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Book Review

Tony Cliff as a Socialist Leader - On the history of the British SWP

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***Tony Cliff, A Marxist for His Time.* By Ian Birchall. London, England: Bookmarks Publications, 2011, 648 pages. Approx. \$25 paperback (available from Amazon).**

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THE RECENT SCANDAL in the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), involving accusations of rape against one of its leaders and opening up a profound internal party crisis, not only exposed how grossly the SWP central leadership mishandled the charges, but also revealed its historic lack of internal democracy.

Covered by much of the international left-wing press and even in the British mainstream media, this episode adds a new twist to the history of that political group and, indirectly, to the history of its founder and long-time leader Tony Cliff, a Palestinian Jew born Ygael Gluckstein in 1917 who emigrated to Britain in 1946, became an important figure in postwar international Marxism, and died in Britain in 2000.

In 2011, Ian Birchall, a historian and long-time member of the SWP, published a massive biography of Tony Cliff, 559 pages of text, plus many pages containing an index, notes and references. Birchall's is a well-written, exhaustive and conscientious biography, which also sheds light over matters such as politics in Palestine on the eve of the foundation of the state of Israel, and the state of the labor movement in Britain in the second half of the 20th century.

Subsequent to writing this biography, Ian Birchall himself has become an important figure among dissident SWP members remaining, for now, in the party. [1]

The book is not a hagiography of Tony Cliff. There are many criticisms of the SWP leader that appear throughout, although not given proper emphasis and the systematic treatment they deserve. This is especially so regarding the SWP's internal political regime for which Cliff bears a major responsibility.

Starting in 1968, and continuing throughout the '70s, Cliff established, under the guise of "Leninism," an internal regime — for example, officially banning "permanent factions" (i.e. internal

tendencies or caucuses of any kind) — reminiscent of the one established by Zinoviev in the mid-twenties in the USSR, [2] as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Comintern continued to decay in a process that in a few years would culminate in the horrors of Stalinism.

Birchall seems ambivalent about this problem inside the SWP. On one hand, unlike countless members and leaders who were expelled or left in disgust, he remained a party member. [3] In fact, he repeatedly cites the testimony of many group members about their initial attraction to Cliff, stressing the fact that they remained members of the organization for many years — even decades — later.

On the other hand, in the middle of the recent rape scandal, Birchall joined the “In Defence of Our Party” faction critical of the leadership on matters pertaining to inner-party democracy, although he was not as critical as the members of the “Democratic Renewal” platform who were also members of the “Defence” faction.

Tony Cliff's Achievement

As much as Cliff is responsible for the establishment of the noxious Zinovievite internal regime in the SWP, he also deserves much of the credit for the considerable success of a group that starting with 33 members on October 1, 1950 had become, at the time of his death, the principal organization to the left of the Labor Party with a membership in the thousands. By this time the group had also played a central role in such major movements as the Anti Nazi League and, shortly after Cliff's death, in the Stop the War Coalition organized to oppose the imperialist war in Iraq.

What accounts for this success? We must first look at the state of the British left during the second half of the 20th century. During most of that period, the Labor Party continued to move gradually to the right, a move that greatly accelerated under the leadership of Tony Blair when it became New Labor in the mid-'90s.

Although the British Communist Party (CP) was never a mass organization like the French, Indonesian and Italian Communist parties, it was nevertheless a significant and influential force particularly among shop stewards and union militants. However, for reasons that cannot be addressed here, starting as early as 1956, with Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes and the Hungarian Revolution, the British CP went into a long-term decline and ceased to exist altogether after the collapse of the USSR.

In a very informative footnote (340), Birchall notes that between 1964 and 1979, a period during which industrial militancy had reached a fever pitch in the country, the number of CP workplace branches declined from 265 in 1964 to 126.

When the British CP began to lose its members in the late fifties, it was not Cliff's Socialist Review group (the name of the organization from 1950 to 1962, when it became the International Socialists until 1976, when it changed its name to Socialist Workers' Party) but the Socialist Labor League (SLL) that managed to attract a significant number of former CPers.

The SLL, however, was hopelessly sectarian; it was led by Gerry Healy whose politics were once described by Peter Sedgwick (a translator and editor of Victor Serge and a long time member of the SR/IS group) as “hysterical materialism.” Predictably, it soon lost most of the members it had recruited from the CP milieu. Ultimately, Healy would be exposed as a monstrous sexual predator.

Although the Trotskyist “Militant” group was saner than the SLL, its “deep entryism” into the Labor

Party, while allowing them to attain significant success in places like Liverpool, cut them off from the main scenes of the class struggle. In any case, the witch-hunt initiated by the Labor leadership against Militant in the eighties led to their mass expulsion from the party and to the end of their influence there.

Last but not least, while Maoism acquired a great deal of influence in the U.S. left of the '70s and several European countries, it never became important in Britain.

The relatively weak competition inside the radical left facilitated but did not, in and of itself, lead to the organizational success that the SR-IS-SWP attained. It was a far from automatic process, requiring a lot of political skill and opportune political interventions for the group to be able to move ahead and grow both in quantitative as well as qualitative terms.

Thus in 1966, Cliff and Colin Barker published a short book entitled *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards*, with an introduction by Reg Birch, a well-known and respected Communist industrial militant. Publicized through meetings and various other means, the book sold 10,000 copies. Just in Manchester, six IS members sold 500 books, and mostly because of the book the branch in that city grew eventually reaching 60 members.

Most important of all, the IS made inroads into "new territory," recruiting part of the Communist Party base among shop stewards and unionists. (259-265) In 1970, Cliff published a book on productivity deals, *The Employers' Offensive: Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them* (311-318), which was also very successful both in terms of sales and as a recruitment tool.

Growth and Turns

As it gradually grew in influence in the union and shop stewards' milieu, the IS became involved and got to play an important role in the student movement that developed in Britain, starting at the London School of Economics in 1967 — where several people who later became important members and leaders of the group were recruited — and in the movement against the war in Vietnam that was developing around the same time. Through participation and contribution to all these struggles, it qualitatively grew in numbers and influence.

Tony Cliff's political style and personality doubtless played a major role. Unlike the grotesque Healy, Cliff could be and often was an attractive political personality. Early in the book, Birchall describes how Cliff's "sense of humour, his brilliant exploitation of imperfect English, his charm, warmth and generosity, his peculiar single-mindedness which could on occasion become ruthlessness (in the interests of the organization, never to his personal advantage), all meant that he exerted a powerful influence on many who crossed his path" (I-II)

Cliff did not stay aloof from the political organizational fray. He used and abused the telephone to contact — and badger — members and leaders to win them over to his political plans and ideas and to make sure that they carried out any number of political chores, no matter how small.

I have occasionally heard of Cliff as being spoken of as a "talented peasant." Putting aside the sometimes abusive Marxist aversion to peasants, I think that the sobriquet must have referred to a certain crudeness that became expressed in Cliff's callousness towards even loyal comrades whom he stopped regarding as important or useful (266), and in a ruthlessness in internal organizational struggles (429) that recognized few boundaries.

On one occasion, when Cliff was criticized for not having a thought out strategy to respond to the

new conditions under the Labor government that had come into office in the mid-1970s, Cliff responded that it was fine that his politics came from his guts, since it was gut reactions that brought people into revolutionary politics. (364) Characteristically, Cliff was deliberately glossing over the difference between what role “gut reaction” can play for a potential convert to revolutionary socialism and whether this “gut reaction” is adequate or sufficient for a seasoned and experienced leader.

While Cliff made significant theoretical contributions, particularly to the theory of state capitalism and to Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution (by modifying into what he called “deflected Permanent Revolution” [4]), Marxist theory was not, in my view, his major strength. His several volumes on Lenin did not reflect a deep engagement with the ideas and actions of the Bolshevik leader, but were much closer to a cut and paste job transparently written for purely conjunctural purposes: to justify his own political strategy and tactics.

Even his much superior work on Stalinist Russia did not necessarily stand out for his theoretical contributions to the theory of state capitalism but, rather, for his prodigious capacity to synthesize a wealth of empirical material into a very insightful, coherent and understandable framework of class analysis written from an uncompromising revolutionary standpoint. Overall, what comes through in much of Cliff’s theoretical work is his deep roots and intimate knowledge of socialist history, theory and debates.

What Cliff did have was an excellent nose to detect shifts in the industrial and political winds, and to grasp the nature of the conjuncture. It was in this sense, and not in his post-1968 organizational views, that he was a true disciple of Lenin rather than Zinoviev — although, as Birchall notes based on the testimony of Nigel Harris, Cliff was impressive in his ability to realize the significance of a situation, rather than in his ability to argue a course of action.

He operated on instinct and generally it took a long time to find out why he did what he did. As Birchall indicates, many older members concluded that although Cliff quickly grasped what was happening, he simply made up his mind about how to proceed without bothering to explain why, and that this was due to his not taking the membership seriously. (292)

Indeed, Cliff tended to have brainstorming and act on that basis, leading Jim Higgins, a former close associate turned opponent, to describe him as having a “whim of iron.” [5] A strong leadership team could have potentially curbed Cliff’s tendency to go half cocked on his own. The irony, and even tragedy, of the situation is that the SWP attracted and developed many talented leaders, but they never really became Cliff’s peers.

Part of the reason for this was that Cliff tended to politically fall in love with many talented people and then brutally dump them. Even when he realized his error and tried to make amends, it would be too late and the mistreated comrade, drained by the experience, refused to continue holding responsible positions (461) or left the party altogether.

Bending or Breaking the Stick

Cliff’s “theoretical” justification for his swings and exaggerations was Lenin’s “stick bending,” which he described as Lenin making “the task of the day quite clear, repeating what was necessary ad infinitum in the plainest, heaviest, most single-minded hammer-blow pronouncements. Afterwards, he [Lenin] would regain his balance, straighten the stick, then bend it again in another direction.” (Cliff, quoted by Birchall, 392)

Birchall admits that Cliff's reliance on this notion was criticized with "some justification" as converting inconsistency into a virtue, and for flitting from one enthusiasm to another. It could also be seen, adds Birchall, as a manifestation of an elitist and manipulative approach in Cliff, a belief that the leadership is the source of all wisdom, which is to be imposed on the membership by overstatement. Yet Birchall defends Cliff, claiming that the need for prioritizing, particularly in a small organization, justified his "stick bending." (395)

This is an unconvincing argument. One can make a powerful case for prioritizing on an entirely rational basis without exaggerations and demagoguery, especially if an organization is trying to encourage the development of independent thinking members instead of treating them as people of limited understanding who must be "rallied" into following a certain course of action.

In Cliff's approach, activism, energy and enthusiasm often became an alternative and not a necessary complement to consciousness and understanding. That spirit of "rallying" may have contributed to a recurring triumphalism (although fairly sane in comparison with most Trotskyist and Maoist organizations) as when he proclaimed the foundation of the Socialist Workers Party on January 1, 1977.

As Peter Sedgwick so aptly pointed out on this occasion, the "intuition" that Cliff had celebrated in Lenin could be, at its worst, "impressionism mingled with emotion" and argued that the "International Socialists are not yet a Socialist Workers Party, and will not get one whit nearer to that position in the working class by some fancy rallying and pseudo-inauguration." (415)

Sedgwick was right: while the IS/SWP had gained strength and influence, it was in no position to claim to be a party in the sense of having developed roots in the working class remotely comparable to those of the Bolsheviks in the Russia in the years before 1917.

It is to Birchall's credit that he shows the many instances where Cliff misunderstood things and, at least initially, insisted on a mistaken political orientation toward many substantive political issues that arose throughout several decades. One example was the case of the Poll Tax that Thatcher's government tried to impose in the late eighties that failed, not through the industrial action by the civil servants that Cliff had recommended, but by the people's refusal to pay it. (504-506)

A second relates to the superficial and misleading perspective that Cliff adopted in the nineties, described by Birchall as having "distinct limitations," that we were witnessing "the thirties in slow motion." (533)

Earlier, in the autumn of 1976, Cliff and the Central Committee had decided that the group should begin to contest parliamentary by-elections in the face of recession, repeated spending cuts and the increasing unpopularity of the Labor government. A total of eight by-elections were contested, with poor results. This orientation came to an end as it was realized that although Labor was doing badly, this did not mean that its supporters were willing to break away to the left. (410-411)

In retrospect, we can see an underlying common theme to these political failures: an approach that did not start from actually existing consciousness and social reality but from a schematism rooted in Cliff's theory and strategy about working class industrial action, the nature of economic crises and the limits of reformism.

The Reviewer's Experience

This reviewer worked with the SR/IS tendency when I was a graduate student at the London School

of Economics (LSE) from 1961 to 1963, and was present when the group's name was officially changed from Socialist Review to International Socialism in 1962.

The SR/IS group's political atmosphere compared favorably in many ways with the Shachtmanite Young People's Socialist League with which I had previously been associated at the University of Chicago. It was a more relaxed and open ambience with far less emphasis on the role of the political intellectual "heavies" that, at least in my perception, characterized the YPSL (youth wing of the Socialist Party).

The SR-IS group was then very democratic, welcomed controversy and disdained the spirit of orthodoxy. [6] It's no wonder that the group's leaders, besides working on the theories of state capitalism and the permanent arms economy, were revising and reviving fundamental tenets of Marxism as witnessed by the writings of Michael Kidron on imperialism and the arms economy, and of Tony Cliff on Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution and Lenin's theory of the labor aristocracy.

Rank-and-file members and people friendly to the SR/IS were strongly encouraged to write for the group's publications. That is how I published my first article on Cuba under the penname of Sergio Junco, with the assistance of Nick Howard, [7] and several book reviews on such authors as I.F. Stone and the Argentinian Silvio Frondizi. [8] To this group I owe a good part of my political education in Marxism, which then continued under the influence of Hal Draper when I went to Berkeley in 1963.

In the '50s and '60s, Cliff's politics were of a broadly libertarian Marxist bent. He may have been considered a "Luxemburgist" in arguing that "for Marxists, in advanced industrial countries, Lenin's original position can serve much less as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's, notwithstanding her overstatements on the question of spontaneity." [9]

Cliff's libertarian tendencies were also manifest in his continued emphasis on the self-emancipation of the working class and in his interpretation of the Russian Revolution in articles such as his "Trotsky on Substitutionism." [10] There he pointed out the political and ideological deterioration that had already taken place under Lenin's government, instead of attributing the revolutionary decay only to objective factors such as the destruction caused by the Civil War, an argument that unfortunately he and others such as Chris Harman in "How the Revolution was Lost," [11] retook years later.

However, even then Cliff and the group showed a certain "economistic" inclination, that is, a tendency to downplay the critical importance of the role of politics and ideology. In this sense, they were poles apart from the Shachtmanites, left and right, who had exactly the opposite inclination.

Cliff's "economistic" inclination was usually accompanied by a "workerist" tendency that played down the importance of democratic struggles that did not directly involve the working class, be it the struggles of women, Blacks or for national self-determination. I believe that this, in addition to other factors such as Cliff's sexism, played a major role in Cliff's conflicts with the IS publication *Women's Voice* and in its eventual closure in 1982. (469-471)

My political activity took place mainly in the Young Socialists — the youth wing of the Labor Party — where I had contact with people of very different social backgrounds than those I had encountered at Chicago, and more similar to the people with whom I had gone to public high school in Cuba. Many of them were workers or children of workers who, characteristically for the England of the period, had not gone or were not going to college.

Since London had little heavy industry, many of these YS members were lower level white-collar

workers, either in the private sector or as very junior civil servants. On the other hand, as one would expect, the members of the Labor Society at the LSE, where I was also active, were far more similar to the Chicago students.

Because I lived in dormitories located near Euston and St. Pancras stations during my entire stay in London, I was active in the South Saint Pancras and Holborn YS and, as a result of this geographic happenstance, I had more contact and was more influenced by Nigel Harris, Alasdair McIntyre and particularly Mike Kidron than by Tony Cliff, who lived in the eastern part of the city, or Jim Higgins, who lived in a working-class suburb located north of London.

Nevertheless, I respected Cliff not only because of his writings, but because I saw him in action. I attended several of his meetings, including his introductory classes on Marxist economics oriented to YS members, and liked very much his ability to engage young working class people who had had only a secondary education.

But several incidents, a couple of which are cited by Birchall, made me question his judgment. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the missile crisis in October 1962, he predicted in all seriousness that there would be no war — because the rate of profit was too high.

This notwithstanding, I remained very sympathetic to the group when I went to Berkeley in 1963. For several years, I sold copies of each issue of *International Socialism* to my American comrades in the Bay Area.

I returned to Britain ten years later where, during the spring and most of the summer of 1973, I collaborated with the group, including going on speaking tours organized by Jim Higgins, then the National Secretary, of several towns and cities in Scotland, the north of England and the Midlands. I was very impressed by how much the IS had grown, and by its success in recruiting substantial numbers of working class unionists and shop stewards.

At the same time, I could not help but notice a change in the group's political tone. It was not so much that the previous "revolutionary revisionism" had been replaced by orthodoxy as that many of the leading cadre, although by no means the whole membership, had adopted a tone of toughness and harshness that was supposed to represent a newly found Bolshevism.

This was not an occasional stance provoked or justified by specific incidents or situations, but a permanent political attitude adopted on principle. I knew that the group had abolished or reduced many of its previous democratic norms. This had started, as I indicated earlier, in 1968 when under the impact of the strikes and rebellions that took place in France and several other countries, and of new important manifestations of racism in Britain, Cliff decided to get rid of Rosa's clothes and don a SuperLenin black leather jacket.

The new outbreaks of racism had led Cliff to the exaggerated conclusion that Fascism was a real and immediate threat, and that this called for the unification of all the left in order to fight it. No group was interested in "unity" except for a sect called Workers' Fight that joined the group with all minority rights of representation in the leading bodies. As I and countless others in both Britain and the United States expected, this turned out to be a total disaster that eventually led to a special conference, in the autumn of 1971, where the group was expelled. (328)

With the establishment of Cliff's version of "democratic centralism," the gradual Zinovievization of the group had begun and would be extended and consolidated through the decade of the seventies. It was as if Cliff had decided that group democracy was fine when things "were slow," as had been the case earlier in the sixties, but the moment things "went fast" it was time for another type of

party regime motivated by what Cliff once called “the organized distrust of the members by the Center.” [12]

It is not the case, however, that Cliff’s flaws developed all of a sudden after 1968; it was rather that while they could be compensated for and restrained previous to that critical year, they became far less restrained and close to intolerable afterwards.

Conclusion

The recent debacle in the British SWP, for which Tony Cliff historically bears a great deal of responsibility, will undoubtedly reinforce the view that socialist organizations are inevitably undemocratic because they are formal and hierarchical and do not “prefigure” the future communist society.

Although this is not the place to take on this view — which has played an important role in the Occupy movement among others — it is a proper context here to argue that the democratic shortcomings of the SWP are to be traced to specific organizational forms that were adopted by that party under Cliff’s direction, not a necessary and inevitable outcome of formal organization and hierarchy.

The central defining principle of “democratic centralism” is unassailable in democratic terms: the decision adopted by a majority requires its execution by all members of the organization until at least the next annual convention, or a special conference called before then, that may choose to overturn that decision. Otherwise, why bother to try to win over a majority, or for that matter have an organization?

This is not a principle that is specific to Marxism, let alone “Leninism,” but a straightforward tenet of democratic organizational comradeship and solidarity. However, the devil in “democratic centralism” lies in the details. One of those evil details is the banning of further discussion on the disputed matter until the next pre-convention period. Such a discussion can be easily continued in the organization’s internal bulletin in order to avoid consuming branch time outside of the pre-convention period, and does not necessarily imply the formation or continuation of “permanent factions,” which should, in any case, have the right to exist if a group of members feel they are necessary.

Even more important than the issue of whether or not “permanent factions” are allowed is the political transparency of the leadership. If the leading political bodies fail to disclose the individual views and votes of their members on the political issues before them, how can rank-and-file members propose alternative leadership slates at convention time when they are ignorant of where the members of the leading bodies of the organization stand on those issues?

Finally, a practical consideration. It has been noted that in Britain the number of people who once belonged to the IS/SWP is far greater than its active membership at any given time. One thing I was reminded of by Birchall’s biography was that many of the splits and expulsions in the IS/SWP occurred not over matters of political principle (such as reform vs. revolution or right-left divisions) but over tactical and strategic differences arising over legitimate conflicting interpretations about the nature of the period.

One such instance was the major 1975 split about whether the group should orient to shop stewards (that Birchall assumes, without providing any supporting evidence, to have been a right-wing tendency) or to young workers, the position favored by Cliff that unsurprisingly won. (403-405) [13]

What if, heresy of heresies, the organization would have adopted a trial period during which both approaches would have been simultaneously attempted and then analyze the results? In the absence of such legitimate and principled “compromises,” it is difficult to conceive how an authentic democratic mass revolutionary party can ever be built anywhere.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°166, September/October 2013. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Some of his current views on the dispute and on “Leninism” can be found at <http://revolutionarysocialism.tumblr.com/post/54588200394/ian-birchall-replies-to-his-critics>.

[2] Birchall describes Zinoviev’s record as head of the Comintern as relying “on authority to cover up for his political inadequacies” and cites Cliff to the effect that Zinoviev “lacked theoretical depth and strength of character, being cowardly, erratic and prone to duplicity and intrigue.” (402)

[3] After indicating that one of the groups that split from the IS/SWP failed to survive, Birchall added that this seemed “to confirm the choice of those who, like myself, opted to stay with Cliff.” (406) This is a consequentialist approach lacking in political and ethical reflection. It is reminiscent of the argument of Communists who stayed in the party because they thought that there was no life outside it.

[4] Tony Cliff, “Deflected Permanent Revolution,” International Socialism, (first series), no. 12, 1963, www.marxists.org/archive/Cliff/works/1963/xx/permarev.htm.

[5] Jim Higgins, More Years for the Locust. The Origins of the SWP, London: IS Group, 1997, 23.

[6] For a wonderful account of what the SR/IS group was like in those days see Jim Kincaid, “IS in the Early 1960s,” International Socialist Network, April 20, 2013. <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org>.

[7] Sergio Junco, assisted by Nick Howard, “Yanqui No, Castro No,” Cuba Si, International Socialism, Winter 1961, First series, No. 7.

[8] At the time, Mike Kidron tried to get me to write a piece evaluating Lenin’s State and Revolution in the light of current realities. I was then in my early twenties and did not consider myself capable of such an ambitious undertaking.

[9] Cited by Ian Birchall (186) from Tony Cliff’s Rosa Luxemburg, 54.

[10] Tony Cliff, “Trotsky on Substitutionism,” International Socialism (first series), no. 2, Autumn

1960. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1960/xx/trotsky.htm>.

[11] Chris Harman, "Russia — How the Revolution Was Lost," *International Socialism* 30, Autumn 1967, <http://www.marxists.de/statecap/harman/revlost.htm>.

[12] Cited by Neil Davidson in "Leadership, membership and democracy in the revolutionary party," *International Socialism*, January 22, 2013, <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.com/2013/01>.

[13] Birchall quotes John Rose, a long-time leading member of the organization and supporter of Cliff in the 1975 conflict, who now thinks that Cliff had misunderstood the nature of the period and that the expulsions were a serious mistake. (404)