

The British SWP crisis: some reflections

Tuesday 12 February 2013, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#) (Date first published: 5 February 2013).

Contents

- [A unique situation, or perhaps](#)
- [The Delta case](#)
- [The Leninist party: image \(...\)](#)
- [The apparat](#)
- [Open all hours](#)
- [Atmospherics](#)
- [The sexism thing](#)
- [What next?](#)

"Hear this, ye old men, and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land. Hath this been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?"

Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.

That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten.

Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine; for it is cut off from your mouth."

Joel 1:2-5

The current crisis in the SWP, it is fair to say, has been seriously traumatic for many comrades within and without the party – indeed, anyone in the party who can just blithely carry on in these circumstances seriously needs to go away and examine his conscience, assuming he has one. There have already been thousands of words written on this, and good discussions initiated [[1](#)] – what follows are meant only as some fairly unsystematic reflections on the present situation and on how we got here. Needless to say, not all the bases will be covered by any means, but if a contribution can be made to the discussion, well and good.

More particularly, the author aims with this initial post to flag up certain aspects of party organisation and culture that are making a bad situation worse. The starting point is, quite simply, that **judged by its own criteria, the SWP is not fit for purpose**, and quite possibly it hasn't been for many years. Broader questions such as whether the party's current perspectives make sense (they don't), whether the broader British left is fit for purpose (it isn't) or what forms a revitalised left might take (extremely speculative at this point) will have to wait for later.

Fair warning: this post is a little on the prolix side. I advise you to read this wonderful post from Madam Miaow for a punchier take on events [[2](#)].

A unique situation, or perhaps not

First, let us begin with some background.

For many years, the main Trotskyist current in Britain was that led by Gerry Healy. And the Healy organisation – latterly known as the Workers Revolutionary Party – was actually rather impressive in its heyday. To be sure, it did acquire a very bad reputation over the years for having a thuggish and violent internal regime, sometimes spilling over into physical attacks on members of other groups; for its habit of slandering anyone who disagreed with it as an agent of the CIA, the KGB, or both; and for an impenetrable “philosophy” whose main function was to justify whatever Gerry wanted to do at any particular moment.

Nonetheless, it was still a shock when Healy was exposed in 1985 as a hardened sexual predator who had raped or sexually abused literally dozens of female members of his organisation [3]. This was not just the moral failing of one bad man, though Healy was undoubtedly a very bad man; it was the moral bankruptcy of the entire organisation that he had ruled with a rod of iron for decades. The bankruptcy of those WRP leaders who had covered up for him for so long; also, painful though it is to admit it, of the many WRP cadres, experienced working-class militants with a solid grounding in Marxist theory, who stood by as Healy raped first their wives, then their daughters, and **could not bring themselves to see** what the Great Leader was doing.

It is true that the WRP leadership split down the middle, and eventually removed Healy and his most slavish acolytes. But it is hard to find anyone who emerges from that story with much credit. Certainly not those leaders (and fellow travellers including at least one prominent Labour politician) who insisted for years that Healy was completely innocent and had been fitted up by MI5. On the other hand, the anti-Healy faction led by Cliff Slaughter initiated a wide-ranging discussion of what had gone wrong, open to anyone who agreed that Cliff Slaughter was a nice man who, during his very close thirty-year association with Healy, had had no idea what Gerry was doing. The only conclusion to be drawn was that the whole edifice of the WRP was irredeemably rotten; the only hope that some decent people might reflect on the experience and learn.

Let us now shift continents and organisations. In 1988 one Mark Curtis was arrested in Des Moines, Iowa, on a charge of sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl, and subsequently convicted and sentenced to 25 years in prison. (He was released after eight years.) Curtis was a member of the US Socialist Workers Party, no relation to the British organisation of the same name. At that time the US SWP, under the guidance of its maximum leader Jack Barnes, had purged a series of oppositions, including virtually all the surviving founders of the party, and the organisation had become an inward-looking sect, developing many of the features of a cult.

How did the Barnes organisation react to the Curtis arrest? Firstly, by claiming a huge state conspiracy to frame up Curtis on account of his political beliefs. This was not very likely from a glance at the facts of the case, such as the implausibility of such a political frame-up relying on the testimony of a frightened 15-year-old Black girl and her 11-year-old brother. In fact the evidence against Curtis, who was literally caught with his trousers down, was overwhelming. Still, it did allow the Barnesites to launch a large-scale defence campaign, publishing a book about Curtis’ martyrdom, getting various union figures and leftist celebrities to sign Free Mark Curtis petitions, and not least, raising money for the cause. It seems, incidentally, that the Barnesite leadership themselves didn’t have much faith in Curtis’ story, as his party membership was quietly terminated at some point after his release from prison.

All right, you will say, but these cases were a long time ago, and relate to notoriously sectarian organisations. Do they really have any wider implications?

I would argue that they do – at least, a reaction that says “Those guys were nutjobs, we have nothing to learn from their mistakes” is not very responsible. The fact is that character is not coterminous with politics – not everyone on the left is a nice person, far from it, quite a few are utter scumbags. These things can happen anywhere; the crucial thing is how you respond to them, and it’s not unknown for organisations or movements to close ranks and cover up. Indeed, if you think this only happens in the rarefied world of Leninist politics, this horrific story from Occupy Glasgow should open a few eyes [4], not least the victim-blaming attitude of Occupy activists, and indeed the accusations that even mentioning what had happened was a symptom, not of common human decency, but of hostility to Occupy, and therefore illegitimate.

It can happen here; it can hit you right where you live; what matters is how you respond.

The Delta case

What follows in this section, on the case of “Comrade Delta” and the woman known as “W”, will be fairly sketchy on the details of the case – much of which we simply do not know for certain – and will focus more on the process involved. The reasoning for this will, I hope, become clear, and is not at all intended to minimise the seriousness of a rape charge (which in any case we are unable to decide here), but rather to point out the institutional failure. If you haven’t read them already, I thoroughly recommend this thoughtful and humane piece from Laurie Penny [5]; this very fine piece [6], and this follow-up [7] from Richard Seymour; and the transcript [8] of the closed session at conference. [9]

Firstly, even in an ideal situation – which this clearly was not – there is an obvious question of whether the party’s Disputes Committee was competent to hear a complaint of something as serious as rape. Even the state’s criminal justice system, with all its resources and with all the changes to the legal framework in recent decades [10], finds it difficult to secure convictions, not least because on a purely evidential basis, rape is a difficult crime to prove beyond reasonable doubt. Would an SWP disciplinary panel have the necessary expertise to handle such a case? What forensic resources would it have? If it ruled that an allegation of rape was proven, what penalties could it apply beyond expulsion from the SWP? So even if one accepts an argument that an internal disciplinary panel was superior to a court of law on ideological grounds, because DC members had a fine grasp of political issues surrounding women’s oppression (I incidentally don’t accept this argument, and would hope that nobody but the most brainwashed cultist would do so), there are compelling practical arguments that **the party was simply not competent to investigate the issue.**

There is also the important factor that justice must not only be done, but be seen to be done. There are a whole range of social institutions, from the Boy Scouts to the Catholic Church to the BBC, which have learned the hard way that an institution cannot credibly investigate itself, especially where sexual offences are concerned. The problem is exacerbated when the Disputes Committee which is investigating a Central Committee member contains two members of the CC on secondment, and when all five of the remaining members are long-term friends and collaborators of the CC member. Even if we allow for the personal integrity of the DC members, and trust that they approached their task seriously, it will inevitably look like a whitewash. Moreover, and I don’t think the leadership have considered this – it isn’t fair on the accused either, because outside observers will naturally assume that he was let off as a result of the leadership closing ranks and organising a cover-up. Unless a credible process is gone through, he will always have that stain on his character.

For a thoroughly sensible view on how this could have been handled, I recommend this post by Linda Rodgers [11]. However, this point is worth noting:

*"I have also faced the argument that the DC has investigated 9 rapes in the past (I'm not clear on how recently these 'investigations' were conducted). I believe this argument is put forward to reassure comrades of the competency of the DC. **I don't find it reassuring in the slightest; in fact I find it terrifying.**"*

Quite so, because of course this case wasn't handled in an ideal way. A case that would have been almost impossible to handle well was in fact handled appallingly badly. Leaving aside the issue of whether DC members asked inappropriate questions, it is clear that the CC had been seriously misrepresenting the situation to the members as far back as the latter half of 2010, when rumours first began to circulate about Delta; and that this included the grotesque spectacle of the "special session" at the 2011 conference [12], when a highly evasive speech from Delta was met with an orchestrated standing ovation, stamping and chanting. Although the rumour mills had been working overtime, few comrades attending this year's conference would have been aware of the precise nature of the allegations until the closed session started. The close vote on the DC report, under conditions of very heavy whipping, is a small indication of the sheer anger felt by many delegates at how their leaders had blatantly lied to them about this extremely serious matter.

In fact, this is tacitly acknowledged by the CC whose statements, whether in *Party Notes* or in Alex Callinicos' libertyvalanced *Socialist Review* article [13], barely go through the motions of defending how the Delta case was handled. Instead, they beat their chests about "attacks on the party", about the need to get off the internet and into the "real world", and above all, for the comrades to respect the CC's authority. This is not very impressive.

So, how did we come to this pass?

The Leninist party: image and reality

The SWP fondly believes it is building a modern British analogue to the Bolshevik Party. So do many, many smaller far left groups. This is, let us say, problematic. I direct readers to this elegant and sensible contribution from Tom Walker [14], and a typically erudite piece from Paul LeBlanc [15].

Firstly, there's the question of whether the left's image of "Leninism" bears any substantial resemblance to what was actually advocated and practiced by Lenin, and in my view, the sterling work of Lars Lih has left our latter-day Bolsheviks without a leg to stand on. The conceit that we could mine a bad translation of *What Is To Be Done?* for a ready-made menu of how to build a revolutionary party, perhaps augmented by Cliff's four-volume Lenin biography, has to be discarded.

There's a secondary issue of whether, even if we can retrieve an accurate picture of Lenin's concept of the party, it's worth trying to revive that beyond picking up a few pointers on method. I would argue not; in today's context, the history of Bolshevism is richer in lessons on what not to do. To put things in perspective, if Laurie Penny draws on the politics of the 1960s New Left, then Laurie is at an advantage in that she's only 40 years out of date, while the SWP is 100 years out of date. The radical left really needs to break from the cargo-cult mentality of trying to re-enact things that our ancestors did in the hope that the result will be different this time. [16]

Nonetheless, there are peculiar features of the SWP that are worth drawing out, not least because SWP discourse has a long history of not wanting to discuss internal party structures. This (at least in the self-serving reasoning of the CC) is because the structure of the party is a distraction from what's going on in the real world. One notices the same argument being dragged out again in the current crisis, which is really dumb when the SWP's disciplinary processes are the reason why real-world allies are now shunning the party. It is important to reaffirm that **the regime question is a**

political question.

Trying to anatomise the SWP's mode of organisation is a seriously difficult task. It's not like, for instance, the Socialist Party's replication of the structures of the official labour movement, complete with its plethora of subcommittees and working groups, and fairly well-defined pecking order based on length of service. By contrast, the SWP's informal, semi-anarchist style almost defeats analysis. You really need to be a member for quite a few years to get a sense of how it actually functions. This informality, of course, suits the leadership right down to the ground, because it's much harder to hold anyone to account. And, if public choice theory has taught us anything, it's that a non-profit bureaucracy can be every bit as self-serving as a corporation.

One of the most common misconceptions about the SWP is that the leadership is obsessed with imposing ideological conformity. No, it really isn't – though holding a dissenting view may cause you to be mistrusted, as long as you don't challenge the CC's authority you can survive in the party for many years. The key point – and this is slightly problematic for a revolutionary party supposed to be made up of society's rebels – is that the SWP has developed a very efficient system for **rendering the members docile**. I would say this was deliberate, but if Cliff had designed things this way they certainly wouldn't have worked as effectively as they do.

The apparat

Formally, annual conference is the supreme authority. In practice, there's no way to challenge the CC outside of conference, which makes it very difficult for conference to hold the CC to account. This is reinforced by the ban on factional activity except in the prescribed pre-conference discussion period (the beginning of which is often marked by expulsions for factionalism, pour encourager les autres) and the use of the slate system to elect the CC, which effectively means the outgoing CC re-appoints itself (with one or two personnel changes for reasons that are not made clear to delegates). So the leadership does tend to become a self-perpetuating clique.

Now, if the SWP has a grandiose self-image – remember that this is an organisation of a few thousand which aspires to overthrow every government in the world – this is even more concentrated at the top, in the CC and the surrounding layers of senior cadre (we might borrow from Orwell and call them the Inner Party). This is where you find the talk about “interventionist leadership”, which views the party leaders as chess players moving their pawns around. Cliff, for all his faults, managed to temper this attitude with self-deprecating humour; his successors less so. One recalls Alex Callinicos' great-grandfather Lord Acton, who had a good saying about power.

And then there's the full-time apparat built up over the organisation's 60-year existence. As Kevin Crane puts it [\[17\]](#):

“The SWP centre is a truly bizarre institution that many SWP members, particularly those outside London, quite simply know nothing about. The SWP's 2,500 or so subs-paying members pay for the payroll of dozens of people, mostly to do work which other organisations (including most of the SWP sister groups in other nation-states) devolve to volunteer activity by regular members. The number of journalists employed on its weekly paper is something like double the full-time staff of a typical local weekly with a higher circulation. Bureaucracy, sadly, is self-justifying: there are fifteen people, more or less, paid to produce and distribute the party's publications, and this tends to outclass any debate about the role of those publications in political activity.”

“There is team of people building and promoting meetings on behalf of the membership and there are even people solely gathering money. These teams exist and, naturally, have to justify their

existence, so they are continually forced to act as substitutionists for activity that, in a party of leaders, one should really hope would be done by lay members. And, as branches have become less and less central to SWP members' lives over the years and played less and less of an organisational role, it has become progressively ever more detached and bastardised from its roots. It has become the Vatican City-State of the party and is convinced, like all bureaucracies, that it must expand to meet its expanding needs. It also, like all bureaucracies, has the organisation, time and resources to put its views across and to stifle points of view that do not suit its needs."

That's the centre. Add on to that the full-time district organisers, appointed by the CC and fiercely loyal to it, who exercise almost feudal dominance in their areas, and usually don't contribute much that couldn't be done by lay members. Your district might luck out and get a really good one, but then we come to the question of who organises the organisers, for he is the man who sets the tone. For many years that was Chris Bambery, whose style of man-management could be fairly described as draconian; he was later replaced by Martin Smith, who was arguably worse. The system of appointment positively encourages brown-nosing of those above and casual brutality towards those below. And not merely among party workers; young recruits who aspire to be party workers are acculturated into these attitudes.

This is not, incidentally, unique to the British SWP – the US SWP, which parallels it in some ways, developed an enormous bureaucracy on the back of a commercial income beyond the members' subs, and which in turn provided the material base for Jack Barnes and his camarilla to take it over and turn the party into its opposite.

Add in other elements of party life, such as the CC's operation of cabinet responsibility, where they all show a united face to the membership on every issue (for instance, they were unanimous in support of John Rees, until they dumped him) and an interpretation of democratic centralism that expects members, as a matter of discipline, to pretend to agree with positions they don't believe in... in this context, you can see why rational ignorance [\[18\]](#) begins to look like a viable strategy for the rank-and-filer.

This may be just about forgivable if the party was really good at what it did – an "instrument of steel" like the old Communist Party. But it isn't.

Open all hours

There has already been plenty of commentary about the political effects of this concept of "interventionist leadership". But at this point I'd like to look at some practicalities – because if we apply the standards of modern corporate governance rather than a blueprint derived from Cliff's Lenin biography... well, let's just say a management consultant would take one look at the SWP and tear his hair out.

- The Central Committee is supposed to be a strategic political leadership; however, it also functions as a cabinet whose members all have portfolios. Now, there are some people who might be good at providing strategic leadership and others who are good managers; there are very few who excel at both; and we can probably name some who are good at neither. The CC, as an institution, falls between stools. Virtually all of its members (with the notable exception of Prof Callinicos) are selected from the ranks of party full-timers. There is too much dead wood on the CC, and it would do no harm to have the equivalent of non-executive directors who could hold the full-timers to account. [\[19\]](#)

- Term limits might also be an idea, so as to reduce the phenomenon of apparatchiks who have

worked for the party for decades and whose primary loyalty is to the structure and their place within it.

- As noted, district organisers are appointed by and accountable to the CC. If it turns out that a district organiser is a flaming asshole, members in the district have no way to remove him except by appealing to the same party leaders who appointed him in the first place.
- There are no audited accounts, and the party's finances are shrouded in mystery. Certainly, no accounts are presented to conference, and one doubts if even the CC has a complete picture. This has not been helped by a long series of party treasurers who were unable to add up.
- Outside of the CC, meetings are almost never minuted. Mike Gonzalez's seeming bemusement during the Sheridan affair that a party might actually want to have minutes of a serious decision was not entirely disingenuous – Mike's own tradition just doesn't act that way.
- Party jobs are not advertised among members, often have only the vaguest of job descriptions, and are filled to a large extent by cronyism and nepotism. Similarly, it's quite difficult to get to write for the party press without having a mate in the apparat, and writing and speaking assignments are often handed out as perks, rather than going to comrades with relevant expertise.
- Party bodies, such as the recent Disputes Committee, do not have worked-out terms of reference; equally, there is no set grievance procedure. One simply raises a concern with a leading cadre and hopes for the best.
- The CC continues to be able to second members to the DC, which at the very least calls into question the DC's impartiality – not simply when it is investigating a CC member, but more generally, the bulk of its work consists of hearing appeals against CC disciplinary decisions. Again, confidence is not helped by the usually brief and cryptic nature of DC reports to conference.
- Expulsions and suspensions continue to be carried out arbitrarily, without proper hearings or evidence. The recent innovation of expelling members by email is a particular abomination.
- As has been pointed out at wearying length, the membership rolls are absurdly inflated by including everyone who has signed a form in the last two years, and it is virtually impossible to get the centre to remove names from the list. Re-registration drives become competitions between organisers to see who can get the most names on their list, regardless of whether this bears any relationship to the subs-paying membership. Indeed, the fact that the ISO (US) requires branches to regularly revise their lists and strip out people who aren't active was used as proof of the ISO's "conservatism".

This is just a brief overview – no trade union would work like that in this day and age, and any capitalist enterprise that tried would soon go out of business. There are plenty of other points that could be made along these lines.

Atmospherics

Yet the formal structures don't even tell half of the story. Organisations develop their own cultures, especially those that deviate considerably from the mainstream of society.

The SWP leadership manages the interesting feat of being both extremely secretive and extremely leaky. Ideally, the CC would like to have a monopoly of information in the party; however, this isn't

humanly possible, especially in the age of the internet. This means that the party has a very well-developed gossip network. The Inner Party doesn't like this, but is prepared to take advantage of it, for purposes such as feeding privileged information to young comrades on the informal fast track, or for slandering those who have fallen from grace. This attitude actually helps make the atmosphere in branches much more poisonous.

Fortunately, this is one aspect of SWP life that has rapidly been rendered obsolete by the technological revolution. The very fact that you are reading this on the interwebs, where critics of the CC in Cliff's day would have to resort to badly duplicated samizdats, is indicative of the fact that our hyperconnected digital culture is subversive of existing hierarchies, particularly those who are not web savvy. A leadership from the age of hot metal does not grasp that for younger comrades, Facebook is a perfectly natural method of communication; nor does it grasp that the party's dirty little secrets cannot stay secret forever. Charlie Kimber may not recognise the internet, but the internet recognises him.

In the absence of many formal structures below the CC level, the party operates according to informal in-groups and out-groups, the boundaries of which are constantly shifting. Combine that with a sub-Machiavellian ethical sense – call it Good Cause Corruption if you like – and the disciplinary regime starts to come into focus. Essentially, what you can get away with depends on whether you're in or out – though even if you're in, your transgressions will be stored away for use against you should you later be on the outs. And this, note, in an organisation where bullying is both endemic and informally encouraged.

It's also worth pointing out that formal expulsions are relatively rare. What normally happens is that if you put a foot wrong, or even if your organiser just takes a dislike to you, you will be ostracised and slandered to the point where it becomes impossible to remain a member. Most people faced with this sort of behaviour simply drop out – and the shunning of ex-members provides a warning to those still inside.

Usually, of course, it doesn't come to that. Much more common is the famed Coffee Ritual, where you are invited to sit down with a leading member who will point out your ideological deviations and infractions of discipline at excruciating length, and invite you to make a self-criticism. Please note that disagreeing with the leading comrade is not welcome, nor is adopting a sarcastic tone of voice.

Does this sound a little cultish? Well, no more so than many other smallish social groups – on the British left, there is one group whose guru uses his position to inflict his Vogon poetry [\[20\]](#) on the members. Cultural politics in the SWP generally takes the form of the Marxism festival being overloaded with "What's so great about...?" meetings on the enthusiasms of the leadership (usually Jane Austen and Bruce Springsteen). But we also note, in this thought-provoking article [\[21\]](#), that:

*"A number of CC members are big fans of jazz music. Under their leadership over the past few years, the party has organised a number of (mostly loss-making) jazz gigs as fundraising events. Regardless of their own musical tastes, **comrades were told they were disloyal if they didn't purchase tickets**. This elevates the cultural tastes of the official leadership to a point of political principle; and clearly is not in any way a healthy state of affairs."*

Let's not beat about the bush here: we are talking about the friendship between Gilad Atzmon and Martin Smith, which has not only cost the party credibility, **but actually cost the party money**. Yet in some corners of the party defending Atzmon, despite his profoundly dodgy politics, has become a sign of political virility, for no better reason than that he is a mate of Martin's. Sheesh.

The sexism thing

So, if we may return to where we started, what can we say about the organisation's sexual politics?

Firstly, I am not convinced by arguments that, if only the SWP had adopted patriarchy theory or some particular brand of feminist politics, this could have been avoided. That is simply an idealist analysis. Perhaps (I'll even say probably) the SWP's understanding of sexual politics is inadequate, but there are left groups who stand closer to classic feminist positions and still haven't avoided analogous situations.

That said, CC loyalists' current use of "feminist" as a swear word belies a more complex history than you would think, and certainly a more interesting history than what young members will have absorbed from Judith Orr's small book *Sexism and the System*. Back in the 1970s, the party was quite happy to identify as feminist, and for a long time had an autonomous women's organisation. This position was reversed in the early 1980s for internal party reasons too boring to relate here, culminating in Cliff's 1984 book *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation* [22], which explicitly repudiated the F-word as a self-description. In turn, this was superseded by Lindsey German's *Sex, Class and Socialism* (1989), which finessed the Cliff line without openly criticising it. More recently, there have been interesting signs of fresh thinking from within the SWP's tradition [23]. So feminism, as such, is an area that is open for discussion. [24]

But the theory, I would argue, is not the important thing. Theoretically, this is an area where the party travels light, and can be held up as an example of the SWP's ingrained tendency to be the most vocal advocates of whatever's popular with students this year [25]. In fact, just as we have ethical instrumentalism, we here have political instrumentalism, where the yardstick is the utility of a particular campaign. See for instance the party's long-running fixation on "raunch culture", which began with Lindsey German watching an episode of *Men Behaving Badly* and not being amused; helped explain to comrades which comedians they should go to see; was pressed into service to ally with conservative Muslims against lap-dancing clubs; and has been disinterred at regular intervals to support a most remarkable variety of positions.

On the other hand, this does not fit very well with the blatant misogyny displayed by some party members in Scotland during the Sheridan affair, where one could find well-educated middle-class cadres describing socialist women as "bitches" or "cunts" for the sin of criticising the Tangerine Man. So we find expediency creeps in again.

The point is that the instrumentalism, together with the disciplinary set-up based on in-groups and out-groups, provides a method for seeing how an internal culture could develop, at least in certain corners of the party, which is occasionally somewhat at odds with the party's formal stance on women's liberation. In particular, since standards of behaviour are a moveable feast depending on how well connected you are in the party...

It is not true that the SWP, in general, has the atmosphere of a swingers' club. In fact, at branch level it can often be ferociously puritanical. If you belong to the out-group, a mildly ribald sense of humour can see you hauled over the coals for "sexism". Rather nastier is the habit of expelling political dissidents for sexual harassment, usually on very little evidence but having the useful effect of smearing the dissident's name. At one time, this was a tactic deliberately taught to organisers, which seems blackly humorous in the current situation.

One would expect the Inner Party to be held to even more stringent standards, but actually it works the other way around. This is not to say that all, or even most, senior cadres are mad shaggers. But some are, and they tend to be fairly well connected. There might only be one compulsive skirt-chaser

in a sizeable district; however, it is enough of a phenomenon to be noticeable, and if the centre kept proper membership rolls, it might be interesting to look at which branches have a particularly high turnover of female recruits.

And this helps put the famous “fuck circuit” into context. In an organisation with such a pronounced hierarchy, where patronage rules, bearing in mind the power imbalance between a young female recruit and a middle-aged male party leader with all the mystique surrounding the leadership... Well, one does not expect the party leadership to live like monks, but at the same time, the *droit de seigneur* is supposed to be something we had left behind. And while nobody would be so crude as to admit that sexual favours can help you up the greasy pole, it is not unknown for someone to suddenly get promotion following full and frank discussions with a leading comrade.

This, incidentally, is why W’s complaint is instinctively credible. These unhealthy aspects of party culture – which of course aren’t the whole story – the leadership cult, the bullying, the moral expediency, the view of comrades as pawns to be moved around the chessboard... It isn’t intrinsically unbelievable that a leading member might not take no for an answer. And that, by itself, should prompt some reflection on just how the organisation got to have such an unhealthy culture.

What next?

At this point, it’s unclear where the factional dispute is going to go. My view is that on purely moral grounds, the opposition must win, though it’s very unlikely they will. And this is without having any romantic ideas about the opposition; it’s simply that in this situation, there is a right side and a wrong side. And the current opposition are not irresponsible factionalists. The sheer cold fury you hear from people like Richard Seymour is the reaction of people who for many years have been totally loyal, totally disciplined, bitten their tongues over all sorts of things, and finally have reached a point where, asked to defend the indefensible, they have snapped.

However, the whole structure of the SWP makes an internal coup, the necessary prelude to serious housecleaning, almost impossible. And it looks as if the leadership are gearing up for a purge of the opposition, which to me indicates that they are completely delusional and insulated from the real world. In the real world, the SWP’s allies are abandoning it; in the real world, a young woman approached to join the SWP will have to ask herself whether it’s a safe environment.

The CC are currently making demagogic appeals to the party’s Millwall tendency [26], and not completely without success. They’ll also be heartened by the fact that John Molyneux, clapped out after years of being the token loyal critic, has finally learned to love Big Brother. Professor Callinicos, a very clever man, has laid down the line of “The party represents Leninism; the leadership embodies the party’s collective wisdom; you can’t question the line we whipped through conference because Owen Jones! Also, John Rees!” And some people are buying this. Some bozos actually believe that a few expulsions and gagging orders can sort this problem out, and everything will be back to normal by Marxism 2013 in July. As if.

My instinct at this point, and I would love to be proved wrong, is that SWP members who have rightly revolted over the handling of the Delta case will soon be ex-members. The rump of the party will be able to live off the family silver for a while but, increasingly toxic to what used to be its periphery, it will become more profoundly insular and cultish. It’s likely to end up as something analogous to the Barnes group in the States, a commercially viable bookshop with a small party attached.

As for the opposition, well, the last thing we need is to recreate the SWP in miniature form. That’s

been tried too many times already. What's really necessary is a process where people can discuss openly and think freely, and who knows? If we're really lucky, something might emerge that's not actually repellent to any normal human being. We can but hope.

Soviet Goon Boy

P.S.

* FEBRUARY 5, 2013 · 2:02 AM: <http://sovietgoonboy.wordpress.com/>

Footnotes

[1] See <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/> and <http://rethinkingtheleft.blogspot.co.uk/>

[2] <http://madammiaow.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/swp-sex-implosion-its-dehumanisation-in.html>

[3] <http://marxists.org/archive/hallas/works/1969/xx/building.htm>

[4] <http://www.2ndcouncilhouse.co.uk/2011/10/27/de-occupy-glasgow/>

[5] See on ESSF (article 27842), [What does the British SWP's way of dealing with sex assault allegations tell us about the left?](#).

[6] See on ESSF (article 27618), [Crisis in the British SWP](#).

[7] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/a-reply-to-central-committee.html>

[8] I should also say, and this may not make me popular in some quarters, that Andy Newman performed a valuable service by making the transcript public. Some details would inevitably have leaked; one would have to be a complete moron (or a member of the SWP Central Committee) to think it could have remained secret indefinitely. This means we can at least have a relatively informed debate.

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[10] This area of the law is so notoriously complex that the indispensable Sexual Offences Handbook by Felicity Gerry and Catarina Sjölin, which summarises the relevant law and procedure, runs to a hefty 650 pages

[11] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/can-swp-deal-with-rape-allegations.html>

[12] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/reflections-on-2011-swp-conference-by.html>

[13] See on ESSF (article 27715), [On the crisis of the SWP \(Britain\): Is Leninism finished?](#).

[14] See on ESSF (article 27778), [On the crisis of the SWP \(Britain\) – Lenin versus ‘Leninism’: for revolutionary experiments, not blueprints.](#)

[15] See on ESSF (article 27769), [On the crisis of the SWP \(Britain\): Leninism is unfinished.](#)

[16] This should not be taken as an indiscriminate dissing of cargo cults. The John Frum movement in Vanuatu actually took over Tanna island for a time, and continues to be represented in the parliament of Vanuatu, which is a record of achievement the SWP might envy.

[17] <http://rethinkingtheleft.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/is-interventionism-finished.html>

[18] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rational_ignorance

[19] For example, without naming names, the recently elected CC includes one extremely inexperienced member whose sole leadership qualifications seem to be (a) being the child of a veteran party hatchet-man, and (b) a proven willingness to dob in comrades for “disloyalty”.

[20] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vogon#Poetry>

[21] <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/crisis-in-swp-what-do-socialists-say.html>

[22] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1984/women/index.htm>

[23] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation>

[24] There’s also the question of precisely which of an almost infinite variety of feminisms you’re talking about, but life’s too short.

[25] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnomes_\(South_Park\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnomes_(South_Park))

[26] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_one_likes_us,_we_don%27t_care