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biggest, most
influential, and
most prominent
organisation on
what claims to
be the British

revolutionary left. Yet, even a cursory
study of the antics of the party reveals the
reality of that ‘revolutionary’ character.”



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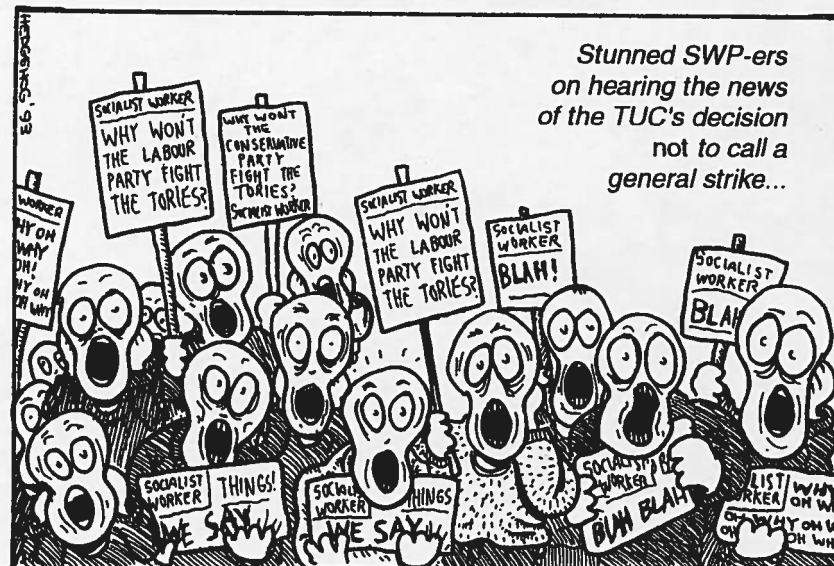
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ISBN 1 873176 02 3

Carry on recruiting!

**Why the Socialist Workers Party
(SWP) dumped the ‘downturn’ in a
‘dash for growth’**

☆ and other party pieces ☆



Stunned SWP-ers
on hearing the news
of the TUC's decision
not to call a
general strike...

★Trotwatch

Carry on recruiting!

Why the
Socialist Workers Party
dumped the 'downturn'
in a
'dash for growth'
and other party pieces

Trotwatch

■ Carry on recruiting! ■ The SWP and the 'dash for growth' ■

*Researched and written by Trotwatch
Jointly published by AK Press and Trotwatch
Printed by Clydeside Press
First Edition October 1993*

ISBN 1 873176 02 3

British Library cataloguing in Publication Data
Catalogue listing available from the British Library

*Correspondence to: TW, c/o Box NDF, 72 Radford Road,
Hyson Green, Nottingham NG7 5FT*

*Trade Enquiries to: AK Distribution, 22 Lutton Place,
Edinburgh EH8 9PE. Phone/fax 031 667 1507.
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■ Carry on recruiting! ■ The SWP and the 'dash for growth' ■

Introduction

The text that follows makes no claim to be a complete or definitive study of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its forerunners. What it is, is a brief examination of some of the key elements that make up the SWP's allegedly 'revolutionary' anti-capitalist politics and that inform its practice. The bulk of our argument concentrates on the party's analysis of the 'labour movement' and on its understanding of the supposedly 'indispensable role' that 'The Party' must perform for the proletariat in its struggles against capital and its works.

It begins by arguing that the SWP's abandonment of its 'downturn' theory at the end of 1992 was part of a conscious reorientation in the party's marketing strategy, in turn encouraged by a belief that it has now become possible for the SWP to break from the small-time leftist pack.

Using as examples the recent struggles over pit closures, and the poll tax (and also the experience of the last Labour government in the 1970s) the pamphlet sets out to examine the reality of the SWP's 'critique' of the labour movement and of the bureaucrats that run it. It goes on to question the SWP's understanding of what constitutes a 'genuinely independent' working class movement.

In doing so, it uncovers an organisation whose politics and practice negate its rhetorical claim to be 'revolutionary'.

Using as a primary source, the SWP's own writings, the pamphlet documents the miserably cynical behaviour of party *apparachiks* who are as ruthlessly self-serving, shamelessly opportunistic, recklessly inconsistent, and thoroughly unprincipled as the barons of the 'labour movement' they profess to oppose.

What follows should, we hope, be of interest to revolutionary militants everywhere. Read on... 'without illusions'.

*Trotwatch
October 1993*

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Why the Socialist Workers Party dumped the 'downturn' in a 'dash for growth'

If the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) had been able to double the size of its membership before lunchtime on Wednesday October 21st 1992 – the day of the first massive weekday demonstration in support of the miners in London – the Party would have been able to halt the pit closure programme in its tracks and drive the crisis-racked Tory government from office that very afternoon.

At least, that was the view of the long-time leader of the SWP, Tony Cliff, who in an interview in *Socialist Worker* at the end of January 1993 asked readers to:

"Imagine if we had 15,000 members... and 30,000 supporters: the 21 October miners' demonstration could have been different.

Instead of marching round Hyde Park, socialists could have taken 40 or 50,000 people to parliament.

If that had happened, the Tory MPs wouldn't have dared vote with Michael Heseltine. The government would have collapsed.

The prospect is not unrealistic or romantic. The number of socialists organised together is important in determining the outcome of the struggle."¹

Tony Cliff's argument – that John Major's administration had survived until the morning of October 22nd only because the SWP hadn't managed to sign up enough new recruits in the critical weeks before the demo – tell us quite a lot about the current political state-of-health of the self-proclaimed 'smallest mass party in the world'.

The portrayal, of two massive passive demonstrations around central London as evidence of the return of a confident, insurgent working class movement ready and able to topple governments given the right 'leadership', would, of course, be unremarkable had it appeared in the pages of *The Newline*, or any of a dozen other tiny orthodox Trotskyist journals.

The interesting thing about Cliff's statement is not so much that it's

lifted from the Alice in Wonderland school of 'marxist' analysis, but that it should come from the leader of a Trotsky-ish party, which has – for over a decade now – argued that we are living in a 'political downturn': a time when low levels of confidence and consciousness have spread a sense of pessimism throughout the working class movement, critically undermining our class's ability to struggle effectively.

The belief in the 'downturn' had dictated the politics and practice of the SWP ever since its adoption: it had been the very hallmark of the group.

The theory had been conjured up, as the new Thatcher government took office, in the hope that it would prevent any real discussion of what had happened to so many of the *other* theories the party had been promoting at the time.

The emergence of the 'downturn' seemed to 'explain' why the party's predictions – specifically about its own prospects for growth; and about the political impact of the 1974-9 Labour government on industrial struggle – had been so wildly inaccurate, or rather 'superseded by events'.

The party clung to the theory throughout the eighties, unmoved by inner-city riots, a year long miners' strike, or any other outbreaks of class warfare. Now, suddenly, in the autumn of 1992, that 'downturn' was declared over, and was immediately replaced by a dramatic 'upturn' – dubbed 'the new mood'.

The adoption of the 'downturn' theory in the late 1970s predicated a series of splits, expulsions and major ructions throughout the leadership of the SWP.

It was the biggest shake-up of the group's apparatus since the tough 'Leninisation' of the Party following the momentous events of 1968-9.

Clearly, the 'new optimism' wasn't immediately and universally accepted in the higher echelons of the party, any more than the 'downturn' had been before it. But the scale of the inner-party revolt is still unclear.

A clutch of long standing cadre were expelled: Phil Taylor and Maureen Watson from Glasgow SWP, were amongst a scattered group of long standing members kicked out of the party shortly after the November '92 National Conference – in their case after officials accused them of "being a secret faction. In SWP-speak... the equivalent of having impure thoughts."² According to a report in the used-to-be 'left-wing' Labour newspaper *Tribune* in early February, Cliff had taken to "denouncing publicly such leading party figures as Pat Stack, Mike Gonzalez and Colin Barker"³. The paper went on to suggest that: "A split is imminent, it

seems". In fact, in contrast with previous U-turns in party policy, the enforcement of the 'new mood' seems to have met little serious resistance, even from those party *apparachiks* unconvinced by Cliff's rhetoric.

Unless a breakaway group sets up a rival 'real-SWP' franchise to challenge the new Cliff orthodoxy, the real scale of the schism may never be known. The dissidents – some of whom remain as officials within the party's bureaucracy – seem to have accepted 'disciplining'.

It was the party's autumn Conference internal document *The SWP and the Crisis of British Capitalism*, widely reported in the left press, that first made clear the extent of the overhaul the party cadre was to be subjected to:

"The Party... must change radically if it is to take advantage of the present opportunities."⁴

"Only a minority of the party is responsible for the successes of the past few weeks – recruiting, selling more papers etc. Many of this minority are very recent recruits to the party.

Many more experienced comrades, scarred by the 1980s, dominate the branch meetings, where they act as a conservative block to shifting the party."⁵

This was quite something, coming from a party leadership responsible for so much of that 'scarring' in the first place. It was they who had enforced the new 'downturn'-ism which had 'damaged' so many of the previously optimistic cadre, in the first place. Now that cadre, whose enthusiasm had been smothered by the dictates of the Central Committee, were being attacked by that same leadership for not cheering up fast enough. It can be a tough place, Left-land. Cliff and his cohorts warned the cheerless that:

"a mood of pessimism... justified by half-thought out theories... [was leading to] abstentionist political practice accompanied by abstract pessimism in analysis of the period."⁶

So, the 'downturn' was history: just what did the 'new optimism' amount to?

The SWP leadership were now claiming that we had entered a dramatically intensified period of class struggle – typified by the massive support for the miners' fight – that had shaken off the glum lethargy that had gripped the working class movement during the Thatcher decade.

Now the biggest obstacle to the growth of the revolutionary party

was not the level of consciousness within the class, but the organisation, politics and practice of the revolutionary party itself.

Hence, in the 'interests of the class', there was a clear need to rewrite the Manifesto, further disenfranchise the membership, purge sections of the cadre, and intimidate and discredit 'secret' factions.

It seems Mr Cliff had decided that Mr Kinnock had known a few things about how to run a political party after all.

Cliff's opponents within the Party faced a difficult task in defending themselves against this offensive, not least because of the seriousness of the charges levelled against them: Because only the small size of the SWP allowed the Tories to cling to power, and only the backwardness of some of the SWP's own cadre had prevented the SWP's growth to the point of critical mass, it was, Cliff reasoned, actually the fault of SWP dissidents that the Tories have survived this long. Gerry Healy would have been proud of such 'logic'.

Of course the discovery of the 'upturn' was like the discovery of the 'downturn' before it, based not on any analysis of the complex realities of the *class struggle*, but on an understanding of the changing needs of the *party apparatus* at different turning points in its history.

For the 'downturn' theory to hold any credibility at the end of the 70s, the Party simply had to ignore any class struggle realities that didn't fit with the new orthodoxy. The new 'upturn' was dealt with in exactly the same way. For the SWP's spin-doctors, reality is a flexible commodity, to be moulded until it fits the needs of the party. •

The struggle for hegemony

The timing of the party's 'dash for growth' has been influenced by its assessment of the current weakness of its major opponents on the left, and of the opportunities this realignment in the balance of forces has opened up for the SWP.

During the depths of the 'downturn' in the early to mid-eighties, the party was eclipsed by the resurgence of the left within the Labour Party, particularly by the emergence of the Bennite left. According to its own theory of the 'radicalising experience' workers would undergo seeing a Labour government at work, the IS/SWP should have thrived in the months immediately following the 'class betrayals' of the Callaghan administration. In fact it lost out badly.

Rather than mass disillusionment driving Labour militants out of the Party and into the ranks of the Bolshevik left, the traffic was heavily in the other direction. Significant numbers of left activists concluded from the experience of the Social Contract that the problem with Labourism, was not its capitalist politics, but the internal functioning of its electoral machine – the fact that the 'left' base of the Labour Party, was constantly 'let down' by a 'right' leadership.

Many leftists *joined* the Labour Party determined to reform and 'democratise' the party's functioning, to prevent – as they saw it – future 'betrayals' by an unrepresentative Parliamentary Party and Cabinet.

The right of the Labour Party were badly disorientated by the failure of the Contract and the pay policy. It seemed to signal the end of the post-War corporatist settlement on which the whole politics of British Labourism had been based since 1945. Unable to offer an alternative new 'big idea' to take its place, and having alienated many of the key union barons through the way the pay squeeze had operated, the centre and right of the Party found itself losing ground to a regorganised left-wing, that was able to 'win' significant organisational victories. Their initial 'successes' proved a powerful pole of attraction on the left.

The SWP developed a new theory to explain the emergence of this recruitment rival. It didn't *really* fit with any of its *other* theories about the relationship between Labourism and class confidence, but by now few in the party seemed in a mood to argue. The theory went as follows: faced by the realities of an economic downturn, many militants were looking to struggles away from the workplace on which to focus, and were in the process able to generate an *illusory* political upturn inside the Labour Party.

"We have the paradox that a *lowering* of working class confidence and self-activity is producing a certain politicisation from which the Labour Party benefits. People have to have some hope and the very lack of self-confidence tends to overcome some of the profound cynicism towards the Labour Party produced by the Wilson-Callaghan government between 1974 and 1979"⁷.

The theory was tortuous and incoherent, but the SWP was right about one thing: the Labour left's 'successes' *were* entirely illusory, even by their own miserable reformist standards: while they were winning the chairpersonship of important inner-party sub-committees, in the real world the working class were coming under a relentless series of attacks as the new Thatcherite

government went on the offensive. As Kinnock replaced Foot as Labour leader, and launched his own onslaught on 'extremism' in the party, following Labour's crushing defeat in the 1983 election, the fictitious nature of the left's 'strength' became embarrassingly apparent. Within a few short years that 'left' had been all but routed – its tattered remnants deeply divided, and bereft of any sort of strategy with which to regain lost ground.

Later in the 80s, the SWP lost out to another expression of 'Labour radicalism': the grand 'municipal socialist' experiment: as Livingstone's grant-rich GLC, Derek Hatton's Liverpool fiefdom, and the 'socialist republics' of South Yorkshire and elsewhere sucked militants into the apparatus of the Labour Party.

The sorry history of the those councils' 'resistance' to central government's attacks on the social wage, during the rate capping and cuts battles, has left little in the way of a glorious legacy. That, combined with the inevitable rightward flight of so many of the key 'left-wing firebrand' leaders of that era (including Blunkett, Hatton and Livingstone) has meant – that for the time being at least – 'municipal socialist' strategies have little currency on the left.

Many of the SWP's earlier rivals have gone the way of all flesh too. The winding up of the Communist Party, and the collapse (or fragmentation) of other sizeable opponents from the 1970s – such as the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) or the International Marxist Group (IMG) – has helped to clear much ground. Assessing its prospects, the party observed:

"We have one advantage which we did not have in the early 1970s: the gradual disintegration of the old Broad Lefts, the crisis of Stalinism and the reduction of the British Communist Party to a joke organisation"⁸.

The SWP's only serious mainstream rival in the labour milieu still in business – with significant numbers, profile, money and influence – the Militant Tendency is clearly moving politically in the SWP's direction⁹. It's certain, that as part of its struggle to assert political – if not organisational – hegemony over the 'far left', the SWP will begin to pile the pressure on Militant in the years running up to the next election, seeking to poach its members, and push it closer still. •

How come the SWP has been able to grow?

The SWP has now probably overtaken Militant to become the biggest 'far-left' organisation in the UK. There are a number of reasons that help to explain how the SWP has been able to carve out such a dominant position.

SWP party bosses have a clear grasp of the importance of marketing – and of tuning their product to what they hope the punters might want to buy. As an earlier critique of the party succinctly put it: "The SWP hopes to maintain its student recruitment by establishing itself as the most... resolute advocate of whatever is popular".¹⁰

And at the polytechnic, and on the picket line, the SWP's populist packaging of anti-Tory anger and simple economic reformist 'class politics' will usually supply the local branch a stream of new recruits – particularly if the party's PR managers spot when it's time to abandon one bandwagon and set off in pursuit of the next.

On the 'theoretical' level, many of the key political positions the 'IS-tradition' has adopted since the 1950s have enabled it both to differentiate itself from many of its rivals, and dump much of the orthodox Trotskyite baggage that has weighed down so many of its opponents.

The earliest incarnation of the SWP, the Socialist Review Group (SRG) was a tiny organisation, comprised of around 30 people. It began life as a faction within 'the Club', an entryist Trotskyite group, operating within the Labour Party in the late 1940s under the leadership of one Gerry Healy.

Three of the four main strands of British trotskyism – the IS/SWP tradition; the Healyite SLL/WRP tradition; and the RSL/Militant tradition – have their roots back in 'the Club'¹¹. The SRG parted company from 'the Club' in 1950 after its leader, Tony Cliff, endorsed a 'state capitalist' analysis of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe¹². The 'heresy' of state capitalism, was not developed by the Socialist Review Group, but its adoption by Cliff and his supporters clearly helped mark them out from the bulk of the Trotskyite camp, and – because it freed them from the obligation to 'critically defend' the Eastern European regimes – enabled them to appear less implicated by the crimes of 'already existing socialism'¹³.

Secondly, while the rest of the British Trotskyite movement clung tenaciously to the very letter of Trotsky's *Transitional Programme*¹⁴, forever predicting the imminent final economic crisis of capitalism, the SWP de-

veloped a counter-analysis that avoided the pit-falls of orthodox 'catastrophism'. Cliff, and party co-theorist Kidron, developed the theory of the 'permanent arms economy' which sought to explain the late arrival of the post-War global economic crisis Trotsky had predicted. This theory offered a 'marxist' explanation for the post-War boom, and again clearly separated the party from the crisis-obsessed Trotskyite morass¹⁵.

Thirdly, the party's decision that it would not battle for the British franchise of any of the rival Fourth Internationals, meant it avoided an entire history of crisis, split and implosion that for decades pre-occupied so many other outfits in Britain and around the world, destroying some and pushing others in unsellable political directions¹⁶.

The IS tradition thus avoided debilitating debates over, for example, the 'revolutionary potential' of gucrilla-ism, of Castro-ism, or of the Stalinist ruling parties of Eastern Europe. The IS tradition has had more than its fair share of splits, but has at least been able to contain them within one country, and none have seriously threatened the survival of the parent body.

Much of the SWP 'success' as a Trotsky-ish party is therefore based on the distance that it has struck between itself and orthodox Trotskyism. Of equal importance to the party's astute revisionism is the practical position the SWP has chosen to adopt in relation to the official labour movement.

From its earliest days, the SWP/IS has managed to combine a theoretical critique of the Labour Party and trade union officialdom, and an *assertion* of the need for complete political independence from it, with *actual allegiance* to both wings of the bureaucracy at every crunch point in the class struggle¹⁷. This has enabled the party to pose as a 'radical alternative' to the Labourist tradition, while at the same time keeping the party organisationally and politically close enough to the bureaucracy to recruit from the milieu around it. An examination of the party's coverage of the pit closure battle, and of the last Labour government, exposes the reality of the SWP's *realpolitik*.•

The SWP, the TUC and the 'rank and file'

The SWP claims that it supports a 'genuinely independent' working class movement – one that is outside the control of either wing of the labour bureaucracy – but the reality of both the party's analysis and practice tells a very different story.

In fact the party has nearly as many conflicting positions on the trade union question as it does on the Labour Party.

Sometimes the SWP attacks the bureaucracy for *failing* in its 'duty to lead'. Other times the party argues that that bureaucracy has different interests to our own, and so *can only fail* to lead us. Sometimes the party urges workers to 'go beyond' the official union structures to run their own struggles. Other times the party is certain that only loyalty to the TUC can deliver victory.

Whether 'rank and filism' or 'TUCism' is party flavour of the month depends entirely on what SWP bosses think the recruitment group they've targeted wants to hear.

During the pit closure battle, the SWP faced a conflict of interests between different strands of its new marketing strategy. On the one hand, the logic of the party's 'upturn' optimism demanded the most left-wing and radical of the party's industrial strategies be adopted: militant 'rank and file' trade unionism. After all, if a newly confident workers' movement really *was* charging back onto the offensive, then any party that didn't put on its best 'militant front' surely risked being left behind by the troops it so desperately wanted to lead?

But at the same time, because the party leaders who'd dreamt up the new ad-campaign didn't *really* believe their own press, they feared that an 'overly-militant' brand profile risked isolating the party from the mass recruitment pool they had set their sights on.

As a result, the SWP's 'strategy for the miners' flailed about wildly ('centrist vacillation' as it is known by trade competitors) as the SWP struggled to remain both popular and palatable. This conflict of interests produced an 'analysis' you could strain pasta through. •

A few days in October

There was nothing tentative or cautious about the arrival of the SWP's upturn. It burst full-blown onto the pages of the Party's press in late October 1992 without warning – and must have come as as big a shock to the rank and file membership of the party, as it did to its rivals on the left (who set about rubbishing the 'new optimism' with a mixture of incredulity and thinly-disguised jealousy)¹⁸.

In the early days of the pit closure battle the SWP's enthusiasm was uncontainable. "The government is left isolated and tottering"¹⁹, it proclaimed. With all the evangelism of the newly converted, the Party's *Review* declared that, following the two big miners' demos in London: "Politics will not be the same again", and added:

"The current struggle cannot simply be registered as another peak on the same scale. It represents the beginning of a period when politics will have to be calibrated on an entirely different scale, judged according to entirely different criteria... Of course there will still be periods of greater and lesser activity, still defeats as well as victories, but they will take place at a higher level of struggle."²⁰

The momentum of this new mood was almost unstoppable. The party's half-hearted recruitment drive may have temporarily 'let the Tories off the hook', but Major was still tectering, and the class on the march:

"None of the likely outcomes of the current crisis, including the fall of the Tories and the return of a Labour government, are going to meet even the most elementary of [workers'] needs"²¹.

And, of course, having plumped for the 'upturn', the party – like the good scientific Leninists they are – had to retrospectively 'predict its arrival', by dumping embarrassing sections of their previous analysis that no longer fit. Being the most conscious section of the class, the SWP's central committee naturally:

"... knew that the fight was coming, that the well of anger and bitterness inside the working class would not wait for the

next election, or for John Smith to get his act together. This was a much more accurate assessment than was held by many on the left."²²

Including, of course, the one held by the SWP until about four weeks previously. But then, as the *Review* reminded readers: "What a difference a month makes."²³

More surprising still was the party's decision to do-a-*Newsline*, as the saying goes, and plaster demands for a TUC-led "General strike now!" all over its front pages²⁴. Many other left outfits became understandably irritated by the SWP's theft of their one Big Idea: particularly as throughout the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, the SWP refused to 'raise the demand', because, they then argued, the realities of class struggle in a 'downturn' rendered the demand unrealisable²⁵.

The party offered little analysis that might explain this switch, beyond the claim that the miners "would be fighting on a far more favourable political terrain than in 1984"²⁶. This, of course, was a self-proving argument: because the party had declared things were now so much better on the class front, then battles would *de facto* be fought on 'more favourable terrain'. No actual evidence was offered to support the assertion. The party made no attempt to analyse the strength of *working class* forces within the huge cross-class 'popular front' against pit closures that briefly emerged in the autumn. The politics of that popular front – while it enjoyed the support of hundreds of thousands of proletarians – remained firmly in the control of tabloid editors, Labour front-benchers and rabid Tory racists like Churchill.

In fact, if the miners battle was to be conducted in the same way it was last time, the terrain was going to be much more *unfavourable* than it was in 1984-5.

The material problems that dogged the fight then, remained: massive coal stocks at power stations and pit heads; a government prepared to pay whatever-it-takes to wait out a strike; a battery of anti-worker legislation already in place and backed by a paramilitary nationally co-ordinated police strike breaking operation; and so on. But new factors had to be added to the equation.

The scale of unemployment and the depth of the recession have helped drive strike levels across the whole of industry down to a new fifty year low. Winning widespread 'solidarity action' in support of a miners' strike would prove even more difficult than it was nine years ago. Thousands

of miners have left the industry since the Great Strike, and many many pits have closed. These days, British Coal – through a combination of bullying and blackmail – ensures there is no shortage of takers for 'voluntary' redundancy deals at pits earmarked for closure. Even many militant miners now believe they are working in an industry without a future.

The openly collaborationist Union of Democratic Mineworkers has flourished in Nottinghamshire, and retains the allegiance of thousands of miners – despite the failures of its whole strategy and the 'betrayals' of the government. Even at the angriest of miners' demonstrations the arguments over the closure programme rarely moved beyond the issues of the 'unfair fixing' of markets; the 'threat' of coal imports; the 'foolishness' of running down 'Britain's own' coal reserves. The important players in the battle proved not to be miners' flying pickets but back bench Tory 'rebels'.

Scargill became an even less 'militant' *sounding* leader than he was a decade ago, much more conciliatory towards the right-wing of the TUC, far more committed to a 'public sympathy' campaign. Yet Scargill came under no significant pressure from even isolated groups of miners, to launch a strike or pit-occupation campaign. There were few examples of even localised attempts to break from the NUM strategy.

There were sporadic unofficial one-day strikes by small groups of workers in October, but sadly their emergence was short-lived. The NUM's, and the RMT's, 'one day strike' strategy that followed only served to wear down militancy (as was intended) in a dwindling and drawn-out campaign of 'token stoppages': yet both union leaderships got away with it unchallenged by rank and file defiance.

These are the kind of enormous problems that needed to be tackled head-on before the miners – in combination with rail, public sector and other workers – could even begin to take the action needed to effectively repel the government's attacks. The puerile TUC-submissive politics propagated by the 'revolutionary' left, only served to confuse this situation: by focusing – not on the very real problems facing rank and file workers, or on the real nature of the 'trade union movement' – but on a spurious and irrelevant 'crisis of leadership' at the top of the rotten Labour bureaucracy. The notion that only the hesitancy of Norman Willis stood in the way of an immediate general strike was as contemptable a piece of leftist ideology as it was absurd.

The SWP leadership's particular variant of this nonsense involved catching the first plane to Fantasy Island: a land where the struggle was all but won and where Willis would lead the storming of the DTI – given a bit of encouragement.

What were they up to?: The 'new optimism' and more militant phrase-mongering were adopted by the SWP for one reason alone: because they helped push the party's new and more aggressive recruitment drive. The 'TUC-General Strike' line, underpinned by the 'new optimism', managed to *sound* militant and provocative, without risking alienating pro-Labour miners and their supporters who might have been 'put off' by a more critical attack on the Labour bureaucracy.

Despite all their 'vacillations', not once during the autumn and winter did the rank and file revolutionaries of the SWP (who are often dismissed as 'syndicalist' by their rivals) suggest that the miners needed to break from the NUM-TUC-Labour alliance and begin to escalate the struggle under their direct control, if they were to stand any chance of victory.

And as the party began drawing in more and more new recruits in the weeks that followed the closure announcement, it became ever more important not to advocate anything that smacked of potential 'unpopularity'.

If the politics that the SWP claims to believe in comes into conflict with the party's ability to sign up recruits, it's time to wave goodbye to those 'less popular' political principles.

The inevitable result is that, in times like these, the bigger the party becomes, the more cautious and conservative its leadership will become with it, and the more timid its 'demands' – as the need to maintain stability and growth takes precedence over the distractions of politics.

There was another major problem inherent in the adoption of the 'new optimism' that soon became apparent. How to sustain the momentum of an 'upturn' that – as time went by – was coming into increasing conflict with an uncooperative reality.

Option One was to stick with it regardless of the reality-problem in the hope of buoying up the membership by the sheer fervor of its evangelism – in the style of the unlamented Socialist Labour League (SLL). Option Two was to let the 'upturn' peter out by talking it slowly down in the pages of the party's press. This would help let the membership down gently and minimize the loss of disillusioned new recruits whose Rapture had failed to materialise.

The SWP plumped for Option Two – but with an added twist: it began the job of retrospectively revising what *it says it said* way back in the heady days of October.

By making no direct reference to its emphatic October claims, the party has avoided explaining what's become of its 'upturn', or of analysing why 'politics looks very much the same again'. This process is helped

considerably by the party tradition of discouraging the membership from developing more than a fortnight's memory.

At the beginning of the pit closure battle, the SWP had offered what seemed to be a superficially radical critique of the *function* of the trade union bureaucracy – (but not, of course, of the ultimately anti-working class nature of trade unionism).

"Why won't union leaders call the action we need? Why do union leaders and officials make fiery speeches and sometimes lead strikes, but then undermine militancy, and sell out strikes?", asked one *SWP* centrespreader²⁷.

The party's answer was clear:

"The double sided character of trade union leaders is no accident nor is it due to personal failings. It flows from their position in society."

So leaders 'fail' the working class precisely because of their *nature*, their position in the hierarchy of capitalist industrial relations. Worse, union leaders are manipulative and devious too. They even *pretend* to be on our side, the better to crush our resistance later:

"If they never led or called struggle there would be the danger that workers could ignore and bypass union leaders... They call action to bolster their position in negotiations, yet undermine action as soon as it threatens to get out of their control."²⁸

So armed with this understanding, and buzzing with new found optimism, what position did the SWP adopt?: A declaration of the need for independence from a bureaucracy which has different interests to us – which only leads us into struggle precisely to derail our militancy?

Hardly: more a case of: 'The TUC [that can't, won't and shouldn't] must call the action we need to win'. Just as in the Great Strike of 84/5, they feared that:

"...to openly call for workers to break from Labour and the unions would not be popular among militant workers. So using the excuse that 'party must not lose touch with the

masses,' the SWP advances what it hopes will be more popular views – which *it knows* are not only wrong, but disasterously wrong."²⁹

So the party – which proclaims itself to be the 'memory of the class' – then pretends to forget the entire history of the labour movement:

"The story of the TUC's behaviour since the pits crisis erupted in October of last year would be laughable were it not so tragic..."

In fact, the party's theorists know it is neither of these things.

"...In the months since October, the TUC's campaign has gone from the sublime to the ridiculous."

But what's 'ridiculous' about the TUC's attempts to smother miners' resistance to the closures. When have they *ever* acted differently? During the General Strike of 1926? Or in the Great Strike in 1984-5? Or at any point in between? It's 'ridiculous' to expect them to do otherwise. But the SWP continued to 'criticise' the TUC for letting the side down.

"The leaders of the Trade Union Congress are busily engaged in throwing away the best opportunity that has come their way in a long time."

So the TUC were busy 'throwing away opportunities' to lead us into battle? Presumably, then, it's 'cowardice' and 'weakness' that holds them back, rather than 'function'?. The party's indignant outrage was as confused as its analysis:

"The TUC would urge all workers to seek the views of their employers on the position of their businesses in the economy and to build a partnership for jobs on their National Recovery Day on 9 December'. What kind of policy is this? How can the TUC have a partnership with the Confederation of British Industry whose director general, Howard Davis, welcomed the 1.5 percent pay limit?"

Of course, the real question here is how much longer are the SWP going to

pretend to expect the TUC to do otherwise?

What kind of policy was reflected in the National Recovery Day? A policy that clearly demonstrates the class loyalties of the Trade Union Congress: both the left and right wings of it. The SWP's 'shock', meanwhile, never let up for a minute:

"... It is particularly sad that the left wing of the TUC are as much involved in blocking action as the right"³⁰.

Sad? Why's it 'sad'? What the hell else were they ever going to do? And why does SWP columnist Callinicos claim to be morose about something he's supposed to believe is inevitable?

By the beginning of January, even the SWP's patience with the TUC seemed to be wearing a little thin. "Why won't the TUC lead the fightback?", asked one page 3 editorial.

"While the TUC delays, tens of thousands more workers join the dole and thousands more hospital beds are lost.

Delays also bring the risk that workers, who in October looked to the trade unions to lead the fightback, will abandon hope or look elsewhere...", it warned. "We cannot afford to wait."

Was *SH* finally calling for a break from the bureaucracy? Not exactly: "...The TUC must name the day for real action."³¹ (The call had now been toned down to a demand for an 'action day': exhortations to Willis to lead a 'general strike' were now nowhere to be seen). Meanwhile, the party's *Review* attacked Arthur Scargill – for following the SWP's advice:

"[Scargill] has preferred to rely on the chance of convincing Jimmy Knapp to back official action rather than taking the chance of issuing a call for rank and file action and relying on rank and file activists to deliver it in the face of opposition from the TUC".³²

Because of the contradictions inherent in its politics, the SWP were unable to decide from week to week if Scargill was still a 'good militant leader' or had become a 'bad bureaucrat' implicated in holding back the fight. Sometimes Arthur was reproached for "playing down militancy and attacking miners who called for pit occupations and relying on the TUC general council, which has delivered nothing"³³. Or, in the words of an

SWP miner from Frickley:

"Scargill's credibility... is very low. Many people are disgusted at Scargill's role in this dispute – sharing a platform with and defending Bill Jordan, going along with the TUC – to see someone with Scargill reputation coming behind Norman Willis, who he has previously attacked has raised the anger"³⁴.

Yet at the same time, in another party journal, Scargill had become an inspiring firebrand, who attacked the timidity of other leaders:

"...miners' leader Arthur Scargill ripped into Labour and TUC leaders for not responding to the miners' call"³⁵

Because the party has so many contradictory analyses to try to hold together, it tends to get confused about developments – even those it's supposed to welcome – like growing 'dissatisfaction' with the TUC and the Labour Party.

Workers' anger at the behaviour of trade union and Labour leaders can, of course, lead people off in reactionary, individualistic or defeatist directions, rather than 'radicalise' and empower them. What matters is the overall political atmosphere in which that resentment and disaffection grows – crucially on the level of class combativity and confidence that exists. But if the SWP now believed that things were going corkingly well on the class front, then surely they would welcome any fracturing in workers' loyalty to the TUC as evidence of an 'upturn' in action? It's at this point that the true extent of the SWP's 'critique' of trade unionism, and of their supposed belief in the necessity for independent proletarian action becomes clear:

"[Union leaders'] behaviour and that of the Labour leadership has been so cowardly and appalling in recent months many socialists and militants have despaired of them ever leading a fight."

So explained the April *Review*³⁶, describing a development which the party clearly seemed to think was a bad thing. Other party members reported similar problems:

"One of the things I noticed when I was handing out the

[SWP] 'Start the Fight Now' leaflets which were arguing for pressure to be put on the TUC to call some action, was that people were looking to the leaflet and the general response was 'well yes, but pigs might fly'. There is an evident wide dissatisfaction with the TUC and the likelihood that they will deliver, now matter how much pressure is put on them".³⁷

Again – a sense of dissatisfaction that the SWP does not seem to approve of, or see even as a *potentially* positive development.

An SWP railworker commented:

"The most common question here is 'why do we need Knapp?' [head of the RMT transport workers' union]. 'Why do we need these union officials'... There is cynicism about the trade union leaders and the argument that they can shift after pressure from below is one that I have not won."³⁸

Overall, this sense of disillusionment with the old order of trade unionism was clearly seen as a 'very bad thing'. Of course, because of the marketing conflicts the party faced, at the same time it had to be seen as a 'very good thing' too:

"The block that trade union leaders used to put on action isn't always a block now – it makes people angry. I've seen people who, only the day before, joined the union and are now almost lynching a union official"³⁹.

Struggles were also becoming more volatile and unpredictable, and:

"... the disenchantment with the union leaders also means there are less barriers to militant action when the struggles do come"⁴⁰

As the SWP's attention wandered from the pits battle to the fight against the unofficial 1.5% public sector pay norm, the party offered some lessons from history:

"Can government pay policies be smashed? Workers have proved they can, but not by waiting for the trade union leaders to lead the fight."⁴¹

The SWP had given up on the pits battle by the end of April. Its post-mortem on events was predictable enough, even if it didn't explain why the party's 'upturn' had plateaued so quickly. The miners had been: "Betrayed by the TUC and Labour"⁴². They had been 'sold out', 'abandoned' and 'let down', by a leadership that should, and could, have done better. As a result, miners now felt demoralised, vulnerable and powerless.

Of course, the SWP felt no need to re-examine their politics in the light of this defeat. How could they possibly have known that an analysis that insisted that only the TUC could 'organise the action needed to win' might contribute to that demoralisation, when – to everyone's surprise – Norman Willis decided *not* to call a General Strike after all?

An Armthorpe miner, interviewed in *Socialist Worker* suggested that an alternative approach to the General Council of the TUC might have produced better results: "A lot of lads were saying even then [back in October] we should have ripped the heads of those bastards"⁴³. •

Labour last time

"It will be a set back for us if Labour loses the next election."
(SWR, June 90, p19)

"The defeat of Labour opens the door to the building of the party"
(Tony Cliff, *International Socialism*, Summer 92, 'Prospects for Socialists', p76).

To understand why the leadership of the SWP decided that the 'downturn' ended so dramatically in the autumn of 1992, as a new and exciting 'upturn', rich with possibility, took its place, it's necessary to go back to the point where the SWP claim the 'downturn' began.

The SWP locate the origins of the downturn somewhere during the period of the last Labour government – between 1974 and 1979. In essence, the party's position is this: During those five years, the powerful upsurge of worker militancy that had been so clearly visible throughout the early 1970s began to decline, ultimately paving the way for the emergence of Thatcherism, following the collapse of the Callaghan government after the infamous Winter of Discontent.

In fact, that's pretty much the party's position *in full*. If there's one thing the SWP - like so many of their compatriots on the left - don't like to talk about, it's the experience of the last Labour Government. And that's because it makes a nonsense of their whole analysis of contemporary Labourism.

The SWP in fact has a *number* of contradictory analyses of the Labour Party and its relationship to the class struggle - 'conflicting realities' that, as a result, it tries to keep separate from one another.

The basis of the party's analysis is, predictably enough, that the Labour Party is, essentially, a 'capitalist workers' party': formed to represent working class interests, particularly trade union interests, in Parliament, yet doomed by its reformism, parliamentarism and commitment to the capitalist order to perpetual 'betray' the interests of its working class electoral constituency. A constituency it remains 'organically linked to', irrelevant of the party's programme, through its structural connections with the trade unions. So far, so orthodox. But when the party tries to explain the impact of Labourism on the class struggle, and in particular the significance of Labour's periods in office - in government - things start to go badly wrong.

This is because the party is unable to reconcile the irreconcilable:

- the SWP's claim of 'revolutionary political independence', with the reality of its commitment to the Labour bureaucracy;
- the SWP's 'rejection' of the 'parliamentary road', with its obsession with the importance of electoral success for Labour;
- the party's rejection of 'entryism' with its frantic concerns with the political health of Labour's loyal left-wing; and so on.

An analysis of the SWP's adoption of the 'downturn' illustrates the party's problems. •

The 'winter of discontent': the 'downturn' begins

In any material now produced by the SWP discussing the history of the British labour movement, the experience of the 1974-79 Social Contract under the Wilson-Callaghan Labour government will hardly merit a mention⁴⁴. The narrative will almost invariably leap from descriptions of workers' battles with Heath in the early 70s, to the struggles of the Thatcher decade in the 80s.

This highly selective amnesia is all the more surprising because of the importance that the party places on Labour's last five years in office.

The party credit the Wilson-Callaghan administration with crushing a rising tide of industrial class militancy through a combination of tough economic and industrial relations policies, ultimately ushering in the Thatcherite decade of 'new realism' and industrial defeat.

Interestingly enough, the IS thought things were going so well in 1977, that they chose that year to transform themselves from wanna-be Bolsheviks, into a fully fledged Socialist Workers Party. And it was during that period that the IS/SWP attempted to set up a rank and file front organisation in the union movement. One year into the new government, Tony Cliff had written:

"It is now possible to talk, and to talk credibly, of the need to build a socialist workers' party that will sweep away capitalism. Building such a party is now fully on the agenda. It is a challenge the International Socialists willingly accept."⁴⁵

Within three years of the optimistic launch of the new SWP, the gloomy 'downturn' had become official policy of the still tiny new party. So what had happened?

"Heath couldn't break the workers' revolts of the 1970s", explained the most recent article in the party's *Review* on Labour's last time, "it took Labour and the trade union leaders to stem the tide"⁴⁶.

This part of the analysis is spot on. The 1974-79 Social Contract, put in place just as the economy slid into recession, *did* derail an incredibly powerful wave of industrial militancy: the 'betrayals' of the Labour Party and trade union leadership did surprise, confuse and disorientate a vast number of workers - including many involved in the most militant resistance to the brutal attack on working class living standards that the Contract represented.

The Labour Party adopted a corporatist approach to the unions in the expectation that the TUC bureaucracy would collude with the party's attacks on shop-floor militancy and its assault on public spending, if the government repaid it by drawing those bureaucrats into the machinery of government. Such a 'co-operative partnership' would encourage union leaders to better police their members, and enforce the pay-policy that was

the core of the Contract. Any effective political response to the Social Contract had to begin with an understanding that working class interests were independent from *and directly opposed to* those of the 'left' capitalists who ran the Cabinet and the unions. Any 'left' opposition to the Social Contract that saw some sort of shared common interest between the workers under attack, and the government and union bosses leading the attack, *could only lead to confusion, demoralisation and defeat.*

What was lacking as the class battle against Heath became the class battle against Wilson and then Callaghan, were powerful *genuinely* independent proletarian voices, arguing that the attacks of Labour were not the shocking 'betrayals' of 'degenerate' working class leaders, but the entirely predictable actions of a capitalist government committed to slashing the social wage and shifting the balance of forces decisively back to capitalist class.

What was lacking was the emergence of a minority movement within the working class that saw the need to break from the Contract – not simply to return to old style pre-corporatist trade unionism – but to abandon the whole capitalist logic of the British labourist tradition.

Such a movement, built initially among the most combative opponents of the Social Contract in both the public and private sector, could have had a powerful impact on the direction of the unrest that culminated in the Winter of Discontent, which drove Callaghan to defeat at the polls. The legacy of the experience of 'Labour last time' could then have been dramatically different.

As it was, the experience of 1974-79 was so 'disorientating', precisely *because* so many workers, even at the height of Callaghan's attacks on the class, continued to expect 'better' from Labour and the unions. Such illusions could only be strengthened and maintained by the voices of the Labour-loyal left who continued to express 'shock', 'surprise' and 'disbelief' as the hammer blows of Dennis Healey's budgets rained down on the class, and as the trade union bureaucracy attempted to hold the line against massive industrial action and so protect 'their' government.

Even as millions of pounds were slashed from successive public expenditure budgets, and the four-phase pay restraint programme cut deep into working class living standards, the left, including the 'independent' IS/SWP continued to insist this was 'our' government too.

The last Labour Government-Trade Union pact utterly discredited the whole notion of Labourite corporatist socialism. It also exposed the anti-working class loyalties of the British trade union bureaucracy. The

experience had such a damaging impact on the fortunes of the class struggle, *because at the same time* it seemed to discredit so many of the ideas of class struggle itself.

The Labour-loyal left, including the IS/SWP, contributed (in however small a way) to this confusion, and the reactionary consequences it implied, because they insisted that we should somehow have expected different. That one section of our movement – the leadership – had attacked the other – its rank and file.

So the SWP can blithely assert that:

"Unlike 1969, the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1979 was not part of a rising tide of class struggle or consciousness, but a receding one. The Labour Party broke the tendency, which had been growing under the Heath government, when workers were beginning to challenge capitalist society in action.

Though this had been insufficient in 1974 to pose an alternative to electoral politics, it had been a developing force. ... Labour's success in holding back the workers' movement provided the background to the general election of May 1979, which the party lost badly."⁴⁷

And who were the critical players, who were able to turn workers' combative confidence into pessimistic resignation in such a short period of time?:

"What made the difference when it came to the crunch was the attitude of the trade union leaders – not the right winger who had proved so incapable of holding the line in 1969-70 – but the left wing. For these could persuade many militant rank-and-file activists to accept the government policy – at least for the time being."

"The feeling among a growing minority of workers in 1969-74, that their class had the ability and power to run society, began to evaporate. There was a general rightward shift throughout society. This meant that even when there was a limited revival of struggle in 1977 and again with the 'winter of discontent' in 1978-9, it did not lead to the sort of political generalisation that had taken place before."⁴⁸

But the party continue to argue that the return of a new Labour government

is crucial – even one that "starts much further to the right" – because:

"...the only decisive test is the test in practice therefore we are for another Labour government...

We are for everything which weakens the present government and forces the Labour Party into a position where its policies and practice can be tested in the eyes of millions of people."⁴⁹

And what could we expect from a new Labour government: "...Labour will act as the agent of capital..."⁵⁰.

Such comments are typical of the SWP's confused analysis of what the Labour Party represents. Fearful of upsetting its 'anti-Tory' constituency, the party continually disguise the reality of the Labour tradition. Labour is never seen as having its *own* agenda.

When, for example, Labour councils ruthlessly enforce poll tax budget cuts, the SWP will decry them for doing the "Tories' dirty work". When Labour front benchers denounce and attack strikers or rioters, the party will attack them for "sounding like Tories", and so on. When Labour is in government attacking wages and tearing into the welfare state, it is said to "act as the agent of capital", as if it was somehow at one removed from the rest of the capitalist class.

This, of course, locks the party into the closed circle of its own analysis: Workers look to the Labour Party to defend working class interests, and expect an incoming Labour government in alliance with the unions to defend and extend the social wage. The arrival of a Labour government marks the beginning of an upturn in workers' confidence.

The inevitable 'betrayals' and *almost* capitalist-like behaviour of the new Labour administration will shatter workers' loyalty to Labour, allowing "the employing class to retake the initiative" and the Party to "stem the tide" of workers' revolts.

"The only thing which can offset that is a rise in the level of the class struggle"⁵¹. So what did the SWP think was happening under the Callaghan-Healey government?: At the time, they suggested that:

"The Labour government is now facing a crisis approaching in scale that which brought down Edward Heath in 1974. The immediate cause of panic in high places had been the lorry drivers pickets' success in bottling up the profitable heart of

British capitalism. This has taken place just as the public sector manual workers are mounting their biggest ever protests against low pay...

All the props are being pulled out from the elaborate structures built up over four years to hoist profit rates at the expense of wages. Thatcher's ranting about 'strike committees defying the elected government is not just demagoguery: it expresses the very real fear of the ruling class that they are losing control of events."⁵².

That sounds a little bit like class struggle doesn't it? So what was the problem?:

"However, there is one big difference between the struggle now and then in 1973-4. As yet the level of *political generalisation* is lower.

In 1973-4, all the struggles began to focus on a single achievable goal – the removal of the Heath government. The Labour opposition seemed to provide some political alternative to wage control and the three day week."⁵³

So the greater 'political generalisation' the party identified as taking place under Heath – the bigger rise in class consciousness – was actually a renewal of faith in the Labour Party. Some generalisation... Now that that faith was seen to be misplaced, confusing and uncertainty were growing:

"Now there is no credible national political alternative to the left of Labour, capable of giving a sense of unified purpose to the many groups of workers in struggle...

Although the class is advancing, it is doing so in a fragmented manner, which again and again allows the employers to retake the initiative."⁵⁴

So the only thing that can prevent this is the outbreak of the kind of class struggle that, in the SWP's view, the very existence of a Labour government makes impossible. Class resistance to Labour's programme will therefore be compromised and confused, leading to disillusionment, a return of the Tories, and a profound sense of malaise on the left.

Hardly surprising then that the SWP try to keep their infallible marxist analysis of the Labour Party, split down in its separate components.

Any genuine rise in the level of class struggle requires workers, and the working class as a whole, breaking free of the trade union and Labour hierarchy and asserting direct control over the battle for their interests. A battle that sees the barons of the labour movement as part and parcel of the enemy. Otherwise the impact of the Labour Party's exercise of class power *will* certainly be to depress the level of class struggle. •

The party goes for growth: "All we have to do is recruit"

The SWP has been promoting its new membership drive with a range of slogans: 'the dash for growth', 'the turn to recruitment', and 'the open door perspective'. All of them illustrate the party's determination to capture as many new members as it can, as quickly as possible, regardless of the kind of 'socialist' politics the recruits might bring into the party with them.

The SWP began claiming a membership of around 7,500 in December 1992⁵⁵ which had risen to 8,500 by March 93⁵⁶ – the biggest the party has ever been in its history. These figures, almost certainly inflated, are also the result of 'creative accounting'. The 'definition' of a party member has been considerably loosened:

"Today a member of the party is someone who sells *Socialist Worker* and is prepared to defend the politics it contains."⁵⁷

So the size of the solid cadre will still be a lot smaller. Even so, the party clearly is growing rapidly at present.

This growth, the SWP claims, reflects more than just a 'good period' for the party: Things, they say, are becoming *qualitatively* different. The party is now claiming to be on the verge of a major breakthrough, that would transform it from propaganda group to genuine political force:

"At the moment the SWP is still too small to give the sort of lead which can provide a real fighting alternative, but for the first time there is a real possibility of growth which would allow it to do so."⁵⁸

The future is 'looking good':

"The SWP in Britain has huge opportunities... We are still too small to decide events, which means we need to grow and use our paper to spread our ideas as widely as possible. But it also means we are well placed for the big battles on the horizon..."⁵⁹

All in all:

"The prospects for building a real revolutionary alternative to Labour could not be better."⁶⁰

So, to 'meet the challenge', the SWP had to 'make the change':

"The Socialist Workers Party made a sharp shift in the last three months of 1992. That meant scrapping much of our existing routine. The result has been a growth in our membership of over 2,000, the setting up of over 40 new branches and a substantially higher sale of *Socialist Worker*."⁶¹

Seeming to draw parallels with the growth of the Bolsheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia, one *SW* article – 'What kind of party do we need?' – quoted Lenin on the 1905 Revolution:

"Open the gates of the party. Get rid of all the old habits. Form hundreds of circles and encourage them to work full blast.

"All we have to do is recruit more widely and boldly, more boldly and widely!"⁶²

An internal document produced for members of the Irish SWP, the Socialist Workers Movement (SWM), about the new drive, makes clear just how 'open' the door to the party is:

"We must adapt to take the steps necessary to thoroughly implement 'Open Door' recruitment. Every non-member at a meeting must be asked to join the SWM. This not only involves a call from the platform, but it means that every member must have on them membership cards and

registration forms and must ask individually any non-member at the meeting to join. The nature of the period has proved that numbers of new individuals will respond if they're asked directly: 'Do you want to join the SWM?'.

Today's regular readers of the paper are tomorrow's recruits... People who make it plain that they won't join just now, and even more distant contacts, must be allocated to a member to drop off the paper every month. Sometimes someone is asked to join but refuses for the time being. Ask them if they will take papers for their friends. This is a good way of pulling people into a more organised relationship with us...

The biggest danger we face is that we do not go after recruitment vigorously enough and miss opportunities that would significantly increase the size of the SWM. These steps, together with a determined political will from the branch leadership, will help properly implement the 'Open Door' perspective.⁶³

Size, it seems, is everything. There is no suggestion here that the new recruits need to agree with even a single word of the minimal party principles printed every week in the paper, or know anything about any of the party's perspectives or politics.

In one respect, the 'open door' policy, and the 'dash for growth' obliged the party to dump the 'downturn', regardless of the real state of the class struggle. After all, according to bolshevik logic, a *real, proper* 'revolutionary party' can only expect to grow dramatically in size in times of mass class radicalisation. In times of reaction and defeat, in times of 'downturn' in fact, a 'revolutionary party' can only really expect to hold its own.

The fact that the SWP was finding it possible to recruit in droves therefore 'proved' that an 'upturn' had begun. Convincing, isn't it?•

The poll tax: **'Non-payment is dead... Long live non-payment'**

The roots of the SWP's current 'period of growth' lie in poll tax struggle, which – considering the party's analysis first of the non-payment campaign, and, later of the Trafalgar Square poll tax riot – is little short of incredible

When campaigning against the poll tax got underway in late-1987, the SWP could only muster perfunctory interest.

The party couldn't abstain entirely of course, because of the risk of passing up potential recruits, but the 'politics of the downturn' were clear here – low levels of class confidence in the workplace meant there was no real hope of stopping the tax. Indeed there was a danger of the inevitable defeat further undermining workers' confidence, if unrealistic expectations of victory took hold.

The party's first attempt at an analysis of the poll tax struggle appeared towards the tail end of 1987, and centred on the need to 'force' labour movement leaders to lead a campaign around the twin slogans of 'Don't Pay!' and 'Don't Collect!'⁶⁴. It didn't last long.

The SWP's second – and *slightly* longer lasting – poll tax strategy, adopted in the Spring of 1988, was to launch a propaganda war against the idea of a community based non-payment campaign.

The analysis that they now offered was pretty crude.

In all its propaganda the party began painting a picture of two starkly opposed approaches to class struggle: one, community based, was *inevitably* disorganised, weak and doomed. The other, action in workplace – particularly trade union action – was collective, organised, powerful, and rich with possibility. Best of all, it took place at the point where *proper* working class struggles – indeed where proper working class people – were to be found.

"There is also the danger that community politics divert people from the means to win, from the need to mobilise working class activity on a collective basis", explained the party's first and last poll tax pamphlet. "The state machinery, through fines, stopping of wages and so on, can wear down

community resistance if it cannot tap the strength of the working class."

"Some may defy the Tories now. But that number could be whittled away... The remaining activists would start to blame other individuals bitterly for not standing firm."⁶⁵

Dissidents within the SWP – who have since left the party – suggest that this new line was adopted by the Central Committee following a:

"decision to bend the stick hard against the Militant. For Militant the call for non-payment became the be-all and end-all and seemed to acquire almost religious significance. The SWP's policy was framed in sectarian reaction to this"⁶⁶.

This probably was a factor – the need for the party to distinguish its identity in the market place in opposition to its rivals, but the party also sought, for a few months at least, to defend its particular class analysis, which stresses the primacy of trade unionism and industrial struggle. Even the party's *first* analysis – which allowed for the possibility of 'non-payment' – clearly saw it largely as the *outcome of non-collection* by council workers, rather than as an active force in its own right. And because such workplace action was highly unlikely, mass non-payment was a big non-starter.

Tony Cliff later took the party to task for adopting such a position – not that he as leader of the Central Committee was in any way responsible for it

"... we tend to telescope processes. We can say that the poll tax can't be beaten without strike action, and as we don't have that now, the campaign is doomed. This is disastrous..."⁶⁷.

Disastrous it was. The logic of the party's poll tax position obliged it to 'talk down' community resistance just as it was beginning to take off. The party first layed into the non-registration campaign:

"...resistance has collapsed completely in the last three weeks as officials in Glasgow and Edinburgh started threatening people with £50 fines", reminding people that, "[t]he alternative to this is organised working class action."⁶⁸.

By the autumn, the party was losing interest: "The official capitulation by

the Labour Party has, of course, demoralised and disorientated the campaign."⁶⁹. Not of course that the SWP had spent the previous twelve months demanding that the Labour Party 'lead the fight', or had in any way contributed to the 'demoralisation' they now saw as that strategy failed...

In the meantime the much advertised 'workplace action' being advocated in opposition to non-payment, was (by now) muted and uninspiring. It amounted to little more than calls to top up forthcoming wage demands.

"A new wave of pay claims becomes due this autumn. Workers involved can make sure their pay rise is enough to cover the extra cost of the tax"⁷⁰.

When non-payment began in earnest and showed hundreds of thousands involved and refusing to pay up, the party stood firm and stuck the boot in:

"... activists should recognise that a majority of workers are likely to feel that they have no choice but to pay. In Glasgow up to a third of people have failed to pay or are several months in arrears. Two thirds have paid. In Lothian at least five out of six have paid. A similar pattern is likely in England and Wales"⁷¹.

The fact that this was a complete and deliberate lie, based on figures concocted by Tory central office to disguise the true scale of non-payment, did nothing to temper the SWP's determination to write-off the campaign. Other reports, quoting Lothian's own figures, highlighted a £25.5 million shortfall in poll tax receipts across the region, which was forcing the council into expensive short-term borrowing to cover the massive debt⁷². The SWP preferred to promote the 'Tory lie' that the campaign had crumbled.

And while Labour councils across the country despatched bills and prepared to take non-payers to court, the party concerned itself with the real issues, noting with alarm that:

"There's also the danger that blunting a fight to sink the poll tax now..." [ie Labour leaders 'refusing to fight'] "... could eventually turn the anger against the Tories into a sense of resignation, costing Labour the election."

As a recruitment pitch, the strategy was hopeless, and was dropped in the late Spring of 1990: overnight the SWP became passionate advocates of the

collective class power of community based non-payment:

"The Tories, the councils and the courts are desperately trying to crack resistance. They are shaken by the continuing huge scale of non-payment."⁷³

Though not as shaken of course as the Central Committee of the SWP.

"Scarce tactics aren't enough to break non-payers... Councils have two ways to try to get the unpaid tax. Both can be fought"⁷⁴.

There was no more insistence that:

"... unless the campaign is organised and focused on the power of workers to stop the tax there is a danger. The Tories can sit tight and watch the resistance slowly crumble away"⁷⁵.

The pages of *Socialist Worker* began to be filled with court and bailiff busting reports – and the party began recruiting heavily, further fueling its new enthusiasm.

The party's 'demands' on the labour bureaucracy continued throughout:

"Labour councils are increasingly taking the lead in the use of brutal methods to enforce poll tax payment... Instead of mobilising the bailiffs Labour councils should be organising resistance to the Tory tax"⁷⁶.

And the party remained concerned that Labour's complicity with the poll tax, would damage it.

"... Labour councils are already in the process of planning cuts in order to trim the poll tax bills. This has the effect of immediately concentrating attention on what the council does or does not spend, not the years of cuts in Tory funding."⁷⁷

The party were clearly worried that some of the anti-Tory anger at council cutbacks might come Labour's way – which they saw as *confusing* rather than *widening and deepening* the struggle. So much for the SWP's 'political independence' from Labour... •

The 'problem' of the poll tax riots Re-writing the Riot Act

The Trafalgar Square poll tax riot and the violent town hall demonstrations that preceded it caused the party particular problems. Partly because of their violent nature, and partly because they took place outside the confines of the trade union movement.

"The Tories and the police are to blame for the violence", it concluded following 'disturbances' in Lambeth, London.

The party didn't 'condemn' the violence but pointed out: "...the vast majority of demonstrations saw no violence at all. The violence occurred where police and local councils provoked it."⁷⁸

So there was no point in getting 'over-excited': there were only a few isolated hot spots, and they were the fault of inappropriate policing.

This was also the party's initial response to the Trafalgar Square riot: With all the condescending concern of an Islington social worker, *Socialist Worker* appealed for sympathy for the rioters' plight: "No wonder they fightback" explained its '*what we think*' column. The miseries and deprivations of Thatcher's Britain had led to the troubles.

"That is why 200,000 people filled with bitterness and anger protested."

"That is why, when a peaceful sitdown demonstration outside the 16 foot high gates of Downing Street was attacked by police, tens of thousands fought back."

Adding: "Of course, no socialist believes rioting will beat the poll tax, but neither should any condemn the howl of rage which filled the fashionable West End last Saturday."

The party did suggest, though, that if Labour leaders had done their duty and led some 'proper resistance' to the poll tax, maybe we could have avoided such scenes of disorder altogether:

"If Labour leaders are so worried about that anger, they should organise a campaign to beat the Tories instead of just standing by and hoping to reap the electoral benefit."⁷⁹

In fact, the whole of the SWP's initial response to the events of March 31st.

was extremely *defensive*. The party seemed to expect a strong backlash against the riot to make itself felt in those sections of the labour movement the SWP wants to remain closest to.

The Central Committee's first approach was, as a result, a damage limitation exercise that hoped to minimise the 'negative impact' of the riot by playing *up* police antagonism, and playing *down* offensive action on the part of the rioters:

"Police violence caused the riot", screamed *SWP*'s centre page headline the week following March 31st.

"It was police violence which turned the massive peaceful march into a battleground" it began. "Newspaper reports have described 'bloody mob rule' gripping the heart of London, but many of the facts they bury in their report show who was really to blame."⁸⁰

When faced with examples of direct unmediated class confrontation with the police and offices of the local State, the marxist revolutionaries of the SWP immediately looked round for someone to 'blame' for their outbreak.

Even then, by now, poll-tax-disinterested Revolutionary Communist Party were able to work out that the issue of 'who threw the first punch' was scarcely the basis on which to assess the class value of the riot – as if somehow police and demonstrators began the day with equally clean copybooks.⁸¹

What the party certainly *didn't* expect was an influx of new members in the weeks and months that followed – but that's what they got, and that's what forced a major re-write of the party's riot story.

While, clearly, broad sections of what passes for the 'labour movement' were shocked and appalled by the riot, there was a much smaller 'militant minority' (the very people the party hopes to identify and recruit) that felt angered, exhilarated, enthused and empowered by the riot. The party had, once again, misread the mood, and so adopted a more combative, upbeat analysis, to get back in step.

It's worth pointing out here that the party's recruitment success story (relative to that of their opponents), was greatly helped by the *truly dismal* quality of so many of their rivals' positions:

For the Militant Tendency the poll tax riot was an unmitigated disaster. The repercussions of their public pledge to 'name names' and shop rioters to the police and courts, wounded them severely and cost clearly in terms of recruits, and forced them onto the defensive for the rest of the

campaign. The SWP exploited the crumbling of Militant's previous poll tax hegemony on the left, ruthlessly.

Many of the smaller left groups simply had no point of connection with events external to the 'British labour movement' and had little chance of benefitting from them. The advice, from groups such as Socialist Organiser that rioters should put down their paving slabs and instead join the Labour Party so they could put pressure on Norman Willis to 'offer a lead' against the Tories, was unlikely to find many takers.

Nor, at the other 'extreme', were criticisms by The Leninist of the coppers-narks in Militant for failing to have "taken the lead in throwing up barricades against charges by mounted police and speeding cop wagons." Instead of preparing to 'name names' and denouncing the rioting mob to TV news crews, the leaders of Militant should – apparently:

"have distributed makeshift weapons, eg iron railings and broken up paving stones. Using their stewards, walkie-talkies and other communication equipment, they should have co-ordinated the thousands willing and able to fight back against police terror."⁸²

Kind of a case of: "Why won't Militant fight the coppers?". Suggesting that Militant should co-ordinate street fighting, is a bit like calling on the Pope to give out wine flavoured condoms at Communion. In both cases it's something that's against their religion.

As the weeks went by, and support for the riot became increasingly politically *chic*, the SWP turned up the volume. "The Trafalgar Square demo on 31 March was the high point so far of the battle against the tax"⁸³.

The party still remained dismayed by Labour's inability to see how helpful the riot had been for it. In the opinion polls, Labour "held an unheard of 24.5 per cent lead the week after the Trafalgar Square riot... Then Kinnock insisted people should pay their poll tax, and Labour's lead fell ten points." [our emphasis]

As time went by, the 'riot' the party had blamed on the police, became ever more venerated, and the non-payment campaign which the party had written off before it had even started, became ever more crucial. There were still occasional glitches – times when the party forgot its poll tax enthusiasm for a week or two: "In November 1990, there was "...no obvious national focus for those who want to fight the Tories... For socialists, this lack of focus can sometimes be very frustrating."⁸⁴. But when Thatcher

stepped down as Tory party leader a few weeks later, the SWP quickly remembered the tidal wave of class resistance that had brought about her demise:

"Above all, the poll tax proved her downfall. All the Tory leadership candidates distanced themselves from the poll tax... because they know it's highly unpopular and unworkable. The protests culminating in the Trafalgar Square riot in the spring and the continued high levels of non-payment are proof of this."⁸⁵

By the summer of the following year, the line was retrospectively refined still further: "After 31 March last year, Thatcher's days were numbered."⁸⁶ Not, you remember, that any socialist ever believed that rioting would beat the poll tax. Let alone destroy a Prime Minister...

And this upbeat revision of the riot had one very unexpected implication: if it was the Trafalgar Square riot that fatally wounded Thatcher, and if it was the police who were responsible for the riot – why didn't the party congratulate the boys in blue in The Met for taking her out?

A more serious problem for the party was the clash between its claim of victory and its dismissal of the power of community based class action.

If riots and non-payment had been the key to crushing the poll tax, that surely had important implications for the party's class analysis – for its insistence that only industrially based class action could ever win struggles?

And what of the party's equal insistence that only Willis and Kinnock could deliver the action needed to win? – the poll tax victory was won in the face of outright *opposition* and *attack* from every level of the labour bureaucracy, from trade union office, to local Labour town hall, all the way up to the Walworth Rd party headquarters. If workers could win victories outside and against the confines of the British labour movement, how could the party persist with its loyalty to Labour, especially as "...the idea of Neil Kinnock calling a demonstration on anything is laughable."⁸⁷

The SWP rose to the challenge of a thorough going and rigorous re-examination of its politics in characteristic British Bolshevik style: It denied the existence of any contradictions... and carried on recruiting.

For the SWP the battle against the poll tax began as a community-focused irrelevance, doomed by its inevitable failure only to demonstrate the depth of the downturn.

Later that community resistance became the 'cutting edge of a slow revival of combative working class action'. Eventually, 'resilient non payment and riots in the streets brought down Thatcher'. These days, the

SWP is even claiming to have been stuck into the poll tax fight from day one:

"From the start the campaign was 'tainted' by *Socialist Workers, Militants* and even anarchists, while official trade union and Labour leaders had nothing to do with it"⁸⁸.

Despite, of course, the best efforts of the SWP to hand control of the struggle to them. Once protests against the pit closure programme began in late 1992, however, the party revised the significance of the poll tax campaign down again, reducing its importance to the impact it had had on workplace battles.

"... even though resistance to the poll tax was not based on the workplace, victory had an important effect on industrial relations... [The Tories] have not dared to confront a major national union in a national strike since the poll tax... Unlike the poll tax, the movement is now one of the *organised* working class even if, as yet, the level of industrial action remains low."⁸⁹

"Already this year, the anger has shifted much more from a mood of popular rebellion – like that over the poll tax nearly three years ago – to one which is sharper and more class based."⁹⁰

So the riots and the non-payment campaign the party claimed at the time toppled Thatcher, weren't after all, *real* class struggles at all, but populist precursors to the return of 'real class politics'. So what felled Thatcher?

The poll tax campaign *should* have been an awkward and unsettling experience for a bolshevik party such as the SWP.

In proclaiming it a resounding victory, the party was undermining not only the basis of its own class analysis, but was coming into direct conflict with its own downturn theory, at the very moment when (by its own industrial criteria) the theory was at its most plausible yet: at the moment when strikes and stoppages across industry had just hit their lowest levels for fifty years.

That it was something of a 'success' for the party is a testament not only to the agile opportunism of the SWP, but to the miserable state of genuine revolutionary politics in this country. •

What's wrong with the SWP?

The real problem is not, of course, that the SWP changes its mind so much. Ultimately, the issue is not the party's *inconsistency*. If the SWP decided to stick with just *one set* of its analyses, it would only end up being *consistently wrong*. The fixed tablets-of-stone Trotskyism of the WRP-*Newsline* is no less anti-proletarian.

The real issues here concern the *motivation* behind the complete political flexibility that the SWP have chosen to adopt; the *processes* by which party policy is revised and presented; and the *implications* that that has for the Bolshevik analysis of the relationship between party and class that the SWP claims to defend.

The SWP say they seek to model themselves on the Russian Bolshevik Party, and on the organisational ideas developed by Lenin in the years before and after the October 1917 revolution (but most especially on his post-1905 formulations).

It is, they argue, the unevenness of class consciousness, the limits of spontaneity, and the requirements of the revolutionary event itself, that demand one solution: the intervention of a vanguardist marxist party, able to 'embody' and 'express' the most militant aspirations of the proletariat through a permanent political leadership. Any other approach to the revolutionary project is dismissed as 'pure spontaneism'. Exactly what Lenin had in mind when he described the proletariat as unable of moving beyond a 'trade union consciousness' or of developing *revolutionary* consciousness through its own active struggles against capitalism, is still argued over to this day, even amongst Leninists.

Yet, when it comes to the poll tax or the pits battle, it's this belief in the centrality of 'the party' – the primary importance of 'the party' *as an institution* – and the overriding need to renew and increase the membership of that party that dictates the SWP's politics. It's the party-first-and-last mentality that encourages the SWP leadership to treat its 'materialist marxist analysis' as just so much advertising copy. During the early days of the poll tax battle, if anyone was incapable of moving beyond a 'trade union consciousness', it was the party bureaucrats of the SWP.

Some left groups see devout-orthodoxy and adherence to the letter of Trotsky's teachings as a guarantor of eventual growth. Such fundamentalism has worked on occasion in the past for other groups – the SLL/WRP for one. Currently, the 'say anything' strategy of the SWP seems the more successful

and is paying dividends in terms of numerical growth. At recent miners' demos, SW sellers have been dishing out membership application forms as readily as their 'TUC-must-act' leaflets.

The SWP has been able to recruit so strongly precisely because it demands so little politically from its new members – beyond a dislike of the Tory government and a belief in 'some-sort-of-socialism'. As the party continues to grow, and its politics at 'rank and file' level become ever more diluted and confused, it increases the need for the party's leaders to tighten and centralise political control, the better to 'defend' the party's 'revolutionary' ideas.

A corollary of this, is that it encourages the rank and file to accept their status as increasingly excluded from the processes of the party's politics.

Yet, there are few immediate dangers for the party managers. The reason that such a massive influx of members as the SWP has engineered in recent months does not threaten the political or organisational stability of the party is that the couple of thousand new recruits have no real ability to influence the functioning of the organisation. The party is structured precisely with this in mind.

In 1991, the SWP abolished its National Committee, made up of representatives from the branches in the regions⁹¹. Now there is no forum between the local branch level and the Central Committee, leaving 'Conference' as the full extent of party 'democracy':

"When was the last time a motion or slate to conference was opposed? The CC [Central Committee] usually stays the same or changes by one member. Most of the changes to its composition are made between Conferences. None of the CC's numerous decisions made over the preceding year are challenged or brought to account. Even the Pre-Conference bulletins contain little disagreement."⁹²

The SWP operates a ban on permanent factions, permitting them only in the run-up to Conference, and permits no form of *horizontal* organisational between members to cut across the top-down vertical hierarchy of the party.

The politics of the new recruits are pretty much *irrelevant*. The party's line is handed down through the pages of the party's press from the Central Committee via the editors of the different journals. The branch cadre organise and deploy the new troops and orchestrate their activity. The

bulk of the work involves simply selling the party's journals. It doesn't matter either if the longevity of most of the new members is short, as long as more recruits are constantly being picked up to take the place of the drop-outs. The SWP work on the expectation of a high through-put of members.

There is nothing 'shameful' or 'surprising' about such thoroughly cynical and manipulative practice. It may have nothing to do with the genuine revolutionary politics of proletarian self-activity – but it's easy to understand the bureaucrats self-obsession. The central *apparachiks* who run the party, believe the building of the SWP to be *the* sole guarantor of future working class interests. The interests of the party and the class are seen as more than just synonymous. The interest of the party *is* the interest of the class.

In the longer term the current 'dash for growth' could prove more dangerous:

"One should remember the examples of the WRP in the early seventies and the Militant in the early eighties. Because they were recruiting and their influence was growing, their members refused to conduct any sort of self criticism. Of course the chickens came home to roost in the end."⁹³

The excitement of seeing the party begin finally to 'get somewhere' clearly does put pressure on the cadre at all levels of the party not to risk a loss of momentum by raising awkward questions, or criticising aspects of the party's conduct. Dissent, frustration and power struggles within the apparatus are pushed beneath the surface, often to explode all the more violently later, normally after that new momentum has peaked.

The SWP's advocacy of 'rank and file control' does not extend to the functioning of the SWP, but the leadership are not averse to pretending it does. 'Rank and file' workers may – when the SWP is feeling especially militant – be seen as capable of running their own strike committees, and challenging capitalism at the point of production, but those are not ideas it seeks to bring into the party. 'Socialism from below': but not within the SWP machine. The continual reappraisal of the SWP's politics is carried out not by the mass of the organisation, but by the party's political specialists, in and around the Central Committee.

"There is real debate within the SWP, but the framework for

discussion is set by the Central Committee. The agenda's at national events... are set by the CC or its appointees and are never challenged... Pre-Conference bulletins come out only once a year. Members can only express their views through Conference and Council to the whole of the party indirectly."⁹⁴

The party may claim that: "[T]here should be no hierarchy inside a revolutionary party"⁹⁵. What they mean is not that everyone has an equal ability to help shape the direction of the party, but they everyone should be encouraged to 'value' and *accept* their place in the pecking order: the *meritocracy*. Those factory bosses who, these days, eat in the same canteen as their production line workers, often use the same argument. It's what Mr Major has in mind when he talks of a 'classless' Britain.

In reality, a Leninist party simply reproduces and institutionalises existing capitalist power relations inside a supposedly 'revolutionary' organisation: between leaders and led; order givers and order takers; between specialists and acquiescent and largely powerless party workers. And that elitist power relationship is extended to include the relationship between the party and class.

"There are people who through knowledge, experience and ability to deliver have shown themselves capable of leading. But they are not all knowing. On the contrary, they make mistakes because they are constantly facing new situations and new problems."⁹⁶

And where does the self-activity of the working class figure in all this?:

"Real leaders are not infallible but are capable of recognising, admitting to and learning from mistakes." [The SWP 'admit mistakes?': Surely some mistake? Ed] "This can only be done by learning constantly from the working class and by testing its theories and actions in practice. The ability to do so gives revolutionaries the right to lead inside the party and the class."⁹⁷

So it's the very ability of those leaders to be *wrong*, to have to learn 'constantly *from* the working class' that gives them the 'right' to lead that class, and that proves them to be in advance of it?

So, for instance, the SWP's utter failure to grasp the class realities of the poll tax struggle – its attack on non-payment, its insistence on the need for Kinnock's leadership, its late conversion to the politics of rioting – only serves to *confirm* the SWP's fitness to lead. And what about challenging the 'mistakes' of those leaders:

"Those arguing against the party (CC) face the problem that if they were to win the argument in the branch, they would have to change the line of the party nationally. No one knows how to do this quickly, efficiently and without causing great embarrassment to the party. So the opposition is disarmed of the will to win from the start..."⁹⁸

In principle, of course, "...there is only one way the leadership of a revolutionary organisation can know if its strategy and tactics are correct: if the membership can criticize them and demand change if they do not work in practice."⁹⁹ But it is frowned upon in reality:

"Saying the CC [Central Committee] has too much power is to misunderstand what democratic centralism is about... spending time consulting the members as to whether this or that initiative is correct would inevitably mean missing opportunities and turning the organisation into a debating club."¹⁰⁰

What *is* depressing is the ease with which they generally get away with it: that rank and file members of the party accept violent changes of line on the say so of party full-timers:

"An amazing feature of revolutionary militants who constantly challenge authority in the outside world is the often unthinking acceptance of the whims of the party leadership."¹⁰¹

The membership of the SWP is certainly not a homogeneous mass of unthinking automatons. Any yet, most of that membership, for example, mutely accepted the party leadership's bewildering series of poll tax U-turns, or its more recent discovery of the 'upturn' without dissension or complaint.

The party pretends to recognise at least one of the problems

associated with Cliff and Co's seeming infallibility:

"Surely, the argument goes, if the party is a working class party and the memory of the class, then should not workers learn from it, not the other way round?"

"The problem with viewing the working class as passive recipients of the party's knowledge is that it is elitist and begs the question of who teaches the teachers".

Indeed it does, but the SWP doesn't have much of an answer for that one. They say that:

"In reality that relationship between party and class is fluid, open and depends of the party learning from the real lived experiences of the class."¹⁰²

But the SWP, like dozens of other outfits, claims for itself a pre-established 'right' to lead the class into revolt and then revolution. It claims it party contains, or will contain, the most class conscious workers, and that its Central Committee the most class conscious members of the party. It allows no possibility of new, alternative, non-party, non-Bolshevik forms of organisation being established by a class in struggle; and argues its worse mistakes, its backwardness, its opportunism, only reinforce its 'right' to rule.

The SWP see the party-class relationship as most definitely *fixed*, not fluid.

The SWP is set to become probably the biggest, most influential and most prominent organisation on what claims to be the British revolutionary left. Yet, even a cursory study of the antics of the party reveals the reality of that 'revolutionary' character. •

Notes

- ¹ SW 23 Jan 93, p10
- ² see *Republican Marxist Bulletin* Feb 93, journal of the Revolutionary Democratic Group, a kind of 'external faction' of the SWP
- ³ *Tribune* 12 February 93, p12. Stack later suggested that Cliff's attack on him had been nothing more than "a joke" about the fact that he had been in the US at the time of the Central Committee's "unanimous and swift" decision to "raise the general strike slogan", and so had been unable to vote for it, see 'Letters', *Tribune* 26 February 93, p10
- ⁴ *SWP Pre-Conference Internal Bulletin* 1992 quoted in *Workers Power*, Feb 93 p14
- ⁵ *SWP Pre-Conference Internal Bulletin* 1992 quoted in *Socialist Outlook* Jan 30 93, p14
- ⁶ *SWP Pre-Conference Internal Bulletin* 1992 quoted in *Republican Marxist Bulletin* Feb 93
- ⁷ *SR*, Jan/Feb 1981, p3-4
- ⁸ *SWR*, June 90, p19
- ⁹ The Militant Tendency underwent a 'split' in 1991 over the question of 'entryism', see *Trotwatch* Issue One. For more on the more recent maneuverings of Militant see *Trotwatch* Two.
- ¹⁰ As soon as this pub closes... *the British Left explained*, Chus Aguirre and Mo Klonsky (Estate of Prunella Kaur) p10
- ¹¹ The Socialist Labour League/Workers Revolutionary Party; and the Revolutionary Socialist League/Militant Tendency are the two other distinct traditions with roots back in 'the Club' whose descendants are still operating today. The other newer fourth strand in British Trotskyist history, the International Marxist Group (IMG) tradition, crystallised in the 1960s, though obviously some of its founders had been active in left politics before then.
- ¹² see, for example, 'International Socialists', *British Trotskyism*, John Callaghan (Basil Blackwell) p90.
- ¹³ This has not been without its own problems though. The collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe presented enormous problems for the whole of the Trotskyite left, the SWP included.

While many groups concluded that the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the threatened 'restoration' of capitalism in east, was an enormous threat to the world proletariat, the SWP – keen to stress its state-capitalist credentials – tended to go the other extreme. Because the regimes that were being overthrown were capitalist regimes, they reasoned, the popular protest movements that 'toppled them' were objectively anti-capitalist, if not consciously socialist.

"Trotsky is smiling, and Stalin is dead", concluded Cliff in one key article in the party *Review* (Dec 89, p14) As if somehow Trotsky's 1938 predictions of the fate awaiting the Russian regime had been vindicated by

events (which they hadn't) and that Cliff had agreed with his analysis all along (which he hadn't).

¹⁴ Trotsky's *Transitional Programme*, a document that was part-analysis, part-Manifesto, and part-handbook, was written to guide the Fourth International that he launched at the end of the 1930s. While every prediction Trotsky made in the document was subsequently proved completely wrong, orthodox Trotskyist groups still tend to treat the text as a kind of extended Ten Commandments.

¹⁵ Though it's fair to say that "...the Permanent Arms Economy theory was originally introduced as a stop-gap to explain the temporary delay to the arrival of the big slump. As the slump continually failed to arrive the SWP... gradually elaborated the notion into a full scale theory.", 'Decadance: the theory of decline or the decline of theory?', *Aufheben* 2, p39

¹⁶ At its foundation, the SRG decided to apply for FI membership, but were rebuffed because of their state capitalist theory. They didn't pursue matters. See, for example, Callaghan p91.

¹⁷ On its formation in 1950 the SRG became an entryist tendency within the Labour Party, a position it maintained for the next fifteen years, until it formally withdrew from Labour's ranks in 1965. See, for example, Callaghan.

¹⁸ "A travesty of Leninism", was *Workers Power's* verdict on the new optimism of the SWP. "In reality all you have to do to join [the party] is hate the Tories, not be racist or sexist, and part with 50p". Declaring the party guilty of 'bureaucratic centralism', WP berate the SWP for making a 'break with Leninism': "We see no alternative strategy mapped out for the class by the SWP, except more of the same, and, of course, 'join the SWP'." *Workers Power's* counter response to such anti-Leninist nonsense was unambiguous: "Join *Workers Power*" (all quotes, *Workers Power*, Feb 93, p14).

Socialist Outlook was more straightforwardly jealous of the SWP's success. While noting the dangers of recruiting "on an alarmingly flimsy political basis", their 'Boom or Bust' article admitted: "The SWP's enviable ability to attract new support proves that its propaganda does strike a chord, especially among students and white-collar trade unionists."

Drawing parallels with the super-optimism of the WRP in the 1970s, "minus of course the overpowering stench of corruption", the article, rather sulkily, concluded: "It is a high risk strategy which could yet prove a costly mistake." (*Socialist Outlook*, Jan 30 93, p14).

"Since the SWP is not a democratic organisation, but a sort of piety-fuelled cult in politics, then structured, democratic dissent or debate was not possible", explained *Socialist Organiser*. "...the widespread resistance amongst SWP members to 'the turn'" was unlikely to have an impact on the future of the party. There was, of course, an alternative to the "quasi-Stalinist organisational structures of the SWP", and, surprisingly, that turned out to be *Socialist Organiser's* own "democratic organisation... the Alliance for Workers' Liberty". (*Socialist Organiser*, 18 Feb 93, p7).

¹⁹ SW, 24 Oct 92, p3

- 20 SR, November 1992, pp10-11
- 21 SR, Nov 92, p12
- 22 SR Nov 92 p3. When the SWP talks about 'the left' its always refering to groups it sees as to the *right* of itself. So when the SWP talks about the failings of 'the left', it's talking about the politics of the *New Statesman* and Ken Livingstone. Similarly, when the RCP talks distainfully about 'the left', it means groups like the SWP...
- 23 SR Nov 92 p3
- 24 see for example, SW 24 Oct 92
- 25 *How Socialist is the Socialist Workers Party*, a pamphlet by Wildcat, includes a detailed exposé of the SWP's politics during the 1984-5 miners' strike
- 26 SW Oct 17 92, p5
- 27 SW Nov 7 92
- 28 SW Nov 7 92 8-9
- 29 *How Socialist is the Socialist Workers Party*, p12
- 30 All quotes SW, Dec 5 92, p4 *Comment*, Alex Callinicos
- 31 SW Jan 9 93, p3
- 32 SR Feb 93, p6
- 33 SR April 93, p7
- 34 *IS* 58, 'Roundtable discussion', Spring 1993, p66
- 35 SW April 10 93, p5
- 36 SR April 93, p9
- 37 From 'Politics and the class struggle – a roundtable discussion' [with SWP members], *International Socialism* 58, Spring 1993, p66
- 38 *ibid* p67
- 39 *ibid*. The SWP tends to advocate 'lobbying', rather than 'lynching'
- 40 SR April 93, p9
- 41 SW Feb 20 93, p8
- 42 SW May 8 93, p5
- 43 *ibid*
- 44 see, for example, 'Prospects for socialists – an interview with Tony Cliff', *IS* 55, Summer 92; and 'Can there be a revolution in Britain?', Lindsey German, *IS* 57, Winter 92. In the 400-page-plus *The Labour Party – a Marxist History*, Cliff & Gluckstein (Bookmarks, 1988) the Winter of Discontent merits a mere five paragraphs.
- 45 *The Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism*, Tony Cliff (Pluto Press, 1975), p182
- 46 SWR, June 90, p19
- 47 *The Labour Party – a Marxist History*, Cliff and Gluckstein (Bookmarks) p344
- 48 *The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After*, Chris Harman (Bookmarks) p275
- 49 SWR, June 90, p19
- 50 *ibid*
- 51 *ibid*

- 52 Chris Harman, SWP contribution to IMG's *Socialist Challenge*, 25 Jan 1979, p8
- 53 *ibid*
- 54 *ibid*
- 55 "[T]he SWP has grown by 1,500 members – to 7,500 – in less than two months" (*Socialist Review* Dec 92, p9)
- 56 SR March 93
- 57 SWP 1992 Conference Report, quoted in *Workers Power* Feb 93 p14
- 58 SR Dec 92, p9
- 59 SR March 93, p19
- 60 SR, March 93, p10
- 61 SR, Jan 93, p4
- 62 SW, Jan 10 93, p10
- 63 *Making the 'turn to recruitment*, Socialist Workers Movement briefing leaflet, 1993
- 64 see, eg, SW Dec 19 1992
- 65 *Socialists and the struggle against the poll tax* (SWP pamphlet), p8
- 66 *Democratic Centralism within the SWP*, by three members of Southampton SWP, 1991
- 67 Conference 1988 Report, SW 19 Nov 88, p11
- 68 SW 20th Aug 1988, p16
- 69 SW 15 October 1988, p16
- 70 SW 19 Aug 89, p1
- 71 SW 24 Mar 90
- 72 see, for example, *Organise!*, magazine of the Anarchist Communist Federation, Feb-April 90, p16
- 73 SW, 25 Aug 90, p7
- 74 SW 29 Sept 90, p16
- 75 SW 9 Sept 89, p1
- 76 SW 8 Sept 90, p5
- 77 SWR, Mar 90, p4-5
- 78 SW 17 Mar 90, p5
- 79 All quotes SW, April 7 90, p4
- 80 *ibid*
- 81 see Editorial, *Living Marxism*, May 1990, p4-6. The RCP had their own problems of course. Namely to explain how a movement they had written-off as the concern only of the moaning middle classes of Middle England could have delivered such an enthusiastic class riot to the streets of London. They didn't do a very good job...
- 82 *The Leninist*, June 8 90, p1
- 83 SW 15 Sept 90, p5
- 84 SWR, Nov 90, p4
- 85 SWR, Dec 90, p3
- 86 SWR, July/Aug 91, p3
- 87 SW 3 Nov 90, p10

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- 88 SW 8 May 93, p9
89 SR Nov 92, *The rise of resistance*, p13
90 SR, Dec 92, p8
91 see 'SWP 1991 Pre-Conference Documents'; quoted in *A tragedy of the left: Socialist Worker and its splits* (Alliance for Workers' Liberty) p49
92 *Democratic Centralism within the SWP*, dissidents in Southampton SWP, 1991
93 *ibid*
94 dissidents in Southampton SWP, 1991
95 *Why we need a revolutionary party*, Lindsey German (SWP) p11
96 *ibid*
97 *ibid*
98 dissidents in Southampton SWP, 1991
99 *Party and Class*, Chris Harman (Bookmarks) p3
100 *A tragedy of the left*, p47
101 'Democratic Centralism: a party for bureaucrats'; *Marxism and its failures*, (ACF) p8
102 *Why we need a revolutionary party* pp8-9

Abbreviations:

- SWP Socialist Workers Party
SW *Socialist Worker*, the SWP's weekly newspaper
SR *Socialist Review*, the party's monthly review
SWR *Socialist Worker Review*, previous title of SR, until September 1991
IS *International Socialism*, SWP's quarterly theoretical journal
IS International Socialists; previous name of SWP
SRG Socialist Review Group; previous name of IS