

Alan Thornett, 1937-2026: A militant won to Trotskyism who later embraced Pabloism

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Alan Thornett died on 9 October 2026, aged 89. He ended his days as a leader of the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International, Anti-Capitalist Resistance, and a bitter opponent of Trotskyism.

However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, Thornett was a prominent militant in the car industry who was won from the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain to the Socialist Labour League (SLL), then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Working under the direction of the SLL and its leader Gerry Healy, Thornett conducted historically important work in the British Leyland factory at Cowley in Oxfordshire, centred on a principled struggle to mobilise rank-and-file workers against the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) bureaucracy.

Thornett's subsequent split with the SLL's successor organisation, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), cannot be understood outside the history of the British section of the ICFI and the impact of its political adaptations to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy in the early 1970s, following a hasty and politically unclarified split with the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste, then the French section.

An objective account of Thornett's years in the SLL is important, covering, as they do, the party's most important intervention among a key section of workers at a critical turning point in the struggles of the British working class. It offers vital lessons for today on how to build revolutionary leadership in the working class, the political pressures the revolutionary party faced, and the heavy price of failing to combat them.

Thornett began working at the Morris Motors plant in 1959, nine years before it became British Leyland. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) shortly afterwards.

His break from the CPGB in the mid-1960s, and his recruitment to the SLL in 1966, together with other Cowley shop stewards, was an important gain for the Trotskyist

movement, a product of its consistent struggle against Stalinism and a measure of the SLL's growing political authority.

Thornett was part of a substantial layer of militant workers the SLL won through its uncompromising struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The SLL understood that building the revolutionary party required turning to a substantial leftward movement inside the Labour Party and the trade unions, which at the time commanded the allegiance of millions of workers, many of whom believed these organisations were socialist.

The SLL's task was to systematically expose the socialist pretensions of Labour and union leaders, especially their left representatives, and break the most politically advanced workers from their influence.

Guided by weekly meetings with Healy, Thornett and the SLL's industrial cadre waged a determined struggle against the Wilson Labour government's 1966 wage freeze, as outlined in Healy's pamphlet, *The Alternative to Wilson* (1967), demanding "Make the left MPs fight".

Thornett became chairman of the Transport and General Workers' Union 5/55 branch and of the Joint Shop Stewards' Committee at Cowley, leading many struggles in the plant. He was elected secretary of the party's All Trades Unions Alliance (ATUA), its industrial arm, and led the Western Region of the WRP covering Oxford, Reading and Swindon.

After he broke from the WRP, Thornett still acknowledged that Trotskyism, "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."

This influence was evident in the ATUA's ability to attract the most militant workers in the car industry, on the docks and in the building industry. The party's work in the trade unions produced a rally of 4,000 in Manchester in 1972, and 10,000 at the Empire Pool Wembley in 1973. It led to Thornett being targeted for victimisation in 1974,

which was vigorously opposed by the WRP.

The background to Thornett's split was the SLL's failure to conduct a consistent struggle against the OCI's centrist drift from Trotskyism, epitomised by its insistence in 1966 that the Fourth International had been destroyed by Pabloite liquidationism and had to be "reconstructed". This claim provided a political mechanism for the party's adaptation to centrist and Stalinist tendencies within France as its membership grew rapidly during the May-June 1968 general strike.

The SLL declared a public split with the OCI on 24 November 1971, before any attempt had been made to clarify the cadre of the French section or the international movement on the implications of the OCI leadership's centrist perspective. This reflected the British section's own adaptations to the same pressures, expressed in its campaign against the Heath government.

In 1973, at the height of the mass anti-Tory movement of the working class, the SLL founded the WRP with the declared aim of throwing out the Heath government and replacing it with a Labour government. This was presented as an essentially electoral programme of "basic rights" (jobs, living standards, housing, an unspecified "change the system") with the barest reference to the party's Trotskyist character and the ICFI's international perspective.

The WRP expected that the return of a Labour government in 1974 would bring workers rapidly into conflict with it. But at least initially, illusions in Labour were reinforced—especially as the government made significant initial concessions to workers.

To combat such illusions, the WRP placed renewed emphasis on the party's Trotskyist identity and sharpened its opposition to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Thornett came forward as the leading opponent of the left turn, arguing against what he termed a return to "sectarianism".

His differences reflected the pressure of workers who had joined the party on an anti-Tory line and who had not been won to revolutionary policies. It was a relatively large constituency in the party, whose confusion the WRP was responsible for, and who needed to be politically educated and won to Trotskyism.

Thornett responded in an unprincipled fashion, by making secret contact with representatives of the OCI in Britain in August 1974 to formulate a factional critique of the WRP, seeking to remove Healy as party leader.

Rather than politically combatting Thornett's positions, which would have entailed revisiting the OCI conflict and raising the ICFI's fight against revisionism to a higher level, Healy and the WRP leadership moved by the Autumn to expel Thornett.

The WRP's resort to organisational measures lost the party several hundred members and its most important faction in basic industry, while leaving unclarified all the crucial issues of the struggle against social-democracy and centrist adaptations to the labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The WRP paid an immediate price as the party's social base was now tilted toward the middle class, with figures such as the actress Vanessa Redgrave and former *Sunday Times* journalist Alex Mitchell rising to prominence and facilitating an ongoing political disorientation.

The split freed Thornett to pursue his own syndicalist and centrist orientation. He worked within the Labour Party, in the milieu around Tony Benn, and in efforts to regroup splinters from the ICFI. His International Socialist Group was recognised as a sympathising section of the United Secretariat in 1991 and became its British section in 1995.

By 1990 he was describing Healy as a "degenerate political monster" and the "Ceausescu of the British Trotskyist movement", and the ICFI as a fraud.

He championed a series of opportunist "mass left party" initiatives such as Respect and Respect Renewal alongside George Galloway, then Left Unity, then Jeremy Corbyn's Your Party.

But his later evolution does not alter the fact that his recruitment to the party, his leadership of the ATUA and his work at Cowley were important products of the SLL's fight for Trotskyism in the working class. The WRP leadership's subsequent degeneration undermined those very achievements.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will publish a more thorough appraisal of Thornett and the central issues raised by his role in the SLL and subsequent break from the WRP to arm the party for the ongoing struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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