

Anti-revisionism in United Kingdom

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Notes on the so-called Anti-League Faction (1978)

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When differences in line emerged within the leadership of the RCLB, it occurred against a background of not only a couple of years of intense (and dogmatic) transformation from a federalist to democratic-centralist organisation, that was quickly followed by a lengthy principled struggle to achieve unity of two organisations – the Communist Federation of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) and the Communist Unity Association (Marxist-Leninist).

It was a young, immature political organisation that had had intense internal focus and sought to unify the dissipated Marxist-Leninist movement in Britain with the publication of a manifesto that sketched out its political lines.

The renewal of the organisation suffered from both political struggle and paralysis when, with the initial absence of the Chairman through illness, the national secretary attempted to energise and develop the organisation to be more “bolshevik”. What was labelled the “Anti-League Faction” by its detractors within the RCLB consisted of a few members. What gave it an influence beyond its numbers was that two of the three were political committee members, the highest body of the organisation.

Struggle at the apex of a group, regardless of its size and impact, is a struggle over leadership and the direction of the group. It has a self-importance and intensity that may be out of proportion to the actual outcome but when informed by the necessity of two-line struggle and warnings that the bourgeoisie are inside the organisation, it takes on the mantle of a life-and-death character. This was certainly reflected in the accounts provided by the participants: each saw the two line struggle as one between Bolshevism and Menshevism” – the League

Chairman's criticism of his internal opponents drew upon Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* to underline its characterisation of the political error.

The labelling of the Anti-League Faction was a deliberate move to invoke parallels with the factionalism of the Gang of Four as if there was something in common with both their ultra-left idealism in political line and the struggle against splittism and factionalism in the RCLB. The editorial in *Revolution* claimed, the success of the RCLB in winning victories against small group mentality with the unity between organisations, meant that petty bourgeois individualism, said to be at the root of small group mentality had to come out in a different form- the form of splittism. (*Revolution* Volume 4 No.1 1979)

The partisan accounts that survive bear no allowance for detached observation, but do indicate the divergence issues involved. The main charges against the ALF were publicised in "The Anti-League Faction – its history and main features" published in *Revolution* (Volume 4, No. 1 August 1979) and endorsed at a members conference reported on in "Militant RCL Conference Denounces Faction" *Class Struggle*, April 1979.

The National Secretary's documents lay out the political criticism of the organisation. The intensity of the struggle became personally focussed and it reached an extreme form when the national Secretary denounced the Chairman as a "traitor to the working class". There was no desire to struggle for clarity and unity at a higher level. In his candid memoirs of the episode Neil Redfern reflects upon the heightened political emotions and issues that were at stake.

China's policies loomed over the conflict but more importantly it was the general issue of the League's orientation illustrated by the later observation that "In "*Class Struggle*", in the seven issues published from the founding of the RCLB to the Central Committee meeting which decided that the right opportunism on this question must be rectified, there were eleven articles on Soviet social imperialism in the world, and only four on British imperialism." The charge of social-chauvinism, with the League's adoption of Chinese foreign policies priorities regarding the Superpowers, with the Soviet Union as the main danger, had some basis. Upholding Maoism and being critical of the Chinese party and state was a political stance the leadership, nor the majority of the membership, would not countenance. An editorial in *Revolution* noted,

"In the course of struggle about the application of the theory of the three worlds to British conditions, Redfern finally came out attacking some basic aspects of the theory itself. In spite of the fact that he constantly claimed to be in favour of a "revolutionary" application of it the Anti-League Faction was finally formed opportunistically by allying with P Dixon who had suddenly come out and attacked the theory of the three worlds as "opportunist"; Dixon has since stated that China is a revisionist and social imperialist state."

Of the specific event which sparked off the train of events, the accusation that the then Chairman of the RCL was a "traitor to the working class", the expelled members concede the

subsequent refusal to make a self-criticism for this remark was incorrect “and we are now prepared to make a self-criticism”. The specific matter which provoked the accusation – whether or not to continue the RCL’s Zimbabwe solidarity work – was regarded as but one aspect of the deeper struggle between Marxism and revisionism in the RCL by those who went on to form the Stockport Communist Group.

A self-criticism by the leadership after the events noted that the

“RCLB recognised ... its deeds did not live up to its words. Politically, this error came about because in recognising that Britain is a second world country, subject to superpower aggression and threat, we forgot in practice that Britain's other aspect and its primary aspect at that, is that it is itself a bloody imperialist country which cruelly exploits any third world countries.... these were serious right opportunist errors which, if not corrected, would have developed into full blown social - chauvinism.”

A self-critical ‘Letter to the members of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain from the Stockport Communist Group’ published in *Red Star* (No. 9, January-April 1982) concentrated more on political style and the mistake of “incorrectly treated the contradictions with the then Chairman of the RCL and with other leading members of the RCL as antagonistic ones.”

The consequence of this conflict meant that the political in-fighting at the summit of the organisation served to paralyze the leadership of a much centralised organisation. The disruption and damage was considerable: although only the four members were to leave in January 1979, due to fatigue, disinterest and disillusionment around twenty per cent of the League membership was lost within the year. What the episode illustrated was the rotten state of internal political life within the League: there was an over-emphasized centralism, a concept of democratic centralism imposed so distorted that the Political Committee had a ‘united face’ policy when speaking to the Central Committee; branch committees had that same political façade at branch meetings. There had been a conscious political decision taken by the leadership of the RCLB to build up the authority of the first Chairman in the late 1970s, difficult to attribute it as a ‘personality cult’ but it was a definite campaign to build an authoritative leader - figure. It was not successful; indeed the development of a stable leadership core was never achieved throughout the short history of the organisation. Neil Redfern and Phil Dixon attempted to assert a leadership onto the organisation. Dixon and Neil Redfern were on the Political Committee, and highly regarded, persuasive comrades. As national Secretary Neil had led the organisation in the absence of the Chairman for the first half of 1978.

Pat Redfern (nee Derrington), although a rank - and - file member had a long pedigree in Marxist-Leninist politics that other League members found intimidating. Her previous membership of the German group, *Kommunistischer Bund West Deutschland* (KBW), gave her the reputation of a tested comrade. In the early 70s, she had been active in a local ML circle in Offenbach, joining the KBW in 1973. Membership of the RCLB was short - she had

been granted candidate membership in January 1978 and was expelled by the London District a year later in January 1979 for "splittism".

All were formally expelled for "bourgeois factionalism" in January 1979. They later explained: of the bureaucrat - centralism which then prevailed in RCL, and also because of our own ideological errors and bad style of work, we were not able to bring the two - line struggle in the RCL to fruition.... We weren't all that interested in winning the maximum possible unity, mentally wrote off the members of the RCL and were quite content to split away with a handful of people and found another circle. The interests of the working class would though have been best served if we had made our self - criticisms and stayed in the RCL to fight for our line. What the working class needs after all is a national organization, not a plethora of small circles. (Letter to the members of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain from the Stockport Communist Group. *Red Star*, No. 9, January-April 1982:44)

Class Struggle report April 1979,

“ANTI-LEAGUE FACTION SHOWS ITS TRUE COLOURS”

The faction, which was expelled from the RCLB in January, for its attempts to split the RCLB has now formed an “organisation” and published an attack on the RCL. Their new “organisation” is continuing its opportunist manoeuvrings. With great irony these two couples have named themselves “Communist Unity”. But there is a purpose behind this action. The RCLB was created the faction is trying to give the impression to the Marxist-Leninist movement and to anyone else they can interest, that the RCLB has split into these two defunct groups. This intention is made clear in their pamphlet where they attack the unity between the two organisations as “unprincipled”, flatter the CUA whilst condemning the CFB (and lying about its previous transformation and connection of its worst errors), and where they refer to the RCLB as “CFB/RCLB”. In fact the faction is made up of two couples. One couple was in the old CUA. Of the other couple, one was a member of the CFB, and one joined the RCL after it was founded. Their pathetic attempt to distort what they are, and present themselves as something they are not, just serves to expose their own opportunist manoeuvring even further.”

In the aftermath of their expulsion, the three comrades had issued a pamphlet in the name of Communist Unity entitled "*Exposure and Defeat of the RCL's Social Chauvinism is a Major Task in Party Building*". This was later circulated internally within the League as part of a political offensive against the chairman of the organisation. The League's failed attempt to achieve relevance – the so called 'Rectification Stage' of 1979/80, and the subsequent weakness of its 2nd Central Committee – came to shape the political trajectory of the organisation.