

## Tony Cliff – a life for revolution

By Phil Hearse

Tony Cliff (real name Ygael Gluckstein), founder and central leader of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), died in London on 10 April, at the age of 82. Apart from his family, there was nothing in Cliff's life but the revolutionary movement. His life can only be judged on the basis of his achievements in that, and he would have wanted it no other way. Before any critical points are made, the essential facts about the man have to be recorded.

He built by far the largest revolutionary socialist party in the English-speaking world. He did that on the basis of his boundless enthusiasm, which was infectious in the hundreds of meetings at which he spoke. While he left several books (the most important of which is his multi-volume biography of Lenin) it was in the punishing round of public meetings, convincing newcomers of the socialist message, that he was in his element.

Cliff was also a person with complete contempt for bourgeois niceties, something obvious in his dress and extremely modest financial circumstances. As Paul Foot has written, he died without a penny in his pocket.

### State capitalism

Cliff was won to Trotskyism as a teenager in Palestine in the 1930s. From his experience there he became a life-long opponent of Zionism and champion of Palestinian national rights. Arriving in Britain after the second world war, he joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), the main Trotskyist group. When Ted Grant -- later founder of Militant -- came up with the idea that Russia was a 'state capitalist' country and not a 'degenerated workers state', Cliff was given the task of rebutting him. Disappearing into a library for several months, Cliff emerged convinced that state capitalism was correct, and with the draft of the founding text of his tendency, *State Capitalism in Russia*. Grant meanwhile went back to Trotskyist orthodoxy.

Expelled from the mainstream Trotskyist group, Cliff organised his small band of supporters in the Socialist Review group, working inside the Labour Party. The state capitalist theory was always ambiguous. Did it mean that Russia (and similar societies) embodied a variant of the same mode of production as the imperialist powers, or was it a different mode of production? And what did it change about the attitude of revolutionaries? At two points the state capitalist thesis seems to have made a significant difference. During the Korean war (1950-3) the Cliffites maintained strict neutrality and equally blamed US imperialism and 'Russian imperialism' -- something which in the light of recent revelations of US-backed incursions into North Korea before the war and US atrocities within it, seems outlandish.

When the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, the SWP argued it was only a 'move sideways', neither defeat of victory, which in the light of the huge collapse of the productive forces and impoverishment of the population, seems equally outlandish.

In the meantime however, the state capitalist theory did not prevent Cliff's tendency from taking the right side in the major clashes in world politics, for example supporting the 1956 Hungarian revolution and backing the liberation struggle in Vietnam.

Cliff's group, now named the International Socialists (IS), picked up supporters during the first wave of the British anti-nuclear movement from 1958-63. The IS also started work around some major factories in London. Publishing the only Marxist theoretical journal in the UK at the time worth reading (*International Socialism*), it also organised an entrism group in the Labour party's Young Socialist movement, although here it was marginalised by the dominance of Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League supporters, organised around the journal *Keep Left*.

But in the mid-1960s the IS broke from entrism in the Labour Party, and this move proved to be well-timed. By 1967 the student movement was in full swing, and the revolutionary-led Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was organising its first successful demonstrations. The IS was well-placed to take advantage, winning dozens of student activists.

Leninism?

The breakthrough year for the far left was 1968, with the events in France, Vietnam and Czechoslovakia galvanising the revolutionary tendencies. Cliff responded to the May-June general strike in France with two things: a new edition of his long pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg, and a pamphlet on the lessons of the May-June events in France, co-authored with Ian Birchall.

These were the opening shots in his campaign to turn the IS into a 'Leninist' organisation. Cliff argued that in France only the Leninist tendencies -- the Trotskyists in *Voix Ouvriere* (later *Lutte Ouvriere*) and the Fourth International's youth group the *Jeunes Communistes Revolutionnaires* -- had made any impact, while the loosely organised anarchist and syndicalist groups had failed. A revolutionary group in its early stages, he argued, could be informally organised on a federalist basis, but a real national organisation needed discipline and leadership. Cliff's pamphlet on Rosa Luxemburg had previously championed what it claimed was her more spontaneist and libertarian views on revolutionary organisation against Lenin's democratic centralism. The new edition changed the line 180 degrees, supporting Lenin against Luxemburg. Many older IS stalwarts -- like Mike Kidron (main theoretician of the 'permanent arms economy') and Peter Sedgwick (translator of Victor Serge's writings) -- were outraged. In retrospect we can see that this debate was falsely posed; Luxemburg's writings did stress the importance of working class spontaneity, but her practice in building the Spartakusbund and the German Communist Party reveals no major differences with Lenin on organisational questions. The IS's previous 'Luxemburgism' was a myth, used to fight the 'orthodox' Trotskyist groupings.

The question now became what content the IS's new 'Leninism' was going to have. Part of the answer was to be found in the first volume of Cliff's book on Lenin, which presented Lenin as a master of 'bending the stick'. The book tended to portray Lenin as mainly a master tactician whose theoretical positions at any one time were a function of his latest tactical moves. This inverted the relationship between theory and practice

in Lenin's work -- and was an all-too-obvious justification of sharp and unexplained tactical turns.

This 'theory at the service of tactics' approach could be seen in Cliff's explanation of the differences between Lenin and Luxemburg over Polish self-determination. Lenin's main task, Cliff argued, was to oppose Great Russian chauvinism and therefore he was right to champion Poland's independence from the Russian empire. Luxemburg's key task was to oppose reactionary Polish nationalism, so she was right to oppose self-determination. They were both right!

In the early 1970s the IS grew rapidly, challenged only by the Fourth International's section, the International Marxist Group (IMG). As the IS dived into the major industrial struggles then breaking out, building a series of factory branches around its agitational paper Socialist Worker, internal conflicts saw one opposition after another expelled or resigning. Rumours of harsh internal methods were all over the left. Leading figures like John Palmer, Stephen Marks and Peter Sedgwick found themselves outside the organisation. In the late 1970s Cliff didn't hesitate to unceremoniously boot out the whole of the Birmingham engineering workers fraction, for wanting to work in the Communist Party-dominated Broad Left, and not the (by now) SWP's 'rank and file' group. And in the early 1980s the SWP lost dozens of cadres by closing down all the industrial rank and file groups, and the 'front' organisations Women's Voice and the black group Flame.

Others on the left, particularly the IMG, took the lead in the 1970s in pushing militant anti-racist and anti-fascist activity. In 1977 the SWP stole a march on everyone by launching the Anti-Nazi League, backed by leading sports people, musicians and Labour Party figures. Its carnivals and rock concerts mobilised hundreds of thousands -- and the SWP picked up members hand over fist.

But in the transition from Socialist Review Group to (in 1977) Socialist Workers Party, a very different concept of socialist organisation had come to the fore. The SWP became a by-word in the British left for dogmatism and sectarianism, for narrow-minded factionalism in dealing with others on the left, and for an approach to politics which prioritised only paper sales and new members -- picking up campaigns and then suddenly dropping them when their usefulness as recruitment tools seemed even momentarily diminished. It also gained a reputation for simplistic leftism, attempting to 'out-militant' everyone, irrespective of circumstances.

But its formidable propaganda machinery, and its near-monopoly in the student field, enabled it to ignore the rest of the left and continue to grow.

To build an International?

Another aspect of the SWP's politics which changed radically was its approach to the international organisation of revolutionaries. Against the Fourth International and others who attempted to organise international revolutionary tendencies, Cliff and his supporters claimed that a real revolutionary International could only be built by substantial revolutionary parties, with real national roots, coming together over time. The 'roof' of an International, they claimed, could not be built before the 'walls'. To this end, in the 1970s, the IS/SWP engaged in dialogue with a number of nationally-based revolutionary organisations in Europe. Extensive discussions were conducted with the leftist Italian organisation

Avanguardia Operaia (Workers Vanguard), which had established factory groups in several parts of Italy, especially Milan. A similar relationship with the French Lutte Ouvriere was eventually dumped in favour of a link with a group which had split from the Ligue Communiste. In the 1974-5 Portuguese revolution links were built with the ultra-left PRP-BP (Revolutionary Proletarian Party-Proletarian Brigades). When the latter became involved in the leftist putsch which ended the revolution, they were defended by the SWP.

All these discussions came to nothing. In response, the SWP turned to building their own international tendency, the International Socialists, whose affiliates were mainly in English-speaking countries. The relationship with these groups was one of simple authority -- the SWP decided, the rest did as they were told. The result of course was a series of splits, as local leaders rejected the right of the London centre to decide everything.

The SWP had locked itself into an unworkable method for constructing a new revolutionary socialist International. In the present period -- with the semi-collapse of Stalinism -- new tendencies from a multitude of backgrounds are continually emerging. Revolutionary socialists in other countries must of course engage in a dialogue with these currents, and nothing about their evolution is certain -- as we saw with key components of the powerful Manila-Rizal split from the Communist Party of the Philippines, who eventually drifted off in a rightist and syndicalist direction. But a dialogue with emerging revolutionary, and potentially revolutionary, tendencies cannot be conducted on the basis of ultimatum, or an attempt to force them into a pre-defined orthodoxy or unquestioning loyalty to a party in the imperialist countries. This method just doesn't work, and with good reason.

A dialogue is not a monologue. No party is possessed of absolute truth on all questions, and has answers to all the strategic and tactical problems posed in every country. Any attempt to force feed others with the methods that have been successful in your country, irrespective of national circumstances, irrespective of the experiences that parties have of their own national situation, will result in failure. If the SWP wants to break out of its international isolation and become part of the growing debate on the international left, it has to more constructively engage in a dialogue with other revolutionary currents and admit the obvious facts; there is no one version of Marxism that is absolutely correct, there is no one tendency which has the monopoly of the truth, and there is no one tendency -- national or international -- which is the sole repository of revolutionary marxism. And relations between revolutionaries internationally has to reflect these facts.

## The SWP and the Left

In the building of a revolutionary party, internal political differences are inevitable. Internal debate, and from time to time minorities, are vital for an organisation to successfully orientate itself. Gramsci said the party, as the historical memory of the working class, was a 'collective intellectual'. To do its job properly its members have to have the space to think independently and to be part of a collective effort in defining the way forward at every stage -- and especially when major strategic or tactical turns are taken. The apparently cumbersome business of internal

meetings, conferences and discussions bulletins, the whole time-consuming business of internal democracy, is not a diversion but a vital part of forming cadres and making them part of a genuine collective. If on the contrary a division of labour is established in which leaders decide and then issue instructions, the life of the organisation is impoverished, the political level declines, and people who want to think for themselves inevitably drift away. It is hard not to conclude that the SWP has embodied some features of this latter approach.

Moreover, it has paid a price for its 'ourselves alone' policy towards the rest of the left. Viewed short-term, the evidence seems to be otherwise; by sticking to its 'build the party, don't worry about the others' approach, the SWP has built a substantial organisation. But the cost has been a relative isolation, and an inability to attract many more experienced and thoughtful socialists. While over the past fifteen years the collapse of Britain's Communist Party, the decline of Militant and the auto-destruction of the IMG have given the SWP a clearer run, its political influence in broad layers of the workers movement, and in society as a whole, is much smaller than its numerical size would suggest. Also, the emergence of the Marxist-led Scottish Socialist Party, with a much clearer and audacious attitude to left unity, has made the SWP marginal to the key developments in the most politically advanced part of Britain -- a salutary experience.

However, there are important signs that the SWP is trying to reposition itself. For the first time in more than 20 years it is engaged in a major election campaign in London, and it has done this through the London Socialist Alliance -- a broad front of groups and individuals. SWP spokespeople have supported calls for unity and a break with narrow-minded factionalism. On the very day this article is written, SWP leader Paul Foot is speaking at a London election rally alongside Tommy Sheridan of the Scottish Socialist Party and Alain Krivine of the French Revolutionary Communist League. Most important, the dynamic of unity has galvanised and enthused the campaign, including among SWP members.

Tony Cliff built a substantial party which is unbendingly hostile to capitalism, to the bureaucracy in the workers movement and to all forms of exploitation and privilege. A formidable achievement, especially since much of the last two decades in Britain has seen defeats of the working class and retreat by the left. If those qualities are to be built on, and the potential embodied in thousands of members maximised, the SWP needs now to break out of its knee-jerk hostility -- to other revolutionary trends internationally, to self-organised movements of the oppressed and to the rest of the left in Britain. If the SWP fails to seize the opportunity now posed to reorient itself, both it and the rest of the left will be the losers.