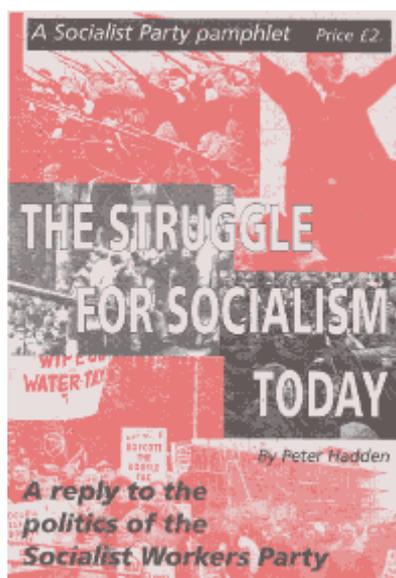


The Struggle for Socialism Today:



A 1999 document by the Socialist Party in Ireland

Left Unity

The Socialist Party welcomes the opportunity to debate publicly the differences between the Socialist Workers Party and us. This is not a matter of sterile point scoring or dogmatic hair splitting.

Our objective is first of all to clarify the points of difference and, by doing so, hopefully to resolve them. The existence of a number of organisations on the left complicates the task of building a Marxist party. Where differences are not fundamental, the needs of the class struggle must override secondary and sometimes petty divisions that may have built up through years of separate existence.

When we engage in discussion with other organisations that claim to stand in the revolutionary socialist tradition, we engage in debate, first and foremost, to see if it would be possible to reach principled agreement on both ideas and method, and then to see if this agreement could be successfully tested in action over a period. Where

this can be done, we would be in favour, not just of co-operation, but also of fusion into a single organisation.

We have to say frankly at the outset that, given what we have witnessed of the past and present role of the SWP, we are not confident that this discussion will take us in that direction.

Even if we do not end with agreement, the exercise will not have been wasted. A public setting out of differences in method and in ideas will be of benefit to our own members and to activists on the left generally. We have to justify to working class people, who instinctively seek the maximum unity of organisation, why there exists more than one organisation which lays claim to the Marxist tradition. If there is no basis for fusion we have to be able to demonstrate that these differences are both serious and irreconcilable, and that a fusion would merely blunt the revolutionary instrument, not strengthen it.

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Your initial approach to the Socialist Party was, of course, not about fusion or about the clarification of differences, but was a proposal for electoral co-operation up to and including a joint platform setting out areas of political agreement. But in our correspondence points have come up which we feel further debate can clarify. For our part, we are in favour of joint campaigning work - and electoral agreements - with other genuine forces on the left. Unity in action - the drawing together of the maximum forces at the point of attack - is an essential ingredient of the class struggle. Broader campaigns are needed where these allow greater forces to be drawn into action than would be possible under the banner of a single organisation - provided, that is, that the content is not diluted to the point where a campaign is broad but too politically blunt to have an impact.

United action allows us to raise a broader banner and to reach layers of the working class we might otherwise not have been able to penetrate. It also permits us to demonstrate in practice to others that our ideas and methods are principled, practical and effective, that we are the best and most consistent fighters for the interests of the working class.

The Socialist Party has always sought to work with other activists and with other organisations, notwithstanding the fact of ongoing political disagreements. In the trade union field we have worked with others in numerous broad left/activists organisations in order to present the strongest challenge to the right wing leaderships. Our campaigning work - on racism, on water charges, against sectarianism in the North, and on innumerable other issues - has often been conducted together with

individuals who are not Socialist Party members, and with other political groups.

In the 1997 Forum elections in the North we very successfully allied with other groups to form the Labour Coalition and won two seats as a result - an achievement which would not have been possible under our own banner. This victory created an opening for a new working class political force to be built. The seats at the talk's table could have been a platform for a public challenge to the establishment and to the sectarian politicians. This did not happen only because a right wing rump, which effectively broke away from the Coalition, took the seats and was recognised by the Tories and by New Labour.

This does not mean that the experience was not worthwhile. In the struggle with the Labour Coalition, we were able to win all but a tiny handful to our arguments. We won over important sections of the Coalition - for example West Tyrone Labour ultimately dissolved itself into the Socialist Party creating a firm base for Marxism among the working class of that area. During this time, the Socialist Workers Party stood on the sidelines criticising us for our electoral involvement and for working with others in the labour tradition.

This was not surprising given the fact that the SWP was at the time shifting from its position of many years which had been to advocate a vote for Sinn Fein in all Northern elections. Previously, when we have stood candidates, both as "Labour and Trade Union" and as Militant Labour, SWP members were actively supporting Sinn Fein.

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As far as the South is concerned, we fought the 1997 general election as part of a broader alliance that came very close to winning two seats. We had already established ourselves as an electoral force through the 1996 Dublin West by election and were hopeful of winning a seat. Yet, we still saw the importance of working with others and of presenting the broadest possible alternative for working people.

By contrast, the Socialist Workers Party stood separately. If your concern is for left unity why did you make no approach to us at that time? Why did you remain outside the left alliance of which we were part? The truth is that you responded to our vote in the 1996 Dublin by election by doing a somersault on the question of standing in elections. You made a headlong rush to stand in 1997, even running a candidate against us in one Dublin constituency. This sectarian attempt to challenge and cut across us on the electoral front failed. It is out of this failure that you have newly discovered the "merits" of unity.

Genuine Unity

We are for unity - because it advances the general interests of the working class, develops the class struggle and points to increased participation by broader layers of workers. We are for unity where it is possible to link with genuine forces that have a real degree of influence among the working class and which are prepared to work in an honest, principled and democratic manner.

But there are provisos. In entering broad campaigns and alliances we weigh seriously the potential. Do the other forces within them have a genuine basis for support? Are the structures genuinely democratic?

Would such agreements enhance our standing among class-conscious workers and within the working class generally? Or would the fact of standing too close to others whose activities do more to repel than attract workers leave us tainted by association, and more isolated as a result?

And so, while embracing the idea of unity and united action, we will not automatically embrace every appeal we receive. We will be especially cautious about approaches from the milieu of ultra left groups, because our experience of such groups, the Socialist Workers Party included, has been almost entirely a negative one.

Take an extreme example, merely by way of illustration. Were we approached for united action by some bizarre grouping as the tiny Spartacist League, we would politely decline the invitation and pass quickly on. We think the Socialist Workers Party would probably do the same. In the first place this is a tiny organisation that represents absolutely nothing in the working class movement. They have no record of mass activity and their intervention in any movement is marred by a uniquely vitriolic sectarianism. And on top of all this there is the fact that their whole past approach to us has been to denounce us as "reformists," "electoralists" and in the North, as soft on "oppression," "conciliatory" towards the Orange Order and so on.

United action with a group, the sum total of whose influence is zero, adds nothing, but attaches to us a quite unnecessary brake that could only have the effect of slowing the momentum of our own organisation. Saying no to such approaches is not sectarianism; it is an expression of our refusal to

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immerse ourselves in the same sectarian swamp as them.

We do not think the Socialist Workers Party is exactly akin to the Spartacists. But if we were to set out a spectrum of left organisations, placing those with a real basis in the workers movement and a democratic approach to co operation at one end, and ingrained sectarians like the Spartacists at the other, we would have to place the SWP, by virtue of method and history, at a point closer to the sectarian end of the spectrum. There are obvious parallels between the political criticisms levelled against us by the Spartacists and the SWP. There is also a similar method of debate, which is to misquote what we say, distort our views and then to tilt at the windmills of arguments we do not put forward.

In saying all of this we do not intend to denigrate individual members of the SWP. We acknowledge that most people join your party attracted by what at first glance appears to be a vibrant revolutionary force. They do so out of a genuine desire to change society. Most will come to discover that their first impression was superficial. The most serious will quickly conclude for themselves that there is more to revolutionary politics than slogans and emphatic pronouncements; that the working class movement does not so easily divide into the SWP "revolutionaries" on one side and various shades of "reformist" and "traitor" on the other.

Moreover, we cannot hold your present membership responsible for ideas you once put forward - on the North for example - ideas which you strenuously, but dishonestly, now deny. We think that your membership - and even some of your leading members - are kept quite deliberately in the dark about old positions you

once held on a number of issues, positions which are now a serious embarrassment given your recent political somersaults.

When considering your proposal for an electoral agreement it is your actual ideas, past and present, our actual record in campaigns that we take into account. We cannot consider joint work in elections in isolation from how you work in other areas. You cannot be for left unity in one field, where it happens to suit you, and continue to behave in a sectarian manner in campaigns, in the trade unions and other areas. Wherever possible the Socialist Party has tried to work with Socialist Workers Party members on specific campaigns. Along with others on the left we have found this a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Generally, the record of your party is one of refusal to engage in genuine co-operation. How many times have genuinely broad campaigns called protests or activities and then found that some new "campaign" has been launched which is holding its protest a few days or a few hours earlier. The new "campaign" almost invariably turns out to be a fig leaf for the SWP, some fictitious "organisation" or "committee" which is "sponsored" by SWP members in different guises.

The problem with SWP "committees" and "campaigns" is not that you have initiated them. We applaud bold initiatives in launching mass activity where these can tap into a mood among the working class and the youth. The real problem is that they are never given any life - there are no structures, no internal democracy - they are simply an implementation device for decisions taken elsewhere by the Political Committee of the SWP.

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The Anti Nazi League is a case in point. The name had an attraction for some young people who genuinely believed it to be an open broad-based organisation. On closer examination they found no such thing. It had no internal life, no structure, and no substance; in short it was a deception, a phantom called into being and then placed in storage at the whim of the SWP leadership.

Most recently, your behaviour in relation to the movement against NATO attacks in the Balkans has shown that, despite your verbal appeals for "left unity" in other areas, your whole approach remains hopelessly sectarian. As soon as the NATO bombing began, Socialist Party TD Joe Higgins called a meeting of representatives of six parties, the SWP included, to set up a broad campaign of opposition.

Instead of throwing its weight behind the "Coalition Against the War" the SWP decided to put its real efforts attempting to build a separate "No to War Campaign" - while at the same time still keeping one foot in the broad Coalition. The "No to War Campaign" insisted on running rival activities to those of the Coalition and at times refused requests for joint activities.

This was not justified on the basis of any political difference between the two campaigns. "No to War" was not a "socialist" or "revolutionary" campaign. It had three vague and quite liberal demands. Speakers at public events include pacifists, advocates of UN intervention and others.

The intention was to create the impression of a "broad" campaign when the reality was very different. "No to War" like other SWP "broad" campaigns was just an extension of the SWP. The non-SWP speakers invited

to appear on platforms have no input into the campaign. There was no democratic structure, only a sham committee which meets to ratify decisions which have already been taken elsewhere by the SWP.

This campaign exposed the inability of the SWP to work in any situation where they are in a minority in Belfast, Socialist Party members and people from other groups joined the "No to War" group. Without exception all of these people very quickly became completely frustrated by the undemocratic manner in which the SWP tried to run it. When activities proposed by the SWP were rejected in favour of other activities, the SWP simply ignored the votes and went ahead to implement their proposals, using the "No to War" title. Effectively, when they lost control they simply split off and set up a rival "No to War" campaign based around themselves. The result was the ludicrous position of two anti war campaigns, both called the "No to War Campaign," advertising rival events. Your sectarian behaviour repelled all those who initially took part in the hope that, through united action, an effective anti war movement could be built.

If the SWP were interested in building a broad anti-war movement, there would have been no question of setting up a second campaign. The fact of two campaigns with a similar, almost identical programme only sowed confusion and weakened the opposition to the war. If the SWP were really for left unity why did you not agree to merge the two campaigns, agreeing a minimum programme but giving every participating group freedom to put its own explanation and programme inside? Your refusal to do so only exposes the inability of the

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SWP to enter into genuine co-operation with anyone.

Work in the Unions

Your work in the unions tells the same tale. How many times do activists in "broad lefts" or other opposition groups within unions find themselves suddenly confronted with new "rank and file," "activist" bodies which spring up as rivals, behave in a hopelessly sectarian manner, and which, upon closer examination, turn out to be a cover name for the SWP members or member in that union?

Your letter (11.1.99) attempts to justify this sectarian approach. You attack what you call "a Broad Left strategy" which you caricature as "replacing the current trade union leaders by others who claim to be more militant and left wing." To this, you counterpoise a "rank and file strategy." It is ironic that a letter appealing for a "left unity" in elections should include a theoretical explanation as to why such unity is undesirable in the trade unions.

We are in favour of setting up "rank and file" structures in the unions, but only where these have a genuine basis of support. In general, we would try to orient these back towards the official structures. The ultra left position of trying to develop alternative structures or new unions has, outside of a few exceptional cases, only resulted in the creation of phantoms.

Instead of discounting the official union structures, we fight with the

membership to transform them. We are for the democratisation of the unions, for the election of full time officials, subject to recall by the membership, and for the limitation of their salaries to the average of the members they represent.

The Socialist Party has always worked with others on the left in the unions and will continue to do so. We are for the establishment of left groupings, rank and file structures, broad lefts etc. where there is a basis to do so. We do not see these bodies simply as electoral blocs—although challenging the right wing in elections for union executives and senior positions is an important aspect of their role. Our attitude is to try to develop them into campaigning bodies, actively mobilising their membership on issues.

In the struggle to transform or "reclaim" the unions, it is necessary to work alongside other lefts where we can reach agreement even on limited objectives. We do so in order to present the strongest possible challenge to the right. That those we link with today for specific objectives we may disagree with tomorrow is neither here nor there. Co-operation does not mean that we abandon our ideas, sink our differences or, for that matter, that we hide our criticisms.

There is nothing of "left unity" in the way the SWP tries to intervene in

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unions. There is unrefined sectarianism dressed up as a "rank and file" approach. To understand what this formulation actually means when brought down into the real world we have to see how your approach to trade union work has evolved. In the past, you dismissed all full time trade union officials, including full time workplace representatives, as "bureaucrats."

Your letter, in attacking the work of the Socialist Party in the trade unions, echoes this approach. Our "mistakes" stem from "a notion that capturing bureaucratic positions can change unions." Compare your attitude on this to that of Trotsky who, in criticising the ultra-leftism of the Communist Party in Germany at the start of the 1930s argued that: "Everything depends upon the interrelation between the party and the class. A single employed Communist who is elected to the Factory Committee or to the administration of a trade union bears a greater significance than a thousand new members who enter the party today in order to leave it tomorrow." (*Germany 1931 1932* [New Park Publications, 1970], p. 180).

You opposed your members running for full time positions or bothering much about official union structures. In practice, you discounted the possibility of transforming the unions. Instead, you adopted the classic position of the "infantile" ultra left, demanding "rank and file" action and the setting up of "rank and file" structures.

As often happens, reality at a certain point rose up and hit you in the face. The phantom alternative structures did not materialise. Meanwhile, real developments were taking place in the unions. Some SWP members who were active in the unions had had more sense and had already instinctively

followed the line of the class struggle by taking union positions, or, in your old parlance, becoming "part of the bureaucracy."

You then did an abrupt about face on this question. A document presented by your Political Committee to your 1996 Conference not only stressed the importance of the official union structures; it berated your members for doing what you had previously urged them to do - that is to pay little or no attention to these structures: "The area where we have been traditionally weakest in our strategy has been taking the official union structures seriously. In the past our members even neglected to put in resolutions at their branch meetings and co ordinate their efforts between each other."(!)

We have no difficulty with an organisation that makes mistakes and corrects them. By evaluating mistakes openly and honestly we can enrich our understanding and strengthen our ideas and tactics. That is not the way of the SWP - on the change of direction in the trade union field, or on the political and organisational somersaults that you perform with acrobatic regularity in other areas.

In the case of your trade union turn, you stumbled to the formally correct position that it is necessary to challenge for positions in the official structures, where there is the basis to do so. But you came to this conclusion blindly, empirically, and not through any reappraisal of your old analysis or perspectives. The new course you set was and is based on old ideas which point in a different direction. The result is a mishmash of sectarian confusion.

In the past, you argued that anyone who becomes a union official would become an organic part of the bureaucracy. Your 1996 document and

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your recent (11 January) letter continue with this theme. These dismiss left currents within the unions as splits "within the bureaucracy." They counterpoise the same old "rank and file approach."

The idea that the emergence of left currents at the top of the unions can be dismissed as splits "within the bureaucracy" is a crude underestimation of the importance of such developments. Even in cases where initial divisions are confined to the top, the opening of these cracks can be a signal to the membership to act from below. We will support every step to the left, every move to greater democracy. Your position, which is to say "no you shouldn't support these 'lefts' because they will betray you sometime in the future," is completely sectarian. Its only effect is to disarm activists in the face of the real divisions and real struggles that open up in the unions.

All that is new since your 1996 about turn is that whereas before all officials were bureaucrats, now there is a caveat - all officials are bureaucrats, unless they are members of the SWP! All who stand for positions are still budding careerists unless they are in the SWP! Your new position is the same old ultra leftism, now overlaid with a particularly heavy coating of sectarianism.

It attacks the union leadership and counterpoises a "rank and file perspective." For "rank and file" read "SWP." In your 1996 document there is not a single word about how a left may develop, about other forces on the left, or about the need for any degree of co operation to present a more effective challenge to the right wing bureaucracy and a collapsing left on the one side and on the other - the SWP.

In a world where this is only the black of betrayal and the white of revolution and where there are no shades of grey, no layer of activists who went to struggle but who do not, at this stage, have a revolutionary consciousness, questions such as how to work with these activists, how to co operate in changing the unions and how to demonstrate the need for an organised revolutionary presence, not in theory but in practice, simply do not arise. Trade union work, to the sectarian, is like all other work, a straightforward matter: attack everyone else, unfurl your own banner and build. The final sentence of your 1996 document encapsulates the sectarian simplicity of your approach. "The basis of our strategy therefore in the unions can be summed up in five words: sell the paper and recruit!"

Unfortunately, this is the strategy which you have attempted to implement, with disastrous consequences for your own reputation and, inasmuch as others on the left are associated or confused with you, for the reputation of the entire left. On more than one occasion, your methods have given the bureaucracy the excuse to launch attacks on the left as a whole.

Civil and Public Service Union

Your work in the Civil and Public Service Union (CPSU) in the South, which you defend in your 11 January letter, is an example of your sectarian approach in practice. Socialist Party members have carried out patient work over a number of years: building the left, and organising a network of activists in this union. As a result, the left gained a majority on the executive three years ago.

In order to consolidate this victory it was necessary to challenge the right wing control of head office including

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the senior full time positions. The ultra left "rank and file" approach of ignoring the bureaucracy would have meant marking time, allowing the right to hold on to the key levers of power in the union and to use these to undermine the left on the executive.

The significance of the struggle to control the apparatus of the CPSU went far beyond this union. The threat that would be posed if an important union were to be run by the left was understood by the ICTU bureaucracy who intervened in the CPSU to try to bolster the right. ICTU desperately used its influence to persuade some of the softer lefts on the executive to draw back. Eventually, there was a differentiation on the left and the majority on the executive became a minority.

Although the SWP played no role in these events, you use them to justify your sectarian refusal to work with other lefts. Why stand alongside others who will only sell out? In fact, it is the nature of broad groupings of the left formed for specific purposes that a differentiation will open up between harder and softer elements at a certain stage, and especially if they succeed in ousting the right.

Only a sectarian purist would conclude from this that it is wrong to form such blocs. The task in the CPSU now is not to retreat into a sectarian cocoon but to regroup the left activists while at the same time trying to strengthen the left politically so that there is a greater understanding of what a new left executive could achieve. This is the serious work which the Socialist Party is engaged in the CPSU.

During all the upheavals, which rocked the CPSU and sent shock waves through ICTU, the leading member of the SWP in the CPSU flitted in and out

of the left network. Rather than work alongside this genuine left grouping he tried to set up a rival "rank and file" group and produced an occasional bulletin in the name of this body. As is most often case with such "revolutionary" body. As is most often the case with such "revolutionary" phantoms the distinguishing feature of this "rank and file" body was that it had no rank and file.

Your intervention was, in effect, a sectarian attempt to split the left. Had you been more successful the only people who would have gained would have been the right wing leadership. Fortunately, your efforts drew no support. All you have managed to do is further isolate the SWP from the left and from the "rank and file."

UNISON

The most recent election for the General Secretary of UNISON, one of the key unions in Britain, provided another example of SWP sectarianism in action. Socialist Party members have worked with others in this union to build a left opposition in the form of the Campaign for a Fighting Democratic UNISON (CFDU). This body ran Socialist Party member, Roger Bannister, as its General Secretary's campaign and working to build the left vote, the SWP ran its own candidate, Yunus Bakush.

Appeals for agreement on a single candidate were brushed aside. The SWP insisted on its own sectarian campaign despite the obvious need for unity in order to maximise the left vote. In the end, Roger Bannister won 18% while Yunus Bakush won 5%. As in the CPSU, the only people who can gain from such SWP sectarianism are the right wing.

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SIPTU

The case of Ireland's largest union, SIPTU, shows the damage which the SWP can do on the very rare occasions where you do gain some influence. The SWP decision to run Carol Ann Duggan for a senior position in SIPTU was a well-timed initiative, coming as it did after 43% of SIPTU members had voted to reject Partnership 2000.

During the partnership ballot Socialist Party members worked along with other left activists to build the No vote. When Carol Ann Duggan's candidature was announced we did not do as the SWP had done in UNISON and stand someone against her. Rather we welcomed her decision to run recognising that she could tap into the anti Partnership vote and could deliver a real blow to the bureaucracy.

Along with other lefts, we made approaches to the Carol Ann Duggan campaign, in other words to the SWP in SIPTU seeking a broad campaign. Unfortunately, but we have to say, typically, these approaches were ignored. Although we worked to maximise Carol Ann Duggan's vote we were excluded from the campaign, as was the rest of the left.

Having gained a significant vote which did shake the bureaucracy there was an opportunity to use this to build a powerful left within the union. It would have been possible to call an open conference of rank and file activists from all over the country, to launch a reinvigorated left grouping and to build real support in branches and workplaces. Instead, the SWP refused to enter into discussion with the other forces and ourselves on the left. You adopted a "go it alone" stance, in line with your general

position which is only to work in "broader" formations over which you have absolute control.

As a consequence of your sectarianism the opportunity was missed. After three election campaigns Carol Ann Duggan's vote has fallen to 20%. No rank and file network has been established. These elections have done nothing to extend the base of the left. In fact, the right wing is now more firmly in control than they were three years ago.

Montupet

The sectarian strategy - "sell the paper and recruit" - is particularly disastrous when it is used to guide your intervention in strikes. Two years ago your organisation in Ireland made a particular turn towards the strike at Montupet outside Belfast. You correctly recognised the importance of this struggle which united Catholic and Protestant workers in a bitter battle not just against the company but against the leadership of their own union and of ICTU, both of whom played a strikebreaking role.

We have no doubt that those of your trade union members who responded to your call for solidarity did so genuinely out of a desire to help fellow workers in struggle. But the crude and, we come back to the word sectarian, manner of your intervention only succeeded in alternating the strikers. Inasmuch as you made any contribution, it was to add to their disorientation and speed their demoralisation.

Your interventions mainly consisted of visits to the picket line to try to persuade workers to go on solidarity trips which had been organised by the SWP in Ireland and in Britain. Your members made outlandish promises of

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what these trips would achieve both in terms of money and in practical support. In Dublin, a group of your trade union members, as ever exaggerating their influence, persuaded three of the strikers that you would raise £9000. The leading SWP member in Glasgow claimed the SWP had raised £100,000 for the Timex strike—and the same could be done again! A phone call from the SWP in Wales promised that Montupet parts in the Ford plant in Bridgend would be blacked.

Given these promises the workers accepted invitations to send leaders of the strike on these tours. Without exception they came back bitterly disappointed. Invariably nothing was properly organised, the strikers were asked to turn up to factories on spec, on more than one occasion to find the plant closed. After a trip to the West and East of Scotland the four strikers returned with a firm decision that they would take part in no more SWP trips and that future solidarity work in Scotland would be handled by the Socialist Party/Scottish Militant Labour.

In Wales, the promised blacking by Bridgend turned out to be a visit on spec to the factory where the SWP had no influence and a meeting with the convenor who promised all help possible "within the law." The strike leader who had gone over came back disillusioned and also embarrassed that he had to explain to a mass meeting that the promise of blacking which had allowed hopes to be raised was only a fiction.

The truth is that these visits were part of the SWP trade union strategy; not to help with the day-to-day aspects of the dispute, but to "recruit." How better to recruit than by luring workers away from the picket line for days at a time

so that they could be "discussed with" in Dublin, Manchester, Glasgow or wherever.

This was done without regard for the effect on the strike. Tours and fundraising have their place in any dispute, but in the case of Montupet, these trips, even if they had been poorly organised, were premature. The picket line at the factory was not solid. There was a daily haemorrhage of scabs back to work. Reinforcing the picket, maintaining morale, building the confidence of the workers - all these things fell on a few shoulders. Taking these key workers away from the factory gate two or three at a time, and for trips lasting days, only weakened the picket at critical moments. The strikers were beginning to learn the art of fundraising. They needed to develop a serious attitude to raising cash in local factories, and to involve as many strikers as possible in bucket collections all over Belfast. Instead they were misled for a brief time - by false SWP promises that the cash would descend like manna from heaven after a few trips.

First consolidate the picket, then build support among other workers locally - and then the solidarity trips further afield - and then the solidarity trips further afield could have been carried out on a firm basis. Instead of this, the SWP priorities were first recruit into the SWP, second recruit into the SWP and third recruit into the SWP. As to tactics to win the strike, your members had absolutely nothing to say.

For the sectarian, the class struggle is little more than an advertising platform conveniently put in place to "sell papers and recruit"; the sectional interests of his or her group override all other interests. Socialist Party members, by contrast, intervened at Montupet on a day-to-day basis,

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advising on the immediate tactical issues, fundraising and organising practical support. Through this work, but only by disassociating ourselves from the haughty and damaging intervention of your members were we able to gain the confidence of the strikers and played a leading role throughout. By the end of the strike, the presence of the SWP was unwelcome to most of those still on the picket line. The Socialist Party was the only political organisation to be formally thanked for its role.

Montupet is an extreme example, but the same features have been present in most recent SWP interventions in strikes. When you complain, as in your 1990 document, about efforts to keep your members away from picket lines you need to distinguish between attacks launched by the bureaucracy and instances where workers involved have been exasperated by your crude methods and have made clear that they would prefer you to stay away.

When it comes to other mass struggles of the working class you have displayed the sectarian approach and have been unable to make any impression. It is a characteristic of a sectarian that he or she can quite comfortably wade in the shallow and generally quite stagnant pool of left political activists. But when it comes to the fast flowing currents of the real workers' movement they tend to find the water too cold, too dangerous.

During the long and arduous struggle against water charges in Dublin your party was found totally wanting. Throughout its history, the SWP has never led any social struggle. As with your work in the unions your general approach to mass movement like the anti-water charges campaign has been to intervene from the outside, participating when you sense fruit in

the form of recruits, but then disappearing to other "campaigns" and activities.

Working class people will never take seriously an organisation which plays hopscotch with real struggles, leaping from one issue to the next with an agility only possible for those who make no impression and carry no social weight.

In order to establish a basis of respect among workers in struggle it is necessary for socialists to demonstrate in practice their commitment to that struggle. This cannot be done with an attitude of taking up and dropping issues at will. If we begin a battle we have to see it through, to go through the highs and the lows alongside all those who become involved. A revolutionary organisation is not an evangel from on high which comes with words of encouragement and support - given out alongside application forms and placards - but is a living part of the day-to-day struggles of the working class.

The problem with the SWP is that it tends to be involved at high points, but to avoid the painstaking, detailed and laborious work which allows these highpoints to be reached. It is like trying to traverse a mountain range by jumping from peak to peak. A serious approach means working in the foothills of the class struggle, not just the most visible points.

During the anti-water charges struggle Socialist Party members built the non-payment campaign by going to thousands of doorsteps, by patiently explaining the issues, by calling dozens of meetings large and small, by building up networks of activists, by creating a thoroughly democratic structure for the campaigns, by organising to prevent people from

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being cut off, by making sure every court threat was answered and resisted, by dealing with the thousand and one detailed problems which arise with a mass movement such as this. Without this work, there would have been no success.

The Socialist Workers Party, by contrast, flitted in and out of the campaign. As we have come to expect from your party, there were attempts to set up rival anti-water charges bodies in areas where our campaign had not yet penetrated. Invariably, these ran out of steam or else the activists within them saw our work and became part of the real campaign. For most of this period, your party did little more than dip its toe into the struggle, keeping a watching brief for any big mobilisations which might provide you with the chance to recruit some people.

Your absence from the real campaign did not prevent you from turning up at demonstrations and other mass mobilisations and offering instant "advice" as to how a real "militant" campaign should be conducted - before you disappeared to whatever other "struggle" or activity had caught your attention. Nor has it prevented you from claiming credit quite falsely for your role in helping defeat water charges.

It is an unfortunate trait of the SWP - and other groups who hold back from day to day involvement in struggles - that when you do appear you are always more "militant," more "revolutionary" and always "know better" how to take the struggle forward than those who are fully involved. Generally, the SWP prescription for success is to escalate, "occupy," "call a mass picket," etc. These are powerful and legitimate weapons of the class struggle. But we need to know more than what weapons

are at our disposal; we need to know how to use them and when. The class struggle does not reduce to a matter of either "escalate" or "betray."

It is a poor general who knows only the command to charge. It is also necessary at times to know how to side step the enemy, how to conduct an orderly retreat. So in the mass struggles of the working class it is at times necessary to draw back from battle - when our forces are not adequately prepared or when there are overwhelmingly superior forces arraigned against us. It can be necessary to retreat, to make compromises, to offer concessions, even to accept defeat, in order to preserve what we can for future struggles.

The line between a principled concession and an unprincipled, opportunist compromise is not always distinct. It can only be determined by a detailed knowledge of all the forces involved in a struggle, the mood, the degree of combativeness, and the nature of the leadership. It follows that it is very difficult to trace this line from the outside of a struggle. We have a responsibility to consider and advise on tactics in struggles in which we are not centrally involved. But we need to do so carefully, always attempting to establish the facts, and, as far as possible, in a dialogue with those involved. This is not the manner of the SWP.

Packard

This method of applying ritualistic prescriptions for every struggle irrespective of the facts or the consciousness of those involved amounts to nothing more than revolutionary posturing and only

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serves to alienate workers. Your comments about the dispute in the Packard plant in Dublin, accusing us of failing to advocate an occupation, only show how removed you were from the reality of that battle.

The background to the eventual defeat and closure of Packard was the defeat of an important strike in the plant in 1987. Following this defeat there was criticism of the poor role played by the convenor. A Socialist Party member was able to challenge for and win this position. In 1994, when the crisis and threat of closure emerged, the mood in the factory was mixed. Only about one-third of the workforce were prepared to take militant action.

This mood was reflected on the shop stewards committee where there were divisions not just on how, but whether to fight. Our position was to advocate a struggle that would have included an occupation of the plant. We argued that the company's intention was to shut the plant and that an immediate occupation was necessary to save the jobs. But it was extremely difficult to build the mood for this. The fact that Packard was a subsidiary of General Motors and that its production was for GM's internal market, was a consideration which could not be just dismissed. If nothing else, it added to the sense of helplessness felt by the workforce and made it harder to gain an echo for action which most workers felt could not succeed. Under these

conditions there was no choice but to make some concessions in negotiations in order to gain more time to prepare the workforce for battle.

We presume from your comments that the "revolutionary" SWP would have acted differently. You would have insisted on an occupation, simply dismissing the arguments about globalisation. You would have launched into a battle with General Motors with a workforce divided and ill prepared and with many on the shop stewards committee either reluctant or outright opposed. Such an adventure would have guaranteed defeat and freed the hands of the company to close the plant on whatever terms they wanted.

In the end, we were unable to build a mood for struggle. Our comrade, in his position as convenor, argued on the shop stewards' committee against the final package. When the final vote of the shop stewards voted against action, but for acceptance of this package, he resigned from his position as convenor. The shop stewards' stance was unfortunately upheld by the membership who still lacked confidence to fight. Victory is never guaranteed in any struggle. The Packard workers were ultimately defeated - but had they listened to the infantile ultra-left advice of the SWP the defeat would have come earlier and would have been more complex

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Marxists, Elections and Theory

The non-payment campaign

The tactical considerations a closed book to your organisation is clear from your approach to other struggles. Here are just two examples. During the 1980s, Militant, the forerunner of the Socialist Party, organised and led the battle to defeat Thatcher's poll tax in Britain. We initiated the mass non-payment campaign which ultimately involved 14 million people and which not only shipwrecked the poll tax, but was a key factor in forcing Thatcher to resign.

Your sister party, the British SWP, argued against the non-payment tactic saying it would not succeed. Of the tactic which was to lead the biggest civil disobedience campaign in British history, the SWP had this to say: "The experience in Scotland has shown non-payment is a vulnerable form of resistance leaving it to the resolve of individuals to stand up against the law. With council officers being given draconian power to collect the tax, non-payment will be impossible anyway..." (*Socialist Worker*, 17 December 1988). You advocated instead that union members in local government should refuse to collect the tax and that this would be the sole form of resistance.

In line with this, SWP members in Scotland not only opposed non-payment; they paid the tax themselves when it was first introduced. So when the real struggle began they found themselves on the wrong side of the non-payment battle line. By contrast,

we supported the idea of non-collection, but only in conjunction with mass non-payment, non-collection, but only in conjunction with mass non-payment. Non-collection on its own would not have succeeded and would most likely have led to victimisation and sackings. Our argument that mass non-payment was the key was confirmed by what happened. Had the movement followed the "advice" of the SWP, the poll tax would probably still be in place today.

The SWP intervention in the current campaign to oppose the imposition of fees on students in Britain has been another catalogue of errors. We have launched the idea of a non-payment pledge to try to popularise and build support for future mass non-payment of fees. The SWP initially opposed the non-payment tactic.

Instead, your members tried to organise protests in the colleges but with no clear programme and absolutely no strategy to build any effective campaign. Last autumn, you organised a demonstration and occupation in Queen's University, Belfast. We applaud the initiative, especially given the inertia of the Students' Union. But the way you conducted the campaign was ill thought out to the point that it could have damaged rather than helped the fight against fees.

There was no serious attempt to test the mood of the mass of students, let alone prepare and build support for the idea of occupation. The result was that

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those involved were left quite isolated to face the retribution of the university authorities. Unfortunately, this has resulted in the victimisation of one student who was suspended for a term.

At the beginning of the occupation you demanded a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor and said that students should stay put until he agreed to this - only to find out that he was in China at the time! Instead of putting the onus on student action to defeat fees your demand was that the college should refuse to collect them! This caricature of your position in the poll tax fight is completely contrary to the method of Marxism. Marxists generally try to broaden struggles, advocating tactics that will increase mass involvement. Your central demand on the fees was effectively that the authorities should solve the problem for us!

Over a period, the idea of non-payment gained support among the best activists in the anti-fees campaign in Queen's. Faced with this your members did a partial somersault - as you did with the poll tax. They went along with non-payment, but instead of a serious mass campaign they argued for a non-payment stunt whereby a few students should refuse to pay for a period - and then would pay.

Again, this is a characteristic of the SWP: to reduce everything to the politics of publicity stunts. It is the mark of an organisation that skirts around, and ultimately away from, serious struggle. There is a place for stunts - to build awareness - but as part of a real campaign, not as a substitute for one.

We now understand that you have gone further. Having lost the argument, you have decided to pull out of the United for Free Education Campaign which you established. Worse, you

have attempted to wreck this campaign which you now view as a rival to your presence on the campus. SWP meetings in Queen's have been deliberately organised to clash with UFE meetings. Sectarianism of this character only repels the best people, while at the same time it confirms your inability to work in any campaign that you do not control.

All of this is well known among activists on the left. These methods discredit the SWP and reinforce its already pronounced sectarian reputation. Worse still, we can all be made to pay a price as workers who became aware of these things inevitably become suspicious that this is the way all socialists behave. On many occasions we have had to emphasise that we are not the SWP - and do not act the way your party acts - before we have been able to get a sympathetic ear among workers who have been exposed to your methods.

We need to discuss all these questions before we can take seriously your appeals for left unity in future elections. We also want to examine and discuss your approach to electoral work. Your party has recently done a U-turn on this question. In the past, you decried us as "electoralist" because we stood in elections. Bourgeois parliaments were a "dung hill" which would corrupt all those who entered them. So ran your old line of argument.

Now, you support the idea of standing for parliament and, presumably, would take your seats if elected. A key factor in your turn on elections was the huge vote for Joe Higgins in the Dublin West by-election in 1996 and our subsequent victory in winning a Dail seat in that constituency. The 1996 vote caught you completely by surprise and led to a hasty abandonment of your past position. Your Political

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Committee responded by presenting a document on electoral work to your 1996 conference. This stood your past arguments on their head and argued for a "highly tactical approach to running a small number of candidates in the near future."

As with your sudden shift on taking trade union positions, you adopted a new policy but largely on the basis of an old analysis. Everyone who runs for trade union positions is a budding bureaucrat - except the SWP. Likewise, everyone who runs for parliament, including Joe Higgins, will descend into the swamp of bourgeois politics - except the SWP!

Our result in Dublin West and the role of Joe Higgins in the Dail have answered your arguments and have shown the difference between a revolutionary organisation capable of building a real base among the working class and a sectarian propaganda group which refuses to involve itself in struggle to the degree that is necessary to sink real roots.

In order to deflect from this and avoid the questions which it will inevitably raise in the minds of the best of your members, you resort, mantra-like, to the charge of "electoralism." Your 1996 document, under a heading "Electoralism versus revolutionary politics," sets out the "defects" of "electoralism." "Despite sometimes verbal nods in the direction of revolutionary socialism, there is a tendency to spread illusions in what parliament can achieve. Here, the Higgins campaign was a case in point. The election was called the 'best chance' to beat the water charges. After promising for months that a strategy of disrupting the courts would be adopted after 'all legal avenues failed' mass action was deemed to

have a secondary role to getting someone elected to the Dail."

You also say that with "electoralism" "sometimes there is talk of the possibility of combining extra parliamentary and parliamentary agitation. But, in reality preparing for elections takes precedent over everything else."

How does your over haste to accuse us of abandoning the mass struggle for a parliamentary road stand against the reality of what actually happened? The fact of the by-election coming at a critical point in the water charges campaign was an opportunity not to be missed. Within the campaign there were a group of anarchists who used similar arguments to the above and opposed us standing. These arguments were dismissed with the contempt they deserved by the campaign activists. The vote in Dublin West was a major blow to the establishment and greatly assisted the non-payment campaign.

Only a group which was not involved in the struggle could argue as you do. The activists did not counterpoise the mass agitation to the election opportunity. They saw them, as we did, as complimentary. The election was a brilliant example of the combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary methods.

The extra-parliamentary struggle - combined with other mass campaigning work we had carried out in Dublin West over a period of years - was the preparation for the election. In turn, the election strengthened the extra-parliamentary campaign in the form of non-payment, resistance in the courts, action to physically resist cut-offs. Your warning of our imminent abandonment of struggle to embrace "electoralism," issued from the distant sidelines of the anti-water charges

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campaign, has been answered by events.

Undeterred, you have continued to monotonously repeat the charge ever since. In your 1997 Conference document you go even further. "The newly named Socialist Party, formerly Militant Labour, have virtually reduced to (?) their whole perspective to getting Joe Higgins elected to the Dail. It is a disastrous approach that will rebound on them as the pull of electoralism removed the last pretences to revolutionary socialism."

Your recent letter to us, although in the name of an electoral pact, continues with the same method - innuendo and unsubstantiated accusation. Our approach, you say, "can lead to a danger of focusing workers struggles on the need to win support in parliament rather than to relying on their own strength to establish victory. In the long term your ambiguity on the question of parliament can prove disastrous."

What ambiguity? The charge is made entirely without substantiation. No class has ever given up its position of power and its ownership of wealth without a struggle. The capitalists would not accept decisive change which challenged their rule through parliament. They would resort to extra-parliamentary means. In such a situation the present state would not be neutral. Its tops are tied by a thousand strings to the capitalists. In order for the working class to defend existing gains and to continue along the road to the socialist transformation which they most likely would have attempted to pursue through parliament, they would find it necessary to use other means.

In a revolutionary situation the working class will develop its own alternative organs of power. For a

period these can co-exist with the old state and parliamentary institutions. Such a period of dual power is an either /or situation: either the working class will take powerfully or the ruling class will continue to rule, most likely by military, not parliamentary means.

The Russian Revolution

This is the kernel, but it is far from all that needs to be said on the complex process of revolution and counter-revolution. To proclaim what is necessary is not the same as to lead the working class through this process to that point. Those who are unable to understand how combativity and consciousness develop, and how to adjust their programme and tactics accordingly, will play no leadership role. Your comments on the subject display a total ignorance of these matters.

Take your statement that "(i)n a revolutionary situation every reactionary element will rally around the cry to defend the 'institutions of parliamentary democracy.'" (11 January letter). This displays a simplified and idealistic view of revolution which befits an organisation that tends to divide all struggles into us - the SWP leading the working class - and them - everyone else! It misses out on the complex dialectic of revolution and counter-revolution.

In 1917 in Russia, the choice was not between the soviets on one side and the Provisional Government or a future Constituent Assembly on the other. The real choice was between the Soviets and a military regime. In August 1917, the Bolsheviks blocked with the Mensheviks and other parties to resist the attempted coup by General Kornilov and in so doing found themselves, in one sense, on the side of the Provisional Government of

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Kerensky in defence of the limited freedoms which had been won - in a sense "in defence of the institutions of bourgeois democracy."

This united front was for a specific purpose: the Bolsheviks maintained their own organisation, their own programme and stayed out of the government. It did not mean they supported Kerensky. Rather, as Lenin put it, this action was "uncovering his weakness" by showing who was really prepared to go to the end to resist reaction. Their advice to the working class was to "use Kerensky as a gun-rest to shoot Kornilov. Afterward we will settle with Kerensky." (Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 2 [Sphere Books, 1967], p. 227). Their action forced the hand of other parties and prevented betrayal.

In a revolutionary situation when the masses are aroused it is no longer possible for the ruling class to rule as before. Even the limited democratic rights allowed under capitalism in more stable times became an unaffordable luxury in that they give the working class freedom to organise. Rather than rally in defence of democracy and parliament the ruling class is much more likely to move to curtail these institutions. Typically, in Spain in 1936 and again in Chile in 1973, they resorted to military methods. Under such conditions your crude formulations about parliament simply would not do.

Yes, in the last analysis it is a question of taking power into the hands of workers' councils or soviets. But even in a revolutionary situation this demand has to be skilfully posed. For a period, it will be necessary to prepare for power, combining propaganda and action to build support and to demonstrate to the working class that only by taking power directly will they

find a way forward. Only when conditions are fully matured will it be possible to pose the question of power more bluntly in an either/or fashion before the masses.

This was the experience of the Bolsheviks in 1917. After the February revolution and the toppling of the Tsar there was a period of dual power. The powerful soviets which had sprung up during the revolution presented the outline of what could be a future workers' state. Lenin's position was to advocate that the working class complete the revolution and that all power be transferred to the soviets. His first task when he returned to Russia in April was to convince the Bolsheviks, especially the internal party leadership who had been wavering and were considering closer links with the Mensheviks. During the period following Lenin's return the Bolsheviks, although a minority in the soviets, put forward the slogan "all power to the soviets" and agitated in the factories and among the soldiers and sailors for this idea.

However, the conditions for a successful workers revolution had not yet matured among the peoples across the vast expanse of the old Tsarist Empire. Among the broad mass of the working class, and especially among the peasantry, there were illusions in the Provisional Government and in the promise of a Constituent Assembly. The key agitational demands of the Bolsheviks had to take account of this: for example the call placed on the Provisional Government for the sacking of the capitalist ministers, in other words for a government of the workers' parties. While the Bolsheviks, at this time, might have been able to take power in Petrograd and some other cities there was the danger that this revolution would be

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isolated and defeated. When, in July, sections of the working class and of the Petrograd garrison moved prematurely against the Provisional Government the Bolsheviks urged caution. They put themselves at the head of this movement, but in order to restrain it and allow it to retreat in good order.

The repression which came in the aftermath of the July Days was directed, among others, by Mensheviks who were both in the government and in the leadership of the Petrograd Soviet. Following this the slogan: "all power to the soviets" lost much of its immediate meaning. The key was to withstand the reaction and to build support in preparation for the next wave of the revolution.

Only in the latter stages of the revolution, when experience of the failure of the Kerensky government to deliver on any of its promises changed the consciousness, and when this was reflected in the growth of the Bolsheviks within the Soviets, did Lenin advance the slogan "all power to the soviets" as the immediate task.

If the issues of power to the soviets or workers' councils has to be dealt with carefully and sensitively in a situation of dual power how much more so in a non-revolutionary situation in which there are not even elements of dual power. In such a period it is simply ridiculous to put forward as a slogan the smashing of parliament and its replacement with something which cannot be seen even in outline, not even by the most far-sighted sections of the working class.

Parliament

We are faced with the fact that Parliament exists and that the mass of the population, despite their criticisms, look to it for change. In 1940 Trotsky,

while discussing the question of war, explained how Marxists must make use of bourgeois institutions like parliament. "The courts are bourgeois but we don't boycott them as the anarchists. We try to use them and fight within them. Likewise with parliaments. We are enemies of the bourgeoisie and its institutions, but we utilise them."

Trotsky carried the argument forward - to the question of war: "War is a bourgeois institution a thousand times more powerful than all the other bourgeois institutions. We accept it as a fact like the bourgeois schools and try to utilise it." He continues: "In the union I can say I am for the Fourth International. I am against war. But I am with you. I will not sabotage the war. I will be the best soldier just as I was the best and most skilled worker in the factory. At the same time I will try to convince you too that we should change society." (*Writings*, 1939-40, p. 256).

So with parliament. There is no contradiction between understanding, from a revolutionary point of view, the true nature of a bourgeois parliament and at the same time fighting for every crumb, every concession we can gain from it. In the same sense as Trotsky in 1940 advocated that the members of the Fourth International, while opposing the war; in the case of that particular war should be the "best soldiers," we must be the "best parliamentary representatives," the most effective in squeezing every possible concession and, at the same time, the most resolute in revealing its limitations. If we are to expose the limits of change through parliament we have to struggle within it to reach those limits and thereby bring them into the view of the working class.

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Instead of such sterile ultra-leftism we explain that we are fighting to become the majority in parliament and go on to spell out what we would do if we had that majority. We say we would pass legislation to take the wealth out of the hands of the ruling class. But, as the bitter experience of Chile showed, the ruling class will not peaceably surrender their wealth and power. They would use their control of the armed machinery of the state to resist. Under those circumstances we would mobilise the working class to confront them, just as the Bolsheviks did in August 1917. Part of this resistance would be the formation of workers' councils, of committees in the army, in short of the emergence of an alternative state based on the independent power of the working class. In this way the real question of power would be posed.

Only a sectarian divorced from reality could reduce this explanation to holding open "the possibility that socialism can be achieved by a mass movement 'backing up' its parliamentary representatives." The ability to go from abstract theoretical understanding to a day-to-day programme and explanation, put forward in a manner and language which can be understood, is one of the factors which distinguishes Marxism from doctrinaire sectarianism. Your comments on the issue of parliament place your party on the wrong side of that line - and by quite some distance.

What is your alternative approach now that you have come round to the idea of contesting elections? You say you would stand for the "dung hill," but would "do so on a clear revolutionary basis," (11 January letter). What does this mean? Would you stand explaining that parliament is a con, that nothing can be achieved through it,

that it needs to be "smashed" and that workers must rely on their own strength outside? Would you declare that you would not present legislation, amend bills etc. in case you would be sowing illusions in the possibility of achieving change through the "dung hill"? In that case workers will say "fine, there is not much point in voting for your party."

Or would you put forward a programme for which you would fight within parliament, in which case, by your own argument, you suddenly become "ambiguous" on the question. The truth is that the declaration that you will stand "but on a revolutionary basis" is just more "revolutionary" posturing and is completely empty of content.

The revolutionary line which avoids the opposite but twin pitfalls of ultra-leftism and opportunism is a difficult and often narrow line which cannot be traced out in advance or from the sidelines of the class struggle. It is not formed through declarations of revolutionary intent, nor is it made deeper by revolutionary phrase mongering. It can only be traced out in practice in the course of the struggle itself.

Joe Higgins

We scrutinise the ideas and policies of others on the left to see if genuine common ground can be found. But the decisive test is how these ideas are put into practice. What is most notable about your criticism of the "electoralism" of the Socialist Party is that it is confined to abstract theoretical points. Conspicuous by its absence is any comment on our actual role in parliament since Joe Higgins was elected as a Socialist Party TD in 1997.

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A year earlier your 1996 Conference document predicted that Joe Higgins, if elected, would succumb to "electoralism," in other words to reformist parliamentary pressures. Your 11 January letter repeats the "electoralist" charge as if nothing had happened in between. It contains the same tired accusations about where we are heading, what will end up doing, but has not a word to say about what we have actually done and are doing in the Dail.

The election of Joe Higgins is not the first occasion that we have participated in parliament. In Britain, Dave Nellist, Pat Wall and Terry Fields, all members of Militant, sat as Labour MPs and were able to use parliament as a tribune for socialist ideas. Terry Fields went to prison for refusing to pay his poll tax. None of these representatives succumbed to the parliamentary pressures. Sadly, Pat Wall died while an MP and the Labour leadership saw that he was replaced by a right-winger. Terry Fields and Dave Nellist were expelled from the Labour Party and eventually lost their seats because they refused to abandon their ideas and their principles. Is this putting parliamentary positions before the building of the revolutionary party? You appear to be lost for words on this as well.

Like Terry Fields, Pat Wall and Dave Nellist, Joe Higgins has not adopted the lifestyle or adapted to the customs and norms of bourgeois politics. He lives on a workers wage and provides the Dublin West electorate with an account of where the rest of his salary and all his allowances go. He has used the Dail chamber to challenge the establishment. He has brought the scent of the class struggle into the otherwise rarefied atmosphere of the Dail, as with his handcuffed gesture in solidarity with jailed building workers.

He has used his position to promote working class struggle outside the Dail, speaking at countless meetings, protests and pickets. He has intervened in debates on legislation, with opposition proposals and amendments. On top of this he has carried a huge constituency caseload, trying to use his influence to help working class people in Dublin West with day-to-day problems.

Lenin, who you are fond of (mis)quoting, often used the expression, "an ounce of experience is worth a ton of theory." You are loud with accusations made in the abstract but when it comes to the concrete are strangely mute on the experience of Joe Higgins' role. If we are to have a properly informed debate on "electoralism versus revolutionary politics" we would want to know precisely what the "revolutionary" SWP would have done in parliament that would be different from what Joe Higgins has actually done.

In your letter (11 January) you say: "Electoral work is subordinate to the overall activity of the party. We do not, therefore, see preparation for elections as the dominant focus for our party's work." At face value, we can accept this. But in the context of the light-minded way in which your party takes up and drops issues and your failure ever to lead or even participate in a sustained manner in any mass campaign or struggle, we are naturally concerned that the real meaning of this comment is that you will apply a similarly casual approach on the electoral front.

Our electoral work is likewise subordinate to the overall work of our party. But this does not mean that we do not take extremely seriously the question of standing and the preparation for standing. During

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elections we put ourselves on public view. How we prepare, campaign, our result and our work in the constituency after the election are all important in building our standing and developing our base of support. We are concerned that your electoral work will be conducted like other aspects of your work. You will appear with candidates without having done the necessary preparatory work. Your campaign will be to recruit to the SWP and little else. After the election you will disappear to other fields of work.

We are engaged in the arduous task of sinking roots in working class areas. Our electoral base has developed out of the serious campaigning work we have conducted on the water charges and on other issues. It is the political and now parliamentary extension of our ongoing extra-parliamentary work. Given the position that we have built and the reputation that we have to protect we will not lightly endorse others who do not have a similarly serious approach.

In discussing some degree of future electoral co-operation, we will also want to establish that this is not the way you will behave. The fact that we have a TD means that we cannot enter into electoral agreements lightly. A call from Joe Higgins for workers to vote SWP means a certain public endorsement from our party. It means that, in the eyes of the working class, we carry some degree of responsibility for your actions. We are prepared to discuss the question with you but we make clear at the outset that we will not tarnish our reputation by endorsing candidates who have done no serious work in an area and who will vanish from view once the votes have been counted.

During future elections we will consider advocating votes to anti-

establishment parties and others on the left. However, unless you can convince us otherwise, we will give no blanket endorsement to the SWP, but will decide our position constituency by constituency. For example, in a case where an SWP candidate, who had no real base, stood against a genuine community activist who had real support, who leaned to the left, and who would not suddenly disappear after the election, we would almost certainly advocate a vote for the latter.

If we are to discuss with you, we would want, in addition to the other concerns we have raised, to examine each constituency where you are standing to see if you have real support and are approaching the election in a serious manner. If you were to implement what you said in your 1986 "Socialists and Elections" document you would do the same. That document concludes by saying: "Here a key consideration will be our success in our more general approach of building roots over the next year... **it is a condition of standing in any area that we do have such roots.**" (our emphasis)

The above are the issues we want to clarify in discussing any possibility of electoral co-operation. Other ongoing differences between us do not exclude joint work on the areas of agreement and are therefore not crucial to the discussion. However, some of these differences have come up in the course of our correspondence.

Your 11 January letter raises points on a number of issues. Although most of these do not have an immediate bearing on the debate on an electoral pact, we believe it is worth continuing a public discussion on them.

Your letter mentions four points of differences, two of which - trade union

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work and electoral work - we have already dealt with. We do not believe we can define what distinguishes us from your party in an arithmetical manner, as the sum of differences on a number of specific questions. We see it as more fundamental, as a question of method and approach. Political and tactical differences that arise from time-to-time are merely the then current expression of the more basic methodological gulf that divides us.

We are in agreement that the task in this epoch is to build a revolutionary party which can carry through the overthrow of capitalism and lay the basis for the building of a socialist society internationally. We agree on this, but on what a revolutionary party is, on how it is structured, on its programme and on the key question of how it can be built, we clearly disagree.

Scotland

Your 11 January letter implies that our "ambiguity" on parliament must lead to an "ambiguity" also on the explicit need for a revolutionary party. And, indeed, if we were "ambiguous" on how society is to be changed that would be true, but we have already dealt with your arguments on that point. You cite the example of Scotland where our sister organisation is working in a broad party, the Scottish Socialist Party, and say "these issues will also emerge for you in the future." The clear implication is that the Socialist Party in Ireland, because of our "parliamentary approach" will lend up as a broad party in which the distinction between reform and revolution is blurred.

In dealing with Scotland you need to address the actual situation. The Scottish Socialist Party was founded from the Scottish Socialist Alliance, a

broad formation within which our sister party, then known as Scottish Militant Labour, was working. The justification put forward for forming the Scottish Socialist Party was that it offered a broader banner which could draw a much bigger section of the working class behind it. The SSP is not affiliated to the CWI. The group which is affiliated works within the SSP, but is organised separately.

During this entire period, the SWP in Scotland acted in a characteristically sectarian manner. You did not support us when we successfully fought elections. You refused to take any part in the Scottish Socialist Alliance.

The most recent turn taken by our Scottish comrades has been extensively debated in our international organisation, the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI). Our World Congress, held last autumn, disagreed with what they have done. It took the view that their best option would have been to re-launch Scottish Militant Labour as the Scottish Socialist Party. This would not have excluded ongoing work within a broader socialist alliance if there were other genuine forces to make this up.

The Congress viewed the launching of the SSP - especially in the manner which was proposed - as a mistake. However, now that it has been formed we believe that our comrades are correct to work within it and make use of the opportunity to put our ideas to a wider audience. To do this successfully requires that we are clear on our political differences with the other non-revolutionary forces within it, that we have separate publications to put our views forward and that we pay attention to our own internal structures, to recruitment, education and so on.

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When the SSP proposal was first made, the material produced by our Scottish comrades did contain some unclear formulations about the need for a "hybrid" or "broad" party. We think that too many concessions were made to get the SSP going and that there needs to be the allocation of extra resources into building our own organisation within it. These are the tasks now being undertaken by those building the CWI in Scotland.

The CWI has 20 sections and a number of other supporting groups. We work in a total of 35 countries and on every continent. Our World Congress brings together delegates from all sections and is the supreme decision making body of our International. Points of difference are debated in a democratic manner and decisions arrived at through debate.

A debate on any major issue is not the property of a small circle at the top of the organisation, but is something in which the membership needs to be involved. Whenever differences have arisen within our International, or when it has been necessary to adjust our position or to correct past mistakes, we have involved the full membership in the discussions. International Discussion Bulletins, containing all the material from all sides of a debate, have been produced and made available to every member. Only in this way can we educate and involve the membership and only then can the members, in turn, become fully informed, intervene and act as a check on all decisions made. When the recent World Congress criticised the Scottish comrades and set out criteria for future work in the SSP, it did so in an informed manner after a full debate.

You are free to criticise the policies and tactics of the CWI. Debate around constructive criticism can only be

beneficial. But if you are going to do so you should attack us for our actual policies and tactics, not for those we have specifically rejected.

It is inevitable that a revolutionary party with real roots in the working class will come up against reformist/opportunist pressures, as well, at times, as the opposite pressures towards ultraleftism. Debates such as the CWI have had over Scotland are absolutely inevitable as we chart the difficult course of constructing a mass Marxist international.

In order to withstand the pressures of moods, temporary or longer lasting, which develop within the working class, it is essential that a revolutionary party maintains a democratic centralist structure. This means the fullest internal discussion on all issues including points of difference, but unity in action when it comes to putting agreed decisions into effect.

Democratic Structures

We apply democratic centralism - or democratic unity - as we sometimes now call it - not just in our individual sections, but also in our International. It is not enough to have an international outlook. It is necessary also to build an international organisation, a world party of socialism, to put this into effect. Only within such an organisation can the lessons of work in other countries be brought into debates such as we have had over Scotland.

Having said this, we understand that decisions taken by the International cannot simply be forced onto reluctant sections. Even after the decision is taken it is necessary to try to convince those still opposed. We are very hesitant about imposing organisational sanctions, especially in this post-

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Stalinist period, when the emphasis must, in Lenin's words, be on "patient explanation." In relation to Scotland, the CWI has registered its disagreement with the Scottish section but has, at the same time, allowed them a period to put their tactics into effect.

We are not fully aware how the Socialist Workers Party is structured. It is clear that yours is a more bureaucratic centralist than a democratic centralist party. Your decisions are from the top down, but without the necessary rights of internal debate guaranteed. Your refusal to allow any democracy in campaigns which you set up is an indication of an autocratic method of leadership which extends into the internal life of your party.

When you change the "line" you do so in the manner of the Stalinist Comintern; a new position appears from above and is declared to have been the position all along. Your membership learn nothing from this. They are not "educated" they are miseducated; they are not left more "informed," only mystified. An organisation which uses this method of debate can only hold together if there is a revolving door membership, if those with a memory of past positions are heading for the exit as the "line" is changed.

In a genuine revolutionary organisation issues need to be democratically debated, not just on a national, but an international level. You have sister organisations in a number of countries but, as far as we can gather, you have no democratic international structure, you do not hold a World Congress and do not have a properly elected international leadership. In building a revolutionary party it is not possible to proceed from the experience of only one country. After the Russian

Revolution the Bolsheviks made the building of a new International a central task. Even though faced with civil war and armed intervention by the imperialist powers they took the time to bring together delegates from across the globe to found the Third International. When this International was eventually destroyed by Stalin, Trotsky turned his attention to bringing together the forces of a new revolutionary international. Although a political refugee, hounded across the world by Stalin's GPU, he devoted much of his efforts during the 1930s to this task.

This is the importance which revolutionary Marxism places on an International. As far as we can observe the SWP organisations around the world are not part of a democratically structured revolutionary International. When you left the Labour Party in Britain in the 1960s you made a call for an International - but then dropped it. Since then you have kept your international structures a secret and have placed no public emphasis on the need to build a new workers' International. This is no secondary issue. If there is no democratic world structure for debate and decision-making how can decisions be democratically arrived at? How can the sections be guided and assisted? Without a World Congress and elected leadership bodies the line of each section will either be taken by slavishly following the lead and "advice" of the biggest and most influential section or it will be a matter of each section "doing its own thing." It will either be a "dictatorship" by the dominant section or else a post box, exchanging information. Either way this is not Marxism, it is not the structure of the revolutionary party.

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Your "ambiguity" on the issue of structures and on the nature of an international is not some minor, secondary question. It is a serious flaw which must have political consequences. It is not possible to build a mass revolutionary party based on bureaucratic methods. And to carry through the tasks of the socialist revolution it is necessary to build a revolutionary international.

Transitional Programme

On the matter of internal structures you are at odds with the tradition set down by Lenin and Trotsky. So on the question of programme. In preparation for the 1938 Founding Conference of the Fourth International, Trotsky drafted a document, "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," which outlines a Transitional Programme for the new International.

Trotsky argued that it was not enough to put forward a call for the abolition of capitalism and the setting up of a new society. Under most circumstances this remains abstract propaganda, far in advance of the consciousness of the mass of the working class. As well as immediate and partial demands which arise from day to day struggles, Trotsky stressed the need for transitional demands, that is those which relate to present consciousness but point the way forward to the need for the overthrow of capitalism. As he put it: "It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the

conquest of power for the proletariat." (*The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, Pathfinder Press, 1983, pg 114.)

Trotsky contrasts a transitional programme with the programme of reformism, of Social Democracy. Social Democracy, before its most recent move to the right, maintained the general objective of a socialist society - but at some remote future time! "Meanwhile," its programme was for reform within the framework of capitalism. Trotsky did not reject the struggle around immediate objectives. He pointed to the absence of any link between the day-to-day programme and activities and the supposed objective commenting that "the Social Democracy has no need for such a bridge, since the word socialism is holiday speechifying." (*ibid*)

The SWP up to now have rejected Trotsky's advice on the need for transitional demands. Examine your programme set out in the "Where we stand" column of your paper. This does not begin with demands relating to today's consciousness and pointing forward to the need for socialist change. Rather it has generally opened with a call for "revolution not reform." Here is a typical example of it's opening, taken from your Irish paper of three years ago: "The present system cannot be reformed out of existence. Parliament cannot be used to end the system. The courts, army and police are there to defend the interests of the capitalist class not to run society in a neutral fashion. To destroy capitalism workers need to smash the state and create a workers state based on workers' councils."

This is true, but it is a theoretical position, not a programme. Under today's conditions your call for the smashing of the state and workers

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councils, when not even the faintest outline of these exist in reality, is abstract propaganda, ultra-left musing, nothing more, nothing less. You put the conclusion which is drawn by Marxists - a conclusion which would only become clear to the mass of the people in a period of revolutionary upheaval and dual power - and don't bother with the reasoning which leads to this conclusion. It is as comprehensible to the working class audience as listening to someone read answers without bothering to read out questions.

When it comes to day-to-day activity, theoretical concepts cannot substitute for a programme. Even the SWP has stumbled on this reality. Your "revolution not reform" maxim, especially in the crude way in which you present it, has no immediate practical meaning for workers. If used as a platform for intervention in the day-to-day struggles of the working class it will be met - at best - with incredulity and shrugged shoulders.

Those - the SWP included - who try to intervene under an ultra-left "revolutionary" banner tend, in the words of Trotsky, to be "toppled by reality" at every step. Ultra-leftism/sectarianism, when it comes in contact with reality, tends to find its bodily form in opportunism. When intervening from the sidelines the SWP are usually the loudest, most defiant, most "revolutionary." But when it comes to campaigns that you run, or to any arena in which you have some influence, you almost invariably switch to limited, often quite liberal demands and, forgetting the denunciations of treachery you made a moment before, unite with whomever you can on this programme.

The SWP programme for the future is "revolution not reform." For the here

and now you find that this will not do and so you put forward an "action programme"; that is, such demands as arise to "mobilise the working class to action." We understand that in formulating this "action programme" the British SWP has recently presented this as an update of Trotsky's Transitional Programme - despite having for years specifically rejected the idea of transitional demands.

You may now pay lip service to Trotsky on this, but we do not believe you are one step closer to a transitional method when it comes to formulating a programme. Your "action programme" remains an immediate set of demands put forward to try to mobilise people around the SWP and the various "campaigns" you launch. Between this and the need to "smash the state," set up "workers' councils" etc., there is no connection, no bridge. The "action programme" is for now, the "revolutionary programme" is for the long term, for later. And so, masked under a heavy camouflage of revolutionary sounding phrases, the SWP actually adopts the same programmatic method as Social Democracy.

In recent election material - we quote here from your election platform for the Scottish Assembly - the SWP put forward its "action programme." This included demands for a minimum wage, trade union rights, and a cut in hours, which we would include in our transitional programme. We would go further however and call for a cut in hours without loss in pay and a minimum wage tied to the cost of living - neither of which your raise. We would also find a formulation to raise the need for public ownership under democratic workers' management of the biggest industries and financial institutions so that we

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can take control of the wealth in society and use this to pay for the improvements to services, to living standards and to the overall quality of life which we want to introduce.

Your material is at best foggy on this. Instead of clearly demanding public ownership of the profit making industries it calls for nationalisation of firms which lay off workers. On privatisation it demands a halt to sell-offs and the scrapping of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). There is not even a mention of bringing services and firms already sold off back into public ownership.

Where will the money for reforms come from? Our answer is found under the headline "Tax the rich." "We say tax the rich and big business to provide the money for the services we need. That money could be used to boost the NHS and education, abolish tuition fees and reinstate full student grants." That is no different from the position of the Labour left who in the 70s and early 80s avoided the question of public ownership by putting forward the idea of a wealth tax. Except that sections of the left at times went much further than you do. Tony Benn, at one point, advocated the nationalisation of the top 25 companies in Britain.

Your "action programme" is in fact a left reformist programme, a set of radical reforms which could be paid for, within capitalism, by soaking the rich with taxes. This is your minimum programme to be struggled for now. And what of your maximum "revolutionary" programme? Yes, the call for "revolution not reforms" is still there, but as something to be attained in the future. As your Scottish election literature, alongside the immediate "action programme," says, "**In the longer term** we have to change the whole basis of society." (our emphasis)

Reform now, revolution tomorrow - it is the classic standpoint of left reformism and has nothing in common with Marxism.

Transitional demands cannot be divorced from the struggle to implement them. It is true that in a general sense the demands which make up the Transitional Programme cannot be fully realised and consolidated within the confines of the present system. This programme is modest - for a decent standard of living to be guaranteed to all - but the fight to achieve it raises the question of where the resources to meet these needs will come from. This inability of the market to deliver poses the need for an alternative, for public ownership of the wealth-producing industries so that additional wealth can be generated to cater for human need, not to satisfy the thirst of a few for profit. That is why this programme is "transitional" - the struggle to achieve these demands brings the working class up against the limitations of capitalism, or, in Trotsky's words, to the "doorstep" of the socialist revolution.

This does not mean that we put these forward with the rider that they are unachievable, that nothing is possible under capitalism, that action in parliament will achieve nothing, that we must have rule by workers councils - in other words we do not preface our programme with the opening phrases of your "Where we stand." To do so would be a recipe for paralysis.

Although in a general sense transitional demands cannot be fully realised under capitalism, this is not to say that concessions cannot be won. It is possible to wrest reforms from the system. Faced with powerful social movements, the capitalists and their representatives at times have to retreat and make concessions they do not

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want to make. During the post Second World War economic upswing real concessions were won and maintained for a whole period. The demand for wages to be linked to prices which Trotsky put forward in the 1938 programme were won in Italy, for example, in the form of the "Scala Mobile," and in other countries.

In the present epoch of economic crisis and counter reform it is more difficult to win concessions and, if won, the capitalists will move more quickly to take them back, either directly or in some other form. Nonetheless it is still possible to make gains, but only on the basis of a concerted movement, and increasingly of a movement which goes beyond national boundaries. Although the general period is characterised more by struggles of a defensive character it is still the case that reforms can be won, but increasingly only as a by-product of revolutionary struggle.

We do not believe that this is the SWP's attitude to struggle. For you, reality is simple. Capitalism must go. A revolutionary party is needed and as there is no one or nothing as "revolutionary" as the SWP all other considerations must be pushed to the side in the frantic haste to "sell papers and recruit." Above all the party cannot be diverted from this by over-involvement in struggles or campaigns, which in any case cannot achieve anything, but which tie up resources, consume huge amounts of energy on small tasks and which cannot simply be dropped when a new issue arises. In the sectarian world of exaggerated self-importance the tempo of the class struggle must not interfere with the tempo of party activity.

Your day-to-day demands and slogans are not really an "action" programme or a call to struggle. The action you see

as necessary is to get people on the streets or into a room so that you can have an audience for your maximum "revolutionary" programme. The "action" programme is any demand or slogan which will achieve this. It is not intended as the first step in a struggle to implement it. Such a struggle would mean that the party would lose the agility to leapfrog to the next issue and to put forward the "action" demands on that subject which might, momentarily, bring a new audience.

Demands which are unrelated to real struggle do not make up a living programme. At best they are propaganda, comment, and not a call to action. If the main concern is to get an audience for the SWP, they can put forward without regard to the consciousness of the working class and without concern about how to develop this consciousness, step-by-step, in the direction of socialism.

Opportunism

Ultra-leftism and opportunism are reverse expressions of each other. In Lenin's words they are "two sides of the same coin." The ultra-left runs ahead of the masses issuing demands which appear abstract and unreal; the opportunist tail ends the working class seeking the lowest common denominator in drawing up a programme. In both cases demands are not related or tailored to existing consciousness and the question of how to develop this consciousness is not even asked.

In real terms the distance between ultra-leftism and opportunism is small and to journey from one side to the other requires only a small step. Those, like the SWP, who regularly make this journey, are unable to relate demands to consciousness and have no need of a programmatic bridge, no use for the

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transitional method of Marxism. This is why we cannot define the differences between ourselves and the SWP statically in terms of a list of specific disagreements. It is a difference of method. The SWP's history is one of incessant movement from ultra-leftism to opportunism and back again. You have been consistent only in your inconsistency, your somersaulting from one political position to another, your discarding, disowning and even denying of your old ideas in the process.

There are as many examples as there are areas of work in which you have been engaged. Your recent letter still holds that Broad Lefts in the unions are electoral alliances with left bureaucrats and therefore a stain on "revolutionary purity." On electoral politics all are "damned" who take the parliamentary road. Yet, in recent SWP campaigns you invite "left" trade union officials onto your platforms and make no criticism of them when they are there. You also have invited speakers from the Irish Labour Party and other political parties and again make no criticism of what they say. Ken Livingstone, in your language, "betrayed" the struggle to stop the Tories closing down the Greater London Council (GLC). Recently he championed the NATO attacks on Serbia and Kosovo. Yet, the SWP in London have run a campaign backing Ken Livingstone to be selected as New Labour's candidate for Mayor of London.

In the 1970s and 1980s you attacked Militant for being within the Labour Party in Ireland and in Britain - and in other social democratic parties, elsewhere. You argued that we were "reformist" because we worked within these mass parties. Yet, in the last few years your members in Germany,

France and in a number of other European countries have joined the social democratic parties and are working within them.

There is a difference between what we did when we were in the Labour and social democratic parties and what you are doing today. We worked within them at a time when they were unmistakably connected to the working class through the trade unions, both in terms of individual membership and broad support. Our view - that the working class in moving into political activity would first turn to these organisations and attempt to change them - was at least partially borne out. In Britain, for example, the Labour Party was radicalised during the early 1980s and shifted significantly to the left, drawing a large section of the working class with it. Within the party we worked openly, always putting forward our ideas and maintaining our separate publications.

During the 1980s the left suffered a series of defeats within these parties. In both Britain and Ireland the expulsion of Militant was a milestone in the shift to the right. The rightward drift has been reinforced during the 1990s. Within all of the social democratic parties in Europe a counter-revolution against the left has either been carried out or is being carried through. The umbilical connection with the working class has been broken or is being broken. Those which are not already bourgeois parties are in the process of becoming so.

You chose to dismiss the idea of working within the mass working class parties at that time when the basis existed for fruitful work as part of the left within them. Yet now that they have shifted to the right, are no longer working class in composition and have no prospect of moving back to the left,

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you have chosen to put your forces inside them in a number of countries. Given the rule changes and dictatorial control now exercised by the right wing leaderships it is no longer to carry out the revolutionary work we were able to do within these parties in the past. The only way to stay within them is to keep your head down, to bury yourself so deep you will be undetected. This is precisely the manner in which your forces are now working. From the revolutionary denunciations of the past you have moved over to an opportunist accommodation to social democracy.

So when we discuss co-operation now or in the future with the SWP we will want to know if the convergence of ideas which makes this possible is because of a fundamental rethink and change of method on your part. Or is it just a case that the political pendulum which carries you from sectarianism to opportunism, and back again, just so happens to be passing close to the position we adopted, but without any consideration of the changed situation?

As you point out in your letter, our organisations have long differed over the question of the class character of the former Stalinist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe. To some degree the collapse of these regimes after 1989 has rendered this difference historical. But not entirely.

The collapse of Stalinism has been a process which is not yet complete in all parts of the world. The Castro regime remains in power in Cuba. We characterise this as a deformed workers state. According to the SWP it is and always has been capitalist. Were the regime to fall and were the capitalist calls in waiting in Miami to return Cuba to its former status as an offshore haven for US capital, we should have very different attitudes.

Despite our criticisms of the Castro regime we would see this as a setback, a counter-revolution in terms of property relations. But, if you were consistent and applied the same approach as you did to what happened in Russia and Eastern Europe, you would see this not as a reverse but as an "opportunity." According to your letter "We saw the collapse of these regimes not as a setback for socialists, but as an opportunity to begin the fight for real socialism in these countries."

The difference is still a live issue even in relation to Russia and Eastern Europe where the restoration of capitalism has been carried through. The CWI is carrying out work in a number of these countries. An essential theoretical foundation for this work is an understanding of what happened after 1989. We begin from the position that there was a change in property relations and capitalism was restored. If we held your view that this counter revolution was not a "defeat," not a victory for world capitalism, but a sideways move from one form of capitalism to another, we would have no adequate explanation for the demoralising and disorienting effect on the working class, the throwback of consciousness with the re-emergence of reactionary ideas which had not had an organised expression since Tsarism, nor for the economic and social collapse which has followed.

Our analysis of the collapse of Stalinism is fundamental for our work within the former Stalinist states. It is also important in the rest of the world since an explanation of what went wrong in Russia is essential if we are to convince workers and youth that socialism can work. For these reasons our differences with the SWP over the class nature of these states remains a live issue.

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Trotsky's Analysis

Contrary to what you have implied recently in your paper we were never "defenders" of these regimes. You argue as though our analysis of the USSR somehow places us at variance with Trotsky. In your letter you say: "While denouncing Stalinism and claiming adherence to the letter of the Trotskyist tradition, you nevertheless regarded these regimes as "deformed" or "degenerated workers states."

This comment is ironic indeed; ironic because one of the greatest contributions made by Trotsky to the history of Marxism was his analysis of Stalinism. Trotsky was exiled, persecuted, members of his family were murdered, his supporters in Russia and elsewhere were butchered, all because of his unstinting and incisive criticism of the Soviet bureaucracy. We stand with Trotsky when he described the Soviet bureaucracy as "one of the most malignant detachments of world reaction," ("Preface to Spanish language edition of *Revolution Betrayed*," *Writings*, 1936-37, p. 378). We are also with Trotsky when he presented the other side of the equation and described the USSR, with this "malignant bureaucracy" at the helm, as still a workers state, albeit a "degenerated workers state."

In fact, every argument you present in your letter to justify your theory of state capitalism was answered by Trotsky in the 1930s. We therefore make no apology for quoting extensively from Trotsky in dealing with these points. You dismiss the characterisation of the former USSR as a deformed workers state. Of "revolutionaries" who, in the 1930s, likewise reject this label and flirted with the idea of "state capitalism" Trotsky was particularly scathing: "But

can such a state be called a workers' state - thus speak the indignant voice of moralists, idealists and revolutionary snobs..." ("Workers State Thermidor and Bonapartism," *Writings*, 1934-35).

Stalin came to power because the defeats of the revolutionary movement in Europe left the 1917 revolution isolated to Russia. Socialism could not and cannot be built in one country, least of all in an underdeveloped country as Russia was at that time. The isolation of the revolution and the exhaustion of the working class allowed space for a privileged layer to emerge. Stalin was the personification of the interests of this bureaucratic caste.

Trotsky in 1935 posed the questions "What does Stalin's 'personal regime' mean and what is its origin?" He answered himself thus: "In the last analysis it is the product of a sharp class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. With the help of the bureaucratic and police apparatuses the power of the 'saviour' of the people and the arbiter of the bureaucracy as the ruling caste rose above the Soviet democracy, reducing it to a shadow of itself." ("Again on the question of Bonapartism," *Writings*, 1934-35, p. 208).

Under Stalin political power was wrested from the working class and placed in the hands of a privileged bureaucratic caste. But not all the gains of the 1917 revolution were lost. The economy remained in state hands; there was planning, albeit carried out in a crude and bureaucratic manner; and the state held a monopoly over foreign trade. The economic foundations of a workers' state remained in place.

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The bureaucracy did not become a class. It did not own the industries which it managed. While the bureaucracy, by dint of privilege, was self-perpetuating it did not enjoy the right of inheritance. Its relationship to the economy was more akin to that of the heads of nationalised industries in the west to the industries they manage. These people are privileged, they are as removed from their workforces as the capitalists, but they are not capitalists.

The capitalist class is defined by what it owns, not by what it consumes. The Soviet bureaucracy consumed a large slice of the surplus wealth produced by the working class. But this is not unique. Every bureaucracy rewards itself for its commanding position by creaming off a larger share of wealth for itself. Unlike the capitalists, the Stalinist rulers did not have ownership of the surplus, and could not have unless they undid the other gains of 1917 and privatised the economy. Trotsky was absolutely clear and categorical on this: "Still the biggest apartments, the juiciest steaks and even Rolls-Royces are not enough to transform the bureaucracy into an independent ruling class." ("The class nature of the Soviet State," *Writings*, 1933-34, p. 113).

According to your letter you "never accepted the argument that the 'planned nature' of their economies meant that they could escape the contradictions of capitalism and crisis." In fact, the contradictions of capitalism, other than its relationship to the capitalist world economy, did not apply to the USSR. The cyclical rhythm of capitalist production, of boom and slump, was absent. There was no crisis of overproduction such as affected capitalism in the 1930s and is

a spectre which has returned in the 1990s.

This does not mean that there was no crisis or that there were no contradictions. But the contradictions of the Soviet economy, and the reasons for the economic impasse which eventually brought Stalinism to its knees, were different. The most fundamental contradiction was between the fact of a planned economy and the bureaucratic administration of the plan. Not for nothing did Trotsky argue that the planned economy needs democracy just as the human body needs oxygen. For a period the advantages of state ownership and a form of plan, however bureaucratically drawn up and autocratically implemented, did lead to significant economic improvement. The USSR went from being a backward country, an India, to the second world superpower, something which would not have been possible on the basis of capitalism.

Once the economy reached a certain degree of sophistication the disadvantages of bureaucratic methods, of the absence of democratic decision making, began to outweigh the advantages of public ownership and of planning. By the Brezhnev era, certainly by the end of this time, the economy had ground to a halt and the bureaucracy, by their crude methods, were incapable of taking it forward. Stalinism came up against its economic limitations, not the limitations or contradictions of capitalism, but the restraints imposed by the stifling fact of bureaucratic misrule. The choice, ultimately, was not of ongoing rule by the bureaucracy but either its removal and the establishment of workers' democracy or else a return to capitalism.

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Transitional Regimes

Your letter scorns the idea that these regimes were "transitional." Trotsky, however, repeatedly refers to their "transitional" character. The triumph of Stalin was a step back from October 1917, but not a complete step away from the gains of that revolution. Trotsky's view was that if the bureaucracy remained in control, at some point the pressures of world capitalism would tell. Counter-revolution, perhaps initially in the form of the invasion of cheaper goods from the more developed capitalist economies, would triumph. It would be the triumph of higher productivity, of "less labour," in the advanced capitalist states, over the less productive, more labour intensive, industries in the isolated Russian economy. The bureaucracy, or a section of it, would seek to transform itself into a capitalist class. Only a movement of the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy could offer an alternative way out.

In the Transitional Programme he writes: "The USSR embodies terrific contradictions. But it still remains a degenerated workers' state. Such is the social character. The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back into capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism."

Trotsky's either/or prognosis, developed particularly in his classic book, *The Revolution Betrayed*, was correct, but it took a whole historic period to work itself out. What Trotsky could not have foreseen was that Stalinism would emerge from the Second World War enormously

strengthened. The defeat of Germany and the exhaustion of the British and US troops, who were not prepared to follow those generals who wanted to continue the war against Russia, allowed the powerful Red Army to conquer Eastern Europe unopposed.

Having taken control of the state, the new rulers proceeded to take over the economy and set up regimes modelled on the Stalinist regimes in Russia. The peculiar circumstances allowed that capitalism was abolished, from above, with the support of a large section of the working class, but not as the conscious and independent action of that class. Again, it was the particular circumstances of the time which allowed the guerrilla armies which later seized power in China and Cuba to follow the Russian example and eradicate landlordism and capitalism.

These did not become socialist societies, but were precisely "transitional" regimes in which the choice was either political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy or else ultimately counter-revolution and their reintegration into the capitalist world market. Since they had not been at any point healthy workers' states the term "degenerated workers' states" used by Trotsky to describe Russia was not quite accurate. We used the term "deformed workers' state" as a more precise definition.

Counter-revolution

The emergence of the USSR as a world superpower allowed the regime a relative stability for a period. Trotsky's 1930 perspective was postponed. However, what happened in 1989 and after brilliantly bore out his analysis. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the eyes of East Germans to

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the goods and lifestyles which seemed to be available in the West ushered in the counter-revolution which ended with the restoration of capitalism. In Russia and Eastern Europe, most of the bureaucracy went along with the restoration - bearing out what Trotsky had also said - that faced with the choice of a workers' movement for political freedom or the restoration of capitalism they would look to the latter as the only way to maintain their privileges.

Counter-revolution, as with revolution, means decisive change. It is clear that the events of 1989-91 marked such a change in Russia and Eastern Europe. The old Stalinist states collapsed, the state apparatus in part "moved over" and in part was replaced. The new states which emerged were intent on re-establishing capitalism. The overthrow of the old state apparatus ushered the beginning of a change in property relations. It was a repeat of 1917, only this time in reverse.

If the SWP believes that the USSR was capitalist you need to show at what point the counter-revolution in property relations was carried through. The victory of Stalin in the late twenties and the thirties, and the purges which followed, represented a political victory for this caste. The property relations - state ownership and the plan - which were established in the years after 1917 were maintained. If this was state capitalism then what was set up by the Bolsheviks was state capitalism also. Or else we would have to draw the entirely un-Marxist conclusion that a change in political rule is tantamount to a change in the social system. In other words, we would have to start out from what is in fact the underlying theoretical premise of reformism.

In fact, this is your entire argument. You say in your letter "For the SWP, as for Marx, the decisive criterion is social relations of production - which class controls industry and society. The key question is whether the working class is really in control and is the real ruling class. For those with eyes to see it was obvious that workers not only did not control industry but were systemically deprived of basic democratic rights. To describe such societies as a 'workers state' as the Socialist Party and its predecessors did, is to make words lose all meaning." (11 January letter)

For Marx, the decisive question was which class owned industry, not whether that class exercised democratic control in management of that industry. There have been occasions when the capitalist class have lost direct control over the state, but so long as property relations remain unchanged, they remain the ruling class. You have mixed up changes to the superstructure - the method of political rule - with the more fundamental question of the economic base. We determine the class nature of society by examining its economic foundations.

Must the working class have a direct hold on the levers of political power before we can use the term "workers state"? Let Trotsky answer you on this:

"The dictatorship of a class does not mean by a long shot that its entire mass always participates in the management of the state...The anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class." ("The class nature of the Soviet State," *Writings*, 1933-34, p. 104).

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And again: "But this usurpation (by the bureaucracy) was made possible and can maintain itself only because the social content of the dictatorship of the bureaucracy is determined by those productive relations that were created by the proletarian revolution. In this sense we say with complete justification that the dictatorship of the proletariat found its distorted but indubitable expression in the dictatorship of the bureaucracy." ("The Workers State Thermidor and Bonapartism," *Writings*, 1934-35, p. 173).

In basing your characterisation on the fact that the working class were deprived of democratic rights, were oppressed and in a sense "exploited," you are in the camp of liberalism, not Marxism. We have already quoted Trotsky on his attitude to the "moralists" who looked at the horrors of Stalinist rule and indignantly professed that this could not be a "workers state." From there your argument gets worse. The regimes in Eastern Europe, you say, cannot be "workers states" because they were installed from above. Marx, you remind us, had argued that "the emancipation of the working class must be accomplished by the working class."

Bonapartism

This indeed is the standpoint of Marxism. But the same Marx who argued in a general historical sense that the bourgeois, or capitalist, revolutions which overthrew feudalism were the historic tasks of the rising capitalist class, also pointed out that in some cases the capitalists relied on other forces to carry this out.

Even the 'classic' bourgeois revolution - in France 1789-1815 - unfolded with a rich complexity which confounds the

one-dimensional historical view of the SWP. The backbone of the revolution at its high point in 1792-94 was the urban poor, the sans culottes, who acted in alliance with the Jacobin left wing of the bourgeoisie. But the power of the plebeian masses who overthrew absolutism began to encroach on the bourgeoisie. The period of Thermidor leading to the triumph of Bonaparte saw many of the gains of the revolution, such as the declaration of universal male suffrage, removed. Bonapartism meant rule by the sword. The state rose above society and, by military means and by decree, 'arbitrated' between the rival class interests. This was a step back in terms of political rights but the new capitalist class relations which were established by the overthrow of feudalism and absolutism remained fundamentally in place.

In 1815, Bonaparte was defeated by the forces of reaction in Europe. The Bourbons were restored. In appearance it was back to pre-1789. But the substance was different. Capitalist property relations remained in place. If the class nature of the state was just a matter of the political superstructure then France after 1815 would have been a feudal state. This was clearly not the case. The rising bourgeoisie had to surrender political power, but in the main the property rights created by the revolution stayed in place.

The revolutions of 1830 and 1848 did away with the Bourbons and with the dynasty of Louis Philippe of Orleans. The working class was by now more powerful than in 1789, but was not yet capable of taking power. The bourgeois, trembling in the face of the growing strength of the working class, were divided and unable to rule. As the struggle between these two modern classes could not be fought to a

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decisive conclusion, the state stepped into the equilibrium and once again assumed the role of arbiter. The Second Republic achieved mainly by the armed working class in 1848 became the Second Empire under the dictatorship of Napoleon's nephew, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte.

The state arbitrated but ultimately came down on one side, the side of the bourgeois. Even in the "classic" example of France the rule of the bourgeois was finally consolidated by a Bonapartist regime which took direct political power from the capitalists, and which creamed off a good proportion of the wealth for itself. Engels, in his introduction to Marx's *The Civil War in France*, written just over a hundred years ago, uncovers these complex and seemingly contradictory processes in a living manner which contrasts sharply with the crude one-dimensional approach to history which the SWP applies to the less complex processes of revolution and counter-revolution in Russia.

"Louis Bonaparte took the political power from the capitalists under the pretext of protecting them, the bourgeois, from the workers, and on the other hand, the workers from them; but in return his rule encouraged speculation and industrial activity - in a word the dominance and enrichment of the whole bourgeoisie to an extent hitherto unknown. To an even greater extent it is true, corruption and mass thievery developed, clustering around the imperial court, and drawing their heavy percentages from this enrichment." (*The Civil War in France*, Progress Publishers, 1968 edition, p 8.)

In other cases the bourgeois played even less of a role in "their" revolution. In the case of Germany the unification of the country was carried through from above by the reactionary Prussian

nobility through the "blood and iron" methods of their representative, Bismark. The German bourgeoisie were too cowed by the power of the working class which had been demonstrated in the revolutionary uprisings of 1848, to play any role. "Their" rule came into being under the militaristic banner of the reactionary rulers of the Prussian House of Hohenzollern.

Stalinism was a modern form of Bonapartism. The political gains of the revolution were wiped away. Tsarist autocracy was replaced by Stalinist autocracy. But as in France the social gains of the revolution were not abolished. Even though the working class did not have political power, Russia did not return to the orbit of capitalism. It was not in any sense a capitalist state.

This is not to say that there can be an exact parallel between the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and the scientific revolutions. 1789 in France may have been carried through by the majority, the great mass of the oppressed in France, but it inevitably had to end as rule in the interests of a minority, the capitalists. In the words of Engels it may have proclaimed "the Kingdom of Reason," but in reality it established "the Kingdom of the bourgeoisie." The socialist revolution, on the other hand, is not carried out by the majority, it allows that majority, for the first time in a real sense, to rule. It is therefore correct to say that the socialist revolution cannot be completed by any class or section of society other than by the working class. But this is not to say that the course of the socialist revolution, like the bourgeois revolutions, cannot be tortuous, that it cannot move along dead ends, or that all sorts of transitional formations

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cannot be thrown up along the road to its completion.

Marx and Engels were absolutely right when they stated that the working class would be the "gravedigger" of capitalism and that no other class could play this role. But truth is always concrete. A general statement made by Marx over one hundred years earlier does not alter what actually happened in Eastern Europe, and under slightly different conditions in China, Cuba, Vietnam and a number of other countries. The inability of imperialism to hold back the colonial revolution and prevent the coming to power of guerrilla armies, or of other forces hostile to the West, combined with the "model" of the already existing Stalinist states, meant that in these cases one part of the task of the socialist revolution was carried through without the working class playing the leading role.

Does this contradict Marx's general aphorism on the role of the working class? Does it mean, as you claim, that "workers revolution" becomes only "one option among many possible roads to socialism," (11 January letter)? In order to arrive at this conclusion you use terminology with a looseness that really does "make words lose all meaning." In the space of a few sentences your letter interchanges the terms "deformed" or "degenerated workers states" as though all mean the same thing. So, if we argue that deformed workers' states have been carved into being by Red Army bayonets, this comes to mean that "genuine socialism" can be created and society liberated in this way.

Of course it means no such thing. As Trotsky said, the Stalinist regimes were transitional, not socialist. This did not mean that they could evolve gradually and peacefully into healthy

workers' states. The bureaucracy would not voluntarily surrender its privileges and step aside any more than the capitalists in the West would voluntarily hand over their property. The transition to "genuine socialism" required the revolutionary overthrow of the bureaucracy.

Political Revolution

We did not support or defend these regimes. We defended all that was left of the October revolution, the state ownership of industry - as did Trotsky: "The economic foundations of the USSR preserve their progressive character. These economic functions must be defended by the toiling masses of the whole world and all friends of progress in general with all possible means," ("The End," *Writings*, 1936-37, p. 189). To defend the economic foundations did not mean defending or giving any measure of support to the bureaucracy. As history has demonstrated the only way to preserve what was left of 1917 was to overthrow the bureaucracy.

Our position was to fight for democratic rights, for the limitation of wages and the election of all officials, for the establishment of rule through genuine workers' councils. Whereas in the capitalist countries we stand for a social revolution to change the ownership of the means of production, in these states we stood for a political revolution to get rid of the bureaucracy and place the working class in direct control of society. This revolutionary emancipation could only be achieved by the working class itself.

The ultimate test of a theory is the effect it has in practice. The working class in Eastern Europe moved into action on many occasions against Stalinism. They did so in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary and

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Poland in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1970, 1976 and again in 1980. On each occasion, the initial direction of these as revolts was towards political revolution. Even in 1989-91 the gaze of the masses was at first towards political change and ending bureaucratic rule. The decision of the East German bureaucracy to open the Berlin Wall was taken in order to save their own skins by diverting the movement towards the West and capitalism.

The position of the Committee for a Workers' International in intervening in these events was to support the mass movements and to put forward the demands of the political revolution. At the same time, we warned against the illusion that capitalism could deliver Western European living standards.

Ours was a programme to take the mass movements forward to the establishment of workers' democracy. Because of the absence of any leadership to take this programme to the masses, the pendulum swung very quickly from the possibility of political revolution towards counter-revolution and the restoration of capitalism. When this happened, we held our ground opposing the sell-off of state property, even though this position meant temporary isolation as the counter-revolution gained pace.

A decade on, our prognosis of what capitalism would mean has been graphically confirmed. Russia has experienced an economic and social collapse. The working class has been demoralised, partially atomised and left unable to resist. Even now, working class struggles and independent working class organisations are at an elementary level of development. Such is the scale of the setback and defeat which was suffered. Another, more subjective

measure of the extent of the counter-revolution is the fact that the group which was sent by the SWP to work in Russia gave up after a period - telling our local comrades that they were leaving because it was "impossible" to build there.

The programme of political revolution which flows from our analysis of the class nature of the Stalinist regimes armed the working class politically. It raised consciousness and pointed the way forward towards "genuine socialism." It was a call to action, at one and the same time to remove the incubus of the bureaucracy and to stave off the threat of counter-revolution. The tragedy of the mass movements which erupted against the Stalinist rulers from East Germany and Hungary in the 1950s to the events of 1989 was that there were not sufficient forces armed with these ideas to have an effect on the outcome.

Capitalism - A Sideways Step

By contrast, the practical conclusions which flow from the theory of state capitalism could only have had the effect of disorienting, stunning and paralysing the working class in the face of the threat of capitalist restoration. If these regimes are already capitalist it is only a matter of change from one form of capitalism to another. And if this is so, the only consistent position socialists could take is one of neutrality, of a plague on both your houses. Otherwise, they would be backing one form of capitalism as somehow more "progressive" than another.

Political consistency is not a hallmark of the SWP. On this question as on all others the tendency has been to bend opportunistically to the prevailing mood within society, and to modify your stance accordingly. During the

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Korean War, in which the capitalist South, backed by imperialism, took on the deformed workers' state in the North, the forerunners of the SWP adopted a position of neutrality. After all this, to them, was a war between two capitalist states. The fact that, leaving aside the class character of North Korea, it was also a case of imperialist intervention in the ex-colonial world did not make a difference to your party. To understand your position at the time it is necessary to remember that the Korean War did not provoke a mass movement of opposition among the working class either in the US or in Europe.

With Vietnam, it was a different matter. Opposition to US involvement helped trigger the student and youth radicalism of the late 1960s. Eventually, the anti-war sentiment spread to large sections of the working class as well. In class terms, Vietnam was a mirror of the Korean conflict. North Vietnam was a deformed workers' state. In the South there was a puppet regime of imperialism which was maintained only by the military backing, first of the French, and then of US imperialism.

This was how most of the left viewed it - but not the SWP. In SWP terms, it was a war between two capitalist states - as was Korea. Yet, not altogether surprisingly, the SWP did not adopt a neutral stance this time. To have done so would have completely cut off your party from the radicalised youth. In fact you, along with most of the left, went too far, giving largely uncritical support to the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. Our position was to demand the withdrawal of US forces, but also to criticise the programme of the Vietcong and warn that the result of a Vietcong victory, on the basis of this programme, would be the

formation of a Stalinist regime modelled on Russia.

There was no Vietnam-style mood of popular sympathy for the deposed tyrants of Russia and Eastern Europe in 1989-91 - and thus no pressure on the SWP to adapt its position accordingly. But there were huge illusions in capitalism and these were reflected in the stance you adopted. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, your German comrades supported German reunification on a capitalist basis, adding only the rider that this should not be carried through by Kohl.

When the regime in the USSR finally crumbled in 1991 your Irish paper greeted the event with the exultant headline: "Communism is dead. Now fight for real socialism." The introductory paragraph of your lead article read: "'Communism has collapsed' declared the newspapers and the TV. It is a fact that should have every socialist rejoicing." (*Socialist Worker*, September 1991.)

The events of the time brought Boris Yeltsin to power with a programme for the privatisation of industry and the opening of Russia to the market and foreign capital. Inside your September 1991 paper you attack the left for the view that "Boris Yeltsin represents a step back, a return to capitalism," and go on to state that "Yeltsin is neither a step forward nor a step backward." You present Yeltsin as a more enlightened member of the state capitalist class who, "confronted with deep crisis, want(s) to haul the economy out of its downward spiral and to organise production more competitively on the world market...He is offering the state capitalists in Russia a lifeline for their own survival." These words appear alongside articles calling for the break up of the USSR and supporting the

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demonstrations which were pulling down the statues of Lenin. "Socialists in Russia should be on these demos just as the Bolsheviks in 1905 went on a religious procession to the tsar's palace."

All this you wrote in 1991 just as events in Russia decisively strengthened the counter-revolution. The comparison with the 1905 revolution against Tsarism is absolutely false. The 9 January 1905 demonstration you refer to was a hundred thousand strong march, overwhelmingly proletarian in composition, held days into a strike wave, which, yes, was led by a priest and there were some people carrying religious icons, but it was hardly a "religious procession." The massacre that took place that day deepened the revolution, brought it from the underground to the surface, spread it from capital to towns and cities across the continental land mass of Tsarist Russia.

The 1905 massacre ushered in two months of revolution. The 1991 events prefaced a capitalist counter-revolution which so far has heaped almost a decade of misery on the heads of the people of the former USSR. It is a poor revolutionary who cannot distinguish revolution from counter-revolution, who does not know the difference between a step forward and a step backward.

The political myopia has practical consequences. It preaches passivity in the face of the impending reaction. If Yeltsin is simply a sideways step, another "capitalist" ruler no better or worse than those who have gone before why particularly challenge his policies? If the privatisation of industry is just a switch from one form of capitalism to another, why resist it,

why defend the "capitalist"(!) state ownership?

We have to provide a theoretical answer to your idea that the Stalinist societies were actually just another form of capitalism. But surely, the most crushing refutation of this theory is the fact that its one practical conclusion was to preach passivity and complacency in the face of counter-revolution.

The chapter is not yet closed on Stalinism. In Cuba, the Castro regime struggles on, despite huge economic problems which have already forced it to partially open up to the world market. The direction of events is clearly towards capitalist restoration. It may be that this will take place less traumatically than in Eastern Europe. Or it could be that resistance by the regime will produce a more dramatic confrontation.

Cuba is not viewed in the same way as was Ceausescu's Romania or Honneker's East Germany. Among large sections of the youth in Europe and the US, but especially so in Latin America, Cuba evokes images of Che Guevara and of guerrilla fighters heroically standing against the military might of the US. Should Castro resist further incursions by capitalism, he could touch a chord of support and sympathy among the most radical youth, which could give rise to big movements in defence of Cuba in parts of Latin America.

This may not happen but if it does we can expect the SWP to abandon the logic which led them to regard restoration in the USSR as neither a step forwards, nor a step backwards; the logic which led them to be neutral in the Korean War; and instead to embrace the more persuasive logic of opportunism and put a pro-Cuba, and

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perhaps even a pro-Castro position, which would be more appealing to radical youth.

In Ireland, the most pronounced and obvious difference we have had with the SWP has been over the North. During the course of the Troubles our parties have adopted positions so divergent that any form of practical co-operation on issues relating to the North would have been impossible.

For most of this period, the SWP has approached the conflict from the standpoint of Republicanism, putting forward what can, at best, be characterised as a left-Republican position. By contrast, we have rejected all forms of sectarianism and have consistently advocated the unity of Catholic and Protestant workers as the only possible road to a solution.

You will, no doubt, deny the charge that you have been lodged in the camp of left-Republicanism for much of the last thirty years. Your letter specifically does so and lays claim to a different political legacy. "The claim that we supported the tactic of armed struggle is wrong and most probably designed to win cheap support from forces to the right of both the SWP and the SP - we have consistently attacked the armed struggle as counterproductive and helped to initiate labour movement demonstrations which opened the way to peace," (SWP letter, 11 January 1999).

This illustrates a difficulty in conducting any form of political dialogue with the SWP. It is not just that you chop and change your ideas to correspond with the then-prevailing mood, but that you do so in total denial that there has been a change, or that you ever said anything different from what you are saying today. In regards

to the North, your party suffers from a severe case of political amnesia. The above statement from your letter is quite simply a lie. We will illustrate this by quoting what you actually said.

These quotes will show that your views have chopped and changed in what at first might seem an almost random manner. But there is an underlying consistency in these shifting sands of political inconsistency. To uncover this, all that is necessary to do is to take soundings of the mood swings in the Catholic working class areas. When Catholics welcomed the British Army, you were silent about the role that troops would play. Only when the repressive methods of the troops turned this support into enraged opposition did you oppose their role. When the IRA enjoyed a mass base of enthusiastic support among the Catholic youth, you defended their military campaign. Now that the predominant mood is against a return to war, the SWP are opposed to a return to "futile" military methods.

Today you are against paramilitary methods and for class unity. Had this change come about through an honest reassessment and correction of an analysis that has turned out to be mistaken, we would be prepared to discuss with your members to see if there is now political common ground between us. No revolutionary organisation is immune from mistakes. The real test is how it faces up to its errors, how it goes about correcting them. A change of position, properly debated and explained at every level of the party, can strengthen an organisation, creating a firmer theoretical base.

A change carried out in the manner of the SWP, behind the backs of the membership, with no explanation except denial that it has taken place,

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will do no such thing. It means that we can have no confidence that what you are saying today will be what you are saying tomorrow, and neither can your membership have any confidence. The working class will not take seriously a "revolutionary" organisation whose opinions are contoured, like desert sand, according to the prevailing political wind.

A change of policy arrived at blindly and empirically is bound to be piecemeal. So your shift from the sinking ideology of left-Republicanism to the firmer ground of class politics, has been partial and incomplete. Your upper body may have shifted towards the labour movement, your feet remain fixed where they were, in the camp of

left-Republicanism. When class issues are to the fore, we have the new thinking of the SWP on the North. When the issues of parades like Drumcree emerged, and a confrontational sectarian mood developed in Protestant and Catholic areas, your party very quickly reverted to its old ways of thinking.

In replying to the specific issues raised in your letter we will refer to the actual record of your party on the North, not to what you now falsely claim that record to have been. When it comes to our policies and our role, your letter contains quite blatant distortions. We will put these to the side and set out what we have actually said and done.

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Northern Ireland

1. *The "Armed Struggle"*

On the issue of the "armed struggle," the differences between us have been as night and day. At the outset we explained the reasons for the emergence of the Provisional IRA in the early 1970s. The factors which gave the Provisionals a mass base of support among the Catholic working class youth were the apparent failure of mass action, in the form of the civil rights movement, to deliver real change; brutal repression by the army and police, especially internment and Bloody Sunday; the poverty endemic in Catholic areas; and finally the failure of the labour movement to offer any alternative means of fighting back.

We understood the reasons for the IRA campaign and we did not see the IRA, as is implied in your letter, as the root cause of the violence. But we stood against the illusions which were widespread among the most combative of the Catholic youth that the Provisionals' methods offered any way forward. The first issue of *Irish Militant*, produced at the beginning of 1972, carried an article on the Provisionals. Its headline summed up our attitude: "Provisional IRA strategy will not defeat Imperialism." In this, and in other material we produced at that time and since, we opposed the tactic of individual terrorism.

We explained the difference between guerrillaism - which can have a certain legitimacy in underdeveloped countries as the method of struggle of the peasantry - and individual terrorism, which has none. We argued that the efforts and sacrifice of those radical Catholic youth who joined the IRA

would be wasted. Far from weakening the state, individual terrorism tends to strengthen it by giving the excuse for a whole raft of repressive measures which otherwise might not have reached the statute books. Inevitably, it would be the people in the working class areas in whose name the campaign was being fought who would feel the full severity of this repression. Against these false methods we counterpoised mass action by the working class as the only way to change society.

We went further. The Provisionals' campaign was not only futile, it was totally counterproductive. It was based on only one section of the working class and had the effect of infuriating the other. It helped deepen the sectarian divide and, in so doing, weakened the working class, the only force capable of showing a way forward.

We took seriously our responsibility to warn the Catholic youth of the blind alley into which they were facing. We did so when the tide of history was against us, when it was not popular; not "revolutionary" to resist the turn to the gun, and not after the event when history had already proved the point. Not so the SWP - or for that matter the rest of the "revolutionary" left - who capitulated to the pressures in the Catholic areas and acted as left apologists for the Provisionals.

Did the SWP, as you claim, stand against the stream and oppose the military tactics of the IRA during the early 1970s when thousands of the best of Catholic youth were moving to embrace these methods? Here is what you actually said - and it is a long way

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from your current claim to "have consistently attacked the armed struggle as counterproductive."

"The only way to minimise loyalist threats and at the same time keep up the anti imperialist struggle is to ensure that the military campaign is subordinate to the political interests of the working class," (*The Worker*, June 1972.) What precisely does this mean? The following makes it quite clear: "Attempts to link the various aspects of the anti-imperialist offensive, North and South, must be made by socialist republicans within their organisations and in the resistance movement. Only when the military campaign is directed by such political ends will Whitelaw's attempts at splitting the anti imperialist side be overcome and the possibility of making an impression on Protestant workers become a reality."

This was the general position which the SWP adopted, basically that the problem with the military campaigns was that it did not have socialist republicans - like the SWP - leading it and giving it political direction. At times, the unconditional support for the Provisionals was hedged with criticisms of aspects of the campaign. Whether the emphasis was on acting as cheerleaders for the IRA, or on criticisms which would distance the SWP from IRA actions, depended opportunistically upon the mood at the time. The allies, such as the SWP, which the IRA won for itself on the "revolutionary left" would turn out to be fair-weather friends.

Here is just one example. In October 1974 the British *Socialist Worker* (19 October) had this way to say on the subject of the troops and IRA activity in Britain: "It's up to us to fight to get them (troops editor) out, by making their dirty war so unpopular with British workers that the Government

cannot continue with it. That means we support all those in Ireland who want to get rid of British troops, including the IRA. When people get hysterical, about IRA bombs in Britain tell them that 20,000 troops in Ireland is like 660,000 foreign troops occupying our towns and cities."

A few weeks later on 21 November the IRA planted bombs in the centre of Birmingham which killed 19 people and injured hundreds. There was an immediate wave of revulsion and an angry anti-IRA and anti-Irish mood swept Britain. On November 30th the *Socialist Worker* ran with a headline "Stop the bombings." The SWP got over the difficulty of supporting the IRA campaign in Ireland where it remained popular among the most combative of the Catholic youth, and opposing it in Britain by drawing the following distinction:

"For we recognise that the Provisional IRA does not operate only, or even mainly, as an organisation carrying out terrorist attacks in Britain. Most of its energies are directed to a quite different task - that of defending the Catholic part of the population of Northern Ireland against murderous attacks, whether they come from the British army or from loyalist thugs. We have to continue to support it in this defence role - at the same time as completely dissociating ourselves from action which kills or maims workers." (*Socialist Worker*, 30 November 1974).

Of the IRA bombing campaigns which had been blitzing towns across Northern Ireland since 1971, not a mention. Of the sectarian nature of some of these attacks, including on occasions the blowing up of pubs in Protestant areas, not a word. In England, condemnation of unpopular actions and a call to halt - in Ireland a

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prettification of the IRA campaign and full support for it to continue.

By the 1980s the IRA campaign was faltering and losing support. The SWP accordingly altered the balance of support and criticism a little in the direction of the later. There was greater emphasis on pointing out that the IRA's methods would not succeed. But there was no call on them to stop. Rather as the January 1986 issue of *Socialist Worker* put it: "We give unconditional support to the IRA in their fight against the Northern State. And we defend their right to take up arms against British imperialism."

More recently this position has been dropped. With the IRA cease-fire in place and deep opposition among the working class to any resumption, the SWP have accepted the accomplished fact, forgotten about the "right to take up arms," and come out against a return to war. Recent SWP material has carried similar theoretical arguments against individual terrorism as those put forward by the Militant/Socialist Party since the early 1970s, arguments which the SWP, for more than 20 years, categorically rejected.

The Socialist Party and before it, Militant, have always stood for the unity of the working class, Catholic and Protestant, as the only basis for a solution. We have explained that this unity can only be built around the common interests of workers, not around the ideas either of Nationalism or of Unionism. Contrary to what you imply this does not mean ignoring issues such as repression, the role of the state, parades, or the national question. It means taking these up in a class manner which can unite workers, not in the sectarian manner they have most often been raised.

Recently the SWP has begun to pay lip service to the idea of class unity. Your letter even claims that you played a role in initiating labour movement demonstrations against sectarianism, a claim which will be greeted with incredulity by those who were actually involved and who knows that the SWP played no role whatsoever in these movements.

In the early 1970s the sectarian reaction seemed unstoppable and the idea of class unity was, to most people, a dim and distant prospect. While the Socialist Party/Militant defended workers unity as the only way forward, the SWP were swept along by the tide. The tiny forces of the SWP were presenting themselves as a radical wing of the "resistance" movement which had sprung from Catholic areas and whose cutting edge was the Provisionals. The "problem" of the Protestant working class was dismissed as something to be dealt with in the future, when immediate issues such as the presence of the troops was resolved.

The arguments set out in SWP publications of the time come close to the Stalinist "theory of stages," first unity with other non-socialist forces to "solve" the national question, then, and only then, can the class issue come onto the agenda. Eamonn McCann writing in *Socialist Worker* (25 May 1974) argued: "If the troops get out, it will at least create the conditions for the Irish people, North and South, to work out their own future, free from outside interference. Which, of course, they have every right to do. In that situation it is likely that Protestant sectarianism would fragment if Protestants lost the British backing which they've come to expect as their right. The basic point is that the development of working class politics

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in Ireland is desperately difficult while the National Question is still unresolved."

Four years later Eamonn McCann, writing in the SWP journal, *Socialist Review* (No. 6, October 1978), doesn't bother to camouflage his nationalist conclusions with even the scantiest socialist dressing: "And we are no longer marching for more 'civil rights,' but against the root cause of all our political ills: British domination. Because the main lesson to be learned from the last decade is that the real problem never was the way Britain ran the North. It was the fact that Britain ran the North. And until Britain leaves, there'll be no end of trouble."

2. *The Role of Protestant Workers*

The idea of Protestant and Catholic workers uniting and fighting for a socialist solution is at no time part of the thinking of the SWP, other than as the music of some distant future. How could any prospect of achieving class unity be seriously considered when the party held the following opinion of the Protestant working class: "Orange bigotry is based on Protestant privilege today as surely as it was when the Orange Order as founded in 1795. Then, the privilege was to do with access to the best land on the most favourable terms. Today, it has to do with jobs, houses, social prestige and access to political influence. The fact that, from the Protestant worker's point of view, the privilege is pretty small, matters not at all. When tuppence half-penny is looking down on tuppence, the half-penny difference can assume an importance out of all proportion to its actual size. The same is true for the 'poor whites' of the southern states of the US or the skin head racists of the

National Front in Britain." (*Socialist Worker*, No. 25, April 1986.)

Or, the same sentiment put rather more succinctly and to the point: "In this sense Protestant workers can be compared to the poor whites of the Southern states of the USA. Their cheap labour goes hand in hand with their racism." (*Socialist Worker*, No. 21, December 1985).

Even were the "privileges" enjoyed by the Protestants to come under attack you held out no real hope that the "ignorant" Protestant workers could be won away from loyalism: "Despite the wave of redundancies that have hit the Protestant industrial heartlands, the perspective of most Protestant workers has been to even more firmly hold on to their privileges and their state," ("Why we need a revolution in Ireland. An introduction to the politics of the Socialist Workers Movement," *Socialist Worker Pamphlet*, p. 27.)

You go on: "This is not to say that all Protestant workers are inevitably bound to loyalism. Their privileges are marginal. They have no objective interest in upholding those privileges above and beyond what could be achieved by uniting working class action. **But given the grip of loyalism in the Protestant communities any real lead in this direction will have to come from outside.**" (ibid, our emphasis.)

And even then the best hope is only that some Protestant workers will be won over: "It is therefore only in the high point of a challenge against both Irish states that sections of Protestant workers will be broken from loyalism." (ibid)

Given this attitude it is not surprising that the SWP held out no real prospect of building class unity. The breaking of

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Protestants from loyalism would have come from the "outside." The fact that there were powerful trade unions and a rich labour tradition, especially in Protestant working class areas, is dismissed as "economic unity" which cannot last. Of the fact that workers involved in industrial struggles are capable of drawing far reaching political conclusions there is nothing. Unity between Catholic and Protestant workers is therefore an objective, but not immediate task. The road to this unity is through the "nationalist" community. When Catholic workers link arms to struggle for socialism they will show a way to their more "ignorant" Protestant brethren and break them from their "racism."

Here is how this strategy is explained in *Socialist Worker*, (January 1986). "Our alternative to the present armed struggle is for Catholic workers in the North to organise as a class against imperialism to put their case to Southern workers. If a mass movement developed out of this, Protestant workers in the Six Counties could be broken from loyalism and workers revolution would be on the agenda."

Today the emphasis of the SWP - on most occasions - is on class unity. But as with the about face on the IRA campaign the calls for Protestant and Catholics to unite are now made in complete denial that your party ever had any other position. You have never clarified whether the condescending and sectarian - in the Northern Ireland sense - attitude you have had to the Protestant working class has been rejected or whether, although deep down and hidden for the moment, it remains your view.

Which brings us to your claim to have helped initiate the labour movement campaigns against sectarianism. Every activist in the North knows that this is

not true. Socialist Party members have been involved in organising working class action against sectarianism since the mid 1970s when we participated in the 1976 Trade Union Better Life For All Campaign. During the 1980s our members were the head of the DHSS workers who established a tradition of striking against sectarian threats, whether from Republicans or from loyalists. In 1992, we organised a general strike in Mid-Ulster against the IRA atrocity at Teebane and against the sectarian attacks on Catholics being carried out mainly by Billy Wright's Mid-Ulster UVF. Our members who took this courageous initiative will recall being chastised by SWP members for organising a "loyalist" strike.

How could the SWP have been part of labour movement campaigns which were demanding a halt to all paramilitary campaigns when you were giving "critical" support to one of the organisations which these movements were directed against? We argued that the broad labour movement was the vehicle which could mobilise workers to defeat sectarianism. You took a different view. You looked, not to the labour movement, but to republicanism, to achieve this. "While never flinching from our profound differences with the Provos, we recognise that they are presently leading the fight against sectarianism and bigotry." (*Socialist Worker*, No. 21, December 1985).

3. Troops and Repression

Your references to the position of the Socialist Party on repression and on the sectarian nature of the state, are wide of the mark. When the Civil Rights campaign developed we, with the very small forces we had at the

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time, gave full support to the struggle to end discrimination. We did not leave it at this but pointed out that Protestant working class people also suffered discrimination and poverty. We called for the civil rights demands to be broadened to class issues so that they could appeal to the Protestant working class.

This was not done and the civil rights movement could only draw its mass support from the Catholic community. In August 1969 the pogroms in Belfast and the threat of even worse pogroms in Derry at the hands of the RUC and B Specials, raised the prospect of a sectarian bloodbath. When the troops were sent in the general feeling in Catholic areas of Belfast and Derry was of relief, of a siege having been lifted. There were some underlying suspicions but it is a fact that the majority of Catholics welcomed the sight of British army uniforms.

The Socialist Party - then Militant - warned against illusions that the troops were sent to protect lives or that this would be their ongoing role. We predicted that: "The call made for the entry of British troops will turn to vinegar in the mouths of some of the civil rights leaders. The troops have been sent to impose a solution in the interests of British and Ulster big business." (British *Militant*, September 1969).

We immediately raised the call for the troops to be withdrawn, but we did not leave it at this. While the troops were not capable of protecting working class areas - their withdrawal without some alternative would have left the armed forces of unionism on one side, and, on the other, would have moved thousands of Catholics to look to their own paramilitary and defence organisations. It would have sparked civil war.

Alongside the demands for the withdrawal of troops we called on the unions to act bring Catholic and Protestant workers together in a trade union defence force. The non-sectarian committees which patrolled parts of Belfast and which prevented intimidation in 1969 offered a model of what could be done. By the 1980s, with the trade union leaders moving to the right and losing any confidence they might have had among the working class, and with the sectarian tensions subsiding, we changed our formulation and called on trade unionists and community activists to take the lead in setting up anti-sectarian committees and in attempting to link these across the sectarian divide.

Throughout the Troubles we have consistently opposed repression, but have done so in a class manner, explaining how repressive measures introduced today against republicans or against loyalists can be used in the future against working class movements which threaten the interests of capitalism. In so doing we have been able to gain the ear of Protestant and Catholic workers where others, including the SWP, have not.

In fact the only time a motion calling for the withdrawal of any section of the troops was passed by a major trade union was in 1993 when Socialist Party members proposed an emergency motion at the NIPSA Conference calling for the withdrawal of the parachute regiment. We won the argument and succeeded in getting this motion passed overwhelmingly in a conference hall packed with delegates from Protestant and from Catholic backgrounds. Interestingly the one SWP member who was a delegate neither spoke in favour of the motion, nor voted for it.

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We also successfully took up the H Block issue in a number of unions. We organised a visit by the Young Socialist representative on the NEC of the British Labour Party to the H Blocks to meet prisoners. He then successfully moved a motion on the NEC which committed the Labour Party to support our position.

It is quite true that, unlike the SWP, we did not simply parrot the demands of the republican movement but put forward our own class programme on the prison issue. We put forward a charter of prisoners' rights which went further than the five demands of the hunger strikers. As to the question of political status we did not go along with the call that all convicted on offences arising out of the Troubles should automatically be granted political status.

To recognise that someone is a political prisoner is to acknowledge that he or she has been unjustly imprisoned for political reasons. We stand not just for political status and special conditions for such people; we stand also for their release. While many of those in the H Blocks could justifiably be called political prisoners, we were not prepared to apply this label to those who, for example, had carried out heinous sectarian crimes and done so quite consciously. We were not going to campaign to award political status to people like the Shankill Butchers, then early into their sentence. Instead we called for a labour movement investigation of all cases so that the working class could determine for itself who was a political prisoner, and not simply read off a script supplied by the Republican movement or by loyalists.

Just as revolutionary phrase mongering is the stock in trade of the SWP on all other issues, so the defiant breast

beating about "oppression" in Northern Ireland is just radical sounding rhetoric which quickly turns into opportunism in practice. Here, again SWP policy is determined by, and changes with, the prevailing wind.

The duty of Marxists is to tell the working class the truth, even when the price of doing so may be temporary isolation. When the troops were sent onto the streets in 1969 it was difficult to stand against the mood of support and explain what their real role would be. The SWP capitulated to the mood and welcomed the arrival of the troops. Whenever this is raised the current SWP leadership in Ireland merely shake their heads and deny that this was their position.

Here is what *Socialist Worker* actually said at the time the troops were sent in: "The breathing space provided by the presence of British troops is short but vital. Those who call for the immediate withdrawal of the troops before the men behind the barricades can defend themselves are inviting a pogrom which will hit first and hardest at socialists." (*Socialist Worker*, No. 137, 11 September 1969).

Yes, your position was for that troops should ultimately be withdrawn when the time was right. In the meantime you supported their presence and role as the only "realistic" means of offering defence of the Catholic areas. But then everyone, including the Labour Government, was for the eventual withdrawal of the troops - after they provided the necessary "breathing space." Your position was nothing more than a left echo, a "socialist" justification of the standpoint of the government and the ruling class.

When, under the whip of repression, the mood in the Catholic areas

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changed, so did the position of the SWP. By 1973/4 *Socialist Worker* headlines were demanding "Troops out." The shift was from one opportunist position to another, from talk of the troops providing a breathing space, to opposition to their presence but from an out and out nationalist point of view. Completely absent from this material is even a hint of a class analysis, a class perspective or a socialist perspective. It is undiluted nationalism from beginning to end.

4. "Root of the problem"

The SWP analysis on the troops and on Britain's role was a left echo of the arguments of the Provisionals and other Republicans. The British presence was the root of the problem. They were in Ireland propping up Protestant supremacy. Force out the troops, end the Protestant veto, call the Unionist bluff, and the door to progress will be open!

This is what you argued: "The supporters of Protestant supremacy and its right wing paramilitary groups can only be encouraged by the presence of the troops. British support, British troops, provide the essential support for Protestant power. They give it the confidence necessary to wage sectarian war on the Catholics. As long as Britain supports a Protestant state in Northern Ireland, and is prepared to commit troops to support that state, Protestant and Catholic sectarianism will flourish. The removal of the troops would take the crutch away from Protestant superiority. It would weaken its confidence and its influence with the majority of Protestant workers." (*Socialist Worker*, 16 October 1974)

This argument is wrong on every count. The British ruling class were

responsible for laying the seeds of the conflict at the time of Partition. But, by the 1960s, before the Troubles began, they would have preferred to withdraw and allow the creation of a capitalist united Ireland which they would have hoped to dominate by economic, not by direct political or military, means. They were unable to do so because there was no way they could convince the million Protestants in the North to accept a united Ireland.

To have attempted to coerce the majority in Northern Ireland into another state would have meant armed resistance and civil war. The British ruling class would then have paid the price for their past role of fomenting the divisions between Protestant and Catholic. The SWP may not have understood that Protestant resistance to a capitalist united Ireland was no bluff, but the British ruling classes were not so blind.

By the 1960s, their strategic objective was to disengage. They have been unable to move even a step in this direction because of the realities on the ground. After 1969, they were faced with a revolt in Catholic areas and chose to lean on the Protestant majority while trying to crush this revolt by military means. This was not to try to preserve the Orange State or allow a return to Stormont. While using repression with one hand the British ruling class attempted to offer concessions to woo the Catholic middle class with the other. They tried to limit and curtail, as far as possible, the sectarian excesses of the Unionists. The policy pursued by the British government during the recent peace process is not something new. It is a continuation of the policy they tried to pursue, under less favourable circumstances, at the outset of the Troubles.

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Instead of attempting to analyse the real interests and real policy of the British ruling class, the SWP swallowed the Nationalist argument and arrived at Nationalist conclusions. The "root of the problem," is described as "the British political and military presence in Northern Ireland," ("H Block - Workers action can win," p. 2). If this is the problem the prescription to resolve it becomes the unity of the so-called "anti-imperialist forces." It is a slither away from the Stalinist idea of stages and a canyon away from Marxism.

As to the obvious fact that the withdrawal of the troops, without an alternative to provide defence, would have led to Unionists and Nationalists arming to fill the vacuum and brought about a Bosnia, the SWP glibly shrugged their shoulders. "If the troops leave won't all hell break out? Maybe people in Northern Ireland, mostly Catholic workers, have been living through enough hell for the past three years anyway, one of the reasons being the troops' presence." (Eamonn McCann, *Socialist Worker*, 25 May 1974.)

During the H Block campaign the SWP published a pamphlet called "H Block - Workers action can win." It is a good example of how the SWP took up the issue of repression. The objectives are agreed - to win a victory which can loosen the British presence, the "root cause of the problem." The only criticism of the Nationalist leadership of the H Block campaign is that they are too compromising on the issue of political status and that they haven't done enough to mobilise the working class to action.

Of a socialist perspective, or the independent interests of the working class, there is absolutely nothing. And the problem of Protestant opposition to

the H Block campaign is solved simply by ignoring it. In fact, while there are occasional references to "loyalists" the pamphlet manages not to mention the word Protestant even once! It talks of strikes in "Waterford Dundalk, Derry Drogheda and parts of Belfast." ("H Block - Workers action can win," p. 11). For "parts of Belfast," read "Catholic parts of Belfast." This is in line with the general attitude of the SWP at the time which was to write off the Protestant working class and call for unity between Catholic workers in the North with Catholic workers in the South as the way forward.

We therefore find it ironic that you accuse others, and ourselves by implication, of a condescending attitude to the Protestant working class when you state: "We categorically reject the patronising approach that issues to do with sectarianism of the state and oppression cannot be discussed in areas such as East Belfast." (11 January letter). We have never held this view. We have always worked in both Protestant and Catholic areas and have been able to put forward all aspects of our programme - because we raise these issues in a class, not a sectarian manner.

The SWP did not do so. The real truth is that when you were presenting a nationalist rather than a socialist case on the issues of "sectarianism and the state" you not only did not attempt to put your case to the Protestants, you justified this by dismissing the Protestant working class and arguing, in effect, for "Catholic class unity." Only by changing your programme and then vehemently denying that you ever had done so, have you attempted, more recently, to make a partial turn to Protestant areas.

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5. *The Parades Issue*

That this has been only a partial turn, brought about by the change in mood and the fact of the united class movements against sectarianism, and not by an honest reappraisal of past mistakes, has been shown by your approach to the parades issue. You attack us for referring to the dispute over parades as a "clash of rights" and for not clearly opposing the "so-called 'right to march' of bigoted Orangemen through Catholic areas," (11 January letter).

Let us set out our actual position on parades. We view the Orange Order as a reactionary, sectarian organisation which has been one of the props of Unionist power in Northern Ireland. However, there is a question of degree. It is an exaggeration to portray it as a semi-fascist organisation equivalent to the British National Front or the Ku Klux Klan.

Orange parades, whether the SWP likes it or not, are part of life in Protestant working class areas. There are many working class Protestants who would have nothing to do with the Order or with Orange culture, and it is true that the Order has been in decline - until the parades controversy.

But, if the thirty years of repression directed against Catholic areas have taught anything, it is that the surest way to promote an ideology or culture is to try to ban it and drive it underground. The vast majority of Protestants, including those opposed to the Orange Order, would defend the right to march. They would particularly do so when the opposition to marches is clearly seen to come from republican-inspired groups.

The Socialist Party does not defend the right of Orangemen to march through Catholic areas. Nor do we uphold the right of republicans to hold parades through Protestant areas if there are objections from residents. However, the disputed marches are not through housing estates, but along what organisers consider to be main arterial routes or through town and village centres. Here the issue is more complex and needs to be looked at concretely.

To say a road or a town centre is Catholic/nationalist or Protestant/loyalist is to say more than "no feet" of the opposite religion are welcome on it. Signs painted up saying a village is 100% nationalist are intimidating and offensive to Protestants who live in or around it, just as the red, white and blue graffiti which bedecks many areas is offensive and threatening to Catholics.

For many years, nationalist parades were banned from Belfast city centre. The excuse given was that they caused offence to the majority of people, especially given the IRA bombing campaign which devastated much of the city centre. Our position was to defend the right of nationalists, and other minorities, to march through the city and to oppose the narrow sectarian view that the space outside Belfast City Hall was for only one religious tradition.

At a time when both communities feel their rights and traditions are under threat, there needs to be sensitivity on all aspects of the national question. To deny the Orange Order the right to march would only serve to inflame Protestants and would increase support for the Order.

We do not support the right of the Orange Order to march through

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Catholic housing estates or through any strictly residential areas where they are not wanted and cause offence. Where there are disputed routes which residents view as Catholic districts, but parade organisers see as arterial routes or as open town centres, we uphold the rights of residents to object and to insist on negotiation. In such circumstances of two conflicting rights, the right to march and the right to object to march, there will either be negotiation and agreement or else force will decide. In that event there is a danger of all out sectarian confrontation which could engulf the North and which would disastrously set back the cause of working class unity and socialism. To the two opposing rights of residents and parade organisers we add a third - the right of the working class to insist that we are not going to be drawn into a sectarian maelstrom due to the intransigence of either side.

In calling on community activists and trade unionists to take the initiative in brokering local agreements we rejected the slogan initially put forward by nationalists of "no consent - no parade." The idea of consent or permission runs counter to the notion of dialogue and negotiation. On the other hand, where parade organisers refused meetings, as at Drumcree, we have fully supported the right of residents to say no to parades until such time as face-to-face discussions take place.

In the summer of 1996, the whole issue came to a head over Drumcree. Northern Ireland was taken to the brink of all out sectarian conflict. The weeklong stand off tapped a mood of sympathy and support in Protestant areas which went far beyond the membership and periphery of the Orange Order. Then, under pressure of

widespread and possibly uncontrollable violence, the state backed down and forced the parade down Garvaghy Road.

Instantly, the mood within the Catholic community changed to rage and anger at what was universally seen as a betrayal. All eyes became fixed on the next major flashpoint - the annual Apprentice Boys march through Derry. A confrontational mood developed in Catholic area, whipped up by residents' groups which had been formed under republican influence to oppose parades. There were proposals to block the centre of Derry to keep the Apprentice Boys out.

At that moment the call which we issued - for pressure from the working class on both sides to negotiate and come up with an agreement - jarred with the general mood and was not widely accepted. Nonetheless we persisted. We argued the point in a meeting with the Bogside Residents Committee. We went onto the streets in Derry city centre calling for negotiation - at a time when the mood in the city was that the Apprentice Boys should be physically prevented from crossing the Foyle and entering the city centre.

This was an unpopular position but, once again, it was our responsibility to tell the truth, no matter how unpalatable it might seem. To halt the Apprentice Boys would have been to send out a signal, intentionally or unintentionally, that Protestants are no longer welcome in Derry City Centre. The result would have been widespread violence with attacks on Catholic communities like the Garvaghy Road and the Lower Ormeau Road. It could very quickly have spilled into civil war.

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In the end, there were negotiations and while there was no formal agreement, it was enough to defuse the situation. Since then attitudes on parades have moved somewhat. There are intransigents on both sides who want to use the issue to provoke sectarian confrontation and derail the peace process. But most people now accept that there must be negotiation and local agreement on the regularity, route, conduct and stewarding of parades. The republican movement has moved a little. The "no consent - no parade" formula is no longer used. Instead, the common slogan is "no talk - no walk," unnecessarily confrontational language for what is a more reasonable position - that unless parade organisers talk to residents their parades will be opposed.

What of the SWP stance on parades? How has it stood the crucial test of time?

Your view is that Orangemen should not be given any rights. "But Drumcree has shown that Orangeism has as much to do with culture as the Ku Klux Kan...Like racism it is a poison which should be oppose by all workers... Socialists do not call for rights for Orangeism - but militant opposition to it everywhere it emerges." (Undated leaflet, "Mass resistance can beat Orangeism")

Unfortunately, you do not follow this line of thought to its logical conclusion which is, not that Orange parades should be kept out of Catholic areas, but that they should be blocked everywhere. If you were consistent, you would be organising opposition to the Orange Order on the Shankill Road every bit as much as in Derry.

When the Orangemen were forced down the Garvaghy Road in 1996, the SWP was swept along by the angry mood in Catholic areas. Your party did

not pause for thought to consider what the nature of this movement was or where it was leading. Your paper eulogised at the riots which were taking place. You talked of an uprising in Derry arguing that the riots were "political" because they tried to burn council offices and the unemployment exchange! You criticised republicans for trying to keep a lid on the situation.

As to the Apprentice Boys parade, you not only echoed the call for it to be halted, you tried to make yours the most defiant voice of the opposition. A leaflet you issued carried the headline, completely meaningless in the circumstances: "Workers' unity against sectarian Orangeism." The leaflet began: "Every worker, Catholic or Protestant, should oppose the Apprentice Boys March on the 10th." Your paper, under the slogan "Stop this Sectarian March," carried an advertisement for an SWP bus from Dublin to go to Derry on August 10th.

In your enthusiasm, you mistook Derry 1996 for Derry 1968-69, not recognising that this movement was fundamentally different in character. The former was a radical movement directed away from nationalism and sectarianism towards class ideas. The more recent was a movement in the direction of all out sectarian conflict. Its ideological wellspring was nationalism, not socialism. The greater the development of the earlier revolt, the greater the opportunity for united class action and socialist ideas. The more developed and sustained the upheaval in 1996, the more likely that the prospects for call unity would be subsumed in a sectarian bloodbath.

In cheering on the "uprising," and mobilising to block the Apprentice Boys, you were cheering on sectarian reaction, not revolution. You were encouraging events which would have

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had a disastrous consequence on the class struggle. As over the restoration of capitalism in Russia and Eastern Europe, you showed yourselves, yet again, incapable of differentiating between revolution and reaction.

It is clear that some SWP members in the North, because they were closer to the reality of the situation, did not look on these events in the same positive manner as the Dublin-based leadership. Your 1997 Conference Bulletin rebukes your Northern membership for not sharing the leadership's enthusiasm for what was happening: "Unfortunately the SWP in the North is not entirely immune to these moods. It was obvious that deep elements of pessimism surfaced in the Northern branches when the Drumcree crisis exploded. The temptation was to see events spiralling out of control, back into the mould of sectarian politics." In fact, the 'temptation' of your members in the North was to see things as they were, not to accept the unreal picture which the SWP leadership was trying to paint.

Today, the call for negotiation over parades is accepted by all but the most die-hard bigots on both sides - and standing alongside them, the SWP. If you were to be consistent you would oppose dialogue between residents and the Orange Order. You would denounce any compromise agreement which allowed Orangemen to march as a "sell-out." Instead, you should be for physical confrontation to prevent all Orange parades. The only basis on which this position would gain support would be in the context of an upsurge in sectarianism such as developed in the summer of 1996. A supposedly "socialist" position which takes on flesh only as part of a wider sectarian reaction is untenable.

6. National Question

On the national question, your letter states your position clearly: "The SWP calls for the smashing of the North's sectarian state and the formation of an Irish workers' republic." Even leaving aside the fact that words can lose their original meaning and the terminology you use is that of left-Republicanism, not Marxism, this formulation is wholly inadequate.

It ignores the fact that partition created not one, but two "sectarian" states. It takes no account of the changes which have taken place over the past ten to twenty years which mean that the characterisation "sectarian state" is one sided and only partly true. The state which exists in Northern Ireland today cannot exactly be equated with the Unionist state of 1921-72, just as it is now a caricature to label the Southern state either "backward" or "clerical dominated."

Your formulation is also one sided in that it says nothing about the relationship of the working class in Ireland to the working class in Britain and beyond. You have clearly made a significant concession to nationalist, anti-British sentiment in leaving this out of your programme.

The Socialist Party advocates a socialist Ireland as part of a free and voluntary socialist federation of Scotland, England, Wales, and Ireland and of a broader European Socialist Federation or Confederation. It is necessary to put this forward to counter those nationalist prejudices which may exist within the Irish working class. Nowhere in your paper or other material do we find any formulation which does this.

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We have updated our position to take into account the current realities and the existing consciousness of the working class, Catholic and Protestant, North and South. The national question is not exactly the same today as it was even thirty years ago. Then the burning issue was the rights of the Catholic minority who had suffered 50 years of discrimination at the hands of the Stormont regime. Among Protestants there was still a sense of security in the fact that they were the majority and had the backing of a heavily armed state.

Catholics today still feel themselves an oppressed minority within the North. But among Protestants there is a difference. The old sense of security has largely gone. With politics increasingly acquiring an all-Ireland and international dimension, Protestants also feel themselves to be a minority whose rights are under attack.

If we are to build unity on the national question the genuine aspirations and fears of both communities have to be taken into account. This means campaigning against all remnants of discrimination and opposing the status quo which forces Catholics into a constitutional arrangement they do not accept. It also means recognising that Protestant fears that they would finish up as second class citizens in a capitalist united Ireland are real and justified. Understanding that Protestants would never voluntarily accept a capitalist united Ireland we are as opposed to this outcome as we are to the status quo.

We believe that Protestants can be won to the idea of a socialist Ireland, that is a single socialist state with the maximum devolution of power to the local level and with the rights of all minorities fully guaranteed. But at this point the majority of Protestants have

made plain that they are opposed to any form of united Ireland. The question has therefore to be answered: if the Protestant working class remain opposed to a socialist united Ireland would socialists coerce them into it? Only if we answer this question with a clear guarantee of no coercion will there be any possibility of overcoming working class Protestant opposition to reunification, even on a socialist basis. Taking the argument further, a guarantee of no coercion means, in practice, upholding the right of Protestants to opt out of a single socialist state and put in place an alternative administrative arrangement for a period. This is a concession, but a concession which is necessary to make in order to build class unity now.

The national question is one of the most difficult questions faced by Marxists. It has to be examined concretely, with an understanding of how it has arisen, as well as where it is headed. It cannot be viewed statically but rather as it changes and develops. It requires sensitivity as well as an ability to register the subtle shifts in consciousness taking place among various layers in society.

There is no once and for all set of demands which Marxists can dust off the shelf and put forward as the socialist answer to every conflict. Demands have to be worked out for each situation and amended as necessary as circumstances change. The key in formulating a programme is to pose the question whether or not a demand raises class consciousness and points towards the unity of the working class across national, ethnic or religious divisions, or whether it reinforces those divisions.

In a sense the programme of Marxism on this issue is a concession, a concession to the fact that nationalist

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sentiments exist and that this nationalism has the potential to overshadow class solidarity and to push class issues to the background. The slogan of self-determination - that is of the right of a nationality to secede from a state - which Lenin defended against Rosa Luxemburg and others who had an ultra-left position, is a concession to the fact that nationalism has a hold, or can develop a hold, over the working class. Were Marxists to deny this right it would be the forces of nationalism which would benefit, being able to put themselves forward as the only "champions" of "their" people.

Rosa Luxemburg made a mistake in one direction, tending to dismiss nationalism. It is possible to make mistakes in the opposite direction and lean too far into the nationalist camp. By making too many concessions to the programme of nationalists, Marxists can find themselves on the nationalist side of the consciousness of the working class, and their actions can reinforce that consciousness.

Working out a programme on the national question which answers the fears and concerns of the various nationalities but at the same time raises class consciousness is a skilful task, and one which the SWP has shown not even the slightest capacity to carry out. During the Troubles, you were found on the nationalist side of the Catholic working class, putting forward ideas which emphasised their separation from Protestants and could only have had the effect of reinforcing nationalism.

When it comes to Protestants you are in the opposite corner. Protestants, you tell us, are not a "community," they have no "separate rights." Echoing the sentiments of Rosa Luxemburg on the national question you protest that there

are not two "communities," that there is one working class; that all talk of separate rights becomes a prescription for "a form of Orange and Green socialism that would make permanent the divisions of the working class," (11 January letter).

So when the parades controversy arises there are "Catholic areas," and a besieged Catholic "community." When you talk about the "Orange state," there is a "minority Catholic community" who have been denied basic rights. All this is correct, although not in the manner you raise it or the conclusions you draw. But when it comes to Protestant sensitivities or Protestant rights there is only one community and any suggestion of anything different is working class heresy.

It is correct to talk of two "communities" in Northern Ireland. By "community," we do not mean a separate nation. It is a term to describe the fact that the sectarian divide has deepened and that there has been a growing sense among working class people that they are either "nationalists" or "unionists." To deny this after thirty years of sectarian conflict is to deny reality. Recognition of what exists is not the same as acceptance or acquiescence to it. If we are to overcome a problem it is first of all necessary to be able to see it and understand it. The development of a united class movement will not be possible in Northern Ireland without acknowledging the fact that the working class is divided; that there are two communities separated on many questions, but still united on many; and requires putting forward a programme which recognises and upholds the rights of both these communities.

Lenin explained that the Russian Revolution would not have succeeded had it not been for the understanding

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by the Bolsheviks of the national question and the programme which flowed from this. In Ireland, as in Tsarist Russia, the national question is a burning issue. The failure of the SWP to absorb even a single grain of the method of Marxism on this question means that, unless corrected, you can make no positive contribution to the struggle to overcome the sectarian divide.

A New Period

The decade of the 1990s has been a difficult period for the genuine forces of Marxism. The collapse of Stalinism, the shift to the right of the former workers' parties, the decline of strikes, the emptying out of the trade union structures and the general throwback of consciousness as the working class have bent a little under the weight of the ideological offensive by the ruling class - all this has made the task of building Marxist organisations considerably harder.

Revolutionaries base themselves on the working class and are not immune from the pressures which come to bear on the class. It is inevitable that a downturn in struggle and a lowering in class consciousness will take a certain toll on the forces of Marxism. On the other hand, such periods, like the period of reaction in Russia after 1905 in Russia, play their part in sharpening ideas and in hardening revolutionary forces which endure them and in this way assist in the preparation for future battles.

Such periods always tend to produce peculiar ideas and to throw up strange political formations. The SWP hailed the 1990s as a period of advance, ushered in by the "positive" developments in Russia and Eastern Europe. As working class organisations shifted to the right and as

the working class generally drew back from struggle, the SWP rounded on left "pessimists" and sounded the call to charge.

Where the working class draw back from struggle, but the ruling class offensive against living standards and working conditions continues, a certain space for ultra-leftism can open up. The SWP, by defying the downward gravitational pull of the class struggle was able to step into the space and grow for a period in the early 1990s. Completely unconnected to the real tempo of the class struggle, the frenzied sectarianism and the reliance on "activism" at the expense of ideas meant it could recruit, especially among students.

A new period is now opening. The economic crisis in Asia, Russia and Brazil will spread to the rest of the capitalist world. The working class and the youth will once again take to the road of struggle. They will do so with the effects of the collapse of Stalinism diminishing, and with the failure of capitalism an everyday reality. Trade union activity will increase and the working class will attempt to rebuild for itself a political voice.

It is characteristic of sectarian groups that they will try to substitute themselves for the real organisations and real movements of the working class by puffing themselves up so as to appear more important than they really are. It is one thing to do this at a time when the class struggle is at a low ebb, when the trade union branches are empty, and when the old mass workers' parties have crossed the class lines. Even then, the exaggerated profile which the sectarian tries to project presents a ridiculous spectacle.

It is another matter, altogether, to try to do it in the face of real mass

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movements of the working class. Small sectarian organisations which continue to puff themselves up to try to become visible will simply explode at a certain point. To intervene in the real movements of workers requires a sense of proportion, an acceptance that revolutionary ideas are held only by a minority at the outset and that frantic efforts to make it appear that this is not so will only repel workers. Intervention means an ability to participate in the class struggle alongside workers, to have answers to the most detailed questions of tactics and strategy and not just general prescriptions. It means being able to know when to go forward and when to advise workers to retreat. It means falling in line with the tempo and rhythm of the class struggle, not the tempo set within some sectarian cocoon.

Everything we have described of the work of the SWP shows that this is all a closed book to your party. It is never too late to learn, but the current indications are that the quickening beat of the class struggle and the emergence of real forces on the left will only draw from the SWP an even more frantic "in your face" approach. It is now only possible to defy the laws of political gravity for so long. At some point it will become clear that producing more placards and shouting louder than anyone else is no substitute for reality. The emergence of real struggles of the working class will leave the SWP behind. In all likelihood the failure of the sectarian "sell papers and recruit" strategy will tilt the SWP organisation more fully into the camp of opportunism.

For Marxists, the new period we are entering will provide enormous opportunities. It will become possible to sink real roots, establish a solid base

of support among the working class and to grow. On the basis of huge events and of the experience and failure of reformism and left reformism, the most combative sections of the working class can be won to Marxism. In turn, the way can be opened to reach the broader layers of the class.

SWP members need to draw the appropriate conclusions. Either they will succeed in breaking their party from sectarianism and opportunism or else, the energy and effort they are now putting into revolutionary politics will be wasted, even counterproductive.

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Appendix:

Correspondence between the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party

*To the Socialist Party: 1 December
1998*

Dear Comrades,

As you know the local elections are going ahead next year.

The Socialist Workers Party plans to contest these elections in a small number of constituencies.

We believe it would not be in the best interests of the Left for both the Socialist Party and the SWP to be running against each other in the same constituencies.

It seems to us that it would make sense if we were to divide our constituencies between the two parties ahead of these elections.

We would like to propose a meeting between representatives of our two organisations to explore whether we can reach an agreement on this issue.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Fraternally,

Kevin Wingfield,

Socialist Workers Party [Ireland]

*To the Socialist Workers Party: 11th
December 1998*

Dear comrade,

We were surprised to receive your letter of 1st December. We recognise by your action in standing in the General Election of last year that you have effected a fundamental change in your policy on revolutionaries standing for election to bourgeois institutions.

This however has not stopped the Socialist Workers Party from continuing to denounce the Socialist Party for being "reformist," for adopting a "parliamentary road," and on a number of occasions attempting to link us to the not only reformist, but Stalinist, Workers Party. All this is done on the basis that we stand in elections. It seems that it is ok for revolutionaries to stand in elections as long as they are not very successful in doing so.

You are entitled to criticise the Socialist Party in any way you wish but you cannot have your cake and eat it. You cannot denounce us for standing in elections, (which we believe revolutionaries should do, as in any other field where we are taking on our class enemies, as seriously and as effectively as we can), and at the same time seek an election agreement with us. We would like an honest clarification from you in relation to this.

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The Socialist Party favours the maximum co-operation between anti-capitalist and socialist forces. The Socialist Party fought the General Election of 1997, not only under our own banner, but as part of an alliance which included the Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charges Campaigns, Cork Householders Against Service Charges, and the Tipperary Workers and Unemployed Group. We did so in an attempt to give working people an alternative in that election on as wide a basis as was possible.

That alliance recorded over 20,000 votes, won a Dail seat (through the Socialist Party) in Dublin, and narrowly failed to win a second one in Tipperary. The only response you made at the time or since has been to attempt to deride the Socialist Party for having, according to you, some sort of obsession with parliamentary politics. This dishonest assertion flies in the face of reality, that this alliance emerged from one of the most significant non-parliamentary struggles of working people ever seen in this country for decades.

You made no attempt to seriously analyse these developments, to look at the class base of the forces involved, their programmes, etc. In fact, the SWP stood against one of the candidates of the alliance in Dublin South Central.

We believe co-operation on the left or in struggles of working people is only possible when there is agreement on a principled basis. This has to firstly include an honest approach to questions of political differences.

The other key principle must be to maximise forces to have a greater impact in the class struggle, to help take such struggle forward, or to have

a greater impact in workers' organisations such as the trade unions, to combat bureaucratism and to argue for a militant programme.

Such co-operation can raise the standing of socialist organisations and the ideas of socialism in the eyes of workers, and achieve real successes for the left.

We have, however, never experienced any desire to engage in such principled co-operations in any sphere of activity from the Socialist Workers Party. This was the case in relation to the anti water charges campaign, it is the case in relation to the movement against racism and deportations, and it is particularly the case in the trade unions.

We wish to raise the question of two unions in particular, SIPTU and the CPSU. In both of these unions, there is an opportunity to develop a strong rank-and-file opposition to the right-wing bureaucracy. This was demonstrated by the 43% vote in SIPTU against P2000 and followed by the excellent vote of Carol Anne Duggan in the elections of the National Officers.

The Socialist Party welcomed the initiative of standing in those elections, and did what we could to gain the highest possible vote. However, we were seriously hampered in doing that, as were other left activists, by your approach. You refused to have a broad campaign. As a result, a great opportunity to build an organised opposition has been seriously lost.

In the CPSU, there is an opportunity to build a rank-and-file opposition which can take that union out of the hands of the right-wing. This is seen as a major threat by ICTU. Yet, you persist in attempting to form an alternative

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grouping to that which already exists. In plain English, attempting for sectarian reasons to split the left and the ranks when they are involved in a major struggle.

Despite our differences over these issues, the Socialist Party would be open to discussing the issue of co-operation, but only over the range of issues raised in this letter, in addition to the question of next year's elections. In relation to the elections, we would also want to have a discussion on the question of programme. As you are aware, there are serious differences between our parties on a range of issues, but particularly on the national question. Up to quite recently, you supported the "armed struggle" of the [Irish] Republican movement. We would like clarification on what your position is now on this issue.

If we could arrive at a position where there was an honest approach to political differences, a real co-operation in the interests of the workers and socialist movement in general, while leaving organisations free to defend their own programmes and attempt to build their own forces, and creating the basis for some mutual respect and trust, then a discussion may have some useful outcome.

Fraternally,

Dermot Connolly,

Socialist Party [Ireland]

To the Socialist Party: 11th January 1999

Dear Comrades,

We wrote a very brief letter to you in December requesting a meeting to discuss possible areas of co-operation regarding the forthcoming local elections. We wished to avoid a situation where candidates from both organisations stood against each other in particular constituencies, as occurred at the last election.

We were puzzled, to say the least, to receive from you a letter which, instead of addressing the issue, contained a series of denunciations of the SWP.

The SWP, you claim, makes 'dishonest assertions': we have never shown any desire to engage in 'principled co-operation;' etc, etc. (The latter we find quite bizarre given that both our organisations sponsored a recent Asylum Rights March and are currently engaged in working with wider forces to oppose deportations).

You state that the reason for outlining this series of denunciations is that there has to be 'firstly...an honest approach to questions of political difference.'

Our political differences are long standing and well-known. We think it is unusual, to say the least, to make discussing these differences a pre-condition to other organisations - or is this approach reserved for an open revolutionary party?

We would prefer you to state clearly whether you are prepared to co-operate with us over the local elections and whether and if, so to arrange a meeting to discuss the nature of this co-operation.

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Just to repeat, our position is that despite long standing and serious differences between our two organisations on a whole range of political questions it would be to the advantage of the Left if we could arrange some degree of co-operation in the forthcoming local elections. That is still our position.

However, as you insist on the 'honest account' of political differences first, let us spell out what we consider these differences to be and then return to the substantial issue. It may, after all, clarify matters beyond the issues of the elections.

We consider that the most important differences between the SWP and the SP can be found in the following main areas.

The nature of the Stalinist regimes of the former USSR and Eastern Europe:

The SWP took the view that the countries of Eastern Europe, China, and Cuba were state capitalist societies where a bureaucratic class collectively organised the exploitation of workers through the state's control of the forces of production.

These societies were not socialist as their Stalinist defenders claimed. Neither were they "post-capitalist" or "transitional." They were state capitalist. Unlike most of the Left, we saw nothing progressive in these regimes and we did not defend them as better than the 'forces of capitalism in the West.'

We never accepted the argument that the 'planned nature' of their economies meant that they could escape the contradictions of capitalist crisis. We saw the collapse of these regimes not as a setback for socialists, but as an opportunity to begin the fight for real

socialism in those countries. Far from the 1989 revolts opening a period of defeat for socialists, we saw it as the first aspect of a wider crisis which would engulf the global system.

The Socialist Party's predecessors, the Militant Tendency in the Labour Party and then Militant Labour, took a very different view. While denouncing Stalinism and claiming adherence to the letter of the Trotskyist tradition, you nevertheless regarded these regimes as "deformed" or "degenerated workers states."

The mistaken characterisation arose, in our view, from a confusion that equates nationalised property relations and the existence of a 'planned economy' with the existence of some sort of workers state.

For the SWP, as for Marx, the decisive criterion is social relations of production - which class controls industry and society. The key question is whether the working class is really in control and is the real ruling class.

For those with eyes to see it was obvious that workers not only did not control industry but were systematically deprived of basic democratic rights. To describe such a society as a "workers' state," as the Socialist Party and its predecessors did, is to make words lose all meaning.

This was more than a dispute about words. Marx argued that the emancipation of the working class must be accomplished by the working class.

For genuine socialists the working class must take control of society in a revolution from below. The regimes that came to power in Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War

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were installed not by workers' revolutions but by Stalin's armies.

If you believed they were workers' states, "post capitalist societies," etc, then you believed there was a way to liberate society that did not involve workers' revolution.

Workers' revolution then became an optional extra and the self-emancipation of the working class merely one option among many possible roads to socialism.

In characterising these societies as state capitalist we understood that the regimes were instruments for the oppression and exploitation of the working class.

We therefore had no difficulty in putting ourselves in the same camp as the workers opposing these regimes and seeking democratic rights, whatever illusions in Western democracy. We were therefore not at all depressed when these intensely unpopular and oppressive regimes were overthrown or collapsed in the 1989-90 period.

This was in sharp contrast to those, like yourselves, who saw these societies as workers' states, etc. They saw the collapse of Stalinism as the "restoration of capitalism."

In reality, the ruling classes in Russia and Eastern Europe sought to liquidate the crisis by re-organising themselves around state capitalism based on state monopolies and instead sought to introduce a greater reliance on market mechanisms.

The belief that the collapse of the Soviet Union represented some form of 'defeat' for socialist forces is entirely wrong. Tragically, it has led many on the left to retreat from an open revolutionary approach.

Parliament and elections:

The SWP believes, along with Lenin in his famous pamphlet *The State and Revolution*, that the existing state is organised to suit the interests of big business. Its structures cannot be adapted by workers for their use. Instead it must be smashed and replaced by workers' councils - directly elected deputies from the workplaces, etc.

Parliament cannot be used as the means by which socialism is inaugurated because real power lies elsewhere - in the boardrooms of big business.

In any revolutionary upheaval in the industrialised countries a key question will soon emerge: shall power in society be exercised either through the old parliament, representing the capitalist class, or through workers' councils?

As this question will only be settled by the contending forces of the rival classes, it is vital that socialists are clear on the issue.

In our view, your organisation is ambiguous. Formally you may distance yourself from the parliamentary road to socialism but you also hold open the possibility that socialism can be achieved by a mass movement 'backing up' its parliamentary representatives.

In present conditions this can lead to a danger of focussing workers' struggle on the need to win support in parliament rather than relying on their own strength to establish victory.

In the longer term, your ambiguity on the question of parliament can prove disastrous. In a revolutionary situation every reactionary element will rally around the cry to defend the

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'institutions of parliamentary democracy.'

The sharpest expression of your ambiguity on this issue has been the recent developments in your international tendency. Your Scottish equivalents, for example, have renounced the project of constructing an exclusively revolutionary party but have explicitly embraced the notion that "at this stage," the Socialist Party needs to unify reformists and revolutionaries within the one organisation. We believe that these issues will also emerge for you in the future.

All of this has some consequence for how our organisations approach the question of elections - but not the way you caricature it in your letter.

The SWP has never taken the view that revolutionaries on principle should not stand for elections. We stand in the tradition of the Bolsheviks who argued explicitly against the "ultra lefts" who abstained from elections. Your claim that we 'denounce' you or anybody else for standing in elections is therefore wrong.

Equally, the claim that we have seen the light and come around to your viewpoint may be comforting for you but is pure fantasy.

For the SWP, elections can provide a platform for revolutionary propaganda. Clearly we aim to receive as high a vote as possible but we do so on a clearly revolutionary basis.

The SWP is a very active party conducting agitation and propaganda on an ongoing basis. Electoral work is subordinate to the overall work of the party. We do not therefore see preparation for elections as the dominant focus for our party's work.

We take seriously Lenin's motto that 'an ounce of struggle is worth a ton of votes.'

While this means that we approach the question of parliament and elections from different standpoints, we nevertheless believe there is a scope for co-operations. The nature of that co-operation needs, of course, to be discussed.

The Unions:

Socialists have been divided between the two main strategies for the unions. Some have argued a "Broad Left" strategy. What is necessary is to simply replace the current trade union leaders by others who claim to be more militant and left wing.

The SWP believes the problem runs deeper and requires a rank-and-file strategy.

The SWP believes that the union bureaucracy does not just sell out because it has terrible politics (which it has) - but also because it functions as a privileged layer within the labour movement with explicit material interests to defend by maintaining the 'orderly' process of industrial relations.

Splits develop within the bureaucracy between the Left and the Right - but these splits are secondary to the difference of interests between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy.

The recent attack by the left bureaucrat, Peter Bunting, in the NRBU on the rank-and-file organisation, Busworkers Action Group, confirms this analysis.

For this reason, the SWP has long advocated the formation of rank-and-file organisations that are not simply electoral machines to enable left

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wingers to enter the bureaucracy but aim to build a base at workplace level through militant struggle and become capable of taking action that is independent of the bureaucracy.

In our view, the SP takes a different approach. On a number of occasions you have failed to challenge the left bureaucracy of the unions.

The most prominent recent case was the events leading up to the closure of Packard Electric where you accepted the argument about 'globalisation' advanced by the ATGWU bureaucracy and failed to argue for occupation of the plant.

During the last campaign against Partnership 2000 you fought very hard to put left bureaucrats PJ Madden, the INO general secretary, on the campaign platform even though rank-and-file members of his union were furious with his sell-out policies.

We believe that these mistakes arise from a notion that capturing bureaucratic positions can change unions - even if they are not linked to a wider rank-and-file movement that is able to exercise its industrial muscle at workplace level.

You mention two unions specifically. In SIPTU, an SWP member Carolann Duggan defied the dominant pessimism of the left in that union and ran on a clear rank-and-file ticket with open socialist politics. Her campaign was a broad campaign that was open to anyone who agreed with her policies.

Your slur that the SWP refused to have a 'broad campaign' is silly. One of your members attended campaign meetings and of course the size of the vote is a tribute to the fact that scores of SIPTU members worked in this campaign.

The case of the CPSU brings out more clearly the differences in our approaches. The reality is that the union had a 'broad left' dominated executive but unfortunately it failed to advance militant policies and so lost out considerably the following year. In response, supporters of the SWP launched a new bulletin which advocated a rank-and-file strategy. None of this precludes co-operation with the Broad Left as was demonstrated in the recent vote on Partnership 2000.

Oppression and Northern Ireland:

The SWP takes seriously Lenin's injunction that socialists are not simply trade union branch secretaries but work as tribunes of the people openly opposing oppression.

This is vital in Ireland where although there have been gains for the middle class, the Catholic population in Northern Ireland still face the sectarianism of the Northern Ireland state and suffer harassment from its police force.

The SWP calls for the smashing of the North's sectarian state and the formation of an Irish workers' republic. We openly oppose the practice of Orange marches going through Catholic areas and have joined resistance to these marches.

We never accepted the argument that the IRA were the main cause of the violence in the North. The IRA's violence was a tragic response to the sectarianism of the Northern Ireland state and could not simply be equated with that of loyalist forces.

(The claim that we supported the tactic of armed struggle is wrong and most probably designed to win the cheap

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support from forces to the right of both the SWP and SP - we have consistently attacked the armed struggle as counterproductive and helped to initiate labour movement sponsored demonstrations which opened the way for peace).

We openly opposed sectarian oppression while at the same time clearly attacking Republican politics, in particular for their dismissal of Protestant workers.

For us, the main divide in Northern Ireland is the class divide. Precisely because of this we are determined to raise all the necessary issues in all sections of the working class. We categorically reject the patronising approach that issues to do with the sectarianism of the state and oppression cannot be discussed in areas such as East Belfast.

The Socialist Party has a very different record. While you formally acknowledge the state is sectarian, you have never taken part in any campaign to call for the removal of British troops.

You refused even to support the demand for political status during the H Block struggle.

In the siege of Drumcree by Orange bigots and their demand to be allowed to strut through and intimidate the Catholic Garvaghy Road, you claim this is a "clash of rights."

Unlike the SWP, you have not clearly opposed the so-called "right to march" of bigoted Orangemen through Catholic areas in cases like this. Once again, a key difference between us is your tendency to make formally "correct" abstract propaganda while failing to grasp the central issue of the need to oppose oppression.

Most recently, we believe your politics have taken a further shift. You now seem to argue that there are 'two minorities' in Ireland and entertain the possibility of a separate socialist state in Northern Ireland alongside a socialist state in the South.

Logically, this can only lead to a form of Green and Orange socialism that would make permanent the divisions in the working class.

Our view is that both Republicanism and loyalism have to be decisively challenged by fighting for a socialist united Ireland.

Both of our organisations stand outside either the Stalinist or Social Democratic traditions. But our differences as discussed above are serious. This explains why our parties are separate.

We could go on to discuss these differences further and undoubtedly you will not find our reply satisfactory from your point of view. However, to repeat: it was not our intention to start out with a long discussion of the differences - you insisted that these differences first be discussed.

To return therefore to the substantive issue at hand. If you are interested in co-operating in the electoral field we would suggest a meeting to discuss the nature of this co-operation.

(If you are not interested, for whatever reason, please let us know so we can terminate futile discussions and prevent any posturing on the issue.)

For our part, we wish to be absolutely explicit from the word go about our intentions. To facilitate discussion we would make a number of limited proposals.

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Firstly, we believe that both parties - on the basis of their general positions outlined in their respective papers - should call for a vote for each other's candidates. As has been made clear this does not amount to an endorsement of everything each party has said but it is a basic recognition that a vote for SWP or SP is preferable to a vote for the right wing or reformist parties. Do you share this view?

Second, we believe there needs to be a 'non-aggression pact' where we do not run candidates against each other. In an even moderately positive atmosphere we could come to agreement on this.

Third, and more difficult, might be a short platform where we outline areas of agreement. This however, as you say, should still leave organisations free to defend their own specific programmes.

As each of our organisations has expressed in a sharp fashion the nature of their differences, we suggest we now focus on the issues of elections. We request you to respond to the three suggested areas of co-operation outlined above either in written form or at a meeting to be arranged at a mutually agreed time.

We look forward to your early reply.

Yours fraternally,

Kevin Wingfield,

Socialist Workers Party

*To the Socialist Workers Party: 28
January 1998*

Dear comrade,

Further to my phone conversation with Richard, I am writing to confirm our attitude to your proposal for a meeting in the short term. We intend writing a longer reply to the questions of political differences and other points in your letter of 11 January.

We are disappointed with your response to the issues we raised in our letter. We feel that you have avoided the issues raised in relation to co-operation on the left, and particular in relation to the points we raised on work in the unions.

These are for us important issues. We would like to resolve them in the interest of creating better opportunities to build a fighting opposition in this key area. They have not been raised as an excuse for avoiding co-operation in other areas.

Given your response, we feel there would be little benefit in a meeting at this stage. We intend publishing your reply, along with our first letter and a reply to your most recent letter, and we hope that from a discussion on these and other questions which might come up that a better understanding of the politics and approaches of both parties may emerge.

Yours fraternally,

Dermot Connolly,

Socialist Party

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To the Socialist Party

Dear Comrades,

It is time the left grew up. We originally wrote to you with a simple request for a meeting to discuss co-operation in the forthcoming elections.

However we have now found ourselves engaged in an elaborate sectarian charade where you have not only refused to have a meeting with us but then, ironically, you tell us that the issues you want discussed "have not been raised as an excuse to avoid co-operation in other areas."

If this double talk were taken in isolation it might have the black humour of a Monty Python sketch. However, the situation facing working-class people is far too serious for these petty games.

As I am sure you are aware, this correspondence takes place against the background of a major crisis facing Fianna Fail. The revelations about Haughey's lifestyle and the corruption that accompanies conventional politics has given working people a glimpse of how the bourgeoisie really works.

This makes it all the more astounding that you refuse to even meet to discuss the possibility of calling for a vote for each other's candidates; to avoid standing candidates against each other and to draw up a limited joint manifesto.

We now challenge you to state publicly which other left wing parties do you call for a vote beside yourself? Your own paper suggests that you will be fielding less than twenty candidates in the forthcoming local elections. Are you seriously suggesting that if there is no Socialist Party candidate in a constituency that workers should not vote for any other candidate?

Finally, we suggest that if you wish to publish this correspondence as a debate that you publish all the correspondence and that you accord equal space to both parties in the debate. If you wish to write us another long political letter we would be more than willing to supply you a reply for publication.

However, to repeat, our primary concern is the need for both our parties to show some degree of unity in the coming elections. We urge you to have a re-think.

Yours fraternally,

Kevin Wingfield,

Socialist Workers Party