

# Tony Cliff's Family Tree

The largest “state capitalist” group claiming some connection to Trotskyism is the British-based Socialist Workers Party (SWP/B) headed by Tony Cliff. The founders of the SWP/B deserted the Trotskyist movement in the early 1950s under the pressure of the rabid anti-communist hysteria generated at the time of the Korean War. Cliff “discovered” that the Soviet Union was “capitalist” and therefore refused to defend the North Korean deformed workers state (which like China, North Vietnam, etc., was also supposedly “state capitalist”) against U.S. imperialism and its allies. Fifteen years later, when U.S. imperialism attacked Vietnam, the Cliffites (who considered North Vietnam to be equally “capitalist”) wasted no time in hopping on the Vietnam solidarity bandwagon. As Trotsky remarked, opportunists are always acutely sensitive to which way the wind is blowing.

Cliff's “theory” of state capitalism is at least as contradictory as the positions taken by his group. In his major work on the subject, *State Capitalism in Russia*, Cliff concedes that, in the USSR, the law of value does not govern production, that the means of production and labor power are not commodities, and that there are no cyclical crises of overproduction—all characteristic features of a capitalist economy. Nevertheless, Cliff and his followers argue that the USSR is “capitalist” because of a drive to “accumulate” industrial capacity and the necessity to “compete” militarily with the West.

While the Cliffites occasionally pay lip service to the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism in the 1920s, their critique of Soviet “state capitalism” is far closer to Bukharin's Right Opposition within the Soviet Communist Party after the death of Lenin. During the 1920s, the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky, denounced the Stalin/Bukharin leadership's promotion of rural petty capitalism as the road to socialism “at a snail's pace,” and advocated instead a program of industrialization to be financed primarily by transfers from the upper layers of the peasantry (cf. the 1927 “Platform of the Opposition”).

After destroying the Left Opposition, in 1928 Stalin turned on his erstwhile partner, Bukharin, and launched, albeit in a crude and brutal fashion, a bureaucratic version of the industrialization advocated by Trotsky and Evgeny Preobrazhensky. Trotsky said, “The success of the Soviet Union in industrial development is acquiring global historical significance” which, despite the irrationalities of bureaucratic commandism, “provides practical proof of the immense possibilities inherent in socialist economic methods” (“Economic Recklessness and its Perils,” 1930). For Cliff, the introduction of the first Five Year Plan, and the beginning of Soviet industrialization in 1928, marked the beginning of “state

capitalism” in Russia.

In 1985, Michael Haynes, a contributor to *International Socialism*, theoretical organ of the SWP/B, wrote a book entitled *Nikolai Bukharin & the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism* in which the Cliffites' debt to the Right Opposition is unambiguous. Haynes asserts: “Bukharin's internal policy would seem to fit in far more closely with a policy of permanent revolution than that of the [Left] opposition and, in particular, Preobrazhensky....” For Cliff, Haynes et al., “The real question that was posed was whether sustained accumulation could occur without necessarily reproducing the social organization and classes appropriate to it—namely, capitalist forms.” Their answer is a resounding “no.”

In a letter in the July/August issue of *Socialist Worker Review*, the SWP/B's monthly magazine, Haynes comments, “too often we give the impression that we think an analysis of state capitalism can simply be tacked onto what the left opposition in general and Trotsky in particular argued.” He concludes: “It will be our tragedy if we do not confront the degeneration and are not more bold in drawing out the strengths of our own analysis and the corresponding weaknesses of the arguments made by Trotsky and the left opposition.” Paul Kellogg of Cliff's Canadian affiliate responded to Haynes the next month, conceding that Trotsky's program for the Soviet Union had indeed been wrong, but asserting that his international policies, at least, were superior to Bukharin's.

In fact the domestic and international policies of the Left Opposition were inextricably interconnected. The “Platform of the Opposition” argued: “Firm rejection of the theory of an isolated socialist economy would mean, even in the next few years, an incomparably more rational use of our resources, a swifter industrialization, and an increasingly well-planned and powerful growth of our own machine industry.” The industrialization proposed by the Left Opposition was designed to increase the weight of the proletariat within Soviet society and arrest the growth of pro-capitalist kulak elements among the peasantry and their urban counterparts, the petty-capitalist NEPmen. It was also aimed at strengthening the isolated Soviet workers state militarily in preparation for the inevitable imperialist assault.

Haynes is right about one thing: there *is* a fundamental disjuncture between Cliff's “International Socialism” current and the Trotskyist movement—and it goes right back to the 1920s. The politics of the Cliff tendency are alien to everything that the Left Opposition stood for. We welcome the fact that at least some of the elements of the opportunist, “third camp” swamp are prepared to make this explicit. ■