitalist modes, than it could by reconstituting social production on a capitalist basis. Given the inherently greater technological dynamism of capitalism, it was always only a matter of time before the balance of advantage shifted in favour of full imposition of capitalism.

The question then is: since we observe that the Soviet-type economies also lack the technological dynamism of capitalism, surely they too will succumb? Won't the Soviet ruling class be forced to join capitalism, if it can't beat it — and isn't this happening already? Witness, for example, the opening up of China to Western 'co-operation' deals since the fall of the Gang of Four ...

What undermines precapitalist modes of production is not just higher productivity based on a more advanced

division of labour, private ownership of the means of production and competition — with of course some degree of physical coercion; it is also the impact on the **political** system of the apparent freedom of commodity production. Soviet-type societies may have to respond to the challenge of higher productivity, in order to maintain the military balance and rising living standards — and they may feel obliged to use Western technology to do so. But they are able to resist the political impact of this productivity challenge much more successfully than pre-capitalist formations. Partly, this is because their exploited classes are well aware that capitalism can only offer them a subordinate and dependent place in the international division of labour, and an exploitation far more ruthless in material terms: there has never been any evidence that Soviet workers, or even technical strata, actually want a capitalist Russia. And partly, their system of political and economic control, however wasteful and ineffective it may often be, has proved very resilient in meeting the most threatening challenges such as the loss of access to Western technology during the Cold War.

But the strongest evidence the success of this resistance to capitalist penetration is given precisely by the observable **laws of motion** of Soviet-type economics, which brings us back to the much-touted issue of the law of value. F&M argue against Cliff that his thesis cannot hold, because only in the trading of private farm plot produce, and in foreign trade, is there really commodity exchange; and because foreign trade is quantitatively insignificant. But what decides whether or not commodities and exchange are the basis of a variant of the capitalist mode of production is not their quantitative significance, but whether or not the laws of motion of the economy are capitalist or not. Foreign trade, in any case, is quantitatively insignificant for the USA, and yet since the devaluation of the dollar in 1971, we have seen 'the tail wagging the dog' repeatedly.

Do relations with the capitalist world economy lead to the reproduction **within** Soviet-type economies of the dynamics of capital accumulation? According to Cliff and his supporters, they do: according to East

European critical economists, they do not. There can, of course, be no evidence from published profit figures, because profits are meaningless in a system where prices are administratively fixed — but in any case, many Marxists now reject the view that Marx's 'tendency of the rate of profit to fall' has necessarily any correlate in rates of profit as actually observed, because of the 'counter-acting tendencies.'

More important is the nature of cyclical fluctuations in Soviet-type economies. Their **immediate cause** is chronic over-investment, leading to acute shortages of labour and other inputs and thence to economic disorganisation — whereas in capitalism the **immediate cause** is over-production in relation to the size of the market. Their **underlying origin** is bureaucratic competition between vertically-organised economic sectors and sub-sectors — whereas in capitalism it is the struggle between workers and capitalists over the effective rate of exploitation, mediated only by competition between capitals. Their 'cure' is physical cutbacks in investment, determined by the priorities of the political leadership to maintain class rule — whereas in capitalism it is the recreation of the industrial reserve army (internationally if not nationally) as a result of the response of capitalists to their lack of markets. (No one thinks that the role of the state in late capitalism is anything other than to assist this process — even the SWP has abandoned its old left Keynesianism in favour of the 'state monopoly capitalist' viewpoint.)

This pattern of the cycle is found even in Hungary, where 40% of national income is generated by exports, of which in turn over a third go to capitalist markets. On the other hand, the qualitatively different, and far more precarious, position of **non-industrialised** state collectivist societies is shown precisely by their inability to resist the economic dynamism of world capitalism except by effective **incorporation into the Soviet economy** (Cuba, Vietnam). Right now, Machel's new policies in Mozambique, which will reincorporate that country into the world capitalist economy, indicates that no 'third way' exists.

This leads naturally to my last point. Many readers of

the pamphlet may doubt whether, in the light of the invasion of Afghanistan and the adventures in Ethiopia and Kampuchea, Soviet 'imperialism' is really so different. F&M see it as different because the Soviet moves seem to be primarily defensive. Unfortunately, the same could be said of Imperial Germany's incursions into Africa — and indeed it was said by right-wing social democrats. The 'geo-political' reason for conquest, like the desire to secure raw materials and plunder, is common to all types of empire regardless of modes of production. What is specific to capitalism, and lacking for the USSR, is the imperative of the search for markets and investment outlets.

Conclusion
I have tried to show the core of F&M's theory of state collectivism, and to indicate some ways in which it can be strengthened. Like them, I am reluctant to make too much of the idea of a 'new mode of production': what matters is not definitions, but whether the analysis accounts for how Soviet-type societies work, and points towards meaningful implications for the strategy of the British left. Since most readers will have much more confidence in their knowledge of the latter, I have said little about that aspect — and indeed neither do F&M. A lot more debate is needed here, and I hope very much that **The Century of the Unexpected** will stimulate that debate.

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