

workers power

FEBRUARY 1986

Theoretical Supplement

10p if sold separately

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SLL

by Mark Hoskisson and Dave Stocking

HEALY AND THE BEVANITES

IN THE 1950s the main component of British Trotskyism pursued a policy of deep entry into the Labour Party. This represented a political triumph for the faction of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) led by Healy.

In the late 1940s Healy, with the aid of Michel Pablo and the FI, split the RCP, and later reorganised it under the control of an unelected majority expelling all dissident voices - such as Tony Cliff and Ted Grant. In the summer of 1949 the RCP's openly Trotskyist paper, the *Socialist Appeal*, ceased publication. An open "Trotskyist" paper was not to re-appear on the British left for almost a decade.

The Healy faction collaborated with a number of left-reformists to establish the Socialist Fellowship (SF) in 1949. This loose grouping published an avowedly non-Trotskyist paper, the *Socialist Outlook* (SO) until 1954, when the Labour leadership suppressed it. In fact, by 1951, it became a vehicle to popularise - and in Healy's schema thereby pressurise - the left-reformist current around Aneurin Bevan.

From its earliest days, the Socialist Fellowship was explicitly non-Trotskyist. It declared its unconditional loyalty to the Labour Party and castigated the ILP for its crime of leaving the Party: "The ILP made the great mistake of leaving the Labour Party in 1932. If we are to succeed where the ILP failed we must remember we are first and foremost members of the Labour Party, desirous of serving it." (SO January 1950 - our emphasis) The idea that revolutionaries are "first and foremost" members of a reformist party indicated the strategic conception that "the Club", as Healy's group was called, had of entryism.

Indeed, retrospectively justifying "the Club's" refusal to fight the 1954 proscription of SO and the SF, the then SLL leader Ted Knight declared: "We retreated on the question of Socialist Outlook. Why? Because at that stage in the development of the left to have gone out would have left a vacuum in a developing situation ... We say our fight around the Socialist Outlook enabled the Left in the movement to mobilise itself around Bevan." (The Newsletter June 11th 1960)

The orientation to Bevan was paramount in "the Club's" politics. Healy regarded the leaders of the Bevanite movement as "centrists". In the schema, of course, centrists could be transformed into revolutionaries. It was only when Pablo, and his ally in "the Club" John Lawrence, pushed for an alternative schema, an adaptation to Stalinism, that Healy broke with Pablo. The question was not Trotskyism versus liquidationism, as Healy's hagiographers would have us believe. Both Healy and Lawrence favoured political liquidation. The argument was about which section of reformism to adapt to.

Healy's victory over Lawrence enabled him to preserve his alliance with the Bevanites. The formation of the International Committee in the split with Pablo in 1953, for all the attendant anti-liquidationist tub-thumping made no difference whatsoever to "the Club's" activities. Their private bellowings about "the party" made not one iota of difference to their practice and public politics. They remained locked on an opportunist course towards Bevan

INTRODUCTION;

THOMAS GERARD HEALY'S expulsion from the organisation he led for so many years poses the Workers Revolutionary Party with a sharp choice. Either it can uncover the roots of its own degeneration and make a clean break with centrism, or it can simply seek a return to a supposed 'healthy period' in its past and embrace one or other manifestation of the WRP's long tradition of centrism.

In the meetings and debates currently being held by the WRP a keen interest is being shown in the history of the party and that of its predecessor the Socialist Labour League (SLL). This interest is healthy. It is in that history that the key to explaining the Healyites' rotten politics can be found. In this article Workers Power is making its contribution to the current debate. The thesis of this article is that the degeneration of the WRP can be found in Healy's early break with Trotskyism. It was a break that was an integral part of the whole Fourth International's (FI) collapse into centrism. This took place between 1945 and 1951. After 1951 no section of the FI represented a revolutionary political continuity with Trotsky's Fourth International.

The Fourth International (FI) was deeply disoriented by the failure of its perspective of a post-war revolutionary crisis that would shatter Stalinism and Social Democracy and open the way for the FI to conquer the leadership of the masses. Instead Stalinism and Social Democracy were greatly strengthened. The FI and its leading figures Michel Pablo and James P. Cannon both continued to predict an approaching catastrophic crisis which would fulfil their perspectives of mass growth.

The Cold War and the Tito-Stalin conflict led the leadership of the FI to a major break with the revolutionary method of drawing up perspectives and by 1951 to a break with the fundamental principles and programme of the

and co.

This opportunism is evident in Healy's other non-Trotskyist publication of the time *Labour Review* (LR). This had no lesser an ambition than to become "Labour's educational and theoretical organ." (LR Vol.1 No.1 January/March 1952). In order to see the extent of their self-presentation as Bevanites we only have to look at their attitude to the Labour Government of 1945-51. Mr Healy wrote of the experience of this government: "They (the working class - WP) were given glimpses of what a Labour regime could accomplish and even more, what a socialist future could bring." (LR Vol.1 No.4)

While Atlee came in for criticism it was not because of his vicious attacks on striking dockers or other workers. These incidents receive no mention in LR. No, the main fault of the government was in the field of foreign policy: "The outstanding debit on the balance sheet of the Labour Government was undoubtedly its foreign policy." (ibid) For Healy the Atlee government and its "considerable achievements" (ibid) proved the possibility of using the Labour Party for socialist tasks. "We may not have to create a Labour Party, but let's use that instrument to fulfill its socialist purposes." (ibid)

Of course this couldn't be done under the right-wing leaders. But happily an instrument for their ousting was close at hand. The Bevanites were the vehicle for the party's transformation. In order to encourage this development Healy advocated a road to socialism that was, in essentials, no different to that being advocated by the Communist Party, in their new programme the openly reformist *British Road to Socialism*: "What should be the right relation between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actions? Mr. Bevan criticises those who looked upon parliamentary action 'as an auxiliary of direct action by the industrial organisations of the working class.' But it would be equally one sided, as he does, to make industrial action always auxiliary and subordinated to parliamentary action. Both forms of action are indispensable for conducting the class struggle." (LR Vol.1 No.2 May/August 1952 G. Healy our emphasis).

So for Healy the industrial struggle and the parliamentary struggle are put on equal footing. Whichever predominates at a particular time depends on external circum-



stances. FL Tito's break with the Kremlin was seen as a left split from Stalinism towards centrism based on a false notion of Stalinism as meaning only subservience to the Kremlin. On the model of Tito's break Pablo and co. developed a schema of developing 'left' forces within Stalinism and Social Democracy.

Pablo and Cannon's 'man' in Britain, Gerry Healy, adapted this perspective to the 'Keep Left' and later the 'Bevanite' movement. On this basis 'deep entry' or 'entryism sui generis' was advocated. Its purpose was to amalgamate the Trotskyist forces with the 'centrist' ones, encouraging the latter to replace the 'Right wing' at the head of the Social Democratic and Stalinist Parties. As against Trotsky's perspective of fighting for a revolutionary programme and leadership they were to fight for an avowedly centrist programme and leadership.

In reality this meant giving a centrist coloration to tendencies that were in reality left-reformist. It meant abandoning the Trotskyist criticism of these tendencies.

We have dealt with this process of degeneration at length in our book *The Death Agony of the Fourth International and the Tasks for Trotskyists Today*. We have examined its impact on postwar British Trotskyism in our paper *Workers Power* (nos. 39 and 40). Relevant material has been compiled into a pamphlet on the split in the WRP. All these publications are available from us. In the article that follows, the thesis that Healy's centrism has a far-reaching past is demonstrated by an examination of the 1952 to 1964 period. We concentrate on this period precisely because it was the time when many of the remaining leaders of the WRP joined Healy's movement. It is the period that they are most likely to look back to as a true revolutionary period. It was not, and there should be no return to it.

In a future article we will look at the evolution of the Healyites' international politics with particular reference to Stalinism, the colonial revolution and the Fourth International.

Workers Power February 1986

stances. Moreover the equal importance given to parliamentary and to industrial action meant a fundamentally parliamentary road to socialism: "It is not excluded that the movement for socialism can be carried far through the gates of Parliament and be 'legalised' to a considerable degree thereby." (ibid)

All that is required is "the active vigilance of the mobilised masses" (ibid) and, more importantly, a Bevanite leadership in the Labour Party: "On the other side, which is popularly designated as Bevanite, are all those forces who, regardless of their previous positions and present differences, have absorbed certain lessons from the post war experiences and are seeking to overcome the defeats of the past. They wish to adopt and implement a programme of action that more closely conforms to the realities, needs and aspirations of the socialist and Labour cause at this critical juncture of its evolution in England." (LR Vol 1 No.4)

Flowing from this whole analysis Healy abandoned the use of Transitional Programme of Trotsky. He put in its place a strategy centering on the election of a Labour government pledged to absolutely vacuous "socialist policies" and led by the "left".

Throughout this period there is not one word of warning about the potential for treachery inherent in left-reformism, and manifested in 1957 with Bevan's reconciliation with Gaitskell and the right. Instead, all we get is: "Mr. Bevan and his associates should be given the chance to lead the Labour Party and its next cabinet so they can carry through as far and as fast as they can his experiment in dynamic parliamentarism." (LR Vol 1 No.2) And the socialist policies demanded of such a government?

1. Complete reliance on the organised power of the working class.

2. No confidence in Britain's capitalists or America's imperialists.

3. Finish without delay the job of nationalising, democratising and re-organising industry along socialist lines.

4. Put into effect a socialist and democratic foreign policy. This is the only road to workers' power and socialism in Great Britain."

(ibid - our emphasis)

Absent from Healy's public perspective was any mention

of a direct clash between the mobilised workers and the capitalist class, workers' councils, the arming of the workers, the smashing of the capitalist state and the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship.

This then was the public programme of Healy's group. "Orthodox Trotskyism" was retained for the private consumption of the few dozen members of the secret grouping and for international polemics. The two were held together by the notion of a prolonged stage of acting publicly as Bevanites which would eventually lead to the triumph of Trotskyism. Of course this process would be speeded up by an oncoming economic crisis. This was where Healy's lifelong predilection for perspectives based on an imminent crisis - of catastrophic proportions came in.

By 1952-53 it was clear to an idiot that capitalism was in a phase of a powerful and protracted boom. The impact of this was to strengthen reformism within the working class at large. Even where left-reformism challenged the right for control of the Labour Party - as it did at the Morecambe conference of the Party in 1952 - the right's control of the union block votes could be repeatedly used to restore order. The lefts themselves were, as always, unwilling to see a fight with the right through to the end.

Faced with such a situation - the reality of which could be measured by so many objective indicators (full employment, rising real wages, restriction of workers' activity to small scale and fragmented economic struggles) - a Marxist would have sought out underlying reasons for this strengthened reformism - seeking its contradictions and limitations.

Healy had a different notion of 'perspectives'. They had to promise a rapid escape for the revolutionaries from marginalisation and impotence to leadership and victory. Hence economic crisis was the mainspring for achieving this. For Healy, a 'crisis' was always an a priori necessity, the evidence for which was then assembled from one sided and exaggerated 'facts'. Thus figures showing downturn in the trade cycle, bankruptcies, financial crises or alarmist statements by bourgeois politicians were eclectically strung together. On this basis dramatic changes in the leadership of the working class were predicted.

Such changes were based on the sudden exposure (by events) of the present leadership and its replacement - in the fifties and early sixties by the lefts and in the later sixties and seventies by the SLL/WRP itself. The appearance of this perspective seems very different - grossly opportunist in the first period and highly sectarian in the second. But these were simply zig-zags of a common centrist method. Their root lay in an inability to fight reformism (right and left) for leadership in the workers' movement, step by step, struggle by struggle.

Healy's false approach to perspectives was visible in an article written after the Morecambe LP conference of 1952, entitled "Where is British Labour Going?". He stridently announced: "...the movement is militantly determined to push ahead toward a Socialist Britain". (LR Vol.1 No.4)

The evidence was Bevan's successes at the Morecambe conference. In the wings is the ever present crisis, albeit craftily concealed by the capitalists "signs of a slump have already appeared, even though the Conservative controlled press maintains a conspiracy of silence around it." (ibid)

From this economic crisis flows a political crisis: "The problem of power is not merely a theoretical one for Labour in Britain today. It has a burning actuality." (LR Vol.1 No.2)

This approach was not limited to a specific crisis or situation for it can be found year after year, scarcely altered or modified by the actual movements of capitalist economy or the course of the class struggle itself. Thus, in 1954 we find William Hunter writing, "Capitalist Britain, in short, is moving into a crisis. That crisis can only be met by the most drastic methods. That must now be seen as the background to all political and industrial developments." (LR Vol.1 No.5)

The objective of this foolish catastrophism was the same as it had been in 1952; "The big task for the Labour movement shaping up for 1954 is to get a Labour government which will take radical measures against capitalism." (ibid)

In the 1950s Healy's catastrophist perspective centred on the installation of a Labour government, under "left" leadership and carrying out "socialist policies". This was a grossly opportunist misuse of the communist tactic of

critical electoral support for, and putting demands on, a Labour government. It was, in essence, confusing a bourgeois workers' government with a revolutionary workers' government. The former could be installed by exclusively electoral means. It would rule for the bourgeoisie and deceive the working class. The latter (whilst it might or might not receive an electoral mandate) would be installed and maintained by the mass mobilisations of the working class and its first "socialist policies" would centre on arming the workers and disarming the bourgeoisie. It was and is quite impermissible to present working class power in terms of an electoral victory.

Healy's adaptationist politics led to no serious successes. With the suppression of **Socialist Outlook** and the suspension of **Labour Review** in 1954 the 40 or so members of the Club stagnated - publishing nothing, contributing to and selling **Tribune**. 'Pabloism' could not have effected a better disappearing act.

Yet in 1957 they were able to enter a milieu and gain significantly from a period of 'socialist regroupment'. Why? The reasons for this lie outside of Healy's own undoubted energy and organisational skills. They lie in a major crisis which erupted within Stalinism caused by the "Secret Speech" of Khrushchev, the de-Stalinisation campaign and the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

THE CRISIS IN STALINISM

The world's CPs were caught in a vicious contradiction. Firstly they had to denounce Stalin and open up a series of revelations of his crimes that confirmed the Trotskyists' case back in 1936 at least. Then they had to support the crushing of the Hungarian workers. They had to open up "discussions", promise greater internal democracy and then expel those who made use of it.

The crisis in the British CP was particularly acute. The CPGB loyally echoed Moscow's mendacious attacks on the Hungarian rising as having been inspired by fascists. However, Peter Fryer, a **Daily Worker** journalist, saw at first hand that what was happening in Hungary was a workers' revolt being brutally crushed by the Kremlin. His brilliant and accurate reports, though suppressed, caused a major impact on the CPGB. Many workers and intellectuals gleaned the truth and became sickened by the party's apologies for the slaughter.

A struggle in the party followed. While the Stalinist apparatus won out, its victory was a pyrrhic one. In late 1956 and early 1957 over 7,000 members tore up their party cards. A ferment was opened up on the left of the labour movement.

The Healy group intervened energetically in this ferment. The split from the CP did not involve the creation of a coherent faction. As well as left-moving elements who were to be won to Healy's group, there were also 'New Left' elements, like E.P. Thompson, whose evolution was towards social democracy.

In order to intervene, the Healyites re-launched **Labour Review** in January 1957. Later that year (May) they participated in the editorial board of **The Newsletter**, a paper edited by Peter Fryer and aimed at the ex-CP milieu.

The centrism of the Healy group was, undoubtedly, given a left impulse by these developments. Two other factors served to push the group further left. In 1957 the balance of payments crisis in Britain alerted the Tories and the bosses to the need to curb the expectations of the working class.

The long boom's minor shudder did produce a limited offensive by the ruling class on the wages and organisations of the workers.

Engineering was a key target and, in 1957, the AEU responded to an attack on wages with a national strike. Significantly it was the first large-scale national strike since the war. It marked a definite resurgence in militancy. In its wake came a whole series of struggles, that were often bitterly fought in the car industry, on London's buses and in the building industry.

While the AEU strike was defeated, it served notice that the industrial working class was not the fading star that many on the 'New Left' were claiming it to be.

The final aspect of the objective situation that led to the Healyites most healthy period, was Bevan's final reconciliation with Gaitskell. Over the H-Bomb issue Bevan, social patriot that he always was, blocked with Gaitskell against the growing unilateralist movement in the party. The Healyites' disappointment with Bevan and their desire to appeal to the exCPers using the capital of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism led them to assert their Trotskyism more openly and assertively than they had done throughout the 1950s.

The Newsletter and **Labour Review** were at their strongest when analysing Stalinism and its crisis and when responding to the working class struggles of 1957-60. Talented intellectuals and industrial militants rallied to these publications including Peter Fryer, Cliff Slaughter, and Brian Behan. Excellent historical articles by Joseph Redman (Brian Pearce) cleared away decades of Stalinist lies and distortion from the history of the British Labour Movement. **The Newsletter** challenged the CP's strategy of pinning "all their hopes on getting majorities in the leading committees of the trades unions".

With the foundation of the Socialist Labour League in February 1959 an organisation existed that was ready and willing to play more than a role as the left tail to the Bevanites. Brian Pearce's articles on the early CPGB's attitude to rank and file organisation armed the SLL's attempts to carry out a similar policy which fell on the fertile ground of the revived shop steward-led struggles of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Having recruited working class militants, like Brian Behan, from the CP, the Healyites got stuck into the struggles. In early 1958 **Labour Review** advanced **The Newsletter**



Newsletter, June 1960.

group's industrial strategy:

"One successful strike, even a small one, is worth a dozen parliamentary debates with the Tories. Inter-union rank and file organisation is a vital part of the answer to the Tory offensive". (LR Vol.3 No.1)

And later that year this rank and file strategy was put into action in the London bus strike. **The Newsletter** produced a special **Strike Bulletin**, which was written by busmen and sold 20,000 at the height of the strike. It argued

"What is needed is a national network of rank-and-file bodies, with efficient liaison and a central organ, so that information can be pooled, experiences shared and generalised, and the sense of participating in a common class battle fostered". (LR Vol.3 No.3)

The interventions in the class struggle reached their pinnacle in November 1958 with the Rank and File Conference. This was called by **The Newsletter** and attracted 500 delegates, most of them from manual unions. So successful was the conference in comparison with other efforts of the 'Trotskyists' during the 1950s, that Fleet Street felt obliged to launch a witch-hunt. The Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers (AUBTW) proscribed the meeting and expelled Brian Behan from the union. Needless to say the CP attacked the event as a 'Trotskyist circus' and joined in the witch-hunt.

The continued interventions of the SLL in the class struggle, enabled it to hold a recall conference in late 1959 this time billed as a National Assembly of Labour, and open to Labour Party bodies as well as unions.

By 1960 the SLL had grown into an organisation of hundreds. **The Newsletter** became its official paper, **Labour Review** its journal. It was proscribed by the Labour leadership. Its members were expelled from the Labour Party by the dozen. To any serious would-be revolutionary in 1960 the SLL was the obvious group to join. Its record of activity in the class struggle and around the crisis of the CP between 1957 and 1959 put those of Cliff's Socialist Review Group, and Grant's gaggle of followers to shame.

Yet the SLL failed to maintain and build on this promise. It rapidly began a process of theoretical degeneration. Its flexible use of the united front: in the unions, its bloc with the Labour lefts in the party and the youth movement, its participation in CND were all to give way to the most virulent sectarianism during the 1960s. Why?

THE SECTARIAN SIXTIES

Obviously it was not simply Healy's fault. It is certain he embodied the worst excesses but the SLL leadership as a whole never fully settled accounts with the centrism inherited from the 1948-51 degeneration of the FI or criticised the right centrist politics of the first half of the 1950s. These uncorrected methods poisoned the SLL in the 1960s and reduced it to an interned sect unable to relate tactically to the struggles of the working class and hence to recruit and consolidate the rank and file militants thrown up by these battles.

The SLL never in fact managed to orient itself correctly on the Labour Party issue. Despite its much higher profile the SLL did not alter the earlier Healy perspective of an uncritical support for a left Labour leadership and an electoral victory to bring in a Labour Government pledged to 'socialist policies'. This led to friction with the ex-CP industrial militants like Brian Behan.

By 1960 Brian Behan arguing that the SLL should split from the Labour Party and declare a new party. The SLL had been proscribed by the Labour leaders immediately after its foundation and its prominent members were expelled in a number of areas. To withdraw voluntarily would have been just what Gaitskell and co. wanted.

The SLL leadership were correct to resist though the



Aneurin Bevan

reasons they gave were the old unprincipled deep enlisting ones. In rejecting Behan's ultra-left and sectarian rationale they trampled on Lenin's definition of the Labour Party as a 'bourgeois party' based upon the organised working class - in short a bourgeois workers' party. The SLL's second national conference declared:

"...that it is a basic principle of the Socialist Labour League that the Labour Party is a working class and not a capitalist party. In the opinion of conference the Labour Party is a working class party with a reactionary bureaucracy foisted upon it as a result of the pressures of British imperialism". (The Newsletter 6th February 1960 - our emphasis)

The answer is clear - oust the bureaucracy and all will be well with the Labour Party. The idea of a protracted struggle to create a new revolutionary party - a Leninist Party is implicitly renounced. The task of preparing an 'alternative leadership' is posed in the narrowest organisational form.

Why did the SLL reject so explicitly what they were to practice in less than four years? The answer lies in the perspective the SLL had developed in response to the revived left ferment after the 1959 election. Labour, led by Gaitskell, had abandoned any serious promises of new nationalisations. They fought the election campaign on a 'revisionist' platform and lost. Their response was to junk as much as possible of Labour's 'socialist rhetoric' and to distance themselves from the unions in order to play down the 'old-fashioned' class identification of the party. They set out to junk Clause IV. This produced a hostile reaction from many union leaders. When this was combined with the upsurge of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament it put new wind in the Labour left's sails - now reorganised as "Victory for Socialism" (VFS).

The conflict between VFS, CND and new 'left' union leaders like Frank Cousins and Gaitskell, backed by the PLP, the NEC and the Campaign for Democratic Socialism became quite fierce. Gaitskell's defeat at the 1960 Conference led to a fierce attack on the left - this campaign of expulsions and suspensions was what he really meant when he said he would "Fight, fight and fight again to save the party" for NATO and the H-bomb.

The Newsletter began to offer the scenario that Gaitskell was another MacDonald. They proclaimed that he intended to split the Labour Party. Their whole perspective was of an imminent repeat of 1931 with the lefts inheriting the leadership with the SLL close behind as the alternative. When Gaitskell proclaimed his defiance of the conference decisions and the PLP continued to vote for nuclear weapon programmes in Parliament The Newsletter proclaimed:

"Left MPs must break away from the unofficial parliamentary party and place their own motions down for discussion in the House of Commons". (The Newsletter 12th November 1960)

As usual they gave little or no warning of the cowardice and unseriousness of the left. The high point of the conflict between left and right was the PLP's expulsion of Foot and five other MPs from its ranks. Foot and co. did not take long to capitulate. Tribune and the 'left' union leaders sponsored an amendment for the 1961 conference that hauled down the unilateralist flag and handed Gaitskell victory without a fight.

Gaitskell - aided by Tribune - turned his witch-hunting fully against the SLL and the Young Socialists (refounded the previous year) within whose ranks the SLL's influence was growing.

This 'betrayal' of the Lefts filled the SLL leaders with fury. The trajectory from now on was towards proclaiming the SLL as the alternative to the Labour Right and towards a virulence of denunciation which ludicrously underestimated the continued hold of reformism with the British working class. Like disappointed lovers they turned with frenzy on the erstwhile object of all their hopes.

The SLL's perspective began to lose all contact with reality. Their crisis-based perspective turned into increasing catastrophism. These 'perspectives' became a 'superior reality' perceivable only by the higher philosophy of 'dialectical materialism'. The 'alternative leadership' had to be built in order to intersect with the enormous crisis. The crisis itself would destroy reformism and lead revolutionaries to victory. The SLL's view of perspective was completely foreign to Trotsky's approach.

Perspectives for a Marxist are a working guide based on a continual assessment and re-assessment of the economy, the political situation, the balance of forces within the working class and between it and the bourgeoisie. Certainly perspectives must be grounded in an analysis of the capitalist world economy. They rest on the understanding of the imperialist epoch as one of wars and revolutions. They rest on an assessment of period based on the upswing and downswing of world economy and on the tempo of defeats and victories within the class struggle.

Since the class struggle is a living 'combat' Trotsky correctly observed that perspectives and predictions must have an alternate character. They are not oracular prophecies and need to be constantly re-assessed. Where they are false it must be admitted. This is vital since the revolutionary organisation bases its activities, its propaganda and agitation on its perspectives. From this work comes real concrete confirmation (or contradiction) of these perspectives. Their prime purpose is not to encourage or console the revolutionary militant. Their job is not to spur the militants on to superhuman efforts of sacrifices but to guide their actions.

Trotsky noted "Programmes and prognoses are tested and corrected in the light of experience, which is the supreme criterion of human reason" (Ninety Years of the Communist Manifesto).

The role of perspectives became quite different within the SLL. Exaggeration was present even in the healthiest period. The Healyites used catastrophism to justify their perspectives for short term mass growth and the capturing of the Labour Party. They rightly insisted from 1957 onwards that the industrial struggle was the motor force behind the struggles in the Labour Party. But they went on to exaggerate the revolutionary and political significance of a range of disputes. The real content of the 1957-59 strikes was the defence of wages and job security. Nor were workers in the mass generalising form these experiences. This much is clear from the fact that between 1950 and 1968 there were only 5 national strikes and in only 5 strikes per year were 50,000 or more days lost.

These disputes had a molecular character. Their mili-

tants were increasingly open to political generalisation, and the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy clearly opened the way to the development of a new rank and file movement fighting for militant policies, class wide solidarity, for democratisation of the unions and against sectionalism, racism and economism.

If the SLL had held to a united front approach it could have given a lead to and crystallised a powerful and organised shop stewards' movement. Instead it squandered its resources in the pursuit of an illusory get-rich-quick perspective.

The task of destroying reformism was entrusted to the crisis. The struggle against Gaitskell marked the beginning of the end for Social Democracy.

"...the crisis of our times permits little room for manoeuvre in the future. In other words social democracy has reached the gravest crisis of its history ... Who will lead the Left?" (LR Vol.5 No.2)

The answer, of course, was:

"Marxism and a Marxist leadership is the only force that can fill the void on the left?" (ibid)

If the crisis mongering was bad, then the 'void on the left' theory was disastrous. There is never a 'void' on the left so long as Stalinism, left reformism or centrism exist. Unless and until those forces are defeated in reality - and not merely literarily in the pages of The Newsletter - then the central task of Marxists is to fight them using revolutionary tactics.

The first shift towards the future sectarianism was reflected in the 1961 Document "The World Prospect for Socialism". In contrast to all of the previous documents with their schemas of transforming the Labour Party this document declares

"The need to build independent Marxist parties in order to provide alternative leadership is the most urgent task of the day". (LR Vol.6 No.3)

The SLL leadership failed to reassess and correct their earlier perspectives. They should have realised that they had held an over-optimistic and foreshortened view of the 'crisis of leadership'. The right held on to their dominance and the left were weakened after 1961. How on earth could this betoken the growing political consciousness of the masses and the weakening of reformism? Yet this is exactly how Healy and co. interpreted events. Along with this loss of contact with the actual Labour movement and the real consciousness of British workers went an abandonment of the various united front tactics necessary to partake in their struggles and really fight the reformist leaders.

DITCHING THE UNITED FRONT

Throughout 1962 united front tactics were ditched in favour of repeated calls in The Newsletter to build the new leadership. The call for rank and file movements disappears to be replaced with:

"On this May Day 1962, we call upon all workers in the trade union, Labour Party and the Communist Party to consider seriously the next step in the struggle for socialism. Join with us in building the Marxist leadership. Join the Socialist Labour League". (The Newsletter 5th May 1962)

The united front could be got rid of for one simple reason. In the SLL's view of things the victory of the right in the Labour Party had exposed the 'lefts'. Left-reformism was therefore no obstacle as it was:

"...thoroughly discredited and cannot under any circumstances be considered as candidates for leadership in Labour's left-wing". (LR Vol.7 No.3)

Discredited in whose eyes? Cannot be considered as worthy leaders by whom?

The SLL and its several hundred workers might have seen through Michael Foot and co., but millions of workers - as Wilson's 1964 election victory showed - had not even had their illusions in right-wing reformism dispelled.



1956: Budapest workers demolish Stalin's statue.

To give scientific weight to their prognoses the SLL projected a scenario of a capitalist economy in Britain teetering on the brink of ruin. The convenient result of economic crisis was that it destroyed the material base of reformism and justified a sectarian method of party building.

By 1963 the features of Healyism - impending crisis, impending bonapartism or fascism, and full blown sectarianism were codified in a resolution "The Class Struggle in Britain" passed at the SLL's fifth annual conference. This warned that union participation in the NEDC indicated that the main threat of fascism came, not from the right, but:

"Within the labour movement itself, policies of class collaboration and integration into the capitalist state can develop a 'left' or 'radical' wing of the corporatist kind". (LR Vol.7 No.5)

In other words class-collaboration and corporatism become one and the same thing in the Healyites telescoped view of the world. At the same time:

"There is no room in the present situation for left reformist movements". (ibid)

This may have been comforting for the SLL but it was a million miles away from reality as the history of the late 1960s to today demonstrates. The class struggle was painted in terms of a continual struggle for power - despite the fact that the level of struggle had declined in comparison with the 1957 to 1959 period.

This apparent paradox was explained away by Britain's economic crisis:

"The problems of the British economy are so acute, and the relation between capital and its political agents so full of contradictions, that the problem of power is in fact continually posed". (ibid)

To meet this explosive (1963) situation the SLL announced its turn away from the united front. The resolution of the continually posed problem of power necessitated building the leadership. The crisis was no temporary phenomenon it was "a deep historical one" (ibid) and building the SLL was therefore a race against time. Via the YS, the SLL had staged some significant lobbies of Parliament against the witch-hunt. Dizzy with success they declared that their own campaigns were central and:

"...the work of all the comrades must be centred on these main campaigns... Our political campaigns are the real answer to the problems which are constantly posed by industrial militants. Only the construction of the League in the fight for the political line corresponds to the real needs of the workers in the trade unions, and the work of our trade union fractions must flow from this". (ibid)

This turn to their own campaigns reflected in the headlines of The Newsletter. Events in the class struggle were pushed into the background while the activities of the SLL become front page news.

With the sectarian turn Healy increasingly needed to seal-off his members from the reality of the class struggle and from contact with the rest of the left. The politics of the amalgam that Healy learnt while he was a Stalinist served him well in this regard. All of the SLL's opponents - right and left - were lumped together in a conspiracy against the SLL and the way was cleared to portray the rest of the left, the 'revisionists', as agents of the bourgeoisie. This found its expression as early as 1962:

"From Transport House and the Communist Party Headquarters at King Street, down to the much smaller groups of Mr. Cliff and his so-called Socialist Review state capitalists and the tiny Pabloite fragments, there is unanimous agreement that the Socialist Labour League should be destroyed". (LR Vol.7 No.2)

From this it was an easy step to assert that revisionism, in particular Pabloism "is in the direct service of imperialism" (Fourth International - the successor to LR - Vol.1 No.2 Summer 1964).

The hysteria against 'renegades and revisionists' helped seal the increasingly young Healyite rank-and-file away from the forums or actions of the Labour movement where he or she would have to compare the SLL's politics with those of its rivals.

From 1963 the degeneration of the SLL into a sect proceeded apace. The combination of repeated declarations of the death of reformism with the presentation of the SLL and YS's own rallies, conferences or demonstrations as epoch-making events marks Healy's final departure into a world of his own. By 5th June 1965 The Newsletter could proclaim: "Virtually nobody has any more illusions with the right-wing government" (The Newsletter 9th June 1965).

This same government was to be returned with a significantly increased majority within a year. Clearly to quote Mark Twain "reports of its death had been greatly exaggerated".

On the other hand the SLL's own activities received the most amazing accolades - from itself;

"The Fifth Annual Conference of the Young Socialists which met at Morecambe on the weekend of February 27th-28th was undoubtedly the most significant event in the working class since the end of the war". (our emphasis - WP)

The importance given to youth work came to dominate everything at this time. Important as youth work must be to a revolutionary organisation it cannot replace effective work in the strongest bastions of reformism - in the unions and in the Labour Party where the reformists maintain their grip on the workers' movement. The youth organisation of the SLL - having been expelled from the Labour Party - set about building itself as a self-contained 'mass organisation'. Increasingly it centered on an agenda of discos, sport, mass rallies and rock concerts with exclusively YS demonstrations and conferences where there was no disagreement or debate and where resolutions were carried 'unanimously'.

The Newsletter reporting the 5th YS Conference blithely quoted The Times report that "they voted unanimously on every resolution". Unanimity is a rare commodity in every living organisation. Usually it indicates an unhealthy or dying one.

The YS was increasingly presented in The Newsletter as the replacement for the reformists.

"...the Young Socialists have rapidly transformed themselves into the most advanced political leadership within the Labour movement that has ever been seen in its history". (ibid)

At the SLL's Seventh National Congress (June 1965) a resolution on building the revolutionary party in Britain

was moved by G. Healy, and, needless to say, "passed unanimously". Its report in the Newsletter makes curious reading. It reported proudly that;

"a highlight of the congress was a collection which reached the all time high of £200. Delegate after delegate pledged to do everything possible to launch the daily paper." (Newsletter, June 12th 1965).

Healy's opening address was packed full of hopelessly false estimates and prognoses. The Tory party "is on the way back" to power he predicted. Curiously he commented that "the only section of the labour movement which separated itself from the right wing was ours" (ibid). True enough but in separating itself from Wilson and co. it also unfortunately separated itself from the labour movement.

The absolute centrality of 'the youth' was stressed. Indeed in a conference in which the Newsletter reported "seventy five percent of the delegates consisted of young people below the age of 20 years". Healy talked of "the age problem within the young socialists" - they were too old!

The "great demand of the hour" was for a daily paper. "The paper is the whole essence of Leninism, the whole centre of the advice of Lenin in 'What is to be Done'." Now this is sheer nonsense. Iskra was not a daily paper. The Bolsheviks had a daily paper in 1905-7 when they were a mass force in the first Russian revolution and again from 1912-14 when they led the recovery of the defeats of the intervening years. Healy put the cart squarely before the horse.

ON COURSE FOR THE DAILY

The mass daily is the result of the winning of mass influence by the revolutionaries. It cannot create that influence for a small propaganda grouping. If the latter type of organisation tries to create and maintain it then it will inevitably be turned into an army of paper-sellers and fund raisers with no time, energy or experience of fighting within the labour movement.

Healy's perspective was completely topsy-turvy:

"If we can launch that paper at the height of the crisis in the leadership of the labour movement, we are set for a transformation. We can transform the present organisation into a mass organisation". (ibid)

And so Healy firmly set the SLL on course for the daily, the declaration of the party and political irrelevance.

The catastrophist perspective becomes the justification for all the sacrifices and hyper-activism, for the obsession with building the leadership. The membership have to be convinced of a permanent pre-revolutionary situation which will boost the 'party' to the head of the masses and justify the pain and burning out of comrades.

The 'reality of crisis' dominated, indeed obliterated the humdrum reality of actual struggles.

"...the second imperialist war opened up an unparalleled revolutionary crisis which still continues despite the ebb and flow of the world class struggle". (FI Vol.3 No.3 - our emphasis)

Unparalleled? Obviously the period of the post-war boom was more revolutionary than the period of 1917 to 1923, which produced the Bolshevik revolution and real revolutionary crisis throughout Europe!

Every strike is turned into an example of this revolutionary crisis. Thus the 1966 Seaman's strike, "opened up a period of political strikes which will be of much greater magnitude and explosiveness". (ibid) Yet no other national strikes can be cited to justify this.

If this was the SLL's response to the strikes of the Wilson years then the advent of Heath and his anti-union laws sent Healy into orbit. Armed with the daily paper Workers Press in 1969, in 1973 the Workers Revolutionary Party was 'proclaimed'. Dictatorship and Bonapartism was now on the order of the day. An article in Fourth International entitled "Preparing for Power" warned that:



Leon Trotsky with a real communist paper

"From the standpoint of monopoly capitalism, bourgeois parliamentary democracy . . . must be dispensed with". Healy was joined in this period, appropriately enough, with the actors and actresses of the Redgrave family.

The SLL completed its evolution from a sect to a cult with Healy as high priest of 'Dialectical Materialism'. This was turned on its head, converted into a subjective idealist recipe for rejecting the real world of victories and defeats, of treacherous reformist leaders who did have a terrible grip on the workers organisations, of Labour Governments that workers did have illusions in.

The WRP of today should not try to return to a 'golden age' . . . there never was one.

Healy's whole approach to the question of crisis and the class struggle was far removed from Trotsky's. In *The First Five Years of the CI* Trotsky observed:

"The circumstance (the ending of the revolutionary upsurge of 1919-20 with a slump - WP) reinforces our conviction that the effects of a crisis upon the course of the labour movement are not at all so unilateral in character as some simplifiers imagine. The political effects of a crisis (not only the extent of its influence but also its direction) are determined by the entire existing political situation and by those events which precede and accompany the crisis, especially the battles, successes or failures of the class itself prior to the crisis may give a mighty impulse to the revolutionary activity of the working masses; under a different set of circumstances it may completely paralyze the offensive of the proletariat and, should the crisis endure too long and the workers suffer too many losses, it might weaken extremely not only the offensive but also the defensive potential of the working class".

Trotsky stigmatises as false any notion of permanent crisis as "incorrect, one-sided and unscientific" and just as crises do not automatically drive the proletariat towards the seizure of power neither do booms or recoveries automatically do the reverse. Trotsky concludes in words that apply powerfully to the Healyite method:

"Most unstable and untrustworthy is revolutionary radicalism which finds it necessary to keep up its morale by ignoring the dialectic of living forces in economics

and politics alike and constructing its prognosis by means of a pencil and ruler". (*First Five Years of the Communist International*)

In looking back over the history of Healyism we can see that it was born in a rightward moving centrist adaptation to left reformism - the British variant of Pablo and Cannon's centrist collapse. We have seen that it effected a left-centrist turn between 1957 and 1959 which led to its healthiest period but that it never rid itself of its methodological weaknesses and its programmatic revisions. In addition these political weaknesses found organisational form in Healy's factional and cliquish methods. Healy never tolerated opposition within his organisation - producing expulsions and splits. Obviously this extreme personal factionalism also evolved as the SLL became isolated from the conflicts and tendencies of the actual labour movement. Healy became despotic and thuggish. The sect became a cult around his personality. But the seeds of this terrible and bizarre degeneration were political not personal.

The WRP of today should not try to return to a 'golden age', for, if that means a revolutionary age, there never was one. They should learn from the history of other splits in the WRP - the Lambertist Socialist Labour Group and the Thornettites - that in response to Healy's sectarianism there is a danger of a return to liquidationism. The SLG and Thornett have thrown the baby out with the bath water and ended up as foot-soldiers in a variety of left-reformist led movements. The WRP should not allow their break with sectarianism to mean a return to the Labourite liquidationism of the 1950s. Workers Power has never tried to lay claim to a golden age of British Trotskyism. We believe that the post-war break up of the FI rapidly precluded the possibility for such a golden age. However, we are not idealists. We recognise that elements of the revolutionary programme were, at various times, utilised and defended by the centrist currents. In our analysis of degenerate Trotskyism we discard all that is rotten and centrist. But we appropriate the revolutionary aspects of this tradition. Thus, while we do not identify the early SLL as revolutionary, we do identify with its orientation to the working class and its commitment to building a rank and file movement.

We appeal to the WRP to use the same method. Break with the tradition of degenerate Trotskyism. Produce an honest balance sheet of your own history. Discard all the accumulated political errors. Begin discussions with Workers Power as a step towards a principled regroupment of British Trotskyism.

workers power

SUBSCRIBE!

Name.....
Address.....
.....
Send £4 to the address below and receive 10 issues of the paper. Make cheques payable to: Workers Power and send to: Workers Power BCM 7750 London WC1N 3XX

OUT SOON

PERMANENT REVOLUTION 3

£1.50 including Post & Packing

Permanent Revolution 1	£2.00
Permanent Revolution 2	£1.50
Death Agony of the 4th International	£2.00
Marxism and the Trade Unions	£1.00
Crisis in the WRP	£0.70
Womens' Oppression and Socialism	£0.50
Where Next for the NUM	£0.40
Red Miner No. 7	£0.30

Price includes Post & Packing