The CWI split: a Trotskyist analysis

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In this article, Martin Suchanek argues that the real reason for the split in the CWI is to be found in the political and methodological errors built into the foundations of the organisation's tradition

After several months of an increasingly fractious international factional struggle, it came as no surprise to participants or observers when the CWI (Committee for a Workers? International) split in July 2019. The minority faction around long-time leader of the Socialist Party in England and Wales, Peter Taaffe, retained the name, while the majority constituted itself as International Socialist Alternative. Both duly claimed that they are continuing the political and programmatic tradition of the CWI.

All the groupings that emerged from the split of the CWI, as well as the International Marxist Tendency, IMT, which also developed from the CWI tradition, lay claim to the politico-methodological legacy of their current and see their continuation of this tradition as a decisive step for building a Trotskyist, revolutionary organisation.

But first we will show that the political foundations established by the CWI, long before the IMT split in the early 1990s, already contained the seeds of the problem, which, as a result of recent political developments, increasingly came to the surface and eventually led to the split.

This article covers these political and methodological roots. In a later article we will cover developments since the foundation of the two successor tendencies. Firstly, we will look at some of the peculiar features of the conflict and the final split.

The split

Formally, the faction called In Defence of a Working Class Trotskyist CWI, led by Taaffe, carried out the split after a majority of the Socialist Party, the CWI section in England and Wales, adopted a resolution entitled Refoundation of the CWI at a conference held on 21 July 2019. An international conference on 22-25 July, to which only the supporters of the Taaffe faction were invited, formalised the rupture at the international level.

According to their own statement, delegates from the following countries participated: England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, Austria, Finland, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Chile and the USA. Supporters from South Africa and Nigeria were unable to participate because of visa problems. As optimistic and confident as the proclamations of this current may sound, they cannot hide the fact that only a minority of the sections of the CWI supported them.

The other current, which now exists as the International Socialist Alternative, could formally always rely on a majority of the organisation?3s International Executive Committee (IEC), the highest executive body between the international conferences. The current around Peter Taaffe, on the other hand, controlled the smaller International Secretariat, IS, which was constitutionally accountable and subordinate to the IEC.
After it became apparent that the majority in the IEC could not be changed, Taaffe?s faction decided to force a split by refusing to implement decisions made by the ?petit-bourgeois majority? of the IEC and to ensure control over the organisation?s apparatus by any means. They had already stated several times before that it would under no circumstances allow the resources of the CWI to ?fall into the wrong hands?. This already became evident in the spring when the IS, led by the faction, refused to convene an IEC meeting or to accept an invitation to one in order to prevent it being voted out of office.

In practice, the majority of the IEC had already begun to form itself as an international grouping before the end of July 2019. Important sections had already stopped paying their contributions months before and in effect set up a counter-faction to the historic leadership of the CWI around Peter Taaffe.

In this sense, the majority of the IEC, which had the support of the clear majority of the sections, although not necessarily of the majority of the members of the CWI, (because the English/Welsh section is still the largest), correctly described this action as a ?coup,? in open breach of the CWI?s constitution.

Only one day after Socialist Party conference and the call for the ?re-establishment? of the CWI by the ?proletarian? faction, the majority of the IEC also went public. While Taaffe and co. want to re-establish the CWI, the majority intended to continue as the CWI. Thus their ?provisional committee? announced:

?In addition to the criminal actions of an irresponsible degenerated bureaucratic leadership, this crisis has also shown the opposite for our organization: that the CWI is a healthy and vibrant organization in which a majority has succeeded in asserting itself against bureaucratic degeneration and maintaining the unity of the vast majority of our International, even though it must assert itself against some of its founders with the greatest authority.

The CWI majority is united, intact and has considerable fighting power in more than 30 countries around the globe!?1

As with any divorce, a struggle over the family silver ensued in the following weeks and months, accompanied by mutual accusations of bureaucratic or even ?criminal? machinations.

Even if the IEC majority was formally correct to say that the faction around Taaffe and the IS majority violated the statutes, a look into the CWI?s history makes it clear that in the past both sides were involved in such bureaucratic manoeuvres, for example, in the break with the IMT, and both tolerated the criminal actions of leading members of the Ukrainian section around the turn of the century, when the latter financially cheated a dozen other international currents.

**Search for causes and its difficulties**

Above all, however, the reference to the rapid and bureaucratic escalation of the factional struggle does not explain why these distortions occurred in the first place and ultimately led to the split.

The emergence of a faction around the core of the international leadership is itself astonishing in an organisation that claims to be revolutionary. Factions and tendencies are usually formed against an existing political leadership to correct perceived errors in the political line of the organisation, not as a political weapon of the core leadership.

The matter becomes even more astonishing when the immediate reason for the foundation of Peter Taaffe?s faction is considered, namely a defeat in the vote on the agenda at an international leadership meeting at the end of 2018. At that time, Taaffe, and the IS he led, wanted to focus the discussion on the work of the Irish section, which they accused of a petit-bourgeois deviation from the CWI programme. However, the IEC majority did not agree to this, and the current around Taaffe saw this as toleration, if not
approval, of the opportunism of the Irish section.

A look at the Irish section’s election campaign and intervention in the campaign against the abortion laws reveals that this accusation was by no means unfounded. However, an international leadership, especially one with several full-time staff, has to explain why it did not prepare the meeting with a document on the work of the section and why it did not make its criticism available to all IEC members and the Irish leadership, in writing, and on the basis of quotes and evidence. It also needed to explain why it was only at this point that it expressed its criticism and noticed an opportunistic development, after the Irish section had been praised as the CWI’s ?crown jewel? for years because of its election successes.

All these questions were met by eloquent silence. The internal documents that have gone public via social media in recent months cover several hundred pages, but they hardly enable any understanding of the mutual accusations on the basis of clear facts and arguments.

The faction around Taaffe can be credited, however, with pointing to serious political differences for the then-threatened and now-completed CWI split, namely, a petit-bourgeois deviation from the CWI’s programme, an adaptation to petit-bourgeois feminism, identity politics and a renunciation of the working class as the central subject of social transformation. The Irish section and the CWI’s majority was presented as following in the footsteps of ?Mandelism?, the politics of the former United Secretariat of the Fourth International (now the International Secretariat of the FI), which repeatedly sought substitute subjects for the proletariat on the basis of opportunism and, in earlier years, revolutionary impatience.

In this way, the faction around Taaffe tried to put the main focus on a political difference, but without substantiating it politically or factually. The extensive documents do not lack sharp accusations, but what they do lack is convincing arguments and evidence. The ?petit-bourgeois deviations? are evidenced by low grade anecdotes such as reports of politically problematic lectures given by leading comrades of the Irish section. An analysis of their election platforms or criticism of the opportunistic procedures of their anti-abortion platform was at best only hinted at.

The example of ROSA

In our opinion, the lack of propaganda for socialism by the Irish section should be condemned. It is noteworthy, however, that in the entire ?Working Class-Trotskyist? critique there was no reference at all to the fact that the ROSA (Reproductive rights against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity) organisation, dominated and led by the CWI, did not demand unlimited and free abortion on demand. Instead, it confined itself to the call for a 12-week deadline.

There is nothing to be said against critically supporting a mass campaign for a 12-week deadline solution against a legal ban on abortion. In Ireland, however, the existing anti-abortion campaigns; Abortion Rights Campaign, ARC, and Cork Women’s Right to Choose Group, unlike ROSA, advocated a more radical demand for abortion without a deadline. Although the CWI section and the international leadership presented ROSA as a ?more radical? campaign because it was supposed to be more socialist and proletarian, they deliberately called for a deadline because they hoped that this would be easier to convey to the existing workers? consciousness, often influenced by Catholicism.

This real opportunism, as well as the lack of a transitional programme that would have linked the struggle for democratic rights and social demands with the struggle for a socialist revolution, was not simply promoted by the section on its own account. For years, the work of the section, its deputies, its broad campaigns, and its electoral successes have been regarded as prime examples of a ?real? socialist intervention. The former CWI leadership only ?discovered? the ?deviations? late in the day and ?overlooked? a central aspect of the opportunism of the abortion campaign until now.
The reason for this is probably to be found in the fact that this does not fit into the narrative of the Taaffe faction. Certainly, the latter rightly criticised the Irish section, albeit belatedly, for not focusing on gaining trade union support for the campaign against abortion laws and for lightly and uncritically adopting statements by petit-bourgeois feminist writers or representatives of the #MeToo movement. This was used as evidence of the adoption of the positions of feminism and identity politics - of course without subjecting them to Marxist criticism in substantial documents on identity politics, or proving their theoretical and programmatic reflection in the politics of the Irish section. Instead, the achievements in women’s politics of the British Militant current and CWI section, which date back several decades, are listed page by page.

It is also remarkable that CWI sections, now accused of moving away from the working class, were described as making enormous progress in November 2018, at the last meeting of a joint IEC. For example, the social composition of Socialist Alternative, the US section, was said to have changed positively and it was reported as having shifted its focus to the trade unions. Today, it is part of the petit-bourgeois deviation of opportunism towards Sanders and the Democratic Party. In this matter, the working class faction around Peter Taaffe has apparently forgotten that the opportunism towards Sanders, the support of his presidential candidacy within the framework of the Democratic Party (as well as the former support of Green candidacies like Ralph Nader and Jill Stein) was internationally acknowledged CWI policy.

**Anecdotes instead of arguments**

There is a general difficulty both in finding the cause and understanding the content, of the split. Both sides respond to accusations with an endless listing of achievements past. The current around Taaffe repeatedly refers to the glorious times of the CWI, which they locate back in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The IEC majority, on the other hand, tries to assert itself against the faction’s accusations by relativizing them and referring to its own political successes. Mantra-like, it accuses the current around Taaffe of exaggerating and playing everything up.

This gives rise to the peculiarity that, after the split, both sides promised to submit more detailed documents to explain their criticism and their respective positions. The history of the revolutionary left may be rich in splits but, as a rule, the parties involved in a dispute normally drew up their most important faction documents during the struggle, not afterwards.

The course of the faction struggle itself throws a light on the CWI’s problematic internal life and its practice of democracy. It is precisely in such internal political struggles, which are a necessary part of the life and development of communist or socialist organisations? no revolutionary should have any illusions about this? that the maturity and quality of an organisation can be seen.

Differences on fundamental programmatic issues will always lead to divisions if they do not lead to clarification (including the possibility of a common, higher, revolutionary synthesis). The question of the evaluation of new social movements, of tactics and politics in the emerging women’s movement, in the environmental movement, in national liberation struggles, in the struggle against racism, in the attitude towards Brexit and the crisis of the EU, in the tactics towards Corbyn, in the characterisation of China, in the assessment of the world situation... all these are fundamental questions that any serious revolutionary organisation must answer.

In these turbulent times, marked by crises and instability, of right-wing advances, but also by mass resistance to them, a revolutionary organisation needs above all clarification of its perspective, summed up in an international programme.

**Marxism and factional struggle**
In this sense, the CWI’s factional struggle, whether or not it led to a split, ought to have served as such a moment of clarification and political training for thousands of members. Thus, for example, the faction struggle in the US Trotskyist SWP 1939/1940 ended in a split but, at the same time, the confrontation led to a political clarification of fundamental methodological and programmatic questions. It is no coincidence that during this discussion two classic works on party building issues emerged, Leon Trotsky’s *In Defense of Marxism*, and James P Cannon’s *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*.

Such an educational character, raising the consciousness and understanding of Leninism and Trotskyism, can of course only be achieved if, during a period of crisis, internal party democracy is expanded in order to create a climate of concentration on political clarification. In the 1930s, Trotsky even went so far as to give the petit-bourgeois opposition in the US SWP guarantees of intra-party democracy and loyalty, regardless of who won a majority at the conference. In the event of a victory for the Bolshevik majority, he proposed granting the opposition further minority rights (including a limited public debate on differences). In the event of the victory of the petit-bourgeois opposition, he insisted on fighting to change the direction of the party as a loyal minority.

In the CWI, neither of the currents had in mind a serious, democratic factional struggle that would clarify and develop the membership’s awareness of the fundamental issues at stake. At best, they paid only lip service to democratic centralism. The faction around Taaffe obviously drew from the possibility of defeat the conclusion that it was better to secure the assets and structures as far as possible than to fight for the majority in an organised manner for even one year.

This attitude, however, does not seem to have been the monopoly of the Taaffe faction. The sections from Spain, Portugal, Venezuela and Mexico, which have been acting as the International Revolutionary Left since 21 July 2019, along with some members from the Hamburg SAV in Germany, behaved quite similarly. Originally, they were part of the faction around Peter Taaffe. At the end of March 2019, however, major differences emerged at a faction meeting, which ended not only with the withdrawal of the four sections from the faction, but also from the CWI itself.

For a long time, the majority of the CWI IEC asserted that the differences were not substantial and that everyone stood on the CWI programme. Naturally, this position did not contribute to clarification. The confrontation at the IEC in November 2018, and the formation of a faction, appeared to be a purely personal bureaucratic procedure, not an expression of political differences. Even if these had only been exaggerated, the majority would at least have had to ask itself what had led to this faction, that is, what was its political error. In its response to the split, it is forced to deal with this when it wrote:

> "The former leadership responsible for the CWI’s day-to-day work, which carried out a bureaucratic coup in the organisation (the majority of the International Secretariat and the minority faction it gathered around itself), showed a lack of confidence in the intervention in these movements. They stressed the fear that our membership might be confused by petit-bourgeois identity politics and other 'unfamiliar ideas' in these movements, preferring, in their own words, to 'dig in' waiting for events within the official workers' movement."

They attacked our sections in Ireland and the US, which successfully fought great struggles of workers, women and youth in which they achieved victories while holding up the banner of revolutionary socialism in a principled and flexible manner, for 'capitulation to petit-bourgeois identity politics?'. The majority believes that such an attitude is not the right way to protect the proletarian principles of socialism and in fact would leave our membership unprepared, and the petit-bourgeois influences unchallenged, in some of the most important mass mobilisations of our epoch."
The wrong method of conducting internal disputes did not only mean that the split adopted bureaucratic forms. It also meant that the factional struggle could not even fulfil the function it was supposed to perform in a genuinely revolutionary organisation - raising its political level, clarifying and sharpening the arguments and therefore the consciousness of its members.

That this did not happen, however, itself requires an explanation. In our opinion, this must be sought precisely where all products of the split (and this applies equally to the IMT split) see their strength: in the constantly invoked ?tradition? of the CWI, closely associated with Ted Grant, Alan Woods and Peter Taaffe.

**The CWI tradition**

At this point, we do not want to rehearse the whole history of the CWI but will only address some of the fundamental characteristics of its particular tradition of centrism, i.e. oscillation between revolutionary communism and reformism, which are necessary for understanding the current crisis and split.3

The development of the CWI as a separate political current in Britain and internationally since the 1970s is closely linked to the work of the Militant Tendency and its predecessors in the Labour Party in Britain.

In order to justify a long-term, strategically interpreted entrism, which means organised work in the Labour Party (and later in other reformist or nationalist parties such as the ANC), the founders of Ted Grant?s current developed a special understanding of the development of class consciousness and the ?radicalisation? of the working class, which broadly went as follows:

In the event of an intensified class struggle, the proletarian masses would (again) flow into their traditional, social-democratic parties or, in the period before the collapse of the Eastern bloc, into the Stalinist ones. In some countries, the same thing could happen with de facto left-bourgeois or nationalist formations such as the ANC in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid, or the PPP in Pakistan.

This reveals a schematism that was always empirically questionable. Thus, in May 1968, it was not only the ?traditional? organisations which grew in France; rather it was the radical left that experienced a massive upswing. It was the same in Italy in 1969 and years after. These were favourable conditions for the creation of revolutionary parties. The fact that the socialist groups - based on ?workers? autonomism?, on Maoism, or a centrist degeneration of Trotskyism - did not have adequate tactics to use against the reformist parties shows a fatal weakness in them, but it does not confirm the schema of the Militant Tendency.

At the beginning of the 1990s, particularly after the international social democracy turned to the right, that schema was questioned to a certain extent by the CWI?s majority around Peter Taaffe. In contrast to the supporters of the CWI?s founder Ted Grant, they saw no further perspective for the work within the British Labour Party and advocated the construction of an ?independent? party. In 1992, the two sides split at the international level. Of course, this did not take place without bureaucratic manoeuvres and intrigues, but the newly established CWI was able to rely on a clear majority and set course to build its own organisations outside traditional social democracy or to participate in new left-wing reformist parties, such as Rifondazione Comunista in Italy.

Their analysis of the social democratic parties, previously characterised as (reformist) bourgeois workers? parties, changed practically everywhere and overnight and they were now declared to be openly bourgeois parties.

The break, however, was by no means as methodologically fundamental as it might appear at first glance.
While the characterisation of social democratic parties was changed, both currents maintained the misconception of the development of revolutionary consciousness. For the CWI, reformist consciousness is not seen as a form of bourgeois consciousness, but as a necessary stage of development on the path to revolutionary consciousness. While the current around Grant and Woods, that is, today's IMT, stuck to the classical schema and its characterisation of social democracy, the CWI kept the schema, but no longer considered the Labour Party (or the SPD, etc.) as concrete and necessary intermediate stages in the development of consciousness. This role they assigned instead either to various ?left-wing parties? (European Left Party, reformist currents within or outside existing parties), the trade unions, or the construction of their own parties on a centrist programme.

Long before the split between the CWI and IMT, this schema had led to important adaptations to reformism or to the (supposed) predominant consciousness of the working class. The Militant Tendency was the only Trotskyist current to theorise the possibility of a peaceful, parliamentary road to socialism. By means of a majority and mass mobilisation of the working class, the proletariat could conquer and assert power without having to smash the bourgeois state apparatus and defeat the counter-revolutionary reaction of the bourgeoisie.

In the 1985 version of Militant?s What We Stand For, under the heading ?Peaceful Transformation? we read:

?All the scheming and conspiracies of the capitalists can come to nothing on the basis of a bold socialist policy backed by mass mobilisation of the labour movement. An entirely peaceful transformation of society is possible in Britain, but only on condition that the full power of the labour movement is boldly used to effect this change.?

In other words: if only the working class wills it, the bourgeois state apparatus of one of the most powerful imperialist countries in the world will not have to be crushed by revolution and the counter-revolution violently suppressed. According to Militant and its successors, the impossible becomes possible; the peaceful transformation ceases to be a reformist fantasy so long as the masses remain ?mobilised?.

This fundamental break with the Marxist theory of state and its understanding of revolution necessarily had programmatic consequences, which can be found in all CWI programmes. The question of smashing the bourgeois state apparatus, arming the class (workers? militias, soldiers? councils) is simply omitted. Thus, adaptation to the prevailing non-revolutionary consciousness of the class finds its justification in theoretical revisionism in order to avoid ?alienating? the working class.

Another form of adaptation was that the Militant Tendency (like other groups of British Trotskyism) from very early on, raised the slogan of a ?Labour government on a socialist programme? - a slogan that practically implied the possibility of the revolutionary regeneration of the Labour Party or other reformist parties.

In work inside and outside the Labour Party, adaptation to the prevailing moods of the working class and, through that, to the bourgeois system, was deepened. Thus, in the Malvinas war between Britain and Argentina, Militant refused from the outset to stand for the defeat of British imperialism, that is, its own bourgeoisie. On the question of open borders, the CWI adapted for years to social chauvinism in the working class and consistently refused to stand up for the abolition of all immigration controls. The abolition of any state selection between ?good? and ?bad? migrants, i.e. migrants who are useful and not useful to capital, would not be ?understood? by the working class. So, instead of politically opposing chauvinism in the working class, it is accepted as ?natural?. This adaptation can be found particularly clearly in the so-called ?Workers? Brexit?, an allegedly left-wing variant of Brexit. This is intended to combat the influence...
of right-wing populist demagogues such as Farage or Johnson. In reality, the CWI tails them and also turns its back on all those wage earners who are against Brexit (and the three million EU citizens denied a vote in the referendum). Here their tailing of what they claim is working class consciousness (in fact it is a bourgeois consciousness even if held by workers) proves to be not only opportunistic, but also useless, stupid, and counterproductive.

**Tailism**

The CWI? s tailism has a theoretical foundation. It deliberately rejects, as does the IMT, Lenin? s conception of the development of class consciousness, most succinctly presented in *What Is to Be Done*. Thus, Alan Woods writes:

>?The working class begins to develop a socialist consciousness from living experience of exploitation and oppression, beginning with the active class that leads the class. (...) The class struggle itself inevitably creates not only a class consciousness, but also a socialist consciousness?.4

Like many other revisionists who consider Lenin? s polemic against Economism to be ?exaggerated? and, therefore, think they can reject his entire theory, Woods overlooks the fact that his idea is diametrically opposed not only to that of Lenin and Kautsky, but also Marx. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx explains that the wage labour relationship itself shapes the consciousness of the classes. The fact that the whole of the value produced through the expenditure labour power is concealed by its transformation into wages and profits, producing an ideological reversal, obscures consciousness of the real exploitative relationship. Marx explains this in *Volume I*:

>?In slave labour even the part of the working-day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of existence, in which he therefore actually works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All the slave? s labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage-labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. In the one case the property-relation conceals the slave? s labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the uncompensated labour of the wage labourer.

We may therefore understand the decisive importance of the transformation of the value and price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all capitalism? s illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above which makes the actual relations invisible and, in fact, presents to the eye the exact opposite of that relation.?5

This makes it sufficiently clear that just from the ?living experience of exploitation and oppression? no class consciousness develops spontaneously at all, but that the ?living experience?, the sale of the commodity labour power and the negotiation of the conditions of its sale, in other words, the regular reproduction of the capital-labour relation, necessarily produces bourgeois consciousness.

Elementary forms of class struggle, for example, the struggle for higher wages and better working conditions can indeed call into question certain idiosyncrasies, mystifications (such as the ideas of ?justice?, of the ?neutrality? of the state, etc) in action. But on their own they by no means lead automatically or spontaneously to the formation of class-consciousness, let alone to socialist consciousness (i.e. consciousness of the necessity to overthrow capitalism as a system and replace it with socialism). According to Marx and Lenin, the purely trade union consciousness that undoubtedly arises ?spontaneously? from experience in this form of class struggle is still a form of bourgeois consciousness.

The reformism of bourgeois workers? parties such as the Labour Party, the SPD or the Left Party is
essentially nothing more than an extension of this form of bourgeois consciousness to the political level. Compared to the “pure and simple” trade unionist, this represents progress because it recognises the necessity of a party of the working class but, nevertheless, such a reformist party remains a bourgeois political force operating on the ground of capitalism. Reformist consciousness, therefore, is bourgeois consciousness.

The ground for the formation of revolutionary class consciousness is indeed promoted by crises, social injustices, social inequality, spontaneous mass actions, uprisings, etc., because questions of class struggle and questions of power become immediately practical. Nevertheless, even then, the production of consistently revolutionary class consciousness – i.e. with a goal of social transformation, requires a prior theoretical analysis, a scientific generalisation, which can emerge not only and not primarily from one’s own experience, but only from the generalised experience of all class struggles. This is not developed spontaneously, but requires theoretical effort. For Marxism, revolutionary politics must be based on a revolutionary theory.

This theory must be carried into the class struggle, into the working class, whether by politically conscious wage earners themselves or by petty bourgeois or bourgeois theorists who have adopted scientific socialism. “Carrying into the class” must not, of course, be confused with “enlightenment”, it means fighting for a programme that builds a bridge between theory and working class experience, that shows a way to combine the limited struggles for social and political reforms with that for socialist revolution.

The idea that class consciousness grows out of experience or spontaneous class struggle by objective necessity is not only a fundamental break with Marxism – it also logically justifies tailist politics, an adaptation to the existing consciousness, an error for which Lenin criticised the Economists in the early part of the 20th century, and which remains valid today.

This idea assumes that pure trade unionist or reformist consciousness already represents half a step towards the revolutionary, and that it only needs to be quantitatively expanded to be organically transformed into the “revolutionary”.

**Economic struggle as the real class struggle**

In reality, however, revolutionary class consciousness means a qualitative break with reformism. The struggle for revolutionary politics in non-revolutionary times, therefore, always involves a struggle against the spontaneous, predominant consciousness – including that within the working class. The renunciation, for example, of the struggle for open borders or adaptation to the social-chauvinist moods in the British working class on the question of the “Workers’ Brexit”, represents a form of tailism, of adaptation to the prevailing, non-revolutionary consciousness of the class, especially to social-chauvinism.

The quote from Woods, which to this day underlies the understanding of class consciousness and its development in all wings of CWI and IMT, still implies a certain attitude to the forms of class struggle. It is well known that Engels and, taking up his legacy, Lenin and other Marxists, distinguish between three main forms of class struggle: economic (trade-unionist), political (party) and theoretical (ideological). The task of a revolutionary party is to engage in all three systematically and to unite them within the framework of a revolutionary strategy aimed at the seizure of political power by the working class.

In the CWI tradition, and in direct contrast to all classical Marxist theorists, the economic struggle involuntarily becomes the core of the class struggle.

The transfiguration of the trade union class struggle into the actual class struggle, the reformist workers’ consciousness into the actual springboard for “revolutionary consciousness”, is an ideological justification
for the workerism that has shaped the CWI current since its inception.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this tendency has been repeatedly sceptical, often directly sectarian, towards struggles of the oppressed: national liberation movements, anti-racist struggles, the struggle for women?s liberation or against sexual oppression. This can still be seen in the left Zionist position on Palestine or in the sectarian attitude to the national liberation struggle in (Northern) Ireland.

If we start from an economistic conception of the development of class consciousness, this does not seem particularly problematic, it could even be seen as a virtue to concentrate on the ?real? workers? issues. If we believe that workers? present consciousness is already class consciousness and well on the way to becoming socialist consciousness, then contradicting their prejudices on international racial or sexual matters can be seen as raising unnecessary obstacles to this development.

From a Leninist point of view, however, this is fatal. In What Is to Be Done, Lenin not only explains that class consciousness must be carried into the class ?from outside?, he also explains in an understandable and concise way what characterises the content of revolutionary class politics.

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected ? unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic [i.e. Marxist ? author] point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding ? or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding of the relationships between all the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of the economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.6

That revolutionary organisations take a clear position on the struggle against women?s oppression, against the oppression of the youth, against imperialism, racism and national oppression, that they intervene in these movements with a class perspective and outline a revolutionary course, does not represent an auxiliary or separate task. Neither does it arise negatively from the necessity to fight the dominance of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologies in movements of the oppressed. Rather, the necessity to develop a policy against all forms of exploitation and oppression follows from the character of the proletarian liberation struggle itself. The working class can only free itself if it overturns all conditions in which humanity is a miserable, subjugated being, by liberating and revolutionising itself through social revolution.

Contrary to this, the economistic schema of Woods et al suggests in all areas that the struggle against social oppression or the state question is ?ultimately? and, so to speak, automatically, won and solved by the class?s naturally ever-increasing weight and consciousness.

The crisis of the CWI is a crisis of its schema

The crisis of the CWI must be understood as a crisis of this schema and certain related expectations regarding the development of the working class, its consciousness and the CWI itself.
Unlike competing Trotskyist currents, such as the near-moribund Mandelite Fourth International or the fragmented tradition of Nahuel Moreno, the CWI expected to make great strides forward after the split with the IMT. The leadership of the organisation itself set the optimistic goal of becoming the world’s largest Trotskyist movement. After the great economic crisis of 2008-2010, these hopes were apparently expressed even more strongly.

But the breakthrough did not happen— at least for the Socialist Party of Peter Taaffe. The various documents of the faction struggle in the CWI that became public in 2019 suggest instead that the organisation had stagnated internationally over the previous 10 years. Secondly, the mutual accusations of the factions reveal that the membership figures had been inflated for years to impress other currents and to raise the morale of their own members. This deceit seems to have worked for years. In the course of the crisis, the discovery of the true state of their own organisation for years, inevitably had a demoralising effect on many comrades, who were deceived.

Finally, the political centre of balance and the relationship between the sections in the CWI also shifted. For years, the dominance and political leadership of the Socialist Party was considered unchallenged, but the authority of Taaffe and co. was undoubtedly undermined.

**The Socialist Party’s policy**

Even though the Socialist Party’s policy was hardly discussed in the factional disputes, and the majority of the IEC had in effect not criticised them, it was obvious that the section had failed to make any significant progress. There are two reasons for this. First, the adherence to the Workers? Brexit line. For the SP, the referendum majority for Britain’s withdrawal from the EU was a victory for the working class; the leadership of the SAV (CWI section in Germany) described it as a reason for joy. And the SP in Britain still insists that Labour and the trade unions must lead an imaginary left Brexit movement:

?To be successful, Corbyn must deliver this message persistently, loudly and clearly - along with the promise to take action on Brexit and beyond for the working class. On this basis, Labour and the unions could mobilise masses for a Brexit in the interests of the working class and thus also counter the right-wing populists? campaign against the EU?.

In fact, they and their rivals - the Socialist Workers Party, who also supported a left Brexit (Lexit), plus the Communist Party of Britain (and its newspaper *The Morning Star*) - proved unable to generate any substantial working class or youth support for leaving the European Union. Naturally they could hardly appeal to the several million workers from multi-ethnic backgrounds who hated the vile chauvinist Leave Campaign run by rightwing populists like Nigel Farage, or Boris Johnson and the European Research Group in the Conservative Party. Brexit was a right wing and racist crusade.

By refusing to join the Labour Party when Corbyn became leader and make contact with the hundreds of thousands of left-wing activists joining it, the SP isolated itself from the defining political movement of the latter half of the decade. Instead of revising its own rash declaration that the Labour Party was now a purely bourgeois party?, the Taaffe leadership clung to this false assessment and chose self-isolation outside Labour. Undoubtedly, a revision of its Labour Party characterisation would have raised critical questions about its own past and its Pope’s infallibility.

This mistake was certainly made more galling by the fact that under Corbyn the Labour Party stood on a left-wing reformist programme from which the SP found it much more difficult to distance itself in terms of content. Its wrong attitude towards Brexit and its rejection of open borders also led it to stand to the right of many Labour activists on these central questions of class struggle.
A “party” that hails defeats as victories, that thought it could turn the Brexit movement into a national road to socialism, whilst turning its back on all those wage earners and migrants who want to fight against the nationalist Brexit folly, was heeded by neither the British nor any other working class.

**Development of other sections**

While the SP was on the decline, other sections of the CWI, especially those in Ireland and the USA, achieved electoral breakthroughs at local or even national level. Not only did the proportions change, but the political focus of the individual sections also changed and became more diverse. The CWI of the 1970s and 1980s followed a largely uniform plan for building up its sections; work in the existing mass parties and the trade unions. All currents that rejected entrist work were denounced as “sectarians on the margins of the workers’ movement?. Such a superficial immunisation of one’s own members against the rest of the left? was naturally no longer possible, or only possible to a limited extent, after the withdrawal from Labour and the SPD.

In addition, some sections sought their focus in new left wing reformist parties, while others, like the SP in England, focused on building their own “parties?. The section-building tactics thus became more and more inconsistent. With the left turn of Labour under Corbyn, the question also arose why work in the stagnating German Left Party (Die Linke) was absolutely necessary, while an organised struggle within the Labour Party was rejected. While Taaffe and co. stayed well away from the Corbyn movement, they supported Sanders? presidential campaign in the openly bourgeois Democratic Party.

Work in the trade unions, for years a matter of pride for the English section in the form of an opportunistic adaptation to the left bureaucracy, in some countries was also deprioritised in the face of defeats of the organised working class and the rise of new social movements. Thus, the Irish section was active primarily in the women’s movement and the campaign against the abortion laws.

**Adaptation to different environments**

These different tactics and building methods increasingly followed the immediate needs of individual sections, rather than any coherent strategy. Sooner or later, this divergence would necessarily raise the question of the CWI’s party-building methods, class politics (the attitude towards the Democrats in the USA), the position on petit-bourgeois movements and so on.

However, an open discussion on all these questions was postponed for years. A unified line was implied, even if in reality it was weakened more and more.

A revolutionary organisation, acting on the basis of a common scientific programme, can easily live with such different emphases in national sections, since the international programme allows these to be put into a common context. The situation is fundamentally different for an economistic organisation like the CWI or IMT. If it is assumed that revolutionary consciousness arises directly from the class struggle, then of course a shift in the respective focus also tends to fundamentally change the milieu out of which the consciousness is supposed to grow organically.

As long as everyone focuses on reasonably similar trade union work and reformist parties, reasonably similar “approaches to consciousness? will emerge.

This will change, however, if different sections act and intervene in different milieus and movements, particularly when some of them have a cross-class character. The struggle itself does not create a common revolutionary consciousness but, rather, different non-revolutionary forms of consciousness. These can be forms of identity politics and bourgeois or petit-bourgeois feminism, as in Ireland, or varieties of reformism and social chauvinism as in Britain.
As correct as the accusation by the former IS majority around Peter Taaffe may be in terms of the adaptation of the Irish majority and its supporters to identity politics, the whole critique remains blind to the fact that this adaptation stems from the economistic notion of the development of class consciousness that has always underpinned the CWI.

When the Taaffe faction speaks of a return to ?workers? politics?, it ultimately means a return to the CWI?s real, economistic roots. This appeal may lead to a rapprochement of the remaining followers, but it will not lead to a solution to the problems of the CWI, certainly not with an adaptation to the predominant left-wing, trade-union consciousness of the workers.

Conversely, further adaptations to petit-bourgeois forces and ideologies, but above all, a tendency towards federalism and arbitrariness, are to be expected in the IEC majority, now the International Socialist Alternative. Unlike the current around Taaffe, it is rather a coalition of opponents of the former leadership so it is doubtful it could develop a uniform counter-project. Rather, it is a grouping of national sections for which their respective ?national? development is likely to be the main focus and, thus, either arbitrariness or further splits is inevitable.

In any case, the CWI?s crisis will not be over with the 2019 split. The political mistakes of recent years, like Brexit, will take their toll even more. While the current around Taaffe is more likely to adopt a sectarian stance towards the new women?s movement or the environmental movement, others will focus on adaptation. And such mistakes can lead to far greater mistakes than an adaptation to identity politics or reformism. Such a development is also to be feared because all currents of the CWI have so far united in a trivialisation of the reactionary developments of recent years.

Assessment of the world situation

Thus, their last and unanimously adopted joint assessment of the world situation does not address its changed character since the defeat of the Arab Spring in Syria and Egypt and that of Syriza in Greece. Of course, the CWI recognises that these were defeats, but not that they represent a shift to the right and a reactionary phase for the development of global capitalism.

As we can see, even this phase can produce mass resistance, such as in Brazil, general strikes, as in India, or even revolutions, as in Sudan. That, however, does not change the fact that the working class is operating in a defensive situation - a defence that not only includes the weakness of its class organisations, but also the advance of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideologies in the movements of resistance as well as in the working class itself. A major danger, but certainly not the only one, is the growth of (left-wing) populism.

In the theses of the CWI of November 2018, however, this appears rather as a process, as polarisation, in which, first, it cannot be determined which force, reaction or revolution, is on the advance, and in which the growth of class consciousness only appears as a question of time, that is, the spontaneous development of mass mobilisations. This is what the paper says:

?The rise of politically nebulous populism is rooted in the global economic crisis of 2007/08 and its consequences. Civic analysts, including Francis Fukuyama and a number of commentators, mock the fact that it was not this left but the right that benefited most from the political consequences of this crisis. This turns reality upside down. In many countries, the working class first turned to the workers? movement and the left to find an explanation and solutions for the crisis. Facing the severity of the recession that led to the discreditation of capitalism and its political representation, the left could have won significantly.?8

Here, the CWI flees into the realm of what might have been. To determine the current balance of power,
however, it is not what could have been that is decisive, but how consciousness and the balance of power actually developed.

This formulation is backed by an objectivist hope that ?radicalisation? and the development of working class consciousness will drive the masses into the arms of a ?well-positioned? CWI during the next larger mobilisations. The last few years have shown that the CWI?s refusal to critically question and reject its own economism has driven the organisation to a split. Only when the CWI, its fragments, or individual comrades question the wrong methodological cornerstones of their tendency can anything positive emerge from this crisis.

Endnotes
2 Ibid.
5 Marx, K., p. 680, Capital, Volume 1, 1976

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