

Ebbing Tide: Maoist decline and dissolution in the 1980s

The 1980s was an eventful decade for the Maoist left in Britain, and not without features that remain on the agenda of the political left. Those questions that pre-occupied the RCLB membership involved the understanding of what constituted class struggle within a developed imperialist society: it focused on investigations into an understanding of the effect of Eurocentrism on revolutionary thinking and the relationship between class identity and that of national minorities. Advances in understanding the importance and nature of Women's Struggles and its contribution to the wider liberation struggles in society came along way from the crude anti-petty bourgeois feminism labels applied a decade earlier.¹ Indeed, from 1980 the League in effect abandoned industrial base building as a strategic orientation, the main changes and new orientations in work were, against the background of massive unemployment and economic depression, to do with non-industrial work.

The 1980s seemed to have start well for some: the Communist Workers Movement united with the RCLB in June 1980, followed shortly after by the fusion of the largest of the small groups, the Birmingham Communist Association with the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain.² The RCLB had united five Marxist-Leninist groups. The majority of Maoists, although much reduced with the defection of the CPB (ML) and RCPB (ML), were in one organisation at last, although still numbering less than a hundred.

Yet the rest of the decade saw the RCLB experienced a deteriorating and unravelling as a democratic-centralist organisation just avoiding the liquidationist trend identified internationally by the Workers Party of Belgium³. Increasingly from the mid 1980s, the observation of historian Raphael Samuel, that the Communist Party (of Great Britain) "had some resemblances to a 'gathered' church: a people apart, in the world but not of it"⁴ could equally apply to the RCLB. And rather like their revisionist counter-part, its membership also lost in the 1980s, its sense of being in the 'vanguard', the belief that their self-sacrificing hype-activity reflected that they were marching in step with, or keeping ahead of, the times. The idea that generally ebbed from their conscious activity was that they were (collectively and by being organisational committed) contributing to a better future.

Those certainties and the sense of urgency dissipated in the aftermath of internal line struggles, turnover in leadership and the set backs in the class struggle. It was not just the year-long Miners' Strike of 1984, but a succession of defeats after all the sacrifices in personal and family life took its toll on a small membership that did not replenish itself. The ebbing of historical confidence was epidemic within the movement internationally as Western society, in the words of German Marxist-Leninists, "jumped to the right".⁵ The Belgian organisation had warned against what it described as the

¹ CFB (ML) Women's Emancipation *Revolution* No. 4, April 1977.

² Birmingham meeting celebrates BCA merger. *Class Struggle*, Vol. 4, No. 14, July 10th-July 23rd 1980

³ *The Liquidationist Tendency within the Marxist-Leninist Movement*. Second Congress of the Party of Labour (PVDA-PTB Belgium). March-April 1983.

⁴ Samuel (2006). *The Lost World of British Communism*. London: Verso p52

⁵ See *State of the Movement* : A selection of texts from the Marxist-Leninist Movement (2011) unpublished ms.

“Right Liquidationist” trend but few were immune to its corrosive effect. The League did not initially succumb but as an organisation it was static, it continued to be active in a few areas but that work remained largely supportive in nature, reported in its publications and did little to grow the organisation.

Out of the Factories, Work in the Community⁶

In early 1976 the CFB (ML) decided to concentrate the organisation’s resources on industrial work (the move into industrial occupation by members was seen as base building). This was aimed at building the vanguard party of the working class which was seen as the central task for all Marxist-Leninist in Britain. After all, the Bolshevik Party was based in factories.⁷ In relation to what the CFB and CUA had previously been doing, this decision was positive in that it:

- (1) recognised in a general way that the working class was the decisive class in class struggle and that work among them was essential,
- (2) it broke with the general practice of most of the 'Left' which concentrated its activities on the over-whelming social-democratic (and often pro-Labour Party) trade union activists and bureaucracy,
- (3) recognised for the first time the need to engage in consistent mass work in order to bring forward new forces for the revolution, as opposed to participating in committees that were divorced from the masses and,
- (4) sought to strengthen the proletarian character and stand of the whole membership, the majority of whom were not of working class origin or background.

A clear example of the mistaken working method of analysis was shown in the early stages in the way members were urged to take up factory work. Proceeding from the reading of Marx’s view on the position of the working class in the 19th century (when the majority of them were engaged directly in the production of surplus value), jobs in industry, particularly in manufacturing and engineering were viewed as what members should aim for. The experience of League members at factory X (actually based on Fords) and factory Y were written as if factory X was the normal experience of factory life with “a relatively high class consciousness and is well organised from the trade union point of view”⁸; while still a large industrial unit, “at Factory Y, what was most immediately apparent was the divisions within the workforce. These divisions were based on race, sex and the complicated pay structure” and were later seen as more typical of the issues involved in contemporary class struggle in Britain.

There was a violation of a Maoist tenant with no investigation of where the main struggles of the working class had been developing over the previous few years- mainly in the public sector- i.e. by those working for the state, the country’s biggest employer. A more basic error was the failure to recognise that the areas of the economy that members were

⁶ This section draws heavily upon an internal RCLB document, ‘David Evans’ The First Summary of Industrial Work 1976-1979 (circulated September 1983)

⁷ Build the Party at the Point of Production. *Revolution*, vol. 4, No. 1, August 1979.

⁸ Firmly Establish the Factory Cells! *Revolution*, Vol. 3, No. 3, August 1978

encouraged to move into were those that were going into decline. The work was started with the campaign on volunteering, applied in a mechanical way that had the effect of driving some people away, misusing the talents of others and unnecessarily creating feelings of guilt among some comrades who held middle strata jobs.

'David Evans', League Secretary throughout the Eighties, concluded the basic error at that time was Rightist (over estimating the importance of industrial work and underestimating the importance of other struggles). "Since the correctness or incorrectness of work done in a particular field is determined first and foremost by the political line guiding that work, then it is clearly not surprising that we made then errors both of the 'Left' and of the Right in carrying out our base building line."⁹

Some of the factors that both impeded the work and also served to compound the erroneous line was a lack of leadership that fell particularly hard on those comrades from the middle class who suffered more, as a result, in completing the first part of the process - Integrate, Investigate, Propagate - than did those from a working class background.

The leads sent out by both the Central Committee and Industrial Subcommittee were of little real value. They were written as though most of the population was employed in huge industrial labour intensive factories. They put too much emphasis on ideological exhortation and paid too little attention to the main features and details of the actual state of the ongoing class struggle. In hindsight it was clear that the lack of any importance given to the question of women's oppression by the organisation and the reduction of the struggle against it to one of equal pay in its publications meant that they had little to offer or enthuse the many women that industrial comrades came into contact with at work. This was strikingly illustrated in an article that concentrated on the economism of the issue:

Workers at Trico in Brentford clearly understand the need for working class unity between men and women when they went on strike in May 1976 for equal pay. The whole factory was low paid, but the women workers were on even less money than the men. In their strike bulletin they pointed out: "The key to better rates is for women to get equal pay. Otherwise they will continue to be used as cheap labour which keeps other rates low". The opportunist misleaders in the union tried to get them to rely on the "Equal Pay Tribunal" set up by the Labour Government. The workers refused to attend saying: "We don't intend to hand over our power to Civil Servants and Lawyers". They stayed on strike. They were proved right when the Tribunal found that there was "no case" for equal pay! The picketing workers replied on placards: "Tribunals do not work for us, we don't care what they say. Outside Trico we will stay till we get equal pay". In October, after 5 months on strike they won.¹⁰

The CFB/RCL paid little attention to the problems that membership could throw up for the good contacts that were made. For many, the combination of time, overall commitment, ability and required knowledge, the difference between membership and non-membership of the organisation was too great to breach. Even the intermediary 'candidate membership'

⁹The First Summary of Industrial Work 1976-1979 (circulated September 1983)

¹⁰ RCLB pamphlet, *Turn the Unions into Fighting Class Organisations* (1978)

status was a too great a gap in terms of its requirements for contacts. The first time the League addressed this was in mid 1979 when the lead on setting up Class Struggle Groups (as transmission belts) was sent out. These approaches was applied to contacts outside of industrial work and prove to be a means to engage in both education and draw people into activity and eventual League membership. But generally there was the inability to co-ordinate the activity of members in specific unions or industries around concrete issues and failure "to develop any feeling that we were working collectively". As the organisation wasnot involved in any other areas of mass work, the possibility was not there of taking contacts into political work outside the factory where they could have developed much faster politically. The inability to consolidate the organisation's work had been seen in its first area of mass work, Industrial base building.

The Industrial SubCommittee did not judge that all the time and effort spent in this three years period was wasted. It pointed out that some members who did volunteer gained immensely and continued to benefit from those experiences; as a whole the organization learned a lot, if only by negative experience and that many good contacts were made, some of which were retained. Relatively large numbers of working class people came to respect and agree with the style of work and politics of individual RCL members they worked with and the gloss Evans puts on was "although we did not succeed in identifying and winning many advanced elements, it is true to say that in a number of factories we did have some success in raising the level of middle elements."

Summing up the London experience in an understatement, the District leadership noted, "Clearly it is a longer and more complicated process than we had imagined in 1976 ... certainly not a cause for self- criticism or despondency, but rather a reflection of the difficulty of this key task in an imperialist society."¹¹

After three years work, the chief characteristic was the tendencies towards empiricism - following the rhyme of the day to day economic struggle, "but not consciously applying a definite policy, summing up and so deepening our understanding", an all too familiar scenario for anyone politically working in an industrial occupation.

There was involvement in the economic struggles of the workers, even numerous elections to unpaid trade union steward's positions. Through leafleting and paper sales the level of consciousness of some the workers was raised to the extent that the factory cell was able to establish a 'Class Struggle Group' in the Edmonton factory in north London, and "they have won at least one worker to a position of subjective support for the League and Communist politics." But eight comrades at two factories were meagre results for what was the largest branch in the organisation.

There, were in London addition factors that added to the setbacks and weaknesses in the work. The District Industrial Work Organiser for the major part of the period had been unable to his tasks, and the pre-occupation with the activities of the Anti-League Faction and subsequent reorganisation of London District into a cell structure , meant in those

¹¹District Committee Report to the General Meeting of the London District. February 1980

circumstances, the industrial work in London has to a large degree been left 'to take care of itself'.

The wider re-evaluation of political line in the organisation had been accompanied by the recognition that to build a multi-national working class vanguard party, it will be essential that it is well organized particularly, although not solely at the point of production. It became the view that the decision to concentrate all League resources on industrial work (or communist work in industry) in order to achieve that was wrong.

“... from the aspect of creating a genuine M-L party building organisation, this decision along with the fundamental political line that was guiding the RCL at that time can now be seen to be totally incorrect. We failed to recognise the decaying imperialist nature of Britain and were making serious errors of social chauvinism on the struggles of the national minorities and of the Irish people. We failed to understand that all levels of society - the working class particularly through the influence of opportunism - were infected to varying degrees with imperialist ideology.

Our Method of analysis was also wrong in that it tended to concentrate on dogmatic reference to the vanguard role of the proletariat under capitalism, without any attempt to prove or qualify that by analysis of what was actually happening in Britain then. Thus we ignored the existence of national struggles within this country and wrote off the significance of the anti-imperialist work that many non-working class elements were doing and so rejected all broad front work; describing this as being only able to represent reformist pressure group politics before the working class had been rallied. We also tended to look at Britain as a capitalist society rather than part of the world imperialist system and were thus unable to bring a strong, anti-imperialist line into all that we did.”¹²

EUROCENTRISM

From the period beginning 1977/78 the majority of the maoist organisations began a process of criticising dogmatism and sectarianism, a move out from the idealized dream world of boldness, purity and irrelevance, particularly after the overthrow of the Gang of Four in China, members were conscious of the need to make concrete and relevant the general theses many had adopted in the 1960s.

An area of advance from the mid-1980s was in the work around Eurocentrism¹³, inspired and driven forward by leading League members [principally RB] but within the framework of the Political Economy Study Group, a collection of London contacts and Third World activists. However it saw little in returns of building the League. Revaluating the state of the Maoist movement drew an early universalist conclusion from a League-initiated Political Economy Study Group:

It is our view that the key to understanding the failure of successive 'revolutionary' initiatives in the West lies in the influence of EUROCENTRISM. Although this trend can

¹²David Evans' The First summary of Industrial Work 1976-1979 (circulated September 1983)

¹³Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement (July 1986)

be characterized in a number of ways, its fundamental characteristic is that it views the world from the standpoint of the western 'Labour Movement', exaggerating the significance and potential of the economic struggles of the western working class and relegating to a subordinate role the oppressed nations and their struggles.¹⁴

Its conclusion of the corrosive effect of 'Left racism' "which embodies a colonialist Eurocentric view- point" was argued, but the white 'left' in this country mostly refuses to recognise all this and persists in its illusions of seeing the world revolving around it - a position where it is in fact peripheralised, at the coat- tails of the imperialist bourgeoisie.¹⁵

The RCLB was to conclude that the effect of the Eurocentric outlook upon these organisations was that when the time came to criticise dogmatic and sectarian errors, this was often done not from a revolutionary standpoint but from a rightist and liquidationist one. The dogmatism and social chauvinism of the Manifesto and the early League were subject to criticism: During 1977/78, the League's theoretical journal, was concerned with (ideological) party building, China and industrial base building. It was around this time that the membership was told: We must boldly struggle against intellectualism using the basic Marxist-Leninist texts, with the sole purpose of applying their general lessons to our practice. The most important book for us at our present stage, is the 'Quotations from Mao Tse-tung'.¹⁶ The dogmatic and inverted intellectualist arrogance engendered by the botched attempt to remould the class stand of the overwhelming intellectual composition of the organisation, to "militantly take our stand with the working class" saw an abandonment of the very skills that could be used, instead "Internal documents are concerned with ideological tempering etc. (BTLTBTP, 'Bolshevis the League...), organizational questions and industrial base building. On the burning issues of the age, Imperialism, the national question – there is not a word.¹⁷

Drawing on the work of mainly Third World Marxists, in particular Samir Amin, the Political Economy Study Group met in the middle floor store room of New Era Books and sought to develop upon the baselines of demarcation that had marked a break with revisionist tendencies in the 1960s.

- 1) opposition to the capitulation to Western Imperialism by the revisionist parties in the Imperialist countries and the CPSU;
- 2) reaffirmation of Leninist theories on the State, the class struggle the need for violent revolution;
- 3) Identification with and support for the revolutionary national liberation movements in the Third World.

In all of these aspects the ML movement was fundamentally correct¹⁸.

¹⁴Eurocentrism, the 'key link' in theoretical work *October*, No. 3, Summer 1985 see: EROL

¹⁵Colonialism and Eurocentrism, *Class Struggle* Vol 9 No. 5 June 1985 p6

¹⁶Build the Revolutionary Communist Party To Lead The Revolution. *Revolution* No. 1, June 1976

¹⁷Eurocentrism, the 'key link' in theoretical work *October*, No. 3, Summer 1985

¹⁸Eurocentrism, the 'key link' in theoretical work *October*, No. 3, Summer 1985

The early Marxist-Leninist movement of the 60s made, through its espousal of the Chinese Communists' analysis of the revolutionary role of the Third World, and the initial defence of correct principles, in particular as enunciated by Lenin and Stalin, the politics of 'return'. As the Eurocentrism study observed:

a contradiction which had existed at the heart of the of the modern ML movement from its inception. The most powerful strategic deviation for the communist movement in the imperialist countries has always been a rightist, if not revisionist, tendency. More particularly there has existed within those countries a long term tendency to adopt social chauvinist/social imperialist positions. In Britain this tendency is manifested most clearly in relation to the communist movement's stand on Ireland, and similar particular manifestations of social chauvinism can be seen in respect of most imperialist countries – e.g. in France the position on Algeria and Indo-China, in the US on the Afro-American question. The roots of this are extremely deep-seated and are to be found in the white-chauvinist Eurocentric standpoint which relegates to a peripheral or subordinate role the oppressed nations and their struggles, a standpoint which gained the upper hand in the Communist movement after Lenin's death, including in the Soviet Union.

Organisations would talk of supporting the national struggles of the Third World, yet failing to grasp their revolutionary significance (the most extreme example being the CPB (ML)).¹⁹ Significantly few of the CPB (ML)'s rivals criticised it for its social chauvinism in this period, the main exception being the Marxist Leninist Workers Association in its pamphlet, 'Economism or Revolution' criticising the economist, pro-imperialist line of CPB (ML)²⁰. It was only in 1976 that the CFB (ML) made any criticism of the CPB (ML)'s social chauvinism²¹.

Some would argue that the CFB (ML) had its own problems: in 1974 it adopted a "Statement on the World Situation" (Section D), later criticised because

... the statement is made from a Eurocentric standpoint – summed up best by the condescending way in which 'we' offered to support national struggles in the Third World: Insofar all these struggles demonstrate a growing awareness of the nature of imperialism and the desire of the masses to improve their conditions, we support them. This support will encourage the working class to fight for hegemony in the anti-imperialist movement.²²

Throughout its organisational development the League had reflected the inherent weaknesses in the new Marxist-Leninist parties and organisations, which arose fundamentally out of the radicalised of the petty bourgeoisie, in particular the intelligentsia, despite attempts to proletarianisation its members and build roots in working class

¹⁹*The British Working Class and its Party* – adopted by the CPB (ML) at its 2nd Congress – failed to mention the Third World, anti-racist struggles or the struggle in Ireland.

²⁰ Later united with C.U.O. (Communist Unity Organization) – a split from the CFB, to form the C.U.A., Communist Unity Association, one of the other founding groups of the Revolutionary Communist League

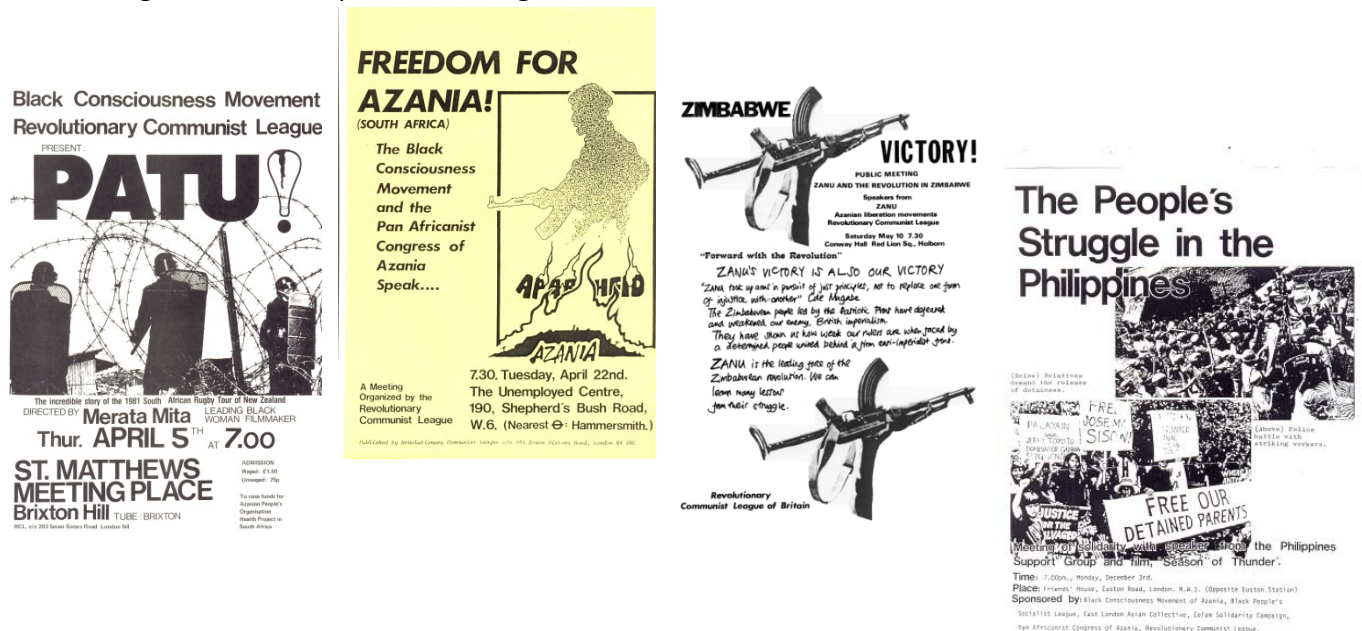
²¹ See: *Revolution* no. 3, January 1977

²² Eurocentrism, the 'key link' in theoretical work *October*, No. 3, Summer 1985

communities. By the mid-Eighties, having addressed that the organisation had perpetuated the social chauvinism of its predecessors while at the same time compounding it with chronic dogmatism and idealism, the RCLB could have been characterised as “third worldist” by critics because of the Maoist emphasis on the national question, imperialism and latterly, Eurocentrism.

Lazy critics would use the Cultural Revolution caricature of evoking Lin Biao’s doctrine of ‘surrounding the cities’ on a global scale - meaning the core capitalist countries in the west - by the global ‘countryside’, the ‘third world’, as if the working class in Britain were irrelevant to the struggles in the world, and Maoists in the west had nothing to do but cheer-lead struggles elsewhere.

Providing a platform for those in struggle to speak directly was evident in practical terms what League members were doing; the stress on internationalism in its public meetings by the organisation reflected not simply its roots in anti-revisionist politics but also a worldview that acknowledged a world largely shaped by imperialism and the fight against it e.g. leaflets advertising RCLB London public meetings in the 1980s.



The League did publicised struggles in the ‘Third World’ consistently in its paper, often those, such as in Eritria which were not approved by the pro-Soviet left in Britain. In March 1986 the RCLB, not for the first time, organised a National tour with Pan Africanist Congress speakers with meetings in Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham, Yeovil and Brixton town hall in London. That ‘out there’ was the main arena of struggle on a world scale was an understanding the RCLB took seriously: with every campaign, tour or article, each time, the inter-connection of the struggles and need to support them was publicised.

The text of May Day leaflet, distributed in Birmingham 1989, encapsulated and reflected this position:

MAY DAY is our symbol of internationalism. It cannot be a single day of celebration. When we raise the banner of internationalism we proclaim our solidarity with all those fighting for national freedom. "*Workers and oppressed peoples and nations of the world, Unite!*" is a slogan that expresses important sentiments. It points to the arena of sharpest class struggle on a world scale: the national struggles of the oppressed nations. We show our solidarity with the advancing victories of people's war in the Horn of Africa, the Philippines, El Salvador, Kampuchea and others. Nearer home, we support the fight for freedom for Ireland.

The left in Britain generally underplays the importance of national liberation struggles. We live in the heartland of the imperialist system. Our ruling class understands that the ability to exploit the peoples and nations of the Third World has a direct bearing on their ability to grant reforms and blunt the contradiction between labour and capital. The creation of opportunism and a racist ideology has deflected the working class from a revolutionary path.

The victory of the oppressed peoples and nations hits at imperialism's rule. The system which they are so vigorously resisting and fighting is the *very* same system that we daily encounter.

The lesson of the struggles of the oppressed people and nations, a lesson so clearly demonstrated in the Eritrean and Tigray struggles, is that self-reliant struggle is our only weapon in the fight for national and for class emancipation. With each *victory*, there comes a new obstacle, as the Afghan people are well aware, and the struggle will continue. Mao Zedong summed it up when he said: "*Countries want independence. Nations want liberation. People want revolution.*" That is the historical trend today

In re-building the revolutionary movement in this country, the politics must reflect those sentiment. The internationalism of May Day must be the spirit that guides our activity every day. Whatever hardships and difficulties people around the world encounter, people's war will slay the imperialist beast. In this country the only way forward in the fight against imperialism is to build an alliance with all those fighting for national freedom and independence, while at the same time, learning from their struggles. Come to our May Day celebration and hear more. Remember the words of Karl Marx:

"No nation that oppresses another shall be free."

Internationalism At Home: anti-racism understood

This emphasis of support for national struggles in the third world was always about national *liberation* struggles not nationalistic struggles. This perspective informed positions taken in relation to domestic class struggle as seen in the League's analysis that developed in the 1980s.

Initially, the RCLB, with others on the Left, argued a standard line that "racism is a product of imperialism. It is an ideology which developed to justify monopoly capitalism's plunder of colonies and the Third world. As such the state (police, army, courts, etc.) which props up their rule instigates and uses racism to keep down national minorities and the whole of the working class."²³

With this historical perspective on the 18th/19th century origins of racism as an ideology, the function of that ideology the Maoists generally took the view, in commenting on the populist mass movement against the fascists that the Anti-Nazi League represented at the end of the 1970s, that, whilst fighting the National Front, the struggle against racism and fascism must be based on opposition to the racism of the imperialist state. The policy of solely equating "NF= Nazi Front" did address the vicious racism of the Far Right organisation but left other manifestations of racism in British society unchallenged:

"...police harassment of black people and arrest on trumped up charges is rife. Often it is combined with fascist provocations. Cases like those of George Lindo and the Virk brothers are commonplace. The attempt of the ANL misleaders to hide the role of the Labour Party can be seen further by their planned campaign in the expected general election, where they intend to campaign under the slogan "Don't Vote NF, Don't Vote Tory" on the grounds that these are the two racist parties. This is nothing but a bald attempt to white-wash Labour's racist record."²⁴

Along with the British left, the League described the struggle against racism as "a class question which is crucial to uniting the working class against the British monopoly capitalist class and achieving socialist revolution in Britain."²⁵

Coexistent with this within the League's thinking was the underlying analysis that maintained an internationalist perspective and saw the main question as exposing state

²³National Minorities – State Racism Hides Behind National Front *Class Struggle* (Vol.2 No.22) December 28 [1978] to January 11th [1979]

²⁴ANL Misleaders Divert Anti-Racist Struggle, *Class Struggle*, October 6-19 1978. The four Asian brothers, Joginder, Mohinder, Bolvinder and Sukhvinder Virk were sentenced to 7 years, 3 years, 2 years and 3 months imprisonment respectively for defending themselves against a racist attack. They were repairing a car outside their home in east London when they were attacked by five white youths shouting racist abuse. Using whatever weapons that came to hand the brothers put up a strong resistance and defeated the attackers. They called the police to deal with the youths and arrange for the treatment of two who were injured. The police let the attackers go free, arrested the brothers and charged them with grievous bodily harm.

²⁵National Minorities – State Racism Hides Behind National Front *Class Struggle* (Vol.2 No.22) December 28 [1978] to January 11th [1979]

racism, which included the “more pernicious racism of the Labour Party” which had its experience of administering the British state machinery. It was, as *Class Struggle* would publicise, under a Labour government that Asian women were subject to fraudulent and humiliating internal examinations in order to “establish” that they were virgins in a supposed “suppression” of arranged marriages to get round immigration rules.²⁶ The government’s support of immigration controls “build up the myth that it is immigration that causes bad housing, unemployment and falling standards of living.” The specific struggle for the *civil rights* for national minorities against Labour governments, against arbitrary harassment and detention under immigration legislation²⁷, as in the “dawn raids” by the Illegal Immigration Intelligence Unit based at Scotland Yard, and use of ‘stop-and-search’ powers by the police in Black national minorities communities, like Brixton in London, were seen as part of the struggle “to unite the working class against the bosses’ attacks on the working class as a whole”.²⁸ In supporting the Campaign Against Racist laws [CARL], launched by the Indian Workers’ Association (GB) in October 1979, immigration controls are described as designed to “incite divisions between the white and black workers to set up a scapegoat for the white workers to blame instead of uniting with black workers to blame instead of uniting with black workers to fight the real enemy, capitalism and imperialism.”²⁹

This convenient analysis and an overview of the ‘racialisation of British politics’ in the period were later explored in ‘Conflicting Narratives of Black youth Rebellion in Modern Britain’ by Dr Evan Smith.³⁰ It makes the point that the Left was genuinely interested in mobilising the black communities but on their terms and into their choice of political battles, often subordinate to the economic issue of the wider class struggle that left the problems of the black communities as of secondary importance.

An influential perspective sketched out by the then Director of the Institute of Race Relations, A. Sivanandan³¹ discussed the rise of ‘communities of resistance’. Associated with the journal *Race & Class*, this was a minority view on the Left but had more influence on Black leftist activists and an element within the Maoist Left.

Both approaches dealt inadequately with the complexities of a developing Black British identity and the over-emphasis on the combative youth downplayed the militancy across the generations. The ‘carnival of spontaneous rebellion’ in the early 1980s was outside the organisations of the Left, but the black youth (and less attention was given to the white youths who joined in) were viewed as potential revolutionaries that could be integrated into what those organisations narrowly defined as the class struggle.

Developing Anti-Racist, Anti-Fascist Work.

²⁶ Racist State Subjects Asian Women To Virginitly Tests, *Class Struggle* Vol 3. No.4 February 23 , 1979

²⁷ National Minorities Face Arbitrary imprisonment, *Class Struggle* October 4-17th 1979

²⁸ ditto

²⁹ Campaign against Racist laws Launched, *Class Struggle* Vol.3 No.22 November 1-14, 1979

³⁰ Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World: A Review Journal, 1(3), pp.16-31.

³¹ ina seminal collection of essays on racism and black resistance from the late 1960s to the early 1980s *A Different Hunger: writings on black resistance* Pluto Press 1982.

In September 1979 the League's Political Committee resolved that "the RCLB in principle resolve to take up ARAF work as a secondary field of mass work nationally ...(ARAF work) is of fundamental importance . It is a struggle which hits directly at an essential aspect of British imperialist state and ideology... The national minorities sections of the working class in Britain are a very important and militant force .They must play a major role in the class struggle in general and the struggle to rebuilt the revolutionary party of the working class in particular ...Behind the anti-racist struggle is the struggle against the oppression of nations by imperialism itself. "³² This element was to be crucial in the developing political analysis of the league.

The maoist reaction to the collapse of the Labour government of Jim Callaghan that year [1979] was that "the future of the working class does not lie in choosing which party of exploiters to represent us next"³³, rejecting arguments to supporting the Labour Party out of fear of the Tories, an anti-election slogan was promoted: ' Labour and Tory: Two wings of a single bird of prey'. In terms of racism, the rhetoric of "people of an alien culture" and "fear of being swamp" from the Tory opposition was seen as no less reprehensible than Labour's actual record in office. The bi-partisan policies on immigration controls followed since 1962 were seen as evidence of Labour's racism as being the basis for Tory proposals on nationality and immigration in the Thatcher era. Indeed, the Labour Party was described as the "best bosses" party in the 1979 May Day address by the League Chairman which "exposed the fraud of bourgeois elections"³⁴.

For a long time variations on approaches to anti-racist work co-existed within the League's ARAF activity. The nitty-gritty of why one emerged dominant is tied up with the larger history of the organization but it is involved with the evolution of the Subcommittee and its determination to provide a lead in its allotted sphere. What emerged as one trend within ARAF work over a period of time was typified by the participation in 'Working People Against Racism, an ad hoc coordinating committee of fraternal organizations (Bangladeshi Workers Association, Youth Forces for National Liberation, CWM, &RCLB) based in London that emerged from the 1979 Campaign Against Racist Laws demonstration. In contrast, there was a push, centred on Birmingham comrades, to strengthen the case made at the July 5th ARAF conference, that: " what we should be involved in ... is the struggle against the oppression of national minorities ... We must develop the struggle against national minority oppression in itself and for itself."

Previously, the issue was approached in a very compartmentalised manner thus the 1980 Programme produced by the CWM argued, in a formula common to the political left , that anti-racist work must be a component part of the fight against fascism. Racism was seen as functional, connected to capitalism's attacks on the living standards of the working people and its offensive against hard-won democratic rights.

³²RCLB Brief Resume of ARAF Sub-Committee (1979-1984)Internal document circulated January 1985. This section draws upon its account of developments within the RCLB. It was not until year later, after an ARAF Conference for exchange of experience in July 1980 and a consultative committee to establish areas of investigation in November 1980 that an ARAF subcommittee was set up.

³³ Labour's collapse is no loss for the working class , *Class Struggle* Vol.3 No.7 April 5-18, 1979

³⁴ RCLB & CWM Celebrate May Day , *Class Struggle* Vol.3 No.10 may 17-30th 1979

“A very important aspect of the trend towards fascism, which it is essential for working people to resist, is the promotion of racism. The latter is encouraged by the immigration policies of both the major parties of the bourgeoisie. Racism has gained a certain influence in a situation where people are extremely disillusioned with the major parties of capitalism, and Labour has lost a great deal of credibility with most working people. Racist organisations like the National Front have benefitted from active propaganda support (direct or indirect) by the bourgeois media and the support of police, in many cases.”³⁵ When it identifies “gained a certain influence” it means white working class absorbing the racist ideas of imperialist society. Racism as a means to dampen down the militancy of the majority component of the ‘multi-national class’ was a one-sided perspective reflected in the slogan “Black & White, Unite & Fight!” chanted by the Left; the issue addressed from a reductionist class perspective that ignored or underplayed the situation in which minority communities were already “extremely disillusioned with the major parties”. It was a standard position across the British Left. The CWLB (ML) had clearly expressed the dominant sentiment of the Seventies:

“The fight against racism is particularly crucial as this is one of the main planks being employed by fascists and reactionaries of all shades to split the working class and divert it away from overthrowing its real, main enemy, capitalism.... The more the capitalist class is threatened by economic crisis and the organised working class the more will it resort to trying to divide and-rule the working class. The central aim is to turn worker against workers so that they will fight each other instead of the boss class... worker fight worker and the bosses laugh all the way to the bank.”³⁶

While not incorrect, it was not the whole explanation for this division, but the point is made, as it is practically everywhere on the Left, that racist contradictions *within* the working class are secondary to the principal contradiction between the working class as a whole and the ruling class.

“White workers should understand that they are not doing black workers "a favour" in fighting racism. For, if they fail to smash the racist offensive they fail to maintain the unity of their own class, the whole working class. And if they allow that unity to be wiped out, then they place the fascist noose around their own throats.”³⁷

The description of the issue as dividing the working class reflects an inconsistency, reporting on specific attacks upon black people, such as deportation and racist attacks, but singularly identifying workers within those communities as if the basic democratic rights of black and national minority people in Britain were solely workers’ concern. Arguing that, “by fighting racism and in hand with the national minority people here, the working class are siding with the third world against imperialism, against their own bosses”³⁸ This emphasised the anti-imperialist nature of the struggle against racism but shifted the concern from the treatment of those national minority communities to the perceived consequences, because “making

³⁵ *Programme of the Communist Workers’ Movement* (1980)

³⁶ Communist Workers League of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), *Building Revolutionary Communist Bases At The Place of Work* (London) 1974:49

³⁷ *Building Revolutionary Communist Bases At The Place of Work*

³⁸ Down With Racist Laws, *Class Struggle* Vol3 No.23 November 15-28 1979

national minorities a scapegoat is an essential part of the plans of the bosses' state in laying the basis for fascism." ³⁹It is as if the consequence to class unity was the real impetus to oppose racist attacks from both the state and fascist organisations.

As the ambitious programmatic work of the League was pared down in the period prior to the Second Congress, programmatic work had concentrated on developing "Section 7" and referred to a multi-national British working class and gave a more thorough treatment of the national question in the context of affirming national minority rights rather than just negating racism. ⁴⁰

The debate had had its controversies but based on the differing interpretations of a common position that as the majority of national minority people are workers, their 'double oppression' puts them amongst the foremost fighters for the rights of the working class against the attacks of capital. One analysis argued that they primarily suffer class oppression and do not constitute national minorities. This was a clear line of demarcation that negated the specific national oppression as a factor, and criticism and questions were raised which would have substitute the concept of "free national development" [FND] with the position of the "democratic rights of national minorities".

The dominant analysis was that the overwhelming majority of national minority people are working class, and are oppressed and exploited as such. But furthermore, FND proponents argued, black national minority people in general also face a particular form of oppression – national oppression; as a consequence, they, it was argued, had far fewer illusions about the true character of the state and of bourgeois democracy than the great majority of oppressed white people. They were thought to have great revolutionary potential, and would play a disproportionately large role in the popular and revolutionary struggles ahead.

This was argued before, yet seen to be confirmed in, the summer urban uprisings of 1981. Some leftist supporters of this line, such as the editor of *Class Struggle* (partially influenced by the politics of the Revolutionary Communist Group), were later to push this view (in 'Re-Orientate The League') into an argument that 'newly emerging' forces, associated with black youth, constitute a vanguard of the struggle in Britain. However, majority of line supporters thought that fighting national minority oppression was, not only a matter of building up unity and solidarity of the multinational British working class, but also of forging a strategic alliance between the proletariat and the national minority peoples in the fight against capital.

The case for the strategic alliance made prior to, and after the 2nd Congress of July 1981 ⁴¹required further areas of investigation. The Anti-Racism Anti-Fascism subcommittee (henceforth: ARAF2) was initially to draw upon the experience of the international

³⁹Down With Racist Laws. *Class Struggle* Vol3 No.23 November 15-28 1979

⁴⁰*PROGRAMMATIC DOCUMENT – SECTION VII: The Struggle to Build the Revolutionary Party of the Proletariat in Britain Today.* (As amended by Congress) 1981

⁴¹in "The Roots of Racism- an examination of the Oppression of National Minorities in Britain", *Interim Journal* No.1 March 1981, and in *October* Volume 1, No. 2 (*October* 1982) with "Racism, National Oppression and FND".

communist movement⁴² and study of national minority oppression and the National Question. There was an awareness of the need to deepen the analysis based on practice: the December 1980 sub-committee had seen discussion on Marxist-Leninist methods in broad fronts and on the proposed programmatic document to contained three elements: the necessity of revolutionary alliance, Free National Development and the building of a multi-national Communist Party.

Summing up the weakness of the pre-2nd ARAF2 noted four main criticism: weak leadership; difficulty of convening meetings; over-centralization of leadership; lack of common involvement in theoretical work and resulting in empiricism in mass work.

To rectify this, ARAF2 sought to clarify the relationship of the sub-committee to the League's ARAF activity⁴³. The back story to this resolution was the evolution, in March 1981, of the London Campaign Against Racism & Fascism (LCARF) formed from "Working People Against Racism". Because of the impossibility of physically directing work, the Subcommittee sought the Standing Committee's decision that the ARAF sub-committee should be empowered to prioritize work, lay down ARAF work orientation.

The theoretical struggle after 2nd Congress was not intense. What was happening was a de facto division in that LCAR practical work was representing a line without analytical underpinning. That line did not produce the theoretical or practical results to advance struggle by contending lines of argument and analysis, there was the inability to criticise such an unarticulated line in the sub-committee. This division continued despite a CC motion that: "sub-committees have the power to decide on priorities in their field of work throughout the RCL and to lead work in that area."⁴⁴

ARAF2 tackled the contradiction of two lines in 'Section 7' as highlighted in "The Struggle of National Minority People and the line of the RCL"⁴⁵, not by attempting to reconcile opposing lines but by developing the majority, and more developed line on ARAF 2. This, in the expectation that struggle would be advanced by contending lines. Expectations of thoughtful C.C. criticism were not forth-coming; no other C.C. member attended sub-committee apart from 'Class Struggle' editor in November 1982 when promoting 'Re-Orientate the League' [RTL]. A line that was mainly asserted, rather than explained, through Class Struggle. So initially, the main focus of contention, due partly to the geographic 'localism' of the opposing lines, was the unsupervised broad front emphasis in London ARAF work, e.g. London Campaign Against Racism and Fascism involvement in the Hall Family Defence Campaign⁴⁶, which was said not to be explicitly "anti-imperialist" in propaganda and at odds with the developing tendency within the League. In practice, LCARA supported a line identified with MH/DH explicitly arguing that strategic alliance not priority, that national minority was an erroneous concept and that we should be learning from practice. Much of

⁴²With specifically investigation on the formulation of National Minorities by (i) Communist Party Soviet Union 1921 vintage (ii) Communist Party of China (iii) Revolutionary Communist League (MLM) USA (iv) Workers Communist Party Canada.

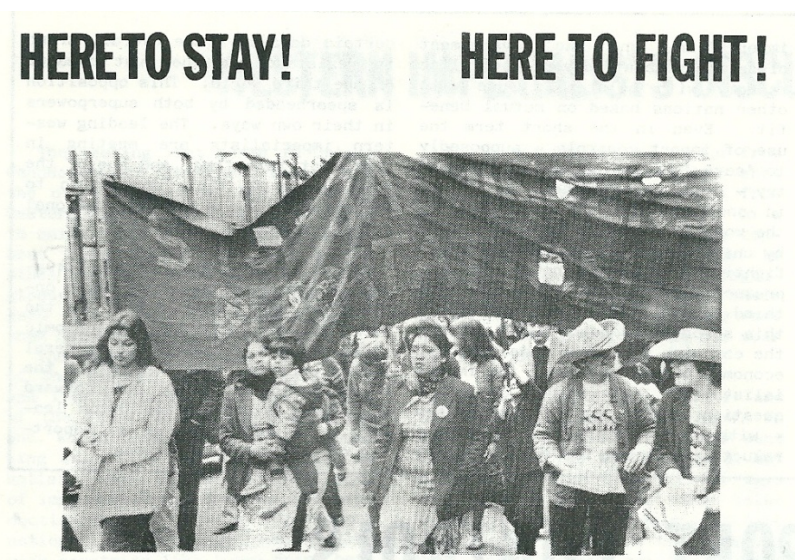
⁴³The ARAF Subcommittee minutes of 9.8.81 noted "the increasing autonomy of the branches, resulting in lack of co-operation and co-ordination. It is the duty of the subcommittee to decide on priorities in ARAF work throughout the RCL, and to lead that work according to those decisions in all the branches."

⁴⁴reported in *Internal Bulletin* 13 (Sept. 1981)

⁴⁵*October*, Volume 1, No.1 April 1982

⁴⁶ Hall Family Defence Campaign *Class Struggle* (Vol.5 No.6) June 1981

the anti-racist activity was, by necessity, reactive to local injustices, involvement (throughout the 1980s) in HADC – Hackney Anti-Deportation Campaign – was in response to the state’s actions in that part of North London. League members were immersed in various local activities throughout the country at a local level. Such participation was underpinned by the desire to win the campaign and defend the victims of state racism, and to advance the political practice and line of the organization. In practice the former was at the expense of the latter.



Centre stage, Anwar Ditta victorious in her anti-deportation campaign 1981⁴⁷

As anti-racist groups and defence committees were being built in many localities the broad resistance to state racism that involved its members in the early Eighties were reported on in *Class Struggle*⁴⁸: In Birmingham there were meetings of over 400 people in Sparkbrook area against harassment of Pakistani and Kashmiri people; The Bradford Asian Youth movement announced plans (eventually postponed) to organise a 22-day Black Freedom March from the Bradford to London⁴⁹; anti-deportation campaign such as Anwar Ditta, Cynitha Gordan and Nasira Begum were active. As such meetings were mushrooming the danger was that the activities and influences of these local groups were being dissipated; on the national level there was a need to co-ordinate these fights and strengthen them with links to other struggles. The strength of feeling was evident: CARL had drawn over 20,000 on 25th November 1979 to demonstrate against racist laws.

Avtar Jouhl, President of the IWA (GB) argued at a mobilising conference that CARL should be as broadly based as possible to hit state racism. Some saw in CARL the possibility of revitalising the approach of the Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination (CCARD), and Black Peoples Alliance set up under the inspiration of former General Secretary of the Indian Workers Association (GB), Jagmohan Joshi.

⁴⁷ Anwar Ditta’s struggle for family unity is now regarded as a case study for citizenship

<http://www.tandana.org/data/pg/Resources>

⁴⁸ e.g. issue of April 3-16th 1980 p3

⁴⁹ Digitised archive of the political ephemera produced by the Asian Youth Movements of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s at <http://www.tandana.org/>

“Never let it be said that the first generation of black immigrants played the role of uncle Toms. Far from it. They took to the streets and struck the blows against all oppression. Joshi said, “We won’t sit back, we will hit back.”⁵⁰

Communities in Southall, south London (April 1979) and St.Paul’s area of Bristol (April 1980) exploded in resisting police activities in these areas, and like with the Black People’s Day of Action (2nd March 1981) under the slogan, “Come What May, We’re Here To Stay”, the organised Left were conspicuous by their absence.⁵¹ This march had been called by the New Cross Massacre Action Committee after the death of thirteen young black people at a House party fire. The struggles of, and within, black communities were not being supported by the organised, and overwhelming white, left in Britain. The orthodox views remain strong even within national minority organisation:

AvtarJouhl, a T&GWU shop steward and national president of the Indian Workers' Association (GB), referred to unemployment as "the cesspool in which racists breed." He argued against 'all black' trade unions, and also disagreed with a speaker who had proposed that seats in the unions' leading bodies be reserved for black representatives.

What was needed first and foremost, said comrade Jouhl, was not necessarily more black shop stewards, but a more class conscious membership. The process of involving more black workers in the movement will inevitably be reflected in the emergence of more black lay and full-time officials at all levels.⁵²

The Tory government led by Margaret Thatcher proposed changes in Nationality Law, with its three categories of ‘British citizenship’ restricting citizen’s rights, affected all national minority communities. CARL Conference in January 1981 drew 250 delegates who focussed on the technical details of the proposals. At the London demonstration on April 5th, the RCLB distributed its leaflets in English, Bengali, Urdu and Punjabi, pointing out the political message that:

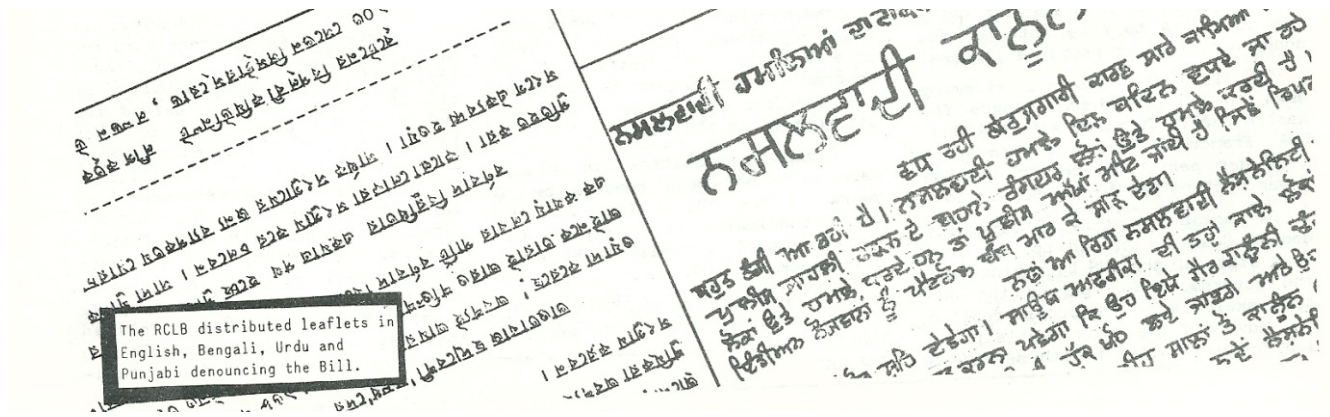
The Labour Party has been forced, yet again, to make proclamations against racist laws. But don’t forget that their past promises never had anything to do with their actions. They passed the 1968 Immigration Act. They strengthened all the Tory laws. They wrote the original Green Paper on which the Nationality Bill is based. The Labour Party is not anti-racist and has never opposed British imperialism.⁵³

⁵⁰Salute to Comrade Joshi. *Class Struggle* (Vol.4 No.13) June 26-July 9th 1980p5

⁵¹ The People Won, *Class Struggle* (Vol.5 No.4) April 1981

⁵²Black workers and the unions. *Class Struggle*(Vol 4 No.13) 1980

⁵³ Fight the Racist bill, *Class Struggle* (Vol.5 No.5) May 1981p6



Communities did fight back in the summer of 1981 in cities and towns across Britain. The Scarman Report on the 'disturbances' while acknowledging discrimination denied the existence of state racism: "There is evidence that it occurs", he says, and quickly adds, "unintentionally no doubt."⁵⁴

Under the general defence of democratic rights, anti-deportation campaigns, police shootings, racist attacks as in the Newham 8 campaign, deaths in police custody like Colin

NEWHAM 8
8 ASIAN YOUTHS AGED 15-21 ARRESTED FOR DEFENDING THEMSELVES AND THEIR COMPACT FROM RACIAL ATTACKS HAVE BEEN CHARGED WITH CONSPIRACY TO ASSAULT PERSONS UNKNOWN.

Black Community on Trial
NATIONAL PICKET
 Thurs. 10th Nov. at 9.00am
Snaresbrook Crown Courts
(Opp. Snaresbrook Underground, Central Line, 73 Hollybush Hill, Snaresbrook, London E11)
SUPPORT DAILY PICKETS OF COURT AS LONG AS TRIAL LASTS.
SELF DEFENCE IS NO OFFENCE

Roach, were added to a list of police harassment of Irish solidarity activists and the RCG-run City Anti-Apartheid picket of the South African Embassy in London. It was not until May 1983 that the specific national demands of minority communities were highlighted in *Class Struggle* article with the headline, "national freedom". There were reports of campaigns within national minority communities that spotlighted the inter-connection of the community political activities with that of their land of origin i.e. the 1983 invasion of Grenada by the United States, the harassment of the Kashmiri community after the assassination of an Indian diplomat as well as the continuing campaigns to defend individuals and families in anti-deportations.

What was lacking was any convincing elaboration on how, in practice, the concept of free national development would be enacted. In a real sense the problems of the perspective for a strategic alliance were easier to list than tackle; the basic point was that a firm alliance was not possible without the weakening of imperialist ideology and politics. The need to challenge the politics that pursued strategies within the system for the right to work, and to challenge ideas of saving "our industry" and "modernizing Britain", and who uses any resistance against the system *as a publicity stunt* for a Labour Party election campaign.

⁵⁴Scarman Covers For Racism, *Class Struggle* (Vol.6 No.1) January 1982

Above all, it meant striving for a different politics that dominated the Left, removing the basis for such position to be commonplace on the left, developed and surviving in the racist and sexist ideas prevalent in the class. In relation to the Miners' Strike, it was observed that: "The 'left' is not immune to imperialist ideas. Social democratic ideas - left or right ignore imperialism and, objectively justify it. Thus hundreds of pages will be written about the miners' strike with no reference to imperialism as though we lived in a fairy-tale world of workers and bosses unaffected by the world around us."⁵⁵

'Fight Racism In The Class! Fight Racism In The Unions!' headline a *Class Struggle* report that focused on trade union tokenism towards black members, commenting "there is a developing tendency for the continuum of working class racism to be met head-on by black workers organising independently within the organised labour movement" Furthermore, "Let us be clear the demands for independent black organisation are emerging in response to the racist institutions of the labour movement in this country. The problem is twofold - racism is perpetuated through the racist institutions of the Labour movement, and it runs deep in our class".⁵⁶

"The working class has for long faced two ways," stated *Class Struggle* resorting to an ahistorical emotive appeal that was short on answers, even if accurate in its diagnosis: "It has fought for its class interests but restricted its fight within the limits set by imperialism. Imperialism is now in crisis. It can no longer make concessions. For all of us, there is a choice: the choice between fighting for freedom or continued collaboration and submission."⁵⁷

The orthodox Left might voice recognition that the struggle to smash British imperialism is a complex, many-fronted one, but of the importance of national oppression as understood in the UK and around the world, and notion of a strategic alliance built on a clear understanding of not only class exploitation but of such nationalism (so easily dismissed and condemned) there was little appreciation.

It would be an understatement that there was a lot of work to do to make concrete the strategy of the revolutionary alliance between the national minorities and the working class. The perspective, drawn from the dependency school of underdevelopment did not sit easily within the established understanding of the Capital/Labour contradiction, of a conflict between capitalists and predominantly white male trade unionists, uncomplicated by national and sexual contradictions. The politics generated by this perspective was not unfamiliar but not seen in the same conceptual praxis. So the League saw national rights involved in what was regarded by the Left as a straight-forward anti-racist and educational dispute.

"Another example is the current struggle by parents and school students in Bradford at the Drummond Middle School to get rid of the racist headmaster, Honeyford. The majority of the children at the school are black. Honeyford, who is openly racist, advocates his policies in the right wing paper, the *Salisbury Review*'. At the same time, local teachers are in

⁵⁵ *Class Struggle* April 1985

⁵⁶ *Class Struggle* July 1984

⁵⁷ *Class Struggle* April 1985

dispute about their own wages and conditions. Yet in the year long struggle against Honeyford, the teachers' union has not once given support to the students and parents in their struggle against racism."⁵⁸ The League would argue that:

The struggles generated within the different communities were about the community's needs for its identity: The sizeable Punjabi-, Gujarati- Hindi-, Bengali-speaking communities have all evolved self-supporting systems of mother tongue instructions. Given that national minority people tend to be concentrated in particular areas, the mother tongue, be it Polish, Urdu, Italian or Gujarati, is still widely spoken in every-day use.

Thus, for example ... North London's Cypriot organisations organise Greek and Turkish language schools, and the Chinese Association of Commerce, which provided free language classes, was considering the possibility of operating a full-time bilingual school in the mid-1970s.

The importance of mother tongue for national minority people as a living element can be found around 104MHz on the radio wave band. LGR is an illegal radio station serving London's Greek speaking community. The music is conventional Greek popular music, there is an occasional radio soap opera serial from Cyprus and Greek football results. Its advertisers include one of Britain's largest Cypriot tour firms and a Greek cafe bar.

In the wake of Budget taxes on take-away food, Greek language explanations were broadcast to London's Greek- Cypriot run taverns on LGR. Although only one of London's known illegal stations to broadcast in a national minority language, other "pirate stations" have specifically catered for musical preference such as reggae.⁵⁹

The Report of the 2nd RCLB Congress argued that those people, who left their own oppressed countries to come to Britain where they have continued to suffer national oppression, are national minorities. They are oppressed as such, whether they are workers, intellectuals, or petty bourgeois. Thus, as national minorities, they share a common interest in fighting British imperialism, and constitute an important revolutionary force in their own right. While asserting that "the advanced elements in Britain are now overwhelmingly located among the national minority, Welsh, Scottish and Irish workers", it was said that:

"The debate at the Congress carried us forward, but national minorities. Further examination of the relationship between class and national oppression is still needed; furthermore we need to get a good grasp of how to apply our line, so that we can test it in practice and develop it further."⁶⁰

With the priority given to line development, ARAF2 did not provide a collective summing up of RCL's ARAF work, partly the result of localised work and too little feedback as, on the whole, practical work continued as branches saw fit. While there was one-sided development of political line in ARAF 2, there were outstanding gaps, most notable there was no analysis of anti-fascist aspect of ARAF remit. Present at the founding conference of

⁵⁸ *Class Struggle* April 1985

⁵⁹ Mother Tongue Teaching, *Class Struggle* May 1984

⁶⁰ *Report on the Second Congress*. *Class Struggle* supplement 1981

Anti-Fascist Action in 1985, League members were involved in confrontation campaigns with the Far Right. Also campaigning on the issue of Irish Solidarity, marches and demonstrations inevitably attracted attacks by Far Right activists.

“The Capitalist offensive against the working class overall takes the form of a trend towards fascism. Coupled with the holding down of wages and living standards there is a political and ideological offensive. Racist ideology is being promoted and so are fascist organisations; the state machine is being strengthened, partly with the benefit of the experience of repression in Ireland. Immigration laws, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, restrictions on picketing, the arming of the police, etc., and all form part of the trend towards fascism.”⁶¹

But, with the shift away from a Labour-inspired ‘Corporate State’ to the neo-liberal agenda, the theoretical focus on the ‘fascist danger’ receded throughout the 1980s.

ARAF2 had begun an internal ‘ARAF bulletin’; firstly reporting campaign news, seeking opinions and experiences and then shifted the content emphasis to present analysis and comments/criticism. There was organised study, trying to combine theory and practice (i.e. a critique of a RCG’s article⁶²) and attempting to sum up practical work (i.e. analysis of Bradford 12 campaign) and analysis trends (i.e. social democracy) which arose from activist experience of the Bakhtaura, Colin Roach and Newham 8 campaigns.

What in effect happened was, with two CC members in agreement with the strategic alliance and FND position, but in a permanent minority on the CC, ARAF 2 had de facto emerged as a ‘opposing political centre’ to the League’s majority line. There was no response to the critique of RCG’s position, which had influenced the policy initiative, ‘Re-Orientate the League’. “Rally Round RTL”, while representing the only written criticism of the strategic alliance line, was discussed neither on the Standing Committee nor the CC, and had an aborted existence. It emerged in a pique of exasperation; its rejection by rank and file, with exception of majority of one branch, both at the weekend school in May 1983 and at the November Conference that year, saw its main promoters leave the organization.

ARA2 had not avoided problems constant to all the League’s bodies: comrades bearing too many responsibilities, not overcoming the problem of developing comrades, inadequate preparation and difficulties in producing bulletins and minutes. Neither was the sub committee immune to the malaise within the League, with at least four resignations from the sub committee in two years.

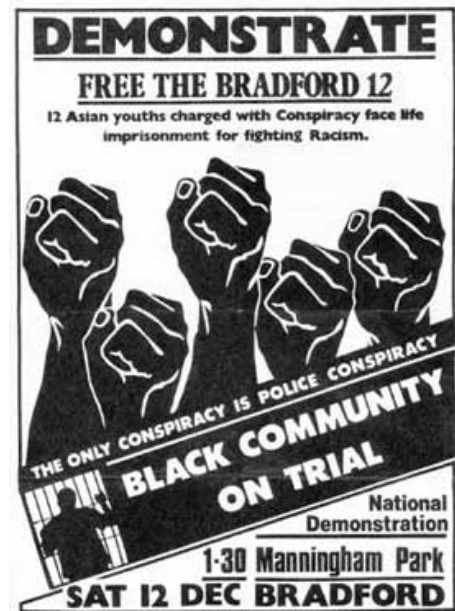
There were perfunctory meetings leading up to the 3rd Congress with a winding down of concentration on the subcommittee by leading comrades, work staggered to a halt. Following the 3rd Congress in 1984 which endorsed the decision of the previous November, and with the re-assignment of its former members, there has been no great impetus or initiative to re-establishing a functioning anti-racist, anti-fascist sub-committee.

⁶¹Report on the Second Congress. Class Struggle supplement 1981

⁶²Black National Minorities, Working Class and the R.C.G. *October* No. 3 Summer 1985

The political malaise that swept the organization from the mid-1980s onwards saw the absence of any real developments after the initial promotion of 'Free National Development' [FND]. The 1992 Political Platform produced by the League repeated that the national minority peoples in Britain today are subjected to a specific form of oppression, derived from the oppression of those nations from which the minorities came. The fragmentation of those nations, resulting in the formation of national minorities in the imperialist heartlands, is part of the process of imperialist oppression.⁶³

Historically national minorities in Britain have formed organisations based on specific nationalities. The national minorities drew on their common origins to organise against their oppression on mainly national lines. Groups like Indian Workers' Association, Pakistan Workers Association, Bangladesh Workers' Association, West Indian Federation, AfroCaribbean Self Help Group were active in their communities and on the wider political stage at times. Such organisations have been linked with the anti-imperialist struggles in their homelands. The dominant approach on the Left of "Black & White Unite and fight!" was seen as burying specific concerns of these communities. The RCL argued:



“There is a left form of assimilation too, strikingly similar to the bourgeois policy and probably the dominant view in the British left. Essentially, it regards national differences as negative. Merely an impediment to "workers' unity".⁶⁴

The declaration of Emergency Laws in India in the 1970s had mobilized the various Indian Workers Associations, Kurdish organizations remained focus on the struggle in Turkey, and domestic Bangladesh politics had a resonance in the politics of Tower Hamlet. These were seen as underpinning the approach that regarded such communities as representing “national minorities in the imperialist heartlands”. While noting that the strength of the specifically national organisations were “diminishing among the generations of national minorities born in Britain”, the League, giving recognition to national oppression, would not simply regard ‘black people’ as a fraction of the working class in Britain. Its analysis looked to a more nuanced understanding both of the class struggle for leadership within the communities and the need to address the specific oppression faced by national minority people. The response of the ruling class vacillated between two extremes the "hard" and the "soft". The hard approach is- summed up as repatriation. The soft approach is assimilation, the policy of destroying national identity and trying to make the national minorities "Black British". The left often had a “soft” approach to the issue; the Finsbury Communist Association succinctly expressed the orthodox Left view:

⁶³ See: NATIONAL STRUGGLES AND ANTI-RACISM from the Political Platform (1992)

⁶⁴ Class Struggle (Vol 13 No.10) Dec 1989-Jan 1990

The RCLB, by calling blacks national minorities, loses sight of the real nature of the struggle of the immigrants. Immigrants do not want self-determination for Southall or Brixton, but simply the right to be treated equally with other British citizens.⁶⁵

On the Left, the term “black” has been widely regarded as a political category, defining and unifying the peoples facing racist oppression, referring to people in Britain from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia as black. While many activists adopt the usage, the Political Platform noted, “it must be recognised that it is not universally accepted and may in fact cover up important specificities in the positions of the various national minorities.”⁶⁶

Racist oppression, was described as, the most intense and vicious form of national oppression, involving the treatment of peoples as if they were not human, justified by the false ideology of a hierarchy of races. The distinctive skin colour automatically marks out Third World nationalities as targets for racism. It originated in the slave trade of early capitalism and developed into a more widespread and systematic form under imperialism. The analysis of FND was less robust on the treatment of ‘non-black’ minorities. ARAF Bulletin did circulate an article on anti-Irish chauvinism that was evident in British society, concurrent with the IRA military struggle, and was condemned (rather than argued against) for not taking the stance, that prevailed on the far left, that anti-Irish sentiments (as seen in ‘Irish jokes’, newspaper cartoons etc.) reflected a form of racism against Irish people⁶⁷.

A social investigation to substantiate the premises of the FND was undertaken, but eventually the work on the Pakistani national minority community “proves little more than a lifeless academic exercise”⁶⁸ and was abandoned. The relationship between communists, national minorities and broad front work was a constant concern, not only for the subcommittee but practically for the League. The Birmingham branch lost two members, one who was well respected within the Pakistani Workers Association, and had been associated with Malcolm X, because of the conflicting demands of how to act, and inter-related as both a national minority member with membership of a multi-national party building organization. The contradiction of responsibilities and duties while working within the two organizations were never really resolved.

The RCLB, when faced with immediate unresolved problems of how to carry out the theoretical debate forward, there was a period of intense mass work that occupied members’ time although political unity was fused by the needs of various campaigns especially the Bradford 12 Campaign⁶⁹. A year-long defence campaign, involving League members throughout the country, and at the trial, argued ‘Self-defence Is No offence’.

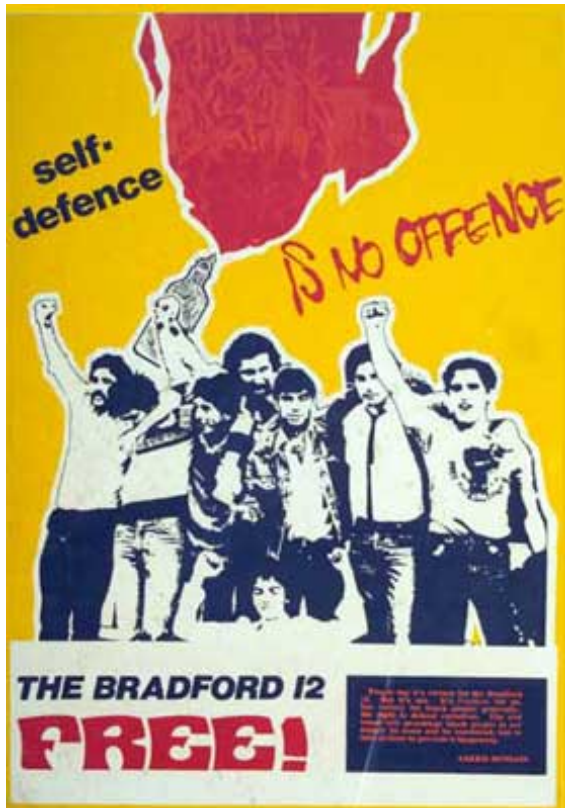
⁶⁵Ultra-Leftism on the National Question *Finsbury Communist*, No.196, May 1981.

⁶⁶Political Platform: NATIONAL STRUGGLES AND ANTI-RACISM. “The ideology of Black Power identifies the white power structure as responsible for imperialism, and also perceives the corrupting effect of racism on the white population as a whole.”

⁶⁷A position drawn from Liz Curtis (1984), *Nothing but the Same Old Story* : The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism (London: Greater London Council)

⁶⁸Private archive: ARAF Minutes 12 January 1985.

⁶⁹The Bradford 12 were young Asian members and supporters of the Asian Youth Movement, who were arrested in July 1981 on charges of conspiracy. On 11 July 1981, news was received that coach-loads of fascists were approaching Bradford. After recent attacks in Southall, Coventry and Walthamstow, those charged made petrol bombs to ‘erect a shield of fire to deter attackers from coming into black areas’.



In June 1982, after a trial lasting eight weeks in Leeds Crown Court, the jury found them all not guilty of the charges of conspiracy and making an explosive substance with intent to endanger life and property. It was a rare political victory in those troubled times.

Free National Development included a specific demand on the nature of organising the state because National minorities have settled in close communities, partly out of migration patterns but also for protection and social solidarity. An important aspect of free national development was that the national minorities have the right to control the areas where they are concentrated.

Racist oppression takes many forms, from immigration control through economic and educational discrimination to violence and murder. Reactive campaigns against

deportation and attacks as in the Bradford 12 Campaign, legal as well as political, epitomised the uncompromising principle of the right to resist against racism here. And came out of an understanding that what was experienced in this country was a reflection of racist colonial oppression and imperialism with its shameless plunder and exploitation and the occupation of other countries.

However, as well as struggling against these aspects of oppression, the national minorities waged a complementary struggle for specific national rights, rights relating to language, culture and religion. The position of the RCLB was clear: Faced with a continuous national oppression involving everything from extreme physical violence to systematic destruction of national identity, national minorities are entitled to demand national freedom. It is the role of Communists to support this demand. One of the most important ways of doing this was to explain free national development to the white working class and to convince them of its correctness.

Only then will it be possible to build the alliance between the working class and the national minorities on which the overthrow of British imperialism depends, and only through the overthrow of imperialism can national freedom be achieved.

The growth of vicious anti-Muslim racism within Britain, particularly orchestrated during the Gulf wars, the right to defend their religion, to demand respect for it and equal treatment within British society, as well as a right to a good education for their children which incorporates respect of Muslim values, are all specific communal issues that could be subsumed under a "democratic rights" approach that strips any "national connotation" from the demand. At the same time, the reactionary politics of much of the leadership of this trend has been criticised by many within the Muslim communities, particularly by women

who have pinpointed fundamentalist aspects of the movement which are oppressive to women.

These concerns were often absent from mainstream media, and the state's response to the resistance of national minority communities has been principally conditioned by the wide scale uprisings in national minority areas, the peak of which was in 1981.

Within each national minority, most forms of racist oppression affect people no matter what their social class, so resistance is able to mobilise people on a cross-class basis. There was in the 1980s, through 'Section Eleven' funding, and evident in the patronage under the Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone, the policy of incorporating sections of the national minorities into the system, by such means as state funding national minority organisations and promoting national minority politicians. The role of the Labour Party in attracting support from national minority voters complicated many campaigns, diverted into political lobbying and building support for social democratic politics, at the expense of self-reliant organisation.

"National minority struggles have their own dynamic which is influenced by internal contradictions, including class and gender issues, and issues between different nationalities. These contradictions are a positive force propelling them to a higher level, and their resolution is primarily the responsibility of people within those communities. There is a class struggle within black communities, which determines how far they adopt resolute opposition to or compromise with imperialism."⁷⁰

By the end of the 1980s, the idea of the 'Strategic Alliance' – an alliance between the working class and national minority peoples with the "new multi-national communist party" at its heart, was the Maoists' basic strategy for change in Britain. Unexplored were the wider issues of contradictions between national minority organisations and with the dominant role of a communist party as the leading force in the post-imperialist society. In *Class Struggle*, the strategic alliance was explained thus:

The struggle for the national rights of national minority people can only be resolved by a new socialist society here. The working class and the national minority people face the same enemy and have a common interest in the defeat of British imperialism and the struggle for socialism.

The overthrow of imperialism requires an alliance between the two struggles. The majority of national minority people are also part of the working class. This forms a strong basis on which the alliance can be built.

A major task for communists, particularly at its early stage, must be to win the support of the working class for the struggle against racism and for the national rights of the national minority people. Racism is not in the interests of the working class, but because of Britain's imperialist past and present, it has a strong hold among many people and we need to fight an active struggle against it, as all other forms of bourgeois ideology.

The role of Communist in developing anti-racist and anti-imperialist ideology in the working class is crucial because support for national struggle is part of a

⁷⁰ Political Platform : NATIONAL STRUGGLES AND ANTI-RACISM

revolutionary world view. Communist education is based on the mass line, the repeated combination of the ideas and experiences of the people with the systematised lessons of indirect experience, ensuring that revolutionary ideas are accepted by the people as their own.⁷¹

The practical work against racist oppression intersected with issues on the relationship between anti-sexist struggles both within communities and the wider societal structures. As the Political Platform observed, “On some issues, for example, attacks by police on black communities, black women have seen the main issue as the defence of the whole of the black community from racist oppression. On others, for example domestic violence on black women, they call for support from other progressive forces in combating attacks on women from within their own community.”⁷²

Women have played an important role in the resistance to racist oppression in general, and have organised separately to take on racism in the women’s movement as well as women’s oppression from within their own communities e.g. Southall Black Sisters were often cited before it later took on state funding for its services.

It was partly involvement in these mass struggles that supported a major shift in the League’s theoretical position on the oppression of women.

WOMEN, CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE LEAGUE

The League played catch-up in coming to terms with developments in the feminist ideas it once condemned. There were symbolic moves like renaming the traditional ‘Workers’ notebook’ column as Mandy’s Diary, but there was also substantial work as in the serialized study on ‘HerStory’ in the paper. The need to analyse concretely the relationship between women’s specific oppression and that of class and national oppression, was part of the Maoist canon that had been neglected and the League made this a priority in their work throughout its last years as a functioning organization.

The League recognized that they had a lot of work to do, both in theory and practice, to develop their work on and with women. As part of this work, *October* No.5 was devoted to the debate round the question of women reflecting the influences upon the studies undertaken. It include articles on the ‘Basis of Women’s Oppression’ drawing on ‘The Left and Feminism’, from the Indian sub-continent and the summary of a book written by Norwegian Marxist-Leninist, leader, Kjersti Ericsson⁷³. There were other contributions discussing the importance of the issue of reproductive rights for women's struggle and

⁷¹ Where We Stand *Class Struggle* October 1989

⁷² ditto

⁷³ Sisters, comrades! (Oktober Publishing House 1987) <http://www.akp.no/hefter/sostrekamerater/sisters-into.html>

various positions from Marxist and non-Marxist writers on women. The issue included a heretical question: 'Should Women Fight Imperialism?' It reflected the theoretical concern to understanding the complexities of the general liberation struggle in all its aspects and specificities, arguing that

"The vast majority of women have a vested interest in overthrowing imperialism in order to rid themselves of class and/ or national oppression. To take a purely feminist position and ignore class and national oppression is irrelevant to the daily situation that the vast majority of women are in. In many specific situations, imperialism has created new forms of women's oppression. This is a concrete link between women's struggle for their own liberation and their involvement in the more general struggle against imperialism. Equally it has to be recognised that imperialism took on board much of the oppression of women by men from previous stages in society. That oppression was created by men, and perpetuated by men, for their own advantage, under imperialism. It must be recognised that the destruction of national oppression and the ending of class exploitation do not automatically lead to the ending of male domination."⁷⁴

At its Congress held in 1989, the RCL adopted an initial position on the question of women's oppression: "Although the RCLB has both positive and negative experience in its work on women, much of the time it has held incorrect positions and in order to move forward, we had to make clear self- criticisms of these incorrect positions."

The central points of self-criticism built upon a process of critical self-evaluation, publically seen in a forensic dissection and criticism of previous positions adopted by the organization and its predecessors, 'The Oppression of Women – Criticism of Old Lines', published in October 1982⁷⁵. That review process had been encouraged when only three derisory paragraphs were included in the programmatic work for Section 7⁷⁶ at the Second Congress in 1981. There was also the experience seen in Canada where the Workers' Communist Party, a seemingly strong Marxist-Leninist organization, imploded; it seemed to some League members, partly because of the sexism within the organization. Furthermore, some of the Canadian criticism struck a chord in the organisational-life experience of some women members and in the observation of some of their male comrades. Seriously addressing the issue, in terms of cadre time and resources, saw the establishment of a Women's Subcommittee to rectify the neglect that had prevailed in the organization. This neglect did have some basis in the male chauvinist attitudes that exists and the previous strategic political decisions to concentrate energy and resources on industrial base building as the main site of struggle for revolutionaries.

The RCL had had an economist view of women's oppression which was part of the view that only the oppression of working class women was important and that the workplace was the only arena for working with



⁷⁴ *October* No. 5 Autumn 1990 A Special issue on Women

⁷⁵ 'The Oppression of Women – Criticism of Old Lines.' *October*, Vol. 1, No. 2, October 1982.

⁷⁶ <http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.hightide/section-7.pdf>

women. At times this position was even reduced to the demand for equal pay for women at work. These positions had rejected earlier work undertaken by women members of the CFB (ML) such as the criticism expressed of such an approach:

In their pamphlet – *Women in Class Struggle*, the CPBML tackle the problem from an economist standpoint, and pay no attention to the political and ideological problems involved. Their advice to women is to stick to the working class man in the struggle against the capitalist system and for socialism and all their oppression will disappear, since the basis of it is economic. Crudely speaking this may be correct but it is simplistic and incomplete, ignoring the ideological struggle which must start now, as well as the existing WL movement.⁷⁷

The RCLB 'Manifesto' period had viewed the women's movement of the sixties and seventies as bourgeois feminist, taking the wrong attitude that it had nothing progressive to say to Marxist Leninists. In the days of the JCC and early CFB (ML) women comrades had been active in the feminist campaigns of the day:

The Women's Liberation caucus, though recently having suffered setbacks due to the development of sharp disagreements, appears to be overcoming difficulties. It has played a positive role in relation to the second "Women' Liberation and Socialism" conference in terms of both the conference itself and its planning, to which the caucus presented a paper and proposals, and its members engaged in formal debate and informal discussion.⁷⁸

However since the mid-1970s, withdrawal from most non-industrial mass campaigns had been the prescription to 'build the League'.

The family was treated in the orthodox way as subordinate to class. Whereas women were oppressed in bourgeois families, the CFB (ML) argued it was possible to build class unity 'between men and women in working class families, to build fighting units of the proletariat.'⁷⁹ This position was rejected and the equally erroneous view adopted that, in Britain, the main aspect of the nuclear family is that it is oppressive. It was one-sidedly regarded as a structure which meets the needs of imperialism and is built on the isolation and oppression of women and on violence towards them.

Mere criticism of previous incorrect positions did not build a full analysis on the question of what was seen in terms of women rather than part of a gender issue. Isolation from this stream of struggle had left the thinking and analysis within the League at a rudimentary level with perhaps an arguable exception, the internationalist perspective that the concerns of women of colour were often not those of presented in western feminist writings. There was acknowledgement that what was needed was "work round this question".

Throughout the 1980s the RCLB's position developed by the work of the Women's Subcommittee (WSC) on the basis that in imperialist society, women suffer different forms of oppression and exploitation. Working class women face class oppression and national

⁷⁷Women's Group (CFB-London), 'Women's Liberation: Critical Notes on Selma James' Pamphlet' *Marxist-Leninist Quarterly* No. 5, Summer 1973

⁷⁸CFB (ML) Report of the Special General Meeting, December 1973/February 1974

⁷⁹Communist Federation of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) Transform the Family into a Fighting Unit of the Proletariat!*Revolution* No. 5, May 1977

minority women in addition face national oppression. However, women also face a common oppression as women, not only oppressed by imperialism in general and its institutions, but also by men, either through the family or in other ways, although in different ways and to different degrees. The members of the WSC held varying positions of leadership with the organization (including at one time, the chair of the organization, the editor of *Class Struggle and branch leaders*) and experience in the anti-racist struggles that was reflected in an understanding, in particular, of the dual nature of oppression for Black and Asian women.

Women's oppression takes many different forms and works on different levels, social, political and economic. There was a very strongly held position that women's oppression cannot be isolated to one aspect of women's situation, for example, that women's struggle for the right to work - while still an important strand of women's struggles was not one that should be *exclusively* support. Women's role in the family, regarded as central to their oppression, was reflected in the various issues increasingly covered in *Class Struggle*: domestic violence and rape; ideological and social attitudes; reproductive rights; educational and cultural questions.

Many progressive people, the WSC observed, including Marxist-Leninists, had either ignored the specific oppression of women or found it difficult to handle. It was wrong to class the women's movement as bourgeois because as women's oppression is cross-class, the main aspect of the fight against it is not its class nature. The women's movement, now seen as a progressive movement, having raised again the question of women's oppression and had led the fight against it. While standing by the basic Marxist method of historical materialism in any analysis of women in society today, it was argued that "feminism in general is a progressive ideology that we should unite with" and support for the right of women to organise separately. This was, for the RCLB, a paradigm shift in approaching the question but in a conscious attempt not to fall into a liquidationist position regarding the need for a revolutionary communist party, there was study of the political economy of women's work to root it in the Marxist perspective.

The WSC made the point in its work published internally and in the pages of *Class Struggle* that women's work often goes unrecognised. "Real work" is seen - as 40-hour a week, waged labour in a big factory or mine. Women's work is made invisible, except at times such as in the First or Second World Wars in Britain, when women were encouraged into the factories to replace the men who were sent to the army.

In fact, everywhere in the world, women's work makes a major contribution to the economy and is essential to the well-being of the people. Women work in agriculture, whether in subsistence farming or as waged labourers in the production of cash crops. As well as bearing children, women do most of the work caring for others and raising children, in many countries, spending hours on basic tasks such as fetching water or grinding corn. Working class women in the imperialist countries have always had to combine paid work with family responsibilities, and increasingly in the Third World, women are being drawn into the factories of the transnational corporations.

The argument made was that although women's position cannot be isolated from that of their class or their nation, they face an extra burden on top of other forms of oppression and exploitation. Women's oppression takes many different forms economic, political, social

and cultural and the struggle against it has to be fought on many fronts. On the one hand, they face the greatest oppression. On the other, they stand to gain the most from change.

Basing its analysis consciously in the political economy of imperialism, it did not fully avail itself of a wider cultural-superstructure critique that emerged with a Marxist approach to the emerging field of gender studies. What insight were to flow from this approach found relatively basic expression in an organisation that had belatedly (and without much discussion) adopted positions against the state discrimination of homosexuality, and, indifferent to the personal sexual orientation of some of its members and supporters, had no experience of any campaigning work in that area.⁸⁰

Given that understanding of centre-periphery relationships in the modern world, and the focus of the position of women in society, the basic positions adopted by the League at the end of the 1980s were that:

- Women of different classes and nationalities face specific oppression as women under imperialism, although it takes different forms.

- Women's oppression is linked to their role in the family, reproducing and maintaining the labour force. The family, as the economic unit under imperialism, is oppressive to women.

- We support the right of women to organise separately. In particular, we support the right of black women to organise separately.

- We recognise the need for women in the imperialist countries such as Britain to consciously work in solidarity with the vast majority of the world's women, in the oppressed countries of the Third World.⁸¹

These positions were continually developed and reflected in the production of the Political Platform (1992) which placed the organization firmly within the mainstream of Marxism feminism thinking, even arguing that:

oppressive gender division prevents women from achieving their potential, and male gender roles are also dehumanising and restricting to men..... the struggle for socialism will not necessarily bring about liberation for women. At every stage sexism and male chauvinism must be challenged. We do not want the kind of socialism which concentrates power in the hands of working class men and allows them to continue to oppress women. There must be a fundamental change in men's ideology and behaviour, which must begin now. A fundamental redistribution of wealth between men and women is also necessary.⁸²

It was a position that showed how far the organization had moved throughout the decade in its theoretical understanding.

⁸⁰ Anecdotal remark provided by David Evans : The demise of the League curtailed any further developments in correcting past positions although an apology was sent years after a member had left the organization in the late 1970s partly due to the lack of solidarity and acceptance to their sexual orientation, and their choice of partner, considered a security risk by the then leadership.

⁸¹ 'Where We Stand' column in *Class Struggle*

⁸² WOMEN'S LIBERATION, Political Platform of the RCL (July 1992)

UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT



A second Hunger Strike, began on 1st March 1981, when Bobby Sands, the IRA's former Officer Commanding in the H-Blocks (Maze Prison), refused food. Unlike the first strike, the prisoners joined one at a time and at staggered intervals, which they believed would arouse maximum public support and exert maximum pressure. During the hunger strike, Bobby Sands was elected an MP to the Westminster Parliament. On 5 May, Sands died in the prison hospital on the sixty-sixth day of his hunger strike. Over the summer of 1981, ten hunger strikers had died, thirteen others participants in the Hunger Strike were taken off either due to medical reasons or after intervention by their families. Campaigning for the 'Five Demands'⁸³ there was an intensity of activity in the area of Irish Solidarity work following the political struggle within the organisation that saw the RCLB adopt a position of 'unconditional support'. This activity coincided with the upsurge in the Irish Prisoner of War campaigns that saw three sustained hunger strikes at the beginning of the decade. As reported in its paper, the League had a new attitude:

The RCLB was also in error in not attaching sufficient importance to the work of campaigning for the withdrawal of British troops and of building support for the Irish people's national democratic revolution against British imperialism and for national independence and reunification. Naturally, this weakness was reflected in our paper. Worse than this, on a number of occasions we slandered the liberation fighters as terrorists devoid of real support from the people. That this is not the case was confirmed by those of our comrades who took part in the Troops Out Movement delegation to Belfast in August.⁸⁴

⁸³ The right not to wear a prison uniform; The right not to do prison work; The right of free association with other prisoners, and to organise educational and recreational pursuits; The right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week; Full restoration of remission lost through the protest.

⁸⁴ See: 'Our Coverage of Ireland' *Class Struggle*, Vol. 4, No. 22, November 1980. Also: 'The Irish Struggle, the CFB and the RCL' *Interim Journal*, No. 3, June 1981.

After unification with the CWM, across the country members were engaged in various campaigns. The 2nd Congress adopted the policy of giving unconditional support to the armed struggle of the Irish people and to its Republican leadership. There followed a period, driven from London members, to build a 'pro-Republican' solidarity movement in conjunction with other forces on the Left, specifically in conjunction with the Revolutionary Communist Group. The existence of three or four solidarity 'movements' each associated with specific organisations, and all with national pretensions, provided for a complex environment.⁸⁵ The CWM had had a more developed line on building solidarity based on their understanding of the "revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle in Ireland"⁸⁶. This had been developed in the unify organisation so what framed the League approach was based on the argument that:

Communists do not make their support for a national liberation movement dependent on it being under communist leadership. The movement is revolutionary in character if it weakens and undermines imperialism. That, the Republican movement clearly does and it is our job to give it anti-imperialist support and solidarity.

But we believe that the Republican movement has many positive features beyond its basic anti-imperialist character. It has mobilised the masses to take up and support the struggle. It has linked the cause of national liberation with that of the emancipation of the working class; it is developing its work in the trade unions and on social and economic questions. It is based solidly in the proletariat and small farming community. It is waging a protracted war against our main enemy, British imperialism. It supports other just national liberation struggles around the world. It is opposed to the two superpowers and supports the non-aligned movement. On the question of political prisoners, it has developed a style of work of uniting all who can be united. Of course, like any other movement in the real world, the Republican movement has its shortcomings and mistakes, but these are very much a secondary aspect.

Our solidarity with the Republican movement is not based on it adopting policies which we feel would be correct, but is extended to the movement purely and simply as one fighting imperialism.

We also uphold the Republican movement because its struggle can teach the working and oppressed people of Britain a lot about what they need to do to carry through a successful revolution. Some of the national minority youth who rose up this summer, as well as elements of the working class youth in Wales and Scotland, have clearly begun to draw lessons from Ireland. This is a further direct contribution to our revolutionary work in Britain from the Irish freedom fighters.⁸⁷

Some London members in the RCLB drew upon their encounter working in the RCG's Irish solidarity campaigning groups (and overawe by their theoretical rigor and hype-activism) to try and rejuvenate their own organisation in promoting a 'copycat' dedication. Two principal

⁸⁵ The oldest, established in 1973, the Troops Out Movement was orientated towards the Labour Party, the Irish Freedom Movement set up by the trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party and the local Irish solidarity committees, as well as the existence of Sinn Fein Britain (disbanded in the mid-80s) and republican prisoner-orientated activities.

⁸⁶ See; BUILD SOLIDARITY!*New Age* no.15 August/September 1979

⁸⁷ *Report of the Second Congress of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain*. Class Struggle Special Supplement 1981.

supporters of this new line were the editor of *Class Struggle*, who used his position to promote the 'Re-Orientate the League' line (later criticised as essentially leave it to the 'black youth vanguard') and a rank-and-file member engaged in a protracted attack upon the RCL leadership.

The major disagreement they had (which was shared with the rest of the RCLB) was the RCG support for the Soviet Union. Even so, the internal faction constructed a platform based on, what they described as, 'Asian Communism'. Empiricist and impressionistic, their analysis that tried to dovetail together various strands of struggles, drawing upon the exception to construct an ultra-leftist rhetorical programme that echoed cherry-picked RCG's rhetoric.⁸⁸

Clearly the RCG's slogan that was unthinkingly transmitted into the organisation was "Ireland as the key to the British Revolution" almost as compensation for the previous social-chauvinist positions. It was argued that existing attempts to build an Ireland Solidarity Movement did not direct their work to the real friends of the Irish people in this country, the working class and the oppressed. Instead, they were little more than liberal pressure groups trying to make the ruling class be "more reasonable". Yet what was seen as evidence for the possibility of a new, pro-Republican, rather than the broad-front slogan of 'Troops Out' (for whatever reason) were traditional political activities : thousands signing a petition calling for self-determination for the Irish people and the immediate withdrawal of British troops, and successful public meetings, street meetings and demonstrations held.⁸⁹

The culmination of the push for a militant anti-imperialist solidarity organisation was the November 20th 1982 Conference on "Building an Irish Solidarity Movement", called by the North and South London Irish Solidarity Committees with 250 delegates attending Caxton House in North London.⁹⁰

The RCL argued that the Irish Solidarity Committees should unconditionally support the actually existing Republican Movement, and not just the 'Irish people' in abstract, but the need to build a broader movement should be based on the slogans put forward by the Irish P.O.W. s in Albany prison:

⁸⁸ See: H. Stephens, 'Irish Independence and Britain's Communists' *Class Struggle*, November 1982 ; and speech delivered by Keith Anderson to the 20th November Conference, 'Spirit of Freedom: RCL Statement on Ireland' *Class Struggle*, December 1982

⁸⁹ 'Building An Ireland Solidarity Movement' *Class Struggle*, October 1982

⁹⁰ The RCG view, expressed in its 1983 manifesto, *The Revolutionary Road to Communism in Britain* (Larkin Press) was that "following the end of the hunger strike in 1981 the RCG participated in and helped establish Irish Solidarity Committees in different parts of the country. Whilst most of the left stopped campaigning on the Irish question, the RCG, along with a few other organisations and individuals, redoubled their efforts. The first step in the national co-ordination of a new movement was taken on 20 November 1982 when a conference of 250 delegates founded Building an Irish Solidarity Movement (BISM). A further conference in October 1983 voted to form the Irish Solidarity Movement (ISM). The RCG has played a central part in creating the ISM which ... direct its work towards the most oppressed sections of the British working class as the basis for a new solidarity movement."

Complete British Withdrawal from Ireland!
Self-Determination for the Irish People!
The Right of Repatriation for All POWs!

During the conference a heated debate was around the question of solidarity with the chosen leadership of the Irish people, the Irish Republican Movement; the position of the RCL was voted down at the conference. Another incident at the Conference was the distribution of a statement from 'Mosquito Press' partly critical of the dominant force at the conference, the RCG and the work of its leader, David Reed (then pseudonym of academic David Yaffe). The statement stated:

David Reed's communist tradition would appear not to extend East of Suez, just as FRFI's support for liberation movements is almost entirely restricted to those which happen to be compatible with Soviet foreign policy.⁹¹

The RCG's criticism that the failure to build large scale solidarity during the Irish Hunger strike was due to Republican movement , "strategy laid down in Ireland" , was criticised and dismissed by Mosquito Press:

"any complaint emanating from any political force in Britain whatsoever, least of all from a British political group which unashamedly preaches support for "domination" of countries such as Afghanistan and Poland where this is done under a 'socialist' signboard. What guarantee do we have that these comrades will not apply such 'principles' to Ireland??"⁹²

This individualistic intervention, undertaken without sanction from the Leninist organisation he was a member, muddled the working relationship between the two organisations in London. The editor of *Class Struggle* put a positive spin on the weekend,

The work must now be intensified to build the Ireland Solidarity Movement, to set up new committees (new ones are already being formed in Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester and West London) and in particular, to ensure that March 12, 1983 sees a huge demonstration that can begin to tap the support which exists amongst the oppressed for Ireland's fight for freedom..... There are those who say that the line of uniting with and relying on the most oppressed is sectarian. The Conference refuted this slander in practice and showed where a real, flourishing revolutionary movement can be built in this country.⁹³

The November conference was a turning point for the developments within the RCL: for those outside London, it was extended exposure to the RCG and its manipulation of conference procedures and dogmatic style of work that served to alienate, what was a wary membership less enamoured with the politics of the 'semi-trotskyist' group than some London members. There had been criticism of the decision taken to sell the RCG's newspaper, *Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism* at New Era Books, and the public use of

⁹¹<http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.ebbingtide/mosquito-ireland-3.pdf>

⁹²<http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.ebbingtide/mosquito-ireland-3.pdf>

⁹³Keith Anderson, 'A Task Taken Up For Solution' *Class Struggle*, December 1982

'Comrade Reed' by leading League members.⁹⁴ And to emphasize that it is often the small things that are a hinge factor, the Conference was the occasion Hugh, with his criticism of the RCG's (again expression the view which others shared) but in such an egoistical and undisciplined manner was a tipping point that lost him some influential internal League supporters that had previously defended his political position if not his style.

Work within the newly established Irish Solidarity Movement⁹⁵ did continue, but without the heightened frenzied drive. The March 12th 1983 ISM march saw 600 in a 'long spirited demonstration through working class north London' to Whittington Park, and addressed by a member of Sinn Fein (Britain)⁹⁶. As a *national* mobilisation it was reflective of the strength of the organisation.

It was not just RCLB members who found the political deception and ineptitude of the forces involved in ISM hard to work with; Red Action, in a letter to the Irish Republican Socialist Party explained it stopped working with the RCG's Irish Solidarity movement in 1986 when a march through Islington in support of Irish prisoners' of war attracted "a sum total of 50 people including Red Action's contingent". Its abject failure pre-determined: "apart from being badly organised, poorly promoted and supported, all the decisions were taken by the RCG." The main impetus behind the debacle was the sectarian opposition to the R.C.P. and its front organisation, the Irish freedom movement.⁹⁷

On Ireland, the basic position of the RCLB was to continue to campaign for the end to British involvement in Irish affairs. The basis for this stance was clarified in the Political Platform: Ireland's unfinished national liberation struggle was regarded as part of the world struggle (led by the Third World's people) to defeat all forms of imperialism. The Republican Movement's political programme was aimed at reuniting Ireland as a country free from foreign domination in which the Irish people as a whole are free to decide their own future, a programme that advocates the Irish people determining the means for their own liberation free from British limits and conditions. "It is our duty to defend the right of the Irish people to choose their own leadership, organisations and forms of struggle as they see fit in order to achieve their national liberation."⁹⁸ Flowing from this was the stance that solidarity work of the organisation struggle must be guided by the priorities set by those leading the Irish national liberation struggle and their supporters within the Irish national minority organisations within Britain.

Interestingly the situation was that the dominant Republican organisation, Sinn Fein, had a broad political approach that preferred a withdrawal movement uniting as many anti-war positions as possible. They did not want a smaller pro-republican solidarity movement as the League had been in danger of committing itself at the start of the 1980s. The corrective to that ultra-left posture was expressed at the November 20th Conference and a decade later in the Political Platform:

⁹⁴ Anecdotal evidence

⁹⁵ The actual founding of the ISM was in November 1983 but the actual reality was that the forces from the 1982 conference constituted a campaigning trend that was later given formal recognition.

⁹⁶ 'A Great Beginning' *Class Struggle* March 1983

⁹⁷ Red Action National Committee. *A Reply to the IRSP* [Hands off Ireland and its march]

<http://afaarchive.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/ra-reply-to-irsp.pdf>

⁹⁸ Political Platform of the RCL (July 1992) Para 119

“for the RCL to be overt in our unconditional support for the Republican movement, while in our practical solidarity work our emphasis must be on building as broad a movement as possible to oppose British involvement in Ireland. We must be prepared to work with those who for whatever reason and to whatever degree oppose British oppression.”⁹⁹

A public assessment of the withdrawal movement in Britain as stifled by stagnation and sectarianism was made at the end of the decade that laid responsibility on the left attitudes;

There are still those who raise the question of "What kind of united Ireland?" to deflect from any commitment to supporting those forces who are facing up to British imperialist forces in the north.

Others use the gulf in political positions between themselves and others active on Ireland, to justify attacking other activists' platform and devote time, energy and resources to this task to the detriment of expanding the audience for a withdrawal argument. Such gutter-sniping does little to enhance the reputation of the British left.¹⁰⁰

It noted that after a year of activity, culminating in a 15th anniversary march, Time To Go failed to match the numbers - around Ten thousand - mobilised on the tenth anniversary of the Labour government sending in troops. That march was organised by a coalition convened by the Young Liberals in 1979.

Publically the organisation's attitude to those engaged in struggle echoed its stance on the liberation struggle in South Africa, where it supported the African national Congress, Pan-Africanist Congress and Black Consciousness Movement, with Ireland it said,



Manchester Martyrs commemoration

Communists 'unconditional support is given to the cause of national liberation in Ireland and not to any particular organisation. There are different Republican forces active in the struggle against Britain's armed agents. Some elements have a Marxist perspective, others do not. But it is not up to the British left organisations to fight the Irish revolution; our own is not very advanced.

Respect for Irish determination should not mean taking sides in the internal politics of, and between organisations.¹⁰¹

In practice, the Republican movement – defined as Sinn Fein/IRA and Irish Republican Socialist party/ INLA – was not given equally consideration. When Sinn Fein withdrew its support from the Manchester Martyrs commemoration march, it quietly became

⁹⁹ Political Platform of the RCL (July 1992) Para 120

¹⁰⁰ Solidarity not squabbling *Class Struggle* (Vol13 No.7) September 1989

¹⁰¹ Ditto

downgraded in the priorities of the League's Irish solidarity activity. The more ideologically inclined IRSP – self declared Marxist-Leninists - was not seen as a more appropriate force to align with.

A combination of the study around eurocentism, the experience of anti-racist and anti-imperialist solidarity campaigns and absorption of the lessons from the experience of the November 20th Conference meant that RCLB gained a better grasp of what was meant and clarified the notion of 'unconditional support' in the context of the anti-imperialist struggles.

It signified a recognition that conditions as to whether the orientation of particular movements is explicitly socialist or not cannot be imposed, and in reflecting the existing resistance to imperialism it is ludicrous to choose movements or trends according to what is acceptable to the organisation. Solidarity with communist parties within the liberation movements is an important aspect of proletarian internationalism, and such bi-lateral relationships were valuable components of the League's international work. However, one cannot say we support the struggle of 'the people' without also supporting the organisations to which that struggle necessarily gives rise. It is the right of those in the oppressed nations to determine the appropriate means of their struggle, including the armed struggle, or where appropriate negotiations with the enemy

Given this stance in solidarity work, unconditional support in no way implies that there is no study of conditions in the oppressed nations independently. In many cases there are several different trends, then these should be critically assess differences in line, within an overall context of clearly siding with the oppressed against the imperialist aggressors. The old style national liberation movements were being replaced in a context of 'neo-colonialism', i.e. in countries where a supposedly independent regime is subservient to imperialism.

The specific point that it was also essential to support just struggles on the part of nations oppressed by regimes claiming to be socialist was included in the 1992 Political Platform. The list of countries claiming to be socialist was then shrinking but included China. In line with the position of 'Free National Development', part of Irish solidarity work in Britain was to respect the right of Irish people to set up their own independent organisations as a national minority within Britain, such as The Wolfe Tone Society, and to oppose anti-Irish racism by the English majority nationality.

League members remained quietly active¹⁰² in campaigns and prison pickets in their localities, mobilising for the national set pieces such as the Manchester Martyrs commemoration, the Internment protest and for many years the main mobilisation of the Irish solidarity movement in Britain was for the annual Bloody Sunday Commemoration march each January. They typically attracted between two and five thousand people and ended up in a north London area with a high Irish population like Kilburn or Archway. A

¹⁰² The 1984 arrest and imprisonment of Peter Jordan although covered by *Class Struggle*, (e.g. Support Peter Jordan , July August 1986 and Letter from A Prisoner, November /December 1991) were never politically emphasised at his own request. The Irish language television company TG4 aired a documentary series called 'Brathadoiri' ('Informers' in Irish) about enemy agents & informers during the liberation struggle in the North. The first episode May 21 2009 dealt with how MI5 agent Pat Daly set up 'INLA men' Martin Mcmonagle & Peter Jordan.

feature of the Bloody Sunday marches was that the far right (BNP etc.) often mobilised to confront, heckle and attack the marchers at their rallying point and along its route, so in the pubs and streets surrounding the demonstrations there would be skirmishes between anti-fascists and racists. In 1990 for instance, three Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) members were jailed after Nicky Crane, a notorious fascist skinhead, was dragged out of a taxi in Kilburn in the vicinity of the Bloody Sunday march. Then on the tense Bloody Sunday march in 1993, an unprecedented mobilisation by the far right saw hundreds of fascists and football hooligan allies attempted to attack the march at the assembly point in Hyde Park and then again along Edgware Road. Some 376 fascists were arrested before the march made it to Kilburn.



The political differences at the November 20th Conference had went unresolved and following the League's withdrawal from the Irish Solidarity Movement, its members remain active , at first in the East London Irish Solidarity Committee and then were instrument in establishing the CAMPAIGN FOR A FREE IRELAND.

Campaign for a Free Ireland [CFI] was not a propagandist group like other strands in the Irish Solidarity movement, nor promoted as a League organisation. It consciously restricted its activity to practical work. CFI worked in North London in support of the relatives of Republican prisoners, engaged in fund-raising activities include socials and car boot sales, as well as providing catering services at Republican and other Irish meetings.¹⁰³

Clearly from the late 1980s, the impetus for peace was from a politicised republican movement arguing a 'demilitarise' strategy to continue the struggle towards a united Ireland. This 'turn' was not alien to a movement brought up on Mao's aphorism that the 'party controls the gun', others on the Left simply saw betrayal. At the implementation of the 1994 ceasefire, the League argued:

The force of revolutionary nationalism has still to play its hand; the Six counties remain, as does the aspiration and struggle to reunify Ireland. Without the armed resistance the British state would not be edging forwards to the inevitable negotiations. Republican sacrifice has underlined that there can be no internal settlement, no return to Stormont and all that it represented.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Anecdotal evidence: It was said, mention the Campaign for a Free Ireland in Strabane, in west County Tyrone and people pointed to a community mini-bus used by relatives of Republican prisoners to visit their loved ones. CFI made two donations of £2,000 towards the cost of the mini-bus, and the Sinn Fein-led local council of Strabane (a town then with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe) presented CFI with a plaque bearing the town's coat-of-arms.

¹⁰⁴RCLB Leaflet. 1994 "Was It Worth 25 Years?" Some Ask. But the Struggle is Not Over.

AND YET ANOTHER 'LINE STRUGGLE'¹⁰⁵

Any opportunity at the start of the 1980s, following the Maoists consolidation in the RCLB, to integrate the strengths of the membership, their experience of mass work and chart a political strategy was squandered with a leadership crippledly pre-occupied internally in a parody of line struggle.

There is a Maoist expectation of two-line struggle to drive the revolutionary advance, an acceptance of the fruitfulness of error, learning from the past experience and in the understanding that a minority can become the majority. Given this paradigm, internal dissent is a legitimate political expression within the organisation.

All political organisations have its share of the eccentric, the bore, and the socially inadequate tolerated by the collective. In a small group the impact of such individuals is exaggerate out of proportion to their importance to the group. Within the RCLB, Hugh was one such individual.

However, even if evoking the spirit of “saving the patient”, the struggle over what do about Hugh that occupied the leadership for a couple of years after unification resembled a piece of humour in the British satire school of ridicule and set the organisation on a downward spiral to oblivion.

Joining the Communist Workers' Movement [CWM] after its formation, Hugh's journalistic involvement from 1978 saw him eventually take on the position of editor of the organisation's monthly publication, *New Age*. At the time of unity with the RCLB, Hugh was a member of the National Committee of the much reduced CWM. He was not elected to the leadership of the enlarged RCLB at the time of its unity conference in the summer of 1980. He was not included in the leadership slate but individually nominated for the Central Committee; Hugh claimed he was the only member of the League to “have the courage of my convictions and the confidence and determination to advocate my own election to leadership at Congress.” That sort of self-belief was instilled in an education at Harrow School and Cambridge University (Jesus College). This clamour for leadership was to be repeated throughout the first few years of the 1980s.

The Communist Workers' Movement brought into the unity process with the RCLB a more favourable position to Irish national unity and the republican movement fighting for that goal. The CWM line recognised Ireland as a single nation, (unlike the old RCLB) opposed the building of the British revolutionary party in the Six Counties and supported the armed republican struggle. As in most things, the collective nature of the CWM line was underplayed (and malicious intentions quickly ascribed to those who disagreed) with Hugh's deliberate, conscious attempt to portray himself as boldly championing an anti-imperialist position on the Irish struggle, helped in part by his (shared?) authorship of the CWM's “*Ireland Solidarity: Towards A Programme*”.

¹⁰⁵ As this section draws largely upon unpublished internal documentation of the RCLB some identifying initials have been suppressed and/or used pseudonyms substituted for actual names.

As for the old RCLB line on Ireland, in Hugh's characteristic flourishing rhetoric of abuse, he would assert that:

"The Orange Faction has struggled tooth and claw against this revolutionary line. Taking its architect's Union Jack dialectics as its starting point, it has clung desperately to every shred of Orange (Nazi) or Sticky (treacherous) politics, whining all along"¹⁰⁶

This in a nutshell was the charge maintained in a steady and abusive correspondence with the leadership initiated by Hugh shortly after the fusion of the two organisations. The nature of the one-sided line struggle was established in Hugh's memorandum to the Central Committee, entitled, "*Seven Lean Years*" (dated 27th June 1980). The former chairman, 'T.E.', was charged with leading an organisation "whose line on Ireland is little better than that of Orangemen" and described, what he considered a residue of the reactionary line, as "this lump of shit in the wedding cake" of the unity between the RCLB and CWM. Hugh offered his services: "*Seven Lean Years*", the first letter to the CC, Hugh envisaging saving the RCL, "I place myself at the disposal of the CC in the task of trying to save them for Marxism-Leninism", to challenge the counter-revolutionary 'Two-Nations' line propounded by TE.

It was a private 'line struggle' : political attacks upon the chairman of the organisation continued to flow directly from the pen of Hugh, sent to the leadership and taking place without the knowledge or participation of the membership. Eventually, TE responded to the abuse by taking the organisational procedural high ground, calling for the Standing Committee [SC] to criticise Hugh for:

- Allegations (at the Irish Commission meeting of November 30th 1980) at lower levels that the SC was established in a factional manner at the time of the Unity Conference;
- Slandering the leadership as a "reactionary Orange" leadership, and
- The use of language describing an "extremely reactionary anti-nationalist fascist organisation".¹⁰⁷

The Central Committee had called upon Hugh to desist "from personal attacks and seriously struggling to get rid of his errors of gross individualism". This resolution of 12/13 December 1981 came after consideration of Hugh's document, "*Purge the C.C. of the Orange Faction – The Only Way to Unite the League*" where Hugh had simply repeated and enlarged the scope of attack.

The C.C. noted that Hugh had "evaded making a proper reply" to previous letters from the leadership, and "opportunistically drop the serious allegations". Describing Hugh's approach as "singularly sterile", pinning "labels on comrades to discredit them" and noted that "your piece "*The British Army's writ still runs in the CC*" which reads like

¹⁰⁶ Purge the Orange Faction. Private Archive (unpublished). In October 1982, copies, in Hugh's handwriting, were distributed of a section on Ireland from 'Why Paul Foot Should Be A Socialist.' Its line was that of the RCLB of 1978 vintage. Not that remarkable given Hugh's participation in the London 'Non-Member Comrades' meetings of the RCLB in the late 1970s for potential recruits to the organisation. Hugh did the bulk of the writing when he was not in any organisation. There were changes in position to the printed version of the publication, drawn up in consultation, and with material supplied by "David Evans".

¹⁰⁷ TE, *Criticism of Slandering Talk by Cde HG*. February 21st 1981. Private Archive (unpublished)

something produced as a send-up of the publications of an obscure sect. this is the stuff of witch hunting”.

Still the CC proposed to Hugh, “instead of hurling accusations, you draft a “platform” to present to it, setting forth your political line.” Why? Why? “The CC could then deal with the major questions of political line which are at issue.” Repeatedly, SC/CC correspondence called upon Hugh to “substantiate the charges made or withdraw them”. No compliance with this instruction was forthcoming. It illustrated the leadership’s own collective liberal weakness in not ensuring or expelling a repeat offender violating the democratic centralist structures and disrupting the organisation.

Hugh’s actions clearly dismissed the development of a strong, collective and communist spirit, disregarding the procedures of the organisation in an arrogant self-belief of indispensable individualistic contributions. Others recognised Hugh as “erratic”, “individualistic” “deciding his own priorities”, displaying “high-handedness” and “pissing from a great height”. Criticism under the rubric of ‘*style of work*’ was regarded by Hugh as irrelevant and secondary: whereas he saw ‘strident language’, others saw abuse and slander.

Acting on the assumption that what was of over-riding importance was his right to voice his opposition to that “ideological trend” influenced by the British & Irish Communist Organisation that had as its “foremost advocates” the Standing Committee of the organisation. Other members, at all levels of the organisation, provided, by their indecision, support to Hugh’s actions by not challenging Hugh’s justification, as JB explained “insisting to others that your lies, distortions and manoeuvrings should be treated as secondary and your political line as primary.”¹⁰⁸

Hugh was not unaware of the issue of ‘style of work’. In a letter to the London District leadership (dated May 14th 1981), he injected a classic red herring into the mix to deflect and confuse the issue: Hugh questioned whether there was a breach in democratic-procedures by the Standing Committee in sending him their critical resolution of his behaviour and style, after all, he was a rank-and-file member “responsible to you”. He added a self-critical (and self-serving) modesty by explaining, “any short-comings in my style of internal polemics are very closely related to questions of overwork and general politic hectic-lattiness in London and should not merit such ‘ultimatum’-type language as that of the SC.”¹⁰⁹

Hugh sought to use the London District’s political disagreement with the TE-led Standing Committee as a building bloc in a political alliance. Hugh tried to capture the notion that he could decide who comprised the “revolutionary, anti-imperialist tendency” within the organisation, a shifting composition which depended on whom he sought to entice into a supportive relationship. Some comrades were thought important enough to cultivate by flattery and displays of false modesty that he had learnt from them; for others, there was accusation upon accusation. Hugh’s position was not helped by his urging to set aside “procedural considerations as he put it –

¹⁰⁸ “Dear Hugh” A letter from JB dated 4thOct 1982.Private Archive (unpublished)

¹⁰⁹ Letter to the London District leadership (dated May 14th 1981).Private Archive (unpublished)

what other members regarded as the established channels of communication and policy considerations within a democratic-centralist organisation. He declared that he was “quite prepared to take on the SC single-handed if I have too.”¹¹⁰

Hugh’s self-serving narrative of his “contributions to the revolution” was full of egotism. Hugh presented himself as the embodiment of the Irish republican supporters, thus any criticism of his actions was presented as an attack on both the Irish Republicanism and the Anti-imperialist politics he claimed to advance. Thus opposition to his politics was never a disagreement among comrades to be resolved by argument and persuasion, but the result of a vile political purpose i.e. the slander of comrades involved in anti-racist campaigns as representing ‘Ku Klux communism’. So, while Hugh asserted he was a leader-in-waiting, he characterised the existing leadership as comprised of “Orange factionalism, Strasserism, Ku Klux communism and enigmatism.”¹¹¹ So what made him think that given all his ‘criticism’ that he could be able to work within this same leadership?

Hugh was not a unique individual, nor his attitude uncommon in other political organisations, however the true flavour of Hugh’s political approach can be found in his presumptuous, “Policy Statement on Assuming Office in the CC.”. This document was produced in June 1982, when a CC member step-down and Hugh claimed he was in line to assume the vacant position on the basis of right of succession.

The response from the League Secretary, “David Evans”, to this letter was brief and to the point.

“Dear Hugh, Received your latest epistle. You are not on the Central Committee of the RCL, as you were not elected by Congress and the CC has not taken a decision as yet on whether to co-opt another member, let alone on who that other member might be.”

Hugh was stung into a two page response: the emotional hurt, the effortless arrogance, the delusional entitlement to office are clearly and convincingly laid out in his mind. So naturally he replies with,

“ This is a direct and brazen violation of the Constitution of the RCLB and represents an extremely serious escalation of the efforts of my political opponents in the RCLB to suppress democratic rights within the organisation.”¹¹²

Hugh goes on to condemn “shameless rigging of the whole election process” at the Unity Conference as “only those speakers were called upon who could be relied upon to speak against me in an atmosphere of pogrom and witch-hunt.” The missive ends with: “I therefore repeat: kindly send me the necessary papers for my attendance at the forthcoming meeting of the CC, of which I am a member, without further delay.” It is that final flourish of giving an order to an underling that betrays Hugh’s true class

¹¹⁰ Letter to LK, dated May 14th 1981. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹¹¹ Letter to RB – April 1982 p5. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹¹² Letter dated :Dhofar Day 1982. Private Archive (unpublished)

stand. By now the “impolite characterisation” is stock-in-trade style that undermined any political discourse.

“*Sleepers Awake*”, Hugh’s letter to the CC in January 1982 oozed defiance, repeating charges that there had been no break with social-chauvinism in the Central Committee, arguing that (the newly introduced concept) “CWM NC majority” had saved the RCL’s revolutionary life with its injection of its line on Irish Solidarity. His attempt to try and split the leadership along previous organisational membership is both crass and unsuccessful. How it tally with the charge that “The CC’s business is still conducted strictly according to the British Army’s fiat” is never adequately or consistently or coherently or even given an attempted explanation.

Drawing upon an exaggerated, and inflated, opinion of himself, Hugh claims “drafting ISTP, the main seminal programmatic work currently in existence in the revolutionary movement in Britain. All subsequent debates in the League have hinged around the question of the standpoint taken towards the argument in that document” – *Irish Solidarity: towards a Programme*, produced within the CWM in 1980. In October 1982, Hugh produced and publically distributed, a new document, “*Ireland and British Revolutionary History – a new interpretation*”.

An audacious solution to the “political and ideological atrophy of the League” was proposed: dissolving the CC and its replacement by a Secretariat led by a General Secretary, namely himself. Because? Hugh had “confident and determined grasp of line”. His answer was to look at the “revolutionary unity and dynamism” of the Revolutionary Communist Group.

The impressive impact that the activity of the Revolutionary Communist Group [RCG] had upon Hugh was reflected in his writing and praise for that organisation. Rather than work, as directed, in the League’s London Ireland Squad, Hugh chose to participate regularly in the North London Irish Solidarity Committee meetings influenced by the RCG. Although Hugh was critical of their support and defence of the Soviet Union, he described the RCG as “the only British Left group not to be caught hopping, ideologically speaking, by the Youth Uprisings “[of 1981], “the only one group on the British left that has so far made fairly consistent progress in word and action in identifying with these and others of the most revolutionary forces in our society.” These sentiments gained its own lexicon: labelled “the newly emerging forces” (essentially a ‘Black Youth Vanguard’ stance) was combined with recognition of different streams of struggle: the ‘Asian Communist tradition’ and drew upon the Irish Marxist, James Connolly and militant Irish Republican traditions, under the label of ‘Connollyism’. These ideological constructs provided a political platform and anti-imperialist worldview that became peppered with quotations from Kim Il Sung and his *Juche* philosophy. The main conceptual peg he hung his political stance on, that of “Asian Communism” evaporates the second any critical eye is cast on its ideological foundations, dismissed in a few paragraphs in the ‘October’ editorial of 1985 that observed some “glaring errors” in this ideological construct:

“The Irish national struggle is a complex one, having different trends within it. We support it, and the Republican movement who lead it, unconditionally. But we do not purport to be able to isolate the theoretical or ideological essence of it, under the name of Connollyism or Republicanism or whatever. And, although clearly it is a struggle against the British state, in the sense that British imperialism is the enemy of the Irish nation, it is a national struggle outside the territory of the British state, and must not be confused with the internal struggles against it. “Asian communism” is a figment of its inventor’s imagination. We know from its subsequent use that it was intended to embrace the writings of Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung, together with the revolutionary struggles of communists in Vietnam, Kampuchea, Malaya, the Philippines, South Asia etc. All these elements cannot be lumped together to form one school or form of communism. Nor can they be identified with the whole struggle of the Third World against imperialism and hegemonism. Apart from the fact that the Third World is not just Asia, there are many struggles against imperialism and hegemonism in the Third World which are non-communist. And of course, they do not amount to a “stream of struggle” against the British state.

What the former editor has done is to take disparate elements from vital and highly advanced struggles and to mix them together as if they could become an antidote to the backward ideology of the English working class....The black and Irish youth are the most revolutionary forces, the argument goes, the English working class will spontaneously follow in their revolutionary example.”¹¹³

This “black vanguard” position was influenced by the approach of the RCG who were said to have succeeded for some years, particularly during the period of the Irish Prisoners’ Hunger Strikes, in providing a “rallying-point in England for those who wanted an active alternative to the chauvinist and inactive politics of the middle-class left. In particular the RCG developed an effective style of defence of democratic rights as a result of the defence campaigns modelled on the ‘Glasgow 2’ campaign in Scotland and other cases of state suppression of anti-imperialist activities. As a result the RCG built a cadre force that stood out among other English-based groups for its efficiency and dedication.”¹¹⁴

Hugh’s admiration for the hyper-activity of the RCG was ironic given his own lack of activity, and well-observed disdain for the mundane work of the organisation he was a member. The absence at campaign meetings or internal meetings was always raised in London district, not surprising given the time required to pursue his ‘line struggle’ with the leadership of the RCLB. Hugh’s political ally, the editor of “*Class Struggle*” noted his weaknesses in a note to the CC (dated 15/10/1981) in his work on the paper. Hugh was said to have been passive in proposing coverage, showed much lower commitment to the development of the paper and was erratic in work. The main error was of individualism.

¹¹³ Editorial, *October* No.3 Summer 1985 p4.

An exposition of the line criticised can be found on EROL: THERE IS A WAY FORWARD – LET US TAKE IT! Speech of Comrade Keith Anderson to the Conference of Independent Anti-Imperialists held in Glasgow on November 27th 1983.

¹¹⁴ There Is A way Forward – Let Us Take It! See Footnote 1

In July 1981, Hugh asked to resign from *Class Struggle's* Editorial Committee and the responsibility of 'domestic editor. He cited three reasons:

- 1) The need to establish better relationship between political and family commitments having emerged from a family break-up with responsibilities for his daughter;
- 2) Noting he had failed to "integrate with the organisation" – that is, London district, and not attended Central London cell meetings ;
- 3) Needed "to rehabilitate myself" in terms of commitment and discipline in respect to league work.

Hugh's political platform had crystallised into easily sloganeered positions: He explained,

"The Connolly-Kimization of the League means upholding the vigorous national self-assertion of Asian Communism and other sustaining Third World forces and upholding above all the politically conscious anti-imperialist forces in this country who are now largely mobilised around the Gs."¹¹⁵

The stream of documents Hugh had sent to the CC since early December 1981 had not been circulated to the membership. The distribution by the Central Committee of the document, '*HG's charges against CC members and Rank and File members of the League*' [July 2, 1982] not only brought the issue to the attention of the entire membership (London comrades had been on the receiving end of Hugh's campaign), but harden the opposition engendered by Hugh's behaviour, it also increased exasperation at the leadership's vacillating liberalism, "talking tough" but indefinitely accommodating internal discussion. While the leadership seemed paralysed by its inability to decisively act upon the character assassination of members, the demagogic and derogatory accusations that pepper the letters, and disruption to the internal operation and life of the RCLB, those most affected by all this, a majority of membership in London, were clearer on what should be done. By July 1982 the London District Committee, the factory cell and North London cell were poised to call for Hugh's expulsion from the organisation.

A ten-point *Resolution on Comrade H.G.* was finally adopted by the leadership on October 7th 1982, but they were not as yet united over the degree of disciplinary action which should be taken. Unsurprisingly as Standing Committee member "Keith Anderson" allied himself with Hugh in the co-existent but non-League 'Mosquito Press' grouping. This faction had two other rank-and-file members, London member, former CPE (ML) supporter BH, and a Kent-based comrade, the veteran South African exile, Melville Fletcher.

Whilst still a member, Hugh had convened organisational discipline in his external relations by issuing, under the name of 'Hugh Stephens' of 'Mosquito Press'¹¹⁶, an unauthorised attack on the RCG while the RCLB co-sponsored the November 20th Irish

¹¹⁵ 'Gs' meaning Revolutionary Communist Group, and quoted in JB's "Dear Hugh" Letter 4/10/1982 Private Archive (unpublished)

¹¹⁶ Leaflet: Mosquito Press. Statement to the November 20th 1982 Conference

Solidarity Conference in 1982¹¹⁷. The Standing Committee noted serious breaches of democratic-centralism connected with the self-publication and distribution of the document, *“Ireland and British Revolutionary History – a new interpretation”* and the public criticism of David Reed’s series on the Irish Revolution (published in *Fight racism, Fight Imperialism* newspaper) for its “chauvinist criticism” of Sinn Fein, its “whites only tradition” and “Anti-Asian racism”.¹¹⁸

After three-quarters of a day of arguments the Central Committee formally repudiated the charges that Hugh had flung at LK, “the Orange gangster Chieftain”, and his creature ‘secretary’, “David Evans” and others, and condemned his “*style of work*”. For two years Hugh had campaigned against leading comrades, in particular targeted (former CWM comrade) the League Secretary who concluded that Hugh was “self-indulgent, egocentric and arrogant”, “an unreformable splittist, individual liar”¹¹⁹ whose “steadily mounting campaign of lies and misrepresentation” totally exhausted his patience. Hugh was “dangerous because of the C.C.’s weakness”, and in light of the “liberal irresponsibility” shown towards Hugh, an exasperated and exhausted “David Evans” made the decision to resign from the organisation in December 7th 1982.

Members were incessant with rage: A letter from Betty Paterson, the mainstay of ‘New Era Books’ reflected the rank-and-file’s disbelief that the leadership had indulged Hugh for so long, she noted, “...the C.C. by failing to follow the terms of its own previous resolution, shows itself to be impotent, indecisive, liberal and without leadership.... You had better pack up, resign and let others with courage, boldness and initiative take over ... Hugh has you by the ‘coat-tails’ and is no doubt very pleased with himself.”¹²⁰

Another veteran of the movement, Peter Jordan demanded that “H be immediately expelled...I think H is completely isolated in the final analysis”. If H stays the “RCL will be shattered, demoralised and disastrously splintered.”

A crescendo of protest threatened to engulfed the leadership: a resolution [dated 11 December 1982] from the League’s Primary leaders urged Hugh’s suspension from membership.

Context is all important: in open and democratic voting the membership – that Hugh describes as “confused and manipulated” – rejected his bid for leadership in the Congress elections; and again gave him no position of authority, at whatever level, within the organisation. Any position he had was appointed by the same leadership he derided. Hugh was seen, observed, listened, measured and rejected by members. The

¹¹⁷ The Irish Solidarity Movement that emerged in opposition to the ‘Troops Out Movement’ and the smaller ‘Hans off Ireland’ influenced by the Revolutionary Communist Party/Living Marxism trend, placed itself as the revolutionary alternative with solidarity work directed at the revolutionary forces in the British working class. It argued work based on the three demands of the ISM: ‘Victory to the Irish People’, ‘Troops Out Now’ and ‘The Right to Repatriation on Demand for all Irish POWs’ was how a new Irish solidarity movement could be built.

¹¹⁸ See: David Reed, *Ireland: The Key To The British Revolution*. Larkin Press: 1984.

¹¹⁹ *Testament and Call To Action* 10/10/2012. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹²⁰ BP. Letter 6/12/1982. Private Archive (unpublished)

common view of Hugh from the rank-and-file was that "...the style of struggle he uses is so grossly sectarian that it is not possible to see if there is any serious political content in them."¹²¹

A resolution from the London District [dated 9/8/1982] when calling for the withdraw of all Hugh's slanders noted, "virtually no cdes in Ldn who have any confidence in him as a communist, never mind a potential member of the leading body."

How far Hugh "had a strong formative influence on the development of political line has been lost in the mists of time. Certainly some supported him, but that the only support he had were three members (including himself) of the London Ireland squad, who renamed themselves, 'The James Connolly Kim Il Sung Squad',¹²² suggests that the "influence" was not as widespread as he imagined. It emerged that Hugh had maintained his own contacts with non-League people as a kind of substitute group, who he drew into supporting 'Mosquito Press' activities after he left the League.

The Standing Committee's inability to resolve "What do about Hugh?" was, in hindsight, understandable given the characteristic belief that "Politics should be in command" and the varying degrees of sympathy and identification with the political positions that he ostensibly promoted amongst the leadership. His ally in the editor of the League's paper had an influential position and sway within the organisation, more so in London (the biggest branch), others were more ambivalent because of the complexities of the political issues and conscious of past quilt and errors in Line. There were personal issues thrown into the equation. However, as they say, the villain had form. Hugh had worked on the National Committee of the CWM, with comrades on the Standing Committee; they had had experience of his mode d'operation.

Active in the twilight of the CWM, as editor of *New Age* and an early believer in his own opinions and abilities, Hugh's correspondence and memoranda for the National Committee were characteristically about Hugh.

"The UC [Unity Committee] should have ensured that I was put forward as a candidate for the amalgamated CC. I should like to have seen what the CWM would have been like these last two years without WPF [*Why Paul Foot Should Be A Socialist*], RPB [*Revolutionary Press in Britain*] and NA 6-19 [*New Age*]." ¹²³

In a circular complaining of the neglect by the CWM's industrial comrades in contributing material to the newspaper, he acknowledge a 'weakness', "I know this letter is rude; in particular I am conscious that intellectuals ought not to talk like this to workers. But I'm afraid it may take some time for me to learn good manners."¹²⁴

¹²¹Comments re Cde HG from the Ln FC to the CC. 9th August 1982. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹²²Minute of London Ireland Squad. *Emergency resolution of 3/8/1982*

¹²³Hugh, What Is To Be Done?!? Memorandum for NC 19/4/1980. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹²⁴Danger ... 'New Age' Dying On Its Feet. Private Archive (unpublished)

If consistency was a virtue, Hugh would have had a redeeming feature, unfortunately as JB observed, Hugh had a “colossal dose of vanity”. In his ‘*Memorandum on Leading Comrades*, Hugh, providing pen portraits of the merits and failings of leading comrades in relation to their role in supporting him, offered this insight from a would-be self-appointed saviour from on high.

“The terrible theoretical confusion that prevails makes me, I am afraid to see, something of a ‘man of the moment.’”¹²⁵

Perhaps the question to ask is why his assessment of comrades was in any way valid when what result was his own self-promotion?

Jan 6th 1983, Hugh was suspended by London District; Hugh followed this up on January 12th with his resignation from the organisation: “I shall continue to use my public name of H. Stephens in connection with my publishing work. As I am resigning in this non-contentious manner, I assume the question of the RCLB giving any publicity to the fact of my resignation is unlikely to arise. In such an event, however, I request that my family name be kept out of public (and for that matter internal) currency to avoid any possible compromising consequences for my family-residential and employment circumstances.”¹²⁶

Not everything was about Hugh in the RCLB, sometimes it just seemed that way. What he represented was the beginning of the end. The slow terminal course of the RCLB continued having been unable to sustain a political leadership. Before Hugh, there was the stifling struggle at the summit of the Political Committee, soon after the founding of the League, that saw the expulsion of the Anti-League Faction -portrayed as a Gang of Four! A struggle so restricted by the bureaucratic secrecy of the time that the Central Committee were kept in the dark until asked to endorse the then Chairman's resolution to expel the League's secretary and others!

Not surprisingly the second major struggle quickly followed, with middle leadership in London set firmly against the rightist politics and authoritarianism of the Chairman. The opposition to the intolerable errors received wider support although London was the cockpit of the struggle. A victory was gained at the price of a dose of liberal inductiveness that sweeps the organisation.

One internal appraisal written at the start of the 1980s could have equally been written throughout the following years: *What is the main feature of the current situation? Without doubt it is our lack of direction. Collectively we do not know where we are going and what we should do. ..The RCLB is in danger of disintegration. We have been unable to resolve certain fundamental problems of party building. Our unity is tenuous, based more on a common commitment to our ultimate goal than on any common understanding of how to get there... in the absence of clear cut debate...*

¹²⁵ *Minute By Minute* 1980. Private Archive (unpublished)

¹²⁶ To LDC: Resignation from the RCLB. January 12th 1982. Private Archive (unpublished)

[there is] no outlet except cynicism, demoralisation and ultimately disintegration."¹²⁷

Then some leading comrades acted out of desperation it seemed: one last push saw a remedy handed down as a leadership lead in the superficially attractive, but theoretically incoherent "Re-Orientate the League". Quickly known as RTL and as quickly rejected by a substantial majority of members, with Birmingham and Leeds leading the way, the rebellion against the lines contained within RTL, dove-tailed with exasperation at the inability of the leadership to resolve the asphyxia brought about by the activities of Hugh's "Kim Il Sung" faction in London.

Each time the organisation survived an upheaval or set back there was no convincing analysis which reassured and re-forged the membership; instead more work was expected of less people. Members were neither won to, nor educated upon the substantive issues involved as various threads were tightly woven until a question of style; political criticism and opportunism advancement were indistinguishable. The political damage to the organisation was almost spiritual: a lot of members trust, call it faith, in the leadership was shattered by these episodes. On the one hand rank and file comrades would complain about the lack of decisive leadership, on the other if the leadership tried to provide a lead, or laid down an instruction, the alarm bells of reminiscence would sound. After all, to hold a leadership position in the organisation seems to guarantee certain departure from active politics within a few years.

The Slow Relentless Decline in the 1980s

From the mid-80s the RCLB floundered, unable to assert itself into co-ordinated political intervention or consolidate its own political organisation. Individual political work seldom contributed to raising the profile of the organisation, and too often took on the character of support work independent of a political strategy. There was no shared practice to generate interest, and theoretical education or development became a personal pursuit. Such work became increasingly identified with individuals, and in the end assumed an importance beyond that of the organisation. As was observed:

"The organisation is not a social club, members met seldom outside RCL activity. This should be a source of political strength -that there is ideological unity -but as members work [when active] in isolated campaigns, it is a source of weakness as a group identity was not really developed. This was not always the case, and in early times it did have a stronger social aspect."

By the late 80s, the organisation was in a bad shape that was politically unsustainable, but it continued to exist, if only in name as the political authority of the centre was nil and liberalism dominated the organisation.

¹²⁷Private archive. Internal Document authored by LK [n.d. 1982?]. He half-heartedly supported RTL, along with KA, but quietly left the organisation after its rejection.

Politically the discussion at the last national conference in Hoxton in 1996 saw a broad ideological unity on most issues apart from the essential one of organisation. In a reflective piece, the RCLB was said to “exist at a local level active as far as circumstances allow.”¹²⁸ It was a detached and brutal critique on the state of the organisation that had experienced a deteriorating and unravelling as a democratic centralist organisation. When it spoke of a membership “shell-shocked by the experience” it was referring to the paralysis because of the struggles within the leadership. It expressed the fear that “single-issue spontaneity will dominate”, that “we seek succour in localism, in a focus on activity with an absence of any national perspective”. It raised a question over the very existence of the RCLB:

“We used to regard local activity as a component part of building a national organisation. The foundation of “the Party” was not originally seen in local campaigning, as if its structure would organically emerged out of building links between local struggles. There will always be the “parochial” struggle against the local representative of Capital. These, like trade union struggles, are reactive to the latest manoeuvre in class struggles. The role of Party-builders was not simply to be active in such struggles. As members of an organisation, armed with revolutionary theory and analysis, part of the role was to promote a programme that attracts militants, guides campaigns and builds strength. We have no sense of being a cadre building organisation. There is no organisational machinery to encourage and sustain this cultivation of revolutionary successors.”

This was not a new concern, in ‘Time To Reflect’¹²⁹, it noted that the old political certainties that brought people into the organisation were no longer there: “Within the League gradually political disenchantment with developments in China became widespread: Maoist no longer means automatically ‘pro-china’. The movement in Britain generally had “been reduced to the status of a propaganda cadre group”, what was worse, and of longer effect was that low self-esteem seeped into the very life and functioning of the organisation: members' reflected a deep seated mistrust in the ability of the collective to achieve anything; wracked by the liberalism of self-doubt, of an inability to lead and motivate the membership. That failure is partly the membership's silent wariness about where the leadership might lead it.

The rest of what had been termed the anti-revisionist movement fared no better. It was not an isolated decline. Within Britain, the political left contracted in the last two decades of the century, ‘left thinking’ gradually retreated to the confines of academia as the gravitational attraction of Left organisations diminished, the once dominant Communist Party riven by factional disputes moving to dissolution and trotskyists sects unable to break out of their circles. Indeed, the essentially sectarian idea of the League as constructing a vanguard had explicitly been abandoned with the publication of the Political Platform discussed at the start of the nineties. The events of the previous year in China¹³⁰ saw the organisation disassociate itself from their past political

¹²⁸ *October Review* August 1997

¹²⁹ Published in *October Review*. April 1998, still relevant although written five years earlier in 1993.

¹³⁰ Statement of the Central Committee of the R.C.L.B., June 6th 1989

identification with the ruling Communist Party but reaffirm its foundations in its political heritage and legacy still referred to as Marxism-Leninism- Mao Zedong Thought. The organisation deliberately did not associate itself with the trend around the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement that sought to claim 'Maoism' as its own.

The 1980s saw a progressive and significant decline of anti-revisionism on the left in Britain. The Maoist movement had already been reduced in size as a result of the defection of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (ML)'s allegiance to Albania in the late 1970s, and the adoption of a pro-Soviet stance by the Communist Party of Britain (ML).

The CPB (ML) reaction to the election of Thatcher in 1979 emerged shriller in a series of publications ¹³¹ that spelt out the nightmare that they foresaw:

"The prospect now before us is appalling. We have the hag-ridden Thatcherite nightmare of an impoverished, de-industrialised Britain, dependent on the fickle whims of the tourist trade, our sons as waiters and our daughters as prostitutes, a dependency of the USA – a Puerto Rico without the sun."¹³²

What underlay the political evolution of the CPB (ML) in the Thatcher years was an analysis that promoted the idea that "survival itself, in capitalism's present plight, has become revolutionary."¹³³ Chairman Reg Birch reflected the tone of the CPB (ML) in a speech at Conway Hall on November 30th 1979. Then he painted a picture of Britain in 'accelerate decline'; it was "either them or us. In the first place, and especially because of her ineptitude, Thatcher must go. Don't let us get involved in a jesuitical debate about who comes afterwards." That perspective was a political retreat from everything that had informed the life and practice of the Party up until that time. The view that survival was paramount led the CPB (ML) to a readjustment in its traditional hostility towards social democracy when, in the 1980s, it adopted the politics of "Thatcher Out!"

The personalised focus on the prime minister of the day was to characterise CPB (ML) propaganda throughout the 1980s. The restructuring of the home-based operations of British Imperialism were seen in very crude terms by the CPB (ML), as an almost conspiratorial attack on the working class' very existence: for *The Worker* the issue was that, "the employment of our class is dependent upon the wellbeing of our manufacturing base. If we are without industry then we are without the means to provide for ourselves." ¹³⁴

The Anglocentric analysis of the CPB (ML) betrayed a very weak grasp on the nature of contemporary imperialism, on the internationalisation of finance capital and production systems. While Marx pointed out that economic crisis were times not only of social conflict and decay but also involved the reallocation of capital, the CPB (ML)

¹³¹See the three-part, 'The Economics of Genocide' (1980) and 'Britain's Finances- Treachery in the City' (1984)

¹³²CPB (ML), *Protracted Struggle and the Working Class*. May 1986

¹³³*The Worker* April 26th 1979

¹³⁴*The Worker* May 11th 1978

had promoted a line of "absolute decline". They were ill-equipped to explain the longevity of the Tories in office and collapsed into a position of unconditional support for the Labour Party.

Throughout the build up to the 1987 General Election, the CPB (ML) observed that the working class had won the right to vote through class struggle:

"The winning of the vote by workers encroached on territory that Capitalism had treated as its own. We brought democracy to this country as part of a fight for basic rights ... You can't change the system by voting for another one, but you can change the government. Such an opportunity will soon arise, and votes provide a means of removing the Thatcher government from office. A victory for Labour would break the mould of Thatcherism, and it would indicate a renewed interest by citizens in the future of Britain."¹³⁵

The past criticisms of social democracy were put aside as the CPB (ML) supported what it described as "Labour's challenge to save Britain for its people."¹³⁶

Where once it identified trade unions with the working class, now the Labour Party was taken as leading the political fight on the basis that "in the present circumstances only Labour in government can replace Thatcherism".

The CPB (ML) identification with the cause of the Labour Party went further than the critical support call for by the trotskyist SWP. In the past, the CPB (ML) had boasted that it had a 'Don't Vote' line, but in 1987 it condemned those who advocated such a position, for "abstention is an abdication of responsibility ... Those who stand against Labour are for Thatcher, fringe candidates included." ; a position that would silence any independent Left voice outside of the Labour Party.

The Party had moved a long way since 1976 when *The Worker* argued:
" As long as workers are willing to limit their political action to, a choice between Labour and Tory, which is no choice at all since both parties are equally committed to the defence of capitalism, as long as the working class languishes in this ideological self-emasculatation of merely opting for what appears to be the lesser of two evils, there will be no limit to the miseries imposed on the working class in the interests of profit."¹³⁷

What had changed in the preceding years was that the CPB (ML) had transferred the perceived "fascist intent" of Labour's corporate strategy to the "free market policies" of the ruling Tory administration.

According to *The Worker*, the Labour Party stood for jobs and industry, peace, education, health and for the decent people of Britain. A public meeting held in London heard the CPB (ML) argue that " voting Labour is a matter of honesty and

¹³⁵*The Worker* February 23rd 1987

¹³⁶*The Worker* June 1st 1987

¹³⁷*The Worker* March 22nd 1976

integrity. We don't expect socialism on June 12. But we will have checked the move towards fascism."

A 1987 Election Special produced by the CPB (ML) said "The Working class must say 'Vote Labour', the workers' voice in parliament ... There is not a moment to dwell on the shortcomings of Labour. Kinnock its leader is doing a great job fighting divisions and sticking to the main task." Four days prior to the 1987 election, and oblivious to all the public opinion polls, *The Worker* proclaimed: "Thatcher is sinking faster than Venice. Thatcher has lost." Such a judgement only illustrated how far the CPB (ML) were in touch with the reality of the British political scene: in a widely inaccurate analogy calling Thatcher "the Hitler of today", it argued, "Hitler reduced some victims of the gas chambers to such a state of despair that they felt no emotion on meeting their fate. Thatcher is embarked on a similar process of dehumanisation."

The politics was defensive "in this period of counter-revolution", arguing that 'Thatcher Out' "should inform all decisions made on this and that policy wherever workers gather. That is the main task for us... Organise to survive, come together to survive, retreat collectively to survive, and then to counter attack... This is not a time of moving forward for the working class, but we must come to order to halt the decay of Britain under this system in absolute decline."¹³⁸

This perspective led to the CPB (ML) stating: We must stop immigration until the chaos has been reduced to order.¹³⁹ Perhaps flogging a dead-horse, *Class Struggle*, in its last issue of 1988 accused the CPB (ML) of "joining the rabid right ", and crowing that such poisonous rubbish would have crippled the Marxist-Leninist movement if unity at any price had been pursued in the 1970s. But then, as now, lines of demarcation were drawn. The narrow chauvinism of the politics of the CPBML was foreshadowed by its two-class line that saw only workers and bosses: it recognised no other contradictions or antagonisms to resolve.¹⁴⁰

Reg Birch had stepped down from his leadership position in 1985, but the politics was unaltered under its new Chairman, Les Elliot. In an address in April 1988 to the Central Committee, Reg informed them:

We are almost of age -a mature Party, beholden to none save the British Working Class, patronised by no external force or person, nor internally so within Britain. And at this time without cult figures, overpowering zealots, potential defectors ambitious for place, and such. These we have had, and they will show again.

The greatest number of departures from the ranks arose from faint hearts, lack of stamina; stemming from environmental reasons, domestic and economic, but in sum from lack of conviction.

So here we are, small but strong, and grown up.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸CPB (ML) Changing Gear. Leaflet advertising new pamphlet, Congress '88.

¹³⁹ CPB (ML) *Congress '88* page7

¹⁴⁰*Class Struggle* December 1988

¹⁴¹ CPB (ML) *Congress '88* page3

Another, and arguably more accurate reflection, anonymously posted online suggested:

For my money what has happened is that by pursuing an entrenchment into bureaucratic trade union officialdom – (an extraordinarily large percentage of their small membership are fairly senior, and it must be said pretty competent, either full time or lay TU officials) they are now just developing the politics which expresses the concerns and interest of full-time trade union official type folks in their mid-40s upwards.

Incidentally they are, or certainly WERE, quite good bar-room companions and I just wonder whether they are now soaking up the sort of sentiments to be heard in bars all over Britain – you see they always had the idea that “the class” was right and its concerns were always to be listened to – so if working class Brits are worried about asylum seekers.....get my drift.¹⁴²

The end of the decade saw the 10th Anniversary of the founding of the RCPB (ML) celebrated with an Internationalist rally on March 19th 1989 at Stratford Town Hall, in East London.¹⁴³ Despite the depleted resources of the organisation, each speech was “greeted with a sustained and enthusiastic standing ovation” according to the party press. One of the last large gatherings of the Bainite constellation had the First Secretary himself and Central Committee members from the Communist Party (Reconstructed) of Portugal, Communist Party of Denmark (ML), the Communist Party of Ireland (ML), Communist Party of Trinidad and Tobago, the Communist Ghadar Party of India and the U.S. Marxist-Leninist Organisation. But it did not accurately reflect the diminished presence and energy of the aging organisation.

The Working Peoples Party of England reasserted past lessons at the beginning of the decade and identified the strength of Labourism, and its affect on working class politics, as the major block to the re-building of a revolutionary party. In a view common to other Left groups it co-authored, with the Coventry Worker Association of Dick Jones, a pamphlet “*The Labour Party: a vehicle for Socialism?*” around 1982/3. Its candid assessment that “Revolutionary groupings had shown themselves incapable of using language and adapting theory to political practice in Britain” was not a unique observation even amongst maoists but besides noting the necessity for a Marxist Leninist party had no real strategy for building that party other than active involvement in struggle. Throughout the pamphlet there were expression of wariness about manoeuvring and manipulation by activists, and substituting organisational power for class power.

When the WPPE reconstituted itself as the WNG -Workers Newsletter Group- in April 1980 it was giving a greater reflection of its activity (the production of a bulletin) and ability:

¹⁴² October 15th 2003 Anecdotal “charliewoods2003”

¹⁴³ *Workers’ Weekly* Vol.16, Nos 12-14 March 23 – April 8 1989

"We have no desire to achieve 'domination', or to use a currently fashionable term 'hegemony', over others. We want to make revolution, that is serve the working people and help them achieve political, economic and social power. This is a giant and very serious undertaking.

At present we are not adequate for this task, politically, psychologically, morally or in numbers. But we are determined to learn, to change, to grow by experience of practical struggle and theoretical study and discussion." ¹⁴⁴

As a small group, the WNG 's more sober and respectable in their language and practice while being as ineffective as the more ultra Left in nature. What it criticised as "inadequate, immature politics" was never seriously challenged by its own low key theoretical and organisational approach. In the Christmas of 1980, the WNG suggested that "to overcome our deficiencies -the basic cause of our lack of objective achievement - we must re-study our own history critically-name calling and slogan mongering are no substitute for understanding." ¹⁴⁵

They were speaking for a movement they were always slightly embarrassed by, and seldom an integral part of: the end came not with a bang but a whimper and seemed to have faded away by 1986.

There had been one last issue of '*Voice of the People*' in the politically interesting summer of 1981 with its inner-city riots, before the CWLB faded away. One of its last members went on to join, and remained active, after the RCLB demise, in the 'George Jackson Socialist League', a component of the Co-Ordination Committee of Revolutionary Communists of Britain.

Ken Houlison and Val Sutherland had been the initial leaders of the Workers' Party of Scotland (ML) but Tom Murray had sustained the organisation's existence beyond its actual effective operation. Membership of the WPS had shrunk to three members and on February 9 1983, Tom Murray died at the age of 82; the Party was finally laid to rest. ¹⁴⁶

Paul Cockshot reported that COBI disintegrated when, "The split leading to Communist Formation occurred over whether it was correct to enter into alliance with Big Flame to stand candidates against the Labour Party in elections. Those of us who went into CF thought it was worth doing, but the huge gap between our Leninism and Big Flames ideology meant that the project eventually foundered." ¹⁴⁷

Abihimanyu Manchanda died of a massive coronary on October 27th 1985. In the last four years of his life, he took up his lifelong interest in alternative medicine,

¹⁴⁴ *Workers Newsletter* Vol 5:1 April 1980

¹⁴⁵ *Workers Newsletter* Vol 5:4 December

¹⁴⁶ The Workers Party of Scotland (without the ML) was revived by Matt Lygate after his release from prison. It went on to initiate in Glasgow's Maryhill what became the anti-poll tax movement in Scotland, which helped spark mass resistance throughout Britain to Margaret Thatcher's Tory government.

¹⁴⁷ CeaderLounge website August 9th 2008. **The Distinguishing Features of Leninist Political Practice** [was the document which codified the differences with COBI.

Homeopathy. There was no more realistic political assessment of Manchanda than that given by those politically close to him: After a highly laudatory memorial meeting held on December 8th 1985 at the Royal Commonwealth Society chaired by founder-leader of the Communist Party Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist) Harpal Brar. The Kennas later observed: "nearly everyone influenced by Manu appears to have dropped out."¹⁴⁸ As usual with such observations from the FCA, not totally true: Diane Langford stayed active in progressive politics through the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and at least one "scallywags" emerges in the leadership of various Left organisations. But the general point was that while past activists were no longer to be seen, they were not being replaced by new recruits: indeed, the RCLB had no new recruits in the final six years of its existence.¹⁴⁹

Both NCG and SCG pursued the attempt to rally others to their Programme Commission for nearly a year. After three years of trying to persuade others of "the correctness of this approach", the NCG embarked with the Stockport Communist Group (SCG) upon implementing the work of the Marxist-Leninist Programme Commission [MLPC] formally set up in the summer of 1982. Divorcing itself from practical experience or acknowledging any lessons to be drawn from past practice, the MLPC -as the commission was affectionally known to its participants -took on the attitude of a left academic project. One half of SCG, acknowledged that "the NCG also had a strong tendency to sneer at all movements which didn't come up to their high standards"¹⁵⁰ It had the same characteristics of the aborted attempt by CWLB (ML) and it never reality got off the ground and quickly collapsed

The Marxist-Leninist Programme Commission did not consider itself as isolated in the task of formulating the revolutionary programme for Britain; they had the support of those organisations that adhered to the Joint Communiqué of the 1980 international Conference convened by the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. Most of these constituted themselves as the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement in March 12th 1984. Both the NCG and SCG were signatories to the declaration announcing its formation, along with a Marxist-Leninist Collective, seemingly unknown to the rest of the movement in Britain.

RIM criticised the belief of the MLPC that it could draft a programme for revolution without participating in practice. It also denounced the SCG publication "*The Holy Alliance: The United Front Against Fascism and War, 1937-1947*" as liquidationist for its treatment of United Front politics. The MLPC saw the errors of its way. 'The collapse of the idea of laying down the line for revolutionary advance came amidst "a number of intense ideological and political struggles within" the fiveperson MLPC. There was a split on organisational lines as the SCG repudiated the struggle to develop the Programme.

Redfern and Dixon, after rejecting the idealist positions inherent in the MLPC, gravitated towards the organisation they had been expelled from in 1979. They worked under the

¹⁴⁸ *Finsbury Communist* 267, April 1987

¹⁴⁹ Anecdotal Source

¹⁵⁰ Self Criticism by PD: written when seeking re-admittance's into RCLB

supervision of its Manchester branch in the mid-1980s. NR had raised the possibility of re-joining the RCLB as early as 1979, and for a brief period was a candidate member of the Manchester branch until both deserted their flirtation with the RCL to reform the SCG. Perhaps it was a 'fishing trip' as they later explained away their behaviour. After re-establishing their relationship with the NCG, both organisations reconstituted themselves as the Revolutionary Internationalist Contingent [Britain] (RIC) -- a pre-party organisation based on the RIM Declaration. Rather mischievously, the RCLB published under the title "On Ultra-Left Revisionism"¹⁵¹ a criticism of RIM's founding Declaration they wrote when seeking re-admittance into the organisation.

Clearly by the end of the 1980s, the 'Maoist movement' was a spent trend in Britain: there was the Revolutionary Communist League seen as drifting into a heavily influenced-Third-Worldist interpretation of Maoism i.e. that revolution was more likely in the developing countries, that working class struggles in the imperialist centres had been modified by imperialist bribery and the national minorities in Britain were a leading component of the (to be built) vanguard. The Marxist Group perception of their politics was one that can be described as Maoist. Yet they scarcely refer to Mao in their literature. However in applying the Three Worlds Theory to British conditions came to the conclusion of supporting NATO's decision to station cruise missiles and increased military spending, all in the name of struggling against the main reactionary superpower- Soviet social imperialism. Theirs was in tune with Chinese foreign policy.

Another remnant of the once diverse Maoist left in Britain was the trend associated with its 'left wing': the Nottingham and Stockport Communist Group were the RIM official section in the UK. When RIM announced its existence in March 1984, these two local English groups were signatories on its Declaration. *A World To Win* -not the official, but widely recognised as the journal of the RIM grouping – had first appeared in 1985, and had been initially printed in Nottingham before outsourced to India.

The NCG/SCG created Revolutionary Internationalist Contingent has a London-based counter-part, the Revolutionary Communist Union [RCU] which is made-up largely of exiled militants of the Iranian Sarbsdaran organisation supported by a sprinkling of students. As a combined force they number around twenty. The characteristics they share besides both adhering to RIM, was an uncritical promotion of the Cultural Revolution and trumpeting the revolutionary struggle of the Communist Party of Peru, more commonly referred to as 'Sendero Luminoso -the Shining Path'.

Both groups were engaged in political consciousness raising activities -chalking-up slogans on the London Underground, and militant slogan shouting on marches. Both published similar programmatic documents: *Break The Chains!* Manifesto of the RIC, and the RCU's *Draft Programme for the Revolutionary Communists in Britain*.

Harry Powell argued that 'Break the Chains!' contained an analysis of British capitalism within the context of the current international situation, an assessment of the historical development of the international communist movement and a programme

¹⁵¹"On Ultra-Left Revisionism" *October* 4 (1988)

for political action and party-building. While inadequate in many respects, it nonetheless represented, for its co-writer, a theoretical advance over anything previously produced by Maoists in Britain.

The conclusion was that:

the fundamental error of the Marxist-Leninist movement during the 1960s and 1970s was the failure to achieve any sort of true unity of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory and practice. Instead there was a massive gap between the professed theory and the actual practice of the movement. There was dogmatist theorising and empiricist practical action.¹⁵²

The problem facing the self-declared RIMish Maoists was that its reach exceeded its grasp. It had categorised the majority of the movement as no longer maoist thus narrowing its immediate pool of activists, so party-building fell onto the shoulders of a small group, ill-equipped to achieve its objective. One difficulty the new organisation had was sheer lack of personnel. At no time were there as many as a dozen members and supporters¹⁵³

The contradictions within the Revolutionary Internationalist Contingent [Britain] saw it split in mid-1987. Partly because, according to its one-time leading member, the London group of Iranian Maoists, had never grasped or agreed with the project of the Marxist-Leninist Programme Commission. Their approach to party-building was empiricist, i.e. one simply formed a group and plunged into political activity hoping that somehow everything would be sorted out as one proceeded. These comrades were much influenced by the "anti-revisionist" line of the RCP, USA so in practice their activity consisted of going to demonstrations and meetings to sell literature and holding the occasional public meeting of their own. Being based in London, it was quite easy for them to fall into the illusion of imagining that they were making some real headway. Given the concentration of cosmopolitan and radical elements in the capital it is not too difficult to sell a few papers and stage a meeting or demonstration, (usually small), on just about anything. People can run around for a long time, maybe years in some cases, engaged in this sort of activity before they realise that they are going around in circles.¹⁵⁴

The Nottingham-based remnant was unable to cement organisational/programmatic unity with the London-based Iranian Maoists comrades, so the Revolutionary Internationalist Contingent [Britain] was formally declared dead in 1989. The blame lay partly with Harry, as he acknowledged:

We did not provide sufficient leadership for our Iranian comrades who, after all, were only temporarily domiciled in Britain. Perhaps if leadership had been provided there would have been a better outcome.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵²*Break the Chains* (1986) Section 5.3

¹⁵³Harry Powell, Is A Revolutionary Movement Possible In An Imperialist Country Today? March 1993: <http://freespace.virgin.net/pep.talk/RevMov.htm>

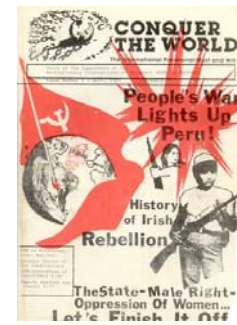
¹⁵⁴Harry Powell, Is A Revolutionary Movement Possible In An Imperialist Country Today?

¹⁵⁵Harry Powell, Is A Revolutionary Movement Possible In An Imperialist Country Today?

There followed a period of confusion. From the London group, a splinter, seemingly



based in the Kurdish struggle, emerged in 1989 calling itself 'The Revolutionary Vanguard in Britain,' (UK), they published a badly designed photocopied journal, Red Rebel, (six issues at least appeared during 1990/91) .It had a limited London circulation.



Also based in the exiled and residing Maoists from Turkey, Kurdistan, Iraq and Nepal, there

was the Revolutionary Communist Maoists (MLM), another small group of UK supporters of RIM that published 'Conquer The World' in 1988, that saw 13 issues (at least by December 1991) and it ceased publication around 1993). At the same time, the organisation, largely Iranian in composition, was renamed, in the spring of 1991 the Revolutionary Communist Maoists (RCM).

Throughout the late 1980s the RIM organisations have made no discernible impact on the British political scene. Little was achieved by the remnants of the pro-'Gang of Four' groups.

There was a grouplet on the left flank of the movement that went beyond the Maoist canon to embrace the political thought of Kim Il Sung as its guiding philosophy.

Mosquito Press established by 'Hugh Stephens' while still a member of the RCLB to publish his individual attacks upon both the Revolutionary Communist Group [RCG], with whom the RCLB was working with on Irish Solidarity activities, and upon his political opponents, whom he attached the label of 'Orange faction', within the RCLB . He was instrumental in organising a faction within the RCLB that identified with Juche and Kim Il Sung.

By 1983, this faction left to become politically independent as the 'anti-imperialist' Mosquito Press, a vanity project of one disruptive individual in spite of the various guises it was publically presented throughout the 1980s. Mosquito Press was its most well known expression, as each change of organisational name brought diminishing returns in terms of membership and activity. It was the first public expression, publishing the memoirs of Nora Connolly O'Brien, and distributed English-language editions of Korean publications as well as publishing "*Korean Outlook*" to promote friendship for Korea and solidarity with Korean reunification". Mosquito Press worked with a group based in Scotland, whom were also critical of the RCG, and went on to form a minuscule organisation called the Scottish Communist Republican Party [SCRP]. Mosquito Press, rebadged as the Communist Organization of England, claimed to be the 'English component' of the Communist Organisation of Scotland and England, whilst the SCRP was its other component. This organisation, COSE, declared its political identity with North Korea.