

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article647>



Globalisation

The anti-capitalist movement and the revolutionary left

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV332 - June 2001 -

Publication date: Sunday 3 June 2001

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

In the following article, which has been shortened for space reasons, Alex Callinicos, a leader of Britain's Socialist Workers Party, explains his party's viewpoint on the new world situation. [1]

The birth of a new left

'Seattle was a fork in the road,' as Ralph Nader put it. Since the demonstrations that caused the collapse of the World Trade Organization ministerial meeting at the end of November 1999, there has crystallized in the advanced capitalist countries a politically active minority that sees global capitalism as the source of the world's ills. It is this sense of totality, of the system itself being at fault that distinguishes this new anti-capitalist movement from campaigns that focus on specific issues and grievances. (...)

The anti-capitalist movement manifests itself along four dimensions - protest demonstrations, a broader change in the political climate, the formation of new political milieux, and an intellectual shift:

(i) A new cycle of protest: Since N30 in Seattle there have been major mobilizations against international capitalism in Washington (16 April 2000), Millau (30 June 2000), Melbourne (11 September 2000), Prague (26 September 2000), Seoul (10 October 2000), Nice (6-7 December 2000), Washington again (20 January 2001), and Quebec City (20-21 April 2001). In addition there were protests against the World Economic Forum in Davos, which meets in January every year, in both 2000 and 2001. Among the targets for upcoming protests this year are the European Union summit in Gothenburg on 14-16 June and the G-8 meeting in Genoa on 20-22 July. The character and composition of these demonstrations has been quite variable. Thus the participation of the organized working class was strong in Seattle and Quebec City, weak in both the Washington protests, strong in Millau, weak (though far from non-existent) in Prague, and dominant in Seoul and Nice.

Despite these variations, there can be no doubt of the scale of the movement. As Susan George puts it, 'there has not been such a resurgence of activist energy since the Vietnam War.'

(ii) An anti-capitalist mood: But in some ways more important is the change in the broader political climate. The significance of the demonstrations lies partly in what they actually achieved - thus those in Seattle did help precipitate the collapse of the WTO meeting, while the Prague protests brought the IMF annual general meeting to an abrupt halt. But they also play a symbolic role whose importance can't be underestimated.

There have been larger demonstrations in the United States, even in recent years, than Seattle. There were earlier protests against capitalist globalization - for example, over Third World debt at the G-8 summits in Birmingham in July 1998 and in Cologne a year later, and the J18 anti-capitalist riots in London in June 1999. But - perhaps because workers, students and NGOs came together there in the very heart of the beast, indeed in the capital of the 'New Economy' - Seattle crystallized a mood. (...)

To a lesser, but still remarkable degree the Prague protests have also come to play the same symbolic role, even though they have been demonstrations elsewhere that were bigger and more working-class. (...)

Seattle and Prague represent the revival of a belief in the possibility of collective resistance to the system. It is important to understand that this does not mean that every struggle that takes place around the world is an expression of this anti-capitalist mood. The Al Aqsa Intifada, for example, is driven by the Palestinians' burning resentment of the oppression they suffer at the hands of the Zionist state and in particular of the way in which the 'peace process' has served to entrench and legitimize the Israeli seizure of large parts of the West Bank and Gaza. There is, of course, a connection between the Palestinians' oppression and global capitalism in the shape of US imperialism, but the system itself is not at the centre of their consciousness when they fight the Israeli state. Nevertheless, the anti-capitalist movement is becoming a political reference point even for struggles whose immediate driving force lies elsewhere. Thus Edward Said writes:

A turning point has been reached, however, and for this the Palestinian Intifada is a significant marker. For not only is it an anti-colonial rebellion of the kind that has been seen periodically in Setif, Sharpeville, Soweto and elsewhere. It is another example of the general discontent with the post-Cold War order (economic and political) displayed in the events of Seattle and Prague.

(iii) The formation of new political milieux. The anti-capitalist mood finds concrete expression in the emergence of more or less organized political milieux where a new left is beginning to take shape. This process began in France after the 1995 strikes, where *Le Monde diplomatique* and ATTAC have provided a focus for opposition to neo-liberalism. These initiatives have had a Europe-wide impact: there are now English, German, and Greek editions of *Le Monde diplomatique*, while ATTAC has been set up in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland.

In the United States also a plethora of coalitions and campaigns have emerged to articulate the new anti-capitalist consciousness. Ralph Nader's presidential campaign helped to give a national focus to these movements. As one supporter put it, '[v]oting for Nader felt like a tiny step into a broader movement, an act that connected me with protestors in Seattle and Prague.' Thomas Harrison summarized the main political thrust of the campaign thus:

'Plutocracy', 'oligarchy' - these were the words Nader used. Nader is no socialist - he is not even opposed to capitalism and the market as such. His rhetoric is very much like that of old-fashioned American Populism and Progressivism. But Nader's campaign relentlessly drew attention to the problem of class rule. Not since Norman Thomas in the 1930s has a prominent candidate for the presidency made this an issue and forced people to think about.

Though the pressure to vote Democrat in what proved to be an ultra-close race cut Nader's share of the vote below the critical five percent level required to secure public funding for future challenges, his candidacy galvanized a nation-wide campaign. Howie Hawkins, an activist for the Green Party (which endorsed Nader), writes:

Four hundred and sixty three thousand signatures were collected to put Nader on the ballot in forty-three states and the District of Columbia ... 150,000 volunteers are on the data-bases of the national campaign and the state, local and Green Party organizations to which they were referred. 25,000 student volunteers registered tens of thousands of new voters. Exit polls indicate the campaign brought out about one million new voters who otherwise would not have voted.

Some one hundred campaign staff were hired for two offices in DC and nineteen field offices in various states, with each state having at least one paid field co-ordinator. With the help of this field staff, over five hundred local Green groups and nine hundred campus Green groups organized and distributed eight million pieces of literature and one million buttons, bumper-stickers, and yard signs. Two unions - the California Nurses Association and the United Electrical workers - endorsed Nader outright. UAW [United Auto-Workers] and Teamsters leaders publicly flirted with Nader, if only to send Gore a message on trade issues.

Nader campaigned in all fifty states, the only presidential candidate to do so. His campaign rallies were by far the biggest for any candidate, with 15,000 in Madison Square Gardens in New York, 14,000 at the Target Center in Minneapolis, 12,000 at the Fleet Center in Boston, and 10,000 each at the Pavilion in Chicago, the Coliseum in Portland, and the MCI Center in Washington DC.

On a more modest scale, the Socialist Alliances and the Globalize Resistance conferences in Britain have brought together two overlapping constituencies - those inspired by the anti-globalization movement and Labour Party supporters disillusioned by the experience of the Blair government. This highlights the fact that in Western Europe at least the crisis of reformism intensified by the performance of the social-democratic governments elected in the second half of the 1990s has been one of the main sources of the anti-capitalist mood.

(iv) The re-emergence of critiques of capitalism. To measure the extent of the intellectual shift under way, we have to recall the scene of devastation that reigned after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in 1989-91. It was then, of course, that Francis Fukuyama announced the End of History: liberal capitalism had triumphed over all systemic alternatives and, barring some unforeseeable relapse into barbarism, would reign forever. In a remarkably respectful response from the intellectual left, Perry Anderson conceded that Fukuyama was probably right. Anderson, who recently resumed the editorship of *New Left Review*, re-affirmed this perspective after Seattle, declaring the hegemony of neo-liberalism was now so unchallenged that, '[f]or the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions - that is, systematic rival outlooks - within the thought-world of the West; and scarcely any on a world scale either, if we discount religious doctrines as largely inoperative archaisms.' But this time he was immediately challenged.

Anderson's pessimism now contrasts with the variety of figures who have emerged to offer systematic critiques of capitalism. Chief among them are Walden Bello, Pierre Bourdieu, Susan George, Naomi Klein, and George Monbiot. It is easy enough for Marxists to identify the limitations in these critiques - their ambiguity, for example, over whether the enemy is global capitalism or merely neo-liberalism, the closely related illusions that they often display in petty capitalism as an alternative to the multinationals, and their occasional willingness to ally with the conservative right against the international capitalist institutions.

There is, moreover, a process of differentiation developing in the anti-globalization movement between those forces - for example, the so-called Congos, or Co-opted Non-governmental Organizations - that are willing to collaborate with the IMF and the World Bank in their search for a 'dialogue' and those who by contrast wish, as Bello puts it, to 'intensify the crisis of legitimacy' of these institutions. The World Social Forum (WSF), held in Porto Alegre in January 2001 as an alternative to the bosses' annual jamboree in Davos, saw powerful elements - associated notably with *Le Monde diplomatique* and the ATTAC leadership - that pushed a reformist agenda.

(...) It would, however, be a big mistake, however, to see remarks such as these as the expression of a settled reformist position. (...)

The ambiguities of anti-capitalist theory do not in any case alter the impact that the movement has had in changing the terms of intellectual and political debate. (...)

Of course, defeating the bosses in words is not the same as tearing away control of the planet from them. Nevertheless, what we are seeing is the emergence of an increasingly influential group of intellectuals who see themselves as engaging in a political struggle against global capitalism. Bourdieu's recent writings reveal an increasingly sharp anti-capitalist focus. Thus he writes (with Loïc Wacquant):

Empirical analysis of the long-term evolution of the advanced economies suggests ... that 'globalization' is not a new

phase of capitalism but a 'rhetoric' which governments invoke to justify their willing submission to financial markets. Far from being, as is ceaselessly repeated, the inevitable consequence of increasing foreign trade, deindustrialization, the growth of inequalities and the contraction of social policy result from domestic political decisions that reflect the tipping of class relations in favour of the owners of capital.

(...) What this amounts to is the birth of a new left on an international scale. After the Globalize Resistance conferences, George Monbiot wrote:

At last it's happening. Just as the neo-liberals on both sides of the Atlantic proclaim universal victory, a composite radical opposition movement is beginning to emerge. It's confused, it's contradictory and it looks like nothing we've ever seen before. But for the first time in 14 years of campaigning I feel that I've witnessed something unstoppable.

A challenge for revolutionaries

This is, as they said in 1968, only a beginning. Anti-capitalism is most widely diffused internationally as a mood. Its development into a movement is quite variable - most advanced in the US and France, much more patchy elsewhere. Ultimate success will depend upon what happened briefly in Seattle - the coming together of organized workers and anti-globalization activists - becoming a sustained movement. And that in turn will require anti-capitalism, still as a diffuse ideology defined primarily by what it is against - neo-liberal policies and multinational corporations, developing into a much more coherent socialist consciousness. All this is ABC for revolutionary Marxists. The fact remains that this is the greatest opening for the left since the 1960s.

The anti-capitalist movement is nevertheless an enormous challenge of the revolutionary left. The two are not the same. The anti-capitalist movement is, as Monbiot puts it, 'composite ... confused ... contradictory'. It draws on all sorts of ideological sources, embraces an immense diversity of different organizations, and originated among a very heterogeneous collection of activists - Christian debt campaigners, environmentalists, dependency economists, animal righters, survivors of the 1960s, anarchist street-fighters, members of respectable NGOs, supporters of various Third World solidarity movements, and a sprinkling of trade unionists and socialists. The revolutionary left, by contrast, comprises those Marxist organizations that managed to survive the defeats of the 1980s - most importantly on an international scale supporters of the International Socialist Tendency (IST) and the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI).

There is nothing inevitable about the anti-capitalist movement and the revolutionary left coming together. For this to happen, revolutionaries will have to change themselves. They will have to shake off the habits they developed during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, when right-wing ideas were in the ascendant and it was therefore essential to protect Marxist ideas and organization from a hostile political environment. New methods of working are now required. In particular, systematic use of the united front approach developed by the Bolsheviks and the Communist International during its early years (1918-23) is of crucial importance in relating to the new political milieu.

The Socialist Workers Party in Britain stumbled on this more or less empirically during the Balkan War of 1999, when the anti-war movement was characterized by a much higher degree of unity and common purpose than it possessed during the Gulf War in 1991. Left unity attained a much higher level in the London Socialist Alliance, which ran a slate in the May 2000 elections to the Greater London Authority. It was able to draw on a widespread desire for unity that stretched from a wide spectrum of the far left to many traditional supporters of the Labour left. The success of the Globalize Resistance conferences in February 2001 depended critically on the diverse range of political views represented both in building for them and in the actual conferences themselves.

This shift towards systematic united-front work is merely an important part of the much wider change that revolutionaries must make in order to relate to the anti-capitalist movement. This change involves developing a sensitivity to the distinctive style and concerns of the movement, a familiarity with its literature and issues on which this focuses, and a willingness to engage in dialogue. Experience of the work for Prague and Nice and for the Globalize Resistance conferences has shown again and again that those involved in these united fronts are enormously open to Marxist arguments - provided that these put in a way that is relevant to their concerns, and provided they aren't preached at. All this underlines the importance of breaking with the tendencies towards sectarianism that the isolation revolutionary socialists have to a large extent found themselves in for the past twenty years has encouraged.

But there is absolutely no guarantee that revolutionaries will make the necessary break. The history of the socialist movement has shown again and again that every sharp change in the objective situation creates a crisis within the revolutionary organization. Even when that organization tries to adjust to the new situation it is held back by its own conservatism. A particular method of working, if it has proved successful, tends to become entrenched in the organization. People come to see what were essentially tactics developed to address a particular set of circumstances as a matter of principle. Shifting the organization to meet different circumstances encounters resistance that reflects the inertia created by a perspective that was successful in the past.

Reflecting on the experience of the Bolsheviks, Trotsky wrote in 1924:

Generally speaking, crises arise in the party at every serious turn in the party's course, either as prelude to the turn or as a consequence of it. The explanation for this lies in the fact that every period in the development of the party has special features of its own and calls for specific habits and methods of work. A tactical turn implies a greater or lesser break in these habits and methods. Herein lies the direct and most immediate root of internal party frictions and crises. 'Too often has it happened,' wrote Lenin in July 1917, 'that, when history has taken a sharp turn, even progressive parties have some time been unable to adapt themselves the new situation and have repeated slogans which had formerly been correct but had now lost all meaning - lost it as "suddenly" as the sharp turn in history was "sudden".' Hence the danger arises that if the turn is too abrupt or too sudden, and if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party will prove itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of decades. The party is ravaged by a crisis, and the movement passes the party by - and heads toward defeat.

Lenin was confronted by this danger on a number of occasions. Most famously, in response to the Russian Revolution of 1905 he fought, as Tony Cliff puts it, 'to open the gates of the party' - that is for the mass recruitment of workers radicalized by the experience of the upturn in struggle. He did so against the bitter resistance of the 'committee-men' - the professional revolutionaries who, with Lenin at their head, had built up a tight centralized underground organization during the years of repression before 1905. Lenin's closest ally in this struggle to open up the party was Aleksandr Bogdanov. Yet, in the period of reaction after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution, Bogdanov became the leader of an ultra-left faction within the Bolsheviks who resisted the change in tactics required to adjust to the new situation - for example, opposing standing candidates to the Tsarist Duma as a platform for legal political activity. Despite their close collaboration hitherto, Lenin did not hesitate to break with Bogdanov and ultimately to expel him from the Bolsheviks.

Lenin's practice of 'bending the stick' - of focusing on the key tasks in the current situation to the exclusion of all secondary factors and indeed to the point of exaggeration - flowed in part from the necessity of overcoming conservative resistance within the party to the changes dictated by a 'sharp turn in history'. (...)

Missing the 1960s: the American SWP

But there are more recent examples of revolutionary organizations finding it hard to turn - or failing to turn altogether. The Socialist Workers Party in the United States was the premier organization of the Trotskyist movement during its infancy in the 1930s and 1940s. James P. Cannon and other leaders of the SWP (US) had worked closely with Trotsky and they could claim with some justification to be his political heirs. Despite internal splits and state persecution the SWP was able to hold together during the 1950s, one of the most difficult periods American revolutionaries have had to face, when the Cold War, McCarthyism and the Long Boom conspired to make authentic Marxist politics seem utterly irrelevant.

Yet preserving the organization came at the price of ossification.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the situation began to change. (...) But it was opposition to the Vietnam War, particularly as a result of President Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of direct US military involvement in 1964-5, that generated vast mass mobilizations. Vietnam deeply divided American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with long-term effects that are still felt today. It also produced an enormous shift to the left among the millions in particular of young people who participated in the great anti-war demonstrations. The New Left umbrella organization on the campuses, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), mushroomed in the course of the decade. (...)

The tragedy of the SWP (US) was that it failed to seize the opportunity offered by this radicalization. To its credit, it did throw itself into the anti-war movement and played a key role in building a succession of mass demonstrations. For example, it was the driving force in the National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC), which initiated one of the biggest anti-war demonstrations of all in Washington on 24 April 1971. The problem was that the SWP (US) made a fetish of the single tactic of legal mass demonstrations. (...)

The SWP (US)'s shibboleth of legal mass demonstrations meant that it was bitterly hostile to the powerful forces within the anti-war movement that supported mass civil disobedience. (...)

The absence of any serious Marxist organization that sought to relate to the radicalization helped to create a situation in which activists went through a cycle where huge mass mobilizations were followed by periods of demoralization caused by the fact that the war was continuing in spite of the demonstrations: the resulting frustration pushed opponents of the war towards forms of activity - working for the election campaigns of anti-war Democrats or terrorism - that had in common the attempt to find a substitute for mass action. (...)

An American tragedy: the International Socialist Organization

The roots of the SWP (US)'s failure can be traced back to the mistaken path that it - along with the rest of the Fourth International - took after the Second World War when Trotsky's analysis of Russia as a degenerated workers' state was turned into a sacred dogma. The International Socialist Tendency originated in this moment of crisis, and in particular in Tony Cliff's critique of Trotsky and development of the theory of state capitalism. This allowed us to maintain the classical Marxist conception of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class and to develop an approach to party-building that started from the realities of proletarian life rather than the fantasies of orthodox Trotskyist programme-mongers.

But sectarianism need not be the consequence only of orthodox Trotskyism. A formally correct theoretical analysis is not sufficient to confer immunity to it. The challenge posed by the new anti-capitalist mood has polarized the far left in a way that cuts across traditional lines. Orthodox Trotskyists have been divided in their response. Perhaps the most sectarian reaction came from the leading French Trotskyist organization Lutte Ouvrière (LO) provides an example of

this response. LO did not take part in the nation-wide demonstrations held in France in solidarity with N30 in Seattle, dismissing them as a bloc of left nationalists and right-wing Gaullists, and denounced the entire anti-WTO movement:

Today the internationalization of the economy, under the aegis of the capitalist states, is a fact. To wish to oppose it, in the name of tainted protectionist ideas, of nationalism, is to risk drifting towards openly reactionary objectives. It is moreover no accident that, at Seattle, one can find united on this terrain as well Third World nationalists as the leaders of the American car workers' union UAW, who did not hesitate to organize punitive operations against the American owners of Japanese cars in the 1980s. Because, for both, their opposition to internationalization seeks to bring about a convergence of the interests of the population with that of their national bourgeoisie.

More recently LO has attacked the French peasant leader José Bové for taking direct action against the introduction of genetically modified organisms into agriculture, accusing of him effectively being in alliance with President Chirac and the Gaullist right to block scientific research. The Ligue Communist Révolutionnaire, the other main French Trotskyist organization and the most important surviving affiliate of the Fourth International, has taken a much more positive approach in principle. Some of its members play a prominent part in ATTAC. Activists from an orthodox Trotskyist background sought to raise the profile of a distinctively socialist analysis by arguing that the 'anti-globalization movement' must stop treating 'the question of the forms of property of the means of production, communication, and exchange as a taboo question', and put the issue of social ownership back onto the agenda. But the LCR failed to mobilize seriously for Prague or even - much more disgracefully - for Nice.

Regrettably the rise of the anti-capitalist movement has also divided the IS Tendency., as shown by the case of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which has been the IST's American affiliate since its foundation in 1977.

(...) Despite these difficult beginnings the ISO was able to build on open socialist politics during the Reagan era, when much of the rest of the American left was collapsing into the Democratic Party. (...)

By the end of the decade the ISO claimed about a thousand members. It seemed much better prepared politically and organizationally than the SWP (US) had been in the 1960s.

Yet once again methods developed to build in the long downturn proved to be an ultimately fatal obstacle to the ISO's ability to relate to the movement that exploded at Seattle. This first began to surface during the 1999 Balkan War, when the ISO leadership initiated a debate with the SWP Central Committee by criticizing how the latter were going about opposing the war. The ISO Steering Committee argued that it was the 'duty' of revolutionaries, when building anti-war coalitions, to highlight the differences separating them from others opposing the NATO bombing campaign. In particular, they should attack illusions in the United Nations as an alternative to NATO, sympathy for Serbian nationalism, and opposition to Kosovan self-determination. 'It would,' they concluded, 'be unprincipled to ignore these questions within the anti-war movement.' This stance helped to explain why the ISO - particularly in Chicago, where the group's centre is based - was much less effective in opposing the Balkan War than it had been during the Gulf War nearly a decade earlier.

The ISO's approach contrasted dramatically with that pursued by its European sister organizations, who concentrated on building the widest possible movement in opposition to the war. This prompted the SWP Central Committee privately to communicate our disagreement. (...)

We were, however, shaken by the argument. Already at this early stage in the debate we can see the ISO displaying the attitude that by which Marx defined a sect, namely that it 'sees the justification for its existence and its point of honour not in what it has in common with the class movement but in the particular shibboleth which distinguishes itself from the movement'. Sometimes differentiation is essential if a revolutionary organization is to survive in an

The anti-capitalist movement and the revolutionary left

unfavourable political environment. This had been true during the Reagan-Thatcher era in the 1980s where the ISO and the SWP alike had taken refuge in the Marxist tradition as protection against the right-wing climate in society and the collapse of the left. But such a defensive attitude was no longer necessary, as in the second half of 1990s the long downturn in class struggle drew to an end.

The cost of such a stance became clear when the demonstrations at Seattle exploded at the end of November 1999. Only a handful of ISO members were present. (...)

The ISO offered practical reasons - in particular the distance separating Seattle from its closest district of any size in the Bay Area - to justify its failure to mobilize for Seattle. (...)

The truth is that the ISO leadership did not regard Seattle as an important priority (even after the event they, absurdly, claimed that 'the movement against globalization ... began', not at Seattle, but at the much smaller and more obscure School of the Americas demonstration). They expected it to be dominated by protectionist trade-union leaders and preferred to concentrate their efforts what proved to be a much smaller demonstration where they felt they could have more impact. (...)

These arguments are evidence of a deep-rooted sectarian mentality that judges demonstrations by the politics of their leaders and mechanically reduces changes in consciousness to shifts in the economic class struggle. All the same, missing Seattle was a bad mistake, but not necessarily a fatal one. It often takes time for revolutionaries to adjust to a change in the objective situation. The difficulties that the Bolshevik Party had in responding to the 1905 Revolution are an example, albeit on a much grander scale. On the basis of that experience Lenin wrote:

A political party's attitude towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is and how fulfils in practice its obligations towards its class and the working people. Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analysing the conditions that have lead up to it, and thrashing out the means for its rectification - that is the hallmark of a serious party; that is how it should perform its duties and how it should educate and train its class and then the masses.

Had the ISO leadership recognized their mistake and fought the sectarian mentality that had developed inside the group, events might have turned out very differently. Alas, they did not take this course. As the tumultuous year ushered in by Seattle unfolded, they seemed pulled backwards and forwards - sometimes moving towards the anti-capitalist movement, but always correcting this initial impulse and retreating into the sectarian bunker. (...)

In the event the ISO leadership did mobilize their membership for A16 - perhaps in order to avoid the accusation that, after missing Seattle, they had also missed Washington. But they denied that the demonstrations represented the emergence of a new anti-capitalist minority, preferring instead to describe them as symptomatic of a 'reformist' or 'anti-corporate' mood. As Cliff and I put it, this kind of formulation 'underestimates the fluidity of the developing consciousness' in the movements against corporate globalization, which, while not representing a coherent revolutionary outlook, had gone beyond simply seeking the reform of particular aspects of the system.

The ISO leadership's view of what they refused to describe as the anti-capitalist movement is perhaps best expressed in the following passage;

Within these loosely connected, nascent movements, there is a strand of self-identified anti-capitalists. The radicalization of this minority, which is predominantly young students, overwhelmingly white and largely middle class, springs from the same roots as the radicalization of much wider layers of people who are becoming activated. The radicalization of all these layers arises as a response to the polarization of class relations in the US and

internationally. We view the emergence of the self-identified anti-capitalist minority as an exciting development - but only one development among many. The anti-capitalists are not the leading wedge of the developing movements, and they are certainly not their cause ... When we make this distinction, we in no way 'downplay' the significance of this radicalization. On the contrary, our perspective centres on how to clearly identify the political mood and relate to various movements.

Once again this argument reveals the ISO leadership's urge to differentiate - their implicit dismissal of anti-capitalist activists as white, middle-class students is reminiscent of some of the worst sectarian aberrations of the 1960s, for example, the refusal of the orthodox Trotskyist followers of Gerry Healy and Pierre Lambert to participate in the student and anti-war movements because of their 'petty bourgeois' character. This attitude was articulated through a mistaken assessment of the radicalization developing in the US. As we put it, "the ISO leadership sees the anti-capitalist movement as one among many, of no special importance. The comrades do not see the strategic significance of the emergence of a minority that is beginning to generalize and to target the system rather than any of its specific aspects. By relating systematically to this minority the comrades could make a qualitative breakthrough - recruiting on a large enough scale to be able to leapfrog over other organizations and establish themselves as the dominant tendency on the American far left."

In the debate that developed between the ISO and the rest of the IS Tendency in the course of the year 2000, the American leadership also took issue with the analysis implied by Cliff's remark that observing Europe in the 1990s was like watching a film of the 1930s in slow motion. This analysis, first developed in the early 1990s, was intended to highlight the presence of the same forces - economic and political instability, class polarization, the possibility of sharp shifts both to the left and to the far right - as had driven the great upheavals of the 1930s. We were, however, very careful to stress the differences between the 1930s and the 1990s - most notably, the economic crises of the 1990s were of course much less severe (in the advanced capitalist countries at least) than the Great Depression of the 1930s, and bourgeois democracy was much more securely established than it had been during the inter-war period.

The ISO leadership brushed aside these qualifications, and caricatured our analysis as a prophecy of economic catastrophe. This distortion was taken to its extreme when Joel Geier (speaking on behalf of the ISO at an IST meeting on 8 May 2000) accused us of believing that the world faced 'decades of capitalism's biggest slump'! Such absurdities concealed the lack of any coherent alternative analysis on the part of the ISO leadership. They pointed to the American boom of the 1990s as a decisive counter-example to the '1930s in slow motion' analysis, but since their own accounts stressed its fragile roots and contradictory character it was hard to tell exactly what they were saying. They claimed that 'the CC's insistence on the parallel of the 1930s has led the SWP to orient itself as if economic crisis is always about to hit and detonate a sudden explosion in the struggle'. But the first real signs in late 2000 that the American boom was coming to an end prompted the ISO leadership to flip over into a catastrophist perspective complete with predictions of shantytowns and other forms of immiseration.

The second development that put these differences to the test was Nader's presidential campaign. After initial hesitation, the ISO leadership made a sharp turn towards building the campaign. In the most positive assessment of the anti-capitalist movement written by a leading ISO member, Geier welcomed '[t]he emergence of a new left and the sudden upsurge of an anti-corporate electoral campaign'. Perhaps the ISO's participation in the big demonstrations at the Republican and Democratic conventions in July and August 2000 gave them a sense of how Nader was offering a political focus to the movements on the ground. His campaign further brought into sharp relief the debate on the American left over whether the Democratic Party, particularly under the Clinton-Gore leadership, could be seen as a 'lesser evil' than the Republicans. The size and enthusiasm of the super-rallies Nader held across the US in the fall confirmed that the decision to build his campaign was a correct one.

Once again, however, it was a case of one step forward and two steps back by the ISO. The urge to differentiate conquered the initial decision to involve themselves in the Nader campaign. The ISO Steering Committee declared:

'We will need to begin to offer a long term political alternative to people who are becoming radicalized in these committees and who are also critical of Nader on many issues.' Every ISO branch or district was instructed to hold a public meeting on 'The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx' for 'contacts who are around us in the Nader campaign and other activities' before the election on 7 November, when campaigning activity would be at its height. Two members of the ISO in New York were quick to point out the sectarianism implicit in this attitude. 'The only people criticizing Nader were hopeless sectarians or apologists for Gore!' 'One has to question whether such people actually exist inside the committees and why we should target them and not the people who are most enthusiastic about Nader and, therefore, want to carry on his crusade against corporate power beyond the elections.'

The ISO's approach showed little sense of the dynamic of a growing and radicalizing movement whose members are bound together by their common activity. In such a movement, revolutionaries establish themselves in the first instance through their effectiveness in this activity. Political discussion, of course, is important, but it is most likely to emerge organically from the work of the movement rather than originating from abstract topics artificially introduced by the revolutionaries. The ISO by contrast saw the Nader campaign as something to raid, and to take activists from to their own activities and discussions. (...)

But giving priority to recruitment to the ISO over building the Nader campaign (particular when the campaign was at its height) reflected an essentially sectarian take on a movement that was developing its own radicalizing momentum independently of anything revolutionary Marxists might do or say. It therefore was little surprise that as soon as the presidential election was over, the ISO dropped the Nader committees like a hot potato, preferring instead to relate to the liberal Democrats protesting against George W. Bush's rigged victory. As these remarks by a member of the ISO in New York (approvingly quoted by his district organizer) make clear, this turn was justified on the grounds that the Nader supporters were middle-class:

Are all Nader voters really closer to being working-class revolutionaries than the thousands of Redeem the Dream activists, militant shop stewards and other grass-roots organizers who voted for Gore? It's as if you view the Nader campaign as a full-fledged Social-Democratic party, where we can put all our focus. But the Nader campaign only began to sink the roots in the working class that mass reformist parties take for granted. We've been a big part of sinking these existing roots precisely because of our perspective that there are millions of black and working-class Gore supporters who are just as progressive as those already in the Nader campaign - and potentially more powerful. Thus, the perspective that Nader supporters are far closer to us not only cuts us off from most of the population, it disarms us within the Nader campaign itself, where the key question is how to broaden this movement into the working class.

This passage is a good example of the kind of sectarian logic in which ISO members have been trained: since the anti-capitalist minority aren't revolutionary socialists, they must be reformists, and therefore, since they are middle class (except for those workers attracted to the Nader campaign by the ISO), they aren't as interesting politically as the black and working-class reformists who voted for Gore. Any sense of the difference made by the emergence of a minority that, whatever its class origins, is beginning to generalize against the system as a whole is wholly absent. The ISO increasingly viewed the world through its own sectarian prism. In an extraordinary speech at the ISO's convention in December 2000, the group's National Organizer, Sharon Smith, attacked the idea that the ISO could, by systematically focusing on this minority, 'leapfrog' over the rest of the left, and insisted that methods of party-building forged in the downturn were necessary irrespective of the changing objective conditions. 'Branches are now and will always be the measure of the size of the organization,' she said. (...)

After the convention, the Steering Committee moved to discipline the minority, expelling six of its members in January 2001. This was an extraordinary move to take, particularly since the ISO leadership had always protested that 'there are no differences of principle' between them and the SWP, and that their disagreements with the rest of the Tendency were 'secondary differences'. There was, however, a certain sectarian logic behind the suppression of debate within the ISO. The leadership had decided to ignore the way in which the world outside was changing: there

was only a small step to seeking to silence anyone inside the group who brought the unwelcome news that they were wrong.(...)

Conclusion

The sectarian degeneration of the ISO is undeniably a tragedy. Trotsky described the danger that 'if in the preceding period too many elements of inertia have accumulated in the leading organs of the party, then the party will prove itself unable to fulfil its leadership at that supreme and critical moment for which it has been preparing itself in the course of decades.' In the case of the ISO, sincere revolutionaries who in some cases have been active since the mid-1970s or even earlier have become so ossified that they are unable to relate to the revival of the left for which they have waited for decades.

This sad affair invites two general reflections. The first concerns how disagreements are conducted within an international revolutionary tendency. The SWP and its sister organizations have always set their faces against repeating the mistakes of Trotsky and his followers by launching an international organization, with its own leadership and discipline, before the development of the kind of mass working-class radicalization that made it possible for the Bolsheviks to make the Communist International a major pole of attraction within the world labour movement. We have conceived the IS Tendency as an international revolutionary current composed of autonomous organizations that are united by a shared political tradition.

The ISO leadership has tried to portray the SWP's behaviour in the current debate as representing a break with this approach. Making various fanciful comparisons with the Third International under Lenin and the Fourth International under Trotsky, they claim that the SWP 'increasingly acts as a foreman unwilling to tolerate even the slightest criticism'. This is a caricature of the real situation. The Tendency has developed in large part thanks to sharp political debates among its leading organizations. In 1987-8 the leaderships of the SWP and OSE (the forerunner to SEK) disagreed fiercely over the attitude revolutionaries should take towards the US intervention on Iraq's side against Iran in the final phase of the First Gulf War. This debate played an essential role in preparing the IST to respond effectively to the much greater challenge represented by the Second Gulf War in 1991. Then again in 1993-4, the SWP and OSE disagreed vigorously over the steps necessary to help our German sister group to overcome the crisis into which it had fallen because of its failure to respond effectively to the social and political polarization that developed in Germany after reunification: the resulting reorientation led to the emergence of Linksruck as one of the strongest organizations in the Tendency.

In both cases, sharp political argument was necessary in order to arrive at the clarification on which effective action depended. Because both debates were conducted on a political basis, they did not alter in the slightest the close working relationship that continues to exist between the leaderships of SEK and the SWP. The emergence of the anti-capitalist movement represented an even bigger turn in the situation that required debate in order to clarify the tasks of revolutionaries. In complaining about the SWP leadership's decision to pursue this argument, the ISO Steering Committee seemed to conceive the relations between different organizations within the same international tendency as a kind of mutual admiration society among leaderships that agree not to criticize one another. In rejecting this model, we are not claiming the SWP's right to impose its will on the rest of the Tendency. Each organization is autonomous and therefore must make its own political decisions. But this does not alter the centrality of political argument in the development of the revolutionary movement, internationally as well as nationally.

In any case, the argument between the ISO and the IS Tendency was more than a disagreement over political perspectives of the kind that goes on all the time. It was a symptom of the ISO's degeneration, of its ossification into a sect. To have continued co-existing with ISO would have reduced the IS Tendency to an organized hypocrisy, like the USFI in the 1970s, when, behind a façade of unity, two factions - the International Majority Tendency (based in

Europe) and the Leninist Trotskyist Faction (dominated, ironically enough, by the American SWP) - waged war in every section of the Fourth International. Such a situation would have destroyed the IST, either by producing much more serious splits than have taken place, or by internalizing and factionalizing it till it ceased to be an effective political forum for international political discussion and co-operation.

Secondly, the fate of the ISO is no reason for complacency on the part of those who have avoided it this time. As I have tried to show, the temptation to retreat into sectarianism is a permanent one for revolutionary organizations, particularly when there is what Lenin called 'a sudden turn in history'. Even the vast majority of the IST that have avoided the ISO's fundamental error and recognized and sought to relate to the anti-capitalist movement face an enormous challenge in carrying this through. The ISO's metastasis into a sect is an extreme case of a tendency present in all our organizations. We will all have to fight to overcome this tendency and transform ourselves into an effective part of the movement that is burgeoning beyond us.

This process has, however, begun. The IS Tendency's concerted mobilizations for Prague and Nice have had an impact on the left across Europe. Our Scandinavian sister organizations in Denmark, Norway, and Finland (itself a recent addition to the Tendency) have been actively involved in the establishment of new national branches of ATTAC and in building for the protests at the EU summit for Gothenburg. Genoa will see another Europe-wide mobilization by the IS Tendency.

These activities are not merely important because they allow individual IST groups to grow in size and influence. It is becoming clear that an international recomposition of the left is under way. As we have seen, reaction on the far left to the emergence of the anti-capitalist movement has cut across existing theoretical and organizational allegiances. The way in which the Socialist Alliance in Britain has brought together revolutionaries from hitherto bitterly opposed Trotskyist tendencies alongside left reformists from a traditional Labourist background in very effective common activity is an indication of the kind of realignments under way. This is part of the larger flux characteristic of the anti-capitalist movement itself.

For those with the capacity to abandon old preconceptions, to change, and to learn there is the opportunity of winning a new generation to revolutionary Marxism.

[1] The integral version of this article can be found at swp.org.uk. A response by Greg Tucker was published in [IV330](#).