

THE EXTREME LEFT IN BRITAIN

In the past decade, the main development on the extreme left throughout the world has been a revival of Marxist splinter groups outside the orthodox Communist movement. Trotskyists have been active outside the Communist Party since the Stalinist purges of the 1930s and, for a time in this country, were united in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). But from 1948-56 British Trotskyism was in the doldrums. Then came Hungary. "Something like 10,000 of the faithful quit [the CPGB] in 1956-57. A number stuck to Marxism and tried to restate it, and some started or helped to build the new Marxist sects that have proliferated since 1959..." (Peter Cadogan, in a letter to the Times Literary Supplement, 20 November, 1970). Today it is commonplace for the Communists to be outflanked on the left by Trotskyists, Maoists and the supporters of the New Left, often with anarchist support. Although these groups cannot claim membership comparable with that of the Communist Party (the CPGB has about 30,000 card-carrying members, while all the British Trotskyists together probably number no more than about 5,000), it is these relatively few extremists who have become the pacemakers on the extreme left.

Organisations

In this country the main Trotskyist groups, all mutually hostile, are

- (a) the Socialist Labour League (SLL);
- (b) the International Marxist Group (IMG);
- (c) the Revolutionary Workers' Party;
- (d) the International Socialism Group (IS).

The Maoists have their own

- (e) Communist Party of Britain, Marxist-Leninist.

The SLL, the oldest Trotskyist organisation in the country, is formally proscribed by the Labour Party and adopted its present title in 1959. Its founder and president, Gerry Healy, was expelled from the CPGB in 1938 and has been connected with various Trotskyist organisations ever since. The SLL dominates a tendency in international Trotskyism which is opposed to the current line in favour at Trotskyist headquarters (the Fourth International office in Paris) and, in common with like-minded groups in the USA, France and elsewhere, maintains its own 'United Committee of the Fourth International'. It has about 1,000 members and runs a youth movement, the Young Socialists, captured from the Labour Party in 1963, with its own paper, Keep Left. The SLL also prints 20,000 copies five days a week of its own newspaper, The Workers' Press, which is already potentially a threat to the Communists' ailing Morning Star.

The IMG originated in the 'Nottingham International Group' founded by Patrick Jordan, a local left-wing bookseller, and Ken Coates, a university

teacher, in the early 1960s. It is now based on London and is the official British affiliate of the Fourth International in Paris, being subject to the general direction of that body's International Secretariat; it is on that account anathema to the SLL. It controls the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, which is now run from the same Nottingham address as Ken Coates' Institute for Workers' Control (which it partly finances). The IMG has its own weekly organ, The Red Mole, founded in March 1970 after a row with the original proprietors of the Black Dwarf and edited by Tariq Ali; it has a circulation of about 12,000. IMG probably has fewer than 200 members. Its newly-founded youth section is called the Spartacus League.

The 'Revolutionary Workers' Party (Trotskyist), British Section of the Fourth International' is an even smaller Trotskyist group of the Posadist tendency (J. Posadas, an Argentinian, is a Trotskyist leader with a large following in South America). It is at odds with both the SLL and the IMG. It publishes a weekly Red Flag and has some support on the shop floor.

The International Socialism Group, founded by Tony Cliffe, is not technically Trotskyist (its supporters are followers of Rosa Luxemburg, not Trotsky, and are equally opposed to both the capitalism of the West and the State capitalism of the USSR). It has grown rapidly in recent years and now has about 1,000 supporters, many of them teachers and writers. It was instrumental in founding the Revolutionary Socialist Students' Federation (RSSF) at the London School of Economics in 1968, and has links with revolutionary students at the Queen's University, Belfast. It is increasingly active in industry (as are the SLL and the IMG) and was involved in the Pilkington's dispute at St. Helens earlier this year.

The Communist Party of Britain, Marxist-Leninist, is the leading British Maoist organisation, with a few hundred supporters, mostly in North London where its founder, Reg Birch, is a divisional official of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. Birch has links with Communist China and Albania, both of which he has visited in recent years. His party is uneasily associated with like-minded Maoist organisations, such as A. Manchanda's Britain-Vietnam Solidarity Front (which has about 150 supporters) and the Albanian Society. It publishes The Worker.

Activities

In 1967-1969, British Trotskyists, sometimes with reluctant Communist and Maoist support, promoted a series of public demonstrations on the Vietnam issue which, for a time, posed serious law and order problems. The usual venue was outside the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square. The first was on October 27, 1967; the largest was in March 1968 and involved about 15,000 people. On these occasions the Communists were a restraining influence; the Maoists and other hooligan elements, usually about 1500-2,000 strong, resorted to violence. The importance of these demonstrations was temporarily inflated by the interest of the press and television; when this interest lapsed, the demonstration movement, already hampered by internal quarrels between Trotskyists of different persuasions, disintegrated. The last of these particular demonstrations (on Rhodesia in January 1969 and on Vietnam in March

1969) were flops, attracting fewer than 5,000 people to the streets.

In the same period, many of the same people were involved in the student protest movement at a number of universities, especially London (the LSE), Manchester, Essex, Oxford, Keele and latterly Cambridge. Their main instrument was the Radical Students' Alliance (RSA), an umbrella organisation founded by the National Student Organiser of the CPGB, Fergus Nicholson, in 1966 to dislodge the then moderate leadership of the National Union of Students; IMG and IS supporters eventually dominated some of its local branches, especially in East Anglia. In 1968 a more extreme students' organisation was founded at the LSE by IS supporters (the Revolutionary Socialist Students' Federation) as a British counterpart of the German SDS and in its heyday claimed 2,000 members. By 1969 its London branch was under the control of the Maoist Edward Davoren. Other Maoist students, belonging to a movement founded at Montreal a few years ago and called the Internationalists, have engaged in personal attacks on distinguished university visitors (e.g. at the University of Sussex, where an American diplomatist and the Indian High Commissioner have been subjected to indignity). IS supporters were also active in 1969 at the Queen's University, Belfast, within the ranks of the People's Democracy, and IMG members played a leading part in the troubles at Warwick University early in 1970, when the university registry was raided and confidential files published.

In industry, there have been many examples in recent years of Trotskyists intentionally intensifying disputes at a time when the larger and more highly organised CPGB often tried to restrain hotheads. Indeed the wheel may now have come full circle; in the recent unofficial mining dispute, the Trotskyists, so far from being in any way restrained by Communist caution, may have compelled the Communists to change their policy and promote strike action. The difference is of course one of tactics, not aims; Trotskyists are as much Marxist-Leninists as Communists but, whereas the CPGB has an established base in the trade union movement to defend and long-term aims (such as capturing the TUC and thereby the predominant voice in the Labour Party) which obsess its leaders, the Trotskyists are disorganised agitators without real organisation or any established power-base. They are therefore irresponsible and regard strike action, as Communists cannot, as good in itself (i.e. as a step in the direction of implementing Trotsky's slogan of 'permanent revolution'). The main Trotskyist groups in industry are the SLL's All-Trade Union Alliance (originally the Oxford branch of the Communists' Liaison Committee for the Defence of the Trade Unions, captured by local Trotskyists in 1967) and the IMG-inspired Institute for Workers' Control. The leading figures in the former are Alan Thornett and Reg Parsons (motor shop stewards with the British Leyland group at Oxford), Joe Cubbin (a Merseyside docker) and Jack Gould (a Coventry electrician). The Institute for Workers' Control was founded in 1968 by Ken Coates, the principal director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF), which is a charity now used as a means of promoting not peace abroad but conflict in British industry. The Institute is run, like the BRPF, from Bertrand Russell House, 45 Gamble Street, Forest Road West, Nottingham and has distinguished patronage ("Honorary President, Earl Russell, O.M. FRS (1872-1970), Honorary Vice-presidents, Jack Jones, Alex Kitson, Alf Lomas, Ernie Roberts"). Hugh Scanlon, the engineers' president, has also been prominently associated with it. The chairman is Bill Jones (TGWU) and

the secretary is Ken Fleet, a member of the Association of Supervisory, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) and the business manager of the BRPF's journal, The Spokesman. In practice the Institute is run by its founder, Ken Coates, who left the CP in 1957 and was expelled from the Labour Party in 1966 (he was subsequently readmitted). There have been eight 'National Conferences on Industrial Democracy and Workers' Control' held under Coates' auspices, attended by over 1,000 delegates; the report of the 1969 conference contained the significant statement, "every strike in private industry, particularly on issues other than wages, is a step towards workers' control". But whereas the Pilkington stoppage in 1970, a complex dispute, partly fomented by Trotskyists was just such a strike, the most recent major stoppage involving Trotskyists occurred in the public sector, in the mines.

The Institute for Workers' Control, the IS and the Revolutionary Workers' Party were all involved in the recent unofficial miners' stoppage. After the Executive Committee of the NUM had voted to accept the NCB's pay offer, which it proposed to submit to a ballot of the membership, the initial Communist reaction was to try to "damp down the pressure for unofficial strikes" (Guardian, 9 November). This was particularly true of the leaders of the Communist-controlled Scottish Area of the union. The pressure for a national stoppage came from Trotskyist elements in the Yorkshire NUM which were so successful in their unofficial picketing campaign that, within a week, the Communists in Yorkshire, South Wales and Scotland were forced to follow suit. "The picketers [were] drawn from all around Yorkshire, but appear mostly to come from the Doncaster area" (Financial Times, November 12). Trotskyists have in recent years built up a strong position on the Doncaster Panel; since September 1968, a militant miners' publication, The Mineworker, has been edited by David Douglass, the young "leader of a revolutionary movement aimed at taking control of the mining industry by the workers ... who said he was a Trotskyist" (Doncaster Gazette, September 19, 1968). Douglass and his associates have links with the Posadist 'Revolutionary Workers' Party'; other pickets have been active on behalf of the Yorkshire Region of the International Socialists (Flat 3, 25 Bagly Road, Leeds 2) and the Doncaster International Socialists (16 Ravensworth Road, Hyde Park, Doncaster).

"For a couple of days a schoolteacher was using his car to take pickets out to pits and he was drawing petrol from the Brodsworth home coal depot... This man was distributing International Socialist leaflets."
(Yorkshire Post, November, 17)

This unofficial picketing, some of it amounting to intimidation, was partly financed from these NUM welfare funds which

"... started in the troubles of the 20s and 30s and were usually known as the 'penny fund' - a penny a week from each working miner. They were used to help miners on hard times... Even today the uses are similar - such as sending a miner with a legal claim to be examined by a specialist... A union branch with 1700 members will get £42.10 a week from the sixpenny contributions - in just ten weeks that's

well over £400 available. The Doncaster Panel has 14 branches..." (Sheffield Morning Telegraph, November, 16).

It was these funds which financed the activities of what Lord Robens has called "organised pickets, who are pretty tough ... going round to pits dragging men on strike" and which, by causing the CPGB itself to adopt more militant tactics, closed half the British coal fields for a fortnight.

Trotskyists and Maoists try to be as active in the communications media as in industry. Some of the group associated with Kestrel Films Limited, the independent television and film company which made the successful feature film 'Kes' and whose directors were formerly associated with the BBC (until 1968) and ITV (in 1969), have Trotskyist associations. Their political motive is unconcealed; the director of 'Kes' and 'Cathy Come Home', Ken Leach, has said that the

"point of 'Cathy' was to show how people become homeless, and what happens, and the implication is that only political action can change it..."
(Guardian, June 30)

Others with Trotskyist or Maoist inclinations are still active on all three television channels or inside the Free Communications Group, an all-party group concerned to promote the social ownership of the press and television, although they are of course only a small minority inside the organisations in which they work.

Another major Trotskyist interest is Ireland. As already stated, IS has links with revolutionary student circles in Ulster; it is also an important factor, with other Trotskyists, in the Irish Civil Rights Solidarity Campaign in this country (John Palmer, a well-known Fleet Street journalist, is both a leading IS member and prominent in the Campaign's affairs). The SLL meanwhile has recently opened a branch in Dublin.

It should, of course, be emphasised that the internal quarrels among Trotskyists are as great a disabling factor as their political irresponsibility is a tactical advantage. The feuds between these groups are deep and bitter, both at the personal and the doctrinal level (e.g. the IMG sympathise with the Black Power movement and has tried to infiltrate the Black Panther Party, while the SLL regards the concept of Black Power as irrelevant to Marxism). But there are few spheres of British life where Trotskyists, however few, are not active and where they do not present a more immediate problem, because of their greater militancy, than the Communists whom they would like to supplant.

25 November, 1970