

Special Report

SPECIAL BRANCH

6th day of October 19 82

SUBJECT

SOCIALIST WORKERS

PARTY (SWP)

1. The following information has been received from a secret and reliable source:-

2. "On Saturday 18th September 1982 at 10am at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) held a National Committee meeting.

3. The meeting was chaired by [Privacy] a British Leyland car worker at Longbridge and some fifty-two persons, either Central Committee or National Committee members, attended.

4. The morning session was addressed by Chris HARMAN on Party political and industrial perspectives, followed by contributions from the floor on the same theme. A preliminary draft for discussion entitled "The Way Ahead" (a copy is attached to this report) was distributed to delegates which amply sets out the content of this discussion and is an insight to how the SWP leadership assess the current political and industrial situation.

5. Duncan HALLAS addressed the meeting during the afternoon on "The United Front". The content of his talk is also covered in the leaflet, "The Way Ahead" referred to above.

6. The official speaker, [Privacy] spoke to delegates about a Central Committee proposal to increase the membership of the National Committee from 40 to 80 members, who would be elected annually at the Party Conference. This proposal was carried overwhelmingly and will be put to Conference in November 1982.

7. There was just one observer at this meeting, [Privacy] an American who was expelled from the Communist Party of the United States in 1929 and who went on to found the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in the United States, working closely with Leon Trotsky himself."

10 [Privacy] 14 OCT 1982 P.A. IN

Reference to Papers

400/82/108

BOX 500

8. The undermentioned persons, with Special Branch references where applicable, were present at the meetings:-

Privacy

Tony CLIFF RP 108/56/30

Privacy

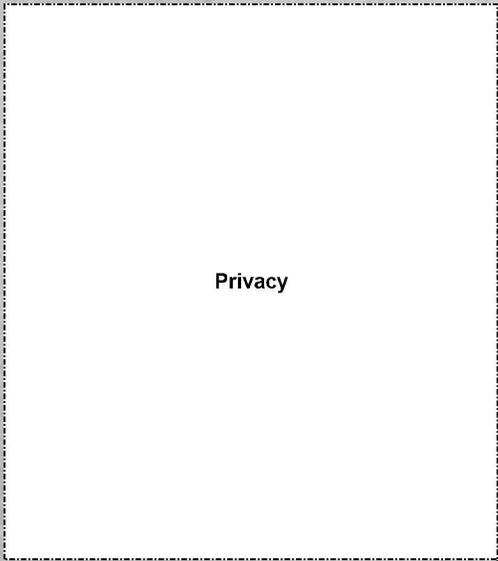
Paul FOOT RP 105/64/395

Duncan HALLAS RP 102/78/863

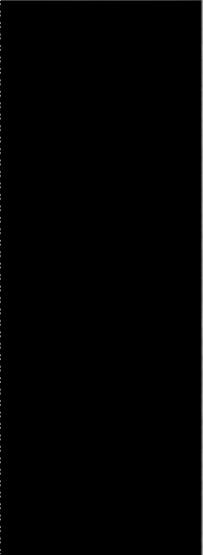
Chris HARMAN RP 105/63/6

Privacy

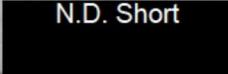
M.P.82(E)



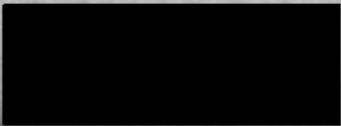
Privacy



N.D. Short



CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT



A Preliminary draft for discussion

1) "The first duty of a revolutionary organisation is to look reality in the face". Trotsky wrote that (in 1952) in circumstances far more difficult than we face today. Nevertheless it is a useful starting point. To change the world it is necessary to understand it as it is. To change the working class movement, the essential task we have to achieve in order to change the balance of class forces in Britain (as an indispensable stage in the struggle for workers power here and elsewhere), we have to assess the current situation realistically.

2) That situation is not at all favourable to the left in terms of big scale politics. That is a fact that we have to recognise in order to find ways of making headway against the current. The low level of industrial struggle in 1981-82, the unfavourable outcome of the major fights, the relatively smooth passage of the anti-union law, the swing to the right at the TUC (1982) and the retreat of the labour lefts, all point the same way. It is not that there has been NO struggle. There have been struggles (although on a much smaller scale than was the case under the last Tory government) but these struggles have, by and large, been sectionalised and relatively unsuccessful. These matters will be considered in more detail later on. First it will be useful to look back at the assessment made by the party at its 1981 conference, not least because 'looking reality in the face' means looking hard at our own role in it. Therefore, the conference resolution On Political Perspectives (1981) is quoted here in full.

3) Industrial Downturn

The period 1969-74 saw a massive rise in the level of industrial struggles with in many cases, a direct political challenge to the government (eg strikes against the Industrial Relations Act, the miners strike in defiance of incomes policy etc). There were some defeats (eg the postmen in 1971) but most strikes were partly or wholly successful. The Tory government was brought down and replaced by a Labour government whose central strategy was control of the working class through the union leaders - the social contract - and convenor and shop stewards involvement in participation schemes etc. The result was the onset of a downturn in struggle, irregular at first but growing. With the return of the Tories in 1979 and the very sharp rise in unemployment the downturn has deepened. The downturn in industry continues to show a shift in the balance of class forces towards the ruling class. Fightbacks are few and show the weakness of the working class rather than its strength. In disputes the employers generalise their attack while workers are sectional in their response. Workers lack the confidence to take on employers in small numbers. Where they have done, the disputes have been long, demoralising and bitter (Lee Jeans, Laurence Scotts). The ruling class generalise their offensive by using unemployment, trade union legislation and the trade union bureaucracy, etc as a weapon against workers.

At the same time the miners respond to BL by waiting to see what happens, before putting in their own wage claims. The key to winning disputes is to generalise them. Isolation results in defeat.

Political Upturn

Hand in hand with industrial downturn is a political upturn which expresses itself in the growth of Bennism, CND etc. The two are linked. Since workers don't have the confidence to take on their employers in the workplace, some look for political solutions outside the workplace. However, only a minority of trade unionists are moving to the left in this way, often those involved in CND, riots etc do not work in industry. Consequently, most of the Labour lefts activities is confined to the Labour Party and union machines, and does not involve or relate to workers in struggle because they are trapped in parliamentarianism. As a result the Bennites have no real mass support among the workers and therefore do badly in elections. This, combined with the pressure on the Bennites to move rightwards in order to win elections (reinforced by the growth of the SDP) has produced some demoralisation among supporters of Bennism.

cont.....

The Communist Party through its policy of support of the parliamentary road, AFS, import controls etc is barely distinguishable from the Bennites. In this situation the SWP must maintain a consistent united front approach to the Bennite left centred on specific action eg Right to Work Campaign, support for disputes etc.

Effect on SWP

If the unity of the working class is the key to winning any fightback against employers, it is certainly the key to how the SWP should intervene in the class over the coming year. The sectional response of workers divides and weakens the class. We are affected by the outside world and have developed sectional interests within the party. In the absence of any real industrial focus, it is very easy for our members to concentrate on one activity (eg Ireland, ANL, women etc).

The development of special interests within the party leads to passivity. Industrial interventions, strike support, industrial sales etc have to be the concern of every member, not of specialists. Industrial work in the present period cannot be left to comrades inside particular workplaces. Energetic intervention from the outside has to be the rule in every dispute. In this, there is a lesson to be learned from the new young workers and unemployed who have joined the Party over the last few months. With them there is no debate about the downturn. They take it for granted that every member must be involved in our whole politics.

4) How far was all this right? On the industrial downturn, and its' continuance in the immediate future, it was all too right. Unemployment has climbed to around 4 million in real terms. A word of explanation is called for here. It is not a matter of pessimism or optimism but of continuously assessing the actual level of struggle, of working class confidence, of solidarity.

Revolutionaries are always optimistic because they have confidence in the capacity of our class to change the world. But that does not at all mean uncritical worship of our class as it is. On the contrary, 'the progress of a class towards class consciousness, that is, the building of a revolutionary party which leads the proletariat, is a complex and a contradictory process... Its different sections arrive at class consciousness by different paths and at different times. The bourgeoisie participate actively in this process. Within the working class it creates its own institutions, or utilises those already existing, in order to oppose certain strata of workers against others.' (Trotsky)

The bourgeoisie, through its own media, has been intervening with considerable success - against the railmen to take the obvious case - with the aid of the 'Labour Lieutenants of Capital' (De Leon), ie the union bureaucracies. It is not all powerful. The health service dispute shows it and shows that the 'Labour Lieutenants of Capital' can be pushed in to half opposition to the boss class. Nevertheless, the overall situation seems as bad as it was twelve months ago. The action on Sep 22nd will show to what extent the idea of a fightback has revealed bigger layers of workers. It will be an important test.

5) Notwithstanding the rhetoric about 'left advances' favoured by various 'left forces', the truth is that the right wing of the bureaucracies (that is most conscious and determined boss class agents) has gained ground in the last year. A significant shift to the right was registered at the TUC on the matter of the composition of the General Council. Our contempt for the past members of this body should not blind us to the fact that from 1983 the General Council is likely to be decidedly further to the right. At the same time the electoral rout of the broad left of the NUR, following the demonstration of their impotence in the rail crisis, is a striking demonstration of the hollowness and shallow roots of the electorally-based new broad lefts.

6) At the same time our 1981 prediction or assessment 'industrial downturn, political upturn' was proved over-sanguine. True, all the qualifications were made, 'the labour left activity is confined to the labour party and union machines and does not involve or retaliate to workers in struggle' and 'the pressure on the Bennites to move rightwards in order to win elections ... has produced some demoralisation amongst supporters of Bennism'. We were right about all that but the fact is that the political upturn was far more shallow than expected. cont

The proof is the Falklands War. The virtual collapse of the labour left in the first weeks and then, when some of them turned against the war, the demonstration that their boasted 'mass support' was little greater than ours. Of course the failure of Benn to run against Healey this year, let alone against Foot, is a decisive indication of how far the tide of Bennery has ebbed since 1981. At the Labour Party Conferences of 1979 and 1980 and the Special Conference of early 1981, the Bennite left had serious gains - compulsory reselection of MPs, election of leader by party conference and so on. Benn's defeat by Healey in the Autumn of 1981 was the turning point. Since then the Labour lefts have been in retreat. The Tatchell affair, the drive against Militant (and the near total absence of left MPs from the Militant defense rally) show the way the wind blows. Naturally, the electoral challenge of the SDP (from March 81) has pushed the Labour Party rightwards. The effect has been to take much of the fight out of the Bennite leaders and to pull the 'Trotskyist' entrists groups rightwards.

7) In this difficult period the SWP has held its own and even grown a little. This has been possible only because of, first, a recognition of the realities (not always as quickly as it seems, with hindsight, we might have recognised them).

Second, a steady and sustained determination to intervene in whatever struggles actually occurred, nationally or locally. 'As we are now the only serious and substantial interventionist organisation to the left of the Labour Party, there is still the CP of course, declining fast but still four times our size on paper, but less and less able to intervene as a party (as opposed to the blocking activity of its fairly numerous union officials). In the course of the last year we have been compelled to look long and hard at what we are doing. The result is a tighter and harder organisation. It is nonetheless necessary at the shifts of emphasis since last conference.

8) A CC document in the summer of 1981 could still speak of challenging the Labour lefts politically by the classic united front approach. 'The united front has to be our response to the political upturn. But it has to be a united front in struggle, in the place where workers potentially have power and therefore the least need to look to others to do things for them - in the workplace. Of course there are other sorts of struggles where a militant presence and a clear exposition of our ideas can attract people.... the fight against the Nazis.... CND... The united front can pay clear dividends there...but such movements can only have a transient existence and a limited impact unless they connect with the power that lies at the point of production.'

By the early summer of 1982 it had become apparent that the approach was unviable. The Falklands war sharply illuminated the weakness and isolation of the left - and the rightward shift of the Bennites. The whole basis of our united front approach to the Bennite left and its CP auxiliaries, the possibilities of action, had evaporated.

It was necessary to recognise the new reality - industrial downturn and political downturn and to reorient accordingly. The CC document 'Facing the Downturn' (June 82) drew the conclusion... 'in these circumstances it is impossible for us to continue with even the limited types of united front work that have been a part of our activity for the past year. In our tradition, the united front is an instrument of struggle. It depends not only on our will to fight on an issue but also on the objective reality that a large number of non-revolutionaries, are prepared to fight alongside of us.' Large is a relative time; in our context it generally means thousands rather than a million but the general validity of the statement, for the time being, is clear. You cannot have a united front for ACTIONS with a weakening and rightward shifting tendency which itself has no mass base.

9) The Rank and File movements are, by definition, united front operations. They are viable and vitally important when significant struggles take place, shells when they do not. One danger of such shells is that they can become a focus for electoralism and, in the present circumstances, a means of transmitting rightward pressures into the party. Another is substitutionalism, an 'attempt to substitute our own tiny resources for a non-existent mass movement' as the CC statement says. We do not abandon the conception of rank and file movements, any more than we abandon the united front where it can be applied. We recognise that, at present,

the conditions for significant rank and file movements do not exist. This will change at some point in the future. All past experience suggests that the end of the industrial downturn will be heralded by a number of bitter strikes, sharp conflicts with the union bureaucracies and the creation of a new layer of militants. This was the case in Britain in 1955-37 and, on a vastly greater scale in France and the USA in the same period. When such struggles develop the problems of the rank and file organisation will go to the top of the agenda. Naturally, we do not wait passively on events. We must intervene in every actual struggle and the interventions must be party interventions, involving all members, and not depending on more or less fictitious blocks with shadow forces.

10) Our difficulties are considerable but the enemy has intractable and deepening problems in Britain and internationally. The world economic situation has created much greater tension and conflicts which the ruling classes of East and West manage to contain with increasing difficulty. The unpredictability and irrationality of the system is growing fast. A real upturn in the class struggle will come and, without diverting ourselves with speculative predictions about precisely where, when and how, we have to relate our day to day activity, as well as our propaganda, to that perspective.

'there is always a minority, sometimes a tiny minority, who are willing to fight back. This minority of many thousands is the audience for our arguments. These arguments will have to be hard political arguments... to build the political life of our branches is central to carrying out our industrial work in this period... there will be a return to mass struggle... What we are doing today is to lay the groundwork which will enable us to take full advantage when times change.' (Facing the D^ownturn).