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The revolutionary press

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> When people want to taunt at revolutionary socialists they often make fun of the effort we put into producing, distributing and selling our newspapers. The stock caricature of us is of wild-eyed, misdressed lunatics clutching wads of papers that nobody wants to buy. It is an image that ex-revolutionaries now making a remunerative career in respectable politics like to encourage. They can compare their present ‘influence’ as they sit on parliamentary committees or administer municipal parks with their wasted past standing outside factories failing to sell one or other weekly paper.

It is hardly surprising that socialists themselves easily become influenced by these views. They can easily come to feel as did H.M. Hyndman, the founder of the first Marxist

organisation in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation. After 28 years of producing its paper **Justice** he could confess he saw it as:

> A purely propaganda sheet, dealing with questions the mass of mankind would not wish to have thrust upon them ... We should have done better to have expended our money and enthusiasm in some other directions. It was one of those fatal mistakes which cannot be rectified and which engender a sort of mania of obstinacy.

It is not common to go as far as Hyndman did in denigrating the enterprise of producing and selling a paper. But it is quite common for individual revolutionaries, and even whole organisations, to feel that here are easier ways to build up influence – whether by effectively forgetting about the paper while winning some position in the workers' movement, by giving away free hand outs, or by trying to find an easy audience through infiltration of the existing media (whether it be the local radio station or the **New Musical Express**).

Yet when you talk of the great revolutionary socialists, you always think of them in connection with papers they produced. Marx and the **Neue Rheinische Zeitung**, Lenin and **Iskra** and **Pravda**, Gramsci and **Ordine Nuovo**, James Connolly and **The Workers Republic**, Trotsky and **Nasha Slovo**, Rosa Luxemburg and **Rote Fahne**.

The connection between the revolutionary leader and the paper is specific to revolutionaries whose concern is to build *mass* struggles. It is not to be found with those whose conception of change is that of a small, determined minority performing heroic deeds on behalf of the majority. So you

don’t talk of Cromwell’s paper, or Robespierre’s or Bakunin’s or Garibaldi’s or Che Guevara’s. Yet even those bourgeois revolutionaries who relied on mass action to achieve their aims had to have papers. In the great French revolution Marat would have been nothing without his paper, **L’Ami du Peuple**, Hébert without the **Père Duchesne**.

This is not a matter of coincidences. The centrality of the paper flows from the very goal of trying to win mass support for revolution.

Any real revolution involves masses of people breaking with the general ideas they have been brought up with and adopting a new way of seeing both the world and their own role within it. Revolutionaries always begin as minorities attempting to propagate the new world view. And that involves, for long periods of time, not only hostility from the old ruling class, but also indifference from many of the members of the oppressed class. There is no way to avoid this period of unpopularity, since in any society the ruling class does dominate ideologically. Its ideas are indeed the ruling ideas.

Revolutionaries cannot begin to win this battle for ideas unless they find some way of connecting with the experiences of the mass of ‘ordinary’ ‘non-political’ people. They have to be able to show that the revolutionary view of the world better fits with at least some of these experiences in a better way than does the dominant ideology.

But revolutionaries are not interested simply in winning people to new ideas. They also have to be concerned with getting people to act on the basis of these, to say not merely what is wrong, but also, above all, *what is to be done*.

Success is only possible for a revolutionary current at any stage in its development if it can find some means of making

the connections between principles, experience and the tasks of the moment.

The revolutionary paper is absolutely indispensable because it is the mechanism for making these connections, to bridging the gap between theory and practice.

As Ernest Jones, the Chartist leader put it when he was attempting to hold together the remnants of that first great workers' movement in the early 1850s:

> The first and essential requirement of a movement is to have an organ to record its proceedings, to communicate through, to appeal through, to exhort through, to defend through and to reach through. It is the fundamental bond of union, the ensign of progress and the means of argument. It is that which enables it to hold up its head amid the whirl of parties and to keep its various elements together.

Lenin made the same point half a century later in his article *Where to begin* and his pamphlet **What is to be done**:

> The newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator. It is also an organiser. It may be compared to the scaffolding erected around a building under construction ... The organisation which forms round this newspaper will be ready for everything, from upholding the banner, the prestige and the continuity of the party in periods of acute revolutionary depression to preparing for the nationwide armed insurrection.

It is amazing the number of times you find people making references to **What is to be done** without mentioning the fact that more than half of it is devoted to pressing the case of the revolutionary paper!

But simply producing a paper is not enough in itself to correctly bridge the gap between principles and practice.

The paper has to make the connection between principles, experience and the tasks of the moment in the right way. And that will change enormously with the ups and downs of the struggle.

As Gramsci pointed out, people's experiences under capitalism are always of two quite different kinds. On the one hand there is their experience of simply living within the system and suffering under it. This by itself rarely leads to them asking revolutionary questions. Rather it tends to make them take the system for granted, to accept the ruling class's definition of what is and what is not possible.

The other experience is the experience, however limited, of struggle against aspects of the system. It is through such struggle that an oppressed class begins to feel it has the collective strength to pose an alternative to the present state of affairs.

Making the connection between its principles and the experience of the mass of people means, for a revolutionary party and its paper, relating to those elements in people's experience that have been established through struggle, separating them off from the rest of experience and using them to lay the basis for a completely different world view.

This is easiest to do when the struggles of the oppressed class are going from strength to strength, with each victory inspiring further victories. In such circumstances there is a powerful spontaneous growth of new ways of seeing the world. The revolutionary paper is able to express its own principles through the words and images which the members of the oppressed class use to express themselves. A process of distillation is still needed to separate them off from the old ideas with which they are still mixed in the actual consciousness of most people. But the process of distillation is not that difficult.

That is why the most successful papers have always been those produced in upturns in the struggle.

If we look at four such papers, we can see what was the appropriate mix of general ideas, of lived experience and of agitation.

Marat and *L'Ami du Peuple*

> **L'Ami du Peuple** was the most influential paper produced during the great French revolution of 1789-93. It was not a workers' paper. Its editor, Jean Paul Marat, was a former court physician who stood for a thorough carrying through of the bourgeois revolution. But he understood that this could not be done unless the bourgeois revolutionaries mobilised the impoverished masses of Paris. He saw the newspaper as an essential tool for achieving this.

Immediately after involvement in street agitation on the day of the taking of the Bastille – 14 July 1789 – he proposed to the popular committee of the area in which he lived the setting up by it of a paper. When the proposal was rejected, he undertook such a project on his own initiative. He wrote eight pages of roughly A5 size each day, and paid to have them printed. With no organisation behind him, he depended on the paper finding its own readership through news hawkers on the streets.

The paper enjoyed enormous success, and was soon the best selling paper in Paris.

This was because of the way Marat succeeded in combining the three elements – general principles, experience and what needed to be done.

His principles were not very original. He laid them out in various pamphlets before and during the early days of the revolution. Basically they were a rehashing of the bourgeois democratic ideals contained in the writings of Rousseau. Had the paper simply reiterated them, it is doubtful whether it would have found any audience at all.

It was the two other elements which laid the basis of its extraordinary success.

The 'What is to be done' component was vital. Day after day, week after week, for four years Marat cut through all the rhetoric of the official leaders of the revolution – first the constitutional liberals, and then the moderate republicans of the *Gironde* – and called for resolute action to extend and defend the revolution.

As the best account of Marat's work in English makes clear: 'The **Ami du Peuple** consisted of eight small pages made up almost exclusively of criticism and remarks on current events written by Marat himself.' These consisted of demands for action, scorn about the latest set of compromises, warnings of danger, insults against those he saw to be enemies of the revolution. Marat himself told people they could recognise his paper from fake editions designed to discredit him because 'their authors are humbugs who preach peace, while I am ceaselessly denouncing while sounding the tocsin'.

It may be the case that 'the unceasing exhortations to watchfulness, the endless denunciations of those in office rend a perusal of the **L'Ami du Peuple** somewhat tedious reading'. But it was precisely this repetition of the message that the revolution was in danger that gave the paper its success.

Typical of Marat's refusal of any compromise with those he regarded as endangering the revolution was his outburst when the orator of the first, constitutional stage of the

revolution, Mirabeau, died. On all sides this was greeted as a great calamity.

Marat's attitude was quite different: 'People, give thanks to the gods', he wrote. 'Your most redoubtable enemy has fallen beneath the scythe of fate … He dies victim of his numerous treasons …'

He was not lulled into any easy optimism even when it seemed that the people had won great victories. After the King's fate was sealed by one of the great *journées* (mass upsurges) of the revolution, Marat's celebration of the event was marked by the deepest tone of caution:

> The glorious day of 10 August may be decisive of the triumph of liberty, if you do but know how to profit from your advantage. A great number of despots have eaten the dust, but they will not be slow to return and assert themselves in a more terrible form than before. Dread the reaction I repeat. Your enemies will not spare you when their chance comes. Therefore no quarter. You are lost if you do not strike down the corrupt members of the municipality, the anti-patriotic judges and the most putrid deputies of the national assembly.

It was this watchfulness which earnt Marat the undying hatred of all those who wanted to stop the revolution halfway. For them he committed two great crimes.

First he insisted the revolution should show no quarter to its enemies. He quite rightly warned that they would not shirk from any level of bloodshed to achieve their aims, and that the revolution had to be prepared to strike them down first:

> I am indignant at our foolish regard for our cruel enemies; fools we are, we fear to cause them a scratch. Let them but be masters for one day, and you will soon see them overrun the provinces, fire and sword in hand, striking down all those who offer any resistance, massacring the friends of the country,

slaughtering women and children, and reducing our cities to ashes.

Second, he was prepared to take up certain of the demands of the Parisian masses so as to spur them into action. This was especially so when it came to the acute shortage of the basic food, bread.

In every country where the rights of the people is not an empty phrase, ostentatiously recorded on paper, the sacking of a few shops, at the doors of which the speculators were hanged, would soon put a stop to those corrupt practices which are driving five million men to despair and causing thousands to perish of want.

This expression of popular discontent linked in to the third thing his paper did – its echoing of people's experience. Soon after the paper started, Marat introduced the innovation of printing letters in which individuals told of the oppression they had suffered under the existing system. Three or four thousand such letters were printed in the course of the paper's existence. Marat explained that shortage of space forced him to edit them somewhat: 'It need surprise no-one to find the same style in most of the letters that I publish: the limited space of my journal obliges me to edit them, so as to retain no more than their substances.'

The success which the combination principles-agitation-experience obtained for Marat's paper is shown by the attempts made by the authorities to suppress it. Both the constitutional liberals and the moderate republicans tried to smash up his printing press, to arrest him personally and to drive the paper out of business. He spent two years on the

run, moving from flat to flat, reputedly working from cellars and hiding in quarries. Yet in this period the paper achieved unprecedented popularity.

When Marat was finally able to emerge from illegality, with the smashing of the constitutional party, his popularity was plain for all to see. He came fifth on the list of deputies elected from Paris to the new National Convention, and through the influence he exercised over the revolutionary municipal authority of Paris was one of the most powerful political forces. Although he had had no previous personal contact with the leader of the extreme republicans of the Jacobin clubs, after the defeat of the moderate republicans of the *Gironde*, he was part of a triumvirate which virtually ran the country, alongside Robespierre and Danton.

For someone without an organisation, a lone revolutionary who had set out to fulfil what he saw as a necessary task single-handed this was indeed a remarkable achievement. The counter-revolution gave recognition to it when finally it eliminated his influence by the only way it knew – the assassin's knife struck into his chest while he worked on proofs of his paper from his bath.

The *Northern Star*

The earliest struggles of the British working class movement were inseparably connected with the production and distribution of papers and journals. The agitation which culminated in Peterloo in 1819 and then the agitation for reform in 1830 was very much spurred on by papers like Cobbett's **Political Register** and Wooler's **Black Dwarf**.

Fear of the subversive effects of the radical press upon the lower classes led to a deliberate policy by governments of trying to reduce the circulation of papers to a minimum by a prohibitive newspaper tax. But the radical press found ways of evading this (like publishing journals which claimed not to be newspapers because they contained only comment and no news), and then, after the middle classes had achieved a reform in 1832 which left the working class disenfranchised, by deliberately flouting the law.

The main protagonist in this campaign was the eight page weekly, the **Poor Man's Guardian** published by Henry Hetherington and edited for much of its existence by Brian Bronterre O'Brien. It was deeply involved in the campaigns of the trade unions which flourished in the mid 1830s and its circulation rose to 16,000, despite the repeated arrest and imprisonment of those involved in producing and distributing it. Its success led to the government turning to a different tactic in 1836 – slashing the newspaper tax and instead relying on the market to drive out of business under-capitalised radical papers.

At first the measure seemed successful. The **Poor Man's Guardian**'s circulation began to drop as trade union agitation declined in 1835-6, and Hetherington closed it down, turning his attention to more successful papers which, in his words, concerned themselves with 'police intelligence, murder, rapes, suicides, burnings, maimings, theatricals, races, pugilism, and all manner of entertainments'.

But then, in November 1837, the **Northern Star** was launched in Leeds.

It was an eight page 'broadsheet' (i.e. the size of the present day **Financial Times**) weekly, covered with column after column of more or less solid type, with perhaps one engraving in every fifth issue, with a front page mainly

devoted to adverts (typically for rather dubious patent medicines) and costing four and a half pence (at a time when a labourer could earn as little as a shilling a day).

Yet it was a prodigious success. By February 1837 it was selling 10,000 copies a week, and a year later was rivalling the London daily, **The Times** with sales of over 50,000. The post office had to buy special waggons, in addition to the usual mail coaches for its distribution!

Its readership was almost certainly ten or twenty times its sale. It would be bought by publicans for their working class customers, and groups of workers would club together to buy a copy between them. Benjamin Wilson, a Halifax chartist could tell how, in the woollen districts: 'It was common practice to meet together at friends' houses to read the paper and talk over political matters.'

Another witness has told how in Todmorden, the day the **Northern Star** was due, people would gather by the roadside to await its arrival 'which was paramount to everything else for the time being' (Quoted in Dorothy Thompson, **The Early Chartists**, London 1971, p.13)

In Leicester, framework knitters would gather in the shop for their afternoon tea break: 'Some would sit on the winders' stools, some on bricks, and others, whose frames were in the centre, would sit on their seat boards ... as short articles would be read from the **Northern Star**, and this would form the subject matter for consideration and discussion and chat during the remainder of the day'.

In terms of our categories – general ideas, experience, what is to be done – there is no doubt that it was the **Star**'s ability to express the experiences of hundreds of thousands of workers involved in a rising movement which was the key to its success. The years 1837-1839 saw a massive upsurge of struggles – over the mass impoverishment of working people as a result of the effects of economic depression; over

the attempts of the Whig government to impose the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, with its workhouses, in the industrial areas of the North; against Police Acts which replaced elected constables, subject to control by the local working class, by new police forces; over the trial and deportation of the leader of a cotton spinners strike in Glasgow; over the demand for the working class to get the suffrage; even over the suppression of a rebellion in Canada by British troops.

So the issue of the **Northern Star** of 13 January 1838 could note: 'Our columns are once again rife with demonstrations. Everywhere the people seem to be alive. In our present number will be found reports of gatherings in Stalybridge, Leeds and Bradford ... A brief notice of a public meeting in Hull on the Canada question ... of Huddersfield, where the sturdy determination of the people has stopped the appointment of a poor law clerk ...'

The previous issue, that of 6 January, contained reports of meetings in Barnsley (on the local Police Act), Leeds, Huddersfield (of the cooperative society), Almonbury, Halifax, Dewsbury (over the Poor Law), Saddleworth (over woollen workers brought before the court by their employer), Manchester (over Canada), Hyde (on the Poor Law), Huddersfield and Bradford (over the Poor Law), as well as a list of donations for the Glasgow spinners and account of a 'great meeting' in Northumberland and Durham, where people were reported to carry the slogan: 'The wrath of god shall fall on them that separates man and wife', 'Go now ye rich man and weep and howl for the miseries that shall fall upon you', 'for child and wife, we'll war to the knife', 'the constitution of Canada and may her brave patriots succeed in defending it'.

By reporting the speeches at these meetings, the paper explained the issues involved in language which its readers

(and perhaps more importantly, those listening to it being read out loud) could easily comprehend. It could convey the horror of the Poor Law 'bastilles', the attempts of the employers to cut wages by legal means, the deprivation under which people were being forced to live. But it could also convey something just as important – the feeling of a rising tide of struggle against all these things. It *reflected* experience, but at the same time *distilled and augmented* it.

It was not only the reports which did this. So did many of the articles. The paper had contributors, especially its proprietor Feargus O'Connor, with immense ability at expressing in their own words the indignation and anger of the oppressed and exploited.

G.D.H. Cole has well described how: 'Feargus O'Connor was unquestionably the best loved, as well as the most hated, man of the Chartist movement. Not in one district alone, but all over England, he had an immense hold over the people ... Moderation in speaking was alien to his nature, and the habit grew in him of writing very nearly as he spoke – using words and phrases as a means of stirring the passions of his readers, never arguing but always vehemently asserting whatever he wanted to be believed, and always making his allusions highly passionate and concrete with the least possible admixture of abstract ideas ... His feeling for suffering was strong and genuine, and it made the wretched and oppressed all over England look on him as their friend, and go on forgiving and loving him, whatever he did amiss' (**Chartist Studies**, pp.300-301).

He would boast ... that this gave him an appeal to the 'fustian jackets' – the impoverished mass of textile operatives, miners and factory workers.

Typical of the style he imparted to the paper was an editorial on the Poor Law Amendment Act in the first issue of 1838:

> That Act is an insult to the rich, a fraud upon the poor and a treason against nature. It is a thief, against which the hue and cry should be raised; a mad dog which should be scouted from hill to hill and from dale to dale. Every man who meets death in opposing this national enemy will better deserve a monument to his memory than does the trained warrior who prostitutes himself for pay, indifferent as to the cause in which his service is embarked.

> This was not the reasoned argument you would find in much of the radical press. It was invective which could easily be based upon contradictory assumptions. But it caught the mood of literally millions of people, and in doing so brought them more closely to understanding the real source of their oppression.

People clamoured to read the paper because it told them what they themselves, and thousands of other people like them, were feeling and doing. And they did not only read it. They also sent in reports to it and aided its distribution. It had correspondents anywhere where there was the slightest level of working class struggle. As its editor wrote in 1841: ‘The **Star** has more original matter that any ten papers in the kingdom’. It was this which made the paper into more than just reading matter: it made it into the organiser of the movement as well.

The **Northern Star** is often seen as a by-product the Chartist movement. But significantly it commenced publication a good six months before that movement was formally established on the basis of a call from people like Lovett in London who were much more moderate in their tone than O’Connor. It was the **Northern Star**’s agitation around a whole range of ‘economic’ issues – especially the Poor Law and the question of trade union rights – that created the political generalisation which provided such a mass base for the suffrage demands of the Charter. This was

shown by the degree to which O'Connor was able to dominate the movement for ten years, while those who had formally initiated it tended rapidly to be squeezed out.

However, the appeal of the **Star** was not simply based upon its reflection of experience. O'Connor was sensible enough to draw into its editorial team people who had a clarity of ideas that he himself lacked. As Dorothy Thompson has noted, 'its staff included many of the ablest men in the movement'.

In particular, its main editorial writer from 1838 to 1840, Bronterre O'Brien, and its editor through most of the 1840s, Julian Harney, were people who took the formulation of clear ideas and the argument against ruling class ideology very seriously indeed. Both based themselves on the ideas of the extreme left wing in the French revolution: O'Brien translated into English Buonarrotti's book on Babeuf's 'conspiracy of equals' and himself wrote an unfinished biography of Robespierre, and Harney was in continual contact with émigrés from the European revolutionary movements. But they both had to try to go further, and to deal with the economic ideas of the ascendant industrial bourgeoisie. They could not be more than partially successful in doing so; but they did at least begin to lay bare some of the notions Marx was to elaborate into a definite critique of bourgeois society as a whole. And they used these notions to make workers begin to understand their class interests.

As the 'moderate' reformer, Francis Place, explained:

> O'Brien wrote long and well adapted papers to the notions which had been carefully instilled in each of the vast number of working men who took an interest in public matters. His purpose being what it has always been, the destruction of property in private hands, all profits, all interest, all accumulation ... (Quoted in Cole, p.245).

Typical of the clarity with which he could write was a piece on Ireland in the **Star** of 27 February 1838:

> This faction (i.e. the government) talk of OUR colonies. They lie, the vagabonds. We have no colonies; our aristocracy, our merchants, possess colonies all over the world, but the people of England – the real veritable people of England do not possess a sod of ground in their own country – much less colonies in any other. What are called our colonies belong to our enemies, our oppressors, to our enslavers.

The weakest point about the paper was when it came to the question of what is to be done. Its weaknesses were the weaknesses of O'Connor, who could brilliantly articulate people's grievances, but was quite incapable of thinking through to a conclusion the strategy and tactics for dealing with them, and so always stepped back at crucial moments in the struggle.

It could deal easily say what needed to be done when the first upturn of the movement was taking place, whether in 1837-8, in 1841-2 or in 1847-8. Essentially, it told working people to unite together into a mass movement of protest, basing their hopes in their own strength and not in any 'moral' influence on the ruling class ('moral humbug' was the paper's description of 'moral force' in 1838). But when things came to a crunch, as in the summers of 1839 and 1842 and the spring of 1848, it was incapable of providing any clear direction forwards. And so after these high points of struggle its circulation fell rapidly, to 18,000 in 1840, to 12,000 in 1842, to 6,000 in 1846, back up above 10,000 in 1848, then right down to 5000 in 1850. Nevertheless, it held together the core of the world's first working class movement for more than a decade, even through hard times when, in the words of one critic of its 'extremism', it

consisted only of 'miserable knots of a dozen or two in each town, meeting generally in some beer shop, and calling themselves branches of the National Charter Association'. (Matthew Fletcher of Bury, quoted in Dorothy Thompson, p.77). And it was, in many ways, a shining example of what a revolutionary working class paper can be.

The *Daily Herald*: 1911-22

> The **Daily Herald** was not a revolutionary paper in the sense of issuing a clear and unequivocal call for the forcible overthrow of existing society. But it is worth looking at for two reasons.

It showed how those on the far left of the political spectrum could produce a paper in a period of rising struggle capable of challenging the bourgeois press when it comes to getting a working class readership. And, because of this, it was often quoted as an example for the revolutionary press to learn from in the early years of the Communist International.

The paper began life as a simple four page strike sheet during a print lockout in London in January 1911. Its first issues dealt only with the strike, and, though its first article started with a verse from William Morris, its language still reflected the influence of established ideas on the printers: 'Englishmen who have bred sons to die for an empire's battles abroad', one of the front page articles argued, 'will not surrender like a horde of starving Asiatics ... Capital may be strong, but manhood is stronger'.

But the paper was soon dealing with industrial issues other than those in the print – like conditions in the bakeries, or what was happening in the Fife miners' union –

and showed the influence of convinced socialists who had become involved in its production, like Ben Tillet of the dockers' union and the left Labour MP, George Lansbury. It contained articles arguing the socialist case, as well as broadening out to include a football column and a gardening column. And its treatment of the print struggle shifted markedly from the craftist tone of the first issues: by 21 April the front page contained a picture of demonstrating women warehouse strikers and an interview with Ellen Smith, organiser of the female section of the warehousemen and cutters' union.

The success of the strike sheet – its sales rose from 12,000 to 27,000 – led those involved in producing it to appeal for funds to keep it going as a regular daily. They were not immediately successful, and after three months it folded temporarily.

But a year later, in April 1912, it resumed publication, and although its initial capital amounted to only £300 it enjoyed amazing success for the next two years. Its exact sales are not known, but estimates suggest its circulation ranged between 50 and 150,000. This was not as large as the two most popular dailies of the time, the **Mail** and **Mirror**, which sold between 750,000 and one million copies, but it was in the same league as the **Express** and **Telegraph** whose sales were 200,000-300,000 – especially since its sales were to manual workers who had not yet normally developed the habit of buying a daily as opposed to a Sunday paper. The **Herald**'s success is even more remarkable when it is noted that the official Labour Party leadership started a daily of their own in competition with it, the **Daily Citizen**, with much greater financial backing, in the summer of 1912.

The new version of the **Herald** unashamedly used the latest techniques of popular newspaper production. So its third issue quite naturally had the banner headline,

'TITANIC FLOUNDERS'. But the techniques of sensationalism were, as often as possible, turned against the existing system. And so day after day it asked questions on its front page as to the circumstances of the sinking – safety precautions in the ship, the conditions of its crew, above all why the male first-class passengers were allowed into the lifeboats while women and children steerage passengers were forced to remain on the sinking vessel.

But the most marked feature of the **Herald** was not its use of these techniques, but the way it combined them with a close identification with workers' struggles. It was known as the 'rebel paper' because, as George Lansbury put it, 'it always found itself supporting workers who were out on strike … All men and women struggling to better their conditions instinctively turned to the **Daily Herald** in those first years …'

Its pages contained account after account of strikes, of workers conditions, of conflicts with employers. So the first issue of the new series contained news of a rail strike, discussion on the recently finished coal strike, details of the ending of a strike of 30,000 Dundee jute workers, and an account of a dispute of electricians at Earls Court. It called upon 'secretaries of trade unions, trades councils, Labour Party committees and cooperative societies … to forward any news to the **Daily Herald**. When 100,000 dockers and transport workers in London struck in June and July, the **Herald** was the official organ of the strike. When the workers of Dublin were locked out a year later, it was the **Herald** that led the campaign for solidarity in mainland Britain.

These years witnessed the biggest upsurge of working class struggle since the time of Chartism, with massive strikes leading to the unionisation of industry after industry, with the initiative usually being taken by 'unofficial'

elements influenced by socialist and syndicalist ideas. And the **Herald** was the means by which workers involved could get a sense of their own strength through reading its reports of their every confrontation with the system. By mirroring their experience at a time of great struggle, it enhanced that experience.

As a letter to the **Herald** in October 1912 put it:

> Let anyone consider the influence of the **Herald** day after day imparting, subconsciously it may be, its note of rebellion and independence. Day after day its record of the uprisings of workers give a wider sense of labour struggling and show the need for solidarity and action on a large scale.

But what about the general ideas that motivated those who ran the paper? These certainly were not clear in any way. Lansbury, who was increasingly the dominating influence as to the direction of the paper, saw it as a forum for all sorts of ideas which challenged the existing system, rather than as a paper that put a single line forward. And so the ideas of syndicalists, Christian socialists, suffragettes, guild socialists, Marxists, anarchists and 'distributionists' like the Chestertons and Hilaire Belloc jostled with each other in the feature articles. The only general notion holding them together was the feeling that militancy against the existing order was a good thing.

The complete jumble of ideas that motivated the paper translated itself into confusion also when it came to the question of what needed to be done.

This did not matter too much in the period up to the summer of 1914. All that seemed necessary was to push forward the rising tide of struggle on every front – in

industry, against the conservative union leaders of the older generation, over home rule for Ireland, for women's suffrage, against attempts to buy off workers with the beginnings of the welfare state.

Appropriately enough the editor for about a year was an out and out syndicalist, Charles Lapworth, who had been a member of the IWW. Lansbury removed him because he could no longer tolerate a method of exposition which he considered to be 'mainly the good old gospel of hate' (**The miracle of Fleet Street**, p.33). Significantly, although Lansbury had been organising a 'Herald League' of the paper's supporters, made up of about 50 local groups, he made sure the League had no formal control over the paper!

However, the lack of clear politics became all important in August 1914. The outbreak of war meant a clean break between Lansbury, whose pacifist views led the paper to oppose the war, and people like Tillett and the Chestertons, who supported it. The paper's circulation declined just as the cost of newsprint began to soar and after a few weeks it had to move to weekly rather than daily publication.

It resumed daily publication again, with its third launching, on 31 March 1919, this time with a capital of more than £140,000 donated by trade unions and co-operative societies. The new source of finance pointed to an important change as compared to the pre-war paper: it was no longer the rebel paper which would be identified with unofficial strikes, but a paper with at least nominal backing from the official leaders of the labour movement. Significantly, the first issue contained greetings not only from figures identified with the left like Tom Mann and Albert Inkpin, but also Ramsay MacDonald, J.H. Thomas, Philip Snowden, and Eduard Bernstein. Lansbury, who later noted that workers expected the **Herald** to support any struggle whether official or unofficial, wrote that it was

fortunate there were not many unofficial strikes in 1919 and 1920.

But struggles there were, on a massive scale. The year 1919 began with a massive engineering strike in Glasgow, which led to bloody clashes with the police, and a general strike in Belfast. It continued with prolonged agitation in the mines, which again and again seemed about to erupt into an all-out strike, a police strike which was forcibly broken, a rail strike, guerrilla war against British rule in Ireland. And all this against the background of Bolshevik revolution in Russia which had already spread to Hungary and which seemed about to engulf Germany as well.

The **Herald** continued to report the experiences of workers in struggle, with a page called ‘the world of labour day by day’ which had an average of 15 reports on strikes, wage negotiations and so on. On other news pages you would find accounts of, say, the trial of the leaders of the Glasgow engineers, alongside the murders and mishaps the rest of the popular press concentrated on. The international news too was *news of struggle* – of strikes in the US, of the war in Ireland, of unrest in India, of the battles of the Russian and Hungarian red armies.

On top of this, the paper used ‘sensationalist’ journalistic techniques to expose both the conditions under which people lived (with ‘horror’ front pages on housing in Bethnal Green) and the schemes of the government to beat the workers’ movement at home and abroad. The paper achieved four notable coups – when it gave publicity to the secret treaties which the British government had made during the war and which had been brought to light by the Russian revolution; when it published secret orders to army officers telling them to prepare their troops for strike breaking; when it revealed details of a meeting between Churchill and a white Russian general about sending a force

of 10,000 ‘volunteers’ against the revolution; and when it exposed how the British government had printed a fake copy of **Pravda**.

No wonder the paper was massively popular among almost all the activists of the working class movement, with a circulation of 200,000 to 370,000, reaching a peak of 500,000 during the 1919 railway strike. No wonder the government was so worried by its influence that it banned its distribution inside the armed forces.

What did the paper use its popularity for?

It was still a paper of the ‘left’, in the sense that it stood four square for ‘direct action’, for industrial action for political ends, and for the widest possible solidarity with those in struggle. But in 1919 and 1920 there were few in the labour movement who were prepared to say they opposed these things outright. The leaders of the main unions formed a ‘triple alliance’ promising each other mutual support, Ramsay MacDonald published a book arguing that industrial action for political ends was all right so long as it was applied constitutionally and not unconstitutionally, and even the arch ‘moderate’, J.H. Thomas, would vote for resolutions in favour of direct action at conferences.

Much of the paper’s argument consisted of insisting that more than just words were required, action was necessary as well. But it was not prepared to spell out what that entailed. One of the **Herald**’s own writers, H.N. Brailsford, noted that while on the continent, the left were putting the method of direct action into practice, in Britain, they merely discussed whether it was right or wrong to engage in it: ‘On the continent, socialists discussed only the mechanics of this method, at home it seems to me, we discuss nothing but its ethics’ (**Daily Herald**, 17 September 1919).

In 1920 this meant the paper argued, correctly, for the need to unify the different struggles, whether it was a

question of unifying the struggle in Britain with that for independence in Ireland, or that of the railwaymen and that of the miners. But when it came to pointing the finger at who was responsible for breaking unity, it kept remarkably quiet.

This became absolutely clear in 1921 when the leaders of the rail and transport unions betrayed the triple alliance and allowed the miners to go down to defeat in isolation. The **Herald** proclaimed the occasion to be 'Black Friday' and printed resolutions from rail union branches deploring what had happened. But the paper's editorial statement insisted, 'it is not for us to blame certain individuals or sections of the movement'.

The **Daily Herald** could not 'blame' the 'individuals' who were responsible for the most important defeat the working class had suffered for a generation because of the 'broad', 'non-aligned' role it sought for itself and, in particular, because of its ties with 'left' union leaders (the transport leader Bevin was head of its fund raising committee).

As Alasdair Hatchett has noted in a very interesting study of the paper: 'The paper had always been respected by all sections of the movement for its reporting of labour news and its indictments of the government. But the uncritical and non-differentiating policy of the editors when discussing the problems of the movement and the "ecstatic effervescence" towards each gain, however small, allowed it both to support the revolutionary tendencies and at the same time to make militant reformism effectively reformist. Support for direct action was expressed in ways that, for the most part, left parliament as an institution unscathed'.

A 'broad' paper, vaguely associated with calls for militant action, could prosper during a period of rising struggle, in which merely to print the cries of anger from different sections of workers was to produce a roar of generalised

revolt. But it was suddenly hopeless the moment the decisive turning point in the struggle was reached. It had nothing to say.

Its silence meant that there was only one direction in which it could go from that point onwards – to the right. The aftermath of the defeat of the miners was that unemployment rose without resistance and that trade union membership fell enormously. The base of militancy that had sustained the old **Herald** was undercut and the sales of the paper fell. Eventually, in 1925 Lansbury sold out in the literal sense of the words – he handed control of his paper over to the General Council of the TUC, which in turn sold a half share to the giant print firm Odhams. The paper prospered in the 1920s and 1930s, not on the basis of any aura of rebelliousness, but on the then equivalents of newspaper bingo. When it could no longer grow on that basis in the 1960s it passed out of the hands of the TUC and eventually, as the **Sun**, into the hands of Rupert Murdoch.

Yet for a period it was, as the Communist labour historian R. Page Arnot puts it, 'the nearest thing that had ever been seen in this country' to the 'collective agitator and propagandist of the revolutionary spirit'. (**The impact of the Russian revolution in Britain**, 1967, p.151).

The Bolshevik *Pravda*

It is difficult to find a figure more different to George Lansbury or Feargus O'Connor in the history of the working class movement than Vladimir Lenin. Yet he had one thing in common with them. He not only understood the central role of the workers paper, he also knew what the paper had to do to fulfil that role.

Pravda was established in Russia a few days after the **Daily Herald** was relaunched as a permanent publication in April 1912. This was a coincidence. What was not a coincidence was the way it was able to grow, like the British daily, out of a rising tide of workers' struggle. For Lenin understood that by drawing together the experiences of workers in struggle, you generalise those experiences and give them a political significance.

As we have seen, Lenin had already argued the vital importance of the revolutionary paper in *Where to begin* and **What is to be done** back in 1902. In the period of defeat after the 1905 revolution, it was extremely difficult to produce underground papers and get them into Russia on more than an irregular and haphazard basis. The Bolshevik organisation barely existed inside Russia itself. Lenin could write in 1911:

> At present the real position of the party is such that almost everywhere in the localities there are small informal, extremely small and tiny party workers' groups and nucleae that meet irregularly. ..They are not connected with each other. Very rarely do they see any literature. (**Collected Works**, vol.17, p.202)

But that year saw the beginnings of a revival of the workers' struggle, and the party was able to produce a legal paper (i.e. one that used special, aesopian language to avoid censorship), **Zvezda** in St Petersburg on a weekly and then twice weekly basis. A party conference in January 1912 decided to launch a daily legal paper, **Pravda** (despite doubts about the feasibility of the project by Lenin and Zinoviev), and the launching actually occurred on 22 April.

This was just as the upturn in struggle really took off. On 5 April the Czar's forces opened fire on a crowd of unarmed

strikers in the Lena goldfields, in the depth of Siberia, killing 500. The days that followed were marked by huge protest strikes and demonstrations throughout Russia involving 300,000 workers. And the protests were continued on May Day with a 400,000 strong strike. This compared with a total of only 105,110 strikers for *the whole* of 1911!

Pravda took off as a paper which reflected this new mood of the class. As one opponent of the Bolsheviks told, in the pages of the paper:

> We read of the activities of workers organisations, trade unions, clubs and cooperatives; of the meetings of the members of those organisations and their leading committees ... of lectures and reports organised by workers; of strikes and strike committees; of the organisation of various collections; of attempts at political activities on the part of groups of workers in defence of the workers press, to honour the memory of Bebel [the German socialist leader who had just died] or for some other immediate purpose.

As Lenin put it:

> As they look through the reports on workers' collections in connection with letters from factory and office workers in all parts of Russia, **Pravda** readers, most of whom are dispersed and separated from one another by the severe external conditions of Russian life, gain some idea of how the proletarians of various trades and various localities are fighting, how they are awakening to the defence of working class democracy.
>
> The chronicle of workers' life is only just *beginning* to develop into a permanent feature of **Pravda**. There can be no doubt that subsequently, in addition to letters about abuses in factories, about the awakening of a new section of the proletariat, about collections for one or another field of the workers' cause, the workers' newspaper will receive reports about the views and sentiments of the workers, election campaigns, the election of

> workers delegates, what the workers' read, the questions of particular interest to them, and so on.
>
> The workers' paper is a workers' forum. Before the whole of Russia the workers should raise here, one after another, the various questions of workers' life in general and of working class democracy in particular. **(Collected Works**, vol.18, p.300)

Zinoviev claimed it:

Devoted more than half of its space to letters from working men and women from the factories. **Pravda** was a special type of Communist newspaper. It performed the functions which no other newspaper performed. It differed even in its external form from all other bourgeois and social democratic newspapers. Half a newspaper was written by working men and women, soldiers, sailors, cooks, cab drivers and shop assistants ...

> These letters spoke of the every day life in the factory or workshop, barracks or factory district. In simple language, the details were given of the privations and oppression to which the workers are subjected. These letters exposed the petty tyranny of the minor officials in the factories and works., these letters drew an impressive picture of the poverty and sufferings which the masses had to undergo. These letters better than anything else in the world expressed the growing and seething protests which afterwards burst out in the great revolution. The newspaper became the great teacher of the labouring masses, and the workers themselves largely contributed toward it.
>
> It was only necessary for a letter to appear in^our paper from a particular factory or barracks for the number in which it appeared to be greedily seized at the factory or barracks. The workers became accustomed to reading this correspondence. The publication of a letter concerning a particular factory would become quite an event for that

> factory. The exposure would be read by party and non-party men as well, and the newspaper would become a terror to all the oppressors of the workers … (**Bulletin of the Executive of the Communist International**, 1921)

Because the paper reflected people's experience in this way, it very easily became an organiser of them. This was especially important for the Bolsheviks, since they were operating as an illegal party, with no possibility of engaging in open recruitment. They could, however, build up a a network of people who corresponded with the paper, distributed it and took collections for it in the workplaces.

So, for instance, half the papers sold in St Petersburg were sold inside the factories. The individual in charge of selling these was in effect, finding a legal way of organising together supporters of the illegal party. Collections of a kopec from each worker for the paper took the place of party dues as an expression of support for the party. The lists of collections printed in the paper gave an indication of how widespread was the network of support for the paper. So when Lenin wanted to show how much stronger the Bolsheviks were than the reformist 'liquidationist' current inside the workers' movement, he compared the list of collections printed in **Pravda** with the lists printed in the liquidationist paper, **Luch**. The fact that **Pravda** sold 40,000 copies daily and received 2,181 separate collections from groups of workers in 1913, as against a sale of 16,000 daily for the liquidationist papers and 671 collections for them, was proof for him of how much more support the Bolsheviks had. (See, for instance, **Collected Works**, vol.20 pp.381-387)

But **Pravda** did not just simply *reflect* workers' experience. It also sought to connect it to the general

principles on which the Bolsheviks operated.

Lenin had argued in **What is to be done** that the revolutionary newspaper had to do more than expose the particular conditions workers found themselves facing in the factories. It had also to provide an 'all round exposure' of society as a whole – of the Czarist state, of the development of capitalism within it, of the role of the different classes, of all the different struggles against oppression and exploitation as well as the struggles of the workers.

Lenin set out to make sure such clear Marxist ideas found their way into the paper by moving from Geneva to Cracow (in the German controlled part of Poland) so as to be able to contribute articles on a near daily basis.

He wrote literally hundreds of articles. Many were quite short, perhaps 500 or 600 words long, commenting on a wide range of things – the Italian Socialist Party congress, the eighteen years of the Russian working class movement, the career of an ageing reactionary who had once been a liberal, the concentration of production in Russia, wage levels and strikes, the British Liberal government, whether priests should be involved in politics, the Italian war in Libya, the Balkan war, the Chinese revolution of 1912, the US elections, the British ILP conference, the death of Harry Quelch of the British SDF, the philosophy of Dietzgen.

The point of these articles was not to impart information just for the sake of imparting information. Each article was carefully designed to make a precise political point: the treacherous role of the bourgeoisie in the fight against Czarism, the danger of the reformist trend inside the working class movement, the way imperialism led to war, the relation between the struggle for national liberation and the struggle of socialists, and so on. The point was to round out the consciousness of the worker readers, so that they

could begin to see the connection between their own experience and the worldwide struggle of their class.

Lenin also wrote articles of a different sort – much longer (two thousand words or more, sometimes serialised over two or three issues of the paper), dealing at length with the arguments inside the working class movement as to the tasks of the moment.

Mainly these took the form of arguing against the ‘liquidationists’. At one level the argument was whether the workers movement could confine itself simply to building a broad based legal party out of the trade unions, the workers’ insurance societies, the legal papers and so on. The Bolsheviks and, at first the section of the Mensheviks around Plekhanov, argued something else was essential – maintenance of the underground, illegal apparatus, with its own papers smuggled in from abroad. But underneath this argument was a more fundamental one. By confining themselves to legal forms of organisation, the liquidationists were necessarily refusing to argue for the revolutionary overthrow of Czarism and blurring their differences with the bourgeois liberals who merely wanted to reform Czarism. For it was only in the illegal press that it was possible to talk openly about the revolutionary overthrow of society, and it was only through illegal forms of organisation that preparations could be made for this.

By insisting that these articles appeared in the paper (on some occasions in opposition to the desires of the on the spot editors in St Petersburg) Lenin was insisting the paper had to be more than just a reflection of working class experience or an organ of propaganda for the general ideas of Marxism. It also had to answer the question: What is to be done?

In this respect Lenin was closer to the consistent bourgeois revolutionary Marat than he was to those who

produced the working class papers, the **Northern Star** and the **Daily Herald**. And because of this, like Marat, he was able to use the paper to help bring about a revolution.

Papers of the upturn

The four examples we have looked exemplify perfectly the sort of character revolutionary papers have to have to be successful in a period of revolutionary upturn. They have to be papers which do not merely articulate revolutionary ideas and state what has to be done, but also to give expressions to the lived experiences of the masses. If they do so, they can be papers *of* the masses, as well as *for* the masses, papers which organise for action as well as preaching it.

The point was well made by a letter which Zinoviev wrote for the Communist International to the editors of Communist papers in 1921. He complained that:

> Our papers are too dry, too abstract, too similar to papers of the old type. They are made up too much of what is of interest to the professional politicians, and contain very little of such items as would be eagerly read by every working woman, every day labourer, every kitchen maid, every soldier. Our papers contain too many 'learned' foreign words, too many long and dry articles. We are too eager to imitate the 'respectable' papers. All this must be changed ...
>
> A daily Communist paper must under no circumstances concern itself solely with so called 'high' politics. On the contrary, three quarters of the paper must be devoted to the every day life of the workers ...

Our newspapers have to compete with bourgeois and other newspapers. We must give plenty of good material, well set up and readable ... We must systematically think why the rank and file of the working class are attracted by ... bourgeois newspapers ... We must learn from such papers as the **Daily Herald** which strives to serve all phases of the life of the worker and his family ... Furthermore, we must also introduce something that is peculiarly our own and what the bourgeois and social democratic newspapers cannot give. This is precisely the letters from working men and working women from the factories and works, letters from soldiers etc.

We must develop a new *Communist reporter*. He must be less interested in the lobbies of parliament than in the factories, shops, the workers' homes, the workers' dining rooms, the workers' schools, etc. He should contribute to the paper not lobby gossip, but reports of labour meetings, descriptions of the workers' needs, the most concrete information about the rise in the cost of living etc. ...

The rank and file appreciate very much poignant sarcasm a vitriolic sneer hurled at the enemy. One caricature which hits the nail on the head is of better use than scores of high flown so-called 'Marxist' articles ... We must often, instead of the customary official daily editorial, insert a more or less remarkable letter by a worker or a group of workers from a certain factory, or a picture of some workers who have been arrested or the biography of a worker who has been sentenced by the bourgeois courts and who has displayed a staunch spirit at his trial. Less abstractness and more concreteness – that is what is needed in our papers ... **(Bulletin of the Executive Committee of the Communist International**, 1921).

> This is an excellent account of what a revolutionary paper should be in a period of rising struggle. It is a summation of not only what **Pravda** did, but also of what was best in **L'Ami du Peuple**, the **Northern Star** and the **Daily Herald**.

As such it reflected the feeling of the years 1917 to 1921, when one country after another was swept by revolutionary upheaval, with the great social democratic parties of Europe splitting down the middle, with half their activists opting for revolutionary communism.

However, it would be a mistake to take Zinoviev's words as indicating what the revolutionary socialist paper can and should be, at all times and under all conditions. For none of the papers we have described so far could survive in its original form once the period of a growth and strengthening of the struggle gave way to a period of defeat and demoralisations.

L'Ami du Peuple did not survive the murder of Marat in 1793, and the papers which took over its audience, like Hébert's **Père Duchesne**, could not survive the decline in the revolutionary wave after Thermidor in 1794. The **Northern Star** limped on for four years after the last great fling of Chartism in 1848, but with a much reduced circulation and influence before collapsing in 1852. As we have already seen, the **Daily Herald** went weekly during the First World War, and only survived after the great defeats suffered by the unions in 1921 by moving sharply to the right and ceasing to be a 'workers' paper' in any real sense.

Pravda too was forced to close down when the downturn in the struggle produced by the outbreak of World War One allowed Czarism to adopt a much more repressive policy than that pursued in the years 1911-13. The paper was able

to reopen with the February revolution of 1917 – but only because the Bolshevik Party managed to hold together its underground organisation in the intervening years, using papers quite different in style to **Pravda**.

The paper in a period of defeat

> The relationship between the everyday experience of workers and the ideas of revolutionary socialism is quite different in a period of defeat and demoralisation from that in a period of rising struggle. Workers no longer discover for themselves the power of collective action. They do not see in practice how false the ideas of the ruling class are. It is only a minority – sometimes a very small minority – of the class who continue to adhere to a revolutionary socialist vision. And they do so on the basis not of direct experience, but of general ideas that have been developed out of struggles in the distant past or in distant countries.

The sort of paper which fits this period is necessarily quite different to the **Pravda** type paper of the upturn. It has to lay much more stress upon general theoretical argument and upon what can be done to stop the succession of defeats. There is no other way it can draw together the minority of workers who continue to be attracted to revolutionary ideas and arm them to resist the general pull to the right. Historically, the best papers produced during periods of downturn have been quite different in style to those produced in upturns. The **Neue Rheinische Zeitung** produced in exile in 1850 was a thick journal containing

long articles, like the serialisation of **The Civil War in France**. The **Red Republican** which Julian Harney produced in 1850 in an attempt to hold together the radical wing of Chartism did contain reports of union meetings and strikes, but the core of it was made up of long editorialising articles – witness the way in which the first English translation of the **Communist Manifesto** was printed in it (with its front page beginning with the immortal words, 'A hobgoblin is haunting Europe ...'). The underground papers which the Bolsheviks smuggled into Russia from abroad in the years 1907-11 and 1914-17 contained articles of many thousands of words, as opposed to the 500 or 600 word articles of **Pravda**.

The revolutionary paper is just as indispensable as a tool for organising in the downturn as in the upturn. It is the means by which the meagre and widely dispersed forces of revolutionary socialism are able to communicate with each other, to defend themselves against the pressures of an ideologically hostile environment, and to draw a few new people to them.

But it is a tool that has to be constructed differently, because the nature of the task is rather different.

What in fact happens, for example, if a paper in the downturn takes seriously Zinoviev's call for half its space to be given over to letters from ordinary workers?

Either it engages in blatant dupery, printing the ideas of the hard core of committed revolutionaries and pretending they flow straight from the factory floor. Or, more likely, it simply gives expression to moans which workers have, without, however, presenting any clear idea as to what can be done about them. For if the mood of the class is one of misery and despair, rather than of fighting confidence, then the Paper will simply reflect that misery and despair. Instead of expressing the anger of the class, as the paper of

the upturn does, it expresses the demoralisation – and very easily ends up bending to the illusions about reformism which grow within the class when it is demoralised.

Of course, there are some points of connection between paper of the upturn and the paper of the downturn. Both should be the papers of fighting organisations, rather than simply commentators on the world. As the *Theses* of the Third Congress of the Communist International put it:

> Our paper must aim to gather the valuable experience of all the members on the party and disseminate this experience in the form of guide lines so that Communist methods of work can be constantly revised and improved ... Our papers will establish their authority by the uncompromising position they take on all proletarian social questions ... They must not heed the criticisms of the petty bourgeois authors and virtuosos of journalism or seek an entry to these literary circles.

Both have to cut through the superficial appearances of events and reveal their class essence. As Trotsky insisted, when criticising the French Communist paper **l'Humanité** in 1921, they must not make the mistake of seeing politics as a question of the games played in parliaments (**The First Five Years of the Communist International**, vol.1, p.166) or international events in terms of the detail of diplomacy.

The analyses they make have to relate to the problems confronting those worker militants, and the language in which they are written has to be accessible to those militants.

But the downturn paper still has a very different, and in many ways more difficult, task to fulfil than the upturn paper. It is confronting a situation where revolutionary socialist ideas are continually under attack on all fronts, and

it has to devote the space to defending them. One of its main tasks has to be that of arming its supporters ideologically, and it cannot do that unless it provides them with a very clear, rounded view of the world. Even the most basic idea, that of workers power, cannot be illustrated by pointing at some event near at hand, but requires substantial historical articles and weighty analyses of what is happening to capitalism on a world scale. In an upturn the ideas of revolutionary socialism correspond closely to developments that are taking place spontaneously within the working class. But in a downturn the situation is very much that described in **What is to be done**, of socialist consciousness coming from outside the class – from a the arguments of a party which bears the memory of what has happened in past upturns.

The downturn paper has to contain reports of those struggles which do take place. These are a key factor in enabling it to relate to the minority who continue to struggle. But the reports cannot be simple descriptions, since such descriptions would more than likely be of defeat and betrayals. What are needed are quite lengthy discussions of what went wrong and what could have been done to rectify matters. In an upturn you can get quite successful papers which are fuzzy about what has to be done, as we have seen with the **Daily Herald**. In a downturn, not only does such fuzziness open the way for defeat, it also ensures that the paper is not a success. For what the minority of fighters want to find out more than anything else is a way of avoiding more defeats.

What happens to a paper that does not provide this explanation is shown by the example of a paper Trotsky edited from exile in the years 1908-12 (the so-called 'Viennese' **Pravda**, not be confused with the later Bolshevik paper of the same name).

Trotsky was by far the most talented political writer among the Russian revolutionary socialists. Yet as Isaac Deutscher noted in his classic biography: ‘On the whole **Pravda** was not one of Trotsky’s great journalistic ventures. He intended to address himself to “plain workers” rather than to politically-minded party men, and to “serve, not lead” his readers. **Pravda**’s plain language and the fact that it preached the unity of the party secured to it a certain popularity but no lasting influence. Those who state the case for a faction or group usually involve themselves in more or less complicated argument and address the upper and medium layers of their movement rather than the rank and file.’

These are able to ‘win the cadres of a party for their more advanced argument’ and these ‘carry the argument, in a more simplified form, deeper down’ to ‘the rank and file’.

Bad papers

> Failure to come to terms with a period of defeat and demoralisations can lead to the production of papers that fail completely to hold together the minority who want to resist the downturn.

The simplest, and in some ways the most tempting, path to follow is that of trying to maintain the popularity of the paper by copying the style and content of the mass capitalist press. Anyone who has ever had anything to do with producing a paper has heard the cry, ‘We could sell more if only we were more like the popular dailies’.

This is not something new. One way radical publishers tried to maintain a wide readership after the collapse of Chartism was by printing papers full of lurid accounts of

crimes, sexual scandals, sporting events and so forth; indeed, radical papers like the **Reynold's News** played a pioneering role in developing the popular Sunday paper. Again, the **Herald**'s pre-war 'official Labour' competitor, the **Daily Citizen** consciously set out to imitate the rest of the popular press (it was even edited by a former editor of the then best selling paper, the **Daily Mail**). When the **Herald** itself fell under the control of the TUC and Odhams, it followed the same path.

However, the result of seeking popularity in this way is inevitably drop serious presentation of the socialist argument. This is because there is a very close inter-connection between the character of the mass capitalist press and its ideological function.

A socialist paper tries to provide its readers with a coherent world view, in which every piece of news fits into a clear cut pattern, enabling them to understand the real forces behind social development and how they can be changed. By contrast, the aim of any mass circulation capitalist paper is to stop the development of such a coherent understanding of the world. It has to make present social reality appear to consist of a mass of unrelated and uncontrollable random events.

As the Hungarian Communist Adalbert Fogararsi pointed out in a pioneering article in 1921, it does so by presenting 'news' as a mass of unrelated titbits of information:

> 'It achieves the systematic advancement of ignorance in the form of communicating an abundance of knowledge and information … The capitalist press seeks to shape the structure of the readers' consciousness in such a way that he will be unable to distinguish between true and false, to relate cause and effects, to place individual facts in their total context, to rationally integrate new knowledge into his perspective … In the process the readers' consciousness must be held in a state

of continuous insecurity, perplexity and chaos ...' (translated in **Radical America**, May-June 1969).

> The reader is made to feel there is real value and real interest to be obtained from knowing all sorts of information about things that in reality have no relevance to his or her own life at all – the exploits of royalty, the sex lives of film stars, the behaviour of top sportsmen, the position of pop records in the charts, the predictions of the horoscopes, the minute details of some crime. A situation is created in which people feel they cannot take part in normal conversations with other people unless they know these things. Yet the titbits of 'news' are rarely ideologically neutral. They take for granted acceptance of the monarchy, the treatment of women as commodities, the inevitability of competition, identification with 'your' country against all others in every field of endeavour (from science to war).

A socialist paper which devotes itself to retailing of this sort of 'news' is drawn, inevitably, into the propagation of a mass of trivia which justifies the *status quo*. That was why the Comintern theses were quite right to insist, 'our papers must not try to satisfy the "public's" desire for sensation or light entertainment'.

In an upturn this does not prevent revolutionary papers themselves being very popular. The experience of struggle drives workers to search for a real understanding of their situation and for the real thrill which come from the struggle, rather than for the vicarious pressure of identifying with the feats of kings, stars or sports teams. In a downturn, however, it necessarily means the socialist paper is criticised

by non-political workers for not containing the things they want (whether it is a mass of sports news or a page three nude). Instead of feeling this means there is something wrong with the paper, socialists have to understand it is merely a reflection of a lack of popularity of revolutionary notions, something which will not last forever.

A second error which is sometimes made is to fall into the trap of producing a paper which can only be understood by the initiated. The Italian organisation Democracia Proletaria made this mistake when it produced a paper (first daily and then weekly), **Quotidiano dei Lavoratori** which was oriented toward the radical intellectual milieu rather than to militants in the workplaces. In fact, because it did not come to terms with what was actually happening to the workers' movement, it didn't even have much to say to the intellectuals.

A similar version of the same fault has been made by numerous sects, who react to the downturn by simply reiterating their founding principles, without addressing themselves at all to the immediate question of what is to be done. Instead of arguing forcefully and clearly the general ideas of Marxism by relating them to the difficulties of the militant minority, however small, they simply talk to themselves and get nowhere.

A somewhat similar error is made by those who see that various non-class movements can flourish even while the workers' struggle is at a low ebb, and devote their papers to them. There have been many examples in the European revolutionary left of papers that have become little more than collations of different pages reporting experiences of the different movements – a page on ecology, a page on peace campaigns, a page on feminism, a page on anti-imperialist movements, a page on youth culture, even a page on activity inside the unions, without any attempt to

integrate these together into a clear picture of an overall struggle in which the role of the working class is decisive. Such papers have nothing to say to those workers who do want a fight back, and usually they have nothing new to say to participants in the ‘movements’ either.

Another mistake that can be made is that of producing what might be called the ‘pseudo-agitational’ paper. This gives the appearance of reflecting an upsurge of real struggle. It is written in the language workers use in their everyday lives and it is full of accounts of exciting battles and exposures of then horror of the system. Yet in reality it is completely phoney, because although large scale battles might be occurring at times, they are defensive battles, which are as often as not lost. Instead of providing the activists with arguments for coming to terms with this situation, the paper with its phoney picture of enthusiasm and success simply leaves its readers cold.

A typical example of how this can occur was what happened with the British Communist Party’s papers, the **Workers Weekly** and then the **Daily Worker** in the late 1920s and early 1930s. After a number of bizarre experiments (for details, see the useful article by Jane Ure Smith in **IS 2: 18**), the party succeeded in turning the **Workers Weekly** into a good agitational workers paper in the years 1924-25. If you read the paper for those years, you get the feeling that the people producing it had learnt from the good side of the old **Daily Herald**.

But then the onset of Stalin’s third period in the late 1920s meant the editors could not at all come to terms with the terrible defeat suffered by the unions in Britain. The tone of the paper became increasingly shriller and more agitational as the mood of the class became more demoralised. And the trend was exacerbated by the launching of the daily paper in 1930. Although the paper seemed to report exciting

happenings, that was certainly not how they seemed to the mass of workers involved in them, who faced one bitter defeat after another. In fact, the pseudo agitational tone prevented any real analysis of what was actually happening in the class or any clear exposition of the ideas activists needed to survive through such a period. And so instead of helping to build the party, the daily paper was, in its first years, an added drain on the enthusiasm and activism of the members.

Finally to what is perhaps the most typical form of the downturn paper – the paper that contains propaganda and exposures of how bad the existing system is, but, again, little in the way of clear analysis of what is to be done about this. The form of the paper is popular, yet in reality its readership is usually small and bored with it. Typical instances in Britain at present are **Labour Herald**, the **Morning Star** and the **Militant**. In each of them you will find accounts of how badly the Tories are treating people, of how bad conditions are for the unemployed, of the deplorable state of the health service or of council housing. But none of then seriously analyses the state of the working class movement and spells out what needs to be done to break the cycle of defeat.

The revolutionary paper and the party

> Very successful revolutionary papers have been launched in periods of rising struggle by individuals without any organisation to back them. They have drawn substantial sections of the masses behind them, and have created currents that have begun fulfil the role of parties.

This, we have seen, was the case with **L'Ami du Peuple**, the **Northern Star** and the **Daily Herald**. Again, Trotsky, who was so unsuccessful in the years 1908-12, had enjoyed much greater success in the year of revolution, 1905. He tells in his autobiography how he was able to produce papers which were apparently more successful than the Bolshevik press:

> With Parvus I took over the tiny **Russian Gazette** and transformed it into a fighting organ of the masses. Within a few days the circulation rose from 30,000 to 100,000. A month later it had reached the half million mark ...
>
> On 13 November, in alliance with the Mensheviks, we had started a big political organ, **Nachalo**. The paper's circulation was leaping by leaps and bounds. Without Lenin, the Bolshevik **Novaya Zhizn** was rather drab. The **Nachalo**, on the other hand, was a tremendous success ... Kamenev, one of the editors, told me afterwards how he watched the sales of newspapers at the station ... The demand was only for revolutionary papers. 'Nachalo, Nachalo', came the cry from the waiting crowds, 'Novaya Zhizn', and again,' Nachalo, Nachalo, Nachalo'. 'Then I said to myself, Kamenev confessed, 'They do write better in **Nachalo** than we do' **(My Life**, New York 1960, p.178).

In such situations a paper virtually sells itself. It may be used to build a party, but it does not require a party to enjoy short term success.

Things are very different in a period of defeat and demoralisation. In such circumstances, the revolutionary paper cannot survive without the arduous, systematic effort that only a party can provide.

Trotsky found this when he tried to produce the Viennese **Pravda** almost single handed.

> For lack of money he published it very irregularly – only five issues appeared in the first year of his editorship. But it was less difficult to bring it out than to transport it clandestinely to Russia. The editor often appealed to readers for help, complaining that 'several poods' of the paper got stuck on the Russian frontier and could not be forwarded because of the lack of 50 roubles; that manuscripts for a new issue had piled upon on his desk and he could not send them to the printers; that **Pravda** was compelled to stop correspondence with readers in Russia because it could not afford the postage ... (**The Prophet Armed**, London 1954, p.192)

> The financial problems were only solved, temporarily, when in 1910 the Bolshevik majority in the leadership of the Russian social democratic party agreed to give the paper a subsidy; they resumed when this agreement broke down and Trotsky's paper ceased publication – just as its Bolshevik namesake was beginning to enjoy such success in Petersburg!

The Bolsheviks did not find it any easier to produce a paper and get tt into Russia than Trotsky did in the years of downturn. But the existence of a disciplined organisation did mean that they had a network of adherents who would undertake the necessarily arduous and dangerous labour involved, even in the face of the harshest repression.

So, for instance, they were able to get copies of an illegal paper into Russia only weeks after the outbreak of war in August 1914 enabled Czarism to isolate the revolutionaries, close down the legal papers, and arrest everyone involved in their production. On 1 November 1,500 copies of **Sotsial Democrat** were printed denouncing the war, and a fortnight later Lenin was able to boast that they were about to cross into Russia. (Krupskaya, **Memories of Lenin**, London 1970, p.254)

The Bolshevik metal worker, Shlyapnikov, has told how he managed to smuggle them in:

> In view of the searches on the border, people returning to Russia were refusing to carry anything compromising, and we had to think about concealment. There were many methods: in trunks, book bindings, dresses, umbrellas, walking sticks, footwear and so forth. I fancied footwear. I gave my boots to a cobbler who had been recommended ... and suggested that he cut hollows inside the the heels and soles and fill them up with thin copies of **Sotsial Democrat**. In the first pair went a small number of copies which were sent by roundabout routes to Petersburg ... (**On the eve of 1917**, London 1982, p.38)

He tells how, a year later, he tried, unsuccessfully, to cross a bridge from Sweden into Russian-run Finland carrying 'several poods' of literature. In the end he had to clamber down from the bridge onto the melting ice, literally passing under the feet of the Czarist regime's armed guards to get the papers to where they would be of most use.

Yet the effort was worth it. In Petersburg:

> The demand for illegal socialist literature was so great that the poor illegal technology could not meet it. Private initiative came to its aid. Every sort of manuscript, hectographed or retyped copies of illegal proclamations, articles from illegal publications abroad, etc., circulated among workers. **Sotsial Democrat** and **Kommunist** were such luxuries that 50 kopecs or one rouble would be paid for one reading. (p.92)

The material was seen as vital to building up the illegal party groups in the workplaces. As the guidelines for party organisers put it: 'Every organiser must prepare a literature store and promptly supply it to the groups. After distributing it he must collect

reports on the effect of the distributed literature in the given firm.’ (p.96)

The press of the party had to be maintained even in the most difficult circumstances. It was the living connection between those in exile, involved in theoretical analysis of the class struggle in all its aspects, nationally and internationally, the underground activists who were in continual danger of arrest as they endeavoured to build the illegal organisation, and the worker militants agitating in the factories over wages, food supplies, and so on.

The party organisation could survive from its peak in 1912-1914 to lead the revolution in 1917, because it could produce, in however small numbers, underground papers in the intervening years which contained on the one hand Lenin’s long analyses of imperialism, the war and the betrayals of social democracy, and on the other reports from inside Russia on the reaction of workers to the war. It continued to make the connection: principles, experience, what is to be done.

No paper produced by an individual without a party could have done that. And no party that failed to produce a paper for the best workers militants could have done so either. The party and its paper held the most conscious elements of the class together in the downturn, and so prepared them to play a leading role once the struggle revived.

Socialist Worker: the early years

Socialist Worker, the paper of our organisation, the Socialist Workers Party, has been appearing for 16 years. It started in a period of rising struggle, and then

continued through a period of retreats and demoralisation.

It first appeared as a weekly in September 1968 just as the student and anti-Vietnam War movements of that year were rising to a peak.

Previously the International Socialists (as we were then called) had produced larger, monthly, papers – **Socialist Review** (from 1950 to 1962), **Young Guard** (the paper of our supporters inside the Labour Party youth organisation from 1961 to 1964) and **Labour Worker** (which changed its name to **Socialist Worker** in 1967). These were of varying quality. At their best they combined serious analysis of the general political questions (the Labour Party, the trade union struggle, the revolutionary tradition, Russia, the prolonged post war boom, and so on) with shorter reports of struggles and current events.

Attempts had been made to turn both **Socialist Review** and **Labour Worker** into more agitational fortnightly publications, but these neither fitted the period (of a low level of generalised struggle accompanied by rising working class living standards) nor the resources of our organisation (which grew from 20 odd members in 1950 to about 100 in 1960 to about 300 in 1967). We were forced to beat a sharp retreat back to monthly publication on both occasions.

Labour Worker distributed about 2,300 copies in February 1967, just before the student movement began to take off (with 450 going to one branch, Islington, alone, 200 to Manchester, 124 to Glasgow, 172 to Tottenham, 187 to Newcastle). The circulation was low in absolute terms, although it did mean the members taking an average of eight per head.

Both the political atmosphere and the International Socialists had undergone a considerable transformation by

the time we relaunched **Socialist Worker** as a weekly on 7 September 1968.

A wave of student occupations and large, militant anti-Vietnam War demonstrations had involved tens of thousands of new people in political activity just as the general strike in France was showing the possibilities of working class action, the record of the Wilson

government in Britain was proving the bankruptcy of reformism and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia was discrediting Russian-style Stalinism. Small numbers of revolutionary socialists were suddenly able to make an impact out of all proportion to their size.

The International Socialists gained more from this situation than 1 any of the other groups in Britain. Partly this was because some of our members played a leading role in student struggles like that at the LSE in 1967. Partly it was because we threw ourselves wholeheartedly into the movement in support of the anti-imperialist struggle in Vietnam. Partly it was because we did not have the hang-ups over Stalinism of some of the left. But above all, it was because we were insistent that the minority of radicalised students had to relate to the only force that could really change society, the working class.

On this basis we grew from about 300 members at the beginning of 1968 to about a thousand in the autumn of the year, and produced the weekly **Socialist Worker** as a means of connecting the enthusiasm of the new revolutionaries with the struggles of workers against the Labour government.

The new paper was not, on the face of it, a very impressive operation. It was produced in a one room office by a single journalist working with one typesetter, and amounted to four pages of news and features. Its news pieces were often crammed together, in a not particularly readable typeface,

and its pictures were usually of a rather poor quality. Yet it was, in its own terms, an outstanding success – more successful than other attempts to cash in on the mood of 1968, such as Tariq Ali's **Black Dwarf**, which had more resources behind it and which was more tuned in to the revolutionary super-optimism of the generation of 1968.

The initial print run of the paper was 8000 copies, and these were sold enthusiastically by the members of the IS. Selling was never easy. People would get up at 6 a.m. to get to factory gates every Friday, getting rid of four or five copies if they were lucky, then spend hours selling on the high street on Saturdays getting a few more sales, then traipsing round council estates on Sunday mornings. But the paper struck a mood among a minority of people in the workplaces and the unions.

These were years in which the Labour government's policy of wage controls, productivity deals and the 'shake out' of labour through state sponsored mergers began to confront opposition – first from traditionally militant groups like car workers, the better organised building sites and dockers, and then from previously unmilitant sections like London dustmen, teachers, and St Helens glass workers. The revival of struggle was given an added political component when, in 1969, the government's attempt to push through anti-union laws collapsed in the face of trade union opposition, including the first political strike for half a century.

The paper reported all these struggles and, in the process, won itself an audience among the militants active in them. Although the IS was an overwhelmingly *student* organisation, the paper was very much a *workers'* paper. It could be eagerly read by many worker activists who would still have felt very much out of place at our meetings. By the time the general election of June 1970 had produced a Tory government, the paper's print order had grown to about

14,000, and it had been able to expand to six and then eight pages – even though the membership of IS had shrunk slightly to about 900.

Part of the success of the paper was due to its ability to provide accounts of struggles and to talk about events in language which avoided the stilted abstractions so beloved of both Stalinism and academic Marxism. The basic aim was to use a vocabulary not so different to that of the **Daily Mirror** in order to present a very different range of experiences and ideas. Writers like Paul Foot, Duncan Hallas and, with his weekly reports from the front line in Derry, Eamonn McCann, were able to do so admirably.

But this was not the major reason for our success. Unfortunately, most of our members did not possess such magical journalistic skills. What they did do, however, was ensure that the paper contained reports of virtually every struggle taking place in those years – from the struggle of the Ford women for equal pay to that of the Aberdeen trawlermen, from that of the Leeds clothing workers to that of Brick Lane Asians against racist attacks.

The element of experience, so essential to any paper in an upturn, ran right through the paper, even if it was usually the experience of the activist minority in the class rather than of the broad mass of workers (who reacted to the betrayals of the Labour government with apathy and depoliticisation rather than any shift to the left). Every time there was a struggle, our members could send in reports, and return to activists a week later with a paper which told their story in a way no other did.

The general ideas of the paper were also vital to its success. People who read it came across for the first time a Marxism which broke completely with every element of bureaucratism and Stalinism, which came to terms with the experience of Russia, which made no apologies for

Labourism, and which argued that the emancipation of the working class was indeed the act of the working class itself. The new activists often found in it ideas which they had half worked out for themselves, but had never been able to reconcile with the caricature of Marxism presented by both the East and the West. Finally, the paper was very sharp on what had to be done. It distinguished itself from the rest of the movement of 1968 by its insistence on focussing on the working class. And within the working class movement, it distinguished itself by its detailed analysis of what the ruling class was trying to do to workplace organisation with productivity deals based on pay systems like measured day work on the one hand, and the plans for anti-union legislation on the other. While the rest of the left more or less ignored the one and simply denounced the other as 'the beginnings of a corporate state', **Socialist Worker** insisted both were part of a single attempt by the ruling class to weaken shop floor control and to strengthen the hand of the bureaucracies within the unions. This was spelt out, week after week, in detailed and often long articles by Tony Cliff, Roger Cox, Peter Bain, John Setters (Roger Rosewell), Richard Hyman and others. One of the highest forms of praise the paper got in that period was when the hippy **International Times** complained that to understand **Socialist Worker** you had to be a shop steward in a car factory of five years standing!

If **Socialist Worker** took off in the years 1968-70, its greatest success came in the period of heightened industrial struggle after the return of the Tory government of Edward Heath. These years saw the highest level of industrial conflict since the 1920s, with major national disputes in the postal service, mining, engineering, building and docks, big conflicts in particular car plants, a succession of political strikes against the Industrial Relations Act, and the spread

of militant trade union action for the first time to groups like the hospital workers and civil servants.

The formula which **Socialist Worker** had based itself on now yielded marvellous results. The print order rose from the 13,000 of 1970 to 28,000 during the miners strike of 1972, and had stabilised at about 27,000 in March 1973. It then rose again at the end of that year, reaching 40,000 during the 1974 miners' strike and even touching 53,000 for one issue before the crucial 1974 election over 'who rules the country'.

There was a dialectical interaction between the growth of the paper's sales and the membership of the organisation which produced it. The paper's circulation would grow among people who would not join the IS – either because they were not convinced of its ideas or because they did not feel happy in what seemed very much a student organisation. Then at a certain point, the IS leadership would sense many of them could be recruited, if only there was a fight to transform the organisation so that they would feel at home. The IS membership would surge forward. Then the problem was to create a new periphery by building up the circulation of the paper again.

But this process would only work when objective conditions were right. The membership did rise in 1971 and again through intensive recruitment drives in 1973-74. But an attempt to boost it with an 'autumn-winter campaign' in 1972 was unsuccessful, despite the high level of class struggle in that year. It was almost as if, when he working class was winning, activists would buy a revolutionary newspaper, but saw no point in joining a revolutionary organisation.

The growth in the sales of the paper was accompanied by an increase in the resources at its disposal. It grew in size to 12 pages in 1971 and 16 in 1972, its staff grew until it

employed several full time journalists, including writers of the calibre of Paul Foot and Laurie Flynn, its design came to match the best in Fleet Street, and it began to be able to do something it never could before, to use photographs to hammer home political points. Increased resources enabled the paper to carry well researched ‘exposures’ – of Bloody Sunday in Derry, of a pit disaster in Yorkshire, of a strike breaking firm in East London and of the ‘small company’ (in fact, a subsidiary of the vast Vestey empire) behind the imprisonment of the Pentonville dockers. These cut through many of the arguments of the government and the media and gained a new respect for the paper even among people who did not agree with its politics. It seemed to many of our supporters it really was becoming the ‘revolutionary **Daily Mirror**’.

Yet for all its popular presentation, it continued to carry the old mixture of reports on a mass of different struggles, serious analysis of national and international political events, discussion of the strategy of the government and the employers, criticisms of the stands of the various brands of reformism, and well written expositions of basic Marxist theory. It continued to combine ‘optimism of the will’ with ‘pessimism of the intellect’ – for instance warning week after week of the dangerous concessions made by the leaders of the Upper Clyde Shipyards work-in, and insisting everything was *not* rosy after the victory at Pentonville in an article (by Tony Cliff) which warned that ‘the dockers will pay dearly’ for the compromises of the TGWU union leadership.

It was this combination, as much as any special journalistic flair or technical brilliance, which built the scrappy sheet of 1968 into the impressive 16 pager of 1974.

Socialist Worker **1974-84**

> In 1974 the miners' strike led to the fall of the Tory government, just as the world was hit by the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s. Cabinet ministers were muttering to each other about 'the end of civilisation as we know it'. Working class militancy was on the increase and seemed able to break through any obstacle. The number of workers prepared to listen to revolutionary ideas was greater than it had been for many decades.

Not surprisingly, those of us who had seen the print order of **Socialist Worker** zoom up from 8,000 to 40,000 in five years expected the upward trend to continue. We felt that now was the time to reach out to an even wider audience of workers radicalised by the events of the winter of 1973-74. In an important article in **International Socialism** Tony Cliff argued now was the time really to apply the lesson of Lenin's **Pravda**:

> One of the problems facing the International Socialists in Britain at present is how to build a bridge between our small but growing organisation and the rising number of militants and socialists inside the working class ... How can a revolutionary organisation of a few thousand relate to the tens of thousands of workers who are moving spontaneously to our politics? We can learn a great deal from Lenin's use of **Pravda** as an organiser in the years 1912-14.

> This involved 'a concerted effort to turn **Socialist Worker** buyers into sellers, so creating a wide network of sellers and supporters of the paper'. But it also meant, as Cliff put it in the organisation's **Internal Bulletin**, a change in the paper itself:

> We need ... a clear decision that items written by or told by workers *have* to find a place in the paper ... The question of

> workers' writing for the paper raises the question of of the identification of workers with the paper. In bourgeois journalism the hierarchical concept in which a small bunch of people from the centre supply the consumption needs of the millions is the prevailing one. For a workers' paper the question of the *involvement* of the 'consumer' is central. The abolition of the abyss between producer and consumer is central. Therefore a story written by a worker that perhaps will interest directly only a few tens of workers directly next to him at his place of work is of fantastic importance. This is the way the paper becomes rooted deeper in the class.

> There was resistance to Cliffs formulation (above all from Jim Higgins, who had been national secretary in 1972-3, and from Roger Protz, editor of the paper until the spring of 1974). But it was resistance whose alternative perspective was one of a paper oriented to 'politically experienced militants' – something which virtually everyone actually involved directly in building the International Socialists in 1973-4 rejected because we knew the new generation of militants often had no 'political experience' at all, although they were all too eager to absorb the revolutionary politics of our organisation.

On top of that, some at least of the supporters of that position believed in a different perspective for magically bridging the gap between our organisation and the class – through the formulation of 'transitional demands'. This was something we had always argued would lead to a shift to the right and accommodation to the reformist bureaucracy. Experience was to prove us right in this respect in the years 1974-79: those 'politically experienced militants' who followed the path of 'demands on the Labour government' were bureaucratised and pulled to the right.

So the organisation set out to implement the perspective accepted by the majority of the editorial team on the paper and outlined by Cliff.

Neither the sales of the paper nor the membership of our organisation grew as we had hoped. For reasons we have explained elsewhere (see Tony Cliff, *The balance of class forces today*, **IS 2:6**; Chris Harman, *The crisis of the European revolutionary left*, **IS 2:4** and Alex Callinicos, *The rank and file movement today*, **IS 2:17**) the Labour government succeeded in containing industrial militancy through a policy of wholesale concessions in its first year, followed by an agreement with the trade union bureaucracy for very heavy policing of wage claims just as rising redundancies were sapping militancy anyway. By 1975 and 1976 the number of strikes and the number of workers involved in them were both falling to much lower levels than in the early 1970s. Many of those militants won to revolutionary politics in the previous period now found themselves isolated inside the workplaces, and under considerable pressure to accommodate themselves to the trade union bureaucracy by a rightward shift in their politics.

Selling **Socialist Worker** certainly did not get easier. If anything it was slightly more difficult than it was before, and instead of circulation rising, it fell a little. The print order by November 1975 was about 30,000, and payment was received at the centre for 14,910 of these (this probably underestimated the true paid sales; the less well run of the organisation's branches have always had a certain tendency to use some of the money from paper sales for other purposes, like paying for coaches to demonstrations, fulfilling targets set in membership levies and so on).

In these circumstances, the efforts to shift the paper to becoming more of a paper *written by* workers could not

amount to a great deal in practice. Militants were on the defensive and their articles tended often simply to regurgitate what they had read in the paper the week before rather than to fill it with the live experiences of a class which is discovering its own power through struggle. Indeed, there were even occasions in which articles would be written in the office and then the name of workers appended afterwards!

We came to terms with this state of affairs in 1975 and 1976 because the real world made it clear to us there was no alternative. But we thought this was a temporary state of affairs, which would soon give rise to a new militancy and a return to rising sales.

The membership of our organisation did grow in 1976, chiefly through our willingness to oppose a tide of anti-immigrant racism which the Labour government and the Labour Party capitulated to completely. Carried way with this revival in our fortunes, we renamed out organisation the Socialist Workers Party and looked forward to great things. Our prophecies seemed fulfilled in 1977 when there was a slight revival of the industrial struggle. I myself wrote a document at the beginning of the year, with the enthusiastic and unanimous support of our leadership, which started off, 'The lull is over. The upturn in struggle we have been predicting for three years is now taking place'.

That year did see some bitter industrial struggles – especially the mass picketing of Grunwicks in North London in the summer and the firemen's strike of the following winter. It also saw further substantial recruitment to our party, as we gained national publicity after leading a successful mass demonstration against a Nazi march in Lewisham, South East London.

All this led us to expect our paper sales to resume the massive growth rates of the early 70s. Instead, they

stagnated and the print order continued to hover around the 30,000 mark. It was easy to draw the conclusion that there was something drastically wrong with the paper.

There *was* something wrong with it. The industrial revival of 1977 was, in fact, a false dawn. Most workers saw no alternative to acquiescing in what the government was doing, and the minority of militants were very much on the defensive. But we were still working to the formula for the upturn paper of 1969-74. Indeed, in some respects we were working on the assumption the paper had to be more 'popular' than it had been then. It had been redesigned in 1976 to a format which meant printing shorter articles and fewer words; we didn't realise this made it more difficult to carry the serious analyses of what was wrong with the movement.

I remember one party member complaining to me that the paper was like 'predigested baby food' – it just did not contain the ideas socialists needed to hold their own in argument. Another made the same point when he said it was like a Chinese meal – you thought it had filled you up, but you were hungry again an hour later. But we dismissed these complaints as the reactions of 'moaners' and continued as before.

Eventually all our problems did come to a head; but without anyone seeing clearly what needed to be done. The editorial team split down the middle, between those who insisted on sticking to the old formula of a paper essentially the same as that from 1968-76, and those who said that what was wrong with the paper was that it was not 'popular enough' – that it needed more 'exciting investigative journalism', more graphics and pictures, more on the things workers were really interested in, like sport and pop music, fewer heavy articles, less industrial coverage. The innovators inevitably won, since they were offering an alternative to a

formula which was breeding dissatisfaction (albeit an alternative that went in exactly the *wrong* direction), while the rest of us were merely offering more of the same. The paper was 'relaunched' in the spring of 1978 with a new format designed to appeal to the large numbers of youth involved in the carnivals of the Anti-Nazi League in 1978 (which earnt it the epithet the 'punk paper') and to those active in other movements like those of women and gays.

The relaunch could not succeed in the aim it had set itself. Being against the Nazis in 1978 did not automatically make people into revolutionary socialists. It *could* be the beginnings of politicisation, providing it was followed up by political argument – and those arguments were much harder when the class was by and large passive than they had been ten years before, at the beginning of a real upturn in working class struggle. And so even the best paper in the world was only likely to get a very small audience among the 100,000 who thronged to ANL carnivals. The downgrading of hard political argument and coverage of the class struggle in **Socialist Worker** meant it could not even hold on to those from this milieu who did buy it. A year after the 'relaunch' both the print order and the paid circulation of the paper were down by about two thousand on the figure of 1977.

The experiments with the paper did not last long. The core membership of the party rejected it out of hand at the 1978 conference, and soon efforts were being made to return to the 'workers' paper' formula, as a document from the editorial staff spelt out clearly late in 1979:

> One of the problems facing the SWP in the coming months is to relate to the growing numbers of militant workers ... .The paper must be a workers' paper ... The paper must smell of the workers' vodka. In other words, not a paper written by professional writers for workers, but a paper written by

workers, a paper which deals with the subjects which concern ordinary working class people, as well as workers' struggles ...

This formula could no more be put into effect in 1979 than in 1975. The downturn in the class struggle resumed with a vengeance with the further onset of recession in 1980, and those producing the paper were faced with the unenviable job of trying to achieve the impossible. They did their best, often at considerable personal sacrifice, but could not produce a paper which would attract and hold the new audience necessary to raise its paid circulation permanently above a figure of about 10-12,000 and its print order above about 25,000 (with the coming of mass unemployment the paid sale figure became even less reliable than previously, since many thousands of papers were sold at half price to the unemployed). Yet the paper was no more satisfactory to militants who bought it in a hope of finding answers to the problems besetting them than it had been in 1976.

The revolutionary paper today

Producing a revolutionary paper in the 1980s is more difficult, but just as challenging and just as important as it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The odds in every workers struggle are much higher now, in a period of never ending world crisis, than they were then. The need to win a minority of workers to a

revolutionary perspective is greater than ever. The paper remains absolutely vital to this.

It was only a little over two years ago that we on **Socialist Worker** came to terms with producing the sort of paper which was necessary at a time of demoralisation and retreat. This was part of the general process by which, over a five year period, the Socialist Workers Party grasped how to cope with a situation quite different to that in which most of our leadership had received their political baptism.

We discovered the paper could only satisfy the needs of the members and close contacts if it answered the questions that continually beset them: Why were defeats happening? What could be done about them? How do you maintain an insistence on the revolutionary role of the working class when 99 per cent of the workers you meet accept the bosses' propaganda about the crisis? Even when it came to reporting industrial disputes, we found it was more important to answer the question, 'What is to be done?' than to explain the strikers' case.

We also found that in answering the problems of the members and close contacts, we were also dealing with questions raised by anyone who was new to socialist ideas. For although they needed a restatement of the arguments for socialism and against capitalism, they also needed to come to terms with the defeat and setbacks the movement was facing. This was the precondition for them seeing any point to joining a revolutionary organisation.

So the paper published longer, more analytical articles than before (with each issue containing at least two articles of more than 1200 words), and put much more stress on what had to be done than on simple reflection of experience or exposures of what was wrong with people's living and working conditions.

This did not, and could not, mean ignoring other issues. During the Falklands War, for example, so small was the minority opposing the war that **Socialist Worker**'s front page every week had to be more or less a poster opposing the war, and pages inside had to be devoted to answering the latest set of lies about the war from the government. Again, every issue of the paper had to contain material attacking the Tory government, the role of the police and so on.

The key point, however, was all the time to try to relate to the issues which concerned the minority of workers who wanted a fight back – whether the Labour left could deliver the goods, why miners' ballots kept going against strike action, why *Solidarnosc* in Poland had been beaten and so on.

The new shift in the paper was a success, in that it won back the interest of supporters who had only half-heartedly read it previously. However, like any turn by a revolutionary organisation it contained a danger of its own. Party members often acted as if the paper was really not of a great deal of interest to anyone outside the party. The habit was not broken of seeing the selling of the paper as a form of self sacrifice you avoided if you could (a sort of revolutionary Lent), and although the sales were not as poor as they had been at some points, they were still quite low.

But the downturn is not something static. It is a period of defeat and retreats for the working class movement, but it is also a period in which quite large battles suddenly break out, even if they are usually defensive battles – the steel strike in 1980, the rail and hospital strike in 1982, the water, telecoms, residential social workers and Warrington printers' dispute in 1983. In any such struggle, a few workers are radicalised and respond much as larger groups of workers do in a period of working class offensive. Or, another way of putting it, in the middle of the downturn,

there are mini-upturns, struggles which give you an inkling what a real upturn would be like.

At such times, the fleeting experience of workers' confidence, initiative and power has to be fed into the paper, even while remaining aware that it will only gain permanence insofar as it is fitted into a more generalised perspective of the struggle for socialism. In the same way, at such moments the members of the revolutionary organisation have to use the paper to organise the activist minority in the workplaces, making sure articles by them or with quotations from them appear in the paper and are used to build the paper's sales in the workplaces.

Enormous flexibility and responsiveness are required of the staff, the local correspondents and the sellers of the paper in such a period. One week, what the paper will desperately need is the reports of workers' initiative, with quotations from workers as to how this was taken. The next it will be quite substantial analyses by the editorial staff as to why the government and the union bureaucracy were able to stifle such initiative and what needs to be done to counter that.

The past can, as Marx put it, weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Years of not understanding the period we are in and the sort of paper needed to fit can easily lead to a failure to use the paper properly every time there is an outbreak of struggle. But if revolutionaries do not seize such opportunities to build their paper and their influence, then they simply rise up with the tide of struggle, and sink when it subsides. They do not begin to create that permanent network of socialist activists inside every workplace that alone can counter the pernicious influence of the reformist bureaucracy and break the vicious cycle of defeat.

Fortunately, there are signs of the members of the Socialist Workers Party understanding this. The reaction to

the series of large-scale, defensive, struggles since November 1983 (Warrington, GCHQ, the miners, the teachers' wages battle) has been quite different to our reaction on previous occasions when the level of struggle rose in the midst of the downturn – in 1977 and in the winter of 1978-79. We have not made the mistake we made in 1977 of seeing an automatic ending of the period of defeat and demoralisations. But neither have we made the mistake we made in 1978-79 of producing a paper that does not relate wholeheartedly to even the faintest stirring of the class.

In recent months our members have begun to relearn how to get some of the life of the struggle into the paper, yet have not forgotten to deal with the all-important questions of 'what's gone wrong' and 'what is to be done about it'. And by intervening in struggles *with the paper*, they have succeeded in shifting its sales up for the first time in eight years – to a print order of 31,000 and a paid sale of around 14,000 a week (more if you take into account half price sales, discounts to newsagents and so on). Such figures are even more impressive if you compare them with those of such rivals on the left as **Tribune** (whose paid sale is reckoned to be less than 10,000) and **Socialist Action** (this latest reincarnation of the 1968 **Black Dwarf** is still only printing 7,000 copies, as few as its predecessor did 16 years ago!).

There seems little doubt that the sales of **Socialist Worker** – and the influence of revolutionary ideas – can be raised still further if effort is put in while the present heightened level of industrial conflict persists. There is a new mood of confidence and militancy among a *minority* of workers. This may well be short-lived, since the trade union bureaucracy is doing its best to bring it do an end and workers have little recent experience of independent, rank and file organisation of struggle. But even on the most

pessimistic perspective, socialists still have a one-off opportunity to influence a minority of activists with their ideas. The revolutionary paper is now, as so often in the past, the key to doing so.

By maintaining **Socialist Worker** through the downturn of the last ten years, we have ensured the survival of a more powerful current in the backward, bureaucratised, reformist working class movement of Britain than exists in many European countries with much healthier political traditions. Despite all the problems it has had, the paper has enabled the revolutionary organisation to keep a living contact with those struggles which have taken place and thus to sustain its own membership at roughly the peak 1974 level.

Now we have to use every period of revived struggle, however short-lived, to reach out to new militants with the paper, to use it to make them understand that they are part of a much wider network of people who want a fight back, and in the process, to increase both their effectiveness and the influence of the revolutionary socialist party within the class.

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