



**Crisis of the European  
Revolutionary Left**  
Chris Harman

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The European revolutionary left has been undergoing a general crisis for the last two and a half years. In country after country the largest organisations have been paralysed by political confusion, leading in many cases to splits, in some to complete disintegration.

The crisis first manifested itself in the country in which the revolutionary left grew to its greatest strength in the mid-1970s – Italy. At the height of its influence it claimed 30,000 adherents, three daily papers, dozens of radio stations, half a dozen MPs.

Then, in 1976, after the general elections of 20 June, each of the three major organisations plunged into crisis. The national secretary and a substantial minority of the leadership of Avanguardia Operaia split from that organisation on a programme that was at least semi-

reformist. The two constituent parts of the PDUP-Manifesto organisation split apart – the minority eventually to join the majority of AO (to form Democrazia Proletaria), the majority to merge with the AO minority. And the third organisation, Lotta Continua consciously dissolved its organisation into the wider ‘movement’, remaining only as a paper. (For a partial account in English of these events, see **Italy 1977–8**, published by Red Notes, henceforth cited as **Italy**).

In France, the biggest revolutionary organisation (although not the one with the biggest base in the factories) the Fourth International’s LCR has been divided down the middle on whether to move towards unity with the right wing ‘Trotskyist’ sect, the OCI (the ‘Lambertists’) and has abandoned its daily paper. (The pro-Lambertist tendency got 38.5 per cent of the votes, the anti 39 per cent – **Combate** (Madrid), 8 February 1979.) A smaller, but by no means insignificant organisation, the OCT (formerly “Revolution”), which had apparently strengthened itself through fusion, promptly split losing about a third of its members and most of its momentum in 1977–8.

In Sweden the organisation Furbundet Kommunist has developed an orientation which mercilessly criticises its own past positions as ‘leftist’ and ‘economist’, and which calls for a ‘left’ government committed to ‘structural reforms’. One of the leading figures of the Danish Kommunistisk Forbund, Bent Moos, has developed an orientation which points in the same direction.

In Spain what was one of the most rapidly growing organisations in 1976–7, the OIC, underwent a series of traumatic crises in the period after the June 1977 elections: its general secretary, Fabrigas, who had been the dominating influence in the organisation, split to join the Catalan branch of the Socialist Party; successive splits to the

'left' took most of its activists in Barcelona, Zaragoza and the Balearic's; what remained then dissolved itself into the semi-Maoist Movimiento Comunista after self criticism of the OIC's traditions by its leadership which denounced its past 'leftism', the theoretical influence on it of 'Trotsky' and its failure to understand 'Marxism-Leninism', (see **Acerca del Proceso de rectification** by the Comité Federal de la OIC, 8 Nov '78, and, for the point of view of some members who split to the left. **Las razones de nuestra separation de la OIC**, Zaragoza, 5 Nov '78). There are also reports (of unknown reliability) that the biggest Fourth International section, the (Spanish) LCR, is plagued by many of the controversies that have been paralysing its French equivalent.

In Portugal, little seems to remain of the movement that could briefly outflank the CP to the left in 1975 and deliver 17 percent of the popular vote to Major Otelo da Carvalho in the presidential election of 1976.

It is important to stress that these political crises are far from destroying the international revolutionary left. The movement is still far bigger than it was a dozen years ago. As one Italian commentator has noted, the 'crisis of Marxism' has been a 'crisis of growth' (**Praxis**, February 1979). Nevertheless, a crisis it is. It threatens to paralyse the activity of many tens of thousands of revolutionaries, and to stop advantage being taken of the many opportunities which exist for building a revolutionary current in the workplaces. An understanding of the roots of the crisis is essential to revolutionaries everywhere. Those who do not learn its lessons may well live to suffer them.

**Background: The growth of the  
revolutionary left 1968–76**

The revolutionary left internationally emerged in the years 1967–69. Previously its numbers had been minuscule and its real impact tiny. In France its total membership before the May events was, at the outside, 2,000; in Britain revolutionaries used to joke that any organisation that grew to the 500 mark was bound then to split and disintegrate; in Italy the future founders of AO were, as members of the Fourth International's Gruppi Comunisti Revoluzionari, so deeply embedded in the Communist Party as to be invisible; in Spain too the future components of the revolutionary left were still encapsulated in the CP, ETA, the Guevarist FLP or the Catholic workers' organisations. In the space of little more than a couple of years, these scarcely visible embryos were very vigorous and noisy, even if still small, intruders into the established political network.

In France and Italy it numbered tens of thousands of adherents by 1970; in Spain it had grown to roughly the same size by the death of Franco in 1975; and even in miserable Britain with its suffocating reformist traditions, the IS (now the SWP) could claim approaching 4,000 adherents by the end of 1974.

But the growth of the revolutionary left was not a result of its own efforts alone. It was a reflection of more profound social and economic developments of those years. This was the period in which the long drawn out boom conditions of the 1950s and 1960s began to give way to the crisis conditions of the 1970s, the boom had as a by-product undercut many of the institutional forms the various European ruling classes had used to control the mass of the

population: industrialisation in Southern Europe destroyed much of the peasantry and with it the ability of priests to dominate politics; the new, young, urban workers were not nearly as intimidated by the police as had been their rural parents; women ceased to be a force for conservatism as they too were sucked into industry (in Britain, only 21.7 per cent of married women worked in 1951; by 1971 the figure was twice as high, 42.2 percent and by 1976 49.0 per cent).

What this meant was that in 1968 in France, in 1969 in Italy and in Spain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, movements could develop among whole layers of workers which the ruling class did not have the institutional means to check. Gaullism was impotent when faced with the May general strike in France; the formerly Catholic unions in France and Italy had veered away from control by the church; the children of the most fanatical supporters of Franco in the 1930s, the Carlists of Pamplona, waged an almost insurrectionary general strike in 1973.

In Northern Europe the process was rather different in form. But in Britain at least the outcome was somewhat similar – successive outbreaks of militant action over wages and in defence of shop floor organisation that the existing institutions seemed unable to control.

Unable to hold these movements in check, the various ruling classes all too often were tempted to use direct repression against them: the use of the CRS riot police by de Gaulle in France, the threatened military coups in Italy in the early 1970s, the inevitable intervention of the Civil Guards and the Armed Police into Spanish industrial disputes under Franco; the increasing resort by the Heath government to the Special Patrol Group. But repression alone was rarely able to smash the new economic militancy. It usually only served to give it a new and a more political dimension.

A final, additional factor helped the revolutionary left to gain from this situation: what we in the IS referred to at the time as 'the vacuum on the left'. The reformist organisations were, by and large, incapable of reacting to the sudden upsurge in working class struggle and consciousness. Their whole political stance focussed their attention on what was happening within the established political structures; they saw the workers' movement as no more than a means for putting pressure on these; it was to be kept going by a routine round of activities, carefully supervised from above and never allowed to take on a life of its own.

For the Communist Parties, this still meant maintaining an inflexible, closed oppositional Stalinist stance which, however, never challenged the system; their 'strategy' was to bide their time until there was an electoral majority for a 'left government' in France and Italy, until a 'peaceful' general strike brought about 'national reconciliation' in Spain, in Britain the perennial talk of 'left advance' and 'alternative economic policies'. Social democracy was in an even worse state: the French party had discredited itself by its support for the colonial war in Algeria and its participation in de Gaulle's 1958 government; the Italian party had lost support and credibility through participation in coalition government with the Christian democrats; the British party had disillusioned many of its own activists through its imposition of wage controls and its attempt to put legal constraints on the unions; the Spanish party was made up of exiles who seemed unable to stir themselves to build an underground organisation; and the Portuguese party barely existed until the early 1970s.

As workers were drawn into wages struggles, demonstrations, political strikes, occupations, the revolutionaries were often the only section of the left to respond to the possibilities. Suddenly, their leaflets and

their papers were being enthusiastically accepted and read by at least some working class activists. There were occasions when they had only to raise their red banners, and thousands would march behind them. It was possible for groups that had built themselves from dozens to hundreds through participation in student struggles now to draw in thousands of workers.

Not all the revolutionary groups managed to grow: some were too tainted by the sectarianism that had inured them to isolation of the pre-1968 period, others fell so much in love with the student movement that they never bothered about the factories – they went on complaining of the dangers of ‘economism’ until it was too late for them to make their presence felt.

Yet, in general the revolutionary left could flourish. And its own political ideas did not seem to make much difference to its success or failure in doing so. So in Italy the dominant trend was semi-Maoist, whether with Lotta Continua or with Avanguardia Operaia; in Spain Maoists and Trotskyists alike flourished; in France three rival Trotskyist groups and the semi-Maoist OCT dominated the scene by the mid-70s. In Britain it was the ‘state capitalist’ IS (now the SWP) which became dominant.

The revolutionary left everywhere had grown from strength to strength in the six or seven years after 1968. Its expectation was that it would continue to grow from strength to strength.

In Britain, as we watched the miners bring down the Heath government, we waited for a massive accretion in our strength as, after a few months of ‘honeymoon’ with Labour, the working class movement would explode in a ‘big bang’. In the SWP our formulations were not as absurdly optimistic as those who wrote, in the Fourth International’s paper **Red Weekly**, of ‘the road to dual power’. Yet we did expect a



rapid resurgence of struggle. 'A period of lull in the class struggle is inevitable. But such is the severity of the economic crisis that this 'honeymoon' between the trade unions and the Labour government will be much shorter than in 1964–6. 'This time it will be a matter of months not years' (*IS National Committee Report, Internal Bulletin*, April 1974); even a 'rightist' oppositional grouping inside our organisation thought that the 'honeymoon' would end 'a little later rather than sooner, but it cannot be long delayed' (Document in April 1974 *Internal Bulletin* by Duncan Hallas, Jim Higgins, John Palmer and Roger Protz).

And, in practice, we behaved as if the near exponential growth of the previous period was going to continue. The round of activities and meetings remained at the same tempo as in the upsurge years of 1969, 1971, 1972 and 1973–4. We set targets for paper sales and for membership that assumed that nothing had changed.

By European standards, we in Britain were profoundly conservative in our perspective in 1974. In Italy, in the run up to the June 1976 election, virtually the whole revolutionary left believed

1. that they would get a substantial vote and many MPs for their joint list, and
2. that the election would give rise to a 'left' government which would lead Italy into a rerun of the Chilean experience under Allende, but this time with a happy ending.

The same expectations were general in Spain in the period up to Franco's demise. The LCR spoke of a maturing pre-revolutionary situation' (its mentor, the

United Secretariat of the Fourth International had been speaking in this sense since 1969 – see its ‘Curta’ in **Accion Comunista**, no. 14, Nov. 1972). And for their part ‘Marxist-Leninist’ organisations still talked of the need to take up the teachings of Mao Tse Tung and prepare for ‘people’s war’.

In France, the wild optimism that had existed in 1968 had died down in the early 1970s – and with it the influence of the various Maoist and spontaneist groups who had most embodied it. Nevertheless, sections of the revolutionary left continued to behave as if their actions alone could transform the political situation – as in 1973 when the LCR fell for a government provocation and battled it out for hours with a vast array of riot police protecting a minuscule fascist meeting. The optimism persisted in the illusion in 1976–78 that the election of a ‘worker government’ made up of the CP and the Socialist Party would produce a huge upturn in the class struggle. ‘For a longer or shorter period ... there would be a period of enthusiasm, or real mobilisation of the working class with enormous illusions.’ (Alain Krivine, in **Revolution**, 2 July ’76) The same beliefs in the immense possibilities of the left taking office in France are repeated in Ernest Mandel’s book on Eurocommunism.

### **The roots of the crisis: (1) The temporary restabilisation of bourgeois institutions**

The expectations of the revolutionary left look absurd in retrospect. They did not seem so absurd at the time. For the first time since the 1920s new revolutionary organisations had grown up, independent of both

Social Democracy and Stalinism, just as workers struggles were rising to new heights. And all this, just as capitalism plunged into by far its deepest economic crisis since the 1930s.

Be that as it may, it was the failure of these expectations to find fulfilment that led straight into the crisis of the revolutionary left. In Italy the elections of 20 June 1976 failed either to produce a 'left government' or to give the revolutionary left more than a couple of per cent of the poll: within a month people were talking of a 'crisis of the revolutionary left'.

The revolutionary left failed to take account of several factors. The first was the adaptability of existing institutions, especially of the reformist organisations within the working class movement. We have seen how in 1968–9 the reformist parties and the unions failed to react to the sudden upsurge of struggle. But that paralysis did not last all that long. Even the ultra-rigid French CP did make some use of the May events, 'running to the front' in order to direct some of the energy into strengthening its base in the factories. The Italian CP was more adept at taking advantage of the new militancy of 1969. Under its influence the trade union bureaucracy created new, apparently democratic organisational forms, factory councils (roughly equivalent to shop stewards committees) in [order to bring] many of the best spontaneous militants in the factories into its orbit. In Spain the CP's caution could leave it very much on the sidelines in great struggles like the Pamplona or Vitoria general strikes; but it was still capable of building the workers commissions into the most powerful and most respected union federation.

In Portugal, the Stalinist CP which had cheerfully broken strikes in the summer of 1974 and which had been among

the first of the CPs to remove from its programme references to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', was just as willing to take up an apparently militant stance after it had been removed from the government in the late summer of 1975.

In Italy, Spain and France the turn to 'Eurocommunism' was also in part an attempt to open the party up to new forces. Although its prime purpose was to reassure the local ruling classes that the CPs would not betray their interests to Moscow, it also enabled the leaders to say to a whole array of leftist intellectuals that there was room for them. A new climate of tolerance inside the parties was promised to those who would not have thought of joining in 1968–9.

However, the transformation of Stalinism was child's play compared with what took place in the case of social democracy.

In France the old Socialist Party, the SFIO, had received an ignominious 6 per cent of the votes in the 1969 presidential election. But after a series of manoeuvres it was reborn in a completely new form in 1971. The new party made every possible attempt to stress its discontinuity with the old; its leader Francois Mitterrand had never been a member of the old party and the new party did not shy away from a certain 'left wing' rhetoric re-absorbing many of the leaders of the left reformist PSU. It made great play of workers' participation and openly sought alliances with the Communist Party. It cultivated relations with the former Catholic union federation, the CFDT, which had gained a reputation for leftism' in 1968, rather than with the SFIO's old ally, the FO union federation (a Cold War split from the CGT with much of the reputation one would expect from such origins). The result was a remarkable renaissance for social democracy in France. It has not succeeded in taking over from the CP as being the party of the industrial

proletariat: but its vote has overtaken that of the CP, and it claimed in 1976 to have 958 workplace cells.

In Portugal, a mixture of money from the ruling German social democrats and an ambiguous politics that seemed to mean all things to all people in 1974 (including in the first few months after the overthrow of fascism a willingness to be 'to the left' of the CP on certain issues), enabled the Portuguese Socialist Party to rise out of nothing to become that country's biggest party. Here, however, its policies lost it most of its active support in the radical Southern part of the country by the autumn of 1975; its attempts to set up rival union federations to that of the Communists enjoyed little success outside the white collar field – and there it had to work both with the openly bourgeois parties and with right wing Maoist sects.

The Soares phenomenon in Portugal was soon followed by the Gonzales phenomenon in Spain. Here again, money from West European social democracy, plus the media, plus a toleration of certain left phrases, enabled the Socialist Party, the PSOE, not only to grab more votes than the CP, but also to scoop its social democratic rivals, even where they had a better record of struggle than itself. It did manage to set up a credible union federation, the UGT, even though this had played virtually no role in the underground struggle against Francoism.

In Britain, there has been no great regrowth of social democratic politics. That has been ruled out by the experience of Labour in power for 11 of the last 15 years. The Labour vote in February 1974 was the lowest since the 1930s, and the Labour party membership has been in continual decline for 25 years. Until a couple of years ago droves of activists were still leaving the party in disillusionment, although there are a few indications that this trend might have been reversed since.

However, in the first half of the seventies, the decline of political social democracy was paralleled by an increased flexibility on the part of the trade union bureaucracy. Union membership expanded and a number of key unions were taken over by figures associated with the 'broad left'. Union leaders consciously set out to develop mechanisms that would tie shop stewards more closely into the running of the union. The strikes of 1968–70 had tended to be unofficial; not so the great strikes of 1971–4.

Overall, the vacuum on the left was not nearly as marked by the mid-70s as it had been in the late 1960s. Institutions aimed at tying workers to bourgeois society had to a very large extent filled the void, and the revolutionary left began to find the going hard. So, for example, although the crisis for the revolutionary left did not break until 1976 in Italy, certain symptoms were visible in 1972–3. In Spain conditions were already ripe enough at the end of 1974 for two thirds of the membership of one of the semi-Maoist groups, *Bandiera Roja*, to rejoin the CP (ex-members of that group are central in the Eurocommunist wing of the party in Barcelona).

### **The roots of the crisis: (2) the attitude of workers**

To recognise the considerable efforts made by reformists of all hues to integrate the new activism of workers is not, by itself, an explanation of why the revolutionary left found itself out in the cold after 1975–6. You also have to explain why workers were prepared to see their struggles restricted within the limits prescribed by the reformists. Why did the

workers movement in Britain which had rejected wage controls in 1969 and 1972–4, accept them in 1975–78? Why did Spanish workers in general accept the pact of Moncloa (the Spanish equivalent of the Social Contract)? Why did Italian workers bow down before a Christian democrat government which had passive CP support? Why did Portuguese workers allow Social Democrat led governments to bring to an end the movement that had threatened the whole future of Portuguese capitalism in 1975?

There is one set of explanations for all these phenomena simply in terms of a ‘new flowering of reformist illusions’. In the 1968–75 period, it is said, revolutionaries failed to understand the peculiar features of western society, with the strong commitment of its workers to democratic forms. Once you understand this, it is then argued, you can see that the left will never reach the widest layers of the working class unless it relates to the reformist organisations and is well established on the parliamentary terrain.

One version of this argument is, of course, that put by Eurocommunist refugees from the lecture halls of ’68. A slightly more sophisticated version is contained in the ‘left Eurocommunist’ theories of thinkers like the former member of the leadership of the Spanish CP, Claudin, and one of *Il Manifesto*’s leaders in Italy, Magri. (For further details see the articles by [Phil Spencer](#) and [Colin Barker](#) in this issue of **International Socialism**.) Even some of the revolutionary left has developed its own version of the theory; see for instance the various texts from the Fourth International in the last three or four years, e.g. Ernest Mandel’s book on Eurocommunism.

Yet, despite its wide popularity, none of the various versions really fits the facts. For, the crisis of the revolutionary left has not been accompanied by any huge flowering of social democracy, Stalinism or Eurocommunism. The passing over to reformism of a few former would-be revolutionaries is not the same thing as the growth of widespread belief within the working class that its redemption is at hand from reformist leaders.

In Britain, as mentioned above, the period of stagnation for the revolutionary left followed the lowest social democratic vote for 40 years. In Italy and France, the revolutionary left began to tear itself apart after an election in which the electoral hopes of reformists as well as revolutionaries received a battering. In Portugal, by the time the Soares government turned the tide against the revolution, it itself had very little solid support within the core working class areas (it is pure mythology to pretend, as some adherents of the Fourth International line do, that there were large working class demonstrations in its support in Lisbon in the autumn of 1975). Even in Spain, where one would expect 40 years of Francoism to have led workers to greet democratisation with enthusiasm, there are already signs of disillusionment with bourgeois democracy (for instance the large number of abstentions in the referendum on the constitution).

A 'growth of illusions in reformism' is, at best, a very inadequate explanation of the forces which derailed the hopes of the revolutionary left.

A better starting point is to be found in certain comments made by Trotsky in 1921 – at a previous time when the first wild hopes of a new revolutionary movement seemed to have come to an impasse internationally. He made some acute observations on how the working class reacts to a sudden turn to the worse in the economic situation.



The political effects of a crisis are determined by the entire political situation and by those events which precede and accompany the crisis, especially the battles, successes or failures of the working class itself prior to the crisis. Under one set of circumstances the crisis might give a mighty impulse to the revolutionary activity of the working masses; under a different set of circumstances it may completely paralyse the offensive of the proletariat.

Prolonged unemployment following a period of revolutionary political assaults and retreats does not at all work in favour of the Communist Party. On the contrary, the longer the crisis lasts, the more it threatens to nourish anarchist moods on one wing and reformist moods on the other. (**First Five Years of the Communist International**, vol. II, p. 78 and p. 82)

Economic crisis leads to attacks on workers living standards and jobs. To that extent it increases their bitterness; as they join the dole queue workers who never before questioned the system at all can develop a bitter loathing of everything to do with it. But the crisis also does something else as well: it makes workers with jobs much more wary about entering into struggle. After all, their jobs might be at stake.

This rarely affects them today, as it might have in pre-war slumps, through the direct fear that management will sack them and replace them by new personnel from the dole queues. Traditions of union organisation are usually too strong for management even to try that. More insidious mechanisms, however, are at work. These make the individual worker feel that his or her job depends upon the viability of the particular chunk of the system in which they find themselves. Protecting their living standards and working conditions, they are told, will increase the crisis

that besets their factory, firm or nation and destroy its ability to provide jobs. The same argument is presented as a more general ideological argument by the media: such is the crisis in society that any sustained struggle over wages, working conditions or hours will push it over the edge into an abyss.

Workers can resist this argument. But only if either they have a general political understanding that a viable alternative exists to the present crisis-prone set-up; or if they are so embittered that they are prepared to struggle no matter what the odds are so long as there is some prospect of success.

This enables us to see how workers were willing to struggle during the period of the Heath government in Britain, before the Italian Communist Party gave its blessing to the Andreotti government, until the Moncloa Pact in Spain. The established reformist leaders of the class indicated that there was an alternative to the existing, crisis-prone set-up: the hoisting of themselves into office. Here was a very visible generalised political alternative with which every worker who had a grievance could identify. He or she did not have to have any great illusions in what the reformist leaders could deliver. What mattered is that a direction was indicated that could link the individual grievance with a general sense of movement.

This alternative focus was removed by the policy of at least half-collaboration with the governments by the reformist leaders in Italy and Spain, the defeat of the left in the French elections, the endorsement of the social contract by the 'left' trade union leaders in Britain, the collapse of the radical sections of the Portuguese army on 25 November 1975. This would not have mattered had there been a huge spontaneous upsurge of anger and struggle. Out of that the class would have begun to create at least the embryo of its

own alternative. Nor would it have mattered if the revolutionary left had been a massive force, capable of appearing as a credible alternative. But in the situation as it existed, there was no credible alternative to the mass of workers between what the reformists offered and seemingly endless crisis.

The reformists offered virtually nothing in the way of reforms. As the economic crisis deepened their language became closer and closer to that of the ruling class. There was little positive in it for workers to have illusions in. What the reformists were effectively doing was tying workers to the measures proposed by the main sections of the ruling class. Workers went along with this – some sections even to the extent of abandoning the reformists themselves for the openly capitalist parties – because however miserable an option it was, it seemed the only viable option. If there was a revival of reformism among the most advanced sections of workers, it was not through illusions in some great new world offered by the reformist leaders, but because of a lack of faith in any revolutionary alternative.

This particularly affected many of the worker militants who had been prepared to work with, or even join, the revolutionary left in the earlier period. Then it had often seemed that an alternative lay in the sheer spontaneity of the workers struggles themselves. Now that was no longer the case. Long drawn out, consistent. Minimised activity was necessary just to maintain elementary forms of class organisation. And in carrying on this sort of activity, the lower reaches of the reformist bureaucracy were often more helpful than the revolutionary left. Their bureaucratic routines could seem more ‘practical’ than the revolutionary fervour of the extreme left. They could link the individual militant with a whole network of other activists who could aid him or her. They could provide access to elected office

within the ranks of the bureaucracy itself. And they did not demand of the individual militant that he or she argue out a political case day after day that meant clashing with fellow workers, since the bureaucracy's own ideology is very close to the 'common sense' conception drummed into workers by capitalist society.

It is this state of affairs, rather than any great blooming of reformist illusions, that explains the way in which in France the Socialist Party, the CFDT and even the CP have been able to recruit former sympathisers of the revolutionary left; the way that in Italy there was the phenomenon of 're-entry' into the CP of ex-revolutionaries three or four years ago; the way that in Spain many former revolutionaries who were active under the most dangerous conditions during the Franco period have dropped out, or even moved towards reformism, now that Franco has gone for good; the way that in Britain there has been a steady trickle of activists away from the revolutionary left towards reformist, 'broad left' activity even to the extent that the younger intellectual cadre of the CP is made up largely of individuals who claimed once upon a time to be revolutionaries.

### **The roots of the crisis: (3) The 'crisis of militancy'**

The revitalisation of the reformist organisations and the changed mood of the class do not by themselves explain why the revolutionary left has been thrown into crisis. Two additional factors are important – one subjective, to do with the motivations of the cadre of the revolutionary organisations, the other political. There is no doubt that an important factor in the

crises of the revolutionary left in France, Italy and Spain has been what has been tailed ‘the crisis of militancy’. By the mid 1970s much of the cadre of the revolutionary organisations had been involved in non-stop activity for seven, eight or even ten years. They had come to politics on the barricades in 1968–9 and had hardly stopped moving since. Day after day, week after week, year after year they sold papers, produced bulletins, stood outside factories, argued over minor programmatic points. This did not seem to matter when the movement was going from strength to strength. But when the forward momentum was checked, much of the activity seemed to lose its point.

The ‘tiredness’ became most marked in Italy after the elections of June 1976, in Spain after the consolidation of the post-Franco regime, in Britain after the downturn in the class struggle in 1975 (the number of strikes fell to the lowest level for 10 years in 1976) and again with the relative downturn in the struggle after the defeat of the firemen’s strike at the beginning of 1978.

The mood created, in some cases, a sort of ‘rebellion’ among the members against the demands of the organisations. In France there was even an example in 1977 of one branch of the LCR going on strike (i.e. refusing to pay subs, attend meetings, sell the paper or read the internal bulletin) until the leadership allowed shorter hours of activity! At the traumatic Lotta Continua conference of 1976, the demand developed, according to an official summary, that ‘one’s own existence and condition in society should be recognised as the basis for one’s own participation in the construction of the revolutionary party’ (quoted **Italy 1977–8**, p. 83): the feeling existed that ‘activity’ for many

militants consisted of selling papers and handing out leaflets from the outside to struggles that did not concern their own lives.

Such moods have undoubtedly been most prevalent among those from the student milieu from 1968. They have either been outside the struggles they had to worry about, or they were 'industrialised', bearing a voluntary burden in the factory. Once the struggle takes a downturn, it is all too tempting to drop that burden, in a way which is not so open to those born into the working class.

But the mood has affected 'real' workers as well. In a few cases it has led them to take escape routes from the factory into courses in higher education, into teaching trade union courses, etc.; more often it led them to the easy temptation of adopting semi-reformist attitudes that open up the way to near full time trade union activity.

The personal tiredness of many of the 1968 generation of revolutionary cadre is a general feature throughout Europe. No organisation has been immune to it. However, that does not mean that a crisis of the revolutionary left has been inevitable. The reason crises have developed in certain organisations has been because their politics did not enable them to cope with the tired attitudes of some of their members. A leader of Lotta Continua wrote at the end of 1976, 'revolutionaries have taken the results of the 20 June general election as a defeat – even a personal defeat – although it was not seen like this by the great mass of people' (quoted in Italy **1977–8**, p. 82). But that was at least in part because of what the politics of the Italian revolutionary left was before 1976.

#### **Roots of the crisis: (4) The politics of the revolutionary left**

The political traditions of the European revolutionary left flow from two different main sources.

The first originates in Maoism and/or Guevarism. This was the tradition of AO and Lotta Continua in Italy, of the MC, the ORT, the PTE and Bandiera Roja in Spain; of the UDP and (in its Guevarist form) of the PRP-BR in Portugal.

Usually the Maoism is diluted. The 'orthodox' or 'hard' 'ML' Maoist groups have not generally worn very well (although large organisations still clinging to the orthodoxy survive in Spain, Germany and Scandinavia). But a whole host of vaguely Maoist notions continue to befuddle the political thinking of the major chunk of the European left.

Typically, the 1974 AO Congress spoke of the need to learn from the experience of the Chinese Communist Party; the Lotta Continua Congress of December 1974 'officially adopted a Leninist type of statute (actually modelled on the statute of the Chinese Communist Party)' (**Italy 1977-8**, p. 110); and the Spanish Movimiento Comunista still speaks of the need for a party which 'assimilates, applies and develops Marxism-Leninism, enriched by the contributions of Mao Tse Tung and by the experiences of the international revolutionary movement.' (**Hacia la Unidad, Documentos para la Preparacion del Congreso extraordinario de unificacion, MC-OIC**, December 1978)

Exactly what 'learning from Mao Tse Tung' has meant has varied considerably from organisation to organisation. But the following elements are common to the political practice of most of the 'soft Maoist' (and 'soft Guevarist') organisations.

1. A strong trend of 'third worldism', which sees the role of 'oppressed people' or even 'oppressed countries' in fighting imperialism as being as important for

achieving socialism as the role of the working class. Hence continual talk of the need for ‘alliances with (undefined) progressive countries’. This trend cut very much with the grain in the late sixties and early seventies when it was a case of the Vietnamese fighting US imperialism or the Angolans fighting Portuguese, South African and US imperialism. It does not have much to say today when the Vietnamese are fighting the Chinese, the Ethiopians the Eritreans etc.

2. Following very much from (1) a strong strand of ‘populism’ –i.e. seeing the revolutionary class as being not necessarily the workers, but a vague entity called ‘the people’. Hence, one of the leaders of AO declared in 1975, ‘there are parts of the world where the historical role given to the working class by Marx are functions today developed in other social groups ...’ (Massimo Gorla translated in *Revolutionary Politics Today: A debate between AO and IS*, in **IS 84**, p. 16) ‘What is meant by proletarian elements is workers and peasants ...’ (**ibid.**, p. 13)

Once other classes than the workers are accepted as playing a key role in the ‘third world’ it is not difficult for some revolutionary organisations to apply the same notion to the advanced countries. Hence in announcing that it was going to merge into the Movimiento Comunista, the Spanish OIC declared that ‘the proletariat and the people are objectively revolutionary classes’. (*Manifiesto Ideologico de la OIC*, in **Boletin Interna**, 6 Diciembre 1978) One leader of Lotta Continua has gone as far as to speak of ‘the



proletariat' as 'all those sectors who, having been invested by the strength and the contents of the workers struggles over the past few years, have now found, or are beginning to find, the path towards their own autonomous growth as a movement and a mass organisation: the unemployed, the state and local government employees, the young people, the soldiers, the social struggle etc. ...' (Guido Viale, quoted at length in **Italy 1977–8**, p. 84)

3. A certain desire to return to what the CPs were like 'before revisionism took them over' – whether this is seen as having occurred in the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s. There is a tendency to identify the 'Marxist-Leninist' organisational form with the form of the Stalinised parties of those years. Partly this is because of the impact of Maoism. Partly also it is a certain nostalgia – in Italy for the armed struggle of the CP-led resistance, in Spain for the time when the CP was certainly not soft.

In practice, the result has been organisational forms which allow virtually no participation of the members of the organisation in (he discussions about its politics and direction. Congresses are dominated by the platform (I was amazed as a visitor to the 1974 AO Congress to find the whole of the first session devoted to a three hour speech by the general secretary), with no debate developing between different positions or resolutions. Internal bulletins (where they exist) merely print the documents of the leadership, not disagreements. There is a tendency for the general secretary of the party to be seen as the 'leader'. It has to be stressed that this style of conducting organisations in the name of 'Marxism-Leninism' developed even where there was a

nominal commitment to a critique of Stalinism, as for instance in AO.

4. A final characteristic of most of these organisations, at least in their early phase of development was a certain 'triumphalist' ultra-leftism. They were very much a product of the mood created by the cultural revolution in China, the victories of the Vietnamese over the Americans, the spread of urban guerrilla-ism in Latin America and the May events in France. It is a mood which proclaimed 'victory is certain', and which downplayed both the importance of defeats and the power of reformism.

In the case of Lotta Continua, for example, its line until well into the early 1970s was that the trade unions were the principle instruments by which the CP could regain its control over the workers' movement. At the beginning, it also included factory councils in this view. It refused to intervene in either, and raised the slogan 'we are all delegates' at a time when the real battle was over the attempt of the trade union bureaucracy to integrate the councils into its structure.

AO's attitude was more complex. It recognised that the unions had great power, but instead of waging a struggle inside the existing trade unions, it called for the creation of revolutionary unions. When it came to form Base Groups in the factories (CUBs) it was never clear whether these were simply groups of revolutionaries, or groupings attempting to involve other workers who were in the unions in a struggle against the line of the CP and the union bureaucracy.

The other main current within the international revolutionary left was that deriving from Trotskyism: the French and Spanish LCRs, and the two French organisations

not connected to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, Lutte Ouvriere and the Organisation Communiste International (usually referred to as the Lambertists).

On the face of it, the Fourth International and the Lambertists stood on ground completely different to that of the soft, third worldist, populist-Maoists. Their traditions claimed to go back, not to the great helmsman, but to the first four congresses of the Communist International and Trotsky's critique of Stalinism.

Yet, in practice, the differences were not always that great. Trotsky's would-be heirs were afflicted by much of the same political and theoretical confusions as the soft Maoists. 'Orthodox Trotskyism' had proved unable in the 1940s and 1950s to come to terms either with the long drawn-out boom of the western economies or, more importantly, with the victories of Stalinist type parties in Eastern Europe, China, North Korea and North Vietnam. Despite the fact that the working class had not been responsible for any of these victories, they accepted analyses that described them as 'workers states' (for a fuller analysis of these points see Duncan Hallas, *Building the Leadership*, **IS 40** (old series)).

It was not a far step from this to seeing themselves in much the same way as the soft Maoists did, as part of world wide movement towards socialism embracing all sorts of forces that had nothing to do with the working class. If AO and MC praised 'comrade Mao', the Fourth International could write lovingly of 'comrade Fidel', for the Fourth International, as for the Maoists, the Vietnamese Communist Party became a 'socialist', a 'workers party'. Indeed, in the early 1960s a section of the Fourth International leadership even developed a theory that had Algeria as a 'workers and peasants government'.

With a 'theory' that separated off the achievement of socialism from the self-emancipation of the working class, it was not surprising that the 'Trotskyists' had a habit of adopting practices that downgraded the importance of the class as well. Prior to 1968 this meant an adaptation towards left reformism, whether, as in Italy through entry into the Communist Party so deep as to become invisible, or in this country through publishing a paper jointly with a number of left Labour MPs.

However, the blossoming of the student movement internationally pulled at least a section of the International away from this particular strategy. Now they joined in the student movement enthusiastically, adopting its slogans, carrying with it portraits of Che Guevara, rejoicing in the general rhetoric – and forgetting to a very large extent about the working class. In this country, for example, they adopted the idea that revolutionaries should create 'red bases' in the universities.

What was common to both the soft Maoists and the would be 'orthodox Trotskyists' was substitutionism: the idea that some other force could substitute itself for the working class in the creation of socialism. While the movement was on the up in Italy or France or Spain (or Britain, for that matter) this was not necessarily that apparent. Workers were in motion, and you had to be a fool not to relate to them (although, as always, there were a fair number of tools). But when, from the mid 1970s onwards the movement was checked, the substitutionism could easily lead revolutionaries to look to false gods – to the trade union bureaucracy, to liberal democracy, to armed lunacy, or even to changes in their own life styles.

## **Moving to the right: (1) the soft maoists**

There was, as we have seen, a change in the mood of workers as the economic crisis grew deeper and reformist leaders started giving open or covert support for government measures. The shift in the centre of political discussion to the right affected the wide layers of workers who were not particularly active in the workers' movement and who had only partially ever broken from the 'ruling ideas' inculcated in them at school and pumped out by the media.

Their 'common sense' attitudes shifted to the right. This in turn exercised a powerful pressure on those militants who previously had been prepared to go along with much of what the revolutionary left said. The mood in the factories was such that faced with a wage claim it became 'more practical' to talk in terms of productivity payments than in terms of across-the-board rises; when faced with threatened redundancies it was 'more practical' to go into 'viability discussions' with management rather than to raise the demand 'occupy, nationalise'; faced with a national unemployment level of a million plus and a national inflation rate anywhere between 10 and 25 per cent, it seemed more 'reasonable' to argue about trading off wage controls for 'alternative economic policies' or 'social investment plans' rather than to call for the overthrow of the system.

In the earlier period, many militants with vaguely reformist ideas has been prepared to go much further than the reformist leaders in the struggle for economic demands that the leaders claimed, half heartedly, to support. Now the same militants themselves often voiced the reformist arguments in the factories.

The members of the revolutionary organisations suddenly found themselves isolated. For reasons they could not quite fathom they were no longer going from success to success. Their papers sales were stagnating or falling; there was little response to their calls for solidarity with particular groups of workers who were fighting; some worker members were dropping out of their organisations.

The easiest response for the revolutionary organisations in this situation was to swim with the rightward moving tide themselves. In case after case, the organisations – especially the organisations that had been previously marred by a ‘leftist’ dismissal of the structures of the reformist Labour movement – shifted their own policies to the right. In some cases the shift was so radical as to mean the abandonment of a revolutionary perspective for a reformist or semi-reformist one.

The move to the right was already apparent in Italy in 1974. The CP had gained control over the factory councils in the years previously, and the student movement had gone into a (temporary) decline: the revolutionary left was losing its basis of support. Mass movements had continued through these years over a variety of issues: inflation, unemployment, housing, democratisation of the police, prisons and the army. Frequently they mobilised tens of thousands of people, prepared to engage in the most militant tactics, initiated by the revolutionary left. Yet there was no significant accretion of strength to the revolutionaries: the workers they mobilised continued to support the Communist Party politically. (This was shown very clearly in the 1975 and 1976 elections when the revolutionary left got only 1.5 per cent of the vote, despite the huge demonstrations they had recently been capable of leading).

The reaction to the right was most marked in the case of the Il Manifesto group. They were led by former leading Communist intellectuals who in 1969 had split from the CP to the left under the impact of the mass movement and of events internationally, and had then merged with the remnants of a previous left split from the Socialist Party (which had particular strength in certain sections of the lower and middle ranks and the trade union bureaucracy) to form a quite sizeable organisation, Il Manifesto-PdUP (it claimed greater numbers than Lotta Continua and AO, but its membership was much less active). But as the CP reasserted its control over the mass movement, the principal leaders of Il Manifesto, Lucio Magri and Rosana Rosanda, began to rethink the strategy of building a separate party. Lucio Magri formulated a perspective in which the role of the left intellectuals of Il Manifesto was to be a 'motor to 25 million Communist legs' – i.e. to exert pressure on the CP pulling it to the left. The labour movement was to be 'recomposed from within, without tearing the fabric'. The logic of Magri's position would be for Il Manifesto to rejoin the CP – although other leaders have resisted such a move so far, preferring to pressurise the CP from the outside.

Within two years the effect of the new Il Manifesto orientation was to split the PdUP, with the bulk of the trade unionists breaking away to the left.

The leaders of Avanguardia Operaia had seen the organisation they were building as much more solidly rooted in revolutionary politics and in Leninism than Il Manifesto and the PdUP: they had traditionally poured scorn on Il Manifesto-PdUP as 'centrist'. Yet now they too were pulled to the right. At their 1974 congress they claimed that revolutionaries had to stop being 'minoritorial', and had to try to fill the gap created as the CP moved to the right. This meant recognising that the reformist line of the CP had two

contradictions: it was incapable of winning the reforms it wanted and it was incapable of involving the masses in the struggle for those reforms. Therefore, what was necessary was 'the revolutionary fight for reforms', where the left could gather round it the best militants involved in the struggle. The revolutionaries had to take ground the CP had prepared, but was now abandoning. And they had to do this both at the level of economic struggles and the struggle for 'democratic demands'.

As abstractly formulated, there seemed nothing wrong with the argument. Revolutionary Marxists have always recognised that certain reforms could only be achieved by the method of revolutionary struggle. But in practice, it soon became clear that some at least of the leaders of AO conceived of the 'revolutionary struggle for reforms' as hardly different from the reformist struggle for reforms.

For the 1976 general elections they produced a joint programme with Il Manifesto-PdUP. The central point made in the programme was not the need for workers to maintain their class independence in the struggle for socialism, but to bring to power a 'left' government made up, apparently, of the two reformist parties and the revolutionaries. It actually went so far as to argue that such a government would be 'an active instrument in the general process of the transformation of society'. 'Constant mass pressure on the government' could 'make it refuse any role ... in stabilising the capitalist system'. Typically, the pressure on the government would be for things such as 'import controls', 'renegotiation of the common market agricultural system', 'direction of investment' and 'a new international division of labour'.

It can be argued that with such a programme, there was very little reason for workers to vote for the AO-Il Manifesto-PdUP list rather than the reformists themselves.



What was certainly the case was that by fighting on such a programme, the revolutionaries did not even gain, in compensation for their small number of votes, the chance of making large scale, consistent, revolutionary propaganda.

Unfortunately, even the small vote in the elections did not make the leaders of AO think again. The secretary of the party, Campi, rapidly drew conclusions that were no different from those of Il Manifesto. The revolutionary left was suffering because it was not sufficiently committed to the 'revolutionary' fight for reforms. It had not broken with a 'sterile intransigence' which cut it off from the wider movement.

Eventually he was resisted by a majority of the AO leaders and left to join with Il Manifesto. But not before the organisation had been paralysed for months, with a very large number of its members dropping out (according to one estimate, the number of its supporters in Milan fell from about 3,000 to about 1,000). And the remaining leaders of AO could hardly be said to have been clear themselves. They continued to attempt to put forward a half-reformist programme for dealing with the Italian crisis. They merged with the left, PdUP half of the old PdUP-Il Manifesto. But it was 18 months before the new organisation, Democrazia Proletaria, even got an inaugural congress together.

The third Italian organisation, Lotta Continua, has been more successful than the others in resisting the pull to the right – perhaps because the ultra-left street fighting tradition is most deeply engrained in its cadre. Yet even it veered to the right in 1975–6. In the 1975 elections it refused either to run its own candidates or to tell people to vote for the AO-PdUP-Il Manifesto list. Instead, it told people to vote CP, in order to expose them, under the slogan 'CP to the government'. It veered again before the 1976 elections,

putting its own candidates up on the same list as AO-PdUP-II Manifesto, but with a programme of its own.

It shared the general euphoria in the run-up to the elections – and the same deep, hung over pessimism on the morrow. Indeed, the election results led its general secretary Sofri to produce a political perspective which saw the revolutionary wave on the retreat everywhere, leaving revolutionaries with the only option of very slow, unrewarding work. For Italy, that meant a campaign centred around the single demand of the 35 hour week.

The turn by the Lotta Continua leadership seems to have been greeted with incredulity by much of the membership. ‘For the first time people were left without any sense of direction’, remarked one female comrade summing up much of the mood of the members at an assembly of the organisation in July 1976 (quoted in **Praxis**, August-Sept ’76, p.8). The resulting disorientation was one of the factors that tore the organisation apart at its Congress three months later.

The veering to the right has not been something confined to Italy. The Swedish organisation Forbundet Kommunist has provided an account of its own lurch in that direction (although it characterises it as a discovery of ‘leninism’):

The strategic debate in Forbundet Kommunist may be divided into three periods:

The first period is characterised by a dogmatic Leninist outlook, lacking a strategic perspective ... The slogans then were to transform the spontaneous struggle to a revolutionary struggle to school a revolutionary cadre ...

The second period is strategically characterised by the concentration of independent struggle for a new workers movement outside the traditional workers’ organisations. The idea was that outside the traditional trade unions, new democratically controlled tools for working class struggle

would develop. Round this a new workers movement would be formed, which would school and strengthen its position through struggle for advanced economic demands ...

‘The third strategic period’ involves ‘a re-establishment of Leninism, but now in a more developed form, and of the political struggle which was lost during the spontaneous frenzy of the second period ... The third period politics points out the importance of structural reforms and alliances with reformists as elements in the revolutionary process in a land like Sweden ... The necessary resistance against the attacks of the bourgeoisie much be linked with an offensive struggle concerned with the direction and the type of production’. (The) ‘strategic’ (way forward, is to start with putting demands for) ‘alternative production’ (demands which it is only) ‘possible to carry out on an extremely small scale’. (This will prepare the ground for building a) ‘new political block of revolutionaries, reformists and environmentalist-political forces’ (based on) ‘a new development plan for Sweden’ (which) ‘through anti-capitalist intervention tries to break the dependence on the capitalist world market’. (To build in this direction means an end to raising) ‘unrealistic demands’.

In a phrase which could come straight out of some Eurocommunist tract, it is stressed, ‘we are breaking away from the former high bidding politics of the left and even starting to fight them.’ (All quotes from **FK International Bulletin**, No. 2, 1978)

The conclusions FK draw from this analysis are discussed elsewhere in this journal (see the [article](#) by Phil Spencer).

FK's position, ending up proposing measures little different from that of Tony Benn and left social democracy in Britain is important because it carries to its logical conclusion a trend which is apparent in other countries. The FK documents arguing this line themselves refer to an 'international discussion' moving in the same direction from 'the Italian organisation Avanguardia Operaia' and from 'Bent Moos of the Danish organisation Kommunistisk Forbund'. (**ibid.**)

### **Moving to the right: (2) the would-be Trotskyists**

The move of the Swedish FK towards reformism follows from an attempt to bridge the gap that the economic crisis has opened up between the general analysis revolutionaries are able to make of capitalism and our inability to offer an immediate alternative to workers, apart from a list of defensive slogans. The failure is not, however, something that we can overcome of our own volition – since the revolutionary alternative involves precisely the self-activity of workers, not revolutionaries substituting themselves for workers. It is the objective downturn in the level of struggle that robs our slogans of their 'credibility', not the way we voice them (although this can, of course, usually be improved).

In the absence of working class struggle, the attempt by revolutionaries to present 'practical' alternatives means revolutionaries behaving like reformists. In the case of FK, the specific form this has taken has been to give the impression that a government operating within capitalism will mean a mitigation of the effects of the crisis on workers and lead, more or less automatically, to the weakening of the system. Since this government is to be made up of reformists, this has meant the systematic creation of illusions in reformism.

A similar tendency to create these illusions has been apparent in much of the Trotskyist' trend within the European revolutionary movement. As we have seen, in the late sixties and early 1970s, a good part of allegedly 'Trotskyist' politics consisted in undigested chunks of third worldism, student vanguardism and 'movementism'. In practice, this meant a certain proneness to the same street fighting ultra-leftism as the soft Maoists (indeed, some of the 'Trotskyists' were much worse than the saner soft-Maoist groups).

But there was always another angle to 'Orthodox Trotskyism'. This resisted the ultra-leftism and on occasion the 'studentism', basing itself on the 'Trotskyist tradition'.

This was apparent with one wing of the Fourth International and with the Lambertists at the time of the Portuguese revolution in 1974-5. The Lambertists identified openly with the reformist opponents of a radicalisation of the revolution. They lauded the leader of Portuguese social democracy, Mario Soares, as the man who was stopping Portugal moving to East European type totalitarianism (that was exactly the tenor of a series of letters to the British Left Labour paper **Tribune** by one of the handful of British Lambertists, Mark Jenkins).

They justified this by claiming that the mobilisations of the farmers in the North of Portugal and of the middle class nationally against the leftward shift of the revolution were the main features of a movement of the masses, focussed through the Socialist Party, around the question of democratic freedoms.

The offensive against the left which led to the burning of the offices of revolutionary organisations, of the Communist Party and of trade unions was organised by underground committees with a membership stretching from the right wing of the Socialist Party through to the collaborators of Spinola (see the various revelations that appeared in the bourgeois weekly **Expresso** in 1976). To the Lambertists it 'had as its main component not organised reaction, but on the contrary was an expression of the extremely deep frustration felt against the Stalinists for their outright support of the bourgeois order, whose main guardian is the Armed Forces Movement'. (**Marxist Bulletin**, Winter 1976, p. 8)

This was justified 'theoretically' by making a distinction between the Socialist Party, which was seen as 'a workers party which remains within the framework of bourgeois society and its slate', and the 'fundamentally different' Communist Party, 'which has no precise policy or programme but that of defending on every occasion the interests of the Kremlin bureaucracy'. Because of this it is not the Socialist Party which in Portugal is waging a bitter struggle against the masses for the benefit of the restoration of the bourgeoisie ...' (The French Lambertists paper, **La Verité**, Sept. '75, quoted in **ibid.**)

The position of the American SWP was, in practice, little different. They, and their minute satellite organisation on the ground in Portugal, regarded the great danger at that time as being the alleged threat of 'Bonapartism' from the

weak group of left wing officers (the MFA) who managed to dominate Portuguese politics for a little over a year by manoeuvring between the classes and making concession after concession to the workers. So they set their faces against the radical measures being taken by the working class in Lisbon and the South of the country in the name of 'defending democratic rights' against the 'Bonapartists' and the 'Stalinists'! Typically, they raised the slogan 'Up with the constituent assembly' (although it contained a majority of counter-revolutionaries and right wing social democrats) and opposed the takeover by its printers of the paper **Republica** as 'an attack on freedom of the press'. It is important to stress, that the support for the constituent assembly and the owners of **Republica** was based on principle, and was not merely advice to workers not to do things that were correct too quickly.

The perverse counter-revolutionary politics of the Lambertists and the nearly as dubious arguments of the American SWP would not perhaps matter, were it not that there are multiple signs that a significant chunk of the leadership of the French LCR (and possibly the Spanish LCR) has been drawn towards their political positions in the last couple of years.

The French LCR displayed signs of a significant shift to the right by the mid-1970s. The narrowness of the victory of Giscard over the Socialist Party candidate, Mitterrand, marked a crucial turning point in French politics. From now on, the formation of a government by the left union (the SP, CP left radical front) became a distinct possibility. Among French workers this was a much more appealing prospect than the formation of a Labour government might be in Britain – the left had not run the government in France for nearly 30 years.

The revolutionary left had no choice but to take account of this, and to say in effect to workers, 'OK, you believe a Left Union government will solve your problems. We don't. But put the Left Union in government and we will see who is correct.'

But the LCR went much further than this. It developed a fantastically mechanical view of what a 'Left Union' government would mean, transcribing into the 1970s what happened in 1936 when the Popular Front government was elected. Within days a huge wave of factory occupations had followed. Now that scenario was just possible in the 1970s – but more likely was a British type scenario, with a Left Union government exploiting the illusions of workers to cool down the struggle and to get away with measures a right wing government never could.

In any case, faced with a reformist government, revolutionaries have the difficult task of carrying through a double strategy: on the one hand to maintain their own complete independence from the government and urging the class to do the same; on the other to fight for demands of a limited character (some of which may even have figured in the left's election programme) alongside workers who have illusions in that government.

This double-edged approach is always difficult to carry out. There will always be pressure on revolutionaries in the workplace to give in to the pressure of the reformist influenced workers around them and to drop their specific criticisms of reformism in the run up to a major election. The task of the party leadership is to aid the members in resisting such pressures.

It cannot be said that the LCR provided such aid. Instead it gave the impression that the mere election of a Left Unity government would open up the ground for revolutionary



advance and that revolutionaries should tone down their criticisms of the Left Union.

At one point Alain Krivine, one of the LCR leaders, went so far as to argue that the reformist leaders were frightened to form a government because it would threaten the system. This was after the left had done quite well in the 1976 local elections. He wrote, 'In such a situation, the workers are right to say to the CP and the SP we've given you a majority, use it. It's possible to throw out this minority regime by basing yourselves on our struggles. CP, SP, take your responsibilities'. (**Rouge**, 17.3.76)

A few months later, he went on to suggest that if a Left Union government were elected, revolutionaries would have to keep quiet about their criticisms of it when it came to mass work. 'For a longer or shorter period ... there would be a period of enthusiasm, of real mobilisation of the working class with enormous illusions ... The essential axis of revolutionaries will not immediately be the battle to overthrow the left government. That wouldn't be understood by workers who hadn't gone through the reformist experience ...' (quoted in **Revolution**, 2.7.76)

Perhaps more dangerous than the possibility of the members dropping their criticisms of the Left Union after a successful election for the left, was the resultant stress on elections and electoral manoeuvring as the way forward for the class. The impression was created that there was nothing militants could do until the Left Union was in power.

But then, shortly before the elections were due to take place in the Spring of 1978, the Left Union fell apart. For its own opportunist reasons (because the Union was strengthening the SP until it had more support than the CP) the leadership of the French CP suddenly took a 'left' turn and demanded a harder programme from its Socialist allies. The SP rejected this, and the two parties entered the first

round of the election at odds with each other. A central part of the argument of the SP leadership was that the CP had exposed themselves as ‘splitters’.

The revolutionary left could not, of course, keep quiet at such a juncture. There was a very simple argument for them to put across: both the CP and the SP leaders had been telling workers for years not to ‘rock the boat’ before elections by undue militancy – and now the people who had said this were ‘rocking the boat’ themselves. This proved how wrong the ‘unity at any price’ argument had been all along.

This was not, however, the argument of the LCR. Instead, they proclaimed the day after the election defeat in words that must have seemed like SP propaganda to many CP members, ‘The price of disunity’. In the period since, their main slogan has been for the ‘Front Unique Ouvrière’ – not meaning by this a united front of revolutionaries and reformists around particular, partial demands that the reformist leaders claim to support, but abstract unity at the top between the CP and the SP. Again, since it was the CP who disrupted the previous unity, the slogan excuses the SP leadership who want just enough ‘unity’ to hoist themselves into electoral office.

In practice, the LCR slogan tends to support the reformist SP leadership in its quarrels with the reformist CP leadership, even though the organised core of the French working class still see the CP and its union, the CGT, as ‘more militant’ than the SP. The line of support for the SP has long been the position of the Lambertists. It is therefore not surprising that within the LCR a sizeable chunk of the leadership have come to the logical conclusion that they should move towards unity of their organisation and that of the OCI.

The turn to the right within the European section of the USFI has not been confined to France. In Britain, the IMG which had predicted dual power in 1974 was advising its members to enter the Labour party in 1975. Since then, the emphasis has shifted to open work through electioneering and to work within the Broad Lefts in trade unions. The rightward drift is shown by the slogan raised by a spokesman of the IMG in a special issue of their paper concerned with the reaction of the left to the rejection of the government's five per cent wage norm by key groups of workers: 'Recall the Labour Party conference', wrote Brian Grogan.

One indication of the overall rightward shift in the European sections of the USFI is the way in which their long row with the American section, the American SWP, has been liquidated. Where there used to be rival USFI sections in particular countries they have been merged – and on terms which give the 'pro-American SWP' elements more than a fair share of influence. A second indication is the way that in theory some of the old positions defended by the American SWP have been implicitly accepted by the other leaders of the international'. During the revolutionary period in Portugal, in 1974–5, the 'European USFI' group in Portugal, the LCI, raised demands not all that different from the rest of the extreme left. It supported the **Republica** workers, and it initiated the negotiations that led to the setting up of the joint revolutionary-centrist-CP front, the FUR (see issues of **Imprecor** for the Summer of 1975).

Today, however, the leaders of the USFI condemn such decisions. They see the action of the **Republica** workers in challenging the right socialist chief shareholder of that paper, Paul Rego, as the action that led to the defeat of the revolution. 'The Portuguese revolution', Ernest Mandel has written, 'was blown off course' over the question of 'freedom

of the press'. (**NLR 100**, p. 110) Such has been the shift to the right in the revolutionary, 'European', sections of the Fourth International that they are now parroting phrases that only used to come from the decidedly non-revolutionary American section – which goes part of the way to explain why some of them hanker for unity with the Lambertists, for whom the American SWP has long felt a certain affection.

As with the soft Maoists, a formerly ultra-left stance has wilted when faced with the stark reality of a temporary downturn in the level of struggle. Again, as with soft Maoists, the characteristic expression of this has been a softening of the attitude towards reformist organisations, even to the extent of pretending that in the guise of 'left governments' (for the soft Maoists) or 'workers governments' (for the alleged Trotskyists) they can 'open up the way' for revolutionary transformation. Finally, in the case of some of the soft Maoists and virtually all of the 'Trotskyists' 'intermediate' or 'transitional demands' are raised in the abstract, without seeing how they relate in the here and now to the only agency that can carry through a revolutionary transformation of society – the working class. Whether in the name of 'Marxist-Leninist tactics' or in the name of 'the transitional programme of the Fourth International' the central element in Marxism is forgotten for the sake of short term manoeuvring.

### **Moving to the margins**

A downturn in the level of generalised class struggle does not mean that all struggles die away. A whole range of particular struggles can flare up and become very bitter indeed while the big battalions of the

working class remain quiescent. So in Britain, in the doldrum years of 1975–6 we saw a very militant reaction against racist attacks within the Asian community, a very important strike for equal pay by the Trico workers, we saw sections of workers who had never taken action before get involved in one day strikes and demonstrations against the public sector cuts, and we saw the biggest wave of student occupations for several years. More recently during the lull after the defeat of the firemen's strike in 1978, we saw the Anti Nazi League draw into demonstrations the biggest numbers seen in Britain since the demonstrations against the Conservatives' Industrial Relations Bill in the early seventies.

In Italy there was a similar phenomenon in 1977 – the year after the Communist Party first threw its weight behind the Andreotti Christian Democrat government and successfully de-escalated the industrial struggle. A huge wave of student struggles blew up in Bologna and Rome, and drew into bigger conflicts with the police and the CP tens of thousands of students and unemployed ex-students throughout the country.

In Spain during the period in which the pact of Moncloa was holding down the industrial struggle, there seems to have been a flourishing of all sorts of movements for national and regional autonomy, outside the traditional centres of national opposition to the Spanish state in Euskadi (the Basque country) and Catalonia. It was during this period, for instance, that a vicious police attack on an autonomist demonstration in Malaga led to a general strike throughout Southern Spain.

Revolutionaries cannot ignore such movements. Their conflicts with the existing state power can bring whole new layers of people to see the need for socialist revolution. If revolutionaries know how to intervene in them, they can refurbish their ranks and maintain the feeling of struggle within their own organisations at a time when the low level of the class struggle encourages some comrades to drop out and others to adopt timid, conservative attitudes.

However, there is always a danger when an organisation works in relationship to such protest movements (just as there is always a danger of drowning when you go swimming – although that is not of course a reason for not taking part in the activity). It is that the members come to think that revolutionary political activity consists in demonstrations against the police, or simply taking part in these movements, and not in fighting to link them with the much more difficult struggle for workers' power.

A great deal of tactical flexibility is needed, since such movements tend to flare up very quickly, can become very intense and very militant for a brief moment – and then die away just as quickly. A revolutionary organisation has to be prepared to work in them unreservedly, to argue for a policy of militant confrontation with the powers that be against those who see the movement as achieving its goals in reformist terms – but at the same time to recognise that the movement may well be fairly short lived and that only those of its members who come to see the need for class politics will survive.

If a revolutionary organisation cannot combine such tactical flexibility with a principled defence of class politics, then far from these movements contributing to the building of the revolutionary forces in society, they can dissipate and weaken the revolutionaries themselves.

The Italian case shows very clearly what such disorientation means. All three major revolutionary organisations were moving to the right in 1976. This led them to distance themselves from their own members who got caught up in the 'movements' that began to build up outside the mainstream of the working class. They lost many of their best and most active rank and file members; and within the 'movements' a whole ideology developed of 'autonomism' – they had to keep out politics, because politics meant the right wing behaviour of the leaders of the revolutionary organisations.

The destructive dialectic at work showed itself first in Lotta Continua. LC was the most left wing of the revolutionary organisations in 1976, and the one that turned its back least on the 'movements'. But it had also tried to cast itself in a Marxist-Leninist (i.e. Maoist) mould. In December 1975 this still meant the party as the repository of Mao's thought laying down the line to the masses. The women's movement organised a large demonstration against the reactionary abortion laws. It was on a women only basis – and so Lotta Continua's all male servizio d'ordine (stewards) broke into the demonstration on the grounds that abortion was an issue for both men and women. The result was a departure of large numbers of women from Lotta Continua in disgust.

The women who remained inside the organisation began to feel that there was some connection between the leadership style of the organisation and what had happened. But few saw the connection in the whole tradition of Stalinist politics which Maoism had passed on to the revolutionary left. Most saw at fault the whole notion of a revolutionary organisation trying to work out a consistent line that linked particular movements into the overall struggle for workers' power. At the 1977 Lotta Continua

Congress, the organisation's leadership came to adopt very much the same standpoint. They abandoned the attempt to try to create an organisation that would argue its politics within the different movements, and instead began to define politics as the sum-total of all the different movements. In the months that followed Lotta Continua dissolved itself as an organisation in an effort to become the movement.

This self-dissolution did not – and could not – solve the problems facing the revolutionary left. The 'movements' that flourished so much in 1977 died down as rapidly as they had grown – and in the process underwent intense political polarisation.

The 'autonomy' of the student/unemployed ex-student movement did not stop the development within it of bitter divisions between the supporters of immediate all-out armed action against the state, and those who had a saner view. (For an account of this period which is excellent despite – or perhaps because of – the authors' sympathy with the 'autonomy' argument, see **Italy 1977–8**.) The 'autonomy' of the women's movement did not alter the fact that despite its power in 1976–7, it was a coming together of women from different social classes, motivated above all by the fight for the right to abortion, which could not hang together for long once that battle was sold out by the CP and an extremely reactionary 'liberal' abortion law was on the statute book.

Lotta Continua's burying of itself in the 'movements' in 1977 had the same effect as its disdain for a movement it could not dominate with its Mao derived theories in 1975. There was no consistent force at work within the movements, drawing the best elements in them to a revolutionary socialist world view and to the organisational consequences of that (i.e. the need to build a party rooted in the workplaces). Instead, Lotta Continua's own theories



came to see virtually any 'autonomous' protest movement as 'the proletariat', however indifferent to it the vast mass of CP-voting Italian workers actually were. 'If the historians of the future have time to spare, they will be able to collect hundreds of articles from *Lotta Continua* in which any students disposed to go into the street with slogans are referred to as proletarians.' (P. Petti in **Praxis**, Feb. 1979, p. 25)

Yet, at least *Lotta Continua* did relate to the movements of 1977. The other organisations of the revolutionary left hardly seem to have done so at all. Their own concern in 1976 to distance themselves from 'extremism' hardly left them any ability to offer leadership to the new groups thrown into struggle a year later. They remained paralysed, torn by internal crises, while their rank and file militants either dropped out of action, or tamely lagged behind demonstrations of the 'autonomisti'.

Yet it cannot be said that the movement of 1977 had no effect on *Democrazia Proletaria* (the new organisation built by the merger of the majority of AO and the PdUP). The confidence of its leadership was shaken, so much so that when the first conference of the new organisation took place in 1978 it refused to set out any precise organisational structures.

This was deliberate. It was, claimed a congress document, meant to discourage 'any individualistic posing, any leaderism' (quoted in **Praxis**, May 1978, p. 5). There were no formal votes on strategy or tactics; this was 'a moment in the process of re-aggregation' of the revolutionary left rather than a formal conference. But such formulations could not hide the fact that a general discussion involving 2,000 comrades could not begin to resolve the problems facing the Italian revolutionary left. 'When questioned about this, the organisers admitted that the left in general and DP in

particular were in no condition to take and abide by decisions passed by a majority and that until some consensus was achieved within the organisation over the very basis of their politics, a formal conference would not have been very useful.’ (Tim Potter, in **SWP International Discussion Bulletin**, no. 7/8, p. 28) The congress did repudiate the old ‘left government’ line. However, other analyses of the congress showed that this confusion had been replaced by other confusions, imported into DP from the ‘autonomous’ movements it had failed to relate to in 1977. It set its task as not being to prioritise work inside the working class, but to ‘accumulate forces practising a broad democratic opposition, based on the radicality of the workers and the new movements and thus capable of unifying the anti-capitalist bloc’ (quoted in **Praxis**, **op. cit.**).

Again, as with Lotta Continua, the old notions of the party which had contained large doses of Maoist-Stalinism were being abandoned. But what had replaced it was not a genuinely Marxist notion of the party, in which militants get together in a disciplined way to discuss what they are doing and to elect a leadership but a near-rejection of any notion of a structured organisation at all.

This approach abandons any attempt either to draw the different movements together into a common struggle, or to relate them to the only force that can win their particular demands – the passive, yet potentially revolutionary industrial working class. For, the movements are movements on the margins of society: this even applies to the women’s movement (though women are the majority of the population) – it is a movement that only involves a very thin layer of working class women and is viewed with bemusement (sometimes sympathetic, sometimes hostile) by the vast mass of those it claims to represent. The notion

of 'autonomy', not simply of respecting the right of those involved in the movements to make their own decisions (as if there were any choice about that), but of refusing in principle to attempt to intervene in the debates within the movements to influence the decisions taken, precludes any attempt to help the movements break out from the 'margins'.

The point can be reached where the notions of separate 'autonomous' sectors infects the revolutionary organisation itself. It drops any attempt to build a politically homogeneous organisation through debate and democratic decision making, and becomes simply a federation of different interest groups, a 'bloc' of 'youth' and the 'old', the 'trade unionists' and 'the women', 'the northerners' and 'the southerners' all taking their separate decisions: a bit like a more left wing version of the Eurocommunist British CP in which any notion of party discipline has disappeared, allowing, for instance, middle rank trade union bureaucrats to continue to behave as if the working class was exclusively male, while the radicalised women members of the same party experiment with alternative life styles.

Once you have such a situation, the revolutionary press ceases to be a real unifier of the different struggles against the system: instead it becomes a series of different sections: this one for the women, this one for the youth, this one for the 40 year old virtually full time member of the factory council, this one for the different members of the 'movement' to debate ad nauseam with one another – the only thing missing is any overall political analysis capable of reaching out beyond the 'movement' and explaining to working class activists still under reformist influence why they should struggle alongside the revolutionary left.

The picture I have just painted is an exaggerated one. But it does point to a danger facing the revolutionary

organisations. In an over zealous attempt to ingratiate itself with the 'movements' (an over-reaction due to its failure to take any real account of them at an earlier stage) the organisation ceases to have anything to say which will attract their supporters away from their 'autonomous' depoliticised beliefs, and at the same time ceases also to be a force attempting to articulate the correct points in their stance to an audience inside the industrial working class.

The first time as tragedy, the second as farce: that just about sums up the way in which the Italian experience of the flight to the margins has been repeated, on a smaller scale, in other countries. In Italy there was, at least, a huge movement by the '*marginali*' in 1977; there was something tangible for those recoiling at the Maoist notion of the party and leadership to throw themselves into.

In France, however, the situation was different. The Bordeaux organisation of Lutte Ouvrière which split away a few years back drifted off in something like the same direction; and much of the opposition to the pro-Lambertist trend inside the LCR is motivated by a reaction against the notion of a democratic centralist party. Yet this has been 'autonomism' without mass 'autonomous' struggles: a sure recipe for revolutionaries trying to resolve their own 'crisis of militancy' by what is little more than life style politics (sometimes dressed up as 'bridging the gap between the personal and the political').

In effect, this is a recipe for the disintegration of the revolutionary left. It means turning away from the struggle to win workers, and instead pursuing purity within existing society. Paradoxically, the end point for those who started off counterposing the 'revolutionary self-activity' of the 'autonomous' movement to the 'rigidity' of the revolutionary organisation is reformism: for the 'self-activity' is the activity of a minority trapped within the structures of

capitalist society who rejoice in the ghetto in which they find themselves; without the influence of revolutionaries prepared to criticise their 'self-activity' and to point the way out of the ghetto, they will end up trying to negotiate the best terms available with the powers that be.

## Sectarianism

'The development of the system of socialist sects and of the real workers movement always stand in inverse ratio to one another'. What Marx wrote to Bolte in 1871 still rings true today. Inevitably, one by-product of the down turn in the level of generalised working class struggle after the mid-1970s was a certain turn towards sectarianism. By this is meant not an insistence on revolutionary organisations arguing out their politics: this is always necessary and those who deplore it end up by merely excusing sloppy theory and practice. Real sectarianism consists in 'instead of looking among the genuine elements of the class movement for the real basis for agitation', attempting 'to prescribe their course to these elements according to a certain dogmatic recipe ... The sect sees the justification for its existence and its "point of honour" – not in what it has in *common* with the class movement but in the *particular shibboleth* which *distinguishes* it from it.' (Marx to Schweitzer, 13 Oct. 1868 – Marx's emphases)

Dropping into 'life style' or 'movementist' politics is one form of sectarianism: would-be revolutionaries stop trying to relate to the movements of the class, however small, and instead put the emphasis on shielding their own lives or groupings from the 'backwardness' of the class. But the sectarianism can be just as marked with those who stick to old revolutionary organisations. They too try to insulate themselves from the outside world. The sect preserves its identity – without putting its members to the test of any real struggle against the forces pulling the movement to the right.

No doubt, it is this which explains the attraction of the rightist sect the OCI to a good half of those inside the LCR who are still committed to party building. It may explain the way in which the Stalinist sect, the MLS has succeeded in maintaining itself, while the three larger Italian organisations have plunged into crisis. It certainly explains the success of the Trotskyist' Militant group in Britain in maintaining itself, and even growing a little, buried deep inside the Labour Party and as the right wing of the Broad Left in a couple of unions. Finally, it provides an explanation of the relative endurance of the very small sects (the small Trotskyist sects in Britain, the Bordigists in Italy): those who have never tried to storm heaven do not resent being earth-bound.

### **The way out of the crisis**

The European revolutionary left is in crisis. But it is certainly not dead. If it were there would have been no point in writing this article! I have located one element leading to crisis in the objective situation we

have all faced since the mid-1970s. But I have also insisted there is another element – the political stances which most of the European organisations embraced in their period of growth, 1968-74. It was a politics which, whether in its sub-Maoist or sub-Trotskyist form, was unable to cope when the easy ‘truths’ of those years fell apart.

To get out of the crisis (or at least to ensure that the temporary recovery noticeable in some places now is not lost the moment there is another sharp shift in the struggle) requires a theoretical, political and organisational reformation of the revolutionary left.

*Theoretical:* One of the worst failings of the revolutionary left internationally has been a failure to use Marxism to understand the dynamic of the modern world. Certain things have been hallowed to such an extent that they never receive critical evaluation by most of the revolutionary left (that there are ‘progressive’ countries, that the ‘working class’ played a leadership role in the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, even that it is justified to talk of Eastern Europe as ‘socialist’, that the Cultural Revolution was intended by Mao as a real revolution, that there is ‘unequal exchange’ between the ‘third world’ and the advanced countries). ‘Theory’ has been left with the task of either purely academic studies or of simply interrogating oneself (exemplified in the case of Althusser where Theory, with a capital T, is not about the real world at all, but about its own status).

In Britain, this has been summed up over the years in a division of labour, whereas for much of the non-SWP left **New Left Review** has supplied the 'theory'; reformism, soft Guevarism, soft Maoism or soft Mandelism has supplied the 'practice'! In the Latin countries, a range of non-revolutionary thinkers like Poulantzas, Althusser, Rosana Rosanda, Samir Amin have supplied the 'theory', and the revolutionaries have then pragmatically inserted 'practice' into it.

The revolutionary left cannot afford such luxuries today. It desperately needs explanations of the invasion of Cambodia, the war between China and Vietnam, of the ever more apparent denial of elementary rights to workers in Russia; it needs a scientific appraisal of the host of 'progressive' regimes in the 'third world' that sing revolutionary hymns while torturing their own working class; it needs an analysis of the dynamic of the world economy, which goes beyond glib references to the diplomatic manoeuvring of the great powers (witness the current tendency of the soft Maoists to explain everything in terms of German imperialism) and begins to explain the economic forces which hold the rival ruling classes in their grip; finally, it needs an analysis of the working class itself, of its changing composition (the growth of allegedly non-productive white collar and service sectors, the influx of married women into the workforce, the effects of this on the working class family) and above all of the role of the reformist bureaucracy that now penetrates, partially at least, into every factory.

The soft Maoist and 'orthodox' Trotskyist organisations have failed to analyse any of these questions seriously: the journalism of Isaac Deutscher and then of Ernest Mandel is the closest most of them have come to admitting them as problems. Yet today, some answers at least to these sorts of



questions are a precondition for consistent work from the revolutionary cadre.

We in the International Socialists and then the SWP have at least sketched out possible answers to some of the questions, with the theories we developed of state capitalism, the permanent arms economy, deflected revolution and 'the shifting locus of reformism' (for outline accounts of these see Tony Cliff, **State Capitalism in Russia**, Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**, Nigel Harris, **The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China**; Mike Kidron, **Western Capitalism Since the War**; the various articles in **International Socialism 1 : 61**). Our answers are open to debate and certainly need updating (see the discussion in **International Socialism 1 : 100** and, of course, in the new series of **IS**). But the answers we have, however inadequate, have provided us with some guidelines through the turmoil of the last few years. They have enabled us to retain a confidence in a political judgement, to grasp some of the aspects of the dynamic of the system on a world scale, and to reach back to the revolutionary traditions without falling into the sectarianism or those who cross themselves before the shrine of Hunan or the tablets of 1938.

There are signs today that others are beginning to take such questioning seriously; certainly without the revival of a current of creative Marxism linked to revolutionary practice, there can be no serious escape from the impasse of the international revolutionary left.

*Political:* Politics is the point of interaction of theory and practice. The absence of serious theory within the revolutionary left (or, what amounts to the same thing, a theory culled from Maoism, Populism, Third

Worldism and, on occasions, an extremely mechanical interpretation of certain things written by Trotsky in the 1930s) has been accompanied by a tendency to look for political substitutes for working class action when the class is in retreat – whether the substitute lies in a softness towards the left’ within the trade union bureaucracy, in certain ‘third world’ figures, or in the ‘marginal’ movements. All this is justified in terms of a rejection of ‘economism’.

In a downturn in the class struggle, it is the duty of revolutionary organisations to relate to all sorts of movements that develop outside the workplaces among oppressed and exploited groups. But, it has to do this while never forgetting that the agent of revolutionary change lies elsewhere. ‘Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there must they be smashed.’ And the link with the working class movement has to be an active one, not merely a rhetorical one. The revolutionary organisation has to search out and connect with the smallest spark of working class resistance against the system, even in a period in which its own growth comes mainly from the ‘marginal’ areas. Otherwise it will not be able to relate to the agent of revolutionary change when it begins to stir.

In Italy, for instance, the CP has defined the workers in the big enterprises as ‘its own’ and the unemployed, the semi-employed and the students as ‘marginal’. Sections of the revolutionary left have merely reversed the terms, seeing the large enterprises as havens of ‘reformism’ and ‘economism’, and the *‘marginali’* as ‘the proletariat’.

You cannot, however, talk about relating to workers in the large enterprises without coming to terms with another question all too often evaded: the role of the reformist trade

union bureaucracy in relation to reformist workers. There is a tendency for revolutionaries to see this merely in terms of a bureaucracy with reformist politics facing workers with revolutionary politics. In the ultra-left phase, the revolutionary instincts of the whole proletariat are always seen as about to break through the thin reformist crust; in the period of the drift to the right, a more complex, but still mistaken notion is accepted – that there is a battle of ‘tendencies’ within the trade union movement, with left officials and workers fighting right officials. What is not allowed for is the way in which the hierarchical structure of the trade unions themselves draw officials away from contact with the shop floor, aligning reformist officials with management against reformist workers – and aligning ‘revolutionary’ officials with reformist officials against workers.

It is this which allows the possibility, even in a downturn, of revolutionary workers etc. drawing reformist workers alongside them in struggle against the reformist bureaucracy. It is this which allows in an upturn the creation of rank and file groups in which revolutionary and reformist workers work together – and it is this too which means that at all points revolutionaries have to be wary of those from their ranks who become full time officials and insist that it is the rank and file party members, not just the officials, who determine the party’s trade union policy.

Without some such conception of building ‘rank and file groups’ – however low key and however informal – around each revolutionary in a factory, trade union strategy alternates between attempts by small groups of revolutionaries to counterpose themselves to the unions as the representatives of the workers, and revolutionaries attempting to manoeuvre as part of the trade union apparatus, relying upon the ‘left’ in the trade union machine

rather than on the movements, however limited, of the class itself.

*Organisation:* There is often a tendency of people to counterpose politics and organisation ('it's a political, not an organisational question'); but revolutionary politics finds its embodiment in revolutionary organisation.

The international revolutionary left is still oscillating between two erroneous organisational principles: that of diluted Stalinism (sometimes called 'Marxism-Leninism'; sometimes called 'Trotskyism', but in fact going back to Zinoviev's 'Bolshevisation' of the Comintern) and that of a semi-anarchist 'anything goes' attitude (usually dressed up with talk of the need for 'autonomous' movements or for 'new forms of organisation').

The diluted Stalinist organisation is one in which the leadership (often in the form of a 'super-star' general secretary) hands down 'the line', in which the **Internal Bulletin** is the explanation of the leadership's latest move, and the congresses are rallies, with occasional dissident voices subordinated to the general aim of creating a favourable public image.

The 'anything goes' form of organisation is that marked by no apparent national line, by endless debates which get nowhere, and by a structure which leaves effective control in the hands of whoever happens at a particular point to have got control of the printing press or the central office. The movement' rules, without structures, without elections, without ordered agenda – and with the best placed or the most vociferous getting their way.

In the IS and the SWP we have attempted, over the years, to develop a quite different model to either of these two – a model which we think bears some similarity to the Bolshevik

party before the isolation and degeneration of the Russian revolution. It is a model that recognises that a leadership is needed – the class war is after all a war, and in a war an army has to be led. But it also recognises that the personnel, and the strategies and the tactics of the leadership should not be sacrosanct, but should be open to discussion by the membership, especially after key developments in the struggle and before conferences. Only thus can the leadership be forced to maintain contact with the lived experience of struggle.

The practice of building organisations along these lines is much more difficult than the theory: in the case of the SWP we have had bitter experience of sectarian groupings exploiting the democratic structure and ruining untold branches in order to try to win members for themselves; we have also discovered the hard way that a free exchange of opinions and a free formation of platforms before conferences must be prevented by the self-discipline of all those involved from degenerating into ritualistic jousting between a ‘leadership’ and an ‘opposition’ that is reminiscent of bourgeois parliaments. (For a rather warped account of this see Martin Shaw in **Socialist Register 1978**; for [a reply from the SWP](#) see Duncan Hallas in **Socialist Review**, Feb. 1979.) Nevertheless, we remain convinced that only the building of organisations on these lines can prevent a continual splintering of the revolutionary vanguard between those with great revolutionary zeal but little experience, and those with great experience, but diminished zeal.

Finally, the question of organisation cannot be separated from the question of the paper. A regular revolutionary paper is essential to bind the different components of the party together. And it must not be – as so many papers produced by the revolutionary left internationally have been

(examples, **Rouge**, **Quotidiano di Lavoratori**, **Il Manifesto**, the **Red Mole**) – directed at ‘the movement’ or the radicalised intelligentsia. It has to be a paper for the section of the working class that shows some movement, carrying news of the ‘movement’ certainly, but in a way that relates to worker activists. Only then can it bind the cadres to the class as well as to each other.

### **Revolutionary patience**

Neither the theoretical, political or organisational remedies we have offered would give a massive new lease of life to the revolutionary left by themselves. They are not going to get us out of the vicious circle in which workers say to us ‘What is your alternative’, we reply ‘your class is the alternative’ and they say, ‘But our class doesn’t care’.

The only way out of such situations is to wait for the class itself to move. That is what previous generations of revolutionaries have had to do: it is what Marx had to do after the defeat of the 1848 revolution; it is what Lenin and the Bolsheviks had to do after the defeat of the 1905 revolution; it is what Rosa Luxemburg had to do in the bitter period between the outbreak of World War I and the first stirrings of the German revolutionary movement nearly three years later. That the class will move is not in doubt: whether it likes it or not it is the most powerful social force in a system incapable of moving in any direction without stumbling; in order to preserve the very things given it by the system in the past, the working class will again and again be forced to struggle, even if again and again it allows the

struggle to die down through lack of confidence in itself as the alternative to the system.

Revolutionary patience is the order of the day. It is the only alternative to either allegedly 'transitional' but in reality reformist palliatives that suggest that something other than the self emancipation of the class can deal with the crisis of the system, or to running off in pursuit of ephemeral 'new movements'. But revolutionary patience must not be confused with sectarian passivity. It means seizing every opportunity to intervene in struggle, using those opportunities to test the organisation, to draw to it the best new activists, to build its reputations within the class, and to slowly move towards the necessary party.

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