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"Trotskyism in Britain in the 1930's"

We shall discuss some political problems and how the Trotskyists faced them in the 1930's. My account is coloured to some extent by my own experiences, but is based on the documents of the period, and I try to make possible an informed discussion, and not to present my own speculations as if they are conclusions.

During the 1920's in Britain the workers were having to deal with the changes in the place of British imperialism in the world, which the end of World War I had revealed. The old basic exporting industries, coal, cotton and ship-building, had largely ceased to be competitive, and the employers saw no way out but cutting wages and lengthening working hours. Falling food prices helped to mitigate the tensions between the classes, but it broke out in the General Strike of 1926. The workers showed a lack of combativity.

The workers' experiences during the war, followed by set-backs in industrial struggles, led them to make great efforts to get representatives of what they regarded as their party, the Labour Party, elected to Parliament and local authorities. The revolutionary examples of 1917 - 1923 were not wasted, but in Britain the experience was still lacking from which they could learn that, to get real power, they need a Bolshevik-Leninist party. They wanted to test how far forward they could go, while avoiding the social and economic upsets which imposed such hardship in Central and Eastern Europe.

They placed their confidence in the promises of the Fabians and trade union leaders that the Labour Party could be the instrument of social change. Even the most advanced workers, who doubted that bourgeois democracy could deliver the expected results, had illusions in syndicalism.

The first Labour Government in 1924, which relied on Liberal support, achieved little. A trend, which was to grow in the 1930's, arose in the belief that the workers had to get a better control on their leaders as well as getting them elected.

The defeat of the General Strike led to renewed efforts to get a Labour Government. This, in 1929, was also a minority government. But the reformists' dreams were shattered only a few weeks later by the Wall Street Crash, due partly to US and British investment in German industry, the markets for which had been closed by the post-war treaties, and partly to a speculative boom in USA and Latin America. General depression followed in Britain: unemployment soared and unemployment benefit and other social services were threatened.

In summer 1931 the Labour Cabinet collapsed and was driven from office. Great possibilities for rallying workers opened up, but the left-ist line of the Communist Party, which denounced Labour as a "capitalist third party" and stood 26 candidates, splitting the Labour vote, prevented it from widening its influence. Already the workers had seen the Communist Party tail in 1926 behind the union bureaucrats. In 1931 they saw it as an obstacle to the unity of the movement, and the Labour leaders were able to strengthen their claim to be the exclusive representatives of the workers.

After 1931, we can see the workers patiently building up the trade union membership in the new, mass-production industries and, between 1933 and 1937, strengthening both the Labour Party and its left-wing, in the hope of warding off the threats of fascism and war.

The first people who can in any real sense be called Trotskyists in Britain were organised in the winter of 1931 - 32. They get the name "Balham Group", because that was the name of the unit of the Communist Party of which their leaders were members. Naville had come from France earlier and one of the Indian comrades round Ridley attended a meeting of the International Secretariat, but the differences between that group and Bolshevism were too great, though Trotskyism won Hugo Dewar from them. Then Shachtman and Glotzer came to Europe from USA, and cemented the influence of the "Militant", the paper of the Communist League of America.

Groves had found that the ultra-left-ism, which he expressed in his early writings, proved in his own experience to be an obstacle between the party and the working-class. Unlike others, he was able to trace the ultra-left-ism to its origin in the bureaucratic centrism of Stalin's dominating group in the USSR.

The Communist Party of Great Britain had always been weak and confused. The British sect-

ion of the International Left Opposition was led by Reg Groves, by Harry Wicks, who had spent three years at the Lenin School in Moscow, and Hugo Dewar. These comrades accepted that the Bolshevik-Leninists must thoroughly test the possibility of reforming the parties of the Communist International before writing them off as ir-remediably lost to the working-class. They at once ran into the problem of getting their message to fellow-members of the Communist Party, some of whom, to be sure, were unhappy about the stagnation of the party, and of penetrating the obstacles with which the party apparatus, Stalin's political body-guard and thought-police, tried to surround them. Should they at once issue a searing denunciation of Stalinism? If they did so, amid the let-down following the Tories' electoral victory, would they not get themselves excluded without the chance of a fight?

They decided to explore the possibilities of clandestine work from the inside, and distributed anonymously to selected members a series of well-produced brochures, presenting what Trotsky actually wrote, as distinct from the distortions normal in the party press.

The leadership soon wrong-footed them. It mounted a discussion on trade union work. This was intended to relax some of the difficulties which the extremes of the ultra-left line imposed on the members; it reversed the earlier prohibition on members joining reformist-led trade unions. The Trotskyists wanted to discuss where the old "line" came from and how it came to be changed, and the leadership isolated them by presenting them as being opposed to the change.

Then in August 1932 the axe fell. The "Balham Group" had already been under suspicion in autumn 1931, when they co-operated with Labour Party and ILP militants in open-air anti-Tory public meetings. The Party did not mind getting the publicity but did not like this fraternising with reformists. But they were finally thrown out because, having put together an anti-war committee in South-West London consisting almost entirely of workers from trade unions and the Labour Party, they arranged for it to issue a declaration based on the original oath taken by soldiers in the Red Army, declaring that the Red Army is the army of the international working class. This infringed the Stalinists' basic tenet, the theory of Socialism in a Single country, and threatened the Kremlin's deals with bourgeois powers; it could not be tolerated.

When the excitement of the struggle against exclusion quieted down, the Trotskyists had to work out how to find a basis in the class struggle and the workers' movement from which to go on trying to influence members of the Communist Party. The political tide was already beginning to run in favour of testing the possibility of controlling a Labour Government, but the Trotskyists had more immediate problems.

They demanded that in Germany the Communist Party must work whole-heartedly for a United Front with the Social-Democratic Party and for the unification of the divided trade unions, in order to advance, within a united working class, Transitional Demands, such as workers' control in industry and an economic plan to relieve unemployment by collaborating in the industrialisation of the USSR, with a view to forming a workers' government, as a first step towards a United Socialist States of Europe.

Then, in Spring 1933, Hitler came to power, and lost no time in destroying every vestige of those matchless organisations which the German workers had built up over half a century, and in taking the entire political life of Germany into the grip of the Nazi party.

Early in April, the Presidium of the Communist International in Moscow resolved that the policies of the German Communist Party had been completely correct; the apparatuses of the Communist Parties bent themselves to stifling any discussion on the share of the Kremlin in the responsibility for the disaster.

On May Day 1933 the British Trotskyists produced the first Trotskyist paper in this country, the "Red Flag". In that summer they had to adjust to a rapid succession of changes. The international discussion had convinced Trotsky that there could no longer be any hope of winning the Comintern back to Leninism. It was impossible, as Trotsky wrote, to stay in the same international movement as Stalin.

If so, what about the USSR? We had to regard the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as the enemy of the Soviet masses, while, in order to defend the gains of the Revolution which the USSR represented, we had to help to create internationally the conditions in which a new Communist Party could be created there.

Where, then, was the human material to be found, out of which to construct the new Commun-

ist parties? Around the world there were already several groupings of workers who wanted to be revolutionaries and had broken away in frustration from Social-Democratic or Stalinist parties. At the same time, these groupings revealed themselves to be unable, by their own limited political experience, to work out how to develop Bolshevik programmes and practice: they oscillated about between reformism, Stalinism and Leninism. We called them the "centrist" organisations.

One of the largest of these was the I.L.P. in Britain. Trotsky urged the Groves-Wicks-Dewar group to negotiate an entry into the I.L.P., in order to go, side by side with the workers there, through their experiences and to test how far the I.L.P. could throw off the bad influences of its past and aim at uniting the working class and grasping the need for the Fourth International.

The Trotskyists dropped the title, "British Section of the International Left Opposition" and called themselves the "Communist League". Then, to Trotsky's fury, they split in December 1933 on the question of the I.L.P. The "majority", led by Groves with the support of the older and more experienced trade union cadres from the Communist Party, opposed the "turn" to the I.L.P. on the ground that meant the loss of their political identity.

The "minority", which made its way into the I.L.P. early in 1934, consisted of some young industrial workers in East London, Bert Matlow, the experienced left-winger already in the I.L.P. and the much-maligned three former students from L.S.E., Harber, Kirby and Margaret Johns.

By then the I.L.P. had already lost much of its possibilities, but by October 1934 the "entrists" attracted round themselves about a hundred people (most of whom had earlier been in touch with "Red Flag") into their open fraction, "The Marxist Group in the I.L.P.". This produced eight issues of its "Marxist Bulletin", which explained why the members of the I.L.P. should turn towards the rank and file of the Labour Party and (later) why the I.L.P. should declare for the Fourth International. Addressing himself to the members of the I.L.P., Trotsky had already written:

"The I.L.P. broke away from the Labour Party. That was correct... But, while breaking away from the Labour Party, it was necessary immediately to turn towards it. Of course, this was not to court its leaders, or to pay them bitter-sweet compliments, or even to suppress their criminal acts... One must seek a way to the reformist masses, not through the favour of their leaders but against the leaders..."

The "Marxist Group in the I.L.P." reached the peak of its influence at the I.L.P. national conference at Easter 1935. By that time the Parliamentarians and pacifists who controlled the I.L.P., who had no intention of waging a struggle against reformism, were helplessly watching the organisation fall apart under them. A desultory discussion opened about perspective in the "Marxist Group" and a few people went off into the Labour Party, but others stayed in the I.L.P. because they still hoped that it might develop into a centre of opposition to support for war, though, for all their efforts, they could not build it up.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party League of Youth was growing rapidly with the recruitment of young workers who detested their dead-end jobs and did not want to be conscripted as their fathers had been. The Socialist League took a position on war not greatly unlike that of Marxism.

What was the Socialist League? In autumn 1932, Ernest Bevin and G.D.H. Cole had seen the need to create some political home for those right-wing people in the I.L.P. who did not want to leave the Labour Party. The Socialist League was formed, with the permission of the right wing and accepted into affiliation. It was expected to consist of a few intellectuals who would do research and offer advice to the right wing when asked for it. Yet within a year it had driven out its original leadership and attracted a number of able, left-reformist people, who began at the 1933 Labour Party Conference to develop serious demands for large-scale nationalisation of industry and finance. Its membership rose by 1934 to about 4,000, and at the Labour Party Conference in that year it clashed sharply with the "official" doctrine on war, that, provided that the League of Nations declared a war to be a "just" war, the British workers should be prepared to surrender their independence and make all the sacrifices demanded by the British bourgeoisie. This apart, the leaders of the Socialist League had little idea how to take advantage of their position.

Trotskyists and Stalinists were soon locked in combat for influence in the League of Youth and the Socialist League. Both of these organisations were nearing a crisis, due to the

pressure upon the left of the reformist bureaucracy and of the Stalinists.

Trotsky had for some months been urging the "Marxist Group in the I.L.P." to prepare to turn into the Labour Party and to take with it what forces it could from the I.L.P. We have an exchange of letters between him and the "Marxist Group" early in 1936, in which he suggested how they could best mobilise their forces. (My article about this, based on the Harvard Archives and first published in French in the "Cahiers Leon Trotsky" is for sale on the bookstall). At the end of July 1936, the International Pre-Conference for the Fourth International re-iterated the same recommendation.

By this time we had three separate journals claiming to present Trotsky's ideas. The publication of each group revealed its distinctive orientation. Of Groves' group, which had begun again to produce "Red Flag", some were in the Labour Party and some not. They had been acting as individuals since having decided in Summer 1934 to do away with any "group line" and to meet periodically as friends for discussion. Naturally some of their people had drifted away. The remainder formed themselves into a "Marxist League".

Groves had joined the Labour Party and the Socialist League in autumn 1934. His abilities soon won him prominence, but he tended to play down criticisms of Stalinism, and his allies remained at the level of left reformism, and tended to look down on the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky as a "personal" matter. Following the Moscow Trials, Groves had to defend the very existence of the Socialist League and its rejection of support for imperialism in war against the Stalinists, who in the end succeeded in persuading its leaders to wind it up "in the interests of unity". He was exposed to a devastating blast from the Stalinists, for which his allies were un-prepared. Most of them abandoned him.

The "Red Flag" published detailed refutations of the lies told by the defendants in the "Moscow Trials" about Trotsky, but they did not manage to make the issues seem relevant to people who in a confused way were seeking a road to peace. They did good work in maintaining the Labour Party League of Youth in South-West London, but in general their youth work did not take up effective criticism of the leaders of the Socialist League. "Red Flag" finally ceased to appear after the Barcelona uprising in Spain, in which the G.P.U. repressed the workers and mounted a witch-hunt against the P.O.U.M. and the Trotskyists; among their victims was Erwin Wolf, a member of the International Secretariat.

James' group attracted those who disagreed with Trotsky's advice to seek a new way to orient towards the Labour left. Some wanted to stay in the I.L.P., while others wanted to start a new, "open" group. They claimed that they could do trade union work as effectively if they were outside the Labour Party as if they were in it: Trotsky denied this. Their journal, "Fight for the Fourth International" was well-written and produced, but was devoted almost entirely to the propaganda of ideas. It tended to soften Trotsky's criticisms of the P.O.U.M. and the centrist "London Bureau". James, Wicks and Sumner (also of the Groves group) played important parts in the work of the Trotsky Defence Committee.

Thirdly, we had the pioneers of "entrism" in the Labour Party. The work started round the journal "Youth Militant", which contested with the Stalinists for influence among the increasingly restless Socialist youth and aimed at forming a stable group there.

Their tactics were based on those of the French comrades, who had made big gains as a result of "entry" into the Socialist Youth and the Socialist Party in 1934. The International Secretariat closely monitored the Labour youth "entry" which Charlie van Gelderen and Ken Alexander led. Their experience provided the basis for Denzil Harber and the ex-C.P. full-timer, Starkey Jackson, to form a group to draw together the former members of the "Marxist Group in the I.L.P.", who with their contacts were joining the Labour Party. This became "The Militant Group in the Labour Party".

We know today that the perspective of "Youth Militant" was over-optimistic. It expected that the experience of a short entry in France would be repeated in Britain, and that the impact of struggles in Spain and in France would lead here too to a rapid evolution among young workers. They advanced the project that by Spring 1936 a substantial force of young workers would want to break out of the grip of the reformist leaders, and would form an independent revolutionary youth league, in which Trotskyists could expect to have great influence. This did not happen. The Stalinists were able to isolate "Youth Militant" as splitters, despite which it won some valuable youth cadres.

By the end of 1936 the "Militant Group" was easily the largest of the three groups. It

too expected an early rise in industrial struggle. However, it was rather more explicit about the aims of its "entry" work than most of the other groups which have experimented with "entry" in later years, though it too mis-judged the means by which to consolidate its influence among the left-ward moving workers whom it could win from the influence of reformism and Stalinism. It paid for its mistake.

In times of crisis in the past, there had been examples of substantial numbers of workers breaking away to the left of Social-Democratic parties when they had had to conclude that Social-Democracy could no longer fulfill their aspirations and broke away to form revolutionary or even left reformist parties, large enough to be influential. In Germany in 1916 a very substantial minority of the Social-Democratic Party left it to form the so-called Independents. The same thing happened again in Germany in 1931, to form the SAP. In Britain such a split would have even greater historical impact because it would affect the leadership of trade unions as well.

Harber and Jackson expected to "split" in the Labour Party to come soon. They also foresaw it as a "clean break" rather than a disintegration into many fragments. They also expected that the "Militant Group" would have an important political role in it alongside the left reformist and centrist elements in its leadership, recognising that there would have to be an on-going struggle to win the new organisation to a Bolshevik programme, to accept the necessity for the United Front of the working class and that of the Fourth International.

Harber had been convinced by the confusion, which resulted in the French Trotskyist organisation from the refusal of Pierre Frank and Molinier to leave the Socialist Party at the height of the crisis in 1935 when the revolutionary youth were expelled, that it was no less necessary to be clear about when to end our "entry" work / <sup>than</sup> when to begin it. The "Militant Group" would fight against being prematurely excluded, by defending inter-party democracy, but would have to be sure to recognise the moment of the best prospect for leading a break.

What did the members of the "Militant Group" do? They involved themselves in building up local Labour Parties, using canvasses to seek out and bring into the Labour Party militants prepared to oppose the right wing, especially young workers. They used control of branches of the League of Youth to organise open-air meetings near factories to denounce the fascists: young workers stewarded these meetings.

They advanced general Trotskyist positions in incessant conflict with the Stalinists: exposures of the Popular Front and the "Moscow Trials" helped to educate them. They also used the National Council of Labour Colleges and the Co-operative members' organisations as debating grounds. But they could also study the politics and internal workings of the Labour Party apparatus. Some too were active in their unions. These activities were to some extent undertaken spontaneously or in the light of local decisions, but the group was well organised and Jackson's experience was a valuable source of advice on local work.

The leaders of the "Militant Group" had expected that the Socialist League would provide the means by which they could organise common struggle with left-ward moving sympathisers, who certainly were there. But hardly had its forces coalesced when the combined pressure of reformism and Stalinism on the left reformist leadership of the Socialist League led that leadership to disband the organisation.

The "Militant Group" believed that the Socialist League had to be replaced, (if only because they have already experienced a successful "periphery" organisation in the "Marxist Group in the I.L.P.") However, 1937 was a time of general down-turn; they tried to offer to the remnants of the Socialist League a ready-made replacement for it, which they called the "Militant Labour League", the programme of which was that of the Trotskyists with the exception that it did not call for the Fourth International. This drew in few of those whom they hoped to attract.

If I <sup>seem</sup> to tell you a lot about the "Militant Group" and about the next group, the "Workers' International League", that is because there is more to be told about them.

In spring 1937 the "Militant Group" received the welcome accession of four Trotskyist militants from South Africa, including Ralph Lee, Millie Lee and Heaton Lee (no relative). At first they integrated well, but in the late autumn Ralph Lee appears to have feared that the leadership, inspired by motives of clique-ism, was excluding him and Millie from responsibilities for which they were fitted. Like lightning from a clear sky, the London members found themselves in a bitter faction fight.

A split followed almost immediately, and some one-third of the members formed a new group, the "Workers' International League". The split needs discussing, not only because the W.I.L. received a great deal of publicity during the war, but because the politics of its majority have coloured those of Trotskyists for many years.

We cannot doubt that Ralph Lee and his associates were motivated by the highest political aims. I must emphasise that in the conditions of relative industrial peace the Stalinists, the reformists and the centrists could all cut Trotskyists off from the possibility of gaining influence in the mass organisations. If we were not rooted in the working class that was not for lack of trying. The un-remitting pressure of our enemies in the conditions of 1937 frustrated comrades' hopes and ambitions. The split was simply the point at which the tension broke.

But the split also suggests that the group and its cadre were fragile, despite their progress in forming new branches and increasing paper sales.

A lively controversy is still going on among those who have studied the documents. Some assert that the recently-formed "Militant Group" had already exhausted its possibilities, that its leaders were exhausted by several years' struggle and that the split was a positive step forward. Others, like myself, believe that subjectivism concealed genuine political differences about how to operate as "entrists", that the "Militant Group" still had plenty of life left in it and that the cause of the break-up of its cadre two years later has to be sought elsewhere. I am, of course, open to conviction on this point.

It may be that a split in the "Militant Group" could have become necessary later, but I think it was premature anyway in 1937. It let loose Gerry Healy on the world to develop those destructive tendencies which had been held more or less in check. But the W.I.L. and its successor, the Revolutionary Communist Party, embodied and has communicated to others a peculiar political character, which, indeed, Karl Radek had formulated in his debates with Paul Levi in 1919, when he wrote of:

"... the puerile conception that we have, that there are the small Communist parties on one side and counter-revolutionaries on the other, and nothing but empty air <sup>between</sup> from which starting-point we can construct our organisation for the world revolution. This conception has nothing to do with the method of Communism. It results from infantile Communist sectarianism".

Possibly recruits from the Communists had an influence on the leaders of the W.I.L. when it empirically abandoned its attitude to the Labour Party early in the war. But one result was that in 1945, following the electoral victory of the Labour Party, the R.C.P. majority found itself beached, high and dry. Its war-time allies in industry no longer saw any reason for its existence; they wanted the Labour Government to be given the chance to show what its promises and its methods could produce. Not only did this problem contribute to the collapse of the R.C.P. in 1949, but it handed on to those who have entered our movement in later years a legacy of problems from the history of which Healy, Grant and others have cut them off.

We had no means of knowing the warning that Trotsky had already written in 1935:

"If one seeks to correct the leadership and its position in a small organisation which has no great mass basis, one may explode the entire organisation... The last twelve years of the history of the Comintern and the general turmoil in the movement have not not been without their effect on us. In the fight against the soul-less apparatus, one was oneself more or less bureaucratised; the oppositions hasten to resort to the weapons of breaking discipline and split. The leadership depends far too little on discussion, on ideological struggle, on the testing of ideas through joint experience."

In the summer of 1938 Cannon and Shachtman came from USA to Europe to help to end the fragmentation of groups claiming to be Trotskyist. Trotsky hoped that the sections of the Fourth International could learn collectively within a common framework from their experiences in the new conditions of the coming war, when the old disputes would cease to be relevant, provided that they united in accepting the general necessity for the Fourth International and its programme.

The fusion which Cannon arranged attracted the remains of the Groves and James groups to fuse with the "Militant Group to form the sole British Section of the Fourth International, the Revolutionary Socialist League, with about 100 members. The Workers' International League, with about thirty members, did not join in, arguing that the components were politically incompatible.

The publication of the Transitional Programme confronted some comrades with problems. Not many of us knew that the idea of "demands, stemming from today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working-class" went right back to the early struggles of the Bolsheviks and in the German Communist Party, and had been raised at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922. Few grasped that Trotsky was providing, not a recipe book, but some examples of that programme which our parties must constantly up-date in the light of current changes, in order to illuminate the road which leads unalterably to the conquest of power by the proletariat.

The fusion provided that the new Revolutionary Socialist League, of which the "Militant Group" was the largest constituent, would be an "entrism" organisation, at least to begin with, and that it would also publish a paper calling openly for the Fourth International. The leading members of the Groves, James and Harber tendencies appear to have worked together effectively at least until James departed for USA a few months later. Sight was lost of the comrades in South-West London and a few individuals who had always opposed "entrism" departed. The Revolutionary Socialist League entered the war, like the Workers' International League, as an "entrism" group, and never subsequently closed the door in principle on "open" work.

To sum up. Political life in Britain was only superficially affected by the upheavals on the Continent. It was a time of civil peace, with the workers getting trade unions into the new industries and seeking to control rather than to replace the Labour Party. After 1936, moreover, war was regarded as inevitable.

In this country, there were very few experienced comrades for us to win from the Communist Party. Starkey Jackson integrated himself successfully, and Abe Elsbury, George Weston and Harry Wicks all made a contribution, but the gap between the Communist Party and our small groups was a hard bridge for them to cross. The single most generally talented comrade was probably C.L.R. James, though, in my opinion, in the strictly political sense Harber was far more talented than James.

The "Militant Group" conception of "entrism" cannot be mechanically applied in all situations. I believe that their general idea, of locating the Trotskyists where they could hope best to involve themselves in the class-conflicts in the mass movements, where the agents of the bourgeoisie actually encounter the aspirations of the workers is at all times indispensable to building our organisation. I also believe that, in conditions of legality, we do best, if we can, to maintain also an "open" presence, so that we can say freely what Labour Party discipline prevents our "entrism" comrades from saying.

We may have been unlucky that there was not a General Election between 1935 and the outbreak of the war. In 1935 we were still so confused that some of us canvassed for I.L.P. candidates, against Labour candidates, and others of us canvassed for Labour candidates. We did not have the chance to try to draw all the groups together to discuss a common programme of demands on which to campaign in the election. As today, we would be quite wrong not to call for Labour to Power, it would have been no less criminal to sow illusions in workers' minds that the Labour right wing had either the will or the intention to solve the workers' problems. Today we are in a more fortunate position, and I hope that in the coming months we shall use the time we have to work out an agreed common slate of transitional demands on which to campaign.

This problem in itself reveals how in the 1930's we were called upon to enrich Marxist theory on fundamental problems of party building, when we had only limited access to the past gains of Marxism and when our enemies could so severely limit our chances of gaining experience.

That, comrades, is what I have to say now, except just to add that in 1939, when the police were coming heavy on an Irish Republican organisation in London called the Friends of the Irish Republic, we all defended the Irish Republicans and published their statements.