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Great Britain: The anti-political party: Tony Cliff and the Socialist Workers Party

Monday 27 May 2024, by [HEARTFIELD James](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2013).

Book Review:

Ian Birchall. Tony Cliff: A Marxist for His Time. London: Bookmarks, 2011.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is the largest political party left of the Labour Party, and has been active on the far left since 1977 and before that as the International Socialists since the 1960s. The party was led by Tony Cliff until his death thirteen years ago, and Ian Birchall, who has written this diligently researched memoir, is still a member since joining in the 1960s. Birchall's "warts-and-all" examination is motivated by a marked unhappiness about *A World To Win*, the autobiography which Cliff apparently wrote based on recollection, without access to the relevant documentation. Cliff, Birchall remarks, was sometimes abrasive and "often underestimated the contributions of other comrades" (ix, 543). However, whatever its deficiencies, *A World to Win* narrates the story of the SWP pretty much as it appeared to Cliff, as one that was inseparable from his own life story. And as Cliff made clear, "there was no time in which militant workers were so open to us as in 1970-74," under the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, "not before and not since." [1] Yet if we take this claim seriously, no organization better embodies the failure of the British workers to take power than the Socialist Workers Party, which has endured for more than half a century, though not for the reasons that its leaders think. [2] Indeed, it might be argued that Cliff's real achievement was to found a movement that rode a wave of disaffection from mainstream politics, unburdened by too many dogmatic ideas.

Birchall recounts that Tony Cliff joined the small Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League in Palestine before coming to Britain after the Second World War. The movement he joined faced some big problems. First, like all far left groups, it was guilty by its association with the repressive dictatorship that Stalin had built in the USSR. Second, the Trotskyists were saddled with an analysis that the economic crisis would get much worse after the Second World War (the destruction of the war had laid the basis for a revival). Third, globally, the working classes were divided between the peoples of the developing world, who were denied their freedom by military imperialism, and those of the developed world, who tended to support reforms offered by the state.

It was in this context that Cliff started to develop new theories to explain the new conditions in which the Left found itself, along with his early collaborators Mike Kidron and later Nigel Harris. He broke with orthodox Trotskyism to argue that the Soviet Union was not socialist, but actually capitalist, "state capitalist," only masquerading as socialist (anti-Stalinists like Max Schachtman and Raya Dunayevskaya drew similar conclusions, and later some Maoists argued the point). He also countered the prevailing claims of the Marxist left that the 1960s would be years of crisis, arguing that government spending on arms would boost the economy, what Cliff referred to as the "permanent arms economy." Lastly, against British comrades who believed in the importance of Lenin's argument about imperialism, Cliff held that it was not the highest stage beyond which capitalism could develop, but the "highest stage but one." Together, Cliff thought of the theories of

“state capitalism,” the “permanent arms economy,” and the end of imperialism as a “troika” of intellectual achievements.

Although Birchall does not acknowledge it, these were not really theories so much as an intellectual spinning of the facts, worked up to avoid specific problems. It was wise to say that the International Socialists did not want to make Britain into the Soviet Union, but bizarre to say that what was wrong with Stalinism was that it was capitalist, as if “capitalist” were a word that you applied to anything that you did not like. For as Kidron went on admit, the “state capitalist” “analysis was never a general theory,” and the “permanent arms economy” was a piece of Keynesian thinking. [3] These “theories” saddled the group with false prognoses that had to be reversed later on. The spending on arms, which was credited with preserving capitalism, was later credited with precipitating a new crisis. And while the International Socialists thought that Lenin’s theory of imperialism was superseded in the 1960s (just as the conflicts in Algeria, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, South Africa and elsewhere were mounting) the SWP later embraced the struggle against imperialism in 2003 when it rallied to support for what the party called “the resistance” in Iraq and Afghanistan. [4]

None of this “theorization” was all that important to the growth of the International Socialists. But it shows that, from the outset, a convenient indifference to dogmatism sat well with the organization’s pointedly anti-intellectual approach. What Birchall’s portrayal inadvertently illustrates is that rather than working through the difficult history of the Left, Cliff’s approach was to travel light, jettisoning theories that did not seem to fit, making up new ones to fill the gaps. While the classical Marxist tradition held that the key question of socialist organization was class consciousness, Cliff dismissed it, thinking that most workers were already socialists and that their bigger problem was *class confidence* (282). It is in this vein that Alex Callinicos, who inherited the mantle of chief theorist of the SWP, has argued it does not matter too much if workers “have reactionary ideas on questions such as race, the position of women and so on” — the key thing was that they build their confidence through struggle. [5]

Birchall owns up to a philistine side to Cliff’s Party: “On occasion in the SWP there had been currents of workerism and anti-intellectualism, and Cliff himself had sometimes been guilty of encouraging them,” (546) — but even that is to talk down the failing. Birchall documents that Cliff often told students, “Don’t waste your time reading books!” And that even Callinicos was told not to bother pursuing a doctorate on Marx’s *Capital* because Cliff had already settled issues of its interpretation (344). Cliff’s anti-intellectualism was not so strange in the 1960s, when hippies painted Blake’s saying, “The Tigers of Wrath are Wiser than the Horses of Instruction,” on the walls of Notting Hill, and Jay Landesmann recommended the “university of life” above college brain-washing. While Landesmann boasted that his children got “the worst education money could buy,” Birchall reveals that Cliff offered his daughter Anna £5 for every exam she failed (390). [6]

With its emphasis on activism, an iconoclastic view of received opinion, and an emphasis on change from the bottom up, the International Socialists caught the mood of the 1960s student revolt. Cliff’s group recruited impressive young comrades in Paul Foot and Gus MacDonald in Glasgow, the polymath Peter Sedgwick and the brothers Christopher and Peter Hitchens at Oxford University, the Women’s Liberationists Irene Bruegel and Sheila Rowbotham, Eamon McCann of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, and the sociologists Laurie Taylor and Jock Young.

In the early 1960s, when they were known as the Socialist Review Group, the International Socialists worked as “entryists” inside the Labour Party, lifted by the mood that ended the wasted years of Tory rule and swept Harold Wilson’s modernising Labour Party into power. The grubbier compromises of Wilson’s non-ideological, managerial approach disappointed the idealism of those

who had voted him in and the International Socialists drifted out of the Labour Party alongside them. While Wilson and his minister Barbara Castle were proposing an official incomes policy, Cliff caught the militant trade unionists' mood with a small, well-selling book, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and the Shop Stewards* (1966). Cliff's one tenacious view was that the International Socialists would stick close to whatever action there was and not let any dogma get in the way; unless they recruited a core of activists, he intuited, they would have no influence. Tellingly, the group ignored its own theoretical view that anti-imperialist struggles were irrelevant and threw itself into the militant student protests against the Vietnam War.

Cliff sought to tighten up the IS group, which was hitherto quite loosely cobbled, through talks and actions, a bit like an anarchist group. He had once set out Rosa Luxemburg's arguments in favor of working class spontaneity and the "mass strike" as the way to achieve power. But then he altered course, arguing for a "Leninist" party of "democratic centralism," pressing the need for discipline in the IS. Birchall takes this intellectual turn seriously, although, to my mind, Lenin's name was invoked more as an incantation than with any real understanding. For, despite what Birchall assumes, it is debatable whether Luxemburg and Lenin held opposite opinions on the issue of party discipline. But the main innovation was that the new group would follow orders. Ted Crawford remembers that the leadership were trying to "hurry things up" and had adopted an attitude of "not in front of the children" (358). Cliff, Kidron, Chris Harman, and Callinicos thought that the discussion of Marxist theory in the party's branches and discussion bulletins would put workers off the party. [7] They were particularly irritated when David Yaffe and others used Marx's theory of crisis to show that the state expenditure-led post-war growth had reached its limits. Kidron referred to this as an instance of "Talmudic" reasoning and he stuck to his Keynesian argument that arms spending would offset the recession. [8] The critics who held that the party needed a better understanding of Labour's grip on the working class were denounced as "paleo-Marxists" and "Abstract Propagandists" and expelled, an episode that Birchall prefers to forget. [9] The lesson seemed to be that socialism had to be dumbed down to appeal to workers.

The International Socialists' investment in student protests of the 1960s was thus followed by an involvement in the explosion of working class militancy in the seventies. Alive to the need to challenge the Communist Party's influence among trade union activists, especially shop stewards, Cliff's student recruits sold the IS newspaper outside factories in order to meet workers. He held that the explosion of protest in France was the result of the "years of depoliticization" and "the deep alienation of workers from traditional organizations" like the official trade union movement and the socialist and communist parties (306). The International Socialists thus challenged the mainstream left for influence just as rank and file militancy was on the rise and thereby transformed itself into a party.

Hacking through the detail, Birchall does not make the point that between 1968 and 1974 the European working class was as close to power as it had been since 1919-23. Industrial militancy went off the chart. In Britain a panic-stricken ruling class attacked militants, sending them to prison (as with the building workers known as the Pentonville Five and then the Shrewsbury Two), drawing up ration books, putting rebellious industry onto a "three day week," waging clandestine guerrilla warfare in Italy and Belgium; in Northern Ireland the troops were sent in as an army of occupation, setting up internment camps to suppress the rebellious civil rights protestors. There was no absence of working class *confidence* as voters backed the striking miners when Prime Minister Heath went to the country on the question of who governs. The failure of the revolution in Britain, though, was pointed. While the ruling class was preparing a clampdown, the working class teetered on the brink of challenging them, and then fell back, uncertain what to do.

The Socialist Workers Party called for more strikes and more solidarity, but when an election was called, it lobbied workers to vote for Labour! When, in 1972, the question of state power was put

most starkly in Northern Ireland, the *Socialist Worker* supported the intervention of British troops.

After the arrest of five shop stewards (the “Pentonville Five”) who disobeyed a court order to cease picketing, a series of strikes and protests swept Britain, culminating in the Trades Union Congress’s call for a general strike in July, 1972.

As is well known, the round of strikes went on, but at a high cost. In 1975 a conference document sounded a note of caution: “we overestimated the speed with which the economic crisis would drive workers to draw revolutionary political conclusions” (376), but of course there was no reason that workers would draw revolutionary conclusions if no political movement was making that case. The SWP’s apolitical militancy just left all the political decisions in the hands of the Labour Party, who were waiting in the wings to take over when Heath’s government lost control. Labour’s plan to halt the crisis was a “Social Contract” — a government-brokered restraint on pay. Cliff drew up a new pamphlet, “Crisis: Social Contract or Socialism” (1975), but what it had to offer working class militants was more strife, but no way out, concluding:

We are entering a long period of instability. International capitalism will be rent by economic, social and political crises. Big class battles are ahead of us. Their outcome will decide the future of humanity for a long time to come. (375)

Some of those who were tasked with building the new factory branches of the party in the early seventies, like Jim Higgins and Roger Rosewell, were burned out, and complained that the perspective was unrealistic. Birchall sums up the party’s failure by blaming the other side:

The hopes of the IS in the early 1970s were not realised because the Labour government succeeded in enforcing its Social Contract and large-scale industrial conflict virtually came to an end... reformism proved rather more resilient than had been expected. (405)

That, of course, was precisely where the SWP had failed. It never sought to challenge the Labour Party for *political leadership* amongst the working class, choosing instead to build influence through trade union militancy.

Struggling to explain the setback, Cliff developed what was called the theory of the “downturn,” which was no theory as such. It was just an empirical statement of the decline in strike activity. Cliff’s view of the working class was essentially sociological. They were defined by their relation to the means of production and they were more or less confident. Workers were organized in trade unions committed to the state socialist policies of the Labour Party. Reformist socialism was the ideal around which the working class had formed itself. When that ideal proved to be a failure, the working class did not “draw revolutionary conclusions” because there had been no political struggle for such conclusions. Instead, the organized working class took the failures of socialism personally. Some were angry; many more were defensive, or altogether demoralized. Cliff’s theory of the “downturn” only reflected the appearance of falling militancy, but left out the decisive factor, the absence of an alternative to Labour that might have become a focus for renewed struggle.

The party’s philistine outlook on questions of race and sex equality was at its strongest in the mid-1970s when there was a concerted push to win working class support. All social questions were reducible to the relation of exploitation of the working class “at the point of production.” The political realm was discounted as unimportant, and the struggle for rights illusory. Women’s liberation was treated as a secondary question, and the student milieu self-consciously adopted what

they took to be working class attitudes towards women. The International Socialists' out-and-out hostility to gay rights went so far that a gay caucus organized by Don Milligan and Bob Cant was broken up (424, 440). [10]

So, too, did the organization struggle to understand the race question. The International Socialists had challenged racism among dockworkers in an infamous walkout in favor of the anti-immigrant cabinet minister Enoch Powell. [11] Still the group thought of racism as little more than divisive ideas, and could not understand the connection between nationally based reformism and the denial of rights to blacks. Racism, they thought, would fall away when workers united in struggle. When police's targeting of black youngsters provoked riots in Brixton in 1981, *Socialist Worker* insisted that the rioting had nothing to do with race, but rather a united black and white protest against unemployment.

Where they did feel comfortable talking about race was in the movement against the far-right National Front (NF). The SWP attempted to connect the anti-racist struggle against the NF with the popular anti-fascist mobilization against Germany in the Second World War. Racism was reduced to a question of fascists who were outside the realm of respectable opinion that the Anti-Nazi League would defend. It was a campaign that footballers and bishops could support because it cast the race problem as one of extremists who were alien to British society.

In the eighties, the SWP survived by amplifying the "anti-Thatcher mood," joining protests and such strikes that were provoked by the employer's offensive. "There is real hatred for this Tory government," Cliff intuited, but "this hatred is accompanied by a very widespread impotence" (451). When left-wingers tried to take control of the Labour Party, putting up Tony Benn for deputy leader, Cliff was skeptical not of the revival of state socialist policies but that this resolution-mongering would be a distraction from building in the workplace. Birchall tells the story as if the SWP had savagely criticized the Benn campaign, but at the time the headline of *Socialist Worker* was "Benn for Deputy." An entente or division of labor emerged where Benn and the other Labour Party leftists would outline the socialist policy at the podium (mostly about state control of industry), but the willing foot-soldiers of the SWP would prove their worth by organizing the grassroots support, whether gathering canvassers in elections or helping organize demonstrations and building support for strikes.

The party's defensiveness was writ large when Yorkshire miners struck over a program of pit closures. The weakness of the strike was the division between the militant miners and the rest. Leftist hero of the 1974 strike Arthur Scargill had been elected president of the union and was close to the militants, but feared that a national ballot would have been beaten. It was the militants' weakness that they sought to sidestep the rest of the membership by avoiding a ballot and instead picketing out the pits in support of those threatened with closure. From the outset "the strike was not solid," and many miners saw the lack of a ballot as a justification to work on. [12] Instead of challenging the evasion of the activists around Scargill and calling for an all-out campaign to win a national ballot, Cliff made a virtue of the strike's weakest point, and *Socialist Worker* denounced rank and file democracy as "ballot-itis" and a concession to Thatcherism. The ballot was not held; the miners stayed divided and lost. Yet more problematic was Scargill's nationalistic "Plan for Coal," which claimed that coal was profitable for British industry, as if miners' interests coincided with capitalist success — the SWP simply ignored the meaning of the Plan for Coal. Birchall makes the interesting point that Paul Foot talked strategy on the phone to Scargill throughout the strike (485). Later Cliff dishonestly tried to shift the blame onto the miners' leader for the strike's failure, much to Foot's dismay, when every step Scargill took had been supported by the SWP. With the miners' defeat, the "downturn" became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Blaming the working class was always easier than trying to understand that it was the Left that had failed.

The SWP seemed set to fall into decline alongside the rest of the Left. On the other hand, the other rivals were falling by the wayside: the Communist Party was irreparably wounded by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Workers Revolutionary Party run into the ground by its hysterical leader (until a bankrupt leadership overthrew him by uncovering a sex-scandal); the Militant Tendency had been expelled from the Labour Party. In a very small pond, the SWP was the larger fish.

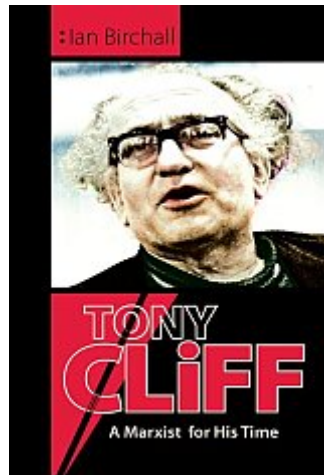
In the last decade of his life, Cliff read the runes of the class struggle, detecting a “new mood” (504). Waiting for the upturn would become the party’s business, and successive events were singled out as the turning point: the middle England protests against the closing of the last mines, the anti-capitalist protests in Seattle, or most recently the expected fight back against Tory cuts. At times popular disaffection would even lead to great carnivals of protest, like the anti-poll tax campaign that culminated in rioting in Trafalgar Square in 1990. In 2003, protests against the Iraq War grew massively as they too became a focus for popular disaffection with the political establishment led by Tony Blair in Britain, who led Labour’s return to office after a 17-year hiatus. The SWP threw itself into those protests, seeing them as a return to mass opposition, but it did not understand that, despite appearances, the dominant sentiment was an anti-political mood of disengagement — pithily captured by the inward-looking slogan “not in my name.”

On the back of the Gulf War protests, the SWP took its most ambitious move yet, founding the RESPECT coalition with George Galloway, Salma Yaqoob and Ken Loach to fight against the Labour Party in the elections. Just as they had handed over political leadership to the Labour left in the 1980s, so too did they let the old Labour MP Galloway draw up the platform for Respect. There were two main platforms: the first was anti-war, and for a domestic social program, RESPECT offered a revived platform of social welfare and nationalization drawn from the Labour manifestos of 1945 and 1983. RESPECT could rally disaffected Labour voters, and Galloway worked younger Muslims who were put off by the Iraq war. But it was not a stable coalition, and in Galloway, the SWP had created a monster whose ego could not be contained. Opportunistically, Lindsey German offered to downplay the SWP’s policies on women’s oppression, especially if these were going to jeopardize Galloway and Muslim voters. Still, Galloway refused to be a puppet of the SWP. The coalition split, with an exposed SWP obliged to stand its own “left list” to save face — but getting a desultory vote.

What Cliff and the leadership of the organization that followed him could not understand was that they were not really seeing signs of an upturn, but following the symptoms of popular disaffection with politics. Often misunderstanding these symptoms of depoliticization and decay as positive features of a “new mood,” the SWP could live off the growing disaffection, but at a high cost. Each successive attempt to kick the party into gear with yet another mobilization would lead to demoralization, and increasingly to factions and splits. These factions would usually claim to be trying to go back to the roots of the International Socialists before it all went wrong — though they never could work out where it was that had gone wrong. What Birchall’s book documents is that it is the IS tradition itself that is flawed; the current leadership has merely adapted to this flawed inheritance rather than questioning it. The anti-political bias of the International Socialists relates to the contemporary mood, but appealing to people on the basis of their contempt for politics, in the end, is bound to demoralize them, so that the rate of attrition among the members leaves the party running to stand still. |P

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P.S.

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<https://thecharnelhouse.org/2013/04/23/the-anti-political-party-tony-cliff-and-the-socialist-workers-party/>

Reposted from [Platypus Review](#).

Footnotes

[1] Tony Cliff, *A World to Win* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), 111, 124.

[2] See for example Alex Callinicos, "Is Leninism Finished?," *Socialist Review*, January 2013.

[3] Borrowed from TN Vance in Michael Kidron, "Two Insights don't make a Theory," *International Socialism*, Series 1, No. 100 (July 1977).

[4] See Alex Callinicos, "Imperialism and the Global Economy," *International Socialism Journal*, 108 (October, 2005).

[5] Alex Callinicos, "Politics or Abstract Propagandism," *International Socialism Journal Series 2*, No. 11 (Winter 1981): 122.

[6] See also Cosmo Landesmann, *Starstruck* (London: Macmillan, 2008), 99-100.

[7] Martin Shaw, "The Making of A Party," *Socialist Register* 15 (1978): 123.

[8] Michael Kidron, "For Every Prince There is a Princess," *IS Internal Bulletin* (March 1973).

[9] See Alex Callinicos, "Politics or Abstract Propagandism," *International Socialism Series 2*, 11 (Winter, 1981). Ian Birchall seconded the motion to expel Yaffe and his followers.

[10] See also Bob Cant, "A Grim Tale The I.S. Gay Group 1972-75" *Gay Left*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1976).

[11] Even then the leaflet they put out made an issue out of Powell's writing Greek Verse, as if to say that really he was upper class and probably a homosexual.

[12] Cliff, A World to Win, 193.