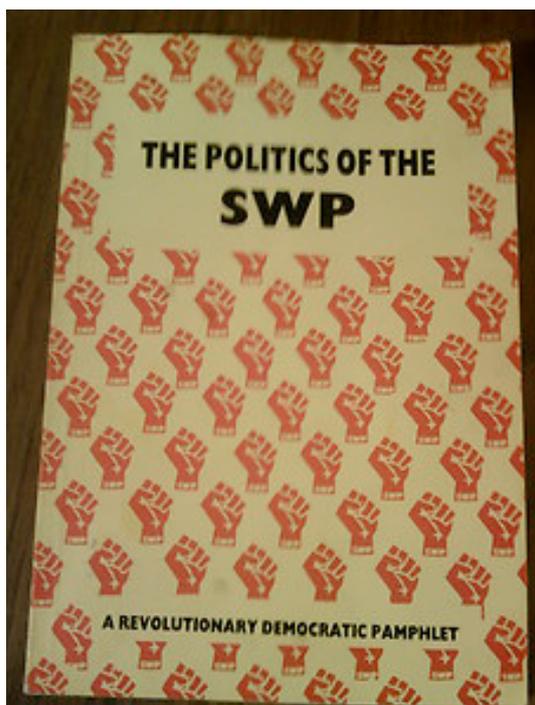


MONDAY, 24 DECEMBER 2012

# IS Group: Discussion Document of Ex-SWP Comrades (1994)

The following document was written in 1994 after the expulsion of Andy Wilson, and was the lead article in the first publication of the IS Group (formed in response to that expulsion), *Democracy and the SWP*. It may or may not have some relevance today, nearly 20 years on.



The IS tradition (Socialist Review Group, International Socialists, SWP, and the international organisations affiliated with this tradition) has carried out some of the most important theoretical work in the post-war left and has organised tens of thousands of revolutionaries in the course of over thirty years activity. The theory of state capitalism, developed by Cliff in the 40's and 50's, laid the basis for these achievements.

However, the SWP today is not a democratic centralist organisation capable of developing a revolutionary cadre. Instead, successive layers of the cadre are driven out of the party, or into passivity within the party, every time the leadership makes one of its characteristic 'turns'.

Naturally it is necessary for the organisation to make sharp changes of direction. The problem lies not with the fact that these turns take place, but in the methods used to carry them out, and with the internal organisation of the party that has grown up to enforce these methods.

## **DEMOCRACY, THE VANGUARD, AND SELF-EMANCIPATION**

There is a dialectical contradiction between a revolutionary party and the working class as a whole. On the one hand there is the need for revolutionaries to intervene and attempt to lead in the class struggle. On the other hand, the situation in which a party intervenes is always shifting, giving rise to new types of struggle and a different balance of class forces. The activity of the working class is always creating new lessons for revolutionaries, and constantly challenges the preconceptions of even the best Marxists. This means that while a revolutionary organisation is always fighting to achieve some kind of leadership in the movement, at the same time it always has to be ready to let the advanced workers influence, direct, and so 'lead' the party.

The organisation of a revolutionary party should embody this contradiction. In order to intervene it is necessary for the party to act in a unified manner to the extent that it is possible to do so. This requires a centralised party regime, such that once political and tactical decisions have been arrived at, they are carried out to maximum effect. Just as necessary to the party is the kind of democratic structure (and political culture) that would allow the rank and file (who reflect the experiences and aspirations of workers) to actively influence the organisation.

This democratic centralism would result in a situation where the leadership would hold influence in the party only to the extent that they could convince the members of the correctness of their perspectives and, crucially, the members would be cadres, capable of acting independently of the leadership and organising to oppose them when necessary; members would have to power to elect (and recall) the leadership at every level; no section of the party would have a monopoly of information; and every member would have the freedom to communicate with other members to argue their own politics, whether or not these agree with the perspectives of the leadership. Democracy in a revolutionary party should involve not only the freedom to applaud and re-elect the leadership but, in Luxemburg's words, freedom for those who think differently.

The only limits to full internal democracy concern cases in which members refuse to accept the collective decisions of the party and actively impede their implementation, or where they threaten the security of the party. The only criterion for membership of the party should be agreement with the fundamentals of our politics, and not agreement with the perspectives of the existing leadership.

In short, within the bounds that define its membership, a revolutionary party should embody, at the very least, normal democratic standards

such as freedom of information, the right to independent tribunal if accused of a violation of party discipline, freedom to communicate one's opinions, democratic control of representatives, etc.

## **THE SWP AND DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM**

The SWP is not democratic centralist but bureaucratic centralist. The leadership's control of the party is unchecked by the members. New perspectives are initiated exclusively by the central committee (CC), who then implement their perspective against all party opposition, implicit or explicit, legitimate or otherwise.

Once a new perspective is declared, a new cadre is selected from the top down. The CC select the organisers, who select the district and branch committees - any elections that take place are carried out on the basis of 'slates' so that it is virtually impossible for members to vote against the slate proposed by the leadership. Any members who have doubts or disagreements are written off as 'burnt out' and, depending on their reaction to this, may be marginalised within the party and even expelled.

These methods have been disastrous for the SWP in a number of ways:

Each new perspective requires a new cadre (below the level of the CC), so the existing cadre are actively marginalised in the party. In this way, the SWP has failed to build a stable and experienced cadre capable of acting independently of the leadership. Successive layers of cadres have been driven into passivity, and even out of the revolutionary movement altogether. The result is the loss of hundreds of potential cadres. Instead of appraising the real, uneven development of individual cadres, the history of the party is written in terms of a star system (comrades currently favoured by the party) and a demonology (the 'renegades' who are brushed aside with each turn of the party).

As a result of this systematic dissolution of the cadre, the CC grows ever more remote from the membership and increasingly bureaucratic in its methods. In recent years the national committee has been abolished (it obediently voted for its own dissolution, on the recommendation of the CC), to be replaced by party councils made up of those comrades active at any one time (i.e. those who already agree with current perspectives); district committees are appointed rather than elected; the CC monopolise all information concerning the party, so that it is impossible for members to know much about what happens in the party outside their own branch; the CC give a distorted account of

events rather than admit their mistakes (so the scale of the crisis in the party in 1986-1987 was admitted in documents presented to the international meeting, but not to the party rank and file); history is rewritten to reinforce the prestige of the CC (their underestimation of the community campaign against the poll tax, which was disastrous for the party, especially in Scotland, is never mentioned).

The outcome is a party whose conferences have no democratic function, but serve only to orientate party activists to carry out perspectives drawn up before the delegates even set out from their branches. At every level of the party, strategy and tactics are presented from the top down, as pre-digested instructions for action. At every level, the comrades 'below' are seen only as a passive mass to be shifted into action, rather than as a source of new initiatives.

The only exception is when a branch thinks up a new tactic to carry out the CC's perspective. In this case, the CC may take up this tactic and apply it across the party. In no way do rank and file members play an active role in determining the strategy and theory of the party - except in the negative sense that if they refuse to implement a perspective eventually even the CC notice, and will modify the line to suit.

A political culture has been created in which the leadership outside of the CC consists almost solely of comrades loyal to the CC, willing to follow every turn of the perspective without criticism, and permanently wound up into a state of hysteria about the colossal 'possibilities for growth' which the CC claims have existed for years now. This leadership can, in most cases, last for only a limited period before the inevitable 'burn out', after which the comrades become passive and cynical.

Increasingly, the bureaucratic methods used by the CC to enforce their control over the political direction of the party have been extended to other areas of party life. In debates over questions of philosophy, culture and even anthropology an informal party 'line' emerged (i.e. concerning matters in which there can be no question of the party taking a 'line'). Often behind these positions lay nothing more substantial than the opinions of this or that CC member, but adherence to the line quickly became a badge of party loyalty, disagreement became a stigma, and the effect was to close down the democracy of the party yet further by placing even questions of theory beyond debate.

Many militants, especially working class militants with some

experience of trade union democracy, etc., are often repelled by the undemocratic norms in the party and refuse to join, or keep their distance despite accepting our formal politics.

A small minority of comrades, in rejecting the undemocratic practices of the party, have come to reject democratic centralism, since they believe the SWP to be democratic centralist. They are then attracted by libertarian and anarchist arguments, and are lost as potential cadres.

Worst of all, the SWP are training a layer of revolutionaries to believe that the organisational norms of the SWP are a shining example of proletarian democracy, applicable to a future socialist society. Not surprisingly, many people are instinctively repelled by this idea.

In a situation in which the CC no longer require the membership to play any role as an independent cadre, there is no incentive to train the members in the political traditions of the IS/SWP. Members are required to operate simply as activists, and so all educationals and cadre schools in the party have been closed down in recent years. The "Marxism" event no longer serves any serious educational role beyond the bare minimum, being given over to the most abstract propaganda and party rallies. In this way, the party refuses to develop the many excellent activists that it recruits.

Anyone calling for more educational work is dismissed as 'abstract' and 'theoretician'. The party's increasing contempt for theory, their assumption that theory (education) and practice (activism) are incompatible, serves to reinforce the domination of the CC across the party - by playing up the importance of the least experienced comrades, who are least able and least inclined to criticise the leadership, and minimising the influence of the existing cadre.

**Concretely, a democratic IS would involve:**

Regular election of all party full-timers, branch and district leadership, conference delegates, etc. with the right of recall. While it would be normal for factions to propose slates for elections, the candidates would be the individuals rather than the slate.

The right of branches to propose motions to the party conference.

For a regular internal bulletin, open to all members. As well as the usual political contributions from members, this bulletin should contain a full account of all party activity in every district, with recruitment figures, etc. to the extent that this is compatible with security. The bulletin should not be censored in any way except, once again, where information would compromise party security. Any censored sections should be marked as such by being blacked out on the page.

The right for members to communicate horizontally in the party, to produce and distribute their own documents.

For an independent Control Commission to review all disciplinary cases (independent of the leadership bodies that exercise discipline), and the right of any disciplined comrades to appeal directly to party conference.

The bureaucratisation of the IS tradition is not just an episode, a subjective failure by a section of the leadership, or a product of adverse circumstances (although it has been accelerated by the low level of struggle in Britain over a decade). The roots of the problem lie with the politics of the IS itself: e.g. the interpretation of Leninism adopted by the party, and the interpretation of 'stick bending' that follows from this. In both cases, and whether or not the SWP interpretation accords with Lenin's theory and practice, the result is an elitist concept of party and class (and hence party organisation). Our disagreements with the SWP concern the fundamentals of SWP politics, and not merely the complexion of the current leadership regime.

### **EFFECT ON SWP POLITICAL PRACTICE: SECTARIANISM**

The deterioration of party democracy inevitably affects the way the party relates to the working class as a whole. After all, it is impossible for the leadership to maintain a consistent contempt for the party membership without this being translated into a contempt for the rest of the working class.

Having correctly decided to relaunch the Anti Nazi League (ANL), the party has run the ANL purely as a satellite of the SWP. Local ANL work is organised from SWP branches, rather than encouraging the building of a real united front, involving forces outside the SWP, by organising separate ANL meetings and building ANL branches. In the conference discussion period of 1993 comrades were instructed to make sure that the SWP branches alone organise all ANL work. The recent ANL conference was called the day before the party council, to ensure that it was dominated by council delegates. This sectarianism discourages

many people from joining the ANL, and ensures that those non-SWP members that do join the ANL do not play an active role in it.

Again, early in 1994 the SWP leadership called an ANL demonstration in Welling (site of the Nazi headquarters), refusing to march on the same day as the YRE (the Militant organised anti-fascist group). By dividing the anti-nazi forces in this way, the party missed the opportunity to influence the many Asian and black youths organised by the YRE. In private, members of the CC admitted that the decision was a mistake; in public they defended it, attacking any comrade who criticised this sectarianism for being 'soft' on the Militant, disloyal to the party, etc.

We want an independent and democratic ANL, not as a moral principle, but because that would increase the strength of the anti fascist movement.

### **REVERSING THE PERSPECTIVES: THE DASH FOR GROWTH**

The developing sectarianism and bureaucratism of the party has been made worse by the kind of 'crisis perspective' developed by the party.

The argument from the leadership has been that, with the rise of fascism across Europe, and in the absence of a revolutionary left there capable of initiating united front actions to directly confront the Nazis, the burden is on the SWP to build a mass party that would galvanise the European left. This breakthrough for the SWP must take place in the coming months, or within a year or so. Otherwise, to quote Chris Harman, we will all soon be in the concentration camps.

Increasingly, party perspectives are based on the need to make this breakthrough rather than on a sober analysis of the balance of class forces. This means that the real opportunities for growth that exist are consistently exaggerated by the leadership, perspectives are 'telescoped', and the comrades are placed on a permanent war footing, encouraged to engage in ever more frantic levels of activity.

The result has been the recruitment of a large number of people, many of whom are then just as quickly lost to the party. Having been recruited on the basis of activism, no attempt is made to educate them in revolutionary politics, with the result that they are often demoralised as soon as there is a lull in struggle, when the campaign they were recruited from ends, or because they are simply burnt out by the level of activity expected from them.

Not unlike the WRP before (though not yet to the same extent) the

atmosphere of 'permanent crisis' in the party, the expectation of huge gains just over the horizon, has encouraged the bureaucratisation of the party. Anyone who is at all critical of the leadership is seen as distracting comrades from the activity that would secure rapid growth of the party. All problems in the party, the failure of particular branches to grow, etc. are blamed on comrades who are not convinced by the perspectives. Success or failure depends purely on the 'subjective factor'; the CC's crisis perspective is placed beyond doubt, and failure to deliver on the perspective and recruit large numbers of people is purely the fault of the party rank and file. This attitude further encourages victimisation and scapegoating in the party.

### **CONCLUSION: FOR A DEMOCRATIC IS**

Our disagreements with the SWP need to be placed on a firmer basis by providing a more thorough account of the history of the IS/SWP. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is no longer realistic to expect the SWP to overcome its problems spontaneously, and that it is necessary to carry out work outside the SWP. This work would take place on the basis of the fundamentals of IS theory (state capitalism, theory of deflected permanent revolution, permanent arms economy, etc.), while at the same time criticising the theory of party and class (leadership, democratic centralism) developed by the tradition in the late 60's and early 70's. In the first place, this work would be mostly of a propaganda nature, attempting to create the core of a future International Socialist Group by winning a number of individuals to our criticism of the SWP.

Our experience of the RDG and other groups means that we believe it would be a mistake to set up a long term agitational orientation towards the SWP, imagining that it is possible to win the party to a set of programmatic and organisational demands. Such an approach would condemn us to the role of merely sectarian critics of the party, unable to develop an independent cadre.

At the same time, it would not be possible for us to begin completely independent work for a long time. The initial aim would be to recruit a small number of individuals from the periphery of the SWP (ex-members and existing, disillusioned members) on the basis of propaganda, with the aim of moving toward independent work only at some point in the future. It may be possible to produce our own leaflets for large demonstrations, and possibly even a regular bulletin.

It remains to be seen whether it is possible to recruit even the small number of comrades needed to carry out this work, as the very size of the SWP makes our criticism unattractive to its members. With over six thousand members, the SWP is capable of initiating movements like the

ANL (even if it organises them bureaucratically), and so party members are understandably reluctant to break with the party, out of a fear that they will be driven into the political 'wilderness'. Nevertheless, even if very few people would be immediately won over to our criticism, it may be possible to maintain a dialogue with a layer of comrades who may be won in the future.

As a bare minimum platform of activity, we propose to produce a pamphlet containing the GIS critique of the SAG, our own criticism of the SWP, and, possibly, an article on the SWP/IS theory of party and class.

**Andy Wilson** 1994-vii-xiii