

# workers power

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**INSIDE: WOMEN  
AND COMMUNISM  
GREENHAM  
COMMON**

## Don't give Thatcher another year

BEFORE 1982 WAS out workers were subjected to the repulsive spectacle of Thatcher on behalf of her Party and her class, delivering her self-congratulatory, pre-election New Year message to the nation. After noting, in characteristically modest vein, her "impressive list of achievements", she went on to declare "Most governments approaching their fifth year of office have run out of steam. But we are bubbling with ideas and we have the energy to put them into practice."

Militants should take such statements seriously; for Thatcher and her boss class backers are indeed "bubbling with ideas", all of which threaten the hard won gains of workers and their families.

1982 was not a good year for the working class. Starting with the failure of Ron Todd and the AUEW to lead a real fight for the Ford claim, it ended with the defeat of the health workers' tenacious struggle and the defeat of the Scottish miners struggle against closures.

It is little wonder then that, given the failure of any of the Trade Union leaders to give a real lead in the fight against the Tories, Thatcher can make gloating speeches confidently predicting a second term. In all major conflicts the Trade Union leaders have ducked out of a fight and sabotaged the efforts of those who have wanted to take Thatcher on.

Thatcher has indeed achieved a lot for her class so far. The massive pool of unemployed, at least 4 million, has had the desired effect of undermining militancy. Real disposable income fell in the year to June 1982 by 2%. In November the Engineering Employers Federation (West Midlands Region) could report that

30% of their members had settled with their workforces for either a nil wage increase or for a deferment for 6 months. The Bank of England reckons that "productivity" (the result of speed ups and erosion of conditions) increased by between 10-15% in 1982. The slump continues to perform its task of weeding out "ailing" companies, there were as many bankruptcies in the first 6 months of 1982 as in the whole of 1975 - the worst year of the last recession.

The Tories have also carried out their first steps in their promise to shackle the Trade Unions through legal restrictions. They now have Priors and Tebbits laws on the statute book, both aimed at undermining an and restricting rank and file action. They have in reserve a massively strengthened and well trained set of picket busting squads, the SPG, the Instant Response Units etc. These undoubtedly will be used in future against isolated groups of workers who dare to stand up to the bosses.

Against the public sector Thatcher has been less successful than she hoped. Although various Labour Councils have capitulated to the Tory cuts - Lothian, Lambeth, the GLC fares campaign for example - the Tories have failed to cut back the social and public services to the degree demanded by their paymasters in the banks and the boardrooms. Thatcher's promise to reduce the Public Sector borrowing requirement by 1% a year failed miserably. Indeed largely because of unemployment it increased by 2% in 80/81 and again in 1981/82.

The "new ideas" the Tories are bubbling with are well developed and flow from their unfinished programme for revitalising British capitalism over the broken bones of the workers movement. The public sector forms the new number one target. The Think Tank report - supposedly

shelved - is already being partially introduced. Privatisation of the NHS through "contracting out" schemes and the massive cuts in hospital beds, the beginning of the end of state finance for higher education through cuts and student loans are just trailers for what is to come. Add to this a planned attack on the closed shop and the determination to break the link between benefits and inflation, forcing larger and larger sections of the working class below the poverty line and we can begin to see what Tory new ideas mean.

Thatcher knows she is pressed for time. While she has forced the working class on to the retreat, British capitalism is still hopelessly uncompetitive compared to Japan, Germany or even France. Measured against these economies Thatcherism must still go much further. The Economist reflects this fact with its campaign for 30% wage reductions to guarantee an end to inflation and increased profits and investment. It is attacks on this scale that the working class must expect if Thatcher is allowed to stay in office beyond 1983.

In the face of this threat the Labour Party's leadership has proved itself pusillanimous and ineffectual. It beat the drum for Thatcher's Malvinas war salvaging the credibility of her Imperialist adventure. It has turned to purge militants in its own rank ranks while Thatcher piles on mercilessly with her attacks on the working class. And the Bennite left - self-deluded that they were on the brink of power last year - has seen the year marked by a stunning silence of their crusading champion.

Shore's economic programme offers the old bankrupt recipe of an incomes policy called a "National Economic Assessment" in return for reflation based on a 30% devaluation. Unemployment will be reduced to



Picture: John Sturrock (Report)

one million hopefully at the end of 5 years!! No one, not even their own leadership takes this programme seriously. Foot knows that his party has to manage capitalism in the midst of a world slump. He can make no real promises to the working class which involve a radical break with Tory policies. Anything which smacks of mobilising the working class, particularly in election year, must be avoided; thus Foot's disparate attempts to sabotage the Peoples March Part II from Glasgow along with Len Murray.

At present the ruling class has no real use for Labour's programme. Thatcher's policies have much more effectively reduced living standards of workers. At the same time Labour's pathetic alternative is incapable of convincing the working class that it is a real alternative to Thatcherism - thus the Tories remain 12 points in the lead in the opinion polls.

As the previous years of Thatcher's government the real chance of throw throwing out the Tories and replacing them with a government which acts in the interests of the workers and against the capitalist class does not lie in waiting for the re-election of a Labour government. It lies in driving Thatcher from office by mass working class action which could not only destroy the Tory government but the capitalist system that it defends.

The British working class has still not suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Thatcher. Its organisations remain strong; the public sector union unions continue to grow. The miners remain unbeaten. Other sections of workers - Fords, Lorry drivers, power and water workers etc have not been broken or demoralised.

The working class could still turn the tables on Thatcher. That is what all class conscious militants should be working for in 1983. ■

## N.U.M. LEFT STAB KINNEIL IN BACK

THE DECISION OF the 28th December conference of pit delegates to call off the fight against the closure of the Kinneil pit was a blow to all miners. The effects of this retreat will be felt beyond Scotland where several other pits - Killock, Sorn, Highhouse, Cardown etc. are threatened with closure. The South Wales miners who had already called a stoppage for January 17th against pit closure were clearly planning to link up with Scotland and spread the fightback. This now is put in jeopardy. The NCB has had its hand strengthened in its determination to close "uneconomic pits".

The blame for the Kinneil debacle must be put clearly where it belongs - on the shoulders of Mick McGahey, NUM Scottish Area President and Executive Committee member of the Communist Party. McGahey,

supported by Scargill from behind had sounded the charge against the NCB which bloomed curdling threat of a national miners strike over the closure of Kinneil. On the 21st December the 'Morning Star' quoted McGahey declaring "As an Executive, we are declaring total support with the Kinneil miners in the fight to save their pit," and predicting "a stoppage of the whole Scottish coalfield in response to an appeal from Kinneil".

The sting was in the tail. The Scottish Executive had already decided at its 20th December meeting not to call for immediate strike action but leave it to the 320 Kinneil miners to lead the way. McGahey proceeded to pull the trick so beloved of spineless left-fakers, rather than using his position and the weight of the Scottish Executive to rally Scottish miners behind the Kinneil men he sat back to let them "test the water" for him. If the Kinneil miners won

support he would claim the credit. If they failed the executive could blame the rank and file miners for the fate of Kinneil colliery. Such is the treachery of the NUM left.

The Kinneil miners attempted to rally support themselves. They organised a five day sit-in in a freezing pit shaft and flying pickets sent out to other pits. While the Scottish Executive sat back and watched, the Kinneil men tried to spread the strike using their own resources. While they had some success - Castle Hill, Fife stopped working after a mass picket of 80 Kinneil miners turned up and other pits had short stoppages - in the majority of pits the Kinneil miners faced the demoralising spectacle of fellow miners walking through "unofficial" pickets.

Once Kinneil failed, McGahey and co were ready to run for cover. At the delegate meeting on the 28th December, the Scottish Executive delivered a death blow to the Kinneil struggle. The Kinneil workers had

been set up to organise their publicity seeking sit-down. They had heard nothing but speeches of support from the Scottish NUM Executive. They knew that South Wales were due to strike in mid-January. But now the Executive recommended an immediate return to normal working and agreement to transfer to new pits at the closure dates. The delegates accepted the Executive's proposals by 13 to 7. McGahey could cynically mutter that he had hoped for a "spontaneous" nationwide strike,

"But the miners were not responding to the call to give support to Kinneil and that was the reality of the situation we were in."

Having refused to lead and take the risk of fighting among his members for all out action, McGahey was now blaming the result on the rank and file. This leader of the British CP could only end up bleating that the Coal Board had shown a "callous disregard for the festive season"!

The NCB has won round one in its closure battle. Many of the crafts-

men at Kinneil will not be redeployed and will join the dole queues in Scotland. Safely through the struggle an NCB spokesman smugly declared "transfers might depend on older miners retiring elsewhere." (Guardian 30.12.82)

Already this defeat has had a demoralising effect on other Scottish miners. In the wake of the Kinneil defeat miners at the threatened Sorn pit have put forward a proposal to buy their pit from the NCB and run it as a cooperative.

The solution to the threats of closure do not lie in miners trying to take over "ailing" pits competing on capitalist terms, in the middle of a slump with a surplus of coal on the world market. The solution lies in a militant fightback against closures, and a tenacious defence of every job. Kinneil showed the dangers of relying on the "left" NUM leaders to lead such a fight. Rank and file members must organise themselves regionally and nationally to defeat the NCB's plans, if necessary pushing aside their vacillating leaders. ■

# "MASS PAPER" OR REVOLUTIONARY PARTY?

IN THE LAST issue of Workers Power we looked at the type of entry carried out by Trotskyists in the SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière - French Socialist Party) in the 1930s. (See "The French Turn: Trotsky's Forgotten Tactic".) This article looks at the period following the Mulhouse congress. Here we see Trotsky arguing for the need to leave the SFIO and construct an independent party. This new turn was, as with the entry in 1934, resisted by an important fraction of the French Section - that led by Raymond Molinier and Pierre Frank.

The first nine months of the entry into the SFIO were carried out on a principled revolutionary basis. The Bolshevik-Leninist Group (GBL), through their newspaper 'La Verité' (The Truth) propagandised for the key elements of the Action Programme, advocated revolutionary tactics in the class struggle, mercilessly attacked the policies of the social-patriotic Blum leadership and warned of the treacherous policies of the Stalinists. In the SFIO, the GBL co-operated on many issues with the 'Bataille Socialiste' tendency and in particular with Marceau Pivert and his followers in the Seine Federation (Paris Region.)

Pivert, a schoolteacher and - true to SFIO tradition - a freemason, had as a result of the crisis in the French labour movement moved towards centrist positions. He was in direct contact with Trotskyists, enthusiastically welcomed them into the party and was influenced by their telling criticisms of the Stalinist and Social Democratic leaders' sabotage of the united front against fascism.

In this pre-revolutionary period Pivert adopted many of the slogans and arguments of the Trotskyists. He was to be found arguing for workers' defence squads: "If this situation does not change soon, we will have to launch a massive subscription with a view to arming the proletariat." But the GBL was not afraid to sharply criticise Pivert "If...if...if the bourgeoisie does not change its nature then we will start getting angry." (La Verite, No.231,10.2.35.)

Pivert presented a classic case of left-centrism - a centrism that the GBL fought successfully up to the Mulhouse congress.

Centrism - in Trotsky's famous dictum - "scintillates with all the colours of the rainbow". It is by nature chameleon-like, taking its political positions from other more fundamental forces - ie. from reformism and revolutionary communism. It is by nature transitional between the one and the other, undergoing its changes due to the pressure of fundamental social forces and their political expression.

Centrism does not have its social base amongst the privileged aristocratic layers of the proletariat like the reformist bureaucracy. It therefore does not have the solid commitment to capitalism of the latter. Nor does it have the consistency of purpose, ideology and practice of revolutionary communism. It does not have its determination to root the communist programme amongst the vanguard of the proletariat. Left Centrism either represents a current moving from Reformism and centrism towards communism - or the reverse.

We continue here our series of articles on the attitude of revolutionaries to work in reformist parties and the experiences of the French Trotskyists in the 1930s. Today's revolutionaries have much to learn from this period. In the face of a purge directed by the reformist leaders, the revolutionaries faced a sharp test. Should they lower their banner to stay in the party at all costs? What attitude should they take to centrists who offered them support while counselling retreat? On all these questions, Trotsky found himself in conflict with his French supporters.

Modern British "Trotskyists" in the Labour Party find themselves facing the same stark choices. Buffeted by the Malvinas war and the tightening grip of the right in the Labour Party, they are repeating all the mistakes that Trotsky fought so hard against. In the face of the witch-hunt, the "Trotskyists" of the 'Militant' have chosen to fight Foot and Golding on constitutional grounds. Fearful of isolation, the "revolutionaries" of 'Socialist Organiser' have systematically dropped their criticisms of Benn and the Left reformists in search of a broad and acceptable "mass paper" for their alliance. Late on the scene, 'Socialist Challenge' has become the latest candidate for centrist brokerage in order to create a new Labour Left paper for 'revolutionaries' to shelter behind. All share one thing in common - a retreat from the fight for a revolutionary Marxist programme and party against the reformists of the left and the right. Our paper has consistently polemicised against the left's increasingly clear accommodation to left reformism. These articles are designed to remind those who recoil at the antics of these so-called revolutionaries that there is an alternative tradition of struggle - that of revolutionary Trotskyism.

The situation in France in 1935-6 saw both tendencies in operation. The followers of Pivert, especially the youth in the Paris region, were seeking sincerely the road to revolutionary communism. Pivert as their leader was obliged to adopt (and adapt) many political positions and slogans from the Trotskyists. However this development convinced many of the leaders of the French Section that this evolutionary process could be accelerated and brought to a conclusion by political adaptation to centrism and by providing the organisational framework for it - ie a mass paper, a common propaganda, a common faction.

They ignored the fact that Left-Centrism derives its direction from the polar forces which operate on it. Its leftwards evolution is not guaranteed by any law of history but by the strength of the reformist or revolutionary pressure. In Pivert's case the onslaught of Blum and the SFIO leadership drove him to the right. For the Trotskyists to abate their criticism, to minimise their programmatic differences or to propose a bloc for common propaganda whilst passing over in silence his failure to act against the reformists, reduced fatally the pressure of the communist pole. Nothing could have been more calculated to produce a rightwards retreat of Pivert and to disorient the subjectively revolutionary elements among his supporters. The latter instead of perceiving, in practice, the difference between Left-centrism and Bolshevism, saw 'Trotskyists' minimising or ignoring Pivert's betrayal.

The decisive moment for Pivert and the GBL came when the reformist leadership, strengthened by their Popular Front compact with the Stalinists, felt able to put an end to the period of toleration for revolutionary activity in their party.

The GBL had, by a fierce struggle against the Right and by fearless criticism of the Left-centrists, been able to win the majority of the Seine Federation Youth Section to their politics. At the Mulhouse Congress they debated Blum himself. The GBL had begun to make the transition from a propaganda group to a small but real revolutionary factor in events.

However Trotsky was only too keenly aware of the fact that the presence of intransigent revolutionaries in a reformist party could not last forever. He had always insisted that entry did not necessarily involve a long perspective. This was proven correct at the Mulhouse Congress itself, when Blum made it clear that the GBL would be expelled if they obstructed his policy of collaboration with the Stalinists in favour of national defence. The People's Front - collaboration between the reformist workers' parties and the bourgeois radical party - was quickly taking shape.

With the turn of the French Stalinists, and soon thereafter of the whole Comintern to social-patriotism (summer 1935), Trotsky considered that the perspective had decisively changed, from that obtaining at the time of the 'French Turn' a year earlier. The turn to class collaboration for Imperialist war - in France called the 'Sacred Union' - was of course nothing new to the SFIO. The latter had crossed the Rubicon of social patriotism in August 1914. But for the worker members of the Stalinist party - this was a betrayal of everything which their party had stood for since the Tours Congress (1920). Since the CP was more thoroughly proletarian in class composition and consisted of the most militant vanguard elements of the working class, Trotsky called for an orientation towards them. On an international plane it meant a sharp and unequivocal drive for a new, Fourth International.

It was necessary to turn to the masses - who were primarily outside the SFIO; in the unions, the CP, and the as-yet-unorganised. Remaining within the SFIO (and thus the People's Front) could only compromise the GBL in the eyes of those workers.

Before his expulsion from France on June 14th, Trotsky stopped off in Paris and spent a few days in discussion with GBL members who had not gone to Mulhouse. They obviously had illusions about a long-term perspective inside the SFIO. Alarmed, Trotsky wrote "A New Turn is Necessary" on June 10th ("Writings 1934-5") urging them to prepare for expulsion. The Paris discussion had convinced Trotsky that it was time for an independent party. Further confirmation was provided shortly after this on July 30th when the reformist bureaucracy expelled 13 leaders of the Seine Youth at the Lille Congress.

Hot on the heels of this expulsion followed the events in Brest and Toulon. On July 10th Prime Minister Laval decreed that public sector wages would be cut by 10%. Trade Union leaders protested but there was no action from them or from the leaders of the SFIO and the CP. They were afraid of breaking with the radicals. The rank and file, however, went into action alone. In Brest the red flag was raised above the marine police headquarters. In Toulon, barricades were set up in defence against police charges. On August 6th 3 workers were killed and several dozen wounded

in Brest. On the 8th, the solidarity strike by workers in the arsenals in Toulon turned into a riot. That evening, there were 5 more dead and many wounded. The parties of the People's Front denounced the role of the 'provocateurs' and called for calm. The CP denounced those who tore down the French tricolour from the Brest police offices. The CP's paper, L'Humanite, published a central committee statement on August 10th which attacked those who had "insulted the tricolour".

Trotsky considered it was of burning importance to address revolutionary politics to these workers. It was of vital import to denounce the CP and SFIO's preparations for 'sacred union'. In these circumstances it was not possible to remain inside the SFIO without making concession after concession to the leadership.

Trotsky however argued in vain. As early as June 15th he had received a reply from GBL leader Pierre Frank (today statesman of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International). Frank, writing in the June Internal Bulletin of the GBL, stated that it would be "criminal to think of leaving the SFIO".



Trotsky (top left) with Pierre Frank (top right)

The GBL leaders continued to treat expulsion as the worst evil. Under the rubric of avoiding giving the bureaucrats "reasons for expulsions" and in order at all costs to win the support of Pivert, they limited their defence to a purely legal, constitutional one, accusing Blum and Co of being "splitters". This position meant avoiding a sharp political attack on the leadership - a retreat from their previous frankness. There was talk of "organisational concessions" and dissolving the GBL's youth fraction. The "Open Letter for the Fourth International" was held back for a month and eventually published only in an abridged form.

Criticism of Pivert ceased absolutely. Indeed Pivert became the object of praise for his purely verbal protest at the witchhunt of the Trotskyists. In La Verite (No.246,2.8.35) we find an article entitled "Marceau Pivert solidarises with the expelled". This was in the form of two letters, written by Pivert, formally opposing the Lille expulsions. Here he states that "to be anti-Trotskyist at this time is the sign of a reactionary state of mind in the workers' movement." However, he also argued that the GBL had helped the expellers by talking of a Fourth International. All such talk should be stopped.

Not one member of the GBL leadership wanted to write a reply. Eventually Trotsky himself had to take on the job (see "Labels" and "Numbers", Crisis of the French Section, p.44.) The only comment by GBL leaders on Pivert in that issue of La Verite was "...revolutionaries within the Party will fraternally hold out their hands to the revolutionaries of the Youth. Following the example of Marceau Pivert, they will declare themselves in solidarity with the Youth."

The National Committee of the SFIO did not bother to thank the GBL. On August 28th it outlawed La Verite, threatening to expel any member who sold it. The reaction by the GBL was not to publish their paper for a month. When it did appear, it was devoted primarily to the agrarian question and the National Committee's decision was

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Cover of "La Verite"

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simply noted in journalistic style on the back page. Arguing that it was "necessary to remain within the party at all costs" Pivert advised the GBL to stop publishing their paper. To this Trotsky replied that Pivert "calls for the discontinuation of La Verite as if that measure could appease the Gods. And Lutte de Classes as well? And Revolution? And the leaflets? ...Before they throttle you they seek to deprive you of your means of defence. To consent to that is to commit political suicide." (Crisis of the French Section, p.52).

Unfortunately, many of the GBL leaders were candidates for self-extinction. There were three main tendencies. The majority was an alliance between the Naville faction and the "conciliators", led by Rous. The other tendency was led by Molinier and Frank. All three groupings supported the policy of "fighting" the expulsions constitutionally. Differences arose simply over the degree of concessions that were permissible. Thus, Molinier agreed with Pivert that La Verite should be stopped, for "tactical reasons". On that particular question, Molinier lost the vote on the GBL's Central Committee (CC). But this was part of a wider debate about the need for a "mass paper".

But in the midst of this debate came the expulsion of 13 adult GBL members on 13th September. In the aftermath of this, Pivert swung to the right, attempting to defend himself by breaking with the Bataille Socialiste and forming the Revolutionary Left (RL) which was designed from the start to be acceptable to the SFIO leadership. This was a great blow to the GBL. It threatened to limit the gains the GBL could make. At the same time, since the RL was at first tolerated by the National Committee of the SFIO, this seemed to prove that the GBL could remain in the party - if they would only be less "sectarian".

The GBL leadership responded to the Pivert-dominated RL in an opportunist manner. Molinier was sent to one of its founding meetings. There he openly stated that the GBL wanted to remain in the SFIO for as long as possible and that it wanted to take part in the RL. From this moment onwards La Verite and Revolution went all-out to court the Pivertists. And in order to do so effectively, they made even less mention of the need for an independent party and a Fourth International. For this reason Trotsky's introduction to Zeller's pamphlet - The Road for Revolutionary Socialists - was never published. Revolution, which had been chosen by the GBL to become its mass paper, greeted the foundation of the RL with the headline "Long live the Revolutionary Left!"

The GBL even suggested to the RL that they bring out a joint weekly. But by this time the RL was wary of running the risk of expulsion for co-operating with an organisation that could bring it neither members nor politics. It therefore rejected the GBL's offer and refused co-operation. This did not stop the GBL from continuing to dilute its politics in the hope of recognition. Thus the GBL's resolution (Motion C) to the Congress of the Seine Federation in November carefully avoided mention of a new party of the FI in order to obtain the RL's sponsorship. The RL refused, and went on to expel its members who had voted for Motion C.

Gluttons for punishment, the GBL still refused to condemn the centrism of the RL and signed a statement for the SFIO National Committee expressing loyalty and willingness to accept restrictions on tendency rights.

With their eyes fixed on Pivert's every move, no real preparation for independence could take place. Trotsky summed up the situation: "Your attitude to the Revolutionary Left to me seems incomprehensible and absolutely opposed to our principles and traditions. What is the Revolutionary Left? It is a French SAP (Socialist Workers Party) - German centrists who ended up supporting the People's Front in Germany and France - WP). If you flirt with these people you are going to push them to the right and lose ground to them. You must denounce them without mercy. La Verite is silent about the Revolutionary Left. This is unbelievable! Permit me to use the right word: this is scandalous!....." "There may exist cases where you act together - against the expulsions, against the fascists, etc. But even then you must spell out your point of view. Do not confuse principles, organisations, and banners. March separately, strike together (please, do both)." (Crisis of the French Section, p.78.)

The RL invariably dissociated themselves from the expelled GBLers. Support for the campaign against the expulsions found little echo in the pages of its press. This was because they were politically closer to the expellers than they were to the expelled.

Intent on fighting the expulsions on statutory grounds and holding on to the Pivertists, the GBL paid less and less attention to the development of the youth. They even used them as bait to attract the RL. Molinier argued that Zeller, leader of the youth, should join the RL rather than the GBL. And at the November 17th Congress of the Seine Youth, GBL leaders attempted to force the GBL youth to compromise with the Pivertists. The youth, led by Zeller, refused.

The Socialist Youth had been clearly marching towards the formation of an independent revolutionary party, whereas the GBL's adult members, led by Molinier and Frank, preferred to manoeuvre to stay in the SFIO and hang on to Pivert's supporters in the adult party.

They failed to recognise that "...what is most important is the youth. While the adults have been marking time since July and have been wasting their energy and time in order to court a few miserable Pivertists, the youth were carrying out

effective and promising work."....."Opportunists are always in conflict with the youth." (Trotsky, Crisis of the French Section, p.96).

When the RL was set up, Molinier had convinced the GBL's CC that they should work with it. GBL members therefore participated in the creation of a "Revolutionary Action Group" in the 19th district of Paris. Molinier and Frank argued for the setting up of other RAGs claiming they were embryonic soviets. This was a feeble attempt to use Trotsky's argument for Committees of Action (which he counterposed to the People's Front). When it became clear that the RAGs were not organs of mass power, Molinier then interpreted them as the basis of a new revolutionary party in formation!

Basing himself on these RAGs (which at their high point existed in only 12 districts out of 20 in Paris), Molinier called on the GBL to join them and launch a paper "for" them - La Commune.

All three tendencies were for the creation of a mass paper that was to be launched on a centrist basis. The question was whether the paper should be La Verite or Revolution (the paper of the Seine Youth, under GBL control). None of the tendencies argued that this paper should defend the whole revolutionary programme. Naville, for example, argued that La Verite "should have its polemical content reduced considerably and its theoretical content cut." Naville proved what he meant by this when he later became editor of Revolution. No articles appeared in defence of the persecuted Bolshevik-Leninists in Russia and there was nothing on the Trotskyist programme.

Frank and Molinier had been arguing for such a paper since April. In June, for instance, Frank had written that "This should not be a Bolshevik-Leninist paper, but a paper bringing together, for example, those who are (1) against national defence; (2) for the militia, against fascism." (Crisis of the French Section, p.231). And on August 1st the CC agreed to launch a mass paper of a centrist nature.

Trotsky replied on Nov.30th: "It is elementary duty of a revolutionary organisation to make its political newspaper as accessible as possible to the masses. This task cannot be effectively accomplished except as a function of the growth of the organisation and its cadres, who must pave the way to the masses for the newspaper - since it is not enough, of course, to call a publication a 'mass paper' for the masses to really accept it. But quite often revolutionary impatience (which becomes transformed easily into opportunist impatience) leads to this conclusion: The masses are not coming to us because our ideas are too complicated and our slogans too advanced. It is therefore necessary to simplify our programme, water down our slogans - in short to throw out some ballast. Basically this means: Our slogans must correspond not to the objective situation, not to the relation of classes, analysed by the Marxist method, but to subjective assessments (extremely superficial and inadequate ones) of what the 'masses' can or cannot accept..." (Crisis in the French Section, p.234).

Faced with the indecisive opposition of the GBL leadership (Naville, Rous etc), Molinier and Frank decided to present it with a fait accompli. In order to create their mass paper they by-passed the leadership and organised it themselves. At the November 23rd Central Committee meeting they announced that the first issue of La Commune would come out at the end of the month. Molinier had even hired the services of a private advertising firm to do the fly-posting!

Trotsky intervened quickly, trying desperately to prevent the whole section drifting into this "mass paper" escapade. He opposed the very idea of a bloc with the "Revolutionary Left" to publish a "mass newspaper" - ie. to make common propaganda with centrists on the centrists own terms. "But it is only a united front", they will reply. But the united front is an alliance of the forces of the mass organisations with a view to concrete action. In the case of La Commune there are neither forces nor action. It is a "united front" for the publication of a newspaper. Now that is the exact opposite of a united front as it is conceived and interpreted by Marxism. The fundamental rule of the united front, in the meaning of the Bolshevik-Leninists and remains: *March separately, strike together.* Now the Revolutionary Action Group (the base units of Commune supporters) is a deliberately ambiguous institution for *marching together* and for *striking* .....the Bolshevik-Leninists." (Trotsky, *ibid.*, p.117).

La Commune aimed at perpetuating at all costs the bloc with Pivert who was running scared of the Right and determined to do nothing to put himself outside of the party. It aspired to become the paper of a motley collection of Centrists. Its



Spot the difference: in 1936 Molinier and Frank returned to the fold to form the POI, whose newspaper was called 'La Lutte Ouvrière'. Unfortunately, as Trotsky remarked "it represents an imitation of 'La Commune'...many readers - and I count myself among them - are disgusted to see on the masthead of the paper this histrionic fellowrushing - one never knows where - with his banner - one never knows which".

central propaganda axis was a rhetorical appeal to the tradition of the Paris Commune. Here again Trotsky's criticism blew away the mist of duplicity and evasion involved in this. "When we say 'Long live the Commune!' we mean the heroic insurrection not the institution of the 'commune', that is the democratic municipality. Even its election was a stupidity (see Marx) and even then, this stupidity was only possible after the conquest of power by the Central Committee of the National Guard, which was the 'action committee' or the soviet of the time." (*ibid.*, p.111)

The concentration on the slogan of communes, the utilisation of the historic Commune of Paris by Molinier and Frank was to cover a retreat from exactly what the Commune lacked - a scientific programme and a revolutionary party.

Despite all Molinier and Frank's efforts the object of their adventurist manoeuvres would have nothing to do with it. La Commune was demonstratively snubbed from the very start by Pivert, who saw it as competition on his own centrist soil. Was not Pivert himself arguing for "workers' militia, revolutionary defeatism, insurrectional general strike, conquest of power and class dictatorship of the proletariat". (Le Mouvement Communiste en France, 1967, p.515.) Who then could it aim at?

Pierre Frank outlined the object and organisational aims of the project "Once the decision to set up La Commune was taken, once the first steps were taken, we turned towards the existing organisations (Bolshevik-Leninist Group, Socialist Youth, minority of the Social Front (a petty bourgeois group of no more than 100 members on the left wing of the People's Front - WP)) saying to them: your discussions are being dangerously extended. We have set up a newspaper for you; take it on you go."

Frank was desperate for shortcuts for the creation of a mass party "We can at last get out of the world of small groups we have been debating in for years. Not to do what we are doing would be to condemn ourselves like our German section three years ago, it would be to let events pass us by like our Spanish comrades. We do not have the choice."

Avoidance of "organisational ultimatism" was used as justification for Frank for abandoning the revolutionary programme. Trotsky replied sharply that although no ultimatism is permissible in relation to the masses, the trade unions or the workers' movement, the most intransigent ultimatism is necessary faced with groups that claim to lead the masses - and that ultimatism "is called the Marxist programme". To do otherwise is an abdication of the fight to build a revolutionary party.

The La Commune programme which replaced Trotskyism was a frequently changing number of points. These included "1) the creation of workers' committees in factories and the creation of communes....2) arming of the proletariat and creation of workers' militia. 3) revolutionary defeatism. 4) struggle for the workers' and peasants' government." (La Commune No.2 13.12.35.) Later a fifth point - "reconstruction of a revolutionary party" was added.

Programmatically, none of this went further than Pivert's Revolutionary Left. Even the call for the revolutionary party - posed in such an abstract manner - was accepted in principle by Pivert. The only difference was that Pivert thought such a party could arise only out of the SFIO whereas La Commune saw the Revolutionary Action Groups as the basis for the new party.

These RAGs were at the heart of the Molinier and Frank project. They were advertised as hybrid soviet/party bodies. This blithely confused soviets (committees of the masses developing in struggle for specific objectives) and the party organised around a complete programme. The role of the party was precisely to win over those people who were rejecting the old parties. But to do so the party had to present itself independently of these RAGs and not dissolve itself into them. It also had to be clear about the nature of these bodies. They were in fact composed of petty bourgeois centrists and not the masses.

Fear of isolation and opportunist impatience led Molinier and Frank to throw out the Marxist programme and replace it with a few slogans and a "mass paper". Needless to say, the masses did not come. Neither did the Pivertists. The motley collection of Social Frontists drifted back into the People's Front - where the masses really were.

This first "Trotskyist" attempt at a pseudo-"mass paper" was a miserable failure - as all such adventures are doomed to be. It succeeded only in misguiding the left centrist elements who could have been won to a revolutionary party.

Confronted with disaster, Molinier and Frank performed another somersault. Deserted by the social frontists, they represented this as a deliberate turn towards the Fourth International. In issue number 8 (24.1.36), Frank, Molinier and friends announced their support for the Open Letter and set up the "Committee for the IVth International [Bolshevik-Leninists]." This also carried an advert for a "theoretical magazine" to be called "Fourth International". It never appeared. As Trotsky put it: "There are groups which have ideas but not financial means; this one had the means but not the ideas." In a theoretical magazine they would have had to present their views in detail. They could not.

Trotsky was clear and harsh in what these actions meant about Molinier, Frank and their followers: "Politically Molinier has gone over to centrist positions."

Organisationally, he has made a bloc with the centrists against our tendency." (Crisis in the French Section, p.105).

The content of this centrism was in Trotsky's view "a capitulation to the social patriotic wave." "The approach of the war has (temporarily) given the social patriots a powerful weapon against the internationalists. Hence the expulsion of the Leninists. Hence Pivert's cowardly capitulation...Hence finally the 'fear' of isolation felt by the unstable elements in our own ranks and their tendency to go with the centrists at any cost and to be differentiated from them as little as possible. There is no other political content in the attitude of Molinier and Frank. They are capitulating to the social-patriotic wave." (*ibid.*, p.103). ■

by R. Ascal



Left to right: Natalia Sedova, Trotsky, Molinier, M. May

## The legacy of Alexandra Kollontai

# WORKING WOMEN AND THE PARTY

THIS ARTICLE IS A TRANSCRIPT OF A TALK GIVEN FOR A WORKERS POWER LONDON BRANCH FORUM

THE MANTLE OF Alexandra Kollontai has been appropriated and misused by countless feminists and centrists in recent years. In the early 70s the women's movement claimed Kollontai as an advocate of an autonomous women's movement. They used her to attack the left, winning from it many women who believed socialism, feminism and autonomy could be happily married in one movement. More recently Tony Cliff has claimed "that the Russian Marxists, including Kollontai, were even more intransigent opponents of women's separatism in the socialist movement than the Germans." (International Socialism Journal 14). He uses this misinterpretation of her work to justify the disbandment of the SWP's Womens Voice organisation and the closing down of any special organisations for work amongst women.

Given the prevalence of such distorted pictures of Kollontai it is important to seriously assess her strengths, and weaknesses, of her contribution to the development of the Marxist programme for the emancipation of women.

Alexandra Kollontai, born in 1872, had a typical bourgeois intellectual background in common with many Russian Marxists at the time. True to form for radical women, she left her husband and child in 1898 in order to study Marxism in Zurich.

She joined the Russian Social Democratic Party (RSDLP) in 1899 but did not become really active until 1905. It was during the 1905 revolution that Kollontai first took a public interest in the woman question. Bourgeois feminists had proved incapable of relating to the democratic aspirations of working women and drawing them into their liberal suffrage campaigns. Kollontai looked for ways of drawing working women away from the feminists and into the working class struggle.

The Russian Marxists had inherited the traditional positions on the emancipation of women developed by Marx, Bebel and Engels. Consequently they accepted, in theory, that women could only be liberated through being drawn into social production and that there was no separate women's question because sexual oppression was inextricably linked to workers' exploitation. The struggle for women's liberation was therefore seen as part of the struggle to destroy class society itself. It followed from this that there was no common interest between proletarian women and bourgeois feminists. Proletarian women had to be organised in the ranks of the working class and demands for women's emancipation had to be included amongst the demands of the working class.

In Germany Clara Zetkin had developed these fundamental positions into a programme for working women which she fought for and won in the German SPD and the Second International. This included demands for universal suffrage, protective labour legislation for women, maternity rights and benefits and equal pay. Zetkin established a strong women's section of the party and a special paper, Die Gleichheit (Equality), which was produced in an attempt to draw more women into the party. She also won rights for women within the party including positive discrimination in leading bodies and party Congresses.

Zetkin's contribution on women and influenced the Russian RSDLP's programme but not initially its activity around women's struggles. Kollontai's work in 1905 showed her lack of awareness of the German Socialist women's movement. After meeting Zetkin the following year Kollontai was inspired to build a mass working class women's organisation in Russia.

Kollontai's struggle to develop a programme for Russian working women was also influenced by the specific features of Russia at that time. The combination of extreme backwardness and poverty, an autocratic political system with a small, highly concentrated industrial workforce had implications for the position of women. Women were drawn into production in very large numbers during the late nineteenth century. They made up 25% of the industrial workforce in 1880 and 40% by 1914. In many industries women replaced men as they were considered a cheap and compliant workforce by the industrialists. Women's pay was about half to two-thirds of men's for the same work, so women were viewed by many male workers as unwelcome cheap competition.

The oppression and exploitation of working women in Tsarist Russia was summarised graphically by Kollontai in "Towards a History of the Working Women's Movement" published in 1920:

"The life of Russia's six million proletarian women was, in those early years of the twentieth century, one long round of hunger, deprivation and humiliation. The working day lasted twelve hours, or at the very least eleven. The women worked for starvation wages of twelve to thirteen rubles a month and they lived in overcrowded barracks. Neither the government nor society assisted them in times of illness, pregnancy or unemployment and it was impossible to arrange a system of mutual aid because the Tsarist government victimised without mercy any such organisational attempts on the part of the workers. Such was the lot of the working woman."

Working and living conditions were appalling even by comparison with other early industrialised countries. Women in particular faced sexual abuse and harassment from the bosses and foremen. They had to work right through pregnancy and birth - any time off leading to the loss of her job. The care of children was an additional burden - being

forced by economic pressures to work, women had to either leave their children to wander the streets, or put them into the care of an old 'Babushka' or factory-owned 'baby-fam'.

Living conditions were unsanitary and cramped, single women in particular being forced to live in factory barracks where men and women were crowded together, sanitation was absent and beds were shared by workers on alternating shifts.

Literacy was a particular problem for women workers, making them much less accessible to the propaganda of revolutionaries. In 1908 in the largely female cotton industry, 72% of men were literate compared with only 25% of women.

The extreme exploitation and oppression of women did not prevent sections of them becoming militant - in the 1890s and again in 1905 there were many strikes involving predominantly female workforces. In the mid 1890s there was a wave of women's strikes in Petersburg over pay and conditions, and many underground leaflets took up complaints of sexual exploitation and mistreatment of women. Methods used by these women strikers were often violent and disruptive. Violent clashes were common with one group of working women throwing tobacco in the eyes of the police in an attempt to resist arrest.

It was against this background and these conditions that the 1905 revolution brought to the fore the problem of drawing working women into working class bodies such as the soviets. Women were centrally involved from early on - Father Gapon's Union of Russian Factory Hands included some 200-500 women, many of whom were involved in the January 9th "Bloody Sunday" massacre, where Kollontai personally observed the slaughter.

The government set up a commission to investigate the causes of the events and women factory workers elected representatives to sit on the commission. The government refused these women entry on the grounds that women had no political rights, sparking off a wave of women's strikes and demonstrations, protests in the name of "all the working women of the capital". Women were involved in many other forms of political activity including the soviets, and political aspirations grew rapidly.

The bourgeois feminist Union for Political Equality organised a petition calling for equal propertied voting rights for men and women. It was signed by about 40,000 factory women, a signal to Kollontai that the aspirations of working women must be actively channelled by the organisations of the working class if these sections were not to be lost to the class enemy.

It was not only town women who were affected by this general political awakening during the revolution. Peasant women supported general political struggles, but also organised themselves to demand full political equality, sending letters to their Duma delegates: "we hope that the representatives obtain civil and political rights for themselves and for us Russian women, who are unfairly treated and without rights even within our families. Remember that a slave cannot be the mother of a free citizen." (Authorised by the Seventy-five women of Nogatino).

Kollontai and other individual Social-Democrats saw the need for a specific effort to organise the growing militancy of women in 1905. The party had done very little other than publish a few general articles on women's conditions in Russian society, and had certainly not directed any resources towards special work on women's political rights.

Kollontai was a Menshevik supporter in 1905, being committed to working for a united socialist movement at this time.



Clara Zetkin



Petrograd women take to the streets in 1917, calling for support from workers and soldiers.

When the Union for Women's Equality was formed in April 1905 by various feminist groups it attempted to build an all-class alliance, paying particular attention to drawing in working women. Kollontai could see the dangers of this exercise and was astonished to see members of her own party participating. She joined together with other sympathetic women, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, in a group to take up the question of organising women workers. First interventions were at feminist meetings where Kollontai would get up and denounce feminism, calling on women to join the socialist movement. These efforts were so disliked by the ladies of the Union for Women's Equality that they barred the Social-Democrats from speaking at their meetings.

In 1906 the group turned its attention towards factory work, holding gate meetings, special lectures and public meetings to draw women into socialist activity and the party. This work was enhanced by Kollontai's meeting Clara Zetkin in 1906 at the German Socialist Women's Movement. Kollontai returned, determined to build a similar women's section of the RSDLP but received no support for her attempts. Local members were actually hostile and obstructive to work around women with only a few individuals becoming involved in the continuing work.

Kollontai became closely involved with the Union of Textile Workers doing lectures and meetings for them and being elected as their representative to International Socialist Women's Meetings. Mounting repression prevented any regular meetings from taking place.

In these circumstances Kollontai and her co-workers had to look for other ways of attracting working women. It was decided to organise a club in Petersburg, registered under the name of "Society of Working Women's Mutual Aid". It organised lectures, discussions, meetings and even a summer camp for its members. Police repression eventually began to impinge on the activities of the club, which also became increasingly wracked with antagonisms between the "intellectuals" and the working women. Finally the project had to be abandoned. One of the workers involved was Klaritya Nikolaeva, a 15 year old type-setter who was later to succeed Kollontai as leader of the Soviet Women's organisations in the 1920s.

The final episode in this first period of building a working class women's movement occurred in 1908 just before police repression succeeded in curtailing effective political activity. The feminists organised an All-Russian Women's Congress, and Kollontai considered it important that Social-Democrats intervene and clarify the differences between their programme and bourgeois feminism. Both the trade unions and the Petersburg Committees of the Social Democrats eventually agreed to participate and organised delegations. Kollontai did most of the work, however, touring factories and areas of the city to address meetings and see that delegates were elected. She tried to prepare the working women's delegation in advance - they met to discuss resolutions and speeches. Forty-five working women formed the delegation in December 1908, among seven hundred bourgeois feminists. They made a determined and

unpopular intervention with resolutions on universal suffrage, labour legislation, maternity protection finally on the need for working women to organise separately from bourgeois women, in order to "throw the capitalist system that exploits and oppresses them." After their final statement the working women walked out, Kollontai herself being forced to leave earlier as the police had a warrant for her arrest. Kollontai later wrote about their intervention: "For the broad mass of working women the conference and the intervention of the working women group was of great educational significance, for a sharp and distinct line had been drawn between bourgeois feminism and the proletarian women's movement." She considered the experience of 1905-8 vital to the later developments in 1917 and 1917 when the foundations of programme organisation could be used and built upon.

Throughout this period Kollontai had consistently stressed the need for working class women to organise independently from the bourgeois feminists. In this she was at odds with the majority of the Menshevik faction which consistently adapted to compromised with the forces of bourgeois feminism. Her hostility to feminism placed her closer to the Bolsheviks who similarly waged a war against feminism. But at this stage she had not yet developed a coherent communist position on the organisation of working women which she was to develop along with the Bolsheviks on the eve of the 1917 Revolution. Most importantly Kollontai, unlike Zetkin, failed to grasp the importance of ensuring Party leadership of the working class women's movement. In this she remained closer to the positions of the Menshevik faction than to those of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Kollontai escaped arrest in 1908 and fled into exile, living in many European countries and gaining valuable exposure to different situations including notably the German SPD's women's organisation. She participated in the International Women's Secretariat and continued to develop her theoretical work on women. "The Social Bases of the Working Question" was completed in 1909. It was followed by a detailed study of maternity conditions and rights. This latter work was commissioned by the Menshevik Duma delegates who planned to draw legislation on maternity benefits but was never used until Kollontai became minister for Social Welfare in 1917.

Bolshevik leaders in exile became increasingly interested in the question of organising women in the period of 1910-14. Inessa Armand began to write for more articles directed towards women, and she attempted with Krupskaya, to organise Russian emigre women in Paris. It was not however until 1912 that the Bolsheviks significantly increased their work directed towards working women in Russia.

1912 in Russia saw an increase in general political activity, with strikes and demonstrations for better wages, conditions and democratic rights. Within the general movement women were once again a significant factor. This time their struggles gained more attention from both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. In 1910 the International Women's Secretariat of the Socialist International had declared March 8th as International Women's Day, and by 1912 the Russian Section began to plan a demonstration

for 1913. A club of about one thousand Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, men and women, was formed in Moscow to plan activities. Before being closed down by the police it was able to hold a large meeting in honour of International Women's Day. Similar activities were organised in Petersburg, Kiev and other cities.

Bolshevik women in Russia again tried to find ways of relating to working women's struggles and demands with Konkordia Samoilova, in particular, understanding that women would not be won simply by encouraging them to be equal party members alongside men. She discussed with Inessa Armand in 1912 when they were editors of Pravda in Petersburg, and they agreed on the need for special forms of work. These ideas were relayed to the exiled Bolshevik leaders when Armand herself was arrested and escaped to Cracow. Armand convinced Nadezhda Krupskaya of the need for a special Bolshevik paper for women, Krupskaya and Lenin then taking these proposals to the Central Committee.

The arguments were supported by the response to a series of articles on women, some written by Kollontai, which had appeared in Pravda in 1912. The number of letters received from working women was so overwhelming that they could not be accommodated in the pages of Pravda.

The Bolshevik Central Committee, meeting in September 1913, finally agreed to pay special attention to working women, and planned a special paper "Rabotnitsa" (Woman Worker) to appear for International Women's Day 1914. It was to be edited by Armand and Krupskaya from exile and Samoilova and others in Petersburg. At the same time the Mensheviks were also planning a women's paper "Golos Rabotnitsy" (Voice of the Working Woman). Both papers were welcomed by Kollontai although she was involved in neither and would have preferred a non-factional united paper. Even at this stage Kollontai still remained committed to building a broad women's paper accommodating all tendencies within Russian socialism.

Rabotnitsa appeared in 1914 — publishing seven issues before the war broke out and stopped its publication. The first issue was beset by difficulties. Although it had been granted a licence for its legal publication, the police raided the Editorial Board in St. Petersburg and arrested all but Elizaveta, Lenin's sister. She was able, through hard work and fund-raising, to produce the first issue as planned, despite a lack of support from the local Bolshevik committee; while the exiled leadership fully backed the project, local party organisations were not always prepared to give it their full backing. Rabotnitsa was very popular among factory women, all issues quickly selling out, being passed from hand to hand to be read.

The first editorial of Rabotnitsa, written by Krupskaya, is a summary of the Marxist position on women with a statement of the purpose of a women's paper. It displays some of the one-sidedness that was still evident among the Bolsheviks. She writes, "The woman question, for working men and women, is a question of how to organise the backward masses of working women, how best to explain to them their interests, how to make them comrades sooner in the common struggle."



Cover of "Rabotnitsa" from 1917. Kollontai is on the left of the bottom row.

This statement on the woman question and the purpose of organising woman workers neglects that side of women's oppression, and consequent backwardness, which produces particular demands and interests for women. Zetkin had recognised this particular oppression and the special interests of working women in her Party women's work in Germany. Kollontai, in her own way, also recognised that working women had their own demands and interests. However, it was not until Kollontai joined the Bolsheviks and broke with her previous Menshevism on the Party question that she was able to make a clear and principled stand on this issue. It was only at this point that she realised that the aim of organising working women must be to bring them under the leadership of a revolutionary party which itself is organised to relate to the special needs and problems of women workers.

While Kollontai was not to join the Bolsheviks until 1915, her writings in 1914 show that she was moving closer to the tradition of party work represented by Zetkin. She summed up her position at this time in the following terms, "Separation (i.e. special party work - WP) has a double

aim; on the one hand these intra-party collectives (commissions, women workers' bureaux and so on) must carry out special agitational work adapted to the level of the questions women want to have answered; their task is to recruit members among the mass of women who have a low level of consciousness, to raise it to the level of the rest of the party members; to move women into the arena of revolutionary struggle. On the other hand these collectives give women workers the possibility of putting forward and defending in practical ways those interests which touch women most of all: motherhood, protection of children, the rate set for children's and women's labour, the struggle against prostitution, reforms in house-keeping and so on." (Kollontai, Women Workers Struggle for Their Rights, p.17)

Rabotnitsa in 1914 was a major step forward in Bolshevik work on women. Opposition remained widespread within the party, reflecting both the divisions within, and the sexism of, the working class, as well as hostility towards bourgeois feminism. Rabotnitsa was a popular Bolshevik publication which organised networks for its distribution and discussion. These were to prove useful in 1917 when the Bolsheviks again began building a working women's movement.

Although Kollontai was not involved directly in the development of Rabotnitsa, she continued to elaborate her own ideas on the basis of the experience of the German and Russian women's movements. Her positions on special work and organisation were codified in the pamphlet quoted above, "Women Workers Struggle for Their Rights" which was written before the war and republished in 1918 in preparation for an All-Russia conference of working women. She argued that because of women's specific oppression and their backwardness in the workers' movement, it was necessary for the party to do special work with propaganda, meetings and activities organised with attention paid to their appeal to working women. This work should be led by a separate bureau of the party, charged specifically with the task of drawing in women workers. Kollontai recognised the need for women to pressure the party into taking up their demands and the importance of drawing women towards the party by actually fighting in their interests, "Although the interests of the working class as a whole are bound up with bringing about political equality for women workers, their actual lack of rights, however, even in countries where male workers possess political rights, imposes on women particularly unpleasant conditions. Joining together in a special collective gives women workers an opportunity to influence their comrades within the party, to inspire and urge them on to the struggle for political rights for working class women, gaining for women those rights which they themselves possess." (Women Workers Struggle for Their Rights, p.16.)

Kollontai's failure to convince either the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks of the need for a special party structure to carry out this work, reflected her isolation from the leaderships of both factions. Standing aside from the political struggle within Russian Social Democracy she was unable to make a serious contribution to the development of the programme.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 stopped most open political activity in Russia, including Rabotnitsa. It also propelled Kollontai, and many others, towards Bolshevism. Amidst the overwhelming chauvinism in Europe, with the Second International's sections turning to defence of their respective Fatherlands, Kollontai was a pacifist and an internationalist. "I knew horror and despair," she wrote as she watched from the Gallery of the Reichstag when the SPD voted for war credits. Moving to Stockholm to evade arrest again, she wrote a passionate declaration to the women of Europe demanding a "just and democratic peace."

Such pacifist sentiments in favour of peace and disarmament were common amongst left social-democrats, but were not shared by Lenin. After a period of corresponding with Lenin, Kollontai was won over to his revolutionary defeatist position and finally joined the Bolshevik Party in June 1915.

Lenin's position was defeated at an International Conference of Socialist Women, convened by Lenin and Zetkin in 1915 and attended by representatives from several national parties. The conference adopted Zetkin's position, similar to Kollontai's initial one, after Lenin's was defeated. Kollontai was unable to attend this conference but became an important Bolshevik figure touring Europe and the United States arguing for defeatism. Her talents as a writer were used to produce the popular Bolshevik pamphlet, "Who Needs War" a key agitational article used in Russia itself.

The imperialist war had particularly devastating effects on the Russian working class. The poverty, starvation and demoralisation was common to workers, peasants and soldiers. Women workers again bore their share of the hardship. As their menfolk were sent to the slaughter of the front-lines, the women were drawn into the industrial workforce in ever greater numbers. By the end of the war, women formed 40% of the labour-force in large scale industry and 60% of all textile workers in the Moscow region.

Strikes and food riots by women desperate to feed themselves and their children became more frequent throughout 1916. It was a mass strike of Vyborg women textile workers on International Women's Day that heralded the February Revolution in 1917. Throughout that year, women played an important role in action and organisation.



Kollontai (centre), with American anarchist Emma Goldman (right).

Appreciating the role of working women, the March 13th Petrograd Committee of the Bolsheviks set up a bureau of women workers and re-launched Rabotnitsa. Vera Slutskaya, previously an opponent of any separate work, was convinced of the need for this work, "In view of the fact that, at the present time, an appreciable movement has come into existence among working women, it is desirable to direct the said movement into the channels of political action, having first organised them into trade cells."

Kollontai returned to Russia in March 1917 after 8 years of exile and immediately launched into the political disagreements between Lenin, Stalin and Kamenev and other old Bolsheviks. She was a committed supporter of Lenin's from the start, personally carrying his "Letters From Afar" back to Russia and supporting his "April Theses" on his return. Kollontai also launched once more into work amongst working women. Pleased by the establishment of the Petrograd women's bureau, she was nevertheless disturbed by the growth of the Feminists.

Kerensky's Provisional Government had brought the Feminists back into the political arena. During the war they were exemplary patriots, supporting their country in whatever ways possible. Now they demanded recognition of their contribution by the granting of political rights. Kollontai was alarmed at the number of women workers who were joining their demonstrations.

Once again she faced abuse and physical attack from the feminists as she forced a platform for herself at their various public gatherings. This time she was backed up by an active Bolshevik women's bureau and paper. Rabotnitsa in this period became a central organiser in this period, holding a large anti-war rally of over 10,000 people, regular meetings in factories and on the streets, arguing for women's participation in the soviets rather than reliance on Kerensky as the Feminist and the Mensheviks proposed. During the period of police repression after the July Days, Rabotnitsa was the only Bolshevik publication that appeared.

Arguments continued within the Bolshevik Party as to the best way of organising work amongst women. Krupskaya maintained that a special section of the party was wrong. Kollontai managed to achieve more success on this question as local organisations often established their own women's sections. While it was not until 1919 that the Zhenotdel (Women's Section) was officially formed as a network of women's sections at all levels of the party, from 1917 onwards, bureaux developed sporadically in local committees and the leading women's commission continued to organise work amongst women.

In addition to general Bolshevik propaganda, Rabotnitsa included articles and organised activities around issues of particular importance to women — the level of allowances for soldiers' wives, conditions of women's labour and so on. In October 1917, Rabotnitsa organised the first All-City Conference of Petrograd Women Workers, attended by 500 delegates representing 80,000 women.

The growth of this communist-led mass working women's movement shows both the potential and the necessity of the special work that was being done. In the post-revolutionary period this was to become even more important as women had to be drawn into the defence of the Soviet Republic during the Civil War and suffered enormous deprivations themselves in the process.

Without the conscious attempt to organise working women many more would have joined the Feminists and Mensheviks, becoming a reactionary rather than revolutionary factor.

Kollontai's contribution to the development of the Marxist programme for the emancipation of women is an important one. Proceeding from what was available to her in the traditional Marxist writings on women and on the basis of an understanding of the particular situation in Russia, she developed a programme and methods of work for organising working women. She was able to combine a vigorous attack on feminism, seeing the threat that an all-class alliance posed to the working class, with a sensitive appreciation of the questions facing women workers. She understood the need for a special body within the party to lead the work, drawing women in not just as a backward, hard to organise, group of workers, but as workers with particular needs and conditions.

Working women pushed themselves forward as a group worthy of attention in 1905, 1912 and again in 1917, each time with their own particular ways of organising and taking action. Kollontai, and other Bolsheviks, recognised and responded to that by creating an organisation and system of demands that would lead those women into revolutionary politics and towards the fulfillment of their aspirations.

The feminists of recent years have seen Kollontai as the original, 'Socialist-Feminist'. Their attempt to portray her as a supporter of women's autonomy is a distortion that they are themselves now beginning to recognise as more of her work is translated. Whilst she understood women's specific oppression, and this informed her work, she did not argue for a women-only movement, independent from the working class and its political party. To be branded a feminist of any description would surely have offended Kollontai who dedicated much of her time to polemicising with the various strands of Russian and European feminism.

In an article in International Socialism No.14, SWP(GB) leader Tony Cliff continued to search for historical precedents for abandoning special work among women. Having tried to show Zetkin as a co-thinker (see Workers' Power 26) he then turned to Kollontai as another anti-separatist. For Cliff, the fact that Kollontai understood the backwardness of women leads him to conclude that she would agree with him that women are just a group of difficult workers who need specially designed articles and leaflets. The significant development made by Kollontai was precisely against this myopic and chauvinist view.

Her fight for the Party to take up the fight for women's rights, to use special forms of propaganda, organisation and activities to draw women into the party, is clearly counterposed to Cliff's Second Internationalist view that the "whole party should fight for all workers", ignoring specific oppression within the working class.

In re-elaborating the Marxist programme for working women in today's conditions, we have much to learn from Kollontai. We recognise the specific oppression of working class women and the need to develop organisational forms that relate to this. But, in doing so, we need to remember the vital lesson that Kollontai herself learnt — our aim is to build a mass communist women's movement as part of the struggle to build a revolutionary communist party able to lead the struggles of the working class to the final destruction of capitalism. ■

by Helen Ward

# A 'COMMUNIST' GLOSS ON A PACKAGE OF REFORMS

THE DECLINE OF the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) has been reflected in contradictory ways amongst the British left groups. For the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), for example, it has meant that the pressure is now off to 'do something about women'. The SWP has wound up its women's organisation - 'Women's Voice' (see WP No. 26) which was originally set up as a response to the growing strength of feminist ideas within the SWP, and whose journal offered a blend of traditional economic coverage of women's trade union struggles and uncritical coverage of the latest feminist campaigns.

A significant number of feminists have drifted into the Labour Party since 1979, seduced by the Bennite democracy campaigns. In the Labour Party they have influenced the right moving centrist 'Socialist Organiser' (SO). SO's sister paper 'Women's Fightback' has degenerated to the level of adopting wholesale the key elements of feminist analysis, leading to an introspective twin obsession with the reactionary male-dominated structures of the Labour Party and ideological campaigns against sexism.

Since late 1981 the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) has been claiming to stand against this tide of reformist feminism. In the guise of 'Women For Communism', now metamorphosed into the 'Women's Right to Work Campaign', the RCP have recently published a book - 'Real Freedom' - which proclaims that it is an attempt to re-establish both a Marxist analysis of women's oppression and a "working class strategy for women's liberation".

The first chapter surveys the various aspects of women's oppression and the specifics of their exploitation. Other chapters include a basic primer in the historical roots of women's oppression and a review of the specific way in which working class women's social oppression in the family determines the manner in which they are exploited in capitalist production. A chapter on state intervention and the nature of the qualified reforms that these have brought women are also included.

Yet all this, which takes up four chapters and half the 124 pages of text, does little to justify the claim in the Introduction that "Much of the analysis is new and...will arouse controversy and disagreement." (p.ii). The book has its uses as a reference book, collating material from government studies or radical academic reviews. But in this and its summary restatement of the classical Marxist position of women, it cannot claim novelty.

Moreover, this section cannot always claim complete accuracy. On the very first page of 'Real Freedom' we have the following "The trend towards higher relative female unemployment is one of the features of the last few years." (P1) This is not, in fact, true. Whilst women have been hit proportionally harder in the production sections, the relatively smaller attacks on public sector employment has meant that female unemployment has increased at a slower rate than men. For example, women constitute 42.5% of the workforce today compared to 40.5% in 1977. Since the Tories have been in, male employment has shrunk 8.6% compared to 8.2% for women. If one takes the figure over a longer term the differential increases. (Figures based on CSO Monthly digest of Statistics).

Despite this lapse, which does not in itself undermine the essentially correct description of the attacks on working class women, the major flaws in 'Real Freedom' lies elsewhere.

The book has been advertised by the RCP as "a working class strategy for women's liberation" (The Next Step No.29) The real failure of the book lies precisely in that area where the RCP claim to be offering a programme of action which arms working class women with a strategy to achieve 'real freedom'.

Whether a programme is adequate to the need of working class women depends on the degree to which it succeeds in linking their immediate struggles with the

struggle for socialism. It is here that 'Real Freedom' fails its readers. In fact the RCP give us two separate things, and neither are either novel or adequate. On the one hand, abstract propaganda for socialism; for example, "There is no future for the working class under capitalism, still less so for women, whose oppression is bound to increase unless we can fight to overthrow the system which enforces it." (RF p24) On the other, we are presented with a list of five demands which together constitute the central strategy - the fight for women workers' emancipation, under capitalism. This programme of action amounts to the following, "1. opposition to all redundancies; 2. opposition to all cuts in social services; 3. for free 24-hour nurseries 4. for free abortion on demand; 5. against all forms of discrimination...which deny access to social services, jobs and civil rights". (RF p123) and as a result, "...a campaign around these objectives provides an immediate defence of women." (RF p123)

This perspective is false because a struggle around these areas brings working class women up against other social and political problems - sexism and racism in the trade unions, for example - which require, in advance, a clear cut solution from communists. In that sense, these five points cannot represent an adequate programme since the programme fails absolutely to arm working class women with the political solution to the attacks made on them now. We can best illustrate this by examining just one of 'Real Freedom's' demands - "opposition to all redundancies".

Workers Power has argued in factory and strike bulletins, trade union branches, on picket lines etc that strike action, the occupation tactic, solidarity strike action and blacking are the essential forms of action against redundancy and closure. Section of women workers have been at the head of such militant action to defend jobs as the seven month occupation of the Greenoch Lee Jeans factory by women workers last year demonstrated. They were well organised and tireless in building support for their struggle amongst workers throughout the country. But in general the argument for this type of action still has to be explained and won at rank and file level amongst the majority of women and men workers. This task does not figure in the RCP's programme of action.

In preparation for and during strike action, as health workers militants have bitterly learnt most recently, rank and file organisation has to be built - factory, plant, hospital, area and national joint shop stewards committees, strike committees and local support committees are crucial to take the control of the struggle out of the hands of the officials and national union leaderships to prevent their inevitable betrayal and sell-out.

As women workers and others have learnt, taking action means a head on clash with the trade union bureaucracy - the bosses' agent in the workers' movement and the entrenched enemy of the liberation of women within the working class.

But all this leads straight to the fundamental problem of women's participation in the organisations and actions of the working class itself. The fight against redundancy and for a woman's right to work, cannot be separated from the need to break the stranglehold of the present leadership in the trade unions, to transform the unions into fighting bodies in which women can play an active and leading role and in which women's interests are central.

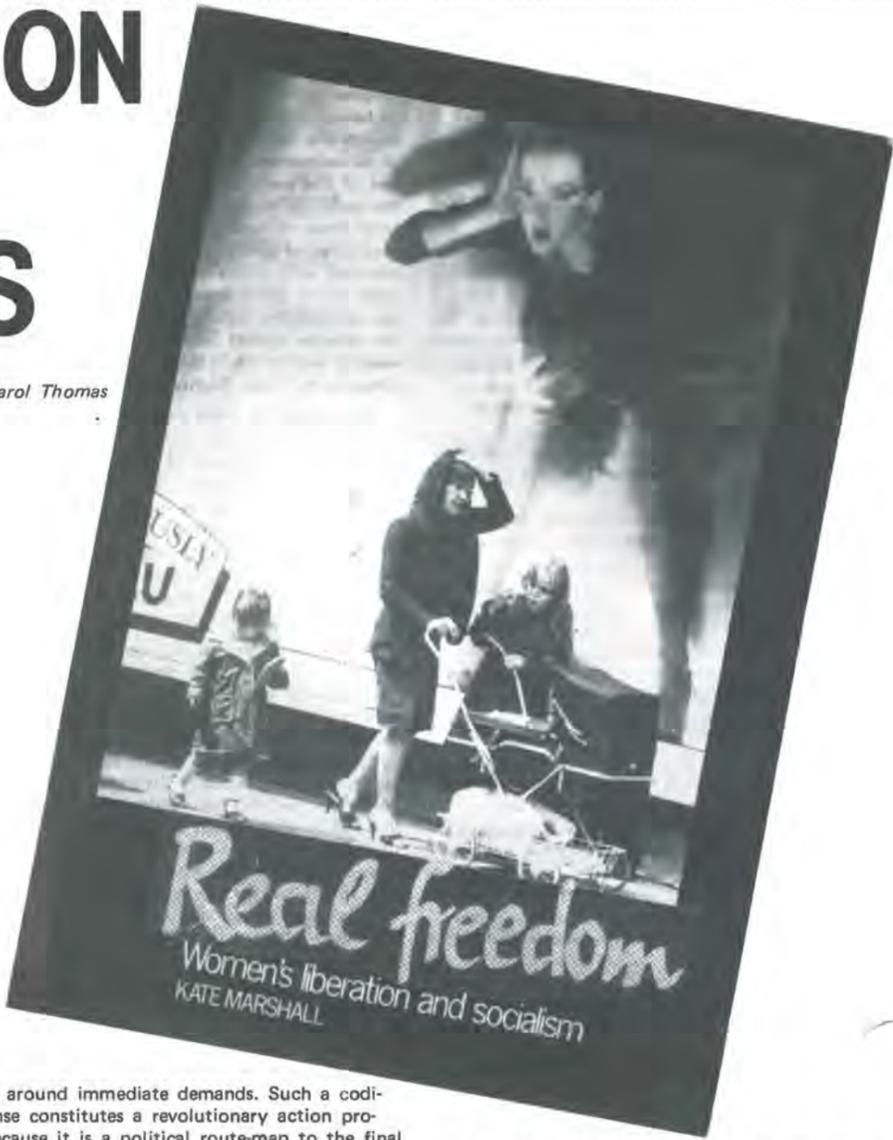
This process of transformation demands a programme for strengthening the position of women in the unions so that the unions take up the immediate defence of women workers and begin to fight for the interests of working class women generally. To defend jobs a massive unionisation drive amongst the unorganised, and thus most vulnerable, women workers, especially part-time workers, is necessary along with the fight for special measures to guarantee women's involvement in the labour movement. 'Open the Unions to women workers' means a struggle for union meeting to be held in work time with no loss of pay; for the right of women to caucus in the unions; for democratic women's sections with full right to put resolutions at all levels of the unions; for creche facilities provided by the union to ensure the full participation of women in meetings, on picket lines, in occupations and for action to secure the extension of full job protection to part-time and shift workers.

A fight around these demands, as part of the general transformation of the unions into fighting bodies lays the basis for winning women and rank and file militants generally to real answers to the employers job-slashing policies - to opposition to all women out first 'solutions'; for worksharing under trade union control with no loss of pay; for a ban on overtime; a 35-hour week with no loss of pay; forcing the bosses to take on more labour; for the nationalisation of all plants threatened with closure, under workers' control.

Finally, women's job loss demands the organisation of unemployed women and house-wives. They must have the right to join trade unions and play a central part in building unemployed workers unions and centres.

This does not exhaust the matter. A real revolutionary action programme imbued with this transitional method, has to consider the question raised by the developing struggle right up to the most general, class-wide events, namely the General Strike and the question of Government. Only a revolutionary outlook anticipates the course of events dictated by the logic of

by Carol Thomas



of struggle around immediate demands. Such a codified response constitutes a revolutionary action programme because it is a political route-map to the final solution, the revolution itself.

In place of a revolutionary action programme (which we have elaborated in 'Communism and Women's Liberation' the RCP have substituted a minimum programme. They give us the same old mix of abstract propaganda for socialism and minimum demands for reforms which the SWP produced daily. As a result, they have produced a five-point plan which, because it is not transitional can be used both in a minimum and maximum fashion at different times.

The RCP programme maximum is unveiled in such observations as: "The struggle for a woman's right to work...can only be realised fully in a communist society..." (RF P124) Yet in the absence of an elaboration of how, in practice, the fight for these demands leads, step by step, to the threshold of revolution, this statement inevitably has all the value of a Sunday Socialism speech at Hyde Park corner.

At another level this platform allows the RCP to create yet another campaign on minimal demands which to ensnare the unwary. Women are attracted to a trimmed-down, agreeable campaign for jobs which can be, at the RCP's discretion, turned into a full scale assault on capitalism. In fact, it is symptomatic of the front-like (and hence dishonest) character of these campaigns that the RCP, as such, is mentioned only once (P120) and then in such a fashion as leaves the reader ignorant of the fact that this panacea for 'Real Freedom' is an RCP offering.

Once ensnared in the 'campaign' the party banner is gradually unfurled and recruitment to the party takes place through agreement with abstract propaganda concerning the merits of communism. It is because this runs counter to the real needs of women workers that we are justified therefore in calling the RCP a sectarian outfit.

The political dishonesty of 'Real Freedom' does not stop here, however. In general, the RCP acknowledge no mentors yet in the book they briefly claim (P101) that their work somehow stands in the tradition of revolutionary work amongst women carried out, articulated by the Third (Communist) International (CI) in its revolutionary period. But 'Real Freedom' tells its readers nothing about that work, and not surprisingly since to do so would only affirm our criticisms. For those concerned to know more they should see our reprint of the 'Communist Theses on Work Amongst Women' in 'Communism and Women's Liberation'. These theses passed at the Third Congress in 1921, deal precisely with those areas that RF considers superfluous and were written in the context of the Third Congress's debate on 'These on Tactics' for the class struggle as a whole. These are an early codification of the nature of transitional demands, which, "...in their application undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, which organise the proletariat, and which form the transition to proletarian dictatorship, even if certain groups of the masses have not yet grasped the meaning of such proletarian dictatorship." (CI Third Congress: These on Tactics)

This silence on the CI symbolises the sin of omission that characterise 'Real Freedom' - the absence of a real revolutionary programmatic content. The section on the trade unions (Chapter 5) gives us evidence of the classic sectarianism of the RCP. Sometimes the crimes of sabotage, of inactivity, of collusion with bosses is correctly laid at the door of the trade union bureaucrats. At other times, (particularly in the last section) it is the unions themselves or the 'labour movement' in general which is held to have failed women workers. On the whole, however, it is clear that the role of the official leadership in women's strikes has proven enough for the RCP to give up the fight to wrest the unions from these misleaders. For example,

there is not a reference in the book to the fact that women workers should join a trade union! Without a perspective and programme to transform the unions into fighting bodies as an immediate task for revolutionaries, the RCP don't really see much point in arguing for the recruitment and activity of women in reform unions. The RCP are clear that the transformation of the unions is on the agenda only after the mass Revolutionary party is built, "It is possible for unions to transcend elementary sectionalism and adopt a perspective which subordinates the immediate interests of a group of workers to the broader concerns of the working class as a whole. The condition for this is the existence in the working class of a highly developed proletarian consciousness given shape and direction by a revolutionary party. Such a party can give a clear lead to the trade unions on important political questions" (RF P62 Our emphasis)

But since the condition for a Revolutionary Party participation in organisation of the working class is an attempt to shape the partial and unfinished struggle in a communist direction, then by their attitude, the RCP condemn themselves to sectarian posture and, ultimately, to irrelevance.

In opposition to the empty, sectarian RCP 'strategy for working class women', our strategy for women's emancipation necessitates the fight now to build a mass working class women's movement. Unlike the RCP, we do not insist that our politics 'dominate' such a movement from the outset as a condition of our fight to build it. In the absence of a mass revolutionary Communist Party, a mass Communist women's movement cannot be constructed from above, but the objective needs of women now and the smallness of revolutionary forces require us to build a united front movement - built around a struggle for demands which meet the immediate needs working class women. The movement should be organisationally independent, having its own democratically elected leadership. In our participation in building such a movement, we will fight for all the essentials of our programme, and for its leadership against the reformists, centrists and feminists in an open struggle with all tendencies and parties, to prove in practice, in action who has the correct politics.

Such a movement must be rooted first and foremost in the workplaces, in the unions - based on those women best organised to lead a struggle - but also drawing in housewives and unemployed women through rank and file labour movement bodies, by building estate-based women's committees of action around amenities, prices, rents and support for local trade union struggles. It must be built around action for demands which take up all aspects of the oppression of women not just the economic or 'sectional' interests of working women alone, but against all attacks on abortion and contraception rights, against physical violence suffered by women, battery and rape, against all the effects on women of capitalism in crisis - rising prices, rents, the closure of hospitals and nurseries etc.

Such a movement meets the needs for a specific organisational form to overcome the specific nature of women's oppression - to draw working class women into political struggle - but it is in no sense separatist 'women only' or solely concerned with women's issues. Rather it must be based on, and routed in, the organisations of the labour movement.

A little over a year ago in a reply to our polemic 'Who needs the RCP' (see WP24), 'The Next Step' modestly stated that "We (RCP) are not strong on inspiring programme..." On reading 'Real Freedom' we think women workers looking for a real answer to their oppression, will readily agree. ■



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# Break Tory-Labour gag

1982 CLOSED IN Northern Ireland with the British Army and RUC pursuing ever more openly their shoot-on-suspicion policy. Five republicans have been shot dead in the past two months, three unarmed, two "staked-out" and shot dead while handling unloaded World War II rifles. The latest killing involved a petty criminal shot dead by the army after robbing a fish and chip shop. Such events are nothing new for the nationalist population of the North, save that they are now being carried out more blatantly than usual in retaliation for Republican attacks on British forces.

In the wake of the bombing by INLA of the drinking haunt of the Cheshire Regiment in Ballykelly, which killed eleven soldiers and five civilians, the army was clearly given free rein to carry out its retaliation. Workers' Power consistently criticises the strategy and tactics adopted by the IRA/INLA in their fight against British imperialism. It is a strategy which relegates the decisive majority of the nationalist workers in the 6 and 26 counties to the sidelines of the struggle. However we place our criticism of the Republican leaderships in the context of their *wholly justifiable* fight against oppression.

As we wrote in *Red Pulse*, a health bulletin distributed in hospitals in Sheffield following the bombing, Ballykelly was an act of war: "a war against an army of occupation (whose soldiers can never really be 'off duty')...The war continues because the sectarian statelet of 'N.Ireland' continues in existence - a state set up by Britain with an inbuilt Protestant domination, against the wishes of the Irish people as a whole....And so, we believe that

the Irish have a right to drive out the British Army from Ireland. We support the Irish resistance; at all times, without placing conditions on that support. Only when the troops are out can the Irish - the whole Irish people - decide their future."

The willingness of the Thatcher government to intensify its attacks on the nationalist population stems not only from the tit-for-tat retaliation of the security forces but is also a result of the 30% of the nationalist vote secured by Sinn Fein in the assembly elections. That vote delivered a severe blow to the Labour/Tory bi-partisan strategy of convincing the British population that the IRA/INLA were a small band of Terrorists and isolating them as criminals. Small wonder then that the Tories, whipping up the yellow press, seized on the Ballykelly bombing as a pretext to ban the Sinn Fein visit to London at the invitation of the GLC councillors.

For Thatcher this was an intolerable breach of bi-partisanship. The Assembly election result had done enough damage. To have the articulate Gerry Adams, an elected Assembly delegate, putting the case for Irish freedom could do little to further the Tory myth of 'mad Irish gunmen'.

Thatcher's ban had the Unionists baying for Sinn Fein blood, arguing that the grounds for the ban justified their arrest in the 6 counties too. Yet Thatcher knows that the nationalist population would not accept the detention of their elected representatives.

Her ability to use the Prevention of Terrorism Act to prevent elected representatives of the nationalist population travelling to Britain to put their case, was again helped along by her "loyal opposition". Foot as always rushed to her aid, disassociating Labour from the invitation and putting pressure on Livingstone to withdraw it. When, to his credit, Livingstone refused to bow to Foot's demands, the PLP leaders openly supported Whitelaw's ban.



Gerry Adams surrounded by reporters shortly after his Assembly election victory.

This year, very probably an election year, will see the Labour leadership and their TUC paymasters doing everything in their power to prevent any solidarity initiatives on Ireland. It will be up to socialists and militants in and outside the Labour Party to rally workers against the war of occupation being fought by the British army in the North. Immediately, it is necessary to defend Livingstone against the witch-hunts which are likely to continue as he accepts the Sinn Fein invitation to visit the 6 counties. The best form of defence would be for as many labour movement bodies as possible to extend invitations to Sinn Fein to speak out here. The spring conference on Ireland called by the Sheffield District Labour Party and Trades Council should be used to do precisely that, as should the LCI 'Plastic Bullets' conference. The Bloody Sunday commemoration demonstration planned for Leeds on the 30th January should be supported and built for, particularly given the present murderous offensive in the North and the hysteria being whipped up in Britain.

It is the task and duty of socialists in the coming year to stand firm against Tory and Labour led witchhunts against those who give support to the Irish struggle. We must lay the blame for the continuing violence squarely where it belongs. Not with those who plant bombs but with those who lit the fuse. The responsibility for the violence rests with those who continue to line up in support of a state which has used detention without trial, torture, legalised murder and the continued use of an Army of occupation to stop the Irish finally throwing off eight centuries of oppression. ■

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# GREENHAM COMMON PACIFISM: NO WAY TO STOP CRUISE MISSILES

ON DECEMBER 12TH 35,000 women demonstrated at Greenham Common Air Base in protest at the proposed siting of 96 Cruise Missiles from December 1983. The sight of a nine-mile human chain 'embracing the base' and entangling itself in a web of wool and familial items momentarily disarmed the gutter press and has captured the hearts while confusing the head of the British left.

Pitted against the Greenham Common women is a determined Tory Government. Thatcher is absolutely committed to making sure that 1983 is the year of Cruise - a year when western imperialism's arsenals are significantly strengthened. The Tories are preparing a major re-armament propaganda campaign. Thatcher's 'Western allies' are set on a new round of re-armament aimed against the USSR and East Europe. This is not because they have become afflicted with a strange madness of irrationality. Re-armament is their means of forcing the Soviet bureaucracy to stand off from any moves

in the Third World designed to exploit the weakness of US imperialism in decline. But the deployment of Cruise brings closer the potential of what the imperialists are now openly calling 'a winnable' nuclear war against the USSR.

1983 will put the growing 'peace movement' to the test of struggle. It will test the 'unilateralist' resolve of the Labour Party, and it will test the revolutionary left as the pacifists set their sights on organising non-violent resistance to the life and death re-armament plans of the imperialists.

If the siting of Cruise were to be prevented then a significant blow would have been struck against British and American Imperialism. The aspirations of the Greenham Common campaigners therefore have a progressive aspect. But the utopian tactics and potentially reactionary ideology under which the campaign is being fought are wrong and must be resolutely opposed.

It is no accident, that, in the words of 'New Statesman' (17.12.82), "Senior police officers have themselves accepted in public that the women's civil disobedience is firmly based in deeply held moral convictions and have tried to avoid

turning the demonstrators into criminals by arresting them." Or that Fleet Street mouths a degree of sympathy for the 'misguided' campaigners. Both testify to the essential weakness of the tactic of *civil disobedience*, even in its militant direct action force. It remains essentially a moral protest of an individual rather than the action of a *class* which has the power to deliver an *effective* blow to the government. As such, therefore, there is no cohesion or power behind the protests. This is even reflected at the level of practical action such as the sit-down protest which is prone to mass arrests and violent retaliation from the police.

The ideological thrust of the Greenham Common campaign reflects the profound degeneration that has taken place within the 'women's movement'. The leading organisers are only too happy to admit that at root they are involved in a battle, not of contending political outlooks or interests, but of emotions. Rationality is abused as male and thus outmoded or even reactionary. The matriarchal symbols of protest reflect a potentially reactionary glorification of all the features of women's oppression in class society.

One Greenham Common feminist, Dorothy Ayres, has put it sharply, "there is (a) new look to the women's movement. The emphasis in all the previous struggles for freedom and equality was that women can do as well as men. But it was still a man's world: Today women are saying, 'Men have had their chance.' We want a different world where the feminine ethos has a rightful place, where compassion, tenderness and caring are esteemed and equally rewarded. We want a world where knitting and sewing and baby care are recognised as important to the well being and survival of civilisation, and where breast feeding a baby is not something to be hidden away." (Labour Herald 17.12.82)

Ayres fails to grasp that motherhood and all it entails can never be free of oppression until capitalism is itself overthrown making it possible to lift woman's burden by the socialisation of domestic labour. The same system that needs the missiles is also the enslaver of motherhood and 'women's values' is reactionary because it leaves the way open for the Tories and the bosses' press to steal the clothes of the campaign. It positively reinforces prevalent capitalist values on the family and women's place and role.

At the heart of the feminists' emotionalism is a view which locates the roots of war in the male character. Men are accordingly excluded from the mobilisations. The revolutionary left - on the whole - likes to run away from this fact. It has tried to simply applaud the confidence-building element to women only demonstrations. But this ignores the fact that the decision to exclude men flows in essence from an unwillingness to recognise the roots of war in the competitive contradiction of capitalism itself. It will prove a crippling limitation to any anti-Cruise movement.

None of this is meant as a denial of the importance of a campaign in 1983 to stop Cruise Missiles. But that struggle will not be aided by a refusal to state these truths and make a decisive turn to organise the labour movement to stop the siting of Cruise. As 1983 progresses, the issue will more and more come centre-stage. As long as the working class remain *passively* concerned about Cruise then it is inevitable that political initiative will remain with the petit-bourgeoisie. The Labour Party has passed resolutions on unilateralism since 1979 by progressively larger majorities; the TUC for the first time declared its support for unilateralism in 1982. But the decisive question remains whether the rank and file, including the six million affiliates to the CND, take to the streets in force, use their industrial might to crush Cruise. Unless this occurs the petit bourgeoisie will remain united behind the present perspective of the feminists. Working class action can split these forces. The Tories will rally to the 'defence of the nation' and the best elements amongst the peace campaigners will be won to the side of the working class. The break up of the peace camp along these lines is what the left ought to be seeking in 1983, not the winning the Labour Movement over to support for the campaign and methods of the Greenham Common women. ■



Sit-down protest at Greenham Common on December 13th.

# workers power

# FOR A HEALTH WORKERS RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT

# DON'T LET SELL-OUT BECOME A ROUT



Picture: G.M. Cookson

LAST MONTH THE longest national industrial dispute since 1926 was defeated. As the health workers' votes against any further industrial action came in, it became clear that Norman Fowler had scored yet another victory for the Tories. It is a victory they will relish.

Despite Tory predictions that the NHS workers' resistance would collapse and that they would accept a 4% pay offer last April, the battle for the 12% rise went on for eight months. This determined battle against the Tories took place thanks to the militancy of a workforce that was fed up with poverty line wages. This militancy certainly took the Tories by surprise. Perhaps more importantly it took the trade union tops, gathered in the TUC Health Services Committee, by surprise as well.

The 6-7.5% deal now accepted is a sell-out by these leaders, but it is one that took them eight months to finally pull off. The lessons of this dispute and its defeat are clearly vital not only for NHS militants, but for all workers.

The dispute was an important one for the Tories in two respects. First, by holding down NHS pay they wanted to demonstrate to the whole public sector workforce their determination to impose a rigorous incomes policy. If the most "deserving" sections of the public sector had to make do with peanuts, then so would the rest. In fact this consideration lay behind the crocodile tears that the reptile press spilled in sympathy

for the nurses. It was a united NHS and public sector fight-back against low pay.

The other object that the Tories had in mind was to inflict a defeat on the health workers' organisations so that a smooth passage to future cuts and privatisation would be cleared. The Think Tank proposals for the dismantling of the NHS were shelved - but only for the time being. The cuts proposed in the report are being imposed piecemeal in certain areas. These cuts will be stepped up in the New Year.

The NHS workers, therefore, were not simply fighting for a wage rise. Their success or failure had implications for the government's whole strategy for the public sector. That this was understood by many workers can be seen from the solidarity strike action taken in support of the health workers. It came, predominantly, from other sections of the public sector - in particular the miners. Indeed the September 22nd Day of Action - the high point of the dispute - was a massive display of public sector anger against the Tories as well as a show of sympathy with the health workers.

Objectively, this dispute had the possibility of becoming the starting point for a united public sector onslaught on the Tories' policies. Their economic policies and, necessarily, their anti-trade union laws, could have been smashed to smithereens had the September 22nd action been extended. Why was this possibility not realised?

From day one of the dispute a militant workforce found itself saddled with a leadership terrified of a real fight with the Tories. Playing on the fears of a disunited campaign similar to the one that caused so much damage in 1979, the trade union leaders invoked a sacred "unity". Alan Fisher - former NUPE General Secretary - declared last May that "The unity of the TUC campaign is paramount." What this meant in practice was unity around hopelessly limited actions - selective strikes, days of action, one-off protests etc.

At all stages the leadership sabotaged the development of a fighting unity around a campaign of all-out strike action that could have won the 12%. The building of real unity at the level of the newly emerging joint shop stewards committees was undermined by the leaderships of the unions. In Sheffield, for example, the NUPE official Ken Curran advised NUPE stewards to boycott the JSSC which played a crucial role in all of the mobilisations throughout the dispute.

Bickerstaffe and Fisher went so far as to flout NUPE conference policy which called for all-out strike action. They sent out a circular in May to all full-time officials warning: "Will you please ensure no action is taken on the recommendation headed 'NHS Pay Dispute' which calls for an all-out stoppage commencing 4th June 1982 until you receive a further letter from the General Secretary."

Throughout the dispute Spanswick, Geoffrey Drain of NALGO, Clive Jenkins of ASTMS etc. all acted in a similar vein. In the name of unity they squandered the militancy and determination of the rank and file health workers.

The leaders were united in their fear of the membership's militancy. The strike and solidarity actions posed the question of public sector unity, of a massive struggle against the Tory government's policies. Terrified that the strike would go beyond their control if it was strengthened by all-out action and force them into a confrontation with the Tories, the trade union tops capitulated. This was no less true of Bickerstaffe than of Spanswick. In the name of "unity" the NUPE leadership failed to break with the right wing who were leading the strike to defeat. In fact Bickerstaffe and Sawyer had no more stomach for a real fight than Spans-

wick and Murray. They were prepared to keep their left image by "pressing" for all-out action safe in the knowledge they would be defeated by the right. They are happy *after the event* in left newspapers to point to the failure to step up the struggle after 22nd September (Sawyer, Tribune, 31.12.82; Bickerstaffe, Labour Herald, 24.12.82). But at the time they failed to give any lead against the right wing's tactic of deliberately dissipating the energy of the militants through sporadic regional days of action.

The lesson from this is that these leaders both right and left must be called to account. They must be replaced with leaders based on, and accountable to the rank and file, truly representative of the members and prepared to lead a fight for their interests.

The dispute proved that the building of such a leadership was possible. Defeat was not the inevitable outcome. Throughout the dispute one heartening feature was that since the 1979 strike a new layer of militants, energetically committed to building joint stewards committees, has developed. At a local level these militants came into their own. They mobilised for the days of action, they led all-out strikes (Edinburgh, Rotherham), they led occupations (Fife, Cambridge) they organised extensive speaking tours of other factories and workplaces. Overcoming the obstacles placed in the way of their involvement in struggle by the bosses and union bureaucrats, thousands of women militants came to the fore in this dispute. Amongst these layers of workers the nucleus of a new rank and file leadership existed.

The principal reason why the bureaucracy was able to sell out was not because of lack of militancy on the part of the members. True, after 8 months of sacrifices many workers were becoming frustrated. The later days of action were, not surprisingly, less successful than earlier ones. But what was decisive was that the minority of active militants at no stage were able to present a nationally organised challenge to the bureaucracy's conduct of the strike. Despite their militancy the bureaucracy were able to outflank and defeat them.

The local stewards' committees remained local. Stewards' organisations were relatively new. The militants were enthusiastic but inexperienced. In NUPE the long tradition of relying on full-timers who were appointed "experts" took its toll. Furthermore the bosses and bureaucrats unscrupulously played on the consciences of health workers by raising the bogey of patient deaths in the event of an all-out strike. All of these factors worked against the militants, delaying the development of a national focus of militant resistance.

After September 22nd when the TUC Health Services Committee refused to call an all-out strike, crunch time had come. Either the militants could have turned the tide or a sell-out was on the cards. It was for this reason that Workers Power argued for, built for and played a decisive role in the Sheffield Health Stewards Conference on October 30th. This was the first time the rank and file had an opportunity in a national forum to express its opinions and organise itself (for a full report of this conference see Workers Power 37). This conference, successful as it was in rallying militants together, failed to press ahead with a campaign for all-out strike action from November 8th (the last named Day of Action which the Trade Union leaders called off.)

This was crucial. The bureaucrats had been forced into consultations on all-out strike action by the intransigence of the Tories and the militancy of their members.

The leadership hoped to conduct the "consultations" with the membership so as to defuse the militancy. A campaign that, through mass meetings, could have led to well-supported and co-ordinated rolling strike

action in several key areas might have prevented this. Of course there was no guarantee that such a campaign would have succeeded. But success in winning an all-out strike was only possible along this route.

The failure of the Sheffield conference to choose this path reflects the political weakness of the militant minority. Many knew what the bureaucracy were up to at that time. However, the alternative, a direct political challenge to Bickerstaffe, Spanswick and Co., was not accepted as viable. Unfortunately this contributed to the defeat of the dispute.

Even defeats provide valuable lessons. Many stewards at the Sheffield conference may now accept that our arguments were right. Many workers may now feel a gut hatred towards the TUC Health Services Committee. They will not necessarily and automatically draw the right tactical conclusions from these feelings. It will not automatically be "better" next time there is a strike - it may even be harder.

In these circumstances the job of communist militants is to drive the lessons of the dispute home, in the workplaces and draw the practical conclusions.

A major achievement of the Sheffield Conference was to set up a stewards steering committee. It has set itself the task of organising a national delegate stewards' movement, to be launched by a conference on February 5th in Sheffield.

Such an organisation is vital. It must be won to political independence from the bureaucracy. It must transform the unions into democratic fighting bodies.

Despite voting to accept the 6-7.5% deal both NUPE and COHSE (unlike NALGO) voted to reject the 2 year clause in the Tories offer. Though the whole deal was eventually accepted this vote indicated that the membership of two crucial health unions are not broken. They are potentially willing to fight again next year. They will be facing cuts in jobs and services as well as in wages. They are facing victimisations as the bosses carry out their vindictive campaign against the militants. The organisation of the militant minority around a programme based on defending and extending the interests of the rank and file is the only way that lasting victory in the conflicts over these issues will be possible. ■

**WE URGE ALL NHS WORKERS TO SEEK DELEGACIES TO THE FEBRUARY CONFERENCE:**

DATE : 5th February 1983  
PLACE : Memorial Hall, Sheffield.

AGENDA : Includes shop stewards organisation, privatisation and the cuts victimisations, the election of a new steering committee.

RESOLUTIONS INVITED.

Delegates accepted from area and local shop stewards committees and union branches.

Further details from Ron Giles, c/o Pharmacy, Nether Edge Hospital, Sheffield 7.

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