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LEADERSHIP, MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOCRACY IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

by Neil Davidson:

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In Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) a trainee guardian angel gives suicidal small Savings and Loans owner George Bailey the opportunity to see what life would have been like in the town of Bedford Falls if he had never existed. What he sees is so shocking, so bleak, that he begins to understand the significance of his own contribution to avoiding this nightmare alternative future. Thus re-inspired, he abandons all thoughts of self-immolation and, supported by members of the community he has lived among and helped for so many years, he thwarts the plans of the evil millionaire Mr Potter to ruin him and take over the town in the interests of The Bank—a plot device which, given the hatred currently directed against finance capital, will probably help ensure this much-loved film's popularity with a new generation of viewers.

What would British society be like if the SWP had never existed? What would we see if the guardian angel of revolutionary parties could show us a United Kingdom where the ship bearing Ygaei Gluckstein to these shores in 1946 had sunk with all on board? Would it be any different? Attempts to credit our organisation with a general influence over events (as opposed to, say, the outcome of individual strikes) risks the danger of sounding bombastic and self-aggrandising, characteristics we rightly deride in other sections of the left. Nevertheless, while retaining an appropriate sense of proportion, a case can be made. Above all, the two great campaigning organisations which we initiated and sustained, the Anti Nazi League (ANL) and the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), were interventions which actually changed social and political conditions for the better, by helping to marginalise the fascist threat, combat the broader racism in British society and integrate Muslims into political life. Both are models of how to successfully apply what the late Duncan Hallas used to call the "spirit" of the united front tactic in situations of real urgency. Both are a standing rebuke to ignorant accusations of "economism" to which we are regularly subjected by sectarians.

Testimony to the impact of these initiatives is easy enough to find. Reporting on a memorial meeting for SWP member David Widgery in 1992, Paul Foot quoted the comments of Darcus Howe, who “said he had fathered five children in Britain. The first four had grown up angry, fighting forever against the racism all round them. The fifth child, he said, had grown up ‘black in ease’. Darcus attributed her ‘space’ to the Anti-Nazi League in general and to David Widgery in particular”. The editor of *Race and Class*, journal of the Institute of Race Relations, noted recently that for some politicised British Muslims at least, an important factor in their move away from “‘pie in the sky’ debates on the Islamic state” was “the process of working with the Left in the anti-war movement”, which undercut the arguments of Islamist organisations like Hizb ut-Tahrir that this kind of cooperation is prohibited by the Koran: “The role of the anti-war movement and the coalitions it fostered between Islamists and the Left have obviously been central to this dynamic and given a wide range of Muslim groups a level of confidence to speak out on issues such as civil rights and foreign policy, despite the fear of being associated with terrorism.” We have much to learn from the way French workers and students have resisted neoliberal attacks on working conditions and social welfare, but we have only to contrast the trajectory of the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles in Britain with those in France to understand what the absence of a party like the SWP can mean: a fascist leader with enough support to stand as a Presidential candidate, anti-war demonstrations in which Muslims and the Left march separately, and a set of legal restrictions on Muslims extending to prohibitions on wearing the hijab by female school students.

But our impact has not been limited to united front activity. Most recently, we have shown our ability to respond directly to a dramatic change in economic conditions. When the financial collapse occurred in September the SWP was certainly not the only organisation on the left to explain what had happened in other than Keynesian terms, but it was the only one able to raise slogans which went beyond abstract denunciations of capitalism and propose concrete demands around which to mobilise, and it was alone in fielding a body of activists large and capable enough to carry both our explanations and demands into the streets, workplaces and universities. This in turn reflects the fact that the SWP is not only the largest revolutionary party in Britain; it is, for all practical purposes, the only one. What we do matters and the responsibility that imposes upon us, particularly in conditions of renewed economic crisis, is therefore very great indeed.

However, if we are to increase our influence to the extent that our ideas

deserve and the situation requires, then we must also face some inconvenient facts and subject ourselves some unwelcome self-criticism. As Georg Lukacs wrote in the mid-1920s, self-criticism becomes important when “the actions of the party, at any given moment were not on the same level as might have been objectively possible in the given situation. In examining the causes of this discrepancy in level between actual activity and its concrete and objective possibility, one must not stick simply to establishing the objective cause, for such objectivism...looks, at best, like fatalism. Examination of the causes of a mistake is, on the contrary, directed towards the eradication of the causes.”

Limits to growth? The problem is not that the SWP has failed to make a revolution in Britain. Revolutionary parties can help develop consciousness and organisation among the working class, and are necessary to provide political leadership in a revolutionary situation; but for a revolutionary situation to become a “concrete and objective possibility” depends on the capitalist crisis (which is not only economic, but expressed through war, environmental collapse, and so on) and the mass activity of the working class in response, neither of which are in our gift.

The problem is rather that there seems to be a limit beyond which the Party is unable to grow. In 1977, shortly after International Socialism (IS) had transformed itself into the SWP, Hallas wrote in *The Socialist Register* that “the SWP is ‘something approaching a small party’. But a small party has no merit unless it can become a much bigger party”. According to Hallas, the party at that time consisted of between 3,000 and 4,000 members. The first pre-conference bulletin this year, over three decades later, says we have 6,155 registered members and 2,000 ‘unregistered members’, defined as ‘comrades that have not returned a re-registration form to the centre for two years’. The Orwellian concept of an “un-registered member” suggests the level of self-delusion involved here: we should obviously try to re-recruit members who have left, but to pretend that they currently remain members is to assume an outcome which has still to be achieved. We have recently become aware of the extent to which the bourgeoisie rely on fictitious capital; revolutionary organisations have nothing to gain relying on fictitious members.

At best then, we have grown between two and three thousand members in the last thirty years. Expressed in percentage terms (an increase of between 50% and 100%) this sounds more impressive, but it is important to retain a sense of proportion. We have greater forces than

the rest of the British revolutionary or even radical left added together, as indeed we did in 1977; but if our ambition is to build a mass party, then we are no nearer to doing so in real terms, particularly given the events that have taken place and the movements that have arisen over the last decade. In fact, our period of biggest membership growth, when we temporarily succeeded in pushing membership up towards 10,000, took place in the mid-1990s before either the election of New Labour or the emergence of the movement for alternative globalisation in Seattle. Peter Sedgwick, a talented comrade who regrettably opposed the transition from IS to the SWP, once noted the difficulty of retaining members for any socialist project: "It was possible to think, 'All those marvellous young people' at the first, second or even third Aldermaston or Young Socialist march, but by the seventh or ninth, when it was obvious that these were different young people each time, the effect was less rejuvenating." And this, in a sense, has been our problem. A blood transfusion may keep a patient alive, but if they are simultaneously haemorrhaging the procedure simply postpones death rather than restores health. Each wave of recruits has left embedded new layers of comrades, but many more have passed through our ranks. Had we had retained even half of the socialists who did so over the last thirty years we would now have an organisation several tens of thousands strong. Our inability to retain members involves a greater structural problem than can be explained by, for example, a failure to persuade comrades to pay their subscriptions by direct debit.

One explanation might be that SWP members are simply inadequate to the task of building a revolutionary party: we are a collection of eccentrics, dilettantes, malcontents and middle-class do-gooders, incapable of relating to workers and the oppressed, and consequently without roots in the class or local communities. I do not intend to dwell on this proposition since, as I outlined in the introduction, it is obviously untrue. Indeed, one of the most frustrating things aspects of our failure to progress is precisely that the party is full of extremely talented individuals. Is it then because our members are too independent, too wilfully individualistic, and have failed or refused to implement Central Committee (CC) instructions? In fact, as I will argue below, we have done the opposite and followed them too closely, even when they have been contradictory or otherwise incoherent.

A second reason would be that the entire aim of building the revolutionary party is a delusional: the working class will simply never attain revolutionary class consciousness, at least in sufficient numbers, to make the project viable. At best, revolutionaries can act as a pressure

group, pushing reformists in the trade union movement and social democracy further to the left than they would otherwise be prepared to go by standing fast to the ultimate, but unobtainable goal of total social transformation. At the time of his departure from IS in 1968, Alasdair MacIntyre invoked what he called the “law of diminishing socialist returns” whereby every political formation inevitably behaves further to the right than their formal political position would suggest. As a result, although “those with a revolutionary perspective” were unlikely to make a revolution, only they “are likely to promote genuine left wing reforms”. If socialism was genuinely impossible, was just the “utopia” that Trotsky was prepared to contemplate in the last months of his life, such a role would of course, still, be essential. But I do not accept this argument, nor, I trust, does anyone else reading this, apart from those who are also employed by Special Branch. (Although it is important to understand that many people on the left do not believe in the possibility of a complete socialist transformation of society and consequently regard the SWP as essential precisely because they see us playing the role described here.) The experiences of the twentieth century surely put paid to any notion of the inevitability of socialism. Consequently, we do not and cannot know that working class will ultimately be triumphant—that is the “wager” on revolution which many Marxist thinkers have invoked; but we still have good reasons to believe that it is possible and that our actions will be important in helping to bring that possibility about.

A third, and by far the most plausible reason, would be that we have faced a series of temporarily insurmountable objective conditions—not such as to make exponential growth an impossible goal, as in the previous reason, but to hold it within certain limits. There is obviously some truth in this; in particular, the period which we retrospectively identified as ‘the downturn’, beginning around 1975, did make growth extraordinarily difficult for the revolutionary left, as we recognised at the time after much internal debate—not coincidentally, the last such debate the party has conducted. However, since the late eighties at any rate, the Central Committee (CC) has never seriously allowed that any objective conditions can impede the possibilities for party growth. Indeed, comrades suggesting that there might actually be reasons outwith our control for failing to build were denounced for their pessimism, lack of involvement, failure to understand the new mood, inability to see the silver linings in every dark cloud, or whatever. One can accept that conditions have not been uniformly conducive to growth, but clearly the objective circumstances have not posed an insuperable barrier either. As it happens, I think the CC was right most of the time about the opportunities, particularly around the anti-war and alternative

globalisation movements, but that merely strengthens my argument. In Julius Caesar, the most explicitly political of all his plays, Shakespeare makes Cassius say: “Men are some time masters of their fates: the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” Where does the fault lie?

Real and imaginary united fronts “of a special type” What is our strategy for building the party? In the very early stages of party formation, with membership numbered in tens (as it was for the Socialist Review Group in the early 1950s), then there is no alternative to what Trotsky once called “the primitive accumulation of cadres”. But for most of the subsequent decades we continued to act as if the party could be built simply by adding individual members on an arithmetical basis, even though mass parties have never been built in this way, and certainly not those of the Communist International in its revolutionary period. The failure of this party-building strategy has, I think, now been tacitly recognised by the CC, but not openly discussed, as is usually the case when our practice is in breach of some notionally Leninist theoretical orthodoxy.

What alternatives are there to recruiting ones and twos as the basis for exponential growth? Historically, there have been four possible mechanisms—which can of course be combined—leading to a mass increase in membership, although others can be imagined: merger with several organisations of a comparable size; an influx of members following secession from a mass reformist organisations; affiliation by militants organised in a trans-union rank and file organisation; or collective adherence by elements of a campaign or social movement. None of these are likely to arise without a generalised move the left. None will leave the host organisation unaffected, so that exponential growth almost invariably means the original revolutionary party acts as the nucleus of a new formation, rather than simply undergoes quantitative growth: the Communist Party of Britain (CPGB) was not simply an enlarged British Socialist Party; the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was not merely an expanded Spartacus League.

The route the most relevant to us in recent years, at least in England, has been that involving a campaign or social movement, although we have not been at the stage where mass membership was prepared to transfer directly to a revolutionary party without passage through an intermediate political formation. Given the possibilities provided by StWC, we were clearly right to establish Respect with the forces it had mobilised. It was vitally important that the project of establishing an

electoral left alternative went beyond shuffling the pack of existing left groups, as both Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Socialist Alliance (SA) had done—which is why, incidentally, the latter cannot be regarded as the “forerunner” to Respect in anything other than a chronological sense: Respect was qualitatively different in that it drew on a membership outwith the existing organisations. We were also right, when the crisis of Respect broke, to take the action we did—including, in my opinion, the expulsions—to save what we could of the situation. The problem lies in what happened in between these two points. Respect’s failure was not simply down to a collision between George Galloway’s rampant egoism and his growing pessimism about working class resistance, but to a lack of clarity about what the organisation was for and how it related to our central revolutionary goals. These problems were highlighted by the misguided attempt to brand Respect as a “united front of a special type”, a category which was first applied to the SA by John Rees in 2001 and is still applied to Respect by Alex Callinicos in the most recent issue of *International Socialism*. Now, the category of “united fronts of a special type” is perfectly valid; indeed, it should be clear that, given the size of our organisation compared to, say, the KPD pre-1933, we will almost inevitably be seeking “united fronts of a special type”, of which both the ANL and StWC are excellent examples. If we leave aside sterile textbook definitions of the united front based on an over-literal interpretation of the model unveiled at the Second Congress of the Communist International (revolutionary party invites larger reformist party to participate in joint activity, etc.), it has two main characteristics.

The first is that it is a coalition of both revolutionary and reformist forces to take action for the achievement of a specific goal, or a restricted set of specific goals, upon which both can agree. Outside of these specific goals the revolutionaries and reformists involved will not agree on broader sets of objectives, other than perhaps some notion of socialism itself, and in the case of groups organised on a confessional basis, like the Muslim Association of Britain, they may not even agree about that. As this suggests, “reformist” in this context does not simply mean “social democrat”, but rather anyone who is not a revolutionary but who is committed to fighting, for example, a specific fascist organisation or a particular war. The goal-directed nature of a united front means that its existence will be time-limited according to how successful it is: goals can of course change in response to events (in the way StWC shifted focus from stopping the Iraq War to bringing it to an end), or be put into semi-hibernation on a “awaken when required” basis (as the ANL was for years); but a permanent united front is a contradiction in terms.

The second is the way in which, during the process of achieving its goals, the revolutionary wing of the united front attempts to win individuals and groups within the reformist one by demonstrating, in practice, the superiority of our ideas, arguments and methods—although this also involves the revolutionaries learning in their turn from others: nothing could more alien to the united front tactic than the grotesque idea of all-knowing revolutionaries coming to enlighten the benighted reformists.

Defined in this way, what I earlier described as the “spirit” of the united front should be the basis of most of our activities, from moving a motion in a trade union branch, to agreeing the tactics on a demonstration, to deciding on the aims of a campaign. Where sectarians seek the point of difference, we seek the point of agreement. Of course, it may not always be possible to find agreement, there are some cases where revolutionaries simply have to stand alone on a point of principle, as our comrades on the PCS National Executive did recently over postponing the Civil Services strike day on 10 November, but these situations should be the exceptions, at least in the current period.

Invoking the spirit of the united front as a general approach does not however mean that every activity we undertake is a united front, in the sense of being an organised coalition. The ten points of the People Not Profit Charter could be the basis for individual united fronts. In relation to point 4 on repossessions and council housing, for example, rather than responding individually to attempted house repossessions, we should consider beginning a united front to systematically oppose all such attempts on the ground (on the model of the anti-poll tax union resistance to poindings and warrant sales) while campaigning politically for the government to take over all such homes and rent them back to the owners, while also demanding the resumption of council house construction. But the Charter itself is a petition, not a united front and to claim otherwise is a form of “concept-stretching” which renders the concept meaningless.

According to a CC contribution to IB2, we have Trotsky’s authority for describing trade unions, workers councils and even the Paris Commune as united fronts, but all this proves is that Lev Davidovitch was as capable of speaking complete rubbish as the rest of us. More seriously—although I don’t have time to pursue the point in detail here—many of these claims were made in periods when Trotsky was trying persuade sceptical comrades of the validity of the united front tactic, and was trying to “normalise” it with examples from historical turning points and analogies with historic class institutions with which his audience would

already be familiar. Whatever might be said for this strategy in context, the arguments are of little help now, as moment's reflection will show. Take the worker's council or soviet as an example. These are the exact opposite of united fronts. In a united front revolutionaries and reformists agree to put aside their differences in order to concentrate on the achievement one or more key issues upon which they agree; in a worker's council—and it is important to remember that they are not just instruments of class struggle but instruments of class rule—reformists and revolutionaries debate their differences in order to persuade delegates to endorse one or the other position as a basis for action; the first assumes common agreement by sections of the class on specific issues prior to taking action; the latter is a method of arriving at an agreed position for the class as a whole on every issue. Vague appeals to Trotsky's authority will not do here: in his more concrete writings he nearly always used specific, restricted examples of how the tactic should be applied, often in relation to the Bolsheviks' willingness to ally with Kerensky against Kornilov in September 1917. And as Trotsky himself pointed out in this context, "the question is not decided by a quotation, but by means of the correct method"—although I'm prepared to make an exception for this quotation. The specificity of the united front strategy is precisely why the term cannot be applied to Respect, which possessed neither of the characteristics outlined above.

First, to operate as a genuine united front, Respect would have had to focus exclusively on the three key demands of StWC: opposition to war; opposition to Islamophobia; and defence of civil liberties—in effect to act as a "multiple issues" electoral campaign. But Respect was a political party which, by definition, must seek to intervene across the entire range of political, social and economic issues facing the workers and oppressed groups it wants to influence, from abortion to zero-tolerance policing. The result was predictably unstable and divisive, because the agreement did not exist over many of the fundamental issues with which Respect was faced.

Second, this might not have mattered had we attempted to win the non-SWP membership of Respect to revolutionary positions; but this does not appear to have happened in any consistent way. There were good local experiences, for example in Preston and Leicester, but at the national level, we seem to have taken an instrumental attitude, particularly to Muslim members, involving no real sense of mutual challenge or discussion, simply an unsustainable agreement not to mention certain issues which broke down as soon as the initial momentum of electoral success was spent.

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Alex Callinicos claims to have found a precedent for treating Respect as a united front in the US Farmer-Labour Party. There are several reasons why this analogy is neither helpful nor, given the outcome, particularly encouraging, as Alex himself hints in a footnote. First, it was an early example of opportunistic “right” manoeuvring within the overall ultra-left turn taken by the Comintern after the failure of the German Revolution in 1923 and enshrined at the Fifth Congress in July 1924. Touted as a basis for achieving that chimera, a “worker-peasant (or worker-farmer) government” in the USA, it represented in embryonic form the catastrophic centrist position imposed by the Comintern later in the decade in which the British trade union bureaucrats and the Chinese bourgeois nationalists were treated as forces capable of bringing about the socialist revolution. Second, although claimed as an example of united front by the Comintern, it was even less of one than Respect. The American Worker’s Party (as the CPUSA was known at the time), simply entered an existing reformist organisation set up by the Chicago Federation of Labour in 1919 and successfully, if very briefly, succeeded into taking over leadership positions at the annual convention of 1923, leading to the mass departure of many of the native members. But the new national Federated Farmer-Labour Party had essentially the same politics as its Chicago-based predecessor, despite communist leadership. Third, because the revolutionaries had no real base in the new party outside their own ranks, they were themselves overturned by the remainder of the original membership when the more attractive possibility of standing the anti-Communist Robert La Follette as their Presidential candidate presented itself. In short, this episode, rightly described by Hallas as a “comic interlude” based on a “fantasy”, has precisely zero relevance to us today, except possibly in a negative sense. But, like the CC’s appeals to Trotsky in IB2, it is another example of the desperate search for historical precedents to justify a tactical turn which actually requires new thinking.

The project of building a “radical left” organisation, or New Anti-Capitalist Party on the French model, in which the SWP is organisationally distinct and independent but cooperates with other forces to our right, will be essential for building a coherent new left in which we can also grow; on this I agree with Alex. But we need to start thinking now about the nature of such a party, in terms of its composition, possible process of formation, and our relationship to it as a revolutionary component, and not leave it until the next opportunity arises, before conducting yet more improvisations, dignified with the spurious theoretical rational of the united front. A new party will not happen without our participation, but unless we change fundamental aspects of our current approach, there is

a danger that it will not happen with our participation either. In effect, we wanted to restrict Respect to being a united front, while the logic of the situation called for building—and many of the other participants thought we were building—a new type of political formation altogether. The key problem is that at least sections of our leadership seem to have no conception of how to work with other forces in situations where they cannot control them, or where the Party might have to make political compromises. And that fact about our external relations tells us something about the kind of internal “guided democracy” that has operated in the SWP for far too long.

One, two, three, many Leninisms IS first began considered moving to a Leninist model of organisation in response to the inability of the revolutionary left to outflank the Communist Party of France in May-June 1968. Peter Sedgwick sounded a warning note at the time: “The ‘responsible central and local bodies, stable in their composition’ (i.e. the same people get elected) ‘and in their attitude to their political line’ (i.e. they pretend not to change their minds) belong to the traditions of a religious order (the Comintern) breathing the stench of an era of defeat and recession within the international proletariat. That era is not ours.” Sedgwick was right to highlight the dangers of establishing an unchanging leadership incapable of recognising, or at least admitting to its own errors, but wrong that this would come from following the traditions of the Comintern, at least in its revolutionary period. The SWP, to paraphrase the Labour Manifesto of 1945, is a Leninist Party and proud of it: but what kind of Leninist party? We are told that the SWP follows the Bolshevik party model as transmitted to the parties of the Communist International after 1920. In fact, there was no single model. The Bolsheviks adopted several different organisational forms according to changing circumstances. Lenin famously wrote in 1906 that in order to bring workers into the party, ‘it is necessary for all comrades to devise new forms of organisation by their independent, creative joint efforts. It is impossible to lay down any predetermined standards for this, for we are working in an entirely new field: a knowledge of local conditions and above all the initiative of all Party members must be brought into play. The new form of organisational nucleus of the worker’s party, must be definitely much broader than were the old circles. Apart from this, the new nucleus will most likely have to be a less rigid, more “free”, more “loose” organisation.’ In a commentary on this passage and others like it, Hal Draper argues that there can be “no ‘concept of the party’ taken as a ‘principle’ divorced from time and place. Lenin’s ideas on party organisation, like those of most others, varied depending on conditions, especially such an immense difference in conditions as that

between the underground conditions in an autocracy and the conditions of relative political liberty and open organisational opportunity that characterised Russia in the 1905-7 period”.

Nor is it true that by the time the Communist International was established the organisational form of the revolutionary party had been distilled or condensed into formula that could be applied anywhere, anytime, like the ingredients of a packet of soup reconstituted by the addition of water. The Bolsheviks had to ensure that the young and mostly immature Communist Parties had a basic knowledge of organisation and tactics, and this involved imposing a hastily-drafted set of political tests (the ‘21 conditions’) and a rough framework of what the party should look like. According to Pierre Broue, the KPD had around 220,000 dues-paying members in the third quarter of 1922. (Interestingly, the figures based on returns by branches suggested a membership over 100,000 bigger. In the case of the KPD, as in that of the SWP, the dues-paying figures are more reliable.) Whatever the precise figures, it clearly was a mass party. How was it organised? In large localities organisation was based on workplace fractions and subdivided into districts, sub-districts and ultimately “groups of ten” (actually groups of ten to twenty), each member of which ‘belonged to two basis structures, the “group of ten” and the [industrial] fraction’: “The leading members at the higher levels of the Party were appointed by elections conducted on this dual basis. The party’s shop-stewards in the workplaces elected the leaders in the districts, as well as half the members of the executive committees of the local groups, the other half being elected directly at general meetings of local activists which included all the members of the ‘groups of ten’. The executive of the local group appointed in this way invited to all its deliberations, with consultative vote, the leaders of the various fractions, workplace fractions or fractions in mass organisations such as the Communist Youth, Communist women, cooperatives, etc. ... At every level, the cadres, whether they were delegated for a particular situation, or responsible for a certain period, were elected and subject to recall at any time by the units which had elected them, whether committees or general meetings, conferences or congresses. In accordance with the Bolshevik principle of democratic centralism, the supreme body of the Party was its Congress, which met at least once a year. The delegates to it were elected on the basis of pre-Congress discussions. In these discussions, different tendencies could confront each other and present their programmes and candidates at the same time. They had very wide freedom to express their differences, including at meetings of local groups in which they had no supporters. In the intervals between Congresses, authority belonged to the Central

Committee, which itself was made up of people elected in two different ways. Some were directly elected by the Congress, but had to live where the leadership was resident... The others were also elected by the Congress, but from people nominated from the districts which they represented at the same time as they represented the Party as a whole. In this way, the Central Committee retained some of the features of the federal type of organisation which characterised the Spartacus League. Functionaries and delegates, whatever their functions, were closely dependent on the base which elected them and had the right to recall them, and permanent Party workers were never in the majority in the Executive organs outside the Central Committee.”

As should be obvious from Broue’s description, the organisation of this most important of Communist parties has some similarities to that of ours, but was also considerably more flexible and open—again, in a situation where civil war had recently occurred and where revolutionary opportunities were rightly thought to be expected to be imminent. In some respects, of course, many aspects of our party’s organisation and approach have changed since the early 1980s—the size and number of branches, our attitude to participation in electoral alliances, our willingness to stand for full-time union positions—but not the relationship of the CC to the rest of the party. At the heart of this relationship is the idea that the leadership will debate issues amongst themselves, then decide on a course of action and only then inform the membership what this decision is and what it will involve them in doing—although we are of course then invited to ratify the CC’s decisions at Annual Conference. And this attitude goes all the way down through the devolved nations and districts. In Scotland, for example, after the disintegration of the SSP the local SWP leadership had an essentially closed discussion about whether or not to join Solidarity—an approach for which I bear as much responsibility as anyone else on our Steering Group. The impulse is always to restrict the debate, or even to refuse to admit there is a debate, in case the “wrong” decision gets taken—the “right” one having been decided by us in advance.

The last occasion there was an open split within the CC was over the downturn in the late 1970s and that only because Cliff was in a minority and therefore felt he had the right to take the debate to the membership as a whole. Cliff was correct, both in the action he took and the position he argued, but surely this is not the only occasion in the last thirty years where this kind of debate would have helped us avoid error? More to the point, should the possibility of discussion simply rest on the personal initiative of one or more members of the CC? This leadership model may

have been a regrettable necessity during the late 1970s and most of the 1980s, but it has been a block to any further growth since, above all since 1999. Why would activists looking for a party to take them beyond trade unionism, single-issue or community campaigning subject themselves to an internal regime which is less democratic than those to which they already belong? The party is organised as a small, revolutionary group with structures and procedures which make it difficult to become anything other than a small, revolutionary group.

The potential problems were identified even before the Leninist turn was complete. In April 1975 John Molyneux complained in this very bulletin of what members regarded as “the high-handed and undemocratic way in which certain important decisions are taken” leading to “disunity, bitterness and splits”. He also proposed an explanation: “the crucial factor I believe is the lack of an established tradition of organised political debate at all levels of the organisation. The branches discuss politics and debate issues, of course, but not in a way that systematically relates to the central strategic concerns of the group and so can contribute to the taking of important decisions. They cannot do this because they are not sufficiently informed on the strategic plans of the leadership or, more importantly, on the reasoning behind differences within the leadership”. We were not, of course, the first party to experience these difficulties. Lukacs highlighted them during the first attempt to build mass revolutionary parties following the Russian Revolution, in a book which I believe may be known to members of the CC: “If the party consists merely of a hierarchy of officials isolated from the mass of ordinary members who are normally given the role of passive onlookers, if the party only occasionally acts as a whole then this will produce in the members a certain indifference composed equally of blind trust and apathy with regard to the day-to-day actions of the leadership. Their criticism will at best be of the post festum variety (at congresses, etc.) which seldom exert any decisive influence on future actions.”

We constantly invoke the democratic freedoms of the Bolshevik Party, but actually have fewer democratic rights than its members did under conditions of autocracy, quasi-feudal barbarism and repression. In 1906, after the temporary reunification of the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party, Lenin could write of the structure that emerged: “We were all agreed on the principle of democratic centralism, on guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition, on the autonomy of every party organisation, on recognising that all Party functionaries must be elected, accountable to the party and subject to recall.” (Comrades will note that there is one

consistent theme between the Russian experience recounted here and that of the German party noted above: the recall of party officials.) Why is our leadership so anxious to retain a constitution and relationship to the membership which is less democratic than one which was possible during the first Russian Revolution? If we reject theories of the inevitability of oligarchy common to both anarchism and Weberian sociology, then the answer must be political. I think there are two reasons.

The first is that the leadership has to have a deep, although rarely openly expressed fear of a split in the party. At one level this is quite understandable. The history of international Trotskyism is characterised by a disabling fragmentation and division, often over minor doctrinal differences. And even where organisations manage to avoid this, it has often been at the expense of effectively establishing permanent factions with all the potential for political paralysis that involves. The experience of the International Marxist Group in Britain in the 1970s and—to a lesser extent—the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire in France today demonstrates the difficulties that can result. The IS/SWP itself had a debilitating experience of internal factions in the first half of the 1970s at the hands of an open entryist grouping called Worker's Fight and several "native" oppositions. As I noted in the introduction, the SWP is not simply hegemonic on the British radical left—in the sense that no serious initiative can be attempted without our leadership or at least our participation—it is for all practical purposes the only serious revolutionary organisation left. In these circumstances the consequences of a split would be very serious indeed, as it would threaten the gains that we have made, particularly since any seceding organisation would inevitably have virtually the same theoretical and political positions as the SWP. Unfortunately, the attitude the CC has taken to avoid the problem is to suppress any debate beyond what it deems a reasonable level, which is usually about the practical or technical application of policies which members of the CC have decided among themselves. But this does not lead to the elimination of differences, just to their internalisation, which in turn leads to cynicism, inactivity and ultimately to comrades leaving the organisation. In effect, it produces the very situation it seeks to avoid, except that the lifeblood of the party is not transfused into another organisation, it simply drains away. The long term corrosive effect of this is actually far more debilitating than any open split would be. In the early 1950s the Italian writer Ignazio Silone once joked with Palmiro Togliatti, then leader of the Communist Party of Italy, that so many people had left the international Stalinist movement: "The final struggle will be between the Communists and the ex-Communists". This will not be our fate.

Many, perhaps most, of our ex-members constitute a pool of individual socialists with politics identical to those of the party, whose talents are not only lost to us, but who very likely add to the general suspicion of our motives and activities by recounting the experiences that led to their departure. Paradoxically, many are also glad that the SWP exists—but simply do want to be part of it.

The second reason is that the SWP was born in a period of defeat, two years into the downturn, and bears all the birthmarks of that experience. The model of revolutionary organisation we developed between 1968 and 1976 was almost immediately elevated into an unalterable orthodoxy. Again, this is understandable at one level. We were operating an intensely hostile environment: industrially, the trade unions were experiencing defeat after defeat; politically, the Labour left initially grew in strength and acted as a pull on revolutionaries, then increasingly capitulated to electoral demands of the right; intellectually, the tone was set by postmodernism and the identity politics which were its popular manifestation. In these circumstances an essentially defensive posture, which aimed to preserve the organisational and theoretical integrity of the party, became our default position except in the infrequent irruptions of class struggle, above all in the Miner's Strike, which characterised the period. We still cling to an organisational model established in a period that period is long over.

Fears of a split in the organisation on the one hand and of malign external influences on the other have apparently led the leadership to believe that the membership are incapable of making decisions about the direction of the party—actually making decisions, I mean, not simply ratifying them in the manner described by Lukacs. One of Cliff's most unhelpful contributions to political theory is the concept of “the organised distrust of the members by the centre”—a position I found so shocking the first time it was confided to me during the Miner's Strike I assumed the speaker (a local NC member long since departed) was joking: alas not. I am not of course suggesting that every single decision has to be put to a referendum of the entire membership. Apart from being unworkable, it is also unnecessary: the party leadership has to make day-to-day judgements and take day-to-day decisions. But large-scale strategic decisions—say over our response to long-signalled legislation, like the introduction of the Poll Tax in Scotland during 1989, or the establishment of a new political formation, like the launch of Respect in England during 2004, required a fundamental consideration by the entire party which they did not receive. The answer to complaints of this sort is usually twofold.

One is the argument from effectiveness, that the CC generally gets it right so any concerns about its judgement is simply “making a fetish of democracy”, or some such formulation. Unfortunately, as we have seen in relation to the cases mentioned above, nearly 20 years apart, the CC does not always get it right. Nor, when it was increasingly apparent to comrades on the ground that our positions involved huge problems, was action taken, except to denounce those trying to point out the facts. Although in the first case at least, the error of assuming that resistance to the Poll Tax would be trade union-based was eventually acknowledged and the position corrected, there was no assessment of what had led to the wrong decision being taken. And in the case of Respect, the debacle was simply put down to contingent factors outwith our control. CC members come and go, of course, and occasionally someone is made a scapegoat for particularly egregious failure (usually because they have become too enthusiastic for a policy just at the point when its failure is becoming apparent), but there is never any overall accounting or accountability, and attempts to secure it are generally deflected by exhortations not to dwell on the past, not to pick at old wounds, not to be inward looking—because, after all comrades, there are always new demonstrations to be organised, public meetings to be arranged, papers to be sold: move on, get over it. We never make mistakes.

The other argument is that, if comrades are unhappy with the role of the CC, its membership can be changed at conference. But this is virtually impossible, not merely because of the stage-managed nature of conference, but because there is no obvious leadership in waiting capable of challenging the CC. Of course, a potential national leadership does exist out in the country—indeed, if it did not, and there were really no cadres who could possibly take over from the core of the CC that has been in place since the early 1980s, then we would have utterly failed in one of our key tasks, which is surely to develop such a leadership. The problem is rather that they are generally operating in isolation from each other, have few means of making themselves known at a national level and are rarely consciously developed. In fact, with very few exceptions, most of the comrades who have been invited to join the CC since the early 1980s have been student or district organisers—in other words they are drawn from the ranks of the party’s paid officials, whose jobs had previously been to relay the views of the leadership to the members. Now, the organiser’s job is a necessary, difficult and not particularly well paid one. The comrades who undertake this task are hardly the basis of a privileged bureaucratic layer and they deserve our respect, but one has to ask whether they are the only members who are capable of performing this role—or indeed whether they do indeed perform it. The

CC gives all the appearance of a two-tier body with one (superior) part consisting of the theoreticians and policy-makers, the other (inferior) part consisting of functionaries. This in itself constitutes a problem, since the former will effectively dominate the latter, thus narrowing the range of participants in decision-making still further. With one exception the entire CC consists of comrades who are paid full-timers, “professional revolutionaries”, all of whom live in the same city. Lukacs again: “Every hierarchy in the party (and while the struggle is raging it is inevitable that there should be a hierarchy), must be based on the suitability of certain talents for the objective requirements of the particular phase of the struggle. If the revolution leaves one phase behind, it will not be possible to adapt oneself to the exigencies of the new situation merely by changing one’s tactics, or even by changing the form of organisation... what is needed in addition is a reshuffle in the party hierarchy: the selection of personnel must be exactly suited to the new phase of the struggle.” Clearly, some current members of the CC would remain as part of virtually any reconfigured body, but not all. Can there be anything more damaging to the idea of revolutionary leadership than the perception that members of what I call the superior part of the CC occupy a sinecure or permanent fixture, that its members will retain their posts—or some post, at any rate—regardless of what they do or fail to do in the exercise of their duties?

The CC needs to be reorganised, both in structure and composition. The leadership should at the very least, be weighted as much towards those who are actually leading in workplaces, universities, campaigns, communities and intellectual life, as towards party full-timers. It also needs to reflect the different spatial experiences of the class: the rhythms of political life are different now in Scotland and, to a lesser extent, in Wales and no decisions about the Britain as a whole can be taken without taking these differences into consideration. (Apart from anything else, this would prevent a repetition of the People before Profit Charter being issued across the UK as a whole with demands that have already been achieved north of the border!)

Understanding the present and preparing for the future These changes are essential, but others are also required. We urgently need accurate intelligence from the field of battle which reflects the changes that are taking place in British society. In particular, a serious revolutionary strategy can only be based on an accurate assessment of the situation of the working class. Of course, preparation of such an assessment involves knowledge already acquired from ongoing practical intervention as much as from theoretical study, but even direct

experience of the struggle has to be interpreted. I believe that an inadequate theoretical framework has prevented us from making the necessary analysis. At the moment, our decisions appear to be based on partial information filtered through a perspective which can envisage the future only as a repetition of the past.

Of course, there is much to be said for tradition and for maintaining positions until they have been decisively proved wrong, rather than light-mindedly abandoning them at the first opportunity. In some respects conservatism can be an under-appreciated revolutionary virtue, particularly in periods of stability. It can, for example, prevent the launching of inadequately thought-out initiatives or the adoption of fashionable stupidities. On the other hand, what we have exhibited for several decades is not simply theoretical conservatism, but a form of scholasticism which, as we have seen, seeks to explain every new phenomenon with reference to an historical analogy or a reference to one of the great Marxists. The prophets of the Old Testament believed that there was nothing new under the sun: we do not agree with them. There are new economic situations, new political formations and new forms of activism which cannot always be explained with reference to the first four Congresses of the Third International, or what Trotsky said (e.g.) to the French Section of the Left Opposition in 1934. Of course we need to be aware of historical parallels and learn from the insights of the Classical Tradition, as I have tried to do in this contribution; but there are limits to how useful this procedure is, particularly when it prevents us seeing where there are breaks, as well as continuities. The search for precedent in every situation is something we should leave to the peculiarities of the English legal system. We are in a situation where precedents are of limited use.

Specifically, I think we were ultimately led astray by the metaphor of “the downturn”. As a means of encapsulating the situation of retreat and demoralisation that the British working class were beginning to undergo in the late 1970s, this was a helpful contribution. The problem was that we then began to see developments entirely in terms of “downturn” or its opposite, “upturn” and this, on the other hand, was not helpful at all. For one thing, downturns and upturns are moments of sharp transition; by definition they have a limited timescale. Most of the history of the British working class cannot easily be allocated to one or the other: moments like 1910-14, 1919 or 1971-4 are highly exceptional. Yet we have been predicting an “upturn” since around 1989. Instead, the major flashpoints have been over the Poll Tax, the Criminal Justice Bill, the BNP, asylum seekers and imperialist war—issues which involved people in responding

to attacks on their communities or opposition to geopolitical developments: trade union involvement there certainly was, but trade union action was minimal.

This misreading of the situation was caused by our severe underestimation of the effects of neo-liberalism on the working class, to the point that, until recently, we refused to recognise that it existed. The all-out frontal attacks on the labour movement and working class conditions characteristic of the first stage of neoliberalism largely ceased after the defeat of the Poll Tax. But this was not simply because the ruling class had become more cautious; it was also because the attacks had achieved their basic aim of weakening the ability of trade unions to effectively defend their members. This allowed three developments. One was to ensure that wage costs fell and stayed down, so that the share of profits going to capital was increased. The second was to enable corporate restructuring, the closing of “unproductive” units and the imposition of “the right of managers to manage” within the workplace. The third, and a more long-term tactical consideration, was to assist social democracy adapt to neoliberalism by weakening the main source of countervailing pressure from the broader labour movement. What followed, particularly after 1997, were two more molecular processes. One was to move production to geographical areas with low or non-existent levels of unionisation and prevent the culture of membership from becoming established: there are now areas of the economy, particularly in the private sector where unionisation is simply unknown. The other was the gradual commodification of huge new areas of social life: services which had been free at the point of use now had to be directly paid for; services where costs had previously been subsidised were now set on competitive lines: the naturalisation of the market is not only an ideological phenomenon—it is what people experience in the fabric of their daily lives. These changes have been more difficult to challenge than the earlier onslaughts, precisely because they did not in most cases involve set-piece confrontations, but they have had a cumulative impact on the working class.

Reformism, in the Gramscian sense of contradictory consciousness, is a permanent feature of working class life; but its consolidation or maintenance in political terms as a social democratic consciousness is not. What, for example, are the implications of social democratic organisations like the Labour Party, which used to embody this consciousness, becoming openly committed to capitalism? What are effects on working class expectations of over three decades of “anti-reforms” and the normalisation of market relations in areas where they

were unknown even a hundred years ago—in the provision of local services, for example? What opportunities are there for workplace socialisation and unionisation for young people who were denied the opportunity to be exploited even before the financial collapse? Historically, we have argued that they have been swept up either by the economic effects of inter-imperialist war or peacetime economic boom. Are we relishing the thought of the former? Are we expecting the latter? It sometimes appears that while we recognise the existence of capitalist exploitation and oppression, we want to deny that they have any negative effects, that they only produce anger and resistance. But these are not all it produces. A report in *The Observer* quoted one GMB shop steward at JCB, where the workers recently agreed to accept a pay cut in order to save 322 jobs: “Industrial action is not on the cards. The days of strikes are long gone. No one ever gets their money back. With higher food and fuel bills, losing even a days’ wages is tough.” It also quoted the managing director of the HR consultancy Marshall-James: “People are less likely to go on strike today—they are less politicised, and also maybe more selfish.” This is not all that is going on in the class, but it needs to be explained—and explained without simply relying on those ever-popular, but often deeply ahistorical concepts, “betrayal by the bureaucracy” and “lack of confidence among the membership”.

These comments may sound like an expression of despair. They are not. In fact, I think the conditions are being prepared for major explosions of an entirely unpredictable sort. The argument can be made in both general and particular terms. The general was famously expressed by Lenin in 1920, but is true of any period of imperialist war and economic crisis, including our own: ‘History as a whole, and the history of revolutions in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more multiform, more lively and ingenious than is imagined by even the best parties, the most class-conscious vanguards of the most advanced classes. ... We do not and cannot know which spark—of all the innumerable sparks that are flying about in all countries as a result of the world economic and political crisis—will kindle the conflagration; we must therefore, with our new and communist principles, set to work to stir up all and sundry, even the oldest, mustiest and seemingly hopeless spheres, for otherwise we shall not be able to cope with our tasks, shall not be comprehensibly prepared...’ As French Marxist Daniel Bensaid once said at Marxism, this approach can be summed up by the notion of readiness: “Ready for the improbable, for the unexpected, for what happens.” But there is also a more specific argument which was well captured by Cliff in 1968: “For decades Marxists used to infer the state of mass consciousness from a few institutional barometers—membership of

organisations, readership of papers, etc. The deep alienation of workers from traditional organisations smashed all such barometers to pieces. This explains why there was no way of detecting the imminence of the upheaval in May 1968. And also, more important, it explains the extreme, explosive nature of the events. If the workers in France had been accustomed to participate in the branch life of the trade unions or the Communist Party, these institutions would have served both as an aid and as ballast preventing the rapid uncontrolled spread of the strike movement. The concept of apathy or privatisation is not a static concept. At a certain stage of development—when the path of individual reforms is being narrowed, or closed—apathy can transform into its opposite, swift mass action. ... Workers who have lost their loyalty to the traditional organisations, which have shown themselves to be paralysed over the years, are forced into extreme, explosive struggles on their own.” The conditions described by Cliff have deteriorated further, much further in Britain today than they had in France forty years ago and effects are likely to be the same.

What does “readiness” mean in these circumstances? This brings us back to the relationship between the leadership and other members. Gramsci and Togliatti noted in 1926 that a crucial aspect of a revolutionary party was the “capacity of the local organisms and of individual comrades, to confront unforeseen circumstances and take up correct positions even before directives arrive from the leading bodies. It is necessary to combat the form of passivity...which consists in only being able to ‘wait from orders from above.’ The party must be characterised by ‘initiative’ at the base; in other words, the base organs must be able to react immediately to every unforeseen and unexpected situation.” What kind of scenarios are we looking at where “initiative” might be necessary? We are already responding to two immediate consequences of the current crisis. The first is the increase in repossessions and evictions, but I would also add personal bankruptcies, since it is equally vital that these are treated as social issues, not individual tragedies; as I wrote earlier this is the area where the united front is a genuinely relevant tactic. The second is the threat to jobs, as the collapse in bank lending begins to hit the service and manufacturing core of the economy. In both cases we have to argue against the logic of capital and assert the political economy of the working class as an alternative.

But there two other situations for which we should be ready, without being able to predict exactly where explosions are likely to come. One is the likely consequence of the persistence of high youth unemployment

in the inner cities and estates, which could result in the type of riots last seen in the early 1980s (something made more likely by the increasingly repressive behaviour of the police and other state agencies), or it could be channelled into racist or fascist scapegoating of minorities: accepting that society is becoming polarised also means recognising that poles tend to come in twos. The other is the opposite situation of people who are in work, but remain un-unionised and here there is a historical precedent which strikes me as being more useful than most. In America during the 1930s the Depression was the backdrop to the re-emergence of trade unionism on an industrial rather than craft basis. These great unionisation movements in the USA during 1930s were motivated by the desire of a second-generation immigrant workforce to participate in a consumerist paradise from which they were excluded by low wages for the previous decade, and which now seemed to be put off again by the economic crisis. Even more important in igniting their resistance was the disciplinary regime of the foremen and pressure of keeping up with the production line. These conditions are quite similar, in terms of internal regime, to those which currently prevail in the great telesales office-factories, the hyper-markets and the financial institutions where, one suspects, things are going to get much tougher for those spared the corporate downsizing. One other aspect of the American experience is of particular importance to us: in each of successful strikes of the mid-thirties, political leadership effectively fell to whichever political organisation of the left was on the ground and had something intelligent to say to the workers—Communists, Trotskyists or the followers of A. J. Muste. We are the only real revolutionary party in Britain, but let us not be so complacent as to imagine that other forces, with superficially plausible arguments and strategies, will not seek to take advantage of a new upsurge, if we are not there to put our arguments.

What Next? We need to extend our period of internal discussion beyond conference in order to allow for greater debate over both strategy and internal organisation, particularly since the CC has not yet recognised that we have problems in either area. (A conference motion containing a proposal along these lines follows this contribution.) One response to this proposal may be concern that our internal discussions may find their way into the websites and publications of the sectarian left, once rightly described by George Lichtheim as “tiny ferocious creatures devouring each other in a drop of water”. China Mieville and Richard Seymour have already dealt with this point in their timely call for a “culture of discussion” in IB2. An apparently more serious objection will be that the extent of crisis and consequently the urgency of the moment are simply too great to indulge in a debate over internal structures: we

have demonstrations and public meetings to build, papers to sell, strikes to organise, and so on. We certainly need to do these things. But it is simply an evasion to argue that we cannot do both. If we have not clarified our ideas and renovated our organisation, then how will we attract the people we meet at these events? If we have not grown substantially over the past thirty years then why do we imagine that we will now, without some change? Simply hoping the depth of the crisis to deliver members to us while we carry on with business as usual, only at a more frenetic pace, is not a serious option. At the beginning and end of the revolutionary period between 1968 and 1975 we held additional conferences to agree the structure of our organisation. If we could find the time to have these considerations then, when the level of struggle was much higher than it is now, we can scarcely pretend that our current situation makes it impossible. If we fail to change, then we will almost certainly survive in some form—but our goal is surely something higher than survival—it is to earn the leadership of the British working class.

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