

# Alan Thornett's denunciation of Trotskyism

## Part two

Chris Marsden  
21 March 2008

*This is the second and concluding part of a two-part article analysing the role of Alan Thornett's International Socialist Group in British Member of Parliament George Galloway's Respect Renewal project. The first part was posted March 20.*

Alan Thornett's diatribe against Trotskyism provides an occasion for a re-examination of his own political evolution. It is instructive in that it demonstrates how a false political conception regarding the development of socialism became the starting point for a pronounced shift to the right by a layer of workers and middle-class people who were once attracted to revolutionary politics. This political shift was bound up with profound experiences made by the working class with Labourism in Britain.

In his denunciation of "Trotskyist groups" in Britain for ultra-leftism, Thornett makes particular mention of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) and its successor organisation, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). The SLL/WRP was formerly the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*. Thornett's tendency originated from a split in the WRP in 1974.

Thornett was part of a substantial layer of militant workers won to the Socialist Labour League in the 1960s as a result of its political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. A leading shop steward at the massive British Leyland car plant in Cowley, Thornett quit the Communist Party and joined the SLL. He led many struggles in the plant, becoming chairman of the Transport and General Workers' Union 5/55 branch and of the Joint Shop Stewards' Committee at Cowley. He was also the leader of the SLL's industrial wing, the All Trades Union Alliance.

Thornett joined the SLL at a time when it was understood that the development of the revolutionary party would necessarily involve a substantial leftward movement developing within the Labour Party and the trade unions that had the allegiance of millions of workers, who believed these organisations to be socialist. The task was to carry out systematic work to expose the socialist pretensions of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in order to win the most politically advanced workers to the revolutionary party by breaking them from illusions in Labour. In this struggle, the unions, which represented more than 10 million members and had a very active rank-and-file, were vital arenas of political struggle.

The tendency that Thornett came to lead emerged as an opportunist orientation towards the very bureaucratic leaderships and organisations the SLL had sought to oppose. In opposition to the waging of a political struggle to win workers away from the leadership of the Labour Party and the trade unions, he was to develop the conception that a left tendency would emerge from within the bureaucracy itself that would be won to socialism.

In a period of sharp political shifts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which in Britain took the form of major struggles against the Conservative (Tory) Party government of Edward Heath, this became the starting point

for Thornett's organisational and political break with Trotskyism.

Thornett had remained very much a trade union militant in his outlook and came to view the struggle waged by the SLL as running contrary to his own work as a shop steward in Cowley, which focused on efforts to work with various left Labourites, Stalinists and left radicals in defence of jobs and working conditions. Thornett wrote later that "Trotskyism, for us—and being a Trotskyist then tended to mean being a member of the SLL because of its size and influence—provided an analysis not only of capitalism but also of the trade union leaders, their role in society and relationship to the employers."

However, he continued, "*The SLL took this to the sectarian extreme. It saw the role the officials played in general as applying equally to them all. It failed to see the different strands within them and that some could play progressive roles. It was, therefore, unable to construct alliances with those who did stand on principle*" [Emphasis added].

Thornett's adaptation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy developed under conditions of a growing political disorientation within the central SLL leadership of Gerry Healy, Cliff Slaughter and Michael Banda.

As is explained in "How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism," the split with Thornett unfolded in the aftermath of the unclarified break with the French Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (Internationalist Communist Organisation—OCI) in 1971.

As early as 1966, the OCI had insisted that the Fourth International had been destroyed and had to be reconstructed. Denying that the ICFI represented the continuity of Trotskyism, it rejected the significance of the struggle that had been waged against the Pabloite movement's political liquidationism and wholesale adaptation to the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties, which it proclaimed to be "blunt instruments" through which socialism would be achieved.

In the tumultuous social and political struggles that wracked Europe following the French General Strike of May 1968, the OCI began to build a substantial youth movement, but on the basis of adaptations to various centrist tendencies in France and internationally. It subsequently formed the Committee for the Reconstruction of the Fourth International and the Workers Party (PT) in France as centrist vehicles, through which it established a leading position within the Force Ouvriere trade union. The OCI was responsible for placing Lionel Jospin in the Socialist Party in 1971. Jospin went on to become a key ally of Socialist Party leader Francois Mitterand, who served as president of France from 1981 to 1995. Jospin later became prime minister of France.

The SLL failed to conduct a thorough-going political struggle against the OCI, declaring instead a public split on November 24, 1971, before any real attempt had been made to clarify the cadre of the then-French section of the ICFI and win them away from the centrist perspective of the party's leadership. This meant that the SLL was politically disarmed and weakened when Thornett's tendency emerged as a result of a similar centrist deviation and became a direct conduit for a political counterattack

by the OCI.

In 1973, the SLL took the decision to launch a campaign to become the Workers Revolutionary Party. The founding documents of the new party represented a major shift away from the SLL's Trotskyist moorings, under conditions in which a militant anti-Tory movement was at its height. The new party's declared aim was to "undertake a specific political task: to unite the working class behind a socialist programme to throw out the Tory government and replace it with a Labour government."

Thus the new party was largely defined in terms of an electoral, tactical policy, rather than as an instrument for achieving the strategic goal of mobilising the working class, on the basis of the historic legacy and international socialist programme of Trotskyism, of overthrowing capitalism, establishing workers' power and constructing socialism in Britain and internationally.

The demand for the return of a Labour government pledged to socialist policies was, in itself, correct, and provided the possibility of taking workers through the experience of a political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The SLL/WRP anticipated that, with Labour having been brought to power due to an offensive by the working class against the Heath Tory government, millions of working people would expect Harold Wilson's new Labour government to implement major social reforms. This, in turn, would bring them into conflict with Labour and create the best possible conditions for a political reckoning with social democracy and the building of the revolutionary party.

The WRP's founding document stated that the subsequent struggle "for socialist policies under a Labour government" would enable the party to "win many thousands to Marxism and throw out the reformist leaders of the trade unions and labour movement."

However, the SLL/WRP made impermissible adaptations to reformist illusions in the working class. The WRP advanced an essentially electoral programme that made the most minimal reference to the party's Trotskyist character and the international perspective and political authority of the ICFI. The programme of demands it outlined were framed as a series of "basic rights"—for employment, a higher standard of living, social benefits and better housing, and to "change the system" in an unspecified way. The launching of a mass recruitment campaign requiring only agreement on this programme meant that workers who had not politically broken from reformism and begun their political education as Marxists could flood into the party.

Subsequent events were to develop in a more complex and protracted manner than was anticipated by the WRP. The party was not wrong to predict that the working class would come in to conflict with the Labour government. (Strike action throughout the public and private sector against Labour's enforced wage restraint resulted in the loss of 30 million working days in the "Winter of Discontent" of 1978-1979.) But it was wrong to assume that a movement against Labour would develop as an uninterrupted extension of the militant movement against the Tories.

Heath had called a general election on May 3, 1974, under the slogan, "Who rules the country, the government or the unions?" Labour won power just four months after the founding of the WRP, but as a minority administration. Its victory had the initial effect of strengthening illusions in the Labour Party and in reformism, not weakening them, including amongst workers recruited to the WRP.

The working class was not politically prepared to immediately wage a struggle against the Wilson government, which it had placed in office, especially after Wilson made significant wage concessions to the coal miners. The reticence to challenge the government was compounded by Labour's minority status and concerns that the Tories might return to power. Wilson was forced to call a second election on October 11 of that year, in which Labour's vote actually increased and secured it a parliamentary majority.

The WRP had clearly underestimated the strength of the illusions in

Labour in the working class. It was forced by these developments to place renewed emphasis on its Trotskyist identity and its historic opposition to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. But this met with ferocious opposition from Thornett, who articulated a right-wing reaction to the WRP's efforts to deepen its struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

As the ICFI later explained, Thornett "had developed a close relation with sections of workers on the basis of the centrist basic rights deviations of the 1973-74 period" and "now resisted the return by the WRP leadership to sharp attacks on the Labour government, especially under conditions where it retained a precarious hold on power and was faced with the imminent necessity of calling new elections."

An additional factor in shaping Thornett's view that the WRP leadership was being "sectarian" towards Labour was the fact that British Leyland's future was in jeopardy and depended on the support of the Wilson government. In 1974, British Leyland announced projected losses of £16.6 million. It sought an overdraft facility of £150 million and began talks with Labour's Department of Trade and Industry. Labour's Tony Benn spoke in Parliament in December to urge that, because British Leyland was a "leading exporter" and a huge employer, it was essential that government money be used to assist it. This was agreed.

### The role of the OCI

Thornett's general discontent with the party and hostility to its leftward turn made him receptive to political advances made by OCI supporters in Britain, organised in the Marxist Bulletin Group and led by two middle-class renegades from the SLL, Robin Blick and Mark Jenkins. The aim of the two, who were later to pass into the camp of open anti-communism, was to create a faction inside the WRP with the initial aim of removing Gerry Healy from leadership. This, in turn, was considered only a step towards shifting the WRP to the OCI's position that the ICFI should be liquidated.

Blick wrote in 1980 of how the Bulletin Group contacted Thornett through the WRP's Western Region Central Committee member Kate Blakeney, who was met in August. Blakeney had told them "there existed an unofficial and rather secret opposition" grouped around Thornett that "had no clear platform or understanding where the WRP had gone wrong, but was rather *a coming together of people who for various reasons were dissatisfied with the national performance of the WRP*" [Emphasis added].

Blick states that he wrote "substantial sections" of Alan Thornett's first oppositional document, including "the section on the Transitional Programme, the section on workers' control, the section on corporatism, the section on Social Democracy." He also collaborated with Thornett on an almost daily basis, preparing his reports "up to and during the expulsion of the opposition."

The sections cited focus in large measure on opposing the WRP for its position that "the entire leadership of the trade unions and the Labour Party have been designated as 'corporatist.'" Thornett's faction platform stated that this was tantamount to calling them social fascists, as the Stalinists had called the Social Democrats in the Third Period.

The WRP's political critique of Thornett's right-centrist positions was correct, but Healy repeated and thus compounded the mistake made with the OCI of moving to an organisational settlement before fully clarifying both the party and the working class as to the political issues at stake.

Thornett's provocative and disloyal behaviour no doubt played a part in Healy's decision to do so, and he was soon proved right in his supposition that Thornett was working with the OCI. But this well-founded suspicion did not obviate the need to probe the essential theoretical issues raised by

Thornett's platform, which would have meant revisiting the conflict with the OCI and thus taking to a higher level the ICFI's struggle against revisionism.

As a result of the confusion the split engendered, Thornett was initially able to take several hundred members with him when he was expelled, and the party lost its most important industrial base.

The split with the WRP liberated Thornett and his supporters to pursue "entry work" within the Labour Party, while he continued his trade union career at branch and national level until the late 1980s. Now in his seventies, Thornett has spent more than three decades trading off of the political confusion created by the WRP, while establishing a niche for himself as an advisor to whichever reformist or Stalinist bureaucrat desires his services.

His group was particularly active in the Chesterfield Socialist Movement, grouped around Tony Benn. For several years, he specialised in seeking to regroup various dissidents and splinters from the International Committee. But this was only a step towards ditching his pretensions to Trotskyist orthodoxy and making his way into his natural political home in the Pabloite USec. His International Socialist Group was recognised as a sympathising section of the USec in 1991 and became its British section at the 1995 World Congress.

With his latest writings, Thornett makes clear that his joining the Pabloites was only a step towards the repudiation of Trotskyism that he has now carried out, a development echoed amongst a substantial number of former radicals who have traded in their tattered credentials for well-paid positions in the higher echelons of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

In an additional polemic with the British SWP, Thornett writes a political paean to Galloway, describing him as "still the only left Labour MP to make a break with Labour," "the best public speaker on the left," and a "central leader of the anti-war movement" with "the biggest electoral base of anyone on the left outside of the Labour Party." He adds that Galloway is "left Labour in his politics.... But it was this which he brought into Respect from the outset—a genuine component of left-Labour politics."

Ultimately, this is what Thornett is concerned with: Ensuring that any new party must be a vehicle for various dissident Labourites and Stalinists that is implacably opposed to genuine socialism. "The strength of Respect Renewal," he declares, "is that it is serious about approaching other sections of the left, such as the trade union left and the [Communist Party of Britain], about a wider regroupment of forces to tackle the crisis of working class representation."

*Concluded*



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**