SWP and the unions: Syndicalism’s fear of the bureaucracy

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It might at first sight seem curious to accuse the Socialist Workers Party of syndicalism. After all is it not a party? But Colin Lloyd argues that in fact the SWP has a thoroughly syndicalist notion of the rank and file movement and the struggle for union democracy.

The SWP is certainly not a classically anarcho-syndicalist formation. Does it not openly proclaim its goal to be state power for the working class? even insisting that without soviets and workers’ control of production there can be no workers’ state? The classic anarcho-syndicalists denied the need for either political action or the proletarian dictatorship. Yet the pre-1914 French CGT, or American IWW were by no means the only syndicalist formations.

English industrial syndicalism? and the De Leonite Socialist Labour parties on both sides of the Atlantic eclectically combined a syndicalist practice in the unions with parties devoted to making propaganda, including electoral propaganda.

In essence the SWP has no clear or consistent commitment to the struggle to oust the trade union bureaucracy and to replace the present reformist leaders with revolutionary ones. Instead the SWP looks to the de-centralising syndicalist idea of a system of democratic checks over leaders.

In the (unpublished) International Socialists’ (IS) programme we find the slogan of workers’ control over the unions?. Workers’ control over production, a system as Trotsky said of dual power in the factory, of control over management is possible in a period of pre-revolutionary crisis and may extend for some period after the seizure of power as a school for workers’ management under a centrally planned economy.

Certainly we seek to check, control, limit the sell outs and betrayals of the trade union bureaucrats, but a system of checks and balances over them is not our goal. Our goal is a communist leadership in transformed fighting industrial unions. Communists fight for a structure of workplace union branches and factory committees which are capable of creating action councils in heightened periods of class struggle and can develop in a revolutionary situation into workers councils (soviets).

Communist do not hide their party label from the mass of workers but openly form fractions in the existing unions. They willingly form united fronts with non-communist rank and file workers who wish to fight for militant policies and trade union democracy. This united front may be episodic and local or long lasting and national.

The best example in Britain was the National Minority Movement in its earliest years and the various reform movements, vigilance committees and rank and file groups which preceded it. Democracy and openness about party affiliation and party policy is, however, a jealously guarded right for communists.
even when, or rather especially when, it is the leading tendency in such a movement, for these formations
remain united fronts and not parties.

Freedom of criticism alone enables the workers to select and reselect the leaders and the policies proven
correct in struggle. The history of the IS/SWP's attempts at rank and file organisation indicate the
foreignness of this tradition to them.

**Tailing the Struggles of the Class**

In 1966 the IS focused its attention on the relationship between shop stewards whose numbers had
increased enormously during and after the war and the trade union bureaucracy. The IS recognised that
the Labour government's attempts to impose incomes policies and anti-union laws was causing stewards
to move into action against a reformist government. In response to this rift the IS published a book by Tony
Cliff and Colin Barker called *Incomes policy, legislation and shop stewards*.

Despite their current insistence that in the 1960s they were not calling for a rank and file movement (see
Alex Callinicos' mendacious account in ISJ Autumn 1982 "The Rank and File Movement Today") this book
did put forward an early version of the rank and file movement slogan. It argued that the principal problem
with the militant shop stewards was the fragmentation of their struggles and the consequent narrow
horizons. Their reformist consciousness was recognised but not regarded as a major problem by Cliff. Ever
the optimist he said that it was fortunately being whittled away:

> ?The importance of state sponsored, central reforms has been declining; today the workers have less to
gain and less to hope for from national reforms. And thus the role of their national representatives, the
Labour MPs, has been declining too. (op cit. p126)

Workers were turning instead to the shop floor and the shop stewards to get do-it-yourself
reforms better piece work rates, bonuses, holidays and so on. While admitting that the consciousness
revealed by this process remained reformist, Cliff argued that since it was reformism located in the shop
floor and based on self-activity it was thereby spontaneously destroying the tradition of reformism from
above? (ibid, p135) i.e. the Labour Party.

The tasks that owed from this analysis were of course to encourage shop floor reformism, but at the
same time to overcome the fragmentation of the stewards' movement and thereby nish the working
class' lingering belief in reformism from above:

> ?The principal tasks of socialists are to do what we can to unify the working class and to encourage the
movement from below. (ibid, p135)

This unity was to take the form of a national shop stewards' movement.

This whole analysis was short sighted and impressionistic. It was certainly true that workers looked to shop
floor organisation and bargaining as the main means of achieving economic gains in the 1950s and 1960s.
It was not true that this shifting locus of reformism, as IS called it, sounded the death knell of the Labour
Party.

Indeed when economic crisis, mass unemployment and inflation, on the one hand, and statutory wage
freezes, cuts in social services and attacks by the law on hitherto established trade union rights replaced
the boom conditions of the late 1950s and early to mid 1960s the need for state wide, governmental
answers would come to the fore.
Before this situation became critical there lay five years in which the shop floor militants of the 1960s were able to utilise their stewards’ organisation for an effective fightback. These were the halcyon days for Cliff’s prognosis and practice. But the problem of the Labour Party’s reformism from above was not, indeed could not be, resolved by reformism from below.

Yet IS blithely continued to keep politics to a minimum in its trade union work. In 1970 a second major book by Cliff was launched. In 230 pages Cliff described in detail the nature of productivity deals and spelt out a trade union programme on how to fight them. In one and a half pages at the end in a section entitled ‘Politics’ it was asserted that ‘We need a revolutionary socialist movement?’ (p232). No connection between this asserted need and the struggle against productivity deals was made in practice.

Trade unionism and politics were presented as separate entities. In their practice in this period the IS followed Cliff’s cue. In the struggle to free the jailed Pentonville Five dockers the IS refused to demand that the TUC call a general strike despite the mass strike movement that was erupting to free the dockers. Symptomatically they refused out of the fear of TUC misleadership! Mass sympathy strikes by the rank and file were in their view safer.

Only when the TUC itself called a one day general strike did the IS shamefacedly see it to raise the call. Thus they tailed not only the working class, but inevitably, the bureaucracy. Morbid fear of the bureaucrats, attempts to avoid rather than challenge and break their influence led to capitulation to it. Also in the miners’ strike of 1972 despite extensive rank and file self-organisation and strength, and despite the existence of a right wing leadership the IS refused to call for or build a rank and file movement during the strike. They cheered on Scargill’s militancy but would not attempt to organise the rank and file during the strike. They claimed that after the strike, that is outside of the context of struggle, they would call a conference around their paper, The Collier.

During the early 1970s the IS did gain recruits amongst workers, thanks to their energetic intervention in workers’ struggles and because they voiced these workers’ views. Generally they did not hold onto those recruits for very long and the dream of IS filling the vacuum on the left as a mass alternative to Labour did not materialise.

To overcome this failure to become a mass alternative, the IS increasingly turned towards the building of rank and file movements, around newspapers, in particular industries – the mines, London Transport, amongst teachers, amongst car workers and others. Encouraged by the winding down of the Communist Party’s rank and file movement, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Union, consequent to their capture of a number of unions, IS in 1974 decided to launch a National Rank and File Movement (NRFM).

This was conceived as a bridge to the party for advanced militants, and a means whereby a tiny party could play a big role. Tony Cliff described the relationship between the party, the rank and file movement and the mass of workers as a series of cog wheels – a small one, the party, setting in motion a larger one, the NRFM, setting in motion a larger one again, the mass of workers. The mechanical analogy was apt because the relationship was conceived of as mechanical rather than political. The party was simply one element of the unifying process, not the political leadership of the NRFM.

Cliff forgot that the big cog wheel turned under the motive force of economic and political crisis. When in 1974 a very powerful crisis rolled the working class in the direction of a Labour Government, the great cog-wheel tore the teeth of the other two in sequence. The rank and fileists fell back under the influence of the new left leaders. The IS members passed back over the bridge to staff the rank and file groups.
In the Callinicos article referred to earlier, the author described the NRFM as stillborn. He is right, but whereas he blames this on the objective state of the class struggle at the time (the beginning of the downturn) we blame the politics of the IS/SWP. The organisation built the NRFM on a syndicalist basis. The refusal to direct workers into a conscious conflict with reformism from above??the Labour Party?was justified on the grounds that it was already discredited in the eyes of the workers.

On the eve of Labour? s election victory in early 1974 Andreas Nagliati, the IS industrial organiser at the time, wrote:

?The traditional party of the working class, the Labour Party, is an empty shell organisationally and in terms of active involvement. Politically it is so discredited that even the Tories? vicious anti-working class measures have not really restored it to working class favour.? (ISJ, February 1974)

The conference called by the rank and file papers?the Carworker, Collier, Platform, NUT Rank and File etc?in March 1974 downgraded any discussion of the political situation facing the working class under. Resolutions put forward by the Workers Fight group on racism and workers? control and nationalisation, were all opposed by IS and given short shrift at the stage managed conference.

The programme adopted at the conference was one of militant trade union demands. The IS itself decided in advance that it would not fight openly for its own socialist policies, for fear of scaring away militants. At some stage in the unspeci?ed future, IS claimed it would raise its politics. The logic of this syndicalist approach was explained by Nagliati. Writing of the non-aligned militants he argued:

?What can bind them together is a programme of ?ghting around certain minimal demands?against wage freeze and incomes policy, for an end to the Industrial Relations Act and laws against picketing, for democratisation of the unions, for a ?ghting policy on wages. In this lies the rationale for the rank and file organisation.? (ISJ February 1974)

The 1974 conference gave birth to the NRFM. It was as united front? controlled by supposed revolutionaries who were boycotting their own politics within it and suppressing anybody else?s! They simply joined in with the militants at the conference in relating particular experiences from their workplace. The meeting was more of a rally than a working conference to discuss strategy and tactics for militants in the light of the fall of Heath and the election of a Labour government.

Fear of reformism and the political incapacity to ?ght it prevented IS from raising and discussing the question of strategy and tactics in relation to the Labour Government. Realism, or rather a deep feeling of their own impotence, stopped IS from posing itself as ?the alternative leadership?. Of course at the end of the day an IS speaker stood up and sang the praises of socialism (much as Cliff did at the end of his productivity deals book), but it had little bearing on the strategy of the NRFM.

The second conference of the NRFM took place later in the same year. In the meantime Wilson had been re-elected. Yet again, however, these developments did little to affect the nature of the conference. It followed the same recipe as the rst and with the same results. The IS leadership were eager to avoid a discussion in the NRFM of what they often scornfully referred to as ?big politics?.

The modest success of the two conferences?approximately 500 delegates to each?reinforced the political modesty of IS. An internal bulletin in April 1975 recognised that the NRFM was not strong enough to launch independent action? but argued that a serious campaign to root the NRFM in the localities would overcome this in the short term. The IS rmly believed that the honeymoon? with Labour was merely the prelude to a ?big bang? and the resumption of militant struggle.
This perspective was rooted in IS’s false understanding of the nature of the trade union bureaucracy and its hold over the workers’ movement. IS hates the bureaucracy. Its vivid expression of this hatred gains it the sympathy of those workers sold out and betrayed by the bureaucrats. But the IS/SWP does not understand how to defeat the bureaucrats?its hatred is based on fear and fear leads them to seek a way around or behind the backs of the union leaders.

This incomprehension dates back to Cliff’s ?Economic roots of reformism?, an article written for Socialist Review in June 1957. Here Lenin’s theory of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy is grotesquely caricatured and smugly rejected:

?A small thin crust of conservatism hides the revolutionary urges of the mass of workers. Any break through this would reveal a surging revolutionary lava. The role of the revolutionary party is simply to show the mass of the workers that their interests are betrayed by the ?in?nitesimal minority? of ?aristocracy of labour?.? (Neither Washington Nor Moscow, 109)

Cliff then mobilised the apparently knock down argument that the mass of workers are in fact reformist in their consciousness. Brushing aside, with a few inconsequential statistics, the very idea that the skilled workers benefit differentially from imperialist super-exploitation he alights on the much simpler argument:

?The expansion of capitalism through imperialism made it possible for the trade unions and Labour Parties to wrest concessions for the workers from capitalism without overthrowing it. This gives rise to a large reformist bureaucracy which in its turn becomes a brake on the revolutionary development of the working class. The major function of this bureaucracy is to serve as a go-between between the workers and the bosses, to mediate, negotiate agreements between them, and ?keep the peace? between the classes. . .

?But the trade union and the Labour Party bureaucracy are effective in disciplining the working class in the long run only to the extent that the economic conditions of the workers themselves are tolerable. In the ?nal analysis the base of reforms is in capitalist prosperity.? (ibid, p115-6, emphasis in original)

The conclusion then ?ows:

?When capitalism however, decays to the extent that any serious demands of the working class reach beyond its limits, the bell will toll for reformism.? (ibid, p117)

This theory is false on all counts. As a critique of Lenin it is nonsense. Lenin did not hold that the working class was a constant ?revolutionary class?, spontaneously ready to erupt but held back by a thin layer. He did hold?with Marx?that the proletariat had no objective and intrinsic ties to capitalist private property and that the demands of the pro?t system constantly led (though obviously not continuously) to collisions between the workers and the capitalists.

Obviously there are periods of boom and slump of expansion and contradiction which affect the frequency, scope and direction of the class struggle. But what Lenin was asserting was that under imperialism a sizeable stratum of skilled workers had emerged, well paid, with the conditions of life of a comfortable petit-bourgeoisie which had made its peace with capitalism.

Disproportionately represented in the unions they were a conservative force on which the union of?cialdom could erect a bureaucratic structure. This frustrated the democracy of the mass of the members and often excluded the mass of non-unionised or unemployed workers. This theory explains how it is possible for the union bureaucracy to maintain its hold even in periods of crisis when capitalism manifestly cannot meet the ?serious demands? of the working class?indeed when it claws back previous concessions. Such clawback periods?1920-23, 1929-33, since 1979?do not in any sense automatically undermine the bureaucracy
because the workers as a whole are no longer prosperous.

The Nature of the Union Bureaucracy

Cliff’s theory tends to obscure the communists’ concentration on the mass of the proletariat, our concern for the interests of the class as a whole. This includes relating to its most oppressed and exploited sections the unskilled, the unorganised, the unemployed, women, immigrants—regarded not as “minorities” but as part of the majority of the proletariat with nothing to lose but their chains. Of course, the well organised, militant sections provide invaluable cadre for the labour movement but without taking up and fusing with the majority of the class this minority remains a base for the bureaucracy.

For Alex Callinicos the bureaucracy is not based on any really existing social forces. Rather it is the natural result of the bargaining process. This is because the bargaining process necessitates organisation and organisation breeds bureaucratism:

“A division of labour naturally and spontaneously emerges between the mass of workers and their representatives, whose time is increasingly spent in bargaining with the employers.” (ISJ autumn 1982, our emphasis)

And:

“The trade unions even if they are born out of elemental struggles between labour and capital, inevitably produce a layer of full time officials whose task it is to negotiate a compromise between the two classes?” (Callinicos, The revolutionary road to socialism, our emphasis)

This analysis, which owes more to the bourgeois sociologist Michel, and his iron law of oligarchy, or the Webbs, than it does to Marx and Lenin, leads to a shallow, contingent hostility to the bureaucrats. It leads to a self-defeating attempt to bypass the official leadership, and a completely one-sided stress on self-activity and self-organisation, not as means to challenge and replace the bureaucrats, but to offset or control them.

Thus Cliff in an article written in July 1971, “The bureaucracy today” (ISJ 48, 1st series) concludes:

“The struggle for democracy in the unions—regular elections of all officials, the right to recall them, giving them the average pay of the workers they represent get, the decision on the conduct of all strikes to be taken by mass meetings of workers, etc—will become of cardinal importance. A vacillating bureaucracy needs the steady, controlling hand of the rank and file.”

These formulations, and other like them in the pages of SWP publications, are based on the Clyde Workers’ Committee declaration:

“We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them.”

Now while this stress on the independence of the rank and file is necessary as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. It leaves out—and given the Clyde Workers’ Committee was dominated by industrial syndicalists this is not surprising—an organised political challenge to the officials with the objective of wresting the national unions from their control and replacing them with a revolutionary leadership subject to rank and file democracy.

From a communist standpoint, i.e. from that of the need for a political struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie and its state power?Cliff’s position is hopeless. Union democracy is necessary not merely to prevent sell-
outs now, but to bind the bureaucracy’s hands. Workers need the full use of that centralised national union apparatus to make their struggles more effective. They need a general staff of labour that leads, mobilises and fights, instead of today’s tame cat TUC.

Therefore the bureaucracy must be dissolved and replaced with a militant communist leadership. Such leaders would both guard and promote the democracy which alone really makes the unions schools of struggle, schools of socialism. But they would also have a positive duty.

The rank and file also vacillates. The job of communist leadership is to answer the fears of the rank and file, overcome their vacillations and mobilise them for struggle. To blather about self-activity or spontaneity is to cover up one’s total lack of direction. The working class will not thank, and more importantly will not choose, advisers who just chatter their self-activity or spontaneity.

The IS, because it feared, and had no tactics to defeat and replace, the bureaucrats, effectively put a signboard up on their rank and file groups: No bureaucrats need apply? Oficials keep out!?. This is what the IS/SWP propaganda about the fat salaries and perks of office amounted to. The method of the united front and of demands placed upon bureaucrats like Scargill was absolutely beyond them.

It might sow illusions, reduce self-reliance and self-activity. So it left these bureaucrats free to cultivate their (enormous) influence over the rank and file whilst the IS contented itself with the tiny handful who would break with them as a first step.

Fear of Opportunism

Like their argument about Labour Party membership to go in is to be de-led, it leads to capitulation in the rank and file movement the IS exclude the leaders because it feared the refection or shadow of its own opportunism. Their horror of contamination masks a deep inner feeling that they have no strategy distinct from or inconsistent with that of the left bureaucrats.

In the struggle with the officials, revolutionary politics as a guide to action are absolutely decisive. An action programme for the unions can rally the membership and defend its interests against the bosses and the officials who try to sell these interests short. It can mobilise the forces to oust the reformist bureaucracy and clear the way for the transformation of the trade unions into organs of revolutionary struggle, instead of being organs for domesticating the workers. In the course of doing this, revolutionaries strive to win the leadership of the rank and file movement and the trade unions as a whole.

The SWP’s syndicalism has always prevented them from beginning such a struggle. Their conception of the NRFM as a body of militants grouped on a self-limiting trade union programme, always meant that they had to conceal their politics within the NRFM, fine words about the socialist millennium notwithstanding.

They could not connect these fine words with the policies of Labour. Every rank and file programme that ever emerged from the IS/SWP stable was based on minimum demands, while those willing to subscribe to socialism (always posed in an abstract and maximalist manner) could join the party. This concept of the NRFM was increasingly untenable under Labour.

It was useless in equipping militants to fight Jones (TGWU) and Scanlon (AUEW) in the unions and Wilson and Callaghan in the government. Militant shop-floor reformism was redundant under these circumstances. Not surprisingly, the SWP turned away from the NRFM and towards the Right to Work Campaign. This was launched by the NRFM, but by the SWP’s admission, the child gobbled up the parent.

It was a campaign of isolated actions and marches which mobilised the angry jobless youth and unleashed
them at TUC congresses. The youth obliged by kicking the shins of the despicable time-servers. While one can sympathise with the sentiments of the youth who did the kicking, what this whole RTWC period reflected was the SWP’s turn away from building rank and file organisations on the shop floor. Nor did it represent a real fight to get the unions to organise the unemployed. It was an expression of their inability to answer the problems of militants.

Thus from 1974 to 1977 the NRFM faded into obscurity. Then in 1977 it was wheeled out for a conference in November during the reghter’s strike. The SWP hoped, opportunistically, to cash in on this strike by relaunching the NRFM. However, the daily bulletin produced by the SWP in the name of a mythical reghter’s rank and file group repeated all the errors of the early 1970s. More and more militancy, bigger and bigger pickets were urged, but the problems of mobilising other sections of the public sector and fighting the TUC which engineered a sell-out, were not answered.

The last gasp of the NRFM came in 1979, in June after the Tories had won the election. This was conceived by Tony Cliff as an anti-Tory rally, not a serious revival of the NRFM. He was opposed in this conception by the industrial organiser, Steve Jeffreys. However the conference, as a rally, was a great success. Over a thousand attended it (double the attendance at previous gatherings).

But its political content marked the low point of the SWP’s economism. It launched a campaign around a Code of Practice?. This called on workers not to cross picket lines, not to break the closed shop, and to observe trade union norms. Yes, it was the old refrain, basic trade unionism.

The Code of Practice was, when measured against the tasks of fighting a Tory government committed to a whole series of anti-union laws, pathetic. As the bosses limbered up to launch their most ruthless offensive for years, Tony Cliff, John Deason and the SWP could only call for a return to basics. After 1979 and the failure of an anti-Tory movement to emerge from the conference, the shrouds were prepared for Steve Jeffreys and the NRFM.

Both disappeared in the subsequent years. They were followed by the various rank and file papers?Carworker, Redder Tape, Engineers Charter etc, all of whose sales had been steadily dwindling.

**The Steel Strike and the Rank and File**

This disappearing act was for a time officially unacknowledged. It even went into partial reverse during the 1980 steel strike when the SWP re-launched their bulletin Real Steel News (RSN). Having learned nothing and forgotten nothing, the SWP Bourbons set about pursuing an identical course to that followed by the IS in the 1972 miners’ strike.

With the rank and file mobilised on a huge scale and acting independently of the officials, the opportunity for forging a real rank and file movement was there. To be realised it would have to take up issues like jobs, the transformation of the notoriously undemocratic ISTC, and so on. RSN eschewed these tasks and refused to organise the rank and file during the strike, against the officials. It concentrated solely on mobilising workers around the pay claim. At some unspecifed future date the time would be ripe for a rank and file movement, but not while the rank and file were actually in motion on a mass strike.

Socialist Worker reported an RSN meeting as concluding:

> After the strike Real Steel News will have to take up issues like the reform of the ISTC and the fight against redundancy as well as the general political arguments? (our emphasis).

After the strike has been sold out by the unreformed ISTC and after the Tories massacred jobs in the steel
industry, and after the militants had once again sunk into apathy, it was too late to take up these issues. Not surprisingly, RSN has not been heard of since.

By 1981 it was obvious to the SWP leadership that their rank and file perspective had collapsed. They were forced to come up with an explanation. Cliff as usual shifted the blame onto his members and the objective situation. The members, it seems, were guilty of doing what he had told them. They had built the rank and file groups as militant trade union bodies, and had themselves acted as militant trade unionists within them.

Lo and behold, they had actually liquidated themselves into these bodies and in so doing, turned them from being a supposed bride into a series of routes out of the party. According to Cliff:

?Instead of recruiting people from rank and file groups into the party, the comrades disappear into the rank and file groups.? (Socialist Review, May/June 1982)

Earlier a rank and file activist?no doubt put up to it by Cliff?had shamefacedly admitted:

?Our rank and file paper was devoted almost exclusively to what was happening in our own corner of the world and this determined our priorities.? (Socialist Review, November/December 1981)

The SWP?s official historian, Ian Birchall, describes the members of this period as having got lost ?in the minutiae of trade union routinism? (The Smallest Mass Party in the World, p24). All of these charges are undoubtedly true, but they beg the question, why did this happen to members of a supposedly revolutionary organisation? The answer is quite straightforward?the SWP leadership ensured that it happened because they designed the rank and file groups as bodies concerned purely with trade union matters.

The second reason cited by Cliff for the collapse of the NRFM perspective is the ?downturn? in the class struggle. Since 1974 there has been a gradual collapse of militancy and confidence inside the working class. Combined with high unemployment, this makes the building of a rank and file movement impossible, goes Cliff?s argument.

While at one time this would have meant at least keeping alive the notion of rank and file organisation, now it means dropping the idea altogether and, in the case of the health strike, actively opposing the formation of a national shop stewards? organisation. All that can be done, says Cliff, is to be at the picket lines but ?to play it low key?until the upturn comes? (Socialist Review, April 1983). This is classic. In the upturn (1972-74) the SWP played it ?low key? so as not to frighten away militants from the IS or the NRFM. In the downturn they play it ?low key? until the upturn! By ?low key? they mean not pushing ?big politics?, but concentrating on organising pickets and taking collections in order to win over the ?ones and twos?.

Back to Basics

In any and every situation, all the SWP can shout is ?back to trade unionism?. Sometimes it?s on a big scale (upturn), sometimes it?s on a small scale (the downturn). So now, despite the doubly treacherous role of the of?cials, and the ferocity of the bosses? offensive, the SWP have wound up their rank and file groups, have retreated into their own geographical branches, where ?politics? are to be discussed.

Of course, they continue to intervene in disputes, but here they must only raise small things:

?In locating the ones and twos by collecting money for strikes, we are locating the ones and twos who are prepared to ?ght and are prepared to identify with our politics. It is out of such small scale activities that a
leadership is built for the struggles of the future. (Cliff, Socialist Review, June 1983)

Cliff and the SWP turned away from the real problems posed by the bosses' offensive. Like it or not, that offensive raised big, that is national, political issues like privatisation, union rights, the welfare state, war and peace?which class shall rule. To concentrate only on 'little things' and hope that the big ones will go away until the SWP and the working class are ready to handle them, is sheer folly. They won't go away.

In the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-85 the same tailing of the existing leadership of the left bureaucracy was revealed. In their publications the SWP certainly criticised the bureaucrats?including lefts like Scargill?and posed as the defenders of the interest of the rank and ?le miners. They argued that picketing should have been in their hands.

But they had no perspective or programme for transforming the unions and breaking the grip of the bureaucracy. They warned militants not to trust the officials but advanced no programme by which the NUM rank and ?le could have organised to transform the NUM during the dispute.

But the miners' strike unleashed the energy of thousands of new militants. In the Midlands it led to the formation of a determined, militant, organised minority. This was the stuff of which a rank and ?le movement could have been built. Tony Cliff once stumbled into the potential of the militant minority when he said:

?The key problem in Nottinghamshire is how to mobilise the minority of miners, the 7,000 who voted for a strike. If they had been organised from the beginning and had picketed their own pits then the police operation would have been paralysed.? (SW, 14.4.84)

But Cliff had no answer to his own problem. The effect of raising no call for a rank and ?le movement was to offer no alternative to Scargill that militants could actually fight for. All the SWP could say was:

?There is only one way rank and ?le activists can protect themselves from this danger [Scargill's weakness]. It is by making sure that as much of the strike as possible is organised from below, by strike committees in each pit, and with co-ordinating committees between pits to organise the picketing.? (SW, 7.4.84)

The SWP's only answer was for the rank and ?le to somehow by-pass the weakness or treachery of the union officials. They offered no way of putting the leaders to the test and, behind their hot anti-bureaucratic talk, they let the left leaders off the hook. In the Health dispute of 1988 we were to see the same thing happen again.

Despite the often tireless activity of SWP members in support of particular strikes, as an organisation the SWP is turning away from the problems that confront the militant minority inside the working class. The SWP's hostility to questions of leadership and politics, and their faith that an upturn will spontaneously rekindle a fighting spirit are condemning it to sectarian irrelevance.

We believe that, despite the defeats that have been suffered by the working class during the 1980s, the building of a rank and ?le movement is a necessary task. But it will only be of use to the militant minority in the class if it addresses the ideological and organisational crisis that has facilitated recent defeats. It must challenge and defeat the reformist bureaucracy.

To do this, it will require a political strategy, a revolutionary action programme. Revolutionaries do not have programmes for self-education circles alone. A programme is a set of policies, tactics and goals capable of mobilising workers in action. For us, therefore, intervention in the trade unions must be communist
intervention. We seek to win, by democratic means, leadership of a genuine rank and file movement.

To do this we need to be absolutely open about, and fight for, our revolutionary politics, and not hide them for fear of frightening people away. This does not mean we present these politics as an ultimatum. On the contrary, we are prepared to take any step, however minimal, that takes the workers forward, alongside reformist workers. However, unless we fight for our own politics at the same time, we cannot expect the working class to break with reformism and march with us along the road of revolutionary struggle.

The SWP’s failure to inject politics into the NRFM left the militants of the 1970s to be duped by Jones, Scanlon and the Labour Government. In the 1980s, their low key approach left the militants at the mercy of Evans, Duffy, Kinnock and Scargill.

In the 1990s we must seize the opportunity of new struggles to forge a revolutionary communist vanguard in the trade unions. If the SWP comrades want to be part of this then they will need to turn their back decisively on their syndicalist past and present.

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