

THE PREMATURE BURIAL: A REPLY TO MARTIN SHAW

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Martin Shaw's 'unofficial' history of the International Socialists¹ makes an important contribution to the debate that has been taking place, over the last few years, in the pages of *The Socialist Register* about the sort of organization that the British left needs. Shaw has written, firmly if not without melancholy, an obituary for the political tendency represented by the International Socialists and (since 1977) the Socialist Workers Party. By 1976, Shaw tells us, the organization was 'radically deformed'; its politics had become 'opportunistic, unrealistic and sectarian'; its 'degeneration' represented a 'squandering of the potential for a new socialist movement'; it had undergone 'catastrophic changes'.*

These are serious charges and require a cool and objective response. Every failure has its lessons and every defeat is a stepping-stone to final victory. For example, the IS/SWP represents the most serious and consistent attempt in recent years to build a revolutionary socialist organization outside of and independent from the Labour Party. An acceptance of Shaw's case would be a strong argument on the side of those who believe that Marxists must continue to work within the Labour Party.

Moreover, any SWP member who reads Shaw's article will be willing to concede that some of Shaw's specific criticisms are at least partially correct. All the more pity that Shaw frames them in the context of an article which uses the weaknesses as the proof of irredeemable corruption rather than asking how they may best be corrected.

Shaw makes a wide range of criticisms, but behind them lie two fundamental points: firstly, that the IS/SWP has failed to develop an adequate form of internal democracy; secondly, that the IS/SWP is guilty of a political deviation described as 'workerism'. Rather than commenting on detailed historical points (though a few may be worth footnotes) I think the most fruitful way of replying to Shaw is to examine these two charges, and then to examine how

they were—or were not—manifested in some of the main areas of IS/SWP activity.

I. *The Internal Regime*

Shaw chronicles in some detail—though not always accurately³—the constitutional changes in IS from 1968 to 1976 and the accompanying changes in leading personnel. But while the details of the account can be questioned, what is much more important is the method that lies behind the account. For Shaw, the changes in IS often seem to proceed in a vacuum, with only the thinnest references to what was going on in the world outside. (For example, Shaw's account makes no reference to the events in Portugal of 1974-5; yet not only did these events have an influence on the perspectives of Marxists throughout Europe, but also IS was deeply involved both in solidarity work and support for Portuguese revolutionaries, and in organizing delegations of workers to Portugal.) The form of an organization must be related to the situation the organization finds itself in and the tasks it sets itself. But Shaw seems more interested, say, in the decision-making process which led to the creation of the Right to Work Campaign, than in what the Campaign actually did, in the workplaces, in the labour movement, or on the streets.

In any revolutionary organization that is more than a sterile and immovable sect there will be a continuing dialectical relation between the forms of organization and the tasks posed by external reality. Habits of organization and of mind which serve well in one phase of development may be a conservative and inhibiting factor in the next.⁴ Thus Shaw, writing of the IS unity proposals of 1968, describes them as 'not ... a well thought out "first step" on the road to a revolutionary party, but something of a panic response'.⁵ The alternative categories proposed are revealing. Revolutionary organizations rarely have the time or the predictive powers to take well thought out steps; this does not mean that the need to respond rapidly and flexibly to new circumstances should be labelled as panic. In which category, one wonders, would Shaw put Lenin's April *Theses*?

Shaw's main contention is that there was a decline in the level of internal democracy between 1968 and 1976. There was less debate and discussion, more tight control from the top. Such a judgement in itself would be impressionistic, but fortunately Shaw gives us a clear criterion. The tight Central Committee control, its imposition of policies and expulsion of political opponents 'took IS further away from a serious and realistic appraisal of the situation in the

working class'.⁶ In this Shaw agrees with what has always been the dominant view in IS/SWP: internal democracy is not an end in itself, but a means whereby the party is able to effectively evaluate situations and critically assess its own intervention. It will be on the basis of this criterion that we shall be able to judge whether Shaw's analysis is correct with regard to the IS/SWP work with relation to trade unions, racism, unemployment, sexual politics and other topics.⁷

Unfortunately, Shaw does not always apply his own criterion. He gives a full account⁸ of the various internal disputes in IS in 1975. Yet the account is lacking in any real presentation of what the debate was all about. As Shaw himself points out, the election of the Labour Government, and the shift in pace of the class struggle posed very real problems. In retrospect it is easy enough to see that we all got it wrong—Wilson, Callaghan and their allies in the trade union bureaucracy succeeded in dampening down class struggle for much longer than anyone had believed possible. The debate inside IS was a real, but necessarily confused, attempt to come to terms with the problems. Initially the Opposition's time-scale was scarcely less cataclysmic than the majority's:

Jim Higgins argued that the honeymoon period might be longer rather than shorter—six or seven months rather than three or four.⁹

By early 1975 the majority had come to a reassessment of their position:

The political perspectives put to the last IS Conference in September had telescoped events, Chris Harman told the IS National Committee on Saturday, opening the discussion on political perspectives for the next annual conference. Our economic analysis had been by and large correct, although unemployment had risen slightly more slowly than we had predicted, he said. Our real mistake had been political—in thinking that political consciousness among workers would rise completely in time with the economic crisis.¹⁰

From this basic question of perspectives flowed a number of other arguments. One concerned the possibilities of growth. Were the potential recruits to revolutionary politics to be found among those workers who had already some experience of the existing political organizations (Labour Party, Communist Party), or would they

come from among young workers with few traditions and little experience of work in the labour movement? It was this question that lay behind the long debate on *Socialist Worker*—its content, level and presentation—which certainly involved every member of the organization over the 1974-5 period.

A second debate related to the question of work in the trade unions. Labour's accession to power had meant a general drift to the right in the movement, typified by the way in which Jack Jones, previously a pillar of the left, supported the Social Contract. The Communist Party and its allies in the Broad Left did not escape the drift; they were both unwilling to make a clean break with former allies such as Jones, and increasingly unable to mobilize, even on the electoral level. IS was faced with the problem of how to respond to this situation; how far should comrades continue to co-operate with the Broad Left, and in what ways could an independent alternative be built? (It is in this context that the dispute about AUEW elections must be placed. Shaw, however, distorts the issues by seeing it as conflict between Birmingham IS members and 'the leadership'; he leaves out of account IS engineers in many other localities who were strongly opposed to the policies of the Birmingham comrades.)

In short, Shaw's account of the alleged decline of democracy in IS/SWP gives us form without content. Debates, decisions and splits are catalogued without any account of the real issues that lay behind them. It is therefore necessary to turn to Shaw's second major accusation, that of 'workerism'.

2. The *Question of Workerism*

The problem of what Shaw describes as 'workerism' has implications which go beyond the history of the vicissitudes of one small revolutionary organization. It raises the whole issue of the analysis of the present epoch and the sort of intervention which revolutionaries can make.

It will therefore be useful to begin with Shaw's own definitions. 'Workerism', he tells us, is used in his article 'to describe the leadership's almost exclusive preoccupation with the economic struggles of male manual workers in industry, and its tendency to interpret all other issues in terms of them'. Behind this lay a 'question of general politics, of understanding that socialism is about more than economics, together with the way in which economic, cultural, ideological and political factors are inter-related in the current crisis'.¹²

On one level it is hard to disagree with Shaw here. The last ten

years have given us a rich experience to be assimilated: student struggles, the rise of the women's movement, the extension of trade union militancy to a wide range of new sectors; and, on the other hand, a ruling class on the defensive thrusting cultural and ideological factors into the centre of the arena. Yet just because what he says is so obviously correct it is less than adequate, for it does not point towards action. It is one thing to grasp the social complex as a totality; it is quite another—especially for a small organization—to develop a strategic intervention.

There is also a more fundamental problem. When Shaw challenges IS/SWP's preoccupation with manual workers in industry, it is not clear whether he is simply making a point about the balance of activity, or whether he is calling into question the whole Marxist thesis that the industrial proletariat is the primary agent of socialist transformation. Of course Shaw has every right to do the latter; things are not true just because Marx said so. Indeed, if he were to develop the argument the point would be considerably more significant than the minutiae of constitutional change in the IS/SWP. The problem is that the question is left unresolved, with the result that it is hard to determine the status of Shaw's critique of IS/SWP 'fundamentalism'.

To take one aspect of the question, Shaw suggests that the IS/SWP leadership has played down the importance of work among white collar trade unionists. The whole experience of the last ten years refutes this charge. The teachers' journal *Rank and File*, founded in 1968 on the joint initiative of IS and Communist Party members, represented IS's first excursion into the realm of rank and file organization, and in many ways provided a model for similar work in other areas. The first Rank and File Conference in 1974 would scarcely have been possible without the sponsorship of such rank and file white collar papers as NALGO *Action*, *Redder Tape*, *Case Con*, *Rank and File Teacher* and *Tech Teacher*. It is unlikely that the right wing in the NUT, CPSA, NALGO or NATFHE would endorse the charge that IS/SWP had neglected work in these areas.¹³

Yet the category of 'white collar' worker is far from homogeneous. The term includes a very wide range of occupations, some of which are, in comparison to other groups of workers, relatively privileged in terms of security, working conditions, etc. Moreover, many white collar unions contain a whole hierarchy of grades (head teachers, managers, etc.) within their ranks.¹⁴ For example, in the last couple of years we have seen both the heroic struggle by APEX members at

Grunwicks and the threat of withdrawal of labour by the Association of University Teachers. Both were examples of the extension of militancy to new sectors, and both deserved support. But scarcely anyone on the left can have had any doubts as to which was the more significant.

For specific historical reasons (radicalized students entering white collar professions, the relative weakness of the traditional left) revolutionaries have found it easier to make some impact on white collar unions than on the more traditional manual unions. This has great advantages, but also certain dangers; there is a constant risk of accommodation, of an economism which is especially pernicious because it adapts to a relatively privileged group. Revolutionary socialists have to constantly combat the dangers of craftism (and its white collar manifestation, professionalism) in the name of the most oppressed sectors of the working class—which include women, blacks and the unemployed. As Tony Cliff has put it:

Some revolutionaries do suffer from elitist notions. They think of the barricades as follows: In the front row there is an Imperial Father of the Chapel representing craft workers in all their glory. He is wearing his gold chain of office to pay homage ...

And then there are some representatives of section one of the Engineering Union.

Only then if there is enough room in the street they would in their generosity allow some blacks; a few women and some youth—if they know their place, that is.

Revolution has nothing at all to do with this hierarchical concept.

Anyone who is in any doubt about it has no need to look further than the boys and girls of Soweto.¹⁵

The struggle against elitism and sectionalism in the labour movement has been central to IS/SWP politics. The Right to Work Campaign, seeking solidarity from employed workers with the (disproportionately black, female and young) unemployed, has been an important weapon in this struggle.

Moreover, Shaw fails to deal with the most important problem of all, that of priorities. Throughout the period in question IS/SWP has been a tiny organization; it has grown, unevenly, from around one thousand in 1968 to around four thousand at present. The failure of both the Labour left and the Communist Party to take necessary initiatives has become ever more marked; the revolutionary left

inherited a range of tasks far in excess of its capacities. For a small **group** even to attempt to intervene in all the different struggles — political, economic, cultural, ideological, **etc.**—**would** require either a debilitating round of non-stop activism or a division of labour organized with military precision. Neither of these suited the model of an organization open to workers which **IS/SWP** has aimed at. The only other alternative was an insistence on priorities, a continuing emphasis by the leadership on intervention in the industrial working class. The limited but real success of **ISA/SWP** in developing a membership of industrial workers and a real presence in certain workplaces and unions has not been paralleled by any other revolutionary organization in Britain since the Communist Party in the 1920s. The achievement must be judged for what it is worth, and by the price at which it was bought. This price, indubitably, was a failure to intervene in a number of other important areas. Moreover, we can concede that opportunities were missed unnecessarily, that gross mistakes were made, and that some comrades interpreted the priorities of the organization in an insensitive and exaggerated manner. To this extent there is substance in some of **Shaw's** particular criticisms. But what Shaw fails to show is that an alternative set of priorities could in fact have been successful. This point can best be pursued by examining in more detail some particular areas of activity.

3. *The Rank and File Movement*

The project of a rank and file movement has for a long time been central to the political current represented by **IS/SWP**. The continuing class-collaboration of the trade union leaders makes it necessary to develop a current within the trade union movement which, while rejecting any attempt to by-pass the existing organizations or wander off into the dead end of breakaway unionism, none the less aims to organize the militants in the workplaces in order, when and if necessary, to act independently of the machine. The tradition of such a movement has deep roots in the British labour movement, going back to the shop stewards' movement during and after the First World War, and the subsequent emergence of the Minority Movement. For revolutionary socialists, such a movement is not only an important tool of the class struggle; it is also a bridge which links the revolutionaries to the most militant sections of the working class.

Until the early seventies **IS** was in no position to do more than propagandize for a rank and file movement. By the last year of

the Heath government, however, things had begun to change. The role of the **trade union** bureaucracy in collaborating with the state was becoming more obvious. Moreover, the body which up to this time had seemed that it might in some ways provide the basis for a rank and file movement—the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (largely under the political influence of the Communist Party)—was becoming increasingly ineffective. Its conferences were so arranged as to make it impossible to take any decision other than endorsement of the platform; there was no attempt to set up local liaison committees; and there was little in the way of co-ordination of struggle and solidarity action. Finally, IS members, in co-operation with other militants of various organizations and of none, had established rank and file papers and caucuses in a number of unions and industries.

It was in this situation that the first National Rank and File Movement Conference was held in March 1974, attended by 500 delegates from 270 trade union bodies. Up to this point Shaw does not disagree substantially—though perhaps he makes the success of the Conference seem too easy. It did not fall from the sky, but was the result of several months intense work by IS members and others; the size of the Conference was in fact a great surprise to all those involved in organizing it.

It is also possible to agree with Shaw that the Rank and File Movement did not continue to grow in line with the expectations its early success had raised. But while Shaw does not deny the objective circumstances—the Social Contract and the general drift to the right in the movement—he puts the main blame on what he sees as the manipulative politics of IS: 'An exaggerated emphasis on the rank and file movement's independence of IS, and encouragement of others to take their responsibility for it, was **needed**.'¹⁶

Here Shaw grossly simplifies the extremely complex problem of the relationship between the political organization and the rank and file movement. The IS position in the problem had in fact been clearly set out in an article by the industrial organizer written before the first Rank and File Conference:

In the initial stages of building a movement, there can be real problems. Because it is revolutionaries who usually take the initiative in calling for the movement, there is the grave danger that they set it up on a basis that makes it difficult for non-revolutionaries to participate. It is necessary to take concrete steps to prevent this happening: it is no good arguing about the

need for the members of the rank and file movement to move towards revolutionary politics if there are no non-revolutionaries involved. Such arguments only make sense when the movement has already begun to gather some muscle and some base. In the early stages the greatest care has to be taken to involve broad support, even if it means revolutionaries keeping relatively quiet about their distinctive ideas.

Once the movement is really off the ground, the opposite danger can arise. IS members could be so involved in the mechanics of keeping the movement going as not to see the need to put their more general political ideas across. But precisely at such a point we have to insist that more is needed than a rank and file movement for fighting the immediate defensive economic struggles of the class. A revolutionary party is also needed, to fight the ruling class on every issue, to raise the level of consciousness of the advanced sections of the class, and to provide a combative leadership in the struggle for power. These are tasks which a rank and file movement, organised on a minimal programme aimed at involving rank and file CP and Labour Party members, can never do.¹⁷

Such an approach, recognizing pitfalls on either side, requires sensitivity and tactical skill; Doubtless IS comrades made mistakes, cut corners or misjudged the pace of events. But Shaw simply offers the panacea of 'the rank and file movement's independence of IS'.

What would such 'independence' have meant in the 1974-8 period? The drift to the right that afflicted the labour movement was not confined to the upper echelons; it permeated right down to the 'rank and file' (in the broad sense of the term). A lack of confidence in the power to win combined with a sense of loyalty to the reformist leaders, inhibited many workers from struggle. The problem in the labour movement was not the excessive influence of IS/SWP ideas, but the continuing grip of labourist and reformist ideas. IS/SWP members had no alternative but to fight for their ideas and policies; if they could find others to fight alongside them, so much the better, but if they could not, then they had to fight alone. If this 'meant that most of the burden, both of taking initiatives and of simply maintaining the apparatus (such as it was), fell on IS members, then this was a sign of weakness, but there was no available alternative. The 'independence' Shaw speaks of would have been nothing other than political abstention.

The drift to the right in the labour movement since 1974 has affected the whole of the left in Britain (and indeed throughout

Europe¹⁸). Many socialists saw no other choice than to swim with the stream, to adapt to the rightward-moving milieu, in many cases going back into the womb of the Labour Party. The IS strategy was quite consciously to 'steer left'; to put up a clear opposition to the rightward drift even at the price of temporary isolation. Part of the cost that had to be paid was that the possibility of rank and file initiative was limited. The signs are now that, after the election, the possibilities for the growth of a more meaningful rank and file movement are emerging. The rank and file organization that has been preserved will then be put to a real test.

4. *The Right to Work Campaign*

One initiative stemming from the national Rank and File Movement did achieve some considerable success—the Right to Work Campaign. Shaw, unfortunately, is not prepared to acknowledge this success, but actually sees the Right to Work as a key element in the sad decline of IS.

Partly this is because of Shaw's tendency to pay more attention to the forms of democracy than to the content of the decisions made. The Right to Work Campaign is seen as just another manipulation by the ubiquitous 'leadership'; in fact, it was comrades from the South-West London district of IS who urged that the organization should take an initiative on this matter. Shaw also complains that the Right to Work Campaign had not been mooted at 1975 Conference, held in late spring.¹⁹ If this were a matter of IS 'leadership' and 'opposition' slogging it out in a vacuum this might seem outrageous. But Shaw omits to mention what was happening in the real world. Between the Conference and the autumn Callaghan and the TUC had cobbled up the six-pound wage policy. For the time being a systematic struggle around wages was ruled out; but the new situation made a campaign around the issue of rapidly mounting unemployment a viable possibility. To argue that any initiative on the question should have waited till the next annual conference is to reject, not only 'machine Leninism',²⁰ but all that is positive in democratic centralism.

Indeed, an uninformed reader would be hard put to it to learn from Shaw's account what the Right to Work Campaign was and why it happened. Unemployment had officially topped the million mark in the autumn of 1975 (in fact the figure was probably half a million higher, including a large number of unregistered women). Women and blacks were especially hard hit—and so were school-leavers unable to get jobs. (The latter category represent a particular

problem for those who argue that everything should be done through the 'official channels'. What exactly are the 'official channels' for a youth who has never had a job and therefore never been able to join a union?) Unemployed youth, moreover, represent a potentially fertile recruiting ground for fascist and racist groups. Unemployment, moreover, was not an isolated issue; it was intimately linked to the whole struggle against the Social Contract. The Labour leaders had argued that wage restraint must be accepted to save jobs; yet unemployment was rising to levels higher than anything since the thirties. Moreover, the Broad Left was failing to take any effective initiatives. The London Co-op and the No. 8 London Confed District Committee did call an Assembly on Unemployment (after the Right to Work march had been announced) which attracted 3,000 delegates; but this impressive conference merely called an ill-supported day of action on 26 May and disappeared without further trace.

In this situation the Right to Work Campaign was able to fill an otherwise unoccupied political space. Basically the Campaign had three aims:

- a) to confront employed workers and the organized labour movement with the seriousness of the unemployment problem as a step towards achieving unity of employed and unemployed workers;
- b) to offer a focus to unemployed workers, especially youth, who had no other organizational channels to work through.
- c) to initiate direct action, of a propagandist or agitational nature, on a limited scale in a period when a generalized response seemed impossible.

To a less jaundiced observer than Shaw it might well seem that the Campaign had modest success on all three counts.²¹ Shaw comments that 'Had it been launched on a wider basis, with a stronger orientation to organised workers, it could have been more successful ... The effect on IS was to turn it away from serious ongoing work in the trade unions—and the women's and student movements—and from wider political campaigning against the policies of the Labour Government.'²²

Of course the campaign could have been wider. It would have been better if it had been a mass movement, but unfortunately there are no recipes for launching mass movements in periods of downturn. The Campaign did get sponsorship from some 480 trade union bodies, despite the coolness of much of the Broad Left; there

was active participation by members of the Labour Party — and of the Communist Party, despite the CP's official hostility to the Campaign. The second march, in September 1976, attracted 568 unemployed, mainly youth, when only 350 had been expected. Shaw's preoccupation with 'organised workers' is a little strange from one who has denounced 'workerism' so sharply, as is his remark about 'serious ongoing work in the trade unions'. Surely in 1976 'serious ongoing work' precisely required raising the question of unemployment — particularly among sectors of workers who had relatively secure jobs. To fail to do so would have been economic routinism. Likewise it is hard to see how the Campaign turned IS away from the women's movement. As has been pointed out, women suffered particularly severely from unemployment, and many of them did not even receive benefit. The Right to Work Campaign was precisely drawing attention to an aspect of women's oppression which more middle-class sections of the women's movement had neglected. Finally the 'wider political campaigning' against the Labour Government that Shaw refers to is dangerously vague. In fact unemployment and the closely intertwined issue of public expenditure cuts were central to a critique of the Labour Government which showed that not only was Labour not achieving socialism (which few would **have** expected it to) but that it was not even able to preserve the minimal level of welfare measures that had been the principal achievement of the 1945 Labour Government.

If the first Right to Work march was not successful enough to satisfy Shaw, it at least provoked enemies elsewhere. On 19 March the march was attacked by police at Staples Corner. Forty-three marchers were arrested. Shaw unaccountably fails to mention this, or the subsequent successful campaign against the trial of John Deason, which won wide trade union support. This allowed the whole political question of the state and police action against trade unionists to be raised.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the Right to Work Campaign was the stress on direct action. The Right to Work marches were not simply propaganda exercises; they constantly attempted to intervene in local struggles. To quote one example among many:

[On 5 March] the March Council read in a local paper that Spear and Jackson, a small garden tool factory at Dronfield, south of Sheffield, was sacking 43 of its 123 workers.

Two hours later, eluding the persistent police escort, marchers invaded the factory.

Before gate security knew what was happening, the marchers were in among the machinery, urging the workers to stand up and fight the sackings.

They called a meeting of **30** workers outside the factory, and held a second in the canteen with another **30**.

The sacked workers were delighted. They told the marchers that the redundancies had been hand-picked, that they left not a single shop steward in the factory, and that the GMWU official had known about them a week before. but had told no one.

Enraged, the marchers, with some of the sacked workers, stormed into the manager's office. London engineering worker and marcher Mick Brightman bellowed at him: 'Will you sleep at night with these **43** and their families on the dole?' The manager replied nervously: 'No comment.'

That afternoon, another delegation of marchers visited the AUEW office in Chesterfield. District secretary Bill Mitchell told them he had not heard of the sackings. But he promised he would go to the factory and fight for the sacked workers that afternoon.²³

Examples could be multiplied many times over, both from the marches and from the activities of local Right to Work committees. Yet Shaw can write that 'major decisions, such as the launching of the Right to Work Campaign ... were received by the membership as *faits accomplis*'.²⁴ The picture of a passive membership, mechanically obeying orders from an omnipotent centre, does not fit the facts. The Right to Work Campaign gave scope to the imagination and initiative of hundreds of comrades, inside IS and outside. That has far more to do with real revolutionary democracy than Shaw's obsession with constitutional niceties.

5. *Sexual Politics*

Undoubtedly the strongest part of Shaw's case is that relating to sexual politics and the women's movement. His case that IS/SWP for too long neglected important developments is now generally accepted in the SWP. As a *Socialist Worker* editorial put it:²⁵

Just like those male socialists **60** years ago, we on Socialist Worker have tended to turn our back on that movement: to denounce it as 'middle class', to protest that we were fighting for the rights of all workers and to ignore the discrimination against women.

The women in the Socialist Workers Party refused to accept this bias. They *acted*, as part of the women's movement, to change the party.

They organised themselves in Women's Voice groups, and changed the face and tone of their paper Women's Voice. They tapped a great well of anger and enthusiasm which men-only socialism had never come near.

But to agree that Shaw makes some valid points about IS/SWP practice is not to endorse his analysis. For Shaw, IS/SWP's lapses and omissions on the women's and gay movements are not errors, however serious; they are a part of his case, indeed a central one, against the workerism and the undemocratic regime which characterize IS/SWP. A defence of the record may therefore be in order.

Socialist feminism was one of the offshoots of the great ferment of 1968. There was an earlier tradition, in the Second International and the first years of the Comintern, but the rise of Stalinism killed it, and it lay hidden for more than a generation. As a result there was no experience and very little theoretical analysis to draw on.²⁶ Hence comrades who were, after all, very busy and endeavouring to implement a set of priorities, took some time to recognize the significance of the new movement that was developing.

Secondly, the women's movement emerges in Shaw's account in a rather purer form than it had in reality. The women's movement itself suffered from the long break in the tradition; it threw up a diversity of ideas—some valuable, some less so; organizationally it was unstructured and hence effectively undemocratic. In composition it was predominantly middle class. None of this is stated to justify abstention or to play down the significance of the movement. It is to suggest that the relations between Marxists and feminists were necessarily complex, and that there were errors and abandoned responsibilities on both sides, rather than everything being attributable to the 'original sin' of IS/SWP. (A dangerous notion, since it suggests the possibility of a party without original sin, one that had everything right from the start without needing to learn from experience.)

Thus Shaw alleges that 'IS's support for the National Abortion Campaign was grudging and highly conditional, bringing it into immediate conflict with the majority of the activists, and accompanied by a constant tendency to call demonstrations in opposition to NAC whenever a disagreement on tactics arose'.²⁷ The problem in reality was more complex. NAC did not have an effective structure with an elected and responsible committee; its 'open committee' form meant that it was constantly liable to reverse its own decisions, and laid it wide open to packing by a variety of tendencies. This

made NAC, after the highly successful demonstration in the summer of 1975, unable to take the necessary initiatives. At times in the 1976-7 period *Women's Voice* supporters found that there was no way of getting a proposal for action considered by NAC except to take the initiative and announce that it was going to take place.

A similar point can be made with regard to the gay question. Here there was an almost total absence of tradition and experience. Shaw draws heavily on Bob Cant's article 'A Grim Tale'²⁸, which presents a severe but generally honest²⁹ account of IS's attitude in the 1972-5 period. But Shaw's account is a one-sided one. Bob Cant's original article contains an element of self-criticism; he recognizes that the gay comrades had a responsibility to explain the problem to other IS members who could not be expected to have all the answers already given. He accepts that mistakes of strategy and presentation were made. In Shaw's account all this disappears; everything is laid at the door of the 'leadership'.

Nor can everything be blamed on workerism. While it is true that IS/SWP did for a time neglect women who were not workers, there can be no dispute as to the importance of industrial struggles involving women—Trico, Grunwick, etc.—for which IS/SWP played an important role in mobilizing solidarity.

Likewise, Shaw asserts that 'On the gay question, there could be no... compromise with the workerist, economic line of IS.'³⁰ On the contrary, there have been a number of cases of gay workers who have faced discrimination at work; John Warburton, a gay teacher was sacked by ILEA, while Wapping social workers struck in defence of a gay workmate who was victimized. Alan Burnside, a gay miner, has attempted to raise the issue in the NUM.³¹ It is precisely cases like these (together with the crucial issue of the National Front's hostility to gays) that enable the question to be taken up concretely and operationally, rather than simply as a question of abstract propaganda.

Finally, on Shaw's thesis, change was impossible. 'After 1975 the leadership was, as one long-standing member described it, "unassailable". It was simply not conceivable that the membership could change it in any way, and any alterations would have to come from the top.'³² Yet changes did happen. The 1976 Conference reversed the earlier line on the gay question; *Socialist Worker* now carried the statement 'We are for an end to all forms of discrimination against homosexuals', and a new IS Gay Group was established. All this in 1976, the year in which according to Shaw IS touched rock-bottom.

And by 1978 not only had a *Women's Voice* organization been

launched, but Tony Cliff himself (the workerist villain of Shaw's history) was contributing to a *Socialist Worker* centre spread on the gay question:

A lot of socialists still have difficulty believing that gays will be taking part in the revolution at all.

On the contrary we should look forward now to the first leader of the London workers' council being a 19-year-old black gay woman!³³

Contrary to Shaw's picture, there has been intense discussion of sexual politics at every level of IS/SWP over the last few years. Only a sect has an unchanging programme; the changes in IS/SWP precisely show that it has been able to reappraise reality.

6. *Theory und Intellectuals*

Shaw's comments on theory and intellectuals may be dealt with more briefly. He accuses IS/SWP of 'theoretical stagnation' and alleges that there has been a 'flight' of intellectuals out of IS.³⁴

This judgement is at best impressionistic. We can only begin to answer it by asking exactly what is meant by 'theory'. It is certainly true that IS/SWP has made little or no contribution to the flood of 'Marxist' literature published since 1968, mainly written in an incomprehensibly convoluted style, and concerning itself with the methodological status of Marxism, or with the marriage of Marxism to psychoanalysis, semiology, etc. Yet it is theory of this sort that is radiated by the 'Communist University' which Shaw unaccountably commends. The Communist Party has attracted intellectuals over recent years precisely because its anodyne brand of Marxism is able to coexist peacefully with the academic establishment.

What are the real theoretical issues facing Marxists in Britain today? The changing nature of the trade union bureaucracy; the lessons of the defeats in Chile and Portugal; the nature and potential of contemporary fascism. One would search in vain through the last twenty issues of *New Left Review* for any work on these topics. *International Socialism* (series one and two) will stand comparison with any other theoretical journals on these questions. Of course we have been weak on some topics—the nature of the economic crisis, sexual politics—but here too some significant work is being done.

As for the flight of the intellectuals,³⁵ it is hard to identify whether such a phenomenon has indeed taken place, for 'intellectuals' do not

form a neatly defined category in IS/SWP. Indeed, eleven years on from 1968, higher education widely open to mature students, graduate unemployment and the spread of white collar trade unionism all tend to make Shaw's categories somewhat anachronistic.

7. The Fight Against Racism

But the most serious omission from Shaw's account is his almost total failure to refer to IS/SWP's work in the struggle against racism. Thus Shaw tacks on to the end of his account of the Right to Work Campaign:

As the furore over immigration increased in the summer, IS leafleted on a massive scale with the slogan 'They're welcome here.' The issue was a godsend, since the media (and the membership) were tiring of repeated long-distance marches for the Right to Work.³⁶

Shaw's language is almost unbelievably flippant. Following the press attack on Malawi Asians, a further outburst from Enoch Powell and an upsurge of National Front activity, three black youths (Dinesh Choudhri, Rishi Alhadidi and Gurdip Singh Chagger) had been killed; scores of other blacks had suffered physical attacks.³⁷ To call this a 'furore' is an understatement; to suggest that IS regarded it as a 'godsend' is a piece of unworthy cynicism.

Britain is an old imperialist country which since the Second World War has had a large influx of black immigrants. The question of racism must be central to any understanding of class struggle and class consciousness in Britain today. It is surprising that Shaw, who puts so much stress on the importance of ideology, has so little to say about what is certainly the key ideological issue in Britain at the present time. If Shaw can, with some justice, accuse us of neglecting sexual politics, we can equally accuse him of underestimating the racist threat. (To make things quite clear: it is not being suggested that the National Front or any other racist group is—at present—a serious contender for political power. What is being argued is that the activities of the racists in harassing, weakening and dividing the working class are a very serious challenge to the left.)

IS/SWP has a record of giving crucial importance to racism going back well before 1968. Shaw mentions the IS response to the surge of

racism following the first Powell speech in 1968; though he strangely refers to the leaflet headed 'The Urgent Challenge of Fascism' as 'exaggerated' and 'inflammatory'.³⁸ Such a charge might be justified had the leaflet suggested that a fascist bid for power was imminent; in fact it spoke of 'long-term fascist development'. But Shaw's suggestion that we exaggerated the significance of a traditionally militant group of workers, the London dockers, striking and marching for an openly racist cause, is surely to underestimate the power of the racist poison in Britain.

When dealing with the more recent period Shaw simply refers to 'militant anti-racism' without giving any detail of the actions and initiatives taken by IS/SWP. From 1974 onwards IS took to the streets to confront the National Front, often almost the only organization to do so. In the summer of 1976 direct action by IS and various black organizations prevented the National Front staging a major demonstration in support of Robert Relf's right to advertise his home 'For sale to an English family'. Relf's sign was removed and publicly burnt, and the NF demonstration collapsed. In August 1977, when for Shaw IS/SWP had already degenerated and squandered its potential, the SWP was at the centre of a national witchhunt for its role in confronting the NF at Lewisham.

Many other initiatives of a similar sort could be listed. Could it be that Shaw gives them so little attention because there was virtually no internal dissension on the question of anti-racist work? Every member took up the struggle with enthusiasm.³⁹

It is also striking that Shaw, who attributes, rightly, so much importance to 'cultural' struggle, finds no place to mention the initiative, in late 1976, by IS members and others, in launching Rock Against Racism in response to openly pro-racist statements by Eric Clapton and pro-fascist remarks by David Bowie.⁴⁰ RAR has undoubtedly been one of the most successful aspects of the anti-fascist mobilization over the last couple of years.

Nor does Shaw make any mention of the IS role in helping to launch the Anti-Nazi League.⁴¹ Once again the key question was that of initiative. As the editorial in *Socialist Challenge*⁴² put it:

The carnival did not fall out of the sky. It was organised. The Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism were the sparks that ignited the anti-fascist fire. The fusion of politics and culture was vital in offering an alternative to the tens of thousands of youth who carried ANL banners and placards on Sunday.

But a further point also needs to be stressed. The Anti-Nazi

League did not fall out of the sky either. It was an initiative undertaken and launched by the comrades of the Socialist Workers Party. They threw the resources and political weight of their organisation to build the League: and ensure the **organisation** necessary to build the carnival.

True, they were not the only force, but without them this event would not have taken place. It would be crass sectarianism to try and underplay this fact.

Conclusion

For Shaw the conclusion is that it was a mistake to found the Socialist Workers Party. There are differences between us as to the facts of the case and the interpretation to be put on them. But the real argument is about the nature and role of a revolutionary socialist party in Britain today.

It has not been my intention in this article to make more than the most modest claims for the actual achievements of the IS/SWP. The adoption of the name 'Party' was simply a recognition of the tasks which faced us and which we had *begun* to take upon ourselves, not any claim to be already leading the class or even a small section of it. The struggle for political leadership in the British working-class movement will be fought out in the factories and on the streets not in the pages of the *Socialist Register*.

Since 1974 there has been a significant shift to the right in British politics, a shift which the recent Tory election victory does no more than **confirm**.⁴³ No tendency in the socialist movement has been able to escape the pressures of this period; we have all faced difficulties and problems. What we can do is to try to establish the best way to respond to this rightward movement.

Shaw, who writes of the 'long, gradual decline' of the Labour Party⁴⁴ does not disagree that it is necessary to build a political alternative outside the Labour Party. The question is the form of such an alternative, and, above all, what sort of activity it should engage in.

A substantial majority of the British working class still gives electoral support to the Labour Party.⁴⁵ But it is important to establish the nature of that support. There can be very few workers indeed who still believe that Labour will initiate sweeping social changes. The support that Labour does get is essentially pragmatic; Labour is seen as being the best of a bad bunch, and no viable alternative is perceived. Hence the strategies of 'exposing' Labour or of 'committing it to socialist policies' can be seen as equally

misguided; they both start from an assumption of expectations that do not actually exist in workers' minds.

More generally, it can be said that at the present time in the British working-class movement, the crisis is not one of class consciousness, but of class confidence. It is not the case that workers have any positive commitment to a reformist view of the world. What inhibits struggle is rather a sense of powerlessness, a feeling that things cannot be changed. The most vital task for a party that claims to be revolutionary is to break down this lack of confidence. And this cannot be done primarily by means of propaganda (though this is in no way to suggest that political argument has no role to play). But the sense of powerlessness will collapse only through the experience of struggle.

Now if we look at the groupings that have inhabited the political space to the left of the Communist Party since the Second World War we can observe in their political style an inordinate preoccupation with the question of programme. Partly this derives from an attachment to Trotsky's *Transitional Programme of 1938*; but much more it is a response to decades of isolation. Getting the slogans right, raising the 'correct demands', even if there was no one to hear them, all too easily became a substitute for actual involvement in struggle.

Against this the IS/SWP has believed that the most important task is to take initiatives that show, albeit on a small scale, that things can be changed. Sackings can be prevented; hospital closures can be stopped; the fascists can be driven off the streets. A policy of giving priority to such initiatives has earned us criticism that we were 'economistic' and 'pragmatists' from many opponents prior to Shaw.

The point is relevant to another of Shaw's preoccupations — unity of the left. He welcomes the moves towards revolutionary unity made by the IMG through the vehicle of Socialist Unity.⁴⁶ Now no serious socialist can feel anything other than depression at the array of splinters and fragments that characterizes the revolutionary left. But this fragmentation has deep historical roots and it will take much effort to overcome it.

What is not so clear is whether the Socialist Unity strategy is the best way to overcome the divisions of the left. Thus far Socialist Unity has been essentially an electoral alliance. But the evidence thus far does not suggest that it is in elections that the revolutionary left is best able to make itself heard.⁴⁷ There has been far more impressive unity in the struggle around specific struggles — solidarity

with Grunwicks, opposition to cuts, and, above all, against racism^{4*}—than in electoral alliances. This is scarcely surprising, for at the present time a revolutionary electoral intervention must be on the level of propaganda, and it is far more difficult to achieve unity in propaganda than in action.

More generally, too much discussion on revolutionary unity proceeds on the basis of what may be called the 'brush-and-pan' theory—i.e., the revolutionary movement is a beautiful vase which has been shattered into tiny pieces; the way to mend it is by collecting all the fragments into one receptacle.

The real task for revolutionaries today is not to regroup those who are already revolutionaries, but to fight for socialist ideas among the thousands of people who are becoming open to them. The title of Paul Foot's pamphlet *Why You Should Be A Socialist*⁵⁹ suggests the emphasis needed; we have to break with the introverted atmosphere of extreme left politics and fight for the most elementary ideas of socialist transformation.

At the time of writing it is impossible to predict the scale and rhythm of the Tory attack on working people, still less those of the resistance. But it is clear that the next two or three years will pose even more sharply the need for a revolutionary alternative to the existing organizations of the left.

To face this challenge all of us, whether in organizations or outside, will have to learn to adapt ourselves to new needs. To do so we need to learn from our mistakes, but not bury ourselves in an introspective search for their historical sources; we need to criticize our own practice, not blame everything on some villainous 'leadership'. Open and constructive debate is needed, and, to the extent that it encourages this, Shaw's critique is to be welcomed.

NOTES

1. Martin Shaw, 'The Making of a Party', *The Socialist Register 1978*. In this article Shaw refers frequently, and critically, to my own 'History of the International Socialists'. *International Socialism*. Nos. 76 and 77. Shaw accuses my history of 'distortion', and sees my omissions as not only 'strange' but 'characteristic' and 'symptomatic'. (For the record, my article was in no way an 'official' history, but an individual, though unambiguously partisan, account.)
2. Shaw, *op.cit.*, pp. 127, 130, 138, 139.
3. Thus Shaw (*op.cit.*, pp. 124-5) devotes considerable attention to what he calls the 'coup' of August 1973. But his account is misleading on

several points. Cliff and Harman were not the only members of the old EC to remain on the new body—Roger Protz also stayed, as did Andreas Nagliatti, the industrial organizer and a key figure up to the Rank and File Conference of March 1974. Jim Nichol was not an 'addition'—he had served on the EC for two and a half years previously. Among what Shaw classes as 'provincial organisers' and comrades not of 'national political standing' were Roger Rosewell, who had served on the EC for some years before moving to Liverpool; John Charlton, a member of over ten years' experience on leading bodies; and Granville Williams, who was to be a central figure in the IS Opposition. The only real newcomer was Roger Kline (who was subsequently to be one of the main opponents of the Right to Work Campaign). Rosewell and Nagliatti both left the organization by 1975. John Deason and Steve Jefferys, who became members of the first Central Committee in 1975, were not only not involved in the *coup*, but critical of aspects of it.

The exits and entrances of such largely unknown individuals may seem a matter of indifference to most readers of *The Socialist Register*. But perhaps they may show that the process of change was more complex and tortuous than Shaw's simplistic version of loss of 'balance' would indicate. The quest for a *rupture* in the history of IS may prove as problematic as that for the break between the young and old Marx.

4. One of the most interesting attempts to study this process is to be found in T. Cliff, *Lenin* (four volumes), Pluto Press, 1975-9.
5. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 108.
6. *ibid.*, p. 13.
7. Shaw gives a detailed account of the transition from a National Committee (a large body with non-full-time membership meeting infrequently) to a small, full-time Central Committee. Yet his evaluation of the effects is impressionistic. He cites John Phillips ('Laying the National Committee Ghost', *Internal Bulletin*, April 1976) to prove that the leadership was now 'unassailable'. Phillips, who advocated return to the National Committee structure, was a long-standing member whose views deserved respect. But for the sake of balance, Shaw might have quoted the case for the other side; for example (from a comrade with five years' National Committee experience): 'It is suggested that the old NC was able to control the EC. In my experience this was rarely if ever the case. The whole attention of the EC was devoted to how to sell things to the NC, and it generally succeeded.' Ian Birchall, 'The Myths of the Golden Past', *internal Bulletin*, May 1976.)
8. Shaw, *op.cit.*, pp. 135-7.
9. National Committee report in *Socialist Worker*, 16 March 1974.
10. *Socialist Worker*, 22 February 1975.
11. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 135.
12. *ibid.*, pp. 130, 132.
13. Just as it is unlikely that Dr. G. Brosan, Director of North East London Polytechnic, would suggest that IS/SWP has neglected

- student work, since he found it necessary to have SWP student Andy Strouthous jailed by the High Court. (*Socialist Worker*: 21 May 1977.)
14. For two attempts to evaluate the changing and contradictory situations of white collar workers, see Duncan Hallas, 'White Collar Workers', *International Socialism* 72, and Colin Sparks, 'Fascism and the Working Class, Part Two', *International Socialism*, series 2, No. 3.
 15. *Socialist Worker*, 8 January 1977.
 16. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 128.
 17. A. Nagliatti, 'Towards a Rank and File Movement', *International Socialism* 66 (February 1974).
 18. Cf. Chris Harman, 'Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left', *International Socialism*, series 2, No. 4.
 19. Shaw *op.cit.*, p. 137.
 20. A term used by Shaw in his 'Back to the Maginot Line: Harman's New Gramsci', *International Socialism*, series 2, No. 1.
 21. For a full account see J. Deason, 'One Year of the Right to Work Campaign', *International Socialism* 93.
 22. Shaw, 'The Making of a Party?', p. 129.
 23. *Socialist Worker*, 13 March 1976.
 24. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 137.
 25. 10 June 1978.
 26. Martin Shaw's *Marxism versus Sociology*, Pluto Press, 1974—a very useful bibliography of Marxist writing—was able to muster only twelve items on women and the family (as against nineteen on religion and twenty-five on culture). He does not have a single reference to the gay question. Shaw, *Marxism and Social Science*, Pluto Press, 1975, has no index entries for 'family', 'feminism' or 'women'. This is not meant as a debating point; but it does suggest that it might be better to approach the problem of Marxism and sexual politics in a spirit of self-criticism rather than using it as a stick to beat the 'leadership'.
 27. Shaw, 'The Making of a Party', p. 131.
 28. Gay *Left* 3.
 29. Not entirely accurate, however. Discussing the IS National Committee statement on Gay Work adopted in autumn 1973 Cant says: 'It fell into the old Stalinist trap of assuming that all gays are middle class, and, therefore, a bit perverted.' My copy of the document (originally drafted by Roger Protz) says no such thing. It in fact states that the Gay Liberation Front contains 'people of widely differing class backgrounds' and explicitly refers to 'male homosexuals on the production line at Ford'. What it does argue is that the Gay Liberation Front has middle-class political leadership.
 30. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 117.
 31. *Socialist Worker*, 21 August 1976, 8 July 1978.
 32. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 137.
 33. *Socialist Worker*, 26 August 1978.
 34. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 145.
 35. Shaw refers, rather patronizingly, to the SWP's 'severely depleted intellectual forces'. It is hard to know how to reply; how does Shaw

quantify 'intellectual forces'? Are there only a few intellectuals left, or are those **who** remain feeble-minded? The nearest I can get to a quantitative answer is to point out that in Shaw's bibliography *Marxism versus Sociology* Tony Cliff and Nigel Harris have more entries than any other thinker apart from Marx, Engels and Trotsky. Both are still members of the SWP.

36. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 130. (On a strict point of fact, there had **been** exactly *one* long-distance march.)
37. *Socialist Worker*, 12 June 1976.
38. Shaw, *op.cit.*, pp. 108, 142.
39. Shaw does pick on the 'rapid exit of the "Black caucus" shortly after it was formed in 1976'. (*op.cit.*, p. 131). This was an unfortunate loss, arising from organizational as well as political disagreements. For the record, a new Black caucus was formed, and in April 1977 the SWP held a Rally for Black Revolutionaries **which** attracted 130 black workers. (*Socialist Worker*, 7 May 1977.)
40. *Socialist Worker*, 2 October 1976.
41. Admittedly Shaw's narrative ends in 1976. But surely one's account of a funeral must be conditioned by knowledge of a subsequent resurrection. Shaw's article was completed after the successful ANL Carnival of 30 April 1978 which attracted 80,000 people. (Cf. footnotes 81 and 82.) Yet he makes no mention of the ANL, despite the fact that he has strong feelings on the question: three months earlier he had described it as part of the SWP's 'blatant attempts to bypass the united anti-fascist movement'. (*Socialist Challenge*, 2 February 1977.)
42. 4 May 1978.
43. A detailed study of the election results reveals some interesting and contradictory factors. The sharp decline in the vote of the National Front (which often fell by more than half in some of its strongest bases) is an encouraging fact. Undoubtedly this is at least partially attributable to the persistent and vigorous campaigning of the Anti-Nazi League, and confirms the SWP view that this **was** a crucial area for revolutionary socialist activity. On the other hand the finding of the BBC/University of Essex election-day survey (*The Economist*, 12 May 1979) that there was an 11 per cent swing to the Tories among skilled workers suggests that the ideological struggle against **craftism** will have continuing importance in the years to come.
44. Shaw, *op.cit.*, p. 101.
45. In many constituencies Labour candidates increased the number of votes **they** received despite the percentage swing to the Tories.
46. Shaw, *op.cit.*, pp. 141, 145.
47. In the general election no Socialist Unity candidate obtained more than 500 votes. (This can be compared with 642 votes for the Silly Party in Dover and Deal.) There is little likelihood that the SWP would have fared significantly better if it had decided to stand candidates; the results seem to confirm the decision that the time **was** not yet ripe.

48. On **28 April 1979** fifteen thousand people— members of the Indian Workers Association, the **Labour Party**, the Communist Party, of most of the revolutionary groupings as well as thousands who belonged to no organization— demonstrated in the streets of **Southall** in protest at the murder by police of anti-fascist demonstrator Blair Peach. It was a dignified but militant demonstration against state defence of racists. The following Thursday Tariq Ali, Socialist Unity candidate, polled **477** votes in the **Southall** constituency. Any strategy towards unity must begin with the fifteen thousand, not the **477**.
49. London, **1977**.

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