

the commune

issue 32

march 2013

thecommune.co.uk



susan
dorazio on
child care



page 3

paul mason
on paris
commune
women



page 7

barry
biddulph
on the
crisis in the
swp



editorial

★By John Keeley

The 8th March is International Women's Day. Susan Dorazio writes about women and childcare, and we also republish Paul Mason's article on women of the Paris Commune of 1871, with kind permission from the History Workshop.

For the revolutionary left in Britain the main topic of discussion is the crisis in the Socialist Workers Party. Members are resigning from the party. The impetus comes from a sexual assault allegation against a senior member of the party, and allegations that it wasn't investigated properly. But unpinning this is the discontent due to the lack of party democracy.

Barry Biddulph writes about Tony Cliff and substitutionism, whereby not only does the party substitute itself for the working class, but the leaders of the party substitute themselves for the party as a whole.

The SWP is a Leninist party and therefore internally organises in a way that is termed democratic-centralism. The basic idea being that the majority decision is decided upon and then there is unity of action led by a central committee. It actual fact it's a fig-leaf ideology to allow a few to justify their life as professional revolutionaries, dreaming of their place in history, whilst the rank and file members sell the paper to fund this lifestyle. It's much like parliamentary democracy's claim to represent the wishes of the people and gives us the illusion of having a say.

Every year at conference the SWP

elect the 12 members of the central committee. But they don't get elected individually. The central committee itself puts forward a 'slate' – a list of names, often the same ones – for conference to vote on. Leading up to conference members can opening organise factions which can put forward an alternative slate. Such factions are only allowed to form about 3

months prior to conference. As far as I know the CC slate usually, if not always, wins. The same faces have power year after year, e.g. Alex Callinicos. Unsurprisingly this leads to a 'them and us' mentality.

This is not the first time that the SWP has faced such a crisis. A major split occurred in 2010 when John Rees and Lindsey German left the party and set up Counterfire after Rees was blamed for the failure of the Respect electoral coalition. This was soon followed by Chris Bambery's departure and his setting up of the International Socialist Group (Scotland). Despite efforts to improve party democracy many members have not been satisfied. But what most will not accept is that the root of the problem lies in allowing a group of professional revolutionaries, supported financially by the rank and file, to hold almost all the power and make the decisions. It's the same problem in the trade unions

whereby the union bureaucracy sells out its members.

If revolutionaries want a communist society where everyone has an equal say, why do they organise in a way that creates a group that is 'more equal' than others? They need to recognise their egos and limit the amount of time that anyone can have in a role. Obviously this is limited by the number of members, their skills and their willingness to take on responsibility. But for a group the size of the SWP it doesn't seem unreasonable to limit the time in a role to two or three years, and preferably doing these roles whilst working like other ordinary members. They should then be prevented for holding any role again for at least five years. All roles should also be voted upon by all members. In otherwords, organise a party as you would organise a communist society. Surely, that's not too much to ask for?



how to get involved in the commune

We are pleased that you are reading the commune paper. Maybe you read the articles on our website regularly? How else can you get involved?

- * Post comments on the website articles
- * Like our Facebook page, 'The Commune'
- * Join our Facebook group, 'The Commune'
- * Join on of our existing local Facebook groups:
London Commune, East Kent Commune, South Yorkshire Commune, Devon Commune, West Midlands Commune, Alexandria Commune, Cairo Commune, Tunis Commune, or ask for a new one to be set up
- * Come to our meetings (advertised on the website and Facebook)
- * Write articles for the Commune
- * Donate money (Yorkshire Bank, sort code 050823, account number 28234494)
- * Join the Commune—email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

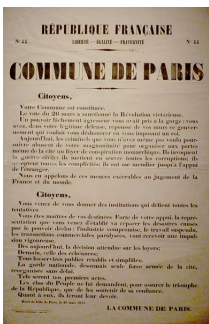
explore our website: thecommune.co.uk

Our **Ideas** page covers the following areas:



What is capitalism?

Marx's book *Das Kapital* describes how the private ownership of the means of production leads to the exploitation of workers and the enslavement of humanity.



What is communism?

Communism is simply the common ownership of the means of production that form the economic base of our society. To have common, collective control requires real democracy. This is direct democracy, most likely taking the form of councils.



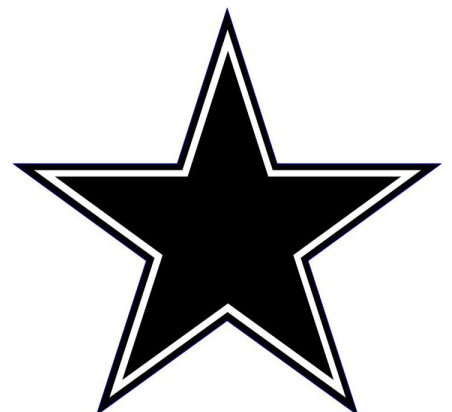
How do we get communism?

Organisation is important. Why join or trust a communist organisation that doesn't practice equality in decision-making? We do. The revolution must come from the working-class. We help raise class-consciousness.

what is the commune?

We are communists. We fight for a new self-managed society based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and an economy organised not for profit but for the well-being of humanity, in harmony with our natural environment. Communism will abolish the system of wage-labour so that our ability to work will cease to be a commodity to be sold to an employer; it will be a truly classless society; there will be no state, no managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management. This will entail a form of democracy which will not coexist with economic exploitation as in capitalism. Communism is about replacing both the international state system and the increasingly interlinked network of capitalist corporations with global, regional and local networks of democratic self-managed workers' councils and cooperatives.

The commune produce a paper, pamphlets and post articles from members and invited guests on a website — thecommune.co.uk. If you want an article to be considered for publication, send it to uncaptiveminds@gmail.com



when child care workers fought back

★ Susan Dorazio on a proud history and of the lessons to be learnt

In the first decade of the 20th Century, agitation by women in the industrial parts of the world for their civil rights and for their rights as workers was gaining momentum. Inspired by this increased militancy-- and by the organizing in 1909 of National Woman's Day by the Woman's National Committee of the Socialist Party of America-- the Women's Congress of the Second International, meeting in Copenhagen in 1910, approved the call by German Socialist Clara Zetkin and other delegates to create a Women's Day to foster international solidarity among socialist women.

In contrast to the liberal movements for woman's suffrage and workers' rights, and in opposition to war and social injustice, International Women's Day would be firmly placed in the context of the global capitalist system, one that basically refuses to recognize, let alone heed, the needs and rights of women.

In the last decade of the 20th Century, another reawakening, also focusing on workers' rights in the context of the range of women's roles in society, was occurring in the United States. For the better part of the 1990's, hundreds of child care workers, including myself, took part in a grassroots project called the Worthy Wage Campaign. Through fact-finding, consciousness raising, marches, rallies, street festivals, letter-writing, and media contact-- and under the banner of 'Rights, Raises, and Respect'-- we confronted what was called the staffing crisis, and were determined to reverse it. Of immediate concern was the revolving door of miserably-paid



Clara Zetkin

child care workers and the effect this had on children and families.

As this phenomenon started getting sorted out through data from centers and interviews with workers, certain facts became clear. First and foremost was that our low wages and lack of benefits and good working conditions were subsidizing the cost of child care, either to 'ease the burden' on parents if there were fees to pay, or on government whose spending priorities invariably put human services such as child care at the bottom of the list.

As we got deeper into our understanding of the various crises in child care many of us started to understand their systemic nature and the ways workers, families, and community members were getting manipulated and pitted against each other. We would see that this was serving to derail us from taking the kind of collective action that would really challenge and transform capitalism, the root cause of the crises that riddled the care and education sectors.

To find allies, some of us Worthy Wage campaigners worked hard to get the rights of child care workers, families, and children on

the agenda of human rights, social justice, and radical labour groups. At the same time, those of us affiliated with the IWW, socialist organisations, and/or women's rights/liberation projects did the reverse: i.e., encouraged child care workers to get involved with the broader movement for social change, since our issues were so often the same. I had what I considered the extra advantage of being a socialist feminist in an overwhelmingly-female workforce. This helped me see my experiences as a child care worker from both a class and a gender perspective. Others, also, came to appreciate the fact that patriarchy and misogyny had a lot to do with our low pay, low status, and tendency to undervalue ourselves.

Unfortunately, liberal politics won out, and by 2002, the Worthy Wage Campaign was now headquartered in Washington, D.C., renamed the Center for the Child Care Workforce, and officially a project of the mainstream American Federation of Teachers Educational Fund. Empowerment for radical change of the relationship between workers, families, and communities-- based on full government funding for good wages and benefits, low child-staff ratios, high quality facilities, support services, and free tuition-- had become a vague reference to a "well-educated" workforce, receiving "better compensation, and a "voice" in their workplace.

Meanwhile, in Scotland the public sector nursery nurses, members of Unison, were getting fed up with government stone-walling on their own child care crisis. The ruse of so-called professionalism that had undermined the militancy of the

Worthy Wage Campaign was playing itself out in Scotland in the form of expanded job descriptions but no pay increases for the added responsibilities. In fact, there had been no salary review since 1988 in any of the Scottish councils in charge of overseeing the nurseries.

By the end of 2003, between 4,000 and 5,000 nursery nurses, disgusted by the intransigence of both the councils and COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) had voted for strike action that led to a series of regional one- or two-day strikes, accompanied by rallies and demonstrations. and by March 1st, 2004, the nursery nurses were ready to engage in an all-out, indefinite, strike for a national settlement on pay raises in line with their current job requirements and the importance of their work.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the standard business-union tactics of Unison not only failed to sufficiently support solidarity among the nursery nurses but failed to foster links between the nursery nurses and workers in other sectors, and between the nurses and their centers' families and communities when more picket support and public outcry might well have changed the strike's outcome.

Instead, the rallying cry for a national settlement-- basic to the goal of equal pay for equal work, and so vital to enabling the nursery nurses to maintain their resolve-- was dropped by Unison based on a pledge of a national review of pay and working conditions at some point in the future. This led to significant discrepancies between the pay settlements negotiated between the union and individual councils and, undoubtedly, to demoralization among the workers when the 12-week strike ended.

Fast forward to London at the end of January 2013, when early years minister, Elizabeth Truss, proposed changes to child-staff ratios in child



care centers in England, as well as the expansion of education requirements for the workers. In child care and other human service sectors this strategy usually works particularly well because it employs the mythology of success through individual effort and perseverance, and platitudes about the importance of our work, while exploiting the workers' collective dedication and compassion. At the same time, it promises families and tax payers that with one stroke of administrative genius, child care (or whatever) will be 'cost-effective' and thus less burdensome.

This is a sham, and workers, families, and community activists need to say so via direct and coordinated actions. Child care workers and supporters must hammer away at the fact that wages, benefits, staffing ratios, appreciation of our efforts, and recognition and support of our skills and interests are prime determinants of quality child care-- and none of these factors should or need to get ignored.

For those of us who participated in the Worthy Wage Campaign in the U.S. or the nursery nurses strike in Scotland, the ridiculous atomizing of quality child care that Truss's proposal represents is an all-too-familiar tactic or diverting attention

from those responsible for the wholly inadequate public funding of social services by cleverly focusing attention on the blameless.

Liz Truss and her ilk need to be told that we won't stand for their continual trade-off schemes, such as further education and training as a pre-condition for good wages and working conditions. By this time, we should know that quality care and quality jobs cannot be an either/or proposition. Ways must be found to enable them to occur simultaneously, and with the rights, needs, and final say of the staff at the core of this planning.

By turning the spotlight, and turning up the heat, on purposely convoluted pseudo-solutions to serious social problems, and on the rapid erosion of the public sector leading to the withering of social services, we will surely advance the struggle for the global unity of the working class.

Furthermore, by remembering the courage and commitment of such women workers as the Worthy Wage campaigners in the U.S. and the striking nursery nurses in Scotland-- acting on behalf of their rights and those of all women and all workers-- we honor the founders, and perpetuate the meaning, of International Women's Day in the best way possible.

why it was kicking off then

★Newsnight's economics editor Paul Mason on the women of the Paris Commune

Almost as soon as the last petrol bomb was thrown, and even as the alleged throwers were being marched through Versailles, stripped to the waist to identify them as female, the ideological battle over the role of women in the Paris Commune of 1871 began.

Vilified as “harpies” and “viragoes”, both in news reports and press cartoons – their sexual energy as terrifying as their politics – many were summarily executed after combat. Others were jailed or deported, either to New Caledonia or the tropical hell of Cayenne.

Then their story became subsumed within the labour movement's attempts to understand the Commune's history as a failed, primarily political, experiment. From Prosper Olivier Lissagaray's (1876) account to Frank Jellinek's 1937 volume for the Left Book Club, the social history of the Commune as a whole, merited scant treatment compared to the military and political events.

It took until the 1960s for feminist historians to begin the specific study of the gender politics of the Commune, with Edith Thomas' path-breaking (1963) study *Les Petroleuses* (published as *The Women Incendiaries* in English in 1966).

Thomas mined memoirs, court transcripts, and newspaper accounts to provide, just short of 100 years after the events, an adequate first draft of the true history: how a small, vocal, middle class feminist milieu collided with the anti-feminist Parisian workers' movement of the 1860s; and the much looser, and more radical social movements of slum dwellers; to create a vibrant political culture among the poor women of Paris.

This, in turn creates a distinct gender politics during the Commune – a network of women activists who



become involved in aggressive street actions, self-help groups, revolutionary debating clubs (in occupied churches), military support roles and – after a struggle – front line fighting.

Today, the study of these events and personalities is a well-trodden academic pathway in French: Gay L Gullickson's *The Unruly Women of Paris* and Caroline J Eichner's *Surmounting the Barricades* are just two of the recent, notable accounts in English.

In my 2007 narrative history of the global labour movement, *Live Working or Die Fighting*, I focused the chapter on the Commune on the stories of two women. Louise Michel, the iconic – and erratic – schoolteacher, eschewed the military support roles of cantiniere or nurse, dressed as a man and participated in the front-line fighting. and Victorine Rouchy, a more typical working class woman activist became the cantiniere of an elite, self-selected militia called the “Vengeurs de Flourens” and also took part in the fighting until the very end.

Michel had written not only her memoirs (translated as *Red Virgin* in 1981) but a specific account of the Commune ([La Commune](#)).

Each is marred by self-censorship due to fear of reprisals.

Rouchy's memoir – *Souvenirs d'une morte vivante* written much later, after she had settled in London as the wife of anarchist free-thinker Gustave

Brocher, has become a key primary source but remains available only in French.

Juxtaposing the actions, alliances and political justifications of the two women, I tried to explore the contrast between Michel's radical republicanism – which was to mutate via Blanquism to black-flag anarchism – and Rouchy's republican socialism (which was also to evolve in the direction of anarchism during her exile).

This, in turn, led to an exploration of three distinct demographics among the women of the Commune: (i) the “respectable” working class, who were generally allied to the reformist anarchists of the International Working Men's Association; (ii) the demi-monde of sex workers and slum-dwellers known popularly as “La Canaille”, who would be drawn into the “mob” actions at the beginning of the Commune and, towards the end, anti-clerical and anti-police reprisals led by Blanquist men. Finally (iii) the pre-existing feminist movement, of which Michel was a part, but where the writers Andre Leo and Paule Minck were leading lights.

Aware that I had only scratched the surface, and with an excess of primary research over final output, I did the only logical thing for someone trapped in a day job: I began a big historical novel about the Commune, with a cast of hundreds, set in Paris. This, over time, has become a small historical play, with a cast of six, set on New Caledonia.

Freed from the rigours of peer review, indeed from rigour in general, the research has progressed, during the past six years, eclectically. I have become fascinated by the new sources of information that have emerged in the digital age, above all digital photographs but also genealogical records and other digitised municipal documents.

The [Siege and Commune of Paris archive](#) at Northwestern University,

for example, puts faces to numerous names within Thomas' and subsequent accounts.

Some, such as [Marie Davier, orateur du club](#), make it to the historical record only through these photographs.

Many of the photographs were "cartes de visite" portraits, some taken for criminological research following the defeat of the Commune. With a knowledge of mid-19th century costume and jewellery it becomes possible to "read" these images afresh: large hoop earrings, for example, were common among descriptions of street prostitutes. It becomes possible to read class, age and – vital for the social historian – attitude in a way that was not possible for those reliant simply on the written archives.

On top of the portraits, there is a large and growing archive of digital street photographs. On the first day of the Commune (18 March 1871), having built the barricades, the insurgent National Guard units gathered their friends and families for group photographs.

These "barricade photographs" were known to social historians even in the 20th century but of course completely unavailable as a unified archive even to the immediate survivors of the Commune who tried to write contemporary accounts. For example, the barricade on Av de Flandre which led through the meat-packing district of La Villette, and was posed just outside an established Republican political club, shows a very wide cross section of urban society, including women in aprons and children.

Compare this to the account by lawyer and revolutionary, Gaston da Costa, of events just 2km away in the slum (and at the time partially shanty) district of Montmartre:

"Prostitutes, registered or not, came from the quarter of Les Martyrs, or out of hotels, cafes and the brothels... on the arms of line soldiers, accompanied by a legion of pimps, they had surged out, the pathetic spume of prostitution, upon the revolutionary wave." (quoted in Thomas p.59)



Both Thomas and Gullickson have used this passage to illustrate – and dispute – the moralism of the Blanquist male leadership of the Commune. But it also illustrates the complex social reality you are up against in telling the social history of an event seen by its participants through a primarily political and ideological lens.

During the Commune, it is now clear, there were overlapping social networks of activists and fighters, including women. About 260 insurgent battalions of the National Guard were involved in the Commune, as well as self-selected private militias such as the one Victorine Rouchy joined. Contemporary research shows that, although in theory the battalions were geographically recruited, there was much voluntary cross-over between the arrondissements, suggesting that personal, family and maybe workplace networks of loyalty overrode locality, with militants joining the battalion of their choice, transferring etc.

Likewise the revolutionary clubs. In *The Paradise of Association* Martin Philip Johnson provides a social history of the clubs. In contrast to the elected Commune itself, which was all male and met in closed session, the clubs were heavily invested with female activists: these were the venues at which political militants like Louise Michel encountered the women of the backstreets and of the labour movement.

Given face recognition technologies, and the sheer volume of portraiture –

collective and individual – it should be possible soon to map individuals communards to these dates and places. I am not aware of any project to do so.

But for example – if we look at yet another visual source, the sketches by artist Daniel Urrabieta Vierge, taken on the first day of the Commune at the Hotel De Ville, it is hard to resist the conclusion that, by comparison to her photographs, one of the women soldiers is Michel:

Central to the account of socialist feminism during the Commune is the Union des Femmes. Upon arrival from London, Karl Marx's 19 year old female emissary, the Russian revolutionary Elizabeth Dmitreff, persuaded a group of activists to form the Union on 11 April 1871. It quickly became a delegate structure based in each arrondissement. Though formally committed to mobilising women for "the defence of Paris and the succour of the wounded", the Union des Femmes' central focus – as Eichner points out from a reading of its archive – "was to reconceptualise and reorder female labor". (p.72):

"During the Commune feminist socialists worked for the reorganisation of labor, equal pay for equal hours of work, mandatory secular education and the legalisation of divorce." (p.74)

But military events overtook the social experiment. On 21 May government troops broke into Paris and there ensued a "bloody week" of barricade fighting and reprisals, during which an estimated 30,000 Parisians were extrajudicially killed by the regular army and returning gendarmerie.

The role of women during the fighting is indisputable: Michel's and Rouchy's account give detailed accounts, cross-checkable with those of others. However the existence of a "women's battalion", and its specific defence of a barricade at the Place Blanche (ironically now the site of the Moulin Rouge) has been disputed, notably by historian Robert Tombs (1999).

Johnson's account, however, finds documentary evidence to support the iconic contemporary illustration,

“Barricade de la Place Blanche defendu par les femmes”.

Thomas, from four separate sources, had captured the essence of the event in her 1963 study. A meeting called by Dmitrieff of the Union des Femmes, for 21 May in the 4th Arrondissement town hall, turned into a muster for an ad-hoc women’s battalion, estimated at around 120 combatants. This marched across the city towards Batignolles and thence to the Place Blanche. The survivors fell back to what is now Place de la Republique where, according to one eyewitness:

“Just as the National Guards began to retreat, a women’s battalion turned up; they came forward on the double and began to fire, crying ‘Long live the Commune’. They were armed with Snider carbines and shot admirably.” (quoted in Thomas p.159).

After the events the women combatants were vilified as “petroleuses” – blamed for setting fire to the numerous government buildings gutted by arson and fighting in the last days. Though classic labour movement accounts have tended to see this as pure demonology, the later, feminist scholarship supports some systematic involvement and intent among the women.

It is also likely – according to the account given in Communard Jules Valles’ fictionalised history of the events, *L’Insurge* – that women were involved in the high-profile massacre of police informers and priests at the Rue Haxo in Belleville, two days before the end.

This became the subject of [one of the photographic montages](#) produced as propaganda for the victorious authorities (making the Commune not just the first social conflict to be photographed, but the first to see doctored photography used as political propaganda).

The woman seen leading the massacre, on a white horse in the photo-montage, was never identified or tried. Valles recounts a conversation with one female participant in the massacre just afterwards:

“This one had no opinions of the Social



Revolution but her sister had been the mistress of a priest, got pregnant, and left her family after stealing their savings. “That’s why I came down when I saw the cassocks passing under my window; that’s why I pulled the beard of one of them that looked like Celine’s lover; that’s why I shouted ‘Kill them!’ and that’s why my wrists are red.” (p.216)

The past 50 years of scholarship have altered the image of the Commune: no longer is it seen through the lens of survivors like Lissagaray saw it through – a political battle over strategy between authoritarian Jacobinism, moderate anarchism and Marxism.

Studying the first-hand accounts, contemporary novels, memoirs and the new digital evidence allows us to see it as a granular social revolution as well: a revolution whose “social” aspect took place in people’s personal lives, communities, workplaces and clubs.

Both Michel’s and Rouchy’s autobiographies are laden with emotion, sentiment, nostalgia (and in Michel’s case imagination) – which we can understand better given the experiences of modern survivors of mass murder. By the time they were each written, the political world that had produced the Commune had disappeared, to be replaced by a labour movement so incorporated into capitalism that neither woman felt able to take part in it.

The experience of deportation, exile, and political marginalisation is what unites the stories of the two women after the Commune, and of other surviving women such as Dmitrieff (see Sylvie Braibant’s, *Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Aristocrate et Petroleuse*, Paris 1983). I remain fascinated by what is untold in this story of defeat and aftermath.

Eight women were condemned to death, 29 to hard labour, twenty – including Michel as “Prisoner Number One” – deported for life to a fortress; and a further 16 to ordinary transportation. (Jellinek, p.379) They formed a small fraction compared to the 7,000-plus male communards sentenced to deportation.

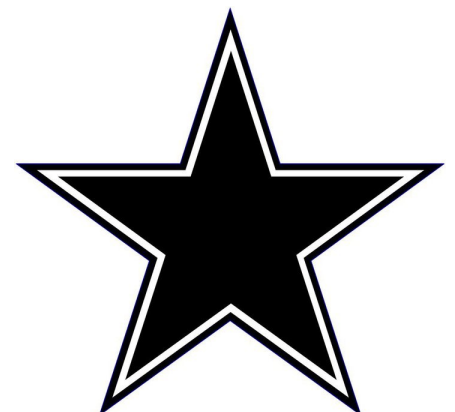
Alice Bullard’s *Exile to Paradise* is a brilliantly original study of the experience of those deported to New Caledonia. Michel’s memoirs and her 1875 book *Kanak Legends and Folksongs* are also valuable

accounts of this experience. Michel’s time on New Caledonia, during which she interacted with the eventually rebellious indigenous people of the island, forms the subject of the Sólveig Anspach’s (2009) acclaimed feature film *The Rebel* and Francoise D’Eaubonne’s *Louise Michel la Canaque* (1985).

Michel survived New Caledonia and returned, serving three years in prison for her involvement in a Parisian bread riot in 1883. Dmitrieff escaped Paris but ended her days in self-imposed exile in Siberia.

Rouchy can be found in the 1891 British census, at 82 Akerman Road, Brixton. She is listed together with her husband, an adopted daughter and numerous young women, including a German wool stapler, who seem to have no good reason for being there other than the most likely one: that they were sofa-surfing fellow anarchists.

Paul Mason’s latest book [Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere](#) was published by Verso in 2012. His play about the women of the Paris Commune, “Defeat”, is currently in development.



tony cliff on substitutionism

★ Barry Biddulph reexamines the SWP founder's organizational views

Just what were Tony Cliff's organisational views, before Cliff's turn to Leninism in 1968? This insight of Cliff from 1960 could almost have been written with recent events in the SWP in mind: "all discussions on the basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day, in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership". (1)

Tony Cliff's interpretation of Trotsky's views on substitutionism written in 1960 (2) does not appear to be fully grounded in Trotsky's response to the second congress and the discussion of the excessive centralism of Lenin's organisational suggestions following the congress. Nor does he draw on the important criticism of Rosa Luxemburg. He roots substitutionism in the uneven consciousness among the working class and ultimately in the backward circumstances of Russia at the time and the minority position of the working class.

Cliff seems to follow Trotsky's view that the basic task of communists is the development of the self-activity of the class, when he states that "the revolutionary party that seeks to overthrow capitalism cannot accept the notion of a discussion on politics inside the party without the participation of the mass of workers. (3) However, he then veers away from the essential need for democratic methods in organising to locate the source of the danger of substitutionism in the uneven consciousness of the working class, rather than the lack of democratic participation. (4)

But Trotsky in the Report of the Siberian Delegation in 1903 and Our Political Tasks in 1904 placed the danger of substitutionism in top down centralism, factory style discipline and identification of the party with the programme and leadership, as a form of working class Jacobinism or elitism. He argued that to have an influence on



political life is to act through the working class and not to act in its name. This echoed the criticism of Lenin's centralism by Rosa Luxemburg. (5) Lenin's centralism was the organised distrust of the party members by a leadership who expected confidence in their policies. Trotsky and Luxemburg did not reduce the party form to the direct pressure of external circumstances or vulgar materialism, nor to an uneven consciousness.

As Trotsky famously predicted undemocratic methods in the party would lead to the party substituting itself for the class, the party apparatus substituting for the party, and finally the leader substituting for the apparatus. This would be the result of an undemocratic organisational form; a subjective factor which could not be directly read off from adverse material circumstances. Uneven consciousness would be overcome by various forms of struggle: defeats, victories and the ups and downs on the bumpy road to transform capitalism.

Despite warning of the threat of substitutionism, Cliff inconsistently invoked the cult of the infallible Lenin. Lenin's "ear was faultlessly attuned to the stirrings of the masses in motion". (6) Here is a pointer to his own future role as the leader who had a sensitive political nose to instinctively follow the stirrings and interests of the workers. Who requires party democracy with such leaders? But even so he still had insight alongside this orthodoxy. There was Lenin's comments about working class rule in the context of claims that the working class, in so

far as it still existed, had become de-classed in Russia. Cliff rightly described this as a substitutionist formula: the Cheshire cats smile after the cat has disappeared! (7)

Lenin's claims about the disappearance of the working class were exaggerated. His polemic was a one-sided distortion. Recent research as shown that the working class was still a significant factor, but was in conflict with the Bolshevik government who did not hesitate to take tough repressive measures. (8) When workers criticised or acted against the Bolshevik government they were dismissed as economistic or workers who were not really proletarian for one reason or another. Routine white-collar workers were described as petty bourgeois. The dictatorship over workers with the party identified as the dictatorship of the proletariat was the counter-revolutionary road to Kronstadt.

Despite his insights, Cliff followed Deutscher and the orthodox Trotskyist tradition in diverting attention from Bolshevik substitutionist policies by seeking an explanation mainly in backward conditions, downplaying Jacobin vanguardism, and failing to value the essential requirement of democratic means of representation. So for Cliff, the working class base of Bolshevism "disintegrated, not because of some mistakes in the policies of Bolshevism, not due to one or another conception of Bolshevism regarding the role of the party and its relation to the class, but because of mightier historical factors. The working class had become de-classed" (9) Apart from anything else the concept of a de-classed working class had a strong ideological component. But this method of Deutscher and orthodox Trotskyism, excused the authoritarian politics of the Lenin-Trotsky government and more importantly their top down organisational methods in 1918-23.

When the various Bolshevik fac-

chris harman's leninism

tions said the party no longer trusted the masses, and feared the initiative of the workers, the party leaders blamed the circumstances. But the form of Bolshevik organisation fusing with the state was also causing adverse circumstances. Material backwardness does not directly explain how the counter-revolution originated in the party apparatus or how Stalin was placed at the centre of the party machine with the task of monitoring and checking bureaucracy. Material circumstances do not explain why workers control was suddenly dropped after 1917 or why one-man management was introduced. As one Lenin critic put it, the dictatorship of a boss in the factory will lead to the dictatorship of a boss in the party.

Members of the Socialist Workers Party can find support for challenging the leadership in Cliff's undeveloped insights in his piece on Trotsky's substitutionism. He does make a plea for the toleration of factions, correctly dismissing the Bolshevik leadership habit of reducing the presence of factions to alien class forces. He asks the rhetorical question of what material pressures directly accounted for the bewildering changes in alliances among the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party members. But this insight and others were not built on. Instead, there was a stampede to Leninist methods of organising in 1968 on the flimsiest of grounds. (10) Today we urgently need to reassess how we can democratically relate to the class and among ourselves.

End Notes

1 Tony Cliff, 1982, Neither Washington nor Moscow, page 207, Bookmarks.

2 as above, page 192

3 Tony Cliff, page 202

4 Tony Cliff, page 207

5 Rosa Luxemburg, 2004, organisational questions of Russian Social Democracy, in the Rosa Luxemburg Reader, edited by Peter Hudis and Kevin B Anderson, page 248.

6 Tony Cliff as above page, 203

7 Tony cliff page 197.

8 One example, Simon Pirani, 2008, the Russian Revolution in Retreat.

9 Tony cliff page 197

10 Tony Cliff, page 215

In 1968 the SWP's predecessor the International Socialists decided to adopt a Leninist model of organisation. Chris Harman argued, that the Bolshevik Revolution was the only successful revolution, and other revolutions, such as the Paris Commune, were defeated. But the Paris Commune was an inspiring defeat, with mass creativity and an open fight to the end. In contrast, outside the year of the masses in 1917, the Russian Revolution was an unclear defeat; the counter revolution took a Leninist form, originating in the Bolshevik party. "The most horrible thing about the way the revolution died in Russia is that the counter-revolution won and called itself socialism" (1).

Harman's rough polemical target was one of Tony Cliff's insights, expressed in the 1959 edition of his pamphlet Rosa Luxemburg, that "for Marxists in the advanced industrial countries, Lenin's organizational position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg" (2). Harman dismissed this undogmatic position as Cliff's unscientific enthusiasm. He then juxtaposed the spontaneity of workers in struggle and organisation, in a crude version of Lenin's view of the relationship of party and class in What is to be done. He made no attempt to assess the concept of democratic centralism or the history of Bolshevism. Instead, Harman dishonestly distorted the positions of Luxemburg and the young Trotsky. Their dispute with Lenin was the degree of centralism and the weight of leadership within the party. In Harman's heavy hand this becomes Luxemburg's fatalism: she preferred to wait for the spontaneous development of the masses (3). The young Trotsky's position is misinterpreted as distrusting all centralist organisation (4).

He claimed that Luxemburg was not aware that, if the masses "are not won over to a socialist world view of the intervention of conscious revolutionaries, they will continue to accept the bourgeois ideology of existing society" (5). Harman, was also aware this Leninist world view was a one-sided polemic against the so-called economists and

so he changed tack to claim that the real basis for Lenin's argument is that the level of consciousness in the working class is never uniform. This is why a strong centralized leadership is considered necessary. But what Lenin actually argued in WITBD was that socialist consciousness would be introduced into the workers material struggle from the outside. The continuity of a small number of talented leaders and their theory is what was decisive for Lenin.

Harman's approach seems to be based in the Trotskyist tradition of distrust of the changing spontaneous moods of the masses, who are assumed to have a low culture, or are backward. This probably originates in the older Trotsky's experience of state building and acceptance of the dictatorship of the party as the dictatorship of the working class in Russia 1918 to 1923.

Harman claimed "that for Lenin the party is not the embryo of the workers state -the workers council is" (6) This is a totally misleading. Shortly after the October Revolution Lenin chose to ground the new regime in the party leaders (Sovnarkom) with the party apparatus fusing with the state. Factory committees and Soviets were emasculated. In 1918, Trotsky complained "that not all soviet workers have understood that our administration has been centralised and that all orders from above will be final" (10). The road to socialism could pass through State Capitalism, one man management, capitalist production methods, as long as the Bolshevik old guard was in control. This was pure utopianism or Jacobin dictatorship. It was also pushing the workers back not advancing their struggle.

We must remember that workers can become more militant than the long time organised. Politics and economics are not separate. Leninist vanguardism is the past.

1 The International Communist current, (2005) The Russian Communist left, page 89

2 -6 Quoted in Chris Harman, Party and Class, 1968,

7 Paul Mattick, Anti Bolshevik Communism page 66

eu referendum

in/out: cameron's false choice

★ John Keeley argues neither a capitalist EU nor a capitalist UK is a good choice

The British people will vote whether to remain part of the European Union or not by 2018. Cameron's promise of a referendum suits the Tories electorally. It should defuse the threat from UKIP and damage Labour's chances of winning the next general election by appearing too pro-European. But behind this short-term electoral positioning lies a split in the capitalist class.

Politics is largely a reflection of the underlying economic power. After WWII Britain was no longer the power it was. The break-up of the empire posed two options for Britain's political class to savage some of their influence. One was by trying to turn the ex-colonies into an economic sphere of influence under the banner of a Commonwealth. The other option was to join with continental Europe in a project leading to economic and political union. As an island nation the second option was always going to be problematic, hence the promises that this was just a 'common market'. It then became the EEC (European Economic Community). Then in 1993 the European Union, launching it's own currency at the turn of the century. Now with the latest economic crisis threatening it's break-up, political union and eventual fiscal union is forcing deeper integration and taking further powers away from nation states. Most in Britain don't want this, but until recently the masses have been fed the line that it's in 'our' economic interest. What they have really meant is it has been in the interest of the rich to stay in the EU. Much of Britain's trade is with the EU. To lose access to the internal EU market will hurt. But industrial capitalists do not have the upper hand. As the financial crisis of 2008 showed, it is the financial capitalists of the City of London who have the most power. When the banks got into trouble the government came running with their cheque-book. We are all now expected to pay for this bailout with austerity. But it is probably the European financial transaction tax that has upset the City and so given



Cameron the green light for Britain's eventual withdrawal.

So how should people vote in a referendum? The EU labour laws are not as harsh as those in the USA. Britain's withdrawal will no doubt led to a watering-down of labour legislation to the benefit of business. Britons may soon end up with just two weeks paid annual leave just like the Americans. So it that sense the British working class are better off being in the EU. But that's like saying it's better to have the least cruel of two masters; why accept that you have to have a master? The choice is a false choice: ruled by Brussels or ruled by Westminster. In both cases the objective is to squeeze as much money out of you as possible for the profits of the rich.

The alternative is the working class ruling themselves. A direct democracy where all the economic resources are collectively controlled through councils. Where there is no such thing as profit or wages. Imagine your street or village, how would the people run it? You could set up a street or parish council open to all. All resources within the street/village would be controlled by the council. Collectively the needs of the people would be assessed, e.g. food, water, shelter, heating, etc. This would then be matched against resources. All those able to make a contribution would be expected to do so. But the provision of many things will require resources from elsewhere, hence there will need to be a geographical

hierarchy of councils, maybe street, parish, town, county, nation, even continent (yes, Europe) and a world council. This may or may not mean delegates sent to councils covering wider geographical locations. With the internet decisions can be taken that affect the whole world, e.g. the allocation of oil resources, without the need for an actual world council of delegates to sit. All 7 billion people could, if we wanted it to happen, vote on-line. It may be that the geographical hierarchy is matched by an interest group hierarchy on some issues, e.g. the programming language used for various worldwide computer applications. But the crucial danger will be to stop any emerging bureaucracy. The person elected in the parish to be responsible for the provision of healthcare will be someone with experience, someone who is able to do the job. But this role and all roles should be held for a limited time to prevent a new class forming. Indeed, it should go further than this. Everyone, especially those in positions of power, should have to do some of the menial tasks that have to be done, e.g. emptying the dustbins or weeding a communal flowerbed. A truly classless society where people and the environment come before profit. This cannot be voted for in a referendum. The ruling class will never give up their power voluntarily. It means organising, it means discussing with people, it means taking to the streets, it means going on strike, it means revolution.

syriza and the crisis in greece

★ Eric Chester critiques SYRIZA's position as the class struggle continues

Greece has become the flashpoint for Europe. The Greek economy has collapsed, with the official unemployment rate standing at more than 25%. In the latest in the series of drastic cuts demanded by the troika, public sector salaries are to be slashed by 25%. Greek unions have called a series of one day general strikes, but these have had little effect. Militant workers are beginning to organize around the union bureaucracies to initiate strikes that paralyze the system, and thus can not be ignored. Recently, the subway workers went out on an indefinite strike. After ten days, the government banned the strike, and threatened the workers with dismissals and long jail sentences. The strike ended, but the turmoil continues.

Public opinion is solidly opposed to the austerity program, and the parties in the coalition government, including PASOK, the official social democratic party of the Second International, are losing their base of support. SYRIZA has become the party gaining the most support in the polls. SYRIZA began as a loose coalition of parties and organization that sought to present a non-dogmatic left-wing alternative to the mainstream social democratic politics of PASOK. It has been evolving into a unitary organization with a recognized leader Alex Tsipras.

From the start, SYRIZA has been dominated by those coming from the Eurocommunist tradition. It has always pursued a reformist path to socialism, but, as it has grown to become a significant player in Greek politics, it has modified its program to demonstrate that it could govern Greece in a "responsible" manner. SYRIZA insists that further austerity



cuts are not possible, and that the memorandum of understanding imposed on Greece by the troika (the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission) should be rejected. Still, SYRIZA is also adamant that Greece must remain within the European Union, and, if possible, in the Eurozone. This contradictory perspective is tenuously held together by the fervent belief that the European Union, and specifically the German government, will accept a significant renegotiation of Greece's debt leading to a substantial reduction in payments, accompanied by a further round of loans at a low interest rate.

Underlying the specifics of the SYRIZA program is the conviction that capitalism can be reformed, and that the European Union is an organizational structure within which structural reforms can occur. Thus, in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the 1930s, SYRIZA has failed to advance a program that could move Greece toward socialism.

As the economic crisis

worsens, many young people are being radicalized, correctly understanding that only fundamental change can create the prerequisite for a positive future. Some of them are attracted to the anarchist milieu, but others, looking for a more organized response, gravitate toward ANTARSYA. As with SYRIZA, this is a loose coalition, but one composed of radical organizations. ANTARSYA does not garner the electoral support that SYRIZA receives, and yet it has become a significant factor in Greek politics. ANTARSYA has not formulated a detailed transitional program that will move the country toward a socialist transformation. Still, it has stated clearly that Greece can not remain within the European Union, and that the enormous sovereign debt must be repudiated in its entirety. These represent a starting point for a revolutionary program, one that represents a sharp break with the current situation, rather than a vain effort to ameliorate the crisis.

There is no way forward for Greece within the European Union. As a start, Greece needs to leave the EU, and repudiate its massive debt. Still, these are only initial steps. For Greece, the slogan socialism or barbarism is an immediate choice. Yet Greece can only move along the path of a socialist transformation if it is joined by other countries in Western Europe. Spain, Portugal and Ireland are all suffering an economic crisis nearly as severe as that in Greece, and are thus the most likely to join Greece in leaving the EU. Still, as radicals in England and Scotland, we need to work harder at developing relations with our comrades in Greece and in the other countries hit hardest by the crisis.