

LESSONS OF PARTY BUILDING

TONY RICHARDSON reviews 'The Crisis of the French Section [1935-36]' by Leon Trotsky, published by Pathfinder Press at £2.50 in paperback. 286pp.

In the introduction to this extremely important book the editors say "History does not repeat itself exactly, and it would be futile to search in this book for tailor-made solutions to current problems."

Of course history does not repeat itself "exactly". But in reading the correspondence of Trotsky and the reprinted pamphlet by International Secretariat member Erwin Wolf, the reader continuously has to remind himself that this material was written forty years ago and not yesterday.

The reason for this is simple. It is because many of the forces calling themselves "Trotskyists" today—including George Breitman and Naomi Allen, the editors of this volume, and their political co-thinkers in the "United" Secretariat of the Fourth International—have thrown aside everything that Trotsky fought for in this political struggle in 1935-6.

To some extent the opportunist errors and disorientation of the leadership of the

French section of the International Communist League (forerunner of the Fourth International) flowed from the complexities of the new situation they confronted.

In France, as internationally, 1935-6 saw the emergence of the Stalinist strategy of the Popular Front—the conscious formation of political blocs with reformist and with *bourgeois* parties in which the political independence of the workers' parties was abandoned.

"Entry tactic"

And it was in France from 1934-5 that Trotskyists first set out to implement an "entry tactic" into the SFIO (the French Socialist Party led by Leon Blum) in a bid to break tendencies towards sectarianism and self-isolation within the tiny (100-strong) Trotskyist group through winning leftward moving sections within the reformist party.

Within the SFIO the Trotskyists were to take up their call for United Front action of workers' parties and organisations against fascism, and to fight for the slogan

"Bourgeois politicians out of the People's Front".

As the economic and political crisis of French capitalism grew worse and the Trotskyist forces began to win growing support for their policies among the youth and in the adult party congress, the SFIO leaders recognised that the Trotskyists stood as an obstacle to their strategy of class collaboration.

At a national congress of the Young Socialists in July 1935 eight Trotskyists and five leading JS members who had been won to their positions were expelled.

Trotsky began campaigning for the French section to consolidate its gains and move towards re-establishing an independent party as an important step towards the Fourth International.

"Our collaboration with the reformists could not last forever. They themselves took the initiative for the split. Good, that saves us the trouble of doing it ourselves..."

"The workers who think—and the other ones, through them—must understand from now on that: — In order to make an

alliance with the bourgeois Radicals, they must separate themselves from the Bolshevik-Leninists.

— In order to make docile cannon-fodder of the youth, it is necessary first to drive out the Bolshevik-Leninists.

— In order the better to fool the workers, the Stalinists and the reformists have to get rid of those annoying witnesses, the Bolshevik-Leninists." (pp43-44)

Trotsky, however, was faced with the problem of shaping a leadership in France from people, many of whom had been drawn to Trotskyism only on the basis that they had left or been expelled from the Stalinist Comintern.

Flexibility

Under these conditions the fight against opportunism was that much more difficult. The book illustrates

Trotsky's method of approach. He demonstrates surprising flexibility wherever it seems a comrade might be won or held for the movement, but an iron inflexibility when he considers the concept of the party itself was at stake.

On this basis he was in favour of expelling the rank opportunist Molinier and his supporter Pierre Frank when their centrist tendency

ES, NA, Davy,
for Trotsky, etc,
M.A. Leary

developed a paper outside the control of the party.

Democratic centralism was a political and organisational principle that Trotsky defended regardless of the possible losses it might bring to the scanty forces of Trotskyism.

This fact alone glaringly contrasts with the Pabliste "United" Secretariat today, in which opposite tendencies within the movement are allowed free reign to publish material putting directly opposite positions to those of the majority.

Leading members

This fact is particularly well known to the authors of the book, both leading members of the US Socialist Workers Party (which is prevented by reactionary US laws from affiliating to the USFI).

They know that until a few months ago tendencies in support of the SWP functioned autonomously in countries all over the world, publishing their own papers in conflict with the USFI majority positions.

Indeed Trotsky's positions cannot be understood as

restricted to the national problems inside France. They relate centrally to the kind of international that is needed, and the kind of parties in each country.

The question remaining to be answered is why did the SWP choose to publish this book, which contains an implicit indictment of their own positions?

The answer lies in the factional debate within the USFI itself.

The majority tendency, under the leadership of Ernest Mandel, and counting in its ranks the same Pierre Frank castigated by Trotsky in this volume, holds a position of angling for "socialist unity".

It is because of this that their British section, the International Marxist Group, has gone overboard in its desire to ditch the wrappings of the Trotskyist programme and link up with circles of degenerate centrists and left reformers through the medium of their paper, *Socialist Challenge*.

The SWP for unclear reasons of their own—disagree with this orientation. But last year they took the decision to drop their pretence of a

most important part begins: "La Commune is not going to add itself to the multiplicity of tendencies in the workers' movement." What sovereign scorn for the "multiplicity of existing tendencies! What does that mean? If all the tendencies are wrong or insufficient, a new one has to be created, the true one, the correct one. If there are true and false tendencies, then the workers must be taught to distinguish among them. The masses must be called on to join the correct tendency to fight the false ones. But no, the initiators of *la Commune* somewhat like Romain Rolland, place themselves "above the battle." Such a procedure is absolutely unworthy of Marxists." (p.99)

"And here is the high point: "La Commune is launched by militants belonging to various tendencies to bring about the rise of a great army of communards." What does this mean, this unknown crew of anonymous, unknown "various tendencies"? What tendencies are involved? Why are they (still unknown) grouped outside and against the other tendencies? The purpose of creating a "great army of communards" is laudable. But it is necessary not to forget that this army, once created (1871), suffered a terrific catastrophe because that magnificent army lacked a programme and a leadership." (p.100)

Of course most of the self-proclaimed Trotskyists of the International Marxist Group will no doubt turn a blind eye to the similarity between Molinier-Frank's attempt to bring together "militants belonging to various tendencies" and *Socialist Challenge's* invitation to join a "broad-based class struggle tendency", which "should be non-exclusive in character, grouping together militants holding a wide range of political views".

But to those concerned to preserve the principles of the movement, Trotsky's ringing advanced denunciation of 'socialist unity' must strengthen their fight:

"... the methods of *La Commune* are diametrically opposite to all my conceptions of the organisation of a revolutionary party.

"No domination"—in other words, no programme. "On the basis of parity" means parity in cynicism with regard to principles, a scarcely enviable kind of parity. A "mass paper" is in reality an imitation of *l'Oeuvre*, dressed up in slogans borrowed from the right and the left and aimed at radicalising petty bourgeois who are not even able to understand that the preparation for civil war begins with the elaboration of a programme and that a "mass paper" can be nothing other than one of the instruments of this programme". (p.116)



Mandel

The Mandelites continue to turn their backs on these crucial lessons. And the SWP, by its new political alliance with this majority leadership, has revealed yet again it offers no alternative line.

Perhaps the most obvious Mandelite attack on Trotsky comes in the appendix by Pierre Frank, who declares:

"I do not believe there is any reason to reply to the argument that was put forward at the time, that with the appearance of *La Commune* we abandoned Trotskyism. Today this accusation raised by Rous and others seems grotesque." (p.262)

But, though the SWP do not draw this point out, the book makes clear that among the "others" that made this charge was Trotsky himself.

Despite the factional stance of its editors, by showing Trotsky's method of approach to these problems of the Popular Front period, to the questions of political independence and revolutionary discipline, this new book makes a valuable contribution to serious forces fighting for the reconstruction of the Fourth International.

serious fight against Mandel, and to "fuse" their supporting tendency with the majority tendency.

So now the SWP seek a more diplomatic way of raising their differences, and are attempting to use Trotsky's writings for their own opportunist purposes.

The editors therefore tell us:

"The current theory and practice of some sections of the Fourth International [they mean the USFI] suggest that not all of their leaders [!] have absorbed the lessons Trotsky tried to teach in 1935-6 about "broad" newspapers, the revolutionary attitude to centrist groups, etc." (p.173)

But the SWP themselves refuse to absorb these lessons!

International

For instance they describe the issue at stake as:

"What, in fact is a revolutionary party? Is it a collection of factions or tendencies each of which is free to go its own way whenever it falls to win a majority?"

But in essence Trotsky was arguing on the nature of a revolutionary international. And the SWP has proved that it believes an international is simply a collection of factions and tendencies that can ignore majority votes.

Hermaphrodite

They clearly do not accept Trotsky's dictum that "International discipline prevails in every case over national discipline". (p. 152).

Nor, for fear of disrupting their new found 'unity' with Mandel do they draw out the content of Trotsky's fight on the notion of a "broad" paper.

Trotsky termed the new paper *La Commune*, launched by the opportunists Molinier and Frank "a hermaphrodite paper".

He attacks its refusal to break from the centrist Marceau Pivert, whom Trotsky describes as the "extreme left of the People's Front".

In analysing the opening appeal for *La Commune* Trotsky strikes a note that should echo for every reader of *Socialist Challenge* today:

"But here is where the