

Part Two

Cliff Slaughter: A Political Biography (1928–1963)

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This political biography of Cliff Slaughter covers the period between 1928 and 1963. A second section of the biography, from 1963 through his death, will be published later in the year.

Labour Review

In the aftermath of the entry of Soviet tanks into Budapest, the work of The Club entered a new stage. It sought to provide a revolutionary perspective for the best elements among those who were streaming out of the Communist Party.

In January 1957, The Club revived its theoretical journal, *Labour Review*, which had been last published in 1954. The political framework of left politics had been so profoundly altered that The Club legitimately titled the first editorial of the relaunched journal, “Introducing *Labour Review*.” In explaining the aims of the new *Labour Review*, the editorial stated:

The Communist Party is decaying before our very eyes. For two decades the members have been cushioned from political realities by the doctrine of the infallibility of the “leader.” Now that this myth has been finally destroyed, the membership finds itself confused, bewildered, lost. Rank-and-file members are demanding greater freedom of discussion but the leaders while appearing to give way partially to this demand, are fearful of its consequences—for a too-penetrating research into the past will reveal their own acquiescence in and culpability for the mistakes and crimes which are now conveniently attributed to the dead Stalin and Beria.

For too long the Communist Party has claimed the heritage of Marxism-Leninism as its own private property, and for too long it has been able to get away with this false claim. The consequence of looking upon Stalin as the sole fount of new contributions to Marxist theory, has been that little of value has come out of official Communist Party sources. On the contrary, it is among those who have consistently opposed Stalinism for the past twenty years or more to whom we must now look for new and worthwhile contributions to socialist thought.

Unfortunately, much of this literature has hitherto been available only to a small section of the movement. One of the aims of *Labour Review* will be to bring the writings of these “banned”

Marxist thinkers to the attention of a wider circle of readers and thus help further to develop the theoretical foundations of our movement. [17]

While insisting that “Marxists cannot be armchair philosophers” and must be actively engaged in the daily struggles of their day, the editorial emphasized the necessity of a detailed knowledge of the historical experiences of the working class:

Only through a knowledge of what has happened and why events took the course they have can we hope to understand what is and what will be. Each generation of workers builds on the foundations laid by previous generations. Each generation bases itself on the experiences of the past and so determines the steps to be taken in the future.

This is the essence of the Marxist method. Failure to apply this method leads to *opportunism* on the one hand and *sectarianism* on the other. These two apparently contradictory phenomena are, in reality, two opposite sides of the same coin. They both spring from an eclectic approach to our problems which is the inevitable outcome of a contempt for theory. [18]

To counter the anti-theoretical prejudices prevalent in the British labor movement, the *Labour Review* editorial pledged to “devote several important articles in our early issues to dialectical materialism, the philosophical basis of Marxism.” It noted:

All the enemies of socialism, all the bureaucrats, all their “left” sectarian shadows, all those whose courage is failing and who seek easy adjustments with capitalism, all these call into question in one way or another the fundamental principles of scientific socialism. Yet experience all goes to show that it is only these principles which can guide us effectively in the search for the answers to the problems of the British socialist movement.

Grasping the challenges and tasks posed by the breakup of the Stalinist monolith with a depth of historically grounded insight unequaled by any other political tendency in the international workers’ movement, *Labour Review* advanced an ambitious intellectual and political program:

Further, it is our belief that the “collective memory” of the socialist movement has to be re-stocked so that the historical record of the last thirty years can be cleansed of the lies which have encrusted it for so long. We are now at the end of the great Ice Age which set in with the defeat of the General Strike in 1926. ... Khrushchev, with consequences that have echoed round the world, has now shattered the authority of the “infallible” chieftain who for so long instructed everyone on the “left” what to believe. We have suffered from this Papal Socialism ever since the Stalin faction destroyed the democracies of the Communist Parties in 1927. What fragments of authority the 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U. left to the leaders of the Communist Party, the Soviet tanks in Hungary have now demolished.

From now on, the normal development of Marxist ideas is no longer held up, artificially, by bureaucratic dykes. Millions of workers and intellectuals, in every country, from Russia to the U.S.A., are stepping forward into struggle. They demand to know, because they need to know, the past history of their movement. These young people want to think, to learn, to use their political initiative. Bureaucratic “bans” and “cults” repel them. Our duty is to help them find the answers. *Labour Review* therefore takes issue both with the open Fabian enemies of Marxism and with the Stalinist hacks who have so grievously soiled its reputation.

It will amongst other things be necessary to discuss the Fabian dreams about capitalism enjoying a new lease on life, thanks to Keynes, or to partial nationalisation, or to “new” colonial constitutions, or to the bounty of U.S. imperialism.

Parallel with the discussion of Fabianism we shall deal with the Stalinist variety of “peaceful co-existence” with capitalism and its feeble though repulsive offspring—the British Communist Party’s programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. Where did Stalinism come from, and why? Was its rise inevitable? Does the dictatorship of the proletariat really mean an odious and murderous tyranny? Does Democratic Centralism really mean the autocracy of a clique of full-time officials? These are some of the questions we shall try to answer in the coming months.

When we discuss the futility of the Fabian policies, we shall also need to examine the reasons for Hitler’s defeat of the German working class, to examine the causes of failure of the French and Spanish Popular Front Governments. We shall try to show the connections between the slogan “Socialism in a Single Country” and these disasters for the international working class movement and also how it led on to the Moscow Trials, the Stalin-Hitler Pact, the Yalta carve-up of Europe and finally to the mass slaughter of workers and peasants in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe. We shall rescue from the obscurity with which Stalin surrounded the writings of Lenin on the character and future prospects of the Russian Revolution and shall publish some of the works of Trotsky, Lenin’s comrade in arms in the Russian Revolution, which have direct relevance to the problems of today.

Labour Review accordingly invites the collaboration of all serious students of the socialist movement. We shall open our pages widely to them. We count especially on establishing close fraternal relations with the developing Socialist movements of Asia and Africa. *Labour Review* however will be no mere discussion forum. It will be fashioned as a weapon in the struggle against capitalist ideas wherever they find expression in the Labour movement. It will be objective and yet partisan; it will defend the great principles of genuine Communism, as expounded by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, from both the Fabians and the Stalinists who have consistently misrepresented them. [19]

The first issue of the relaunched *Labour Review* featured a review of Peter Fryer’s *Hungarian Tragedy*, which it compared to John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Fryer, too, had written about a revolution, but one “not against capitalism, but against a corrupt and degenerate bureaucracy.” [20] While praising Fryer’s work, it noted critically that the author had not explained why the Stalinists crushed the revolution. “For the answer one must go to the writings of Leon Trotsky, particularly his book ‘The Revolution Betrayed’, where he analyses and explains the growth of bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, and the theories propounded to nourish and safeguard this caste, which today we know as Stalinism, and states quite clearly that its overthrow will be a violent one.” [21]

Predictably, the introduction of the new *Labour Review* produced complaints from sections of the left, which objected to its advocacy of Trotskyist conceptions and, therefore, “sectarian” intolerance. These critics were answered in the second issue of the relaunched *Labour Review*, in an editorial titled “Toward a Discussion on Principles”:

Those who disagree with any of the views expressed by any of the contributors to *Labour Review* should not dismiss our journal with the “swear-word” *sectarian*, but should seriously set down their disagreements, unequivocally and at sufficient length for them to develop their arguments adequately. We shall be pleased to publish them. [22]

But *Labour Review* insisted on the critical importance, in any discussion of Stalinism, of both Trotsky’s role in history and the contemporary significance of his contribution to Marxist theory and politics. “Trotskyism,” it stated, “represents the *only* attempt so far made *from the point of view of Marxism* to explain the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and at estimating the significance of the conflict between the progressive character of nationalized property in the U.S.S.R. and the reactionary bureaucracy that rules that country.” [23]

The second issue contained another article that merits recall from the archives: a scathing and white-hot denunciation, written by Michael Banda, of the response of the Chinese Communist Party to the Kremlin’s suppression of the Hungarian Revolution:

When Khrushchev’s speech was made public in all its terrifying detail, it exploded on the leaderships of the international Stalinist movement with the stunning suddenness of a stick of gelignite thrown among a shoal of fish. The most stunned and embarrassed among them were the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. For almost thirty years they had regarded Stalin as their infallible guide, their impeccable teacher, their genius theoretician, their glorious leader. Stalin’s every utterance was treated by them as an historic declaration, every act as an event of international significance, every book and pamphlet as a masterpiece of Marxist-Leninist literature and a permanent contribution to dialectical materialism. ...

History, capricious and perverse as it may be, has never been on the side of idols and their worshippers. Through the medium of N. S. Khrushchev it revealed Stalin to all the world as an uncultured bureaucrat, a shrewd charlatan and a ruthless and unscrupulous tyrant.

The damning revelations of Khrushchev succeeded in eliciting from the Chinese leaders a cautious and ambiguously worded statement. It said nothing new but attempted to rehabilitate Stalin in the eyes of the Chinese people. That was in April 1956. For nine months an inscrutable and seemingly portentous silence followed.

World labour waited in suspense for a supplementary explanation. But it waited in vain.

While the Chinese leaders by their silence were trying to gloss over the crimes of Stalin, History, shamed and saddened by the evil consequences of its own villainy, was preparing to write a bloody and tragic epilogue to Khrushchev's speech. This was the glorious Hungarian Revolution. [24]

Upon reading these paragraphs, which are only the introduction to a carefully crafted theoretical article that related the Chinese regime's defense of the Kremlin's Hungarian intervention to its reactionary Stalinist program and ideology, one cannot avoid recalling Banda's later political adaptation to the Maoist regime and, most abominably, as he broke with the International Committee in 1986, his glorification of Stalin.

The launching of *The Newsletter*

While overseeing the production of *Labour Review*, Healy's discussions with Peter Fryer continued and led to another critical political initiative. He proposed to Fryer that he undertake, with the support and assistance of The Club, a "Newsletter" that would serve as a discussion forum for those breaking with Stalinism, as well as militant workers seeking a path to the building of a genuine revolutionary movement.

Fryer accepted the proposal and brought to this project exceptional skill and talent as a writer. Healy and The Club provided the perspective, trained cadre, and organizational drive that enabled *The Newsletter* to become a powerful force in the British left. The first issue of *The Newsletter* appeared on May 10, 1957. It provided detailed coverage of the Wortley Hall Conference held two weeks earlier, on the weekend of April 27–28. Sponsored by the Socialist Forum, in which Michael Banda and other leaders of The Club were active, the conference participants, representing a broad spectrum of the British left, met to discuss the significance of the crisis of Stalinism and the way forward.

Both Barbara and Cliff Slaughter attended the conference. Cliff Slaughter was intensely studying the struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism. "When he came into contact with the Trotskyist movement," Barbara recalls, "he read everything he could get his hands on." She also remembers that the Wortley Conference venue "was absolutely packed with people, all arguing and discussing furiously. I remember hearing Healy speak and being struck by how calm and confident he was, unlike all the others. All I can remember him saying, and this really stuck with me, was that 'This was the time for reading books. This was the time to discover the true history of the Russian Revolution.' There were no histrionics. He must have been waiting decades for a situation like that. He was very impressive and stood out from everyone else." [25]

Barbara's recollection is substantiated by *The Newsletter's* account of the conference, which took note of Healy's remarks: "This is the season for reading books, not burning them," he said. "Let us have no label-sticking in advance. Let us get rid of demagoguery. Don't put anybody on a 'pedestal'. Read and study. Examine every point of view." [26]

Critical differences emerged at the conference. A substantial section of dissident and ex-members of the Communist Party were prepared to denounce the crimes of Stalin, but they resisted any serious examination of the social and political roots of the Stalinist regime. Much of their critique remained at the level of moralistic condemnation. Above all, they opposed concentrating attention on Trotsky's writings and the international Marxist tradition that he represented.

Among those attending the conference was John Saville, who had been a prominent member of the Communist Party's Historian Group. He argued for an essentially nationalist response to the crisis of Stalinism. *The Newsletter* reported that Saville argued it was necessary to "stop talking hot air and build a body of Marxist ideas that meant something to the British working class. That implied studying our own working-class movement and its history, about which far too little was known." [27]

But the real problem confronting the socialist movement in 1957 was not insufficient knowledge about what happened in Manchester or Liverpool in the 1820s, but what had happened inside the Russian Communist Party in the 1920s.

Saville worked closely with another prominent dissident Communist Party historian, E. P. Thompson, who was later to achieve fame as the author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, which explained the development of class consciousness as a product of uniquely national experiences and traditions. Saville and Thompson collaborated in the production of a journal titled *The New Reasoner*, a forerunner of the *New Left Review*. Thompson considered references to the theoretical and political struggles between Trotskyism and Stalinism to be largely irrelevant and harmful to a new left regroupment. In a letter to *The Newsletter* written shortly after the Wortley Conference, Thompson—who was (and remained) a bitter opponent of Trotskyism—asserted that "positions and attitudes which are labelled 'Trotskyist' tend toward the petrification and perpetuation of sectarian division. ..." [28]

Cliff Slaughter joins the Trotskyist movement

It was during this tense period of political realignment that Cliff Slaughter established contact with the Trotskyist movement and entered into extensive political discussion with Gerry Healy. This marked the beginning of a political collaboration that was to span three decades. Slaughter was strongly opposed to the tendency represented by Saville and Thompson. In a polemical essay that he wrote a decade later, published in *The Fourth International*, Slaughter explained the significance of the theoretical and political divisions that emerged among dissidents and ex-Stalinists in 1956–57. They were shocked by the exposure of Stalin's crimes, but also by their own gullibility. Reflecting their own discomfiture and embarrassment:

[T]he vast majority of Stalinist intellectuals now set their political course not objectively, but subjectively: they saw their "communism" as a vast deception; they could no longer hold up their heads in the liberal circles in which they lived and worked; they were outraged to discover that their idealist acceptance of Stalin and Stalinism had been used to cover up murder, torture and the suppression of all freedom; and so on.

Politically speaking, and insofar as any of them remained in politics, the meaning behind these reactions was the acceptance of the principal capitalist ideological attack on the Russian Revolution and Communism: that Stalinism, with all its abuses and betrayals, is essentially a continuation of Leninism; that the essence of Stalinism is "dictatorship" or "totalitarianism", together with "Realpolitik" or pragmatic power politics; and that the "ideals" with which the rank-and-file members join and build the movement are simply cynically used by the power-seekers in the leadership.

Conscious of this "continuity", the ex-Communists then cast around for alternative moral and political principles. They find, of

course, only the leftovers of bourgeois ethics and the many varieties of reformist and liberal opportunism, which have accepted them. None of these, since they flow from, and depend directly upon, a social order which is historically doomed and decaying, can provide a consistent course of action and theory.

Consequently, the many groupings which blossomed (if the word is appropriate in this connection) after 1956 eventually either dissolved into the reformist and liberal movements, or else drifted more and more closely towards Stalinism, sometimes in the form of open and direct collaboration, in other cases through an ideological accommodation. This is because on an international scale capitalism survives not through any inherent strength, but only through the props provided for it by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This is the social force which holds back the proletarian revolution.

Insofar as there is any political and theoretical work among those claiming to be socialists, it must either gravitate toward Stalinism, or be attracted to revolutionary Marxism, to Trotskyism. *The New Left Review* has a certain continuity since 1956. It was an amalgamation of *Universities and Left Review* and *The New Reasoner*. Both of these were the result of the collaboration between ex-Communist Party members and other left intellectuals.

The New Reasoner was originally *The Reasoner*, a duplicated opposition bulletin for dissident Communist Party members in the North of England in 1956. Its editors, Edward Thompson and John Saville, were and remain strongly anti-Trotskyist. Thompson described Trotskyism as a sectarian, ultra-left and anti-revolutionary trend in the British working class. Like those who succeeded them, Thompson and Saville sought for future development from sources outside the Bolshevik tradition, and particularly from some supposedly special socialist characteristics of the *British* working-class movement.

Their refusal to face up to the historical meaning of Stalinism and of Trotsky's fight against it was reflected in their rejection of any campaign against Stalinism such as that carried out by the Trotskyists, on the grounds that it amounted to "anti-Communism". In this way they accepted the basic position of a continuity between Lenin and Stalin. [29]

The Newsletter of January 4, 1958, announced the establishment of a 10-man editorial board, which included Cliff Slaughter. The notice stated that Slaughter, working as a sociologist at Leeds University, had, after being suspended from membership, resigned from the Communist Party. The first articles written by Slaughter for publication in *The Newsletter*, a series on the background of the struggle of the Kikuyu people in Kenya against British imperialism, appeared in February 1958.

Of the many Communist Party intellectuals won to the Trotskyist movement as a consequence of the 1956 crisis, Slaughter was the most theoretically consistent and profound in his conception of Marxism as an instrument of revolutionary struggle in the working class.

The struggle in the working class

When *The Newsletter* celebrated its first anniversary in May 1958, it received many messages of congratulations and support. Its contribution to the political development of the working class was acknowledged even by many of its opponents within the left wing of the British Labour Party. Michael Foot, the leader of the left Tribune group, wrote:

Good wishes to the one-year-old Newsletter from the 21-year-old Tribune. One of the needs of the Labour movement at this time is that there should be a great increase in debate about the right strategy for attaining socialism.

The Newsletter makes a distinctive contribution to this debate and I hope it will secure an even larger circulation. [30]

Also sending his congratulations was the witch-hunted American novelist, Howard Fast, whose best-known works include *Freedom Road*, *Citizen Tom Paine*, and *Spartacus* (which inspired the 1960 movie directed by Stanley Kubrick). Having broken with the Communist Party in 1956, he met with Healy in London, who discussed with Fast the history of the Trotskyist movement. The writer's respect for the struggle that had been waged by the Fourth International finds expression in his message to *The Newsletter*: "You have my best and warmest greetings on this year of publication. The question is not whether I see eye to eye with you on everything; I support many things if there is a minimum basis of agreement; your importance lies in the fact that you deny the Communist Party the right to pre-empt the struggle for peace and all other areas of human decency." [31]

The struggle waged by the British Trotskyists against Stalinism strengthened their intervention in the working-class movement. The exposure of the criminal role of Stalinism was an essential but not isolated element of the broader struggle to overcome the domination over the workers' movement, in Britain and internationally, of the reactionary labor bureaucracies. The principal agency through which the interests of the working class were subordinated to British imperialism were the social-democratic bureaucracies that controlled both the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress. Within this political context, the British Communist Party's main role was to block the development of an independent movement of the increasingly militant working class against the intertwined bureaucracies.

The Newsletter intervened aggressively throughout 1958 to provide militant practical leadership and political direction to the growing rank-and-file movement. A particularly significant intervention was the support given by *The Newsletter* to the "Blue Union," a rival union, the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers (NASD), that stood outside the control of the mighty Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and had a reputation for greater militancy. Having lost members to the NASD, the TGWU sought to prevent Blue Unionists from getting work, declaring that a worker who was not a member of the official union was a "non-unionist." In late January 1958, more than 9,000 dock workers, including rank-and-file members of the TGWU on the "Merseyside" in Liverpool, took strike action in defense of "Blue Union" members. Opposing the attacks on the "Blue Union," *The Newsletter* asked if the TGWU officials claimed that only those workers who contributed to the payment of their salaries could be considered unionists.

In an assessment of the "Blue Union" struggle published in *Labour Review* in the immediate aftermath of the strike, Bill Hunter, a leading member of The Club who was active in Liverpool, wrote:

Undoubtedly the "blue union" movement in the northern ports was a progressive development. Perhaps the biggest task in the trade union movement today is the reassertion of rank-and-file control. It is foolish to think that this can come about without shake-ups in trade union structure and without explosive movements.

For in the heavily bureaucratized, and often corrupt, unions of Britain today rank-and-file "democracy", like democracy in the capitalist society in which they exist, is often just an expensive

farce. Democracy is not simply a question of balloting, resolutions and waiting for enlightenment and a change of heart among the leaders.

If the bureaucratic apparatus ceases to be a servant of the members, if it preserves itself as master over the ranks, to perpetuate itself by a system of “appointments” rather than elections, if it constantly beats down militant workers and groups, then expulsions are inevitable. So, too, struggles in which the workers have to fight against both the employers and the trade union leadership are inevitable. Moreover, given the right circumstances, large groups of trade union members will seek to break out of what has for them become a union “prison house” in which all workers’ initiative, all attempts to express their own ideas on the defence of their interests, remain caged, canalized or simply suppressed. [32]

Hunter’s article was written 63 years ago, at a time when the trade unions, compared to their present state of reactionary degeneracy, might almost appear to have been citadels of workers’ democracy and class struggle. But even then, decades before Thatcherite Blairism became the official religion of the Labour Party and the TUC, the British Trotskyists directed their work toward the development of a rank-and-file insurgency against the old bureaucratic structures.

Based on advances made as a result of its interventions in workers’ struggles, *The Newsletter* issued a call for a national industrial rank-and-file conference in London. Despite witch-hunting and threats of proscriptions, the conference, held on November 16, 1958, was attended by 500 workers. The delegates adopted by an overwhelming majority a *Charter of Workers’ Demands*, which included the call for the nationalization of major industries, under workers’ control and with no compensation to the former owners.

Slaughter, in his speech at the Conference, analyzed the significance of recent race riots and denounced attempts to blame immigrant workers for rising unemployment:

There are only 200,000 coloured people in this country, of whom 70,000 to 80,000 are employed workers. But there are 500,000 or more unemployed and the figure is rising by 38,000 a month.

The race riots were a clear indication that it was the intention of the employing class to use the presence of coloured people as a diversion.

The basis of race prejudice lay in our social system. You could not send young soldiers to wage war against coloured people in Malaya, Korea and Cyprus without telling them those people were inferior. Imperialism was the root cause of race prejudice. ...

The miners have a saying: “When we get down there we’re all the same colour.” This is true about unemployment. On the dole everyone is the same colour.

In the final analysis only the defeat of imperialism will really solve this problem, and with it all the problems of the working class. [33]

The capitalist press, the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, and, of course, what remained of the Communist Party responded to the success of *The Newsletter*’s November 16 conference with a hysterical anti-Trotskyist campaign. Headlines such as “Red Club Exposed,” “The Men You Must Watch,” “Their Aim is More Strikes,” “600 Plot 24hr Strike,” and “Red Club Men Hold a Secret Conference” appeared regularly in the press. The British Trotskyists responded by announcing, at

the start of 1959, the launching of a nationwide campaign of meetings in all the major industrial centers to build support for the *Charter of Workers’ Demands*. “If, as *The Newsletter* believes, there is widespread support for an organization dedicated to bringing rank and file trade unionists into political activity under a socialist banner, these meetings will lay the basis for its launching.” [34]

In a further statement on the planned meetings, published in the same issue (and signed by the members of the editorial board, including Cliff Slaughter), *The Newsletter* declared, “For our part, we are convinced that the time is rapidly approaching when some form of rank-and-file organization, corresponding to the needs and problems of militants and helping forward their fight inside and outside the unions, will become imperative.” [35]

The founding of the Socialist Labour League

The decision to establish the Socialist Labour League (SLL) was announced publicly in *The Newsletter* issue of February 28, 1959. The Editorial Board explained the aims of the new organization:

The Socialist Labour League will seek to bring trade union militants into political activity under a socialist banner.

It will seek to help workers to win their struggles against sackings and victimization, and to bring their problems and their opinions into the heart of the Labour Party.

It will seek to replace the present Right-wing leaders who dominate the trade unions and the Labour Party with leaders pledged to socialist policies and a socialist programme.

It will fight against bans and proscriptions and the witchhunting of militants. [36]

The statement called for “the mobilization of the whole Labour movement in a struggle, both political and industrial, to put the Tories out of business once and for all.” It continued: “Our horizons are not limited to the winning of the next general election. We want to end capitalism too.” [37] On the international front, the statement declared:

We advocate the withdrawal of British troops from colonies and semi-colonies, the ending of the manufacture of the H-bomb and the construction of rocket bases and a socialist appeal by a Labour government to the workers of the world to end the production of H-bombs everywhere and go forward to socialism. [38]

As *The Newsletter* had predicted, the Labour Party, the bourgeois press, and the Stalinists responded to the formation of the SLL with a vicious counter-attack. The SLL’s formal request for affiliation with the Labour Party, so that it be allowed the right to advance the fight for socialist policies within the organization, was promptly rejected. Instead, the Labour Party proscribed the SLL and escalated its drive to expel from its organization all those identified as Trotskyists. The choice before the Trotskyist movement was either to bow to the discipline of the Social Democratic bureaucracy and disband the SLL—thereby abandoning for all practical purposes revolutionary activity among workers engaged in struggle against capitalism—or to proceed openly with the building of the Trotskyist movement in defiance of the Labour Party bureaucracy.

For Healy, the faction work inside the Labour Party, which it had conducted with extraordinary patience since 1947, had always been a tactic, valid to the extent that it did not undermine, to the point of crippling, its independent intervention in workers' struggles on the basis of a genuine socialist program. For precisely this reason, by the end of the 1950s, the entry tactic as it had been implemented was exhausted. Serious practical involvement in the struggles of the working class led necessarily to a confrontation with the Labour Party and the TUC. The Trotskyists had to choose between persisting in their efforts to develop and expand, to the greatest extent possible, their interventions in the class struggles, or, instead, maintaining a passive, purely propagandist presence within the officially sanctioned structures of the Labour Party. They chose the former.

However, this did not signify the abandonment of interventions within the Labour Party. Rather, the establishment of the SLL actually broadened its influence among the most militant elements within the Labour Party. Five years after the proscription of the SLL, the party controlled a majority of the seats in the national committee of the Labour Party Young Socialists and captured control of its newspaper, *Keep Left*.

"There is no world without Verona's Walls," bemoaned Romeo upon learning of his banishment. For the inveterate opportunists of the Pabloite and other anti-Trotskyist tendencies, there existed no world outside the anti-socialist fortifications of the Labour Party. For the Pabloite Ted Grant, in keeping with his mentor's conception of the revolutionary transformation of right-wing bureaucracies under mass pressure, the time for a break with the Labour Party would never arrive. The tactic became a strategy, and the strategy became a way of life. In the decades that followed—through the reigns of Wilson, Callaghan, the doddering Foot, Kinnock, Blair, and Brown—Grant proved himself, up until his death at the age of 93 in 2008, to be the most loyal and tenacious of Labourites.

The issue of *Labour Review* that announced the founding of the Socialist Labour League was the first in which Cliff Slaughter served as its co-editor (with John Daniels). The editorial statement stated that the task of the *Labour Review*, as the theoretical organ of the SLL, was "no less than the education of a generation of working-class fighters and leaders, to whom it will be given to seize and hold State power, to accomplish the British Revolution." [39]

Slaughter also contributed to this issue a seminal essay, "Revolution and Class Consciousness," which raised many of the theoretical issues that were to be developed and defended in his writings of 1961–63 during the emerging struggle within the International Committee over reunification with the Pabloites.

The critical achievement of Marxism, which was the focus of Slaughter's theoretical work between 1959 and 1964, was the dialectical materialist conception of history and its substantiation of the revolutionary role of the working class. Therefore, the central task of Marxists was the defense, in both theory and practice, of this conquest, against all forms of anti-Marxist revisionism that called into question, even to the point of explicitly denying, that the working class was the principal revolutionary social force in modern society. Slaughter's insistence on the historic role of the working class was explicitly linked to the question of the practice of the Trotskyist movement, which was an active and indispensable force in the development of revolutionary class consciousness.

Slaughter began his essay by relating the theoretical issues raised in the discussion of class consciousness to the political upheavals on the left generated by the events of 1956:

In the last two years many Marxists have had to reexamine their basic assumptions, and have realized that their understanding of Marxist theory was perhaps distorted by their allegiance to latter-day "communism", which for want of a better term will be

referred to here as "Stalinism." The aim of this article is to go to the root of the concept which is the principal target of all revisionists of Marxism: the concept of the working-class revolution and working-class power. In one form or another, all "new thinkers" in the socialist movement, as well as critics on the outside, challenge Marx's hypothesis that the working class is the only revolutionary force in the capitalist system, and that it will inevitably establish its own dictatorship as the first step to a classless society. Some people say that capitalism has changed in such a way that revolution is no longer possible or necessary for the working class. Others say that when revolution did occur, in Russia in November 1917, experience proved that the working class could not prevent the rise of an oppressive and brutal dictatorship, the very negation of socialism. [40]

Slaughter was clearly responding to the disoriented and demoralized left-wing intellectuals, who had concluded, on the basis of the defeats suffered in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, that the working class had exhausted its historical role and that another subject of revolutionary action had to be found. The writings of Herbert Marcuse exemplified this rejection of the working class, but he was hardly alone. Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* shifted the locus of potential revolutionary uprisings entirely away from the imperialist countries, home to the most powerful sections of the working class. The extreme skepticism of petty-bourgeois intellectuals toward the working class was summed up by the radical sociologist, C. Wright Mills, when he wrote in his "Letter to the New Left" that "the problem of the historical agency of change" had to be reworked in non-Marxist terms. He considered it unreasonable for theorists of the New Left to "cling so mightily to the 'working class' of the advanced capitalist countries as *the* historic agency, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really historical evidence that now stands against this expectation." Mills characterized "a labor metaphysic" as "a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic." [41]

Slaughter was answering not only the confused intellectuals gravitating to the "New Left." He was well aware that the retrograde anti-Marxist conceptions circulating within the academic intelligentsia were echoed within the Pabloite tendencies, where they were utilized to justify capitulation to political organizations and movements based on the petty bourgeoisie.

Slaughter's essay provided a careful review of the historical development of Marxist thought, analyzing the interaction of theoretical analysis and objective social process that enabled Marx and Engels to establish the revolutionary role of the working class. He paid particular attention to the *Communist Manifesto*:

In this document, which is without parallel in historical significance, the ideas of class struggle, the economic structure of society, the revolutionary role of the working class, the necessary self-destruction of capitalism and the dialectical method itself are startling in their simplicity and maturity. Many people read the *Manifesto* when they first discover socialism, and think of it as just one more pamphlet. Yet it is perhaps the most complete work of Marx and Engels, in the context of which all their later work should be interpreted. [42]

Those who claim that the *Manifesto* is out of date fail to understand Marx's characterization of the proletariat as a revolutionary class:

A revolution is the seizure of power by a class in order to effect, in its own interests, the overthrow of the existing social structure. In all previous revolutions the victorious class has not overthrown the whole of existing social conditions. For classes like the bourgeoisie, the aim of political revolution was to substitute for the previously dominant mode of appropriation their own, already developed, mode of appropriation. But the inevitable tendency of capitalism is to sweep aside all modes of appropriation other than the capitalist exploitation of wage-labour, so that only two basic classes confront each other. This is the key to the unique role of the working class in history. It cannot substitute its own mode of appropriation for that of the capitalist class, since by abolishing capital it abolishes its necessary opposite—wage labour. The interests of the proletariat are directed towards a society without a proletariat, without exploitation, without a State. [43]

Slaughter's essay sought to situate the founding of the Socialist Labour League in a process that encompassed the entire history of the struggle for socialism. On the basis of this history, Slaughter demonstrated the unbridgeable chasm that separated the existing bureaucratic organizations from Marxism:

Both social democracy and Stalinism are cut adrift from the central ideas of Marxism, which are confirmed in the revolutionary experience of the working class. Both deny the essential class basis of all serious political issues and of all fundamental institutions in society. Both reject the view that the bourgeois State, including Parliament, must be smashed and workers' organs of power set up in its place. Both have departed from true working-class internationalism. Both fear more than anything else the action and initiative of the masses of the people themselves, and therefore erect bureaucratic party machines or State systems which act "on behalf of" the workers. Each of these departures from Marxism was already condemned by Marx in the *Manifesto* and in his writings on the revolutions of 1848. [44]

Slaughter's essay was not written to welcome a party concerned with nothing more than nudging the existing bureaucratic organizations to the left.

In preparation for a founding conference scheduled for May 1959, the editorial board of *The Newsletter* published an extensive programmatic statement. Its opening section, "What Is the Socialist Labour League?" explained:

The Socialist Labour League is an organization of Marxists within the Labour and trade union movement, dedicated to fighting for socialist policies in place of the present policies of class betrayal.

As distinct from others who call themselves socialists, Marxists do not believe that it is possible to reform capitalism out of existence or to change it into socialism by peaceful means.

The experience of over a century of working-class struggle shows that the capitalist class will use all its strength to retain its control of the State machine and its ownership of the means of production.

Marxists hold that only through the struggle of the working class for the achievement of State power can capitalism be overthrown.

Capitalism cannot be destroyed merely by securing a

parliamentary majority. Participation in Parliament and in local councils by workers' representatives can help the struggle for socialism, but only if the fight of those representatives is linked with direct action by the organized working class.

The present leaders of the trade unions and Labour Party are not determined to end capitalism, achieve working-class power and build socialism.

One of the chief tasks of the Socialist Labour League is to help trade unionists and members of the Labour Party and Communist Party, through joint activity and political discussion based on their own experiences, to build a new leadership devoted to socialist principles. [45]

While fighting the expulsions of its members who were still inside the Labour Party and continuing to demand the right to affiliation, the SLL made clear that it would not sacrifice its fight for principles in the interests of short-term organizational considerations. It noted that numerous centrist tendencies had rendered themselves impotent in order to avoid a direct clash with the Labour and TUC bureaucracies:

The Socialist Labour League has come into existence, not in order to repeat the experiences of such Centrist groupings, but to lead a new kind of struggle against Right-wing leaders and Right-wing policies in this new period.

An organization of Marxists is necessary, not only for the purpose of theoretical education and the discussion of policy, but also to give help and leadership to the workers in their immediate struggles against capitalism.

The proscription of the League within a month of its establishment is a tribute to the way the Marxists and their journal *The Newsletter* have helped the workers in struggle in the transport, docks, building and engineering industries.

The Right wing sees what serious repercussions the alternative presented by the Socialist Labour League could have for the exponents and practitioners of class collaboration policies.

The witch-hunt against the Socialist Labour League and *The Newsletter* will not succeed in its aim of smashing our organization and our paper. We shall conduct a determined struggle against the expulsion of socialists whose only crime is that they recognize and perform their duty of working for a genuine socialist policy. [46]

The statement included a substantial section on "The International Outlook of the Socialist Labour League," which began with the declaration: "Marxists are working class internationalists." [47] The section stated the SLL's commitment to the unconditional defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism, but also provided a concise review of the Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism. The statement also declared the SLL's support for "the struggles of all colonial and dependent peoples for independence from imperialism, not out of charity, but because for the British workers this is a common fight against a common enemy." [48] The SLL linked the fight against imperialism to the struggle to unite the working class within Britain:

We bring to the fore the common class interests of immigrant workers in Britain with the white workers.

The splitting of the working class on racial lines can only be in the interests of the capitalist class. We therefore urge united

opposition by white and black workers to all forms of racist propaganda, incitement or violence. [49]

The statement emphasized the critical importance of the SLL's intervention in the struggles of the working class, with the central orientation being to the rank and file, with the aim of mobilizing all of its vast fighting capacity in confrontations with the ruling class:

The employers must be made to feel that by sacking [firing] a single militant they are challenging the whole might of the organized working class.

Either the workers reply to arrogant employers in language they will understand, or the working class will see its organization and its gains whittled away piecemeal.

But this objective of taking the offensive in every strike, of waging each dispute from the outset with the aim of winning a decisive victory, implies efficient, thorough and conscious preparation.

Every encouragement must be given to the development of rank-and-file committees in each industry, consisting of the most experienced and trusted militants, and to the linking up of these committees on a local, area and ultimately national scale.

In rank-and-file committees, built by the workers themselves, directly responsive to their needs and wishes, the working class possesses all the means of preparing for major industrial struggles. [50]

The section that followed the elaboration of the rank-and-file strategy was titled, "What It Means To Be A Marxist":

Marxists are the most conscious of all workers. They do not look upon socialism or the struggle for its achievement in an idealistic way, but in a scientific way.

They base their policies and programme on a study of the objective class forces operating in society, on a study of the real position and needs of the working class. Marxism is the science of working-class struggle and working-class power.

Since Marxism is a science, it must be studied as a science. The Socialist Labour League therefore carries out systematic and thorough education of all its members in Marxist theory, in the experience of the working-class movement in all countries, showing the laws and lessons of that experience.

But Marxism is not merely a theory, but a theory of human action, and first and foremost of class struggle. To be a Marxist is therefore not merely to study, but to study in order to be better equipped to fight and work on behalf of the working class.

But to fight as an individual is not enough. Marxists fight and work as a disciplined team, with agreed policies based on democratic discussion, with a division of labour, and under the guidance of elected and accountable leading bodies. [51]

In this foundation statement, the Socialist Labour League still presented itself as seeking to work as a formally recognized tendency inside the Labour Party. But its program and the practice that flowed from it determined the virtually immediate proscription of the SLL by the Labour Party. The Socialist Labour League's insistence on intervening into the struggles of the working class—with the aim of bringing to bear the full

potential of its power, of viewing each conflict as a battle in a broader national and global class war, of developing within the proletariat an awareness of its strength as a class and an understanding of its historic role in the creation of a new socialist world system—created an unbridgeable chasm between it and the Labour Party. But despite the proscriptions, which made work as a tendency inside the Labour Party impossible, the Socialist Labour League went ahead with its inaugural conference on the holiday weekend of May 16–17, 1959.

Peter Fryer explained the significance of the event in an essay published in *Labour Review*:

The inaugural conference of the Socialist Labour League, held in London at Whitsuntide, demonstrated that the ideas to which a generation of Marxists held firm through three decades of isolation and persecution have struck root in British soil. The Marxist movement has taken shape. It has flung down its challenge to capitalism, to fascism, to Right-wing and Stalinist misleaders, to "new thinkers" and "new Left" coteries, and to the various sectarian groupings. Here is a movement that means business, as every witch-hunting attack, every ban, proscription, and expulsion testifies; a movement that is based on the proletariat in a period of mounting class struggle; a movement that is therefore rapidly extending in size and influence. [52]

To be continued

Notes:

[17] *Labour Review*, January 1957, Volume 2, Number 1, p. 1.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[22] *Ibid.*, March-April 1957, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 35.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] "The Chinese C.P. and Hungary," Michael Banda, *Labour Review*, March-April 1957, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 57.

[25] Email from Barbara Slaughter to David North, July 20, 2021.

[26] *The Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 10, 1957, p. 5

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[28] *The Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 21

[29] Cliff Slaughter, "Trotsky's Marxism Under Attack," *Fourth International*, August 1968, pp. 45–46.

[30] *The Newsletter*, May 3, 1958, p. 133.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] *Labour Review*, "Hands off the 'Blue Union'! Democracy on the Docks", Volume 3, Number 1, January-February 1958.

[33] *The Newsletter*, November 22, 1958, p. 309.

[34] *The Newsletter*, January 3, 1959, p. 1.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

[36] *The Newsletter*, February 28, 1959, p. 1.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[39] "The Challenge of the Socialist Labour League," *Labour Review*, April-May 1959, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 1.

[40] "Revolution and Class Consciousness," *Labour Review*, April-May 1959, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 5.

[41] The letter is available here.

[42] *Labour Review*, April-May 1959, p. 7.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[45] *The Newsletter*, "The Socialist Labour League Looks to the

Future,” April 11, 1959, pp. 108–09.

[46] Ibid., p. 110.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., p. 111.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., p. 112.

[51] Ibid.

[52] “Marxists in Conference,” *Labour Review*, July-August 1959, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 40.



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