

Proletarian
BROADSIDE 1



THE CRACK-UP



15p

BOARD STUDY

THE CRACKUP



IS: rout of a rearguard protoparty

The International Socialists, once the whizz-kids of the revolutionary left, face their biggest crisis. Membership has fallen sharply and the sales of Socialist Worker, the I. S. weekly, are reported to have slumped to 12,000. At least two factions within the movement have split from it recently, and the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian recently reported that a further faction, the "I. S. Opposition", had called for a crisis conference.

The Opposition faction has not, to our knowledge, made public its views of the problems which have beset I. S. recently, but it appears they have criticised the formation of a clique within the leadership, a general lack of internal democracy and failure to accept the realities of the situation. All these criticisms appear to be true, but if the I. S. Opposition is saying nothing more than that then it is failing sadly to get at the roots of the I. S. illness. Given the principles on which the movement was founded, all these diseases were inevitable. This pamphlet, by studying the works of Tony Cliff, the premier I. S. ideologue, shows why.

Of course many of the I. S. Opposition were in at the movement's birth, and held important posts within it. It is reported that their most recent document, for example, was signed by Roger Protz, for many years the editor of Socialist Worker, and John Palmer, another leading member who, ironically, is the European Editor of the Guardian (we wondered who coined the slogan "No to the bosses' Europe"). Since the errors in the I. S. position were there at the beginning, these people must have been party to them and, like I. S. itself, they will rapidly find themselves on the scrapheap of working class history unless they undertake severe self-criticism. But because I. S. is the biggest and most apparent of the movements of the revolutionary Left, it attracted many people who, though new to politics, had at least a general commitment to the working class and to the goal of socialist revolution. In fact, even now, I. S. has some 2,900 members. Now, a revolutionary

organisation with clearly defined goals, an unmistakably revolutionary programme

and 2,900 members, each with a solid grounding in scientific socialism and prepared to sacrifice everything for the revolution, would strike terror into the hearts of the ruling class (the Socialist Labour Party, the only such organisation which Britain has ever seen, managed to cause considerable concern during the early part of this century, and its membership was never more than a meagre few hundred). But I. S. scares only the least astute of the ruling class. As this pamphlet shows, it is weak-kneed, compromising with reformism all along the line. And it disdains revolutionary theory, the idea that man must understand his material environment if he is to master it. Their policy of admitting to the organisation anyone who merely sympathises with it, without regard to their understanding of scientific socialism, means that the organisation is neatly split into its theoreticians, who do nothing but make policy, and the activists, who just do the dirty work. No prizes, of course, for guessing the category that working-class recruits fall into.

Thus the formation of a clique was inevitable in IS, and we can only be surprised at the wonder which seemingly intelligent people seem to express at it.

The 2,900, then, have little idea of what they are fighting for, or why, or how they are to fight for these uncertain goals. Inevitably they lack conviction and dynamism. Inevitably, the turnover rate is high.

IS is frequently under attack from other Left groups because of its "opportunism", but few of them get close to understanding the problem.

At the root of IS opportunism lies a confusion between strategy and tactics. A revolutionary organisation needs to form a strategic plan -- what we call a communist programme -- to jolt the working class out of its reformist rut

and lead it to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and, ultimately, to the goal of international communism. Such a programme is formed scientifically, by Marxist analysis of economic and social conditions and the historical experience of the international working class. Tactics are derived from the strategic plan and are so designed that they make the maximum possible contribution towards its achievement. But, like the Mensheviks in pre-revolutionary Russia, IS has no strategic plan, no communist programme. Instead it believes that such a plan can arise from a series of tactical situations. But this side of the revolution, every tactical situation must result in compromise, what IS calls a "sell-out", or defeat.

There are at least three big mistakes that IS makes here:

1. To build a strategic line based on compromise is to build reformism.
2. Disillusion rapidly sets in when "revolutionary" goals are fixed for individual struggles and they are never realised -- because they never can be.
3. If the strategy derives from the tactical situations, these situations inevitably tend to take the form of a reply to a bourgeois initiative. In the end, IS is left opposing for opposing's sake, whining about "betrayals" and waiting for a new situation to arise -- the only way that its members' interest can be kept alive. (By contrast, tactics which derive from a communist strategy put the working class on to the offensive, and encourage the assertiveness vital to a future ruling class. You can find out more of what we mean by this by reading Proletarian no 3).

IS is bound to flit from cause to cause, if only to keep itself alive, for in each of these causes its failure, its political bankruptcy, is soon revealed. Hence the high turnover of IS members, the cynicism within its ranks, the schizophrenia.

Spontaneism and opportunism go together -- abstractly they are a result of obsession with current moods, struggles and tactics and indifference to long-term tendencies, goals and strategy. Hence IS members are

involved in diverse activities, which are taken up or dropped at will. IS rarely makes it clear to the working class why certain issues are taken up and others not, nor why one issue suddenly displaces another as the priority.

In the six months up to March 1976 IS has called successively for "the big claim", "absolutely no redundancies" and the "right to work". With the same disregard for integrated, strategic work, it has gone through Chile, Portuguese and Spanish campaigns, leaving demoralisation and cynicism in its wake.

Following with its nose the twists and turns of the class struggle, jumping from one bandwagon on to another, and not providing a comprehensive revolutionary orientation to the struggle, IS floats like a butterfly, and it stings like one.

But COBI believes that I.S. contains many people who could be of immense value to the working class in its battle for emancipation. Read this pamphlet. If, at least in broad terms, you agree with the points made in it, contact us. Where groups of I.S. dissidents show interest, we can arrange open discussions. Now read on.....

The significance of IS

IS claims to be the revolutionary organisation in the British Isles, and its claims must be studied seriously. Any organisation making such claims has to be judged by its analysis of the present critical situation, and by the strategy and tactics it advocates for socialist transformation. IS is a very leader-dominated organisation, and in this pamphlet the three main texts by Tony Cliff on the class struggle are examined as representatives of the IS position. These texts are Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards (written with Colin Barker in 1966); The Employers' Offensive. Productivity Deals and How to

Fight Them (1970) and The Crisis Social Contract or Socialism (1974).

This pamphlet will argue that there are extremely serious shortcomings in the IS position, which can be labelled economist and reformist.

But Cliff himself uses these labels, though he does so in a way which is narrow and confusing. So we will have to make it clear what these labels mean in the Marxist tradition.

Political debate is at a pretty low level in Britain and few people who call themselves socialists really understand the scientific theory first stated by Marx and Engels. Because of this unhappy state of affairs it is very easy for people to sound revolutionary when they talk and write, when really all their shouting just hides the fact that they are trotting out the same old reactionary rubbish that Lenin and many others exposed as nonsense long ago.

First principles for revolutionaries

On the surface, IS's claim to be a revolutionary organisation seems formally justified in that it probably accepts the basic first principles of revolutionary Marxism. These are

1. Capitalism is in crisis because it has a built-in contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces. By that we mean that each worker is just a cog in the wheel of a mighty social force -- production. But though production is social, the ownership of it is in private hands -- either the hands of the capitalists themselves, or of the state, representing the capitalist class as a whole.

2. In the long run there is no way out of this crisis, but the capitalist class can find a way out of it in the short term, depending on whether they have enough strength in the political and economic class war and on the hold that their

way of looking at the world has over the working class.

3. The state is an instrument of capitalist class domination, constantly stepping in to make sure that conditions are kept right for capitalist production and exploitation.

4. The workers will not be able to take power and reorganise society to meet their needs unless the present form of state is destroyed and replaced by a workers' dictatorship.

5. Although this has to be done, it adds up to a very big job because of the hold that capitalist ideology has over the working class. This ideology is constantly generated by the process through which capitalism circulates goods (advertising and its handmaiden, the press and TV) and by its facade of liberalism and democracy (Parliament and all the phoney freedoms that go with it, such as the worker's 'freedom' to sell his labour power to the highest bidder -- if there are any bidders!)

6. In Britain capitalist ideology goes right to the roots of the way that the trade unions and Labour Party are built.

7. The only way to fight that ideology is by a revolutionary party vigorously fighting on Marxist lines and for Marxist goals.

8. Such a party must be based on the industrial working class but must overcome the divisions -- of trade, sex, race, etc -- within it. It needs a revolutionary programme and to be internationalist in outlook and organisation.

9. Such a party does not yet exist in Britain.

So far, so good.

The problem is that Cliff never really says what we've just outlined. Not clearly, anyway. The Marxist concepts which these principles are based on are not the ones he uses in his analysis, or what passes for his strategy and tactics. As we shall see, the rag-bag of ideas he uses is a confused mixture of half-digested Marxism at best at worst it boils down to household economics and

the ethics of the man in the corner shop. What follows is a summary of the 1974 text, and it shows this muddle-headedness. The framework and the detail of the earlier texts do not differ greatly from the most recent. Occasionally there are differences in emphasis and we will point these out where we consider them to be important.

The crisis: how Cliff sees it

International capitalism in the 1950s attained relative stability through constant expansion in world trade, itself the result of post-war reconstruction and increased state intervention. (IS calls this stage of capitalism the "permanent arms economy", the successor to imperialism, which was the highest stage but one -- Kidron. Capitalism and Theory, ch 6).

Capital gets more concentrated and centralised as firms join forces and big ones push out the smaller fry. State ownership of capital increases too, so the minimum size for a competitive production unit gets very large and the turnover period of capital very long -- it takes an increasingly long time for profits to come out after investments are put in. This means that capitalist firms and the state need to have plenty of confidence in the future if they are to invest at all -- otherwise they can't feel sure of getting a "reasonable" return.

Thus, they turn to planning, so they can be sure of costs in the one area where they can control them -- wages. So, from the early 1960s, internationally and in Britain. Governments and industry have been working all out to impose systematic wage restraint -- wage freezes, incomes policies, productivity bargaining, "social contracts" and anti-union legislation.

In Britain at least, a strong shop-floor movement began to negotiate what became known as "wage drift".

By the 1960's the situation that made these changes possible had disappeared. World

competition increased, there was an international cutback in arms spending, price inflation got a lot worse with the help of monopoly control of raw materials, the size of investment required to ensure profitability got bigger and the resistance of workers, from whom the finance had to come, increased.

This state of world capital (it is difficult to disentangle the confused interweaving of world capital and British capital in Cliff's analysis, and this is a serious criticism for someone who calls himself an internationalist) is made worse in Britain by the acute unevenness between industrial sectors and by Britain's dependence on world trade.

This has meant continued balance of payments and sterling crises, stop-go policies of deflation and inflation, and now, to cap it all, "stagflation" -- inflation coupled with stagnation.

These are the effects of the declining rate of profit. "Like all investment in the past, these huge sums have to come from the workers. But today, as more and more money needs to be spent on investment in plant and machinery compared with wages, it becomes more and more difficult for the capitalists to extract from workers the minimum sums that are necessary. Squeeze as he might, what the capitalist gets out of workers as surplus is a smaller and smaller amount compared with the constantly growing size of his total investment -- his rate of profit falls."

(Profits do tend to decline, but explaining that is not half as simple as Cliff makes it out to be. He takes his figures from "British Capitalism, Workers and the Profits Squeeze", by Glyn and Sutcliffe. On top of that, Cliff talks about falling profits, but that doesn't stop him talking too, about high profits, frenzies of speculation, foreign investment floods and escalating waste. This doesn't fit the rest of his thesis and he puts it all down to "irrationality", which is a handy way to describe something you can't understand or explain).

Since 1965 British governments have been forced to intervene to guarantee profits.

Thus we have seen the prices and incomes policy, the national plan, productivity bargaining, "social contracts" and so on. These policies are introduced under the pretence that they are essential for maintaining living standards and full employment, are progressive in maintaining the welfare state and are fair to the unorganised and the lower paid. But their real aim is to increase profits at the expense of wages, and to cripple or smash the power of the shop steward, and ultimately the unions themselves "A capitalism that suffers from permanent and deepening crisis is incompatible with trade unionism" (1974, p111). Arguments that any kind of wage restraint will lead to raised profits and hence higher investment, price stability; economic growth and increased standards of living are false, because

1. Countries like Germany have high wages but low inflation and that proves that in Britain high wages do not cause inflation (here Cliff misses out the whole question of the use of "guest workers" in Germany).
2. If profits rise, investment in industry will not increase. If new machinery is installed it is under-used and usually all that increases is speculation and foreign investment.
3. Higher wages are always passed on in higher prices, but higher profits do not result in lower prices, thanks to monopoly pricing.
4. Rising prices and foreign investment prevent any balance of payments benefits.

Overall, wage restraint does not make for increased growth of living standards: "The wages that a worker loses he never sees again" (1966, p26). The capitalist class are the only beneficiaries and the claim that the lower-paid and the unorganised might benefit is a myth. Wage earners as a whole are on an escalator, with the strongly organised setting the speed for the weak. Any kind of wage restraint makes the working class as a whole pay for the wasteful greed of the crisis-ridden capitalist system. The working class must and will refuse to take responsibility for the crisis. "Tightly organised groups at the centre of the system are not going to be scared"; "anything that raises wages at a cost to

profits is fair to the workers, anything that raises profits at a cost to wages is unfair". (1970, p161). The distribution of income and wealth is grossly biased in favour of the capitalist class and its retainers, and the bias is growing.

The political and ideological framework of capitalism has changed and the change has been particularly acute in Britain. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the economic and political levels of capitalism -- the bosses on the one hand, the government on the other -- were, and were clearly seen to be, separated. Today state capital has transformed economic struggle into political struggle and the neutral state in the hostile and repressive state. The Government is now a boss, and it acts like one. In this context, both reformism and economism have become impossible: the institutions that are imbued with these ideologies, the Labour Party and the unions, are now unable to win reforms, and the state unable to grant them. Consequently, it becomes clear as day to the working class that the state is not for all "the people", but just for the capitalist class. So, too, they see that the Labour Party and union bureaucracy (along with any group still fostering reformist illusions, like the Communist Party) are reactionary: "The Labour Party can no longer be thought of as a party of reforms, but managers of capitalism." "With inflation roaring along, workers' resistance to restraint will be adamant, and many of the ideological ties that bind them to the system will be stretched to breaking point" (1974) "Labour will fail," and "this time round workers will know more about what is going on" (1974.) However, since the war the state has won won over the trade union bureaucracy to betray the interests of the class and repress rank and file militancy. Their role as negotiators of the terms of employment and their status as highly paid administrators make them the last bastions of economism and reformism (Cliff defines economism as a belief in the independence of economic reality from political reality, and the commitment to purely economic struggles. He defines reformism as a belief in reforms from