

Formed in London on December 20th 1974, the Institute's guiding spirit was an Indian born Maoist, Ara Balakrishnan, brought up in Singapore.

Bala had suspended his studies at the London School of Economics in 1967 and was a member of the Communist Party of England (ML) until the summer of 1974. The CPE (ML) explained Bala's expulsion for "pursuance of conspiratorial and splittish activities and because of their spreading of social fascist slanders." ⁱ

With his expulsion, Bala took about 10% of the CPE (ML)'s membership, predominantly the overseas students many who had been associated with MASS – the Malaysian Association of Singaporean Students – operating out of his address on the Ashmore estate at the Oval before the activity of the Workers' Institute flowered with the establishment of the Mao Memorial Centre at 140 Acre Lane, Brixton, South London in October 1976.

"Comrade Bala enjoined the educated youth to participate with the Workers' Institute in building the first revolutionary stable base area in the imperialist heartland in and around the mao tsetung Memorial centre in Brixton." ⁱⁱ

The members of the Institute carried out a hectic educational program and propaganda activity in line with the 3-part programme of the organization. That programme called for:

- a) conducting on a regular basis discussion groups on current affairs and study groups on the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Chairman Mao to train contingents of theoretical workers;
- b) carrying out scientific social investigation and detailed mass work in working class communities to build revolutionary stable base areas;
- c) using Chairman Mao's proletarian revolutionary line to participate actively in battles of annihilation at the ideological and political fronts against 'bourgeois reactionary lines and unfolding mass movements in doing so.

However in trying to "boldly arousing them with the historic mission of the proletariat" the relationship with the Brixton masses as set out in the internal guidelines "Ten points for Attention of Comrades Participating in Building A Stable Base Area" were not reflected in the method used to achieve that end.

The Institute took literally the slogan:

"China's Chairman is Our Chairman, China's Path is Our Path

considering the Institute, without any shred of evidence, to be the British component of a Chinese initiated World Revolutionary Party. Thus, what other MLs considered the key political task, party building was regarded by the Institute as "suffering from varying degrees of revisionism, in particular petty-bourgeois nationalists and pacifist distortions and thus serves the headquarters of international fascist bourgeoisie." ⁱⁱⁱ

This anti-party building line did not mean that the Institute did not disseminate its own political analysis: it produced a revolutionary news weekly, *South London Workers Bulletin* and

a theoretical journal, *The New World*. Political evening schools were held at Acre Lane, which acted as a social centre and the accommodation for a commune comprised of Institute members and contacts.

The Institute took seriously the task of building a stable base area, of intergrating with the working class in the community and not just at the factory level. In its propagandist work it did consistent and methodical mass work. Unfortunately, the content of the message it sought to promote was idealist rubbish.

"This year (1975) will see the victory of world revolution and the establishment of the international dictatorship of the proletariat."^{iv}

At the August Conference on Britain held in 1975, the Institute had correctly recognised the importance of Lenin's advice of going "lower and deeper" within the working class, and not to court the respectability of the bourgeoisie. Coupled with this orientation was an assessment that gave recognition, to the National Minority peoples' role in the imperialist heartland as being analogue with the offensive of the Third World people in the world- ide struggle against imperialism.

These two correct positions were negated by the framework within which Balakrishnan led the organisation. The first of May statement for that year spoke of "...the urgent task facing Marxist-Leninists, particularly in the imperialist heartlands, is to boldly disseminate and, ideologically arm the working people with the historic mission of the proletariat and the need for the establishment of the international dictatorship of the Proletariat. We in the Workers' Institute of Marxism-Leninism- Mao-Tsetung Thought take this as our principal task at this stage as part of our contribution to the victory of proletarian world revolution."

The seeds of delusion that saw the Mao Memorial Centre in Brixton as an out-post of the impending world wide victory of the international proletariat led by (the the)beloved Chairman Hua, flowered in the declaration on the advertisement for a Conference on "Socialist China Builds the New World" held at Friends House London on November 23 1979.

" It is after defeating the ultra-left 'gang of four' in China in 1976 and establishing the INTERNATIONAL DICTATORSHIP OF THE Proletariat in 1977, that beloved Chairman Hua brought the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the first in history, to a victorious conclusion...Our Party, The Communist Party of China, became the World Party of Proletarian Socialist Revolution and Our Army, the People's Liberation Army of China, the World Army.....Our Party and Chairman Hua are now mainly involved in reorganising the whole world under the INTERNATIONAL DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT."

The lunacy of that line was complete: the Institute members were in the Communist Party of China which was the only communist party in the world, and why engage in the deviant activity of party-building when the Communist Party of China and the PLA will liberate us.

In the late 1970's, The Times diarist would often quote the Institute's South London Workers' Bulletin for humorous intent. It reported the establishment of the Workers' Institute centre in Acre Lane "right in the revolutionary base area in Brixton", as "this new development in Britain has taken the British fascist state by storm." The diarist would " gently mock the "Brixton Maoists" by advertising the Institute's meetings:

"The Brixton Maoists are this weekend holding a three day conference in Lambeth Town Hall

on 'Building a revolutionary stable base area', with Chinese films. It will later move to a Church Hall in Kingsway, finishing with a 'revolutionary social' ".^v Indeed, film showings and socials were as integral part of the centre as its political meetings: the *South London Workers Bulletin* would report "the Centre was packed from 7pm to Midnight to celebrate" the birthday of "beloved Chairman Mao" , or a revolutionary social on the first birthday of the Mao Tsetung Memorial Centre.

When the Institute complained that "the hired scribes of the bourgeoisie" describe them as "the most lunatic fringe of the lunatic fringe in Britain", that is precisely how the vast majority of the ML movement in Britain regarded the Institute. The fear of contaminating the unwary also reflected the desire to deflect the obvious ridicule that would be forth-coming from other interventions by the Institute's activists. For instance, when 150 students plan to disrupt a L.S.E. meeting addressed by "a leading member of the Indonesian fascist junta (personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of communists and democrats), Workers' Institute members opposed them, saying that the real fascist in LSE that day was Tony Cliff, who had come to speak at an IS Society meeting" (now SWP). Although Denise Chesire and Nicola Clarke did denounce leading Tory M.P. (and future Minister and knighted) Keith Joseph at a meeting of London University students in October 1977.

What caused concern for some was the idea that anyone coming across the propaganda of the Institute would be left with the idea that anyone who upheld Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought is like them. There was valid concern at this happening given the geographical spread of the ML movement: it was thin on the ground. The Institute was an ultra-left organization whose actions could be used to discredit the ML movement. People would not be won to the cause of Maoist politics if their only encounter was, as detailed in an internal circular of the CWM in 1978 offered the judgment that:

"During a wave of student occupations against fee increases, they turned up ... to say there was no need to occupy, because the PLA (People's Liberation Army) would be there any day to liberate everyone... If the Workers' Institute did not exist, the bourgeoisie would soon need to establish an organisation along the same lines to help choke the British ML movement while it is still weak.... They are a gang of revisionists, led by a man who has a long record of counter-revolutionary activity."^{vi}

That judgment was not shared by L Division of Brixton police. Perhaps they were aware of the judgment of a decade earlier:

Whatever the reason, the Institute came under intense police attention disproportionate to its size or effectiveness of its political practice in Brixton. At least 15 members of the Institute were arrested and detained on remand in the space of 30 months; a record unmatched by any other ML organization.

* In February 1976, Institute members Wee Hock Seng and Balakrishnan were detained at Brixton Prison. - Bala detained for 56 days.

Ekins Brome and Najeeb Norman were arrested when visiting the two, detained on remand and eventually found guilty of assaulting Prison officers:

"...we witnessed yet again the mockery of the British legal system – the rubber stamp of the dictatorship of the fascist bourgeoisie of Britain. Our comrades, as soldiers of Chairman Mao

and servants of the working and oppressed people, militantly resisted at every step and resolutely denounced the fascist courts and the moribund criminals who sat in "judgment" of them. They vigorously shouted the slogans: "Long Live Chairman Mao! Long Live the Communist Party of China! Death to the British fascist state! Victory to World Revolution"^{vii}

* In August 1977 Najeeb Norman was deported to Malaysia after being arrested when leafleting a meeting of the CPE (ML) the previous April. He had left his studies at London University "to integrate with and serve the working people of Britain".

* On, March 4th 1978 the police raided Mao Memorial Centre and arrested five people, including the Institute Secretary, Balakrishnan and his wife, Chanda Pattini. Lim Poh Seng and Martin and Nicola Clark were the others arrested.

Bala and Chanda were sentenced to 6 and 3 months respectively for "actual bodily harm" while resisting arrest.

* While the five were detained, there was a further police raid on March 22 at the Centre at 5.30 in the morning on the pretext of searching for drugs. They arrested all nine occupants. The six women – Aisha Wahab, Oh Kareng, Sian Davis, Denise Cheshire, Joseph Herival and Sling – were held on remand for six months at Holloway Prison until their trial on September 7th 1978. They were cleared of any drug charges but sentenced for "obstructing and assaulting the police".

This level of police repression did not break down the sectarian isolation that the Institute had created between itself and the rest of the ML movement: no defence campaign was established to publicise the treatment of the militants of the Workers' Institute. That was not surprising given the view of the Institute's resident guru, Bala, that

"We have waged sharp line struggles with the various 'mountain strongholds' and 'independent kingdoms' among the Marxist-Leninists in Britain. Furthermore, we have waged numerous battles of annihilation; at the ideological and political front against the revisionists and other malcontents whose profession is to mislead and sap the militant fervor of the revolutionary mass movement in Britain."

The Institute even echoed China's political experience in denouncing his own "Gang of Four" in the imperialist heartland – Reg Birch (leader of the CPB(ML)), Hardial Bains (leader of the Canadian CPC(ML)) and former comrades, Carol Reakes and Alan Evans – for attacking Chairman Mao's proletarian revolutionary line and the role of Socialist China.

Regarding everyone else in the ML movement as police agents did not encourage a kind disposition towards the Institute from other activists.

Those outside of the Institute took its activity on face level, few made the attempt to go beyond the hectoring content and sectarian style and dismiss them as "nutters".

But what the establishment of the Mao Memorial Centre represented, albeit in a flawed manner, was some appreciation of the necessity to establish a stable political base in working, class communities.

Other organisations, such as the CWLB and RCLB, did have a priority at this time – the mid/late 70s of building factory cells – but its activities were centred on injecting

revolutionary politics at the point of production. And as both organisations were to gain first-hand experience workers can be sacked and factories closed.

The Institute's strategy was not concentrated on a factory but a geographical location where members worked and lived, thus not restricted to working hours as many workers commute to work and the issues that tend to be successfully raised are work related.

The merits of the Institute's approach were obscured by the absurdity of the bizarre propositions that were part of its political line. There was some understanding that "Serve the People" meant giving recognition to the need to supply some material incentives to establish and build up relationships that went beyond selling the paper at tube stations. The Mao Memorial Centre established a physical presence in the area, the showing of revolutionary films that were attracting hundreds to Lambeth Town Hall, and presence of Institute members in local campaigns did show signs of providing a launch-pad for the Institute prior to the intimidation and arrests of 1978.

The Institute regarded itself as the British section of the Chinese-led International Dictatorship of the Proletariat because it alone copied the Chinese experience of building revolutionary bases, it alone could interpret correctly the line that came from Beijing, and it alone courageously upheld Mao Zedong Thought in the face of state harassment.

The closure of the Mao Memorial Centre – rumoured because of defaulting on rate payments – was enforced by the local council, and in the aftermath of the imprisonment of practically anyone associated with the Institute, its membership withered. Apart from occasional conferences at the University of London Union in the early 1980s organised by Bala, as an organised force the Institute no longer existed; this in spite of Bala's assurances (delusion) that it had established itself "underground" .

As a cult organisation it was finished in 1978, an obscure phenomenon amidst the wreckage of ultra-leftist activity.

In 2013, however, Bala and the Workers' Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao TseTung Thought were back in the news. The story began in November when the media reported that three alleged victims, a 30-year-old Briton, a 57-year-old Irish woman and a 69-year-old Malaysian woman, had escaped from an address in Brixton after being held captive for 30 years in conditions of slavery. A media frenzy erupted when it emerged that "The couple who allegedly held three women, one an Irish woman, for more than 30 years were leaders of an extremist Maoist collective"^{viii}

Aravindan Balakrishnan and his wife Chanda were quickly identified as the couple and drawing upon unacknowledged internet sources – principally EROL – a sketchy account of the Mao Zedong Memorial Centre in Acre Lane, Brixton, was concocted. The 73-year-old Balakrishnan, who along with his 67-year-old wife Chandra Pattni, a Tanzanian of Indian descent, was arrested on suspicion of assault, false imprisonment and immigration offences.

Originally presented as 'slaves' held for 30 years, the three victims were later said to have been held by the "invisible handcuffs" of a "shared political ideology". The Police explanation was that:

"Somehow that collective came to an end and how the women ended up continuing to live

with the suspects.

“How this resulted in the women living in this way for over 30 years is what are seeking to establish, but we believe emotional and physical abuse has been a feature of all the victims’ lives.”^{ix}

As the story unfolded the death of another woman member falling out of an upstairs window was brought into the reporting on the sect. The involvement of a Cheltenham Ladies College former student intrigued part of the media. Reinforced when another woman was identified as a prize-winning classical musician whose mathematician father was a celebrated wartime code-breaker at Bletchley Park. Both used their financial inheritance to fund the work of the Institute. However there was a shift in perceptions: doubt on police claims that the women were held in conditions of “domestic servitude” and had no choice but to stay in the houses occupied by the collective, that the women were held as “slaves”, diminished after footage emerged of them defending their alleged captor and denouncing outsiders as part of the “Fascist state” in a 1997 ITV news documentary. Indeed, the “Malaysian woman allegedly held against her will for more than 30 years was happy in Britain and had a wide circle of friends who cared for her, fed and loved her, her sister said”.^x

The narrative was changing:

“After initial claims of physical imprisonment, the police then started to use the phrase ‘invisible handcuffs’. It was suggested that the south London victims were held for 30 years with these invisible handcuffs. Suddenly, the question of physical force and abuse was relegated to the background and the case was casually redefined as one of ‘brainwashing’.”^{xi}

The actual story was of a Leftist sect that has imploded and collapsed in on itself. The Press were soon mining a doctoral thesis by Steve Rayner at University College London, who described the institute as “the clearest case of far-left millenarianism which I have encountered, ...a tiny Maoist sect with about 25 members, located in the Brixton area. ...In 1977, they confidently predicted that the world would be liberated from capitalist oppression by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army before the end of the year.”

Indeed, the group did exhibit all the indicators of a classic millenarian sect based on an apparently literal belief in the immanence of global revolution. It was recognized at the time that they were at the margins of the Far Left. A Maoist blog, *Democracy and Class Struggle* posted that “Aravindan Balakrishnan the man at the centre of the slavery scandal in Brixton was expelled from Communist England in 1974 and set up a cult around the Workers Institute.

Other Maoist groups were to shun the Workers’ Institute, disassociating themselves from its activities and refusing them entry into their meetings. Aravindan Balakrishnan was generally regarded as a nutter by London Maoists.”^{xii} Others on the Left recalled their own comedic encounters with group members:

“Many, many years ago, back in 1975-76, I worked part time at the London Students Organisation (LSO – the London area of NUS), which operated from the University of London Union. So we regularly ate in the ULU canteen, and without fail earnest Maoists, mostly from Malaysia, as I recall, would distribute leaflets from the Workers Institute of Marxism-Leninism Mao Tse Tung thought.

This was the most delightful and hilarious nonsense, much funnier than anything put out by Trotskyist organisations. It warned us of the dangers of the Gang of Four, led by that dreadful revisionist Lin Biao, and extolled the virtues of the long forgotten Hua Guo-Feng. And it also praised a certain comrade Balakrishnan, whom we in the CPGB and the rest of the Broad Left in those days had never heard of.

The Maoists were most annoyed that we collapsed in laughter over their leaflets.

Who could have imagined back then that there was such a sinister side to this crazy sect!^{xiii}

So what has emerged from all this week-long digging frenzy by the British press.....

The reportage in the media displayed an assumption that there is no neutrality in reporting the 'News';

"Some are using the south London story to air their prejudices about ideological belief, political passion and devotion to a cause. Instead of asking: "How could a seemingly odd, one-off couple manage to mistreat three women like this?" they're saying: "This is where ideological commitment gets you."^{xiv}

Any media outlet will be happy to take what is offered and then use it without attribution and this was especially true of material taken from EROL. And they will take a quote from anyone they can track down, however remotely related or qualified to speak; New York Labour Party chairman Ian Williams, said the short, bespectacled Balakrishnan was an unlikely guru. "He was like a Maoist Maharishi"^{xv}. The Daily Telegraph reported that Balakrishnan had gone largely unnoticed for years. He had come to Britain in 1963 at the age of 23 on a British Council scholarship from Singapore and enrolled at the LSE.^{xvi} "Balakrishnan was charismatic and dominant," recalled David Vipond, a communist at the time who met Balakrishnan at meetings".

Channel Four News thought Robert Griffiths, leader of the Communist Party of Britain relevant for an interview and comment: "If one were to be brutally honest they were more of psychiatric interest than political interest. They had nothing to do with the mainstream leftwing and communist politics of the day."^{xvii}

The London Evening Standard tracked down Community worker Dudley Heslop, 59, who had attended lectures given by Aravindan Balakrishnan, "Bala always came across as approachable and friendly. He would always stop you in the street and chat." He said Balakrishnan had a brilliant mind and was an amazing speaker, adding: "He was handsome and slim and dressed neatly. He always wore a pressed shirt."^{xviii}

In an error-ridden report that confuses the organization Bala was expelled from, The Daily Telegraph states that in October 1971, Balakrishnan married his comrade in the struggle, Chanda Pattni, a 25-year-old Tanzanian history student of Indian origin whom he had met in London. The couple set up home first in north London before moving south of the river a year later. The ludicrous suggestion of Bala preaching to "hundred or so followers" magnifies the appeal of the Institute.^{xix}

As a political current, Maoism was always weak in Britain. Placing the actions of those young

radicals in the context of forty years ago, one leftist celebrity figure^{xx} commented:

“Young women and men who joined the far-left groups did so for the best of reasons. They wanted to change the world. Many fought against the stifling atmosphere in many groups. Women organised caucuses to monitor male chauvinism inside the groups and challenged patriarchal practices. Pity that not all the lessons were learned. Easy now to forget that many who fought within and led the women's and gay liberation movements – in Europe and elsewhere – had received their political education inside the ranks of the combined far left, warts and all.”

“The temper of the times would not admit shades of grey” wrote one blogger claiming to be active in the Institute in its heyday.^{xxi} “I was a teenage Marxist, from an immigrant working class background. The world was clear to me. I knew that I was on the side of history and that proletarian revolution was the only solution to the poverty, racism and violence around me. I was driven by a strong sense of injustice, that people like me were excluded from society, that we were poor and would remain so. It was also clear that class society was organised to preserve the status quo and that the country was run by a political class that did everything it could to keep us down. On the streets the National Front and British Movement were active neo-Nazi movements that were acting as tools of the ruling class, and that the police were there to defend them and to fight those of us who were anti-fascists. And these views, though they may seem extreme now, were not that uncommon... to make sense of what happened to Balakrishnan and his group, you have to let go of any preconceptions you might have about conventional left or far left politics.... you didn't just wander into their centre and ask to be signed up. To become a member you had to work hard at it. You had to prove you could be trusted, you had to show ideological purity, exhibit devotion to the group no matter what. All this and put up with the world around you actively telling you that you're crazy. It's the ideal recipe for cultish behaviour.”

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The Marxist-Leninist Sept.1974 Internal Journal of the CPE(ML)

ⁱⁱ South London Weekly Bulletin No.93 October 22, 1977

ⁱⁱⁱ Section D "On Some aspects of the History of the Workers' Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought" Internal Document 1977

^{iv} "The Final Crisis of Imperialism and the role of the Third World" Internal document

^v The Times April 19, 1977

^{vi} CWM Internal Communication 1978

^{vii} Statement issued 22nd April 1976

^{viii} Press Association 25th November 2013

^{ix} Women held as 'slaves' had been part of a 'collective', police reveal. Daily telegraph 23 November 2013

^x I was happy in Britain, woman held as 'slave' by Maoist cult for 30 years tells sister. The Daily telegraph 1st December 2014

^{xi} Frank Furedi, We denigrate history's victims of slavery with our misuse of the s-word. November 25th 2013

[http://www.spiked-](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/slavery_in_london_an_hysterical_morality_tale/14331#.UpPDmdLFHxB)

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^{xii} <http://democracyandclasstruggle.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/aravindan-balakrishnan-maoists.html>

^{xiii} Paul Fauvet, internet posting November 25 2013 [Former Communists

^{xiv} Brendan O'Neill, Slavery case: Not all political extremists are mad – and I should know. Daily Telegraph 26 Nov 2013

^{xv} 'Brainwashing' tapes as she lay dying and the mystery of the Cheltenham Ladies old girl's fatal fall at the Maoist slave sect HQ Mail Online 2 December 2013

^{xvi} How Chairman Mao of Brixton built his sect of 'slaves' The Daily Telegraph 1st Dec 2013

^{xvii} 'Slave' house couple 'leaders of 1970s political cult' Monday 25 November 2013

<http://www.channel4.com/news/slave-house-couple-lambeth-leaders-1970s-political-cult>

^{xviii} Inside the Brixton sect: slavery suspect 'told recruits he was Jesus and ran cult like army' Evening Standard, 27 November 2013

^{xix} Ditto

^{xx} Tariq Ali, What the Maoist slavery sect tells us about the far-left .The Guardian, Tuesday 26 November 2013

^{xxi} <http://progcontra.blogspot.co.uk/> Thursday, November 28, 2013