

Crisis of the Revolutionary Left in Europe

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That there is a crisis of the revolutionary left in Europe is crystal clear. No doubt there are different opinions on the degree of this crisis, but few revolutionaries would deny that most of their expectations formed in the 'golden age' in the years after 1968 have not been fulfilled. The way we see it, the revolutionary left as a whole is in crisis — over and above that, the way each tendency within it is experiencing this crisis is specific. And this determines how we will proceed in this article: to first start with the causes of the general crisis and then look at how they have affected our tendency in particular.

Of course, this article is mainly concerned with events that happened in England. There will always be dangers about generalizing the argument to other countries since in each country the strength of social movements is different as is the implantation of the revolutionary left in relation to them. Also, the role of the institutions of civil society (e.g. the church) is different in the countries of Northern Europe and those of Southern Europe.



Workers at the Lip watch factory at Besançon, France, who occupied their factory in 1973 to prevent its closure.

Reasons for the crisis of the revolutionary left

1. An erroneous analysis of the capitalist crisis — From 1945 to the present has overall been a period of growth and expansion for capitalism. And there is no doubt that this has taken all revolutionaries by surprise. The following quote from Mandel in 1946 is a fairly typical reflection of what was expected to happen:

*'There is no reason whatever to assume that we are facing a new epoch of capitalist stabilization and development. On the contrary, the war has acted only to aggravate the disproportion between the increased productivity of the capitalist economy and the capacity of the world market to absorb it.'*¹

After the second World War, revolutionaries continued to expect a period of revolutionary turbulence similar to the one that had followed the first World War

in 1918-21. And some have still not realised even after 35 years that though capitalism cannot avoid crises, it is always on the cards that the system is able to use the crisis to restructure itself and lay the foundation for a new period of growth. Whether or not it is able to do this depends on the result of its political struggle with the working class. It is even possible that it will be able to use the coming period of the 'new technology' to begin a new period of growth —

though this will have to be with different mechanisms of social control than are used at present. What is clear is that we must radically break with a mechanistic/deterministic Marxism which sees socialism as being ushered in by capitalism when productive forces reach so high a level of development that they can no longer be contained by the relations of production. There is nothing inevitable about this process: it depends on the working class, which is itself a productive force, being able to impose a political defeat on its class enemy.

2. The continuing hold of reformism

Our inability to assess correctly what was happening to contemporary capitalism had disastrous consequences for our strategy. In particular, it made us unable to understand the relation that institutions like the trade unions, the social-democratic and the Communist Parties have with the working class vanguards we wanted to work with. Our analysis of reformism, which we incorrectly saw as exterior to the working class, argued that reformism's hold over the working class derived from its ability to deliver material goodies and that when the material goodies ran out, the hold would weaken.² And this inadequate analysis meant that we were totally unprepared for the fact that when (in 1974) the economic recession came and the flow of material goodies ceased, the hold of reformism was in no way diminished. In fact, the hold of the trade union leaderships over the rank and file was greater in this period of recession (1974 to the present) than it had ever been in the period 1968-74, which was a period of tremendous rank and file militancy at a Europe-wide level (May '68 in France, Hot Autumn in 1969 in Italy etc) and, not surprisingly, a period of exceptionally fast growth of the European revolutionary left. Since 1974, European politics has moved to the right and this rightward-moving period has been a difficult time for social democracy and for the labour movements – and for the revolutionary left. And this should lay to rest the theory that a period of retreat for the labour movement and social democracy (and the Communist Parties) means a period of opportunity for the revolutionary left when it can fill 'the political space' vacated by social democracy in retreat. The period 1974-79 shows us that no such space exists – that in a period of recession, class vanguards with few exceptions accept the arguments of social democracy that 'in the national interest a government of austerity is necessary.'

Certainly, the rightward shift of politics in the 1974-79 period needs explaining. Here we have only time to identify one of its components: the ability of the political right to appropriate for itself 'freedom of the individual' as against totalitarian state interference. By a clever technique, the bourgeois media have been able to put it across that 'gulag' equals 'USSR' equals 'social democracy' equals 'too much

power to the trade unions' etc. And social democracy has been left with an economic programme of more state intervention in the economy in a period which has clearly proved the limits of Keynesianism and the inability of a capitalist government to avoid a recession by demand management when public opinion is for less state intervention. Social democracy, which had come to stand for the belief that as long as the cake gets larger, everyone could get larger slices, faces very serious problems in a period where there was no economic growth. In Great Britain, where the unions have considerable political independence from the political representation of social democracy (the Labour Party),³ the result of workers coming to understand that bigger slices were a thing of the past was a wave of militant strikes against the Labour government (winter 1978-79), followed by a general election (May '79) in which more workers than ever before voted Conservative, especially the more highly paid skilled workers. In other countries, where the political control of social democracy (and the Communist Parties) is tighter, the falling off of working class support has not been so marked. Even so the Communist Party vote was down from 34% to 30% in the Italian general election in June 1979, and in France and Spain and left-of-centre political forces are not gaining ground. In



none of these countries has the revolutionary left gained from this erosion of social-democratic support – on the contrary, the rightward shift has weakened the revolutionary left as it has weakened social democracy.

There are two very important lessons to be learnt from this co-incidence of our decline with that of social democracy. Firstly, it is no longer possible to argue that the working class is reformist just because a reformist leadership controls a rank and file that is constantly pushing for militant action. And so any 'exposure' politics that is orientated towards exposing the reformist leadership is bankrupt. We have to recognise that there is a reformism of the rank and file, who realise that they have something to lose in a period of capitalist crisis. Economic studies have shown that there is often a connection between wage militancy and unemployment rates – not surprisingly, the higher the unemployment, the less keen workers are to confront management – they are influenced by the knowledge that their job may be at risk. In the same way, revolutionaries have often made the point to other workers that a job is not theirs to sell, but all militants

know that if the terms are right, at every workplace, there will be many workers ready to apply for voluntary redundancy or redundancy payments – and there is a direct connection between redundancy payments and the lack of fights against factory closures. As well as having a material component, reformism also has an ideological one – and this has tended to be overlooked by the revolutionary left.

Secondly, it is the case that rank and file are quite likely to stay with reformism in the absence of a credible revolutionary alternative. The revolutionary left's alternative lacks credibility on two counts: organisationally – which is a chicken and egg situation since there is no way of getting bigger except by recruiting, and politically – in that we do not seem to have much to offer. Our wave of the revolutionary left developed in a period of economic boom and therefore did not have much to offer by way of solutions to economic crises. The period of our political development ('68 – early '70s) was characterised by wage militancy and we got by with demands of 'higher wages', 'equal rises for all', 'abolition of the lowest wage scales' etc. When the recession came, we were theoretically and politically unprepared and all we could do was oppose all attempts to make the working class pay for the crisis so the slogans we used were 'no cuts in public expenditure', 'no closures', 'no redundancies' etc. and to workers who asked us what our way out of the crisis was, our answer was that the capitalists had made the crisis and it was their problem – it was nothing to do with us. We couldn't see that this was a totally inadequate response – after all, working class people were experiencing in their everyday lives the results of inflation, the recession, structural unemployment – and our response was that it was nothing to do with us! Not surprisingly, many workers, including some of our sympathisers, turned to left Labour and the Communist Parties who argue that there is a way out within capitalism for the working class and had one on offer, i.e. the alternative economic strategy of left social democracy. In the crisis, our response was defensive. Since we did not allow ourselves a radical solution to the crisis, the only perspective open to us was defence of working class interests. This meant, in general, support for nationalisations and more state intervention at a time when many working class vanguards were developing much more sophisticated attitudes to these solutions. For instance, the revolutionary left opposed any hospital closure without demanding any change in the NHS at a time when radicals in the health service were seriously questioning the way the NHS had been operating and were coming round to the view that the fight against the rundown of the NHS had to include a fight for a preventive (as opposed to curative) medical service. Though we couldn't see it, our militant defensive

strategies were located on the same terrain as social democracy – we were unable to break with it.⁴

There is little doubt that the current economic recession is not temporary. There are enormous possibilities for revolutionaries in this period but only if we break with some of the articles of dogma closest to our hearts. Before we offer solutions to the crisis, we would be well advised to understand its nature.

3. 1968 – Excessive optimism

No doubt, the roots of the European revolutionary left, especially its Trotskyist wing, go back further than 1968. But for all of us the year was an important one. The Tet offensive in Vietnam was conclusive proof that U.S. imperialism could be defeated and May '68 in France was a clear indication that a pre-revolutionary situation can rapidly come about even in what looks like a stable, 'advanced' capitalist economy; the 'Hot Autumn' in Italy the following year confirmed our giddy expectations. Not surprisingly, many currents in the revolutionary left (including Big Flame) took up positions in which we assumed that it would be no big deal to smash the hold the organs of social democracy had over the working class and replace them with organs of dual power i.e. soviets etc. In one sense our optimism was justified; after all, 1968 was a great year from the point of view of class struggle. It did mark a radical break with periods of post-war reconstruction and the Cold War that had preceded it. It did show that the hold that links the trade union leadership and the rank and file can be broken in a period of intense class militancy. And it did show that political links can be built between vanguards of the industrial working class and radicalised sectors of



the new social movements (e.g. the worker-student assemblies in Turin in 1969).

But because we had little understanding of how the societies we were living in worked – we were unable to put the achievements of 1968-69 in any historical context. For an understanding of contemporary capitalist society, we relied on our knowledge of Russia in 1917 – and so an ultra-left fantasy was constructed. Since institutions like the *Duma* (parliament), and the trade unions had been swept aside by working class vanguards asserting their autonomy in 1917 – so the vanguards we were building links with would assert their autonomy and sweep aside today's parliament and trade unions.⁵ We failed to understand that in Western democracies there is a consensus behind institutions like parliament and the trade unions that was totally lacking in Tsarist Russia. And so our concept of the vanguard worker autonomous (independent) from any of the institutions of the society he or she lived in was nonsense from the start. It was as if we thought someone could grow up in England today and not be affected by the values put across by the schools, the media, the political parties etc. We overestimated the degree to which we ourselves had been able to break with the values of bourgeois society and assumed that everyone else who wanted to could. And, of course, this ultra-left cult of spontaneity and autonomy was less misleading in a period of rank and file militancy. It was after 1974 when the recession began to bite that our ultra-leftism really began to cost us dear.

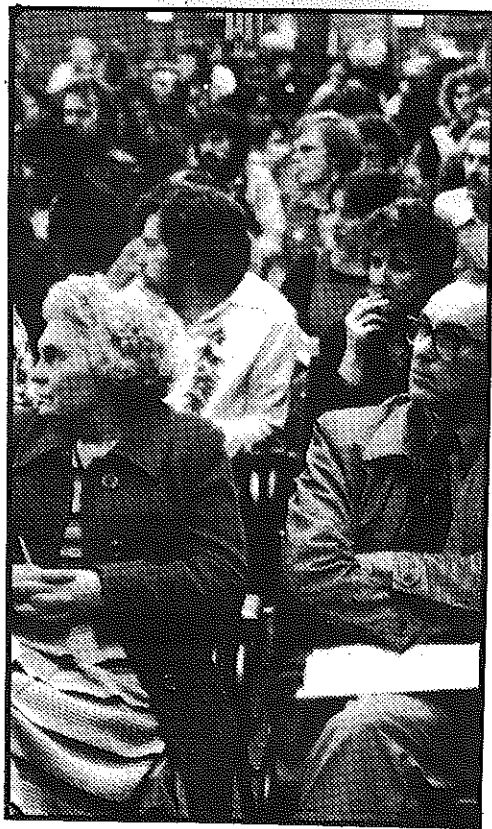
4. The liability of workerism

Because the revolutionary left developed in a period of militancy by industrial workers, it did not feel the need to question some fundamental Marxist beliefs about who are the vanguards. Implicitly or explicitly, it was taken for granted that those who would lead the class struggle would be those sectors (i.e. miners, dockers, engineering workers) of

the working class that had in past struggles taken a vanguard role. And, of course, events like the miners' strikes in Britain in 1972 and 1974 were seen as a confirmation of our expectations. And so we tended to forget how little some of the key ideas of the post-1968 period squared with our ideas of who were the vanguards. In an attempt to affirm their proletarian credentials, many revolutionary organisations (e.g. Socialist Workers Party, Lutte Ouvrière etc.) denied the fundamental role students played in the events of France in May '68 and, even, the key role played by unskilled line workers in the militancy that spread through the car plants of Europe in the late '60s. And, of course, this attempt to forget our own history was so successful that it made us totally unprepared for the fundamental achievements of the women's movement which radically brought into question not only our concept of revolutionary organisation but also our concept of what issues are politically important – women put on the political map issues like abortion, rape, battered wives, the sexual division of labour and many others. Of course, an organisation like *Lotta Continua* is an obvious exception to this generalisation – it did at least at a theoretical level recognise the importance of those sectors of the working class whose involvement in class struggle is a defining characteristic of the post-68 period (i.e. women, prisoners, the unemployed, state and local government employees etc.) but *Lotta Continua* was unable to translate these theoretical insights into organisational terms – this led to the violent confrontations between feminists and industrial workers at the 1976 Rimini conference which caused the disintegration of the organisation.⁶

5. The poverty of theory

What is striking is the theoretical vacuum in which the practice of the revolutionary left has developed over the last years. Of course, there are good reasons for this vacuum – above all, the split between theory and practice of



Marxism as a result of the defeats suffered by the working class movement throughout Europe in the 1920's. The result of this disastrous split has been that whilst Marxist academic theorists continue to develop mainly irrelevant theory in the universities, revolutionary groups operate on a pragmatic day to day basis without asking themselves the fundamental questions revolutionaries need answers to. Fundamental questions like 'who is the working class?' 'What is the nature of the contemporary capitalist state?' remain unasked and the best work being done on these issues certainly does

not come from within revolutionary groups.⁷ The result of this theoretical impoverishment has been that not only has the revolutionary left had no adequate strategy for the issues that it is involved in but also that it has been unable to see the importance of some of the key political issues of the last ten years; e.g. racism, sexism, national autonomy, energy policy were all issues that were *forced* onto the attention of the revolutionary left. For instance, most of the revolutionary left was taken totally by surprise by the struggles of the national minorities for liberation

(e.g. the Basque Country, Corsica, the North of Ireland) that are such a central part of the political struggle in Europe today (though an adequate analysis of the role the Common Market is playing in building capitalist integration inside Europe could have lessened the surprise). In Britain, although most of the groups claim to be Leninist and therefore can be expected to have a satisfactory position on self-determination – in practice, most groups have given little more than token support to the struggle of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland and not even token support to Welsh and Scottish demands for regional autonomy.

The Crisis of Our Tendency



In the first part, I have looked at factors that affected the crisis of the revolutionary left as a whole. In this second part, I want to look at the specific ways in which the political tendency of which Big Flame is part experienced the crisis.

Our political tendency is referred to as 'soft Maoist'. All the groups involved in the tendency came out of the political space created by the May '68 events in France and the 'Hot Autumn' in Italy in 1969. What these events showed us was that revolutionary change could come very suddenly without anyone predicting it. Our tendency which included groups like *Lotta Continua* (Italy), OCT (France), PRP (Portugal), KB (Germany) was never very structured. There were informal visits from one group to another, translations of each other's publications and a shared theoretical reference to the new Italian Marxists like Panzieri, Tronti and Negri.

A brief summary of the views that the

groups in the tendency held would include:

- A positive assessment of the Chinese revolution and of the Cultural Revolution in particular. What we got from this 'Chinese Connection' was a firm belief that subjective factors can override material conditions. Mao's theory and practice was seen as a break with a tradition of Marxism that saw socialism as only being on the agenda in countries with developed forces of production. We accepted the belief of the Chinese Communists that it was possible to begin to build socialism even where there was a low state of development of the productive forces.

- A belief that important sections of the working class wanted revolutionary change. We saw the revolutionary process developing as a qualitative extension of workplace militancy. We remained trapped in an economic perspective which underestimated the need for a

political offensive of the working class that would mobilize more than just its industrial sector.

- The idea that history began in 1968. Unlike, for instance, the 4th International, our tendency had no past – we began on the high point of 1968. So we had no sense of the cycle of the class struggle: of its ups and downs. And, for example, we were unaware of how the institutions of social democracy had managed to recuperate waves of militancy in the period after the first and second world wars. (The Communist Parties too in the later case.)

- A conception of the working class (the proletariat) that was much wider than that held by other revolutionary currents. Because of our lack of dogma, we were able to grasp the roles played in the post-68 cycle of struggles by sectors of the working class traditionally neglected by the revolutionary left – e.g. women, youth, immigrant workers, unskilled

(‘mass’) workers, prisoners, tenants etc. Of course, as could be expected in our theory and practice we ‘bent the stick’ too far to the point of sometimes seeing the established, white, skilled section of the working class as a conservative force and we also failed to resolve the fundamental problem of how to build *ongoing* structures out of struggles that are violent and sporadic; after each prison mutiny, you were organisationally back where you started.

– We over-estimated the *tactics* of struggle and tended to only be interested in struggles which had employed ‘new’ tactics i.e. sabotage. More traditional struggles such as unionization, were neglected.

– We were the first part of the revolutionary left to be affected by the demands and ways of organising of the women’s movement, the gay movement etc. Inside our organisations this meant a struggle against the cult of leadership and the search for less alienating ways of organising meetings – an understanding of the need for childcare if women were to be able to participate in the life of the organisation. It also meant that we rebelled against a Marxist tradition that saw no connection between political activity and personal life and we firmly believed that it was possible and important to challenge the level of personal relationships between socialists *before* the seizure of state power. Like many feminists, we were not prepared to accept that personal liberation had to be deferred until after the revolution. Though we accepted the obvious fact that islands of socialism cannot be built in a sea of capitalism we did (and do) think it possible for revolutionary socialists to develop ways of organising and ways of living that are ‘pre-figurative’ (i.e. that in some way look like what life will be like within a socialist society). We were not prepared to accept that revolutionary politics was a ‘sacrifice’ and we expected from our political activity a certain degree of personal satisfaction.

It should be clear from even this brief summary of our political tendency that it was likely to prove vulnerable and fragile when faced with the political climate of the late 1970’s. Firstly, a political tendency whose international perspective was characterised by a positive attitude towards the Chinese revolution was bound to be seriously affected by events in China since the death of Mao. Groups like Big Flame, the OCT and *Lotta Continua* had for a long time been critical of Chinese foreign policy but we had taken the easy way out and seen it as an aberration in no way connected to Chinese internal policy. At the same time, we under-estimated the crucial lack of proletarian democracy in China. And in some cases, we were clearly guilty of having a double standard, like being indifferent to the repressive policy towards women and sexuality of the Chinese government – a policy we would have violently attacked if put forward by

a Western government. There has been no consensus in the response of the groups of our tendency to the rightward shift in China – the OCT (France) and PLS (Belgium) have taken up Bettelheim’s position that since the defeat of the Gang of Four there has begun the restoration of capitalism in China, and in Big Flame, while there is agreement that socialism is no longer being built in China, there is disagreement as to how permanent the defeat will be.⁷ Whatever we end up calling China, it is important that we

communities, we were not able to oppose this forced repatriation.

Our lack of historical knowledge meant that we underestimated the strength of reformism and the attraction it would continue to exercise over workplace and community militants. As it becomes clearer that revolutionary struggle in advance capitalist countries is very much a long-term business, many activists are abandoning the revolutionary left for social democracy (in Britain, the Labour Party) which they see as



‘We’re taking our health in hand’ (L’Etincelle)

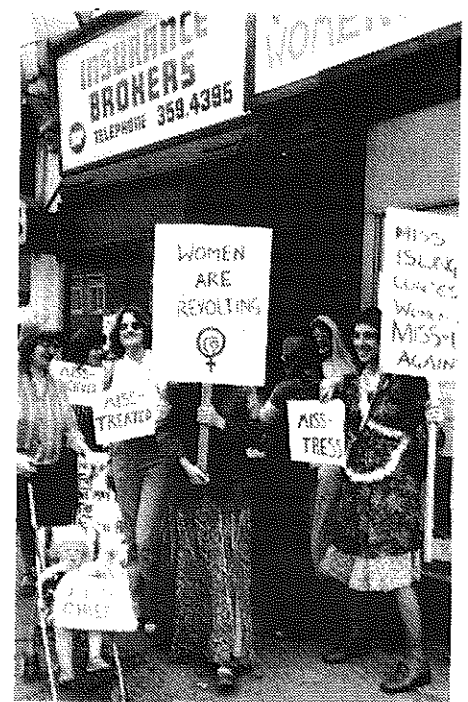
learn from our over-optimism of the past that socialism cannot be built without the institutions of socialist democracy (workers and peasants councils etc.) and that in a situation where party and government are indistinguishable, there is bound to be an erosion of grass-roots democracy.

No doubt, our tendency would have been able to weather the difficulties of events in China if they hadn’t coincided with a reflux of the struggle in Europe and the consequent fatigue of many of our members. Our political perspectives were tinged with voluntarism (‘optimism of the will’) and ultra-leftism, the heady mixture left us totally unprepared for the process of recuperation of the victories of the post-68 period. In fact May 68 was itself successfully converted by the unions and the French Communist Party into a 15% wage rise. Then, the factory delegates that were thrown up by the rank and file militancy during and after the ‘Hot Autumn’ were incorporated into the union structures, campaigns for abortion on demand had partial victories in laws that made abortion legal in certain circumstances. In other struggles we were not strong enough to threaten the right-wing offensive; for example, since 1975, the French and German government have been sending back to their country of origin thousands of migrant workers – although, in some cases the revolutionary left had good contact with the immigrant

protection against the right-wing trend in European politics. Though, of course, this process of revolutionary socialists making their peace with social democracy is not a new phenomenon.

Theoretical unpreparedness

Like the rest of the left, our tendency



was theoretically unprepared for the post-1974 downturn of the struggles. But because our expectations were so much higher, the downturn was all the more painful. There are tendencies on the revolutionary left that have been small and isolated for years — it is rapid growth that would come as a shock to them. But organisations like *Lotta Continua* which had a membership of over 10,000 after five years of existence had a sense of being part of a 'mass struggle.' Because of the extremely rapid growth and a sense that revolution was 'on the agenda', their militants kept up a level of political activity that could not be maintained in the long term. The leadership was able to keep getting this level of activity by consistently over-estimating the possibilities of revolutionary change in Europe⁹ — and of course, when the bubble burst, it burst sharply. Militants dropped out of revolutionary politics by the thousands and there was a 'crisis of militancy' that decimated the groups of the revolutionary left, including those of our tendency.¹⁰

Party and movements

The crisis of militancy hit our tendency head on because of the belief (see above) our members held that political activity and personal liberation had to go together. And the leaderships of our organisations refused to take account of this belief and to find a 'cruising speed' for political activity that did not depend on endless calls for 'one last effort' and have the consequence of militants burning themselves out. It is also true that our tendency was most affected by the growth of 'movement' politics that is characteristic of revolutionary politics in monopoly capitalist countries. We correctly argued that it was important to put class before party and we insisted that our members do long-term systematic work in the different united fronts and campaigns — and we did not make a fetish of the organisation.

But if you push the 'class before party' position to an extreme, the party seems redundant.¹¹ Hard-line Leninist organisations do not have these problems. Since they recruit on the basis of 'the party directs the struggle', there is less chance of their members coming to question the need for a party. But all the groups in our tendency (the most extreme example is *Lotta Continua*) have had a 'movementist' faction that wanted to dissolve itself in the class and its movements. At the same time, the groups have also a 'Leninist' wing arguing for more centralisation and the giving of a higher profile to the organisation — sometimes this tension can be synthesised, in other situations like with the OCT it leads to a 'succession of splits towards the movement and towards more Leninist formations (i.e. the Fourth International) until there is not much left of the original goal of a creative fusion of the two currents.

Not surprisingly, there is no evident solution as to how to resolve this contradiction — after all, it has deep roots in the revolutionary movement. On the other



The steel employers' headquarters at Longwy, France, after being sacked by workers fighting proposed redundancies (photo: Helen Bamberger, Gamma)

hand, its solution is essential since classical Leninist organisations are not able to appeal to key sections of the revolutionary movement (i.e. many socialist feminists, black militants etc.¹²) and movement politics is bound to be limited in its working class orientation and in its ability to develop the degree of discipline and organisation necessary to *stabilise the victories made* — and without this process of stabilisation, all gains are temporary. And although we must continually learn from the class and the movements — we should have no illusions that the class or these movements are either homogeneous or politically united. Inside every political movement (including women's movements) there are revolutionary, revisionist and reformist tendencies which reflect key political differences. A revolutionary organisation must understand these differences and insist that its members inside these movements fight for the tendency which the organisation thinks is correct.

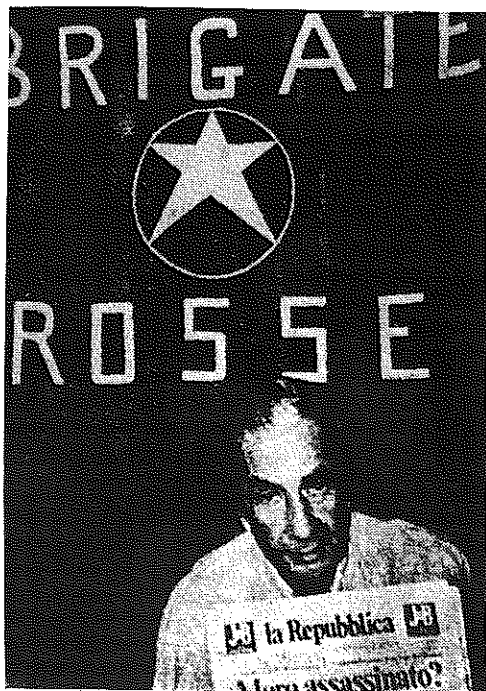
On many occasions, groups in our tendency have failed to recognise these differences and have acted as if the movements were homogeneous — and thus have failed to give their members inside these movements any guidance. Not surprisingly, the response of many of the members is 'of what use is the organisation to me?' It goes without saying that the increasing divisions inside the working class (as it comes to include more and more intermediate strata) and the growing proliferation of political movements and single-issue campaigns pose fundamental problems for revolutionary organisations. Unlike the Trotskyists who tend to make light of these divisions, our tendency sometimes seem to believe that the more proliferation the better — 'let the hundred flowers bloom!' Between these two extremes, some middle way must be found which accepts these divisions (but not as inevitable) and which constantly tries to find issues which move in the direction of unity and recomposition.

'Terrorism'

No doubt on many occasions governments have invented 'terrorists' in order to crack down on revolutionary organisations. But it is also true that our tendency, because it recognised the violent nature of class oppression under capitalism has always refused to condemn those sections of the working class whose response has been violent. And, on occasions, groups like *Lotta Continua* were not clear enough on the difference between mass working class violence and the elitist violence of those (e.g. the Red Brigades) who took it upon *themselves* to act violently for the class. It should be clear that a situation like that of Italy where the Red Brigades have become important actors on the political scene poses enormous problems for the revolutionary left. On the one hand, it has to avoid the lies and slanders of the Communist Parties who call the Red Brigades 'fascist provocateurs', on the other hand, any move to express solidarity with them invited an immediate confrontation with the state. One cannot feel confident about giving advice of what to do in such a situation.

Throughout this article, we have referred to a political tendency that includes revolutionary groups in different countries; this notion of a tendency should be seen as something loose and unstructured. Until quite recently, the links between the different groups were very informal. We would read each other's publications and exchange visits on our holidays. Big Flame's closest links were with *Lotta Continua* — we translated many of their publications and participated in a cadre school *Lotta Continua* organised for our members in 1975. It is probably true to say that the revolutionary movement in Italy was a reference for all the groups in our tendency — and we were disorientated by the collapse of *Lotta Continua* in 1976 and the more gradual disintegration of *Avanguardia Operaio* from 1976 onwards. Contacts between the different groups remained very ten-

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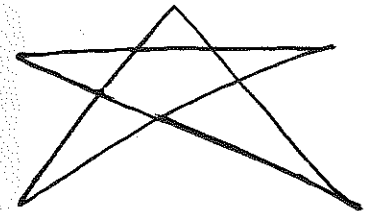
electoral intervention, the co-ordination included groups that are outside our political tendency – for instance, it included centrist forces like the French United Socialist Party (the PSU). Elections are not a happy terrain for revolutionaries¹³ and in many ways it was unfortunate that our coming together occurred over the European elections – especially given the indifferent attitude of working class vanguards to them. Fortunately, the co-ordination did not allow itself to be over preoccupied with the European elections and has now begun to discuss some of the key issues facing our political tendency in the current period, and also concentrate on more practical issues like the international rank and file co-ordination of Ford workers.

A difficult period

It should be unfortunately clear that these discussions take place in a period of retreat of our political tendency. The disappearance of *Lotta Continua* and the severe crisis being experienced by the OCT and Proletarian Democracy (an organisation formed in 1978 out of a merger of the majority of *Avanguardia Operaia* and a minority of the PDUP-Manifesto) show the problems that face those of us whose politics have developed out of the mass struggles of 1968. The current political situation in Europe, which is one of a right-ward shift in almost all countries, demands of us that we make a sober assessment of what we can and cannot do. This assessment must contain a critique of some of the ultra-left positions that were an integral part of our tendency – many of them have

been discussed in this article. *But*, at the same time, we must avoid the very real danger of becoming too accommodating to reformism and social democracy. There is a great temptation that as we become older and more mature that we come to see political positions that we have held as 'youthful follies' – this is part of a process that hits individuals *and* organisations as they desire to be more 'legitimate' and acceptable *within bourgeois society*. At all times, we should remember that revolutionary socialists cannot be comfortable inside capitalist society – if they are, there is bound to be something wrong with what they are doing politically.

In the current period, there are many occasions where it will be correct for us to work alongside reformist forces – i.e. in defence of bourgeois rights, the trade unions etc. And where possible (i.e. over abortion in this country) we must fight to develop situations where this joint work is done *on our terms*. But, we should always be clear that, at the end of the day, the goal of social democracy (including its left variant) is very different from ours. We don't agree either on the nature of the socialist society we are fighting for or on the way to fight for it; they believe in a gradual, peaceful transition to socialism – we don't.



tive in the 1970-78 period which is not surprising given that we all rejected the Fourth International model of international links without having any clear idea of what to put in its place. Each of the groups recognised the specificity of their national experience and, certainly, this led them to a rejection of the idea of a democratic centralist International.

In fact, what brought the groups together in a more structured way was the need to develop a European co-ordination over the elections to the European Parliament which were to take place in June 1979. Since it was an

in any large numbers.

6. As is to be expected, Chris Harman in his article in *International Socialism 4* dismisses the idea that any other social strata apart from the working class can be involved in the revolutionary process. For instance, *Avanguardia Operaia*'s belief that peasants can be a revolutionary force inside the proletariat is dismissed as 'populism.' (Harman in *International Socialism 4*, p.62-63.) For personal accounts of the effects of Rimini see *Dear Comrades*, Pluto Press, 1980.

7. Take for instance the debate over the 'new working class' started by Serge Mallet and others. It is quite clear that the decreasing number of industrial workers, the increasing number of service and state-sector workers is changing the composition of the working class and this must have consequences for revolutionary strategy, but these key questions (and others) are not being discussed in revolutionary groups who, in the main, prefer the *security* of 60 year old dogma. Also see, for example, the very rich debate on sex and class inside the theoretical wing of the women's movement and in the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists).

8. A recent pamphlet published by Big Flame, *The Century of the Unexpected*, puts forward the view that China, like the USSR, is 'state collectivist.' It is a discussion document to further the debate inside and outside of Big Flame.

9. See for instance Lotta Continua's uncritical attitude towards the MFA in Portugal in 1975 in an interview with Otelo which we translated in our pamphlet *Blaze of Freedom*.

10. This decimation has not been so pronounced for Big Flame – we have managed to grow slowly over the last few years. This is probably because firstly we started small and secondly many of the battles of feminism were fought early on in England. Though it should be clear that no organisation can have the arrogance to think that it has 'solved the demands of feminism' – since there is always a tendency (and more) for revolutionary organisations to settle for male-dominated structures and ways of organising – constant pressure from feminists is necessary to prevent these 'relapses.' And it is always possible that at a certain time women comrades do not find this the most useful way to spend their political energy. See the article '1968 – Ten Years On', *Revolutionary Socialism 2*.

11. This point is also made in a very interesting document called 'Our Political Current' by a faction in the OCT that has just joined the Fourth International.

12. See for example the constant problems the SWP is having with its black (Flame) and women's (Women's Voice) wings. Within these wings there are constant demands for political independence which are rejected by the leadership of the SWP.

13. Big Flame's position on elections is that revolutionaries cannot afford to be absent from them – though we do not see electoral work as an over-riding priority. It is for this reason that we are involved in 'Socialist Unity', an electoral alliance that includes the Fourth International. Our position on elections is very different from that of the SWP who see standing candidates in elections as a total waste of time for revolutionaries.

FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted in Paul Thompson and Guy Lewis, *The Revolution Unfinished? – A Critique of Trotskyism*, Big Flame pamphlet.

2. If we classify both social-democratic and Communist Parties as reformist, we also recognise important differences between their respective relation to the working class. In fact, in countries like France the existence of both a large socialist party and a large communist one gives reformism even more room for manoeuvre; it can always provoke a (false) polarity between them as it did in 1978.

3. In Great Britain, unions are organised by *trade* and not by political affiliation as in France and Italy. Although many unions are affiliated to the Labour Party, this link is in no way an organic one. Certainly, it cannot be compared with the link between the French Communist Party and the CGT union.

4. In Big Flame, we have always been aware of the limitations of this wage militancy-defensive unionism cycle. Our pamphlet *Labouring Under the Tories – or a Socialist Alternative* is a clear statement of this position. Fortunately, there seems to be amongst revolutionary socialists a growing awareness of the need for a positive alternative.

5. E.g. the autonomous assemblies in Italian workplaces with their perspective of 'we are all delegates.' A different but connected perspective was that of 'self-help' health, food co-ops, free schools where revolutionaries set up parallel institutions to the existing ones. Even if they were successful, these parallel institutions were not able to involve the working class