

The UCD branch of the Socialist Workers' Party have recently decided to leave the main party and re-name ourselves Socialist Alternative. From now on we will operate as an independent socialist group; we aim to work with other activists on the anti-capitalist left and would like to help build up an activist network of left-wingers who have been alienated by the sectarianism and dogmatism of the existing far-left parties.

Our decision to leave the SWP was not taken lightly; like any intelligent socialists, we deplore the propensity of the far left for splits which paralyse our ability to fight against the system. For a long time, we disagreed strongly with the party leadership yet aimed to reform the SWP from within. Only after realising that this was an impossible task did we opt to break away. There were three main reasons for our decision:

1) The party's approach to propaganda and recruitment is so misguided that it does more harm to the socialist cause than good; its paper, leaflets, posters and slogans give the most unattractive image of revolutionary Marxism to potential sympathisers that could be imagined

2) The party's general political perspective is completely out of line with reality; by exaggerating the scale and depth of radicalisation in Ireland and Europe, the SWP leadership is distracting attention from the work necessary to sow the seeds of a genuine revolutionary upsurge in the future

3) The internal regime of the party makes it impossible for SWP activists to correct the inadequacies of the party line; policy decisions are the prerogative of a self-perpetuating clique who discourage internal debate and isolate dissenters in order to prevent a meaningful challenge to their authority

A brief account of our experiences as SWP members will explain how we came to the above conclusions. We joined the party on arriving in college (or in one case a year beforehand) because we saw it as the natural home for hard-left socialists like ourselves. None of us became socialists because we were convinced by the arguments contained within Socialist Worker; we all made our own way to the far left, and had our own ideas of what a socialist organisation should be. It soon became clear that the SWP left a lot to be desired; however, we found the arguments of Socialist Review and the ISJ generally congenial and felt a broad affinity with the party leadership and its aims, even if we disagreed about certain tactical questions. Genoa proved to be a turning-point, though not in the way we had hoped. The SWP's full-timers came back from Italy convinced that the revolution was nigh and that it was necessary for party activists to shift up a gear and build a mass revolutionary party as quickly as possible. They also felt it essential to curtail any autonomy which had been allowed to branches in the past; a rigid, military-style discipline was now required for the tasks facing the party. In September of last year the first of many blazing rows erupted when we questioned this analysis. After we argued against the idea that revolution was on the short-term agenda, and the ultra-left slogans and propaganda which accompanied it (we were particularly vexed by the needless proliferation of exclamation marks, as if

revolutionary socialism could be sold by the same methods used to promote supermarket clear-outs), our commitment to the cause was questioned by two PC members. Reference was made to the recent expulsion of the ISO-US from the International Socialist Tendency (mystifying to us at the time, this now makes perfect sense, as we were unwittingly repeating the argument of the ISO almost word for word). So our year was off to an inauspicious start, and matters quickly got worse. Our differences with the party leadership concerned two main issues: the paper and the party's style of recruitment. As one SWP pamphlet put it, the party's essence can be summed up in one sentence: sell the paper and recruit. It's unfortunate therefore that their approach in these areas is atrocious. The Socialist Worker is a trashy, sensationalist rag, not a serious left-wing newspaper. Its editors ignore the most basic principles of journalism; there's no distinction between reportage and opinion, and stories are written in a crudely didactic style which drives home the message with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Anyone who suggests a lighter touch is accused of wanting to dilute the SWP's principles. We know many people through friends and family who'd like to buy a good leftist paper; none of them have any desire to buy Socialist Worker. This would be bad enough in itself; but given the importance which the paper holds in the party's activism, its dire quality undermines everything else. The jewel in the party's crown should hardly be a lump of coal. Selling the paper is supposed to be the most important way of recruiting new members; if nobody wants to read it, a problem presents itself. Our solution was simple: we opted out of paper sales. This was greeted with near-hysteria by the SWP hierarchy. They were similarly perturbed by our criticisms of their recruitment style. As soon as a person is foolhardy enough to tick the box reading "Yes, I'd like to join the SWP" and leave a phone number, they're besieged with phone calls at all hours of the day and night urging them to attend a meeting/paper sale or whatever else. Rather than being allowed to find their own level of involvement, new members are immediately hassled into becoming full-time activists; the party leadership sends them out to sell papers and distribute leaflets before they even understand fully what the SWP's politics are about. Many concluded that they had stumbled across some sort of bizarre religious sect and never came back. The SWP's approach to recruitment in broad, united front groups is similarly inept. In an anti-war group, for example, it's quite easy to make the argument linking war with capitalism if it's done well; but shouting a few slogans and standing outside the meeting afterwards selling papers is futile. This approach is particularly inappropriate in a college, where you'll find the same faces coming to several meetings throughout the year. It's possible to build up relationships with sympathetic people and convince them that socialism isn't just for nutters. If they want to come along to SWP meetings, our posters are up and they'll know where to go; constant pressure to join won't do any good. Selling papers on such occasions would be perfectly acceptable if the paper was any good, but we've covered that ground already. It should be noted that nowhere in this indictment will be found a questioning of the principles of revolutionary Marxism; this should be stressed since any questioning of the party's tactical approach is usually met with irrelevant (not to mention impertinent) insinuations about the strength of the questioner's commitment to socialism. It should be clear to any intelligent person that it is quite possible to be a committed Marxist while rejecting an evangelical style of recruitment (as it was described to us by a member of the SWP's Political Committee during one discussion; this individual made clear his contempt for such a style at the time).



We saw recruitment and propaganda as tactical issues; there was no need to change the party's ideology, merely its way of presenting the case for socialism. So we were bemused and increasingly irritated by the consternation which our arguments caused. "Sit-downs" became ever more frequent; this absurd ritual, whereby an errant party member is summoned for coffee and sternly informed of the error of his/her ways, is supposed to correct any deviation from the party line. It proved ineffectual because we argued back and declined to recant our heresies. The leadership were shocked by this response; despite their consistent failure to persuade us of the correctness of their position, they expected their superior authority to be sufficient argument. Dark mutterings went on behind our back; we were described as "reformists" and "indistinguishable from Socialist Youth" among other things. After a few months of this, it was clear that UCD SWSS was regarded by the party leadership as a rogue branch; we later discovered that SWP members who came to UCD had been advised not to join us lest they be infected by heresy. When we ran a candidate for president of the Students' Union, the only college branch in Ireland capable of doing so (and polled 40%), we were offered no assistance or encouragement from the leadership (although they did expect to be granted a veto over the manifesto). We were increasingly forced to ask questions about the party's internal regime. We were never given reliable information about the activities of other branches, let alone about the discussions they were having; we were only informed once of the time and location of a meeting of the party's National Committee. No opportunity was given to us to offer constructive opinions about party policy (the details of which are rather obscure for the uninitiated); any attempt to improvise our own approach was sabotaged by ever-closer supervision of our activities. The party's student organiser seemed to think it his business to attend meetings of united front groups in UCD and speak on behalf of our branch despite not being a UCD student; he justified this behaviour to one party member by explaining that he had to "substitute himself" for the student members.

Anyone with a smattering of Marxism should be familiar with Trotsky's remarks about "substitutionism", remarks which seem remarkably apposite when considering the SWP. The party leadership decide what the SWP is to be, based on their close study of the first volume of Tony Cliff's biography of Lenin (apparently all the knowledge which is required); a mould is constructed into which rank-and-file members must fit. No flexibility or autonomy can be permitted. So the ideal member of a "revolutionary" party is a compliant drone. Anyone who emerges from the rank-and-file membership confident and articulate enough to challenge the leadership is expelled; the infection is contained by the lack of horizontal communication between branches. The PC is a self-perpetuating elite, re-elected year after year; new leaders are co-opted, not chosen by the membership. The contradiction between this type of organisation and the SWP's ostensible ideology ("socialism from below", remember) need hardly be stressed. Since we began to question the nature of the SWP, the knowledge gained from our direct experience has been enhanced by research on the Internet, the fruits of which can be found elsewhere on this website. Briefly, the last decade has seen a rapid degeneration of the International Socialist Tendency; affiliated parties from New Zealand to the USA have been expelled for disobeying orders from London. Shortly before Christmas, most of the Belfast branch were expelled from the SWP for opposing these developments (no attempt was made by the PC to inform us of this decision; it would be surprising if other branches were informed either). Currently Alex Callinicos is conducting a shameful vendetta against the Zimbabwean ISO. The roots of this degeneration can be found in

the ideas of party organisation formulated by the SWP's theoreticians in the late sixties and early seventies. This was compounded by the adoption of a catastrophist perspective reminiscent of the third-period Comintern. The whole sorry story can be traced in the documents assembled here. The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that the SWP is heading for disaster and all serious Marxists would do well to abandon this sinking ship. Despite its innumerable flaws, the SWP is the most prominent and active group on the far left both in Ireland and in Britain; until an alternative group emerges, it will continue to recruit idealistic young people attracted by socialist ideas and turn them into burnt-out cynics within a year or two. At a time when events in Seattle, Genoa, Palestine and Venezuela are leading more and more people to question the capitalist system, the ineptitude of the SWP is positively criminal. The task of creating an alternative home for socialists is urgent. Anyone who shares our views should get in touch.

Signed: Donal Lyons, Daniel Finn, Ciaran Murray, Finbar Dwyer, James Redmond (UCD SWSS Branch Committee)