

Alan Thornett's denunciation of Trotskyism

Part one

By Chris Marsden
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This is the first part of a two-part article analysing the role of Alan Thornett's International Socialist Group in the Respect Renewal project led by British Member of Parliament George Galloway. Part two will be posted on Friday, March 21.

The January edition of *International Viewpoint* publishes a statement by the Socialist Resistance steering committee entitled "Democratic Centralism and Broad Left Parties." Also known as the International Socialist Group, the group is led by Alan Thornett.

Thornett has recently secured his position as chief advisor to Member of Parliament George Galloway in Respect Renewal, the organisation formed following Galloway's split with the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) last November.

The SWP was the motive force for the creation of Respect-The Unity Coalition, which was formed in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war. The SWP conceived of Respect as a political extension of the alliance of antiwar Labour MPs, trade union bureaucrats, Stalinists, Greens, Liberal Democrats and Muslim groups that constituted the Stop the War Coalition.

The SWP calculated that such a coalition could successfully challenge the Labour Party in elections, provided only that it did not place any obstacles in the way of such a regroupment. The biggest obstacle would be to insist that the new party be explicitly socialist. The SWP therefore stated that Respect would be a "broad coalition" with socialists within it, but raising only those demands that were acceptable to all the antiwar forces that joined it.

The "socialist" component of Respect would be made up of the SWP itself, but more importantly, the left Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats it anticipated would break from the Blair government as a result of the war in Iraq and in opposition to Blair's pro-business policies. These dissident Labourites would provide the real leadership of Respect.

The SWP thus oriented itself not to the hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who mobilised against the war, but to the political forces that were able to dominate the anti-war movement and ensure that no political struggle was waged against the Blair government.

Such a party, based on widely disparate political tendencies rooted in opposing class forces, and with no agreement on programme other than being "deeply disappointed by the authoritarian social policies and profit-centred, neo-liberal economic strategy of the government," could under no conditions be viable. But Respect's fate was to be doubly disastrous, given that the break by a significant layer of Labourites from the party never materialised. The token opposition demonstrated by a handful of MPs to the war in Iraq evaporated once the war was underway. None of them were about to sacrifice their comfortable careers within Labour's ranks.

Only Galloway found himself outside Labour's ranks when he was expelled for his opposition to the war. For this reason, Respect became primarily a vehicle for Galloway to win back a seat in parliament.

Moreover, the reliance on Galloway helped to deepen the SWP's own

adaptation begun during the anti-war movement to Imams, Muslim businessmen, petty bourgeois leaders and groups such as the Muslim Association of Britain, as well as to the Middle Eastern regimes to which Galloway is oriented. The SWP did so, hoping to capitalise on Galloway's connections in order to secure its own electoral advances.

The plan backfired badly for the SWP. Galloway eventually moved against his erstwhile allies when the Muslim politicians and business figures made clear their hostility to the alliance with the SWP—an opposition motivated to some degree by anti-communism, but mostly by petty organisational rivalries and a belief that the SWP exerted too much influence over who was in the leadership and who would stand as candidates.

Thornett, whose small group of supporters were the only other nominally left group in Respect, stepped in to paint Galloway's Muslim-dominated faction as a great reforming movement against the undemocratic practices of the SWP. He jumped at the chance to "renew" Respect, even handing over his party's press to it.

The article by Thornett's tendency's in *International Viewpoint* is framed as a polemic against the SWP, claiming that it was responsible for the failure to secure the "broad alliance of progressive forces" that was originally envisioned as the basis for Respect. But in the process, Thornett delivers one of the most unalloyed presentations of the cynical, unprincipled and anti-socialist politics behind all such efforts to construct new parties from the decaying fragments and breakaways from the old social democratic and Stalinist organisations.

Thornett speaks as the leader of the British Section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec), whose affiliate parties—such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire in France—are engaged in similar political efforts throughout the world. He makes clear that the essential basis for all such projects is a deep political hostility to Trotskyism and a repudiation of the essential task of building an independent political leadership for the working class, guided by the socialist and internationalist perspective of Marxism.

The statement acknowledges that "there were no principled questions of politics involved" in the split in Respect, but insists that it is significant nevertheless. Respect failed, Thornett claims, because, unlike the International Socialist Group and the USec, the SWP maintains a commitment to "the models of political organisation and habits of engagement with the rest of the left adopted by some self-proclaimed Trotskyist organisations" that "were strongly pressurised by third period Stalinism and organisational methods and assumptions inherited from the Stalinised Comintern." He adds that "no section of British Trotskyism was entirely unaffected by this pressure." (1)

Thornett's accusation that other left groups in Britain have historically suffered from an ultra-left attitude to the old mass workers' parties and a Stalinist organisational approach sets the stage for his insistence that no one should make the same mistake regarding the new "broad left" parties formed since the late 1990s. He hails organisations such as Rifondazione

Comunista in Italy and, more recently, the Left Party in Germany as a rebirth of the left that has rendered unnecessary and divisive efforts to build an independent Marxist party.

“It is absurd to imagine,” the statement declares, “that it is possible to take off the shelf wholesale texts written in Russia in 1902 or even 1917, and apply them in an unmediated way in 2007. Even less credible is the idea of taking the form of revolutionary organisation and politics appropriate for Minneapolis in 1934 (2) and simply attempting to extrapolate it in a situation where revolutionary politics has been transformed by central new issues (of gender and the environment in particular); where the working class itself has been transformed in terms of its cultural level, geographical distribution and political and trade union organisation; and where the experience of mass social movements and the balance sheet of Stalinism (and social democracy) has radically reaffirmed the centrality of self-organisation and democracy at the heart of the revolutionary project.”

Thornett is not arguing against an uncritical application of Lenin’s writings. He is rejecting any possibility of building a socialist party based on the working class. The future lies, rather, in liquidating into the new “broad left” formations.

He is forced to acknowledge that workers have already had bitter experiences with the very parties he champions, such as Rifondazione Comunista’s “support for Italian participation in the Afghanistan war” and the “neo-liberal domestic policies” of Lula’s Workers Party in Brazil. These, he states, were “of course massive defeats for the left.” But he reserves his venom for anyone opposing the betrayals of these parties.

His document insists: “For some on the revolutionary left, what we might call the ‘clean hands and spotless banner’ tendency, this shows that attempts at political recomposition are a waste of time. Far better to just build your organisation, sell your paper, hold your meetings, criticise everyone else and maintain your own spotless banner.... In our view this simplistic ‘build the party’ option is no longer operable.”

This cynical dismissal of the “clean hands and spotless banner” tendency is a reference to the closing paragraphs of the Transitional Programme of 1938, the founding document of the Fourth International (FI).

Trotsky’s formation of the FI was in political response to world historic defeats inflicted on the international working class as a result of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union and the affiliated parties of the Communist (Third) International under the leadership of Joseph Stalin: the 1926 General Strike in Britain, the Chinese Revolution in 1927, and, above all, the victory of Hitler in Germany.

It was the failure of any party of the Third International to oppose this betrayal that led Trotsky to proclaim its death as a revolutionary organisation and to call for the founding of the Fourth International. He did so in political opposition to centrist parties, such as the POUM in Spain, which opposed building a new international and whose refusal to politically challenge Stalinism led to further bloody defeats. The Stalinist bureaucracy’s response to Trotsky’s challenge was to launch the political purges of the 1930s that culminated in the infamous Moscow Trials.

It was against this background, and on the eve of the Second World War, that the Fourth International was established. Drawing on these terrible experiences, Trotsky wrote: “The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership. The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis. They offer a programme based on international experience in the struggle of the proletariat and of all the oppressed of the world for liberation. They offer a spotless banner.”

Thornett rejects entirely Trotsky’s struggle to build the Fourth International, proclaiming it irrelevant in the modern period. He rails against “a false conception of the configuration of the workers’ movement and the left, a misreading of ideas from the 1930s, that is

common in some sections of the Trotskyist movement. This ‘map’ sees basically the working class and its trade unions, the reformists (Stalinists), various forms of ‘centrism’ (tendencies which vacillate between reform and revolution) and the revolutionary Marxists—with maybe the anarchists as a complicating factor.”

“On the basis of this kind of map,” the statement continues, “Trotsky could say in 1938 ‘There is no revolutionary tendency worthy of the name on the face of the earth outside the Fourth International.’ If this idea was ever operable, it is certainly not today.”

“Today the ‘thin red line of Bolshevism’ conception of revolutionary politics doesn’t work,” the document insists. Why? Because “this idea often prioritises *formal programmatic agreement*, sometimes on arcane or secondary questions, above the realities of organisation and class struggle on the ground” [emphasis added].

For Thornett, it is not permissible to speak of Stalinism, reformism and centrism, because the parties he is seeking to construct can be formed and win influence only if the working class is kept ignorant of the political record of these discredited tendencies and is unaware that their remnants form the backbone of the new parties.

Anyone familiar with the history of Stalinism, for example, would not have been surprised by Rifondazione Comunista’s support for Italian participation in the Afghan war. It did so as a coalition partner of Romano Prodi’s government alongside the Left Democrats, which also emerged from the Italian Communist Party.

Various “left” groups had claimed that Rifondazione Comunista would function as a left alternative to the Left Democrats. But Rifondazione Comunista continued to support the government despite its role in Lebanon, its support for the expansion of a US military base in Northern Italy and its implementation of austerity measures that led to its fall from power in February.

The same can be said of the attacks on workers’ living standards by Lula’s so-called Workers Party and the record of any of the other formations held up by Thornett as having rendered Trotskyism obsolete. Thornett’s aim is to provide a political amnesty for organisations such as the German Left Party, set up by a section of social democratic functionaries led by Oskar Lafontaine and ex-Stalinists from East Germany, into which all manner of “left” groups have liquidated, including the sister party of the British SWP.

Thornett accompanies his denunciation of programmatic agreement with a list of “general guidelines” on how to operate in these “broad left” parties. The most significant of these is his insistence that “no revolutionary current can have the ‘disciplined Phalanx’ concept of operation.... [W]e are not doing entry work or fighting a bureaucratic leadership.”

What do Thornett’s prescriptions say of the type of parties he favours? No struggle for programmatic agreement means that there will be no challenge to the pro-capitalist programme of the leading figures in these parties. His tendency is “not fighting a bureaucratic leadership.”

The same is true of Thornett’s rejection of accountability within his own organisation or the broad party (Respect Renewal or some other formation) in which his co-thinkers operate. He does not speak for the rights of the rank and file, but for a leadership of which he is now a well-established representative. Everything can be discussed, any and all views held, only so long as nothing interferes with the right of the leaders to ignore the nominal programme of their party and the mandate of their members and do precisely what they want.

That is what has happened in the case of Rifondazione Comunista’s support for Italian participation in the Afghanistan war. And that is what will happen with Respect Renewal in Britain, should it ever win significant support.

In a related document, David Packer of Thornett’s group makes this abundantly clear. He states clearly how “in the present context we should

not, nor have we, been fighting for Respect to adopt a revolutionary programme or revolutionary forms of organisation.”

He goes on to give at least one example of how the “freedom” the Thornett group espouses works in practice. He writes, “I am sure we agree that our bottom line on abortion is a ‘woman’s right to choose,’ but this is not supported by our only MP [George Galloway], nor by some other forces in Respect.... Clearly, we would not expect [Galloway], an avowed Roman Catholic, to argue for a woman’s right to choose....”

Far from issuing forth some newfound wisdom prompted by developments unforeseen by Trotsky, Thornett merely revives arguments previously marshalled in order to oppose a struggle against the old and now discredited reformist and Stalinist parties.

His is a warmed-over version of the politics long associated with the United Secretariat and its founding theoreticians, Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. (3)

Throughout the post-war period, the Pabloite groups have insisted that Trotskyism has no independent role to play. The struggle for socialism would proceed by revolutionaries entering into the “mass workers’ parties” that dominated in any given country—Stalinist, reformist or nationalist—which they would steer in a socialist direction by building alliances and giving loyal advice in the hope of influencing their leaders.

In words foreshadowing Thornett’s document, Pablo called in 1951 for “the most effective possible regroupment of conscious revolutionary forces larger than our own” and, through a “fusion with them,” the eventual creation of “big Marxist revolutionary parties.”

Pablo, too, dismissed with contempt Trotsky’s insistence that outside the Fourth International “there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name.” He wrote in October 1953, “In the present concrete historical conditions the variant which is more and more the least probable is the one where the masses, disillusioned by the reformists and Stalinists, break with their traditional mass organisations to come to polarise themselves around our present nuclei, the latter acting exclusively and essentially in an independent manner, from without.”

It was in a struggle against this liquidationist tendency that the International Committee of the Fourth International was formed in 1953. Its founding statement, the “Open Letter to the World Trotskyist Movement,” issued by US Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon, declared: “The attempt to revise the accepted Trotskyist analysis of the nature of Stalinism and the Lenin-Trotsky theory of the party, and thereby in effect, to deprive the Trotskyist parties and the Fourth International as a whole of any historical justification for independent existence, is at the bottom of the present crisis in our international movement” (*The Heritage We Defend*, by David North, Chapter 18: “James P. Cannon’s ‘Open Letter’”).

Cannon could have been writing against Thornett’s document.

For decades, particularly during the revolutionary wave that swept Europe between 1968 and 1975, the Pabloite groups played a key role as apologists for the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements—employing Trotskyist phrases only to justify a policy of complete prostration before the labour bureaucracies.

This loyalty to the bureaucracy has an objective basis. The Pabloites articulated the interests of a layer of the petty bourgeoisie and better-off sections of workers whose social position depended on the welfare state mechanisms and other concessions the bourgeoisie was forced to grant in the post-war period.

The impulse for the ruling class doing so was a fear of a revolutionary development in the working class. However, the instruments through which these concessions were secured and administered were the social democratic and Stalinist parties, which constituted a substantial layer of privileged state apparatchiks in central and local government and the machinery of trade unions, as well as numerous left-leaning academics in

the universities and colleges. It was this milieu that was the political tap-root of the various left radical groups, which specialised in demanding more energetic and greater reforms, from which they benefited, while opposing any development that would bite the bureaucratic hand that fed them.

These same considerations shaped the response of the USec’s affiliate organisations to the collapse of the Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties in the 1990s. This was the decade in which the perspective historically upheld by Pabloism suffered its most crushing refutation.

The revolutionary “self-reform” of the Stalinist bureaucracy that Pabloism had predicted turned out to be its transformation into a capitalist oligarchy that oversaw the reintroduction of private property and market relations in the former Soviet Union. In the West, the reformist Labour parties and trade unions were refashioned as vehicles for implementing Thatcherite policies of privatisation and the destruction of essential services that has resulted in a historically unprecedented transfer of wealth from working people to the super-rich.

In every country, support for these old organisations has haemorrhaged, prompting efforts by sections of the bureaucracy to form new organisations—such as Lula’s Workers Party in Brazil and the Stalinist-led Rifondazione Comunista in Italy—in an attempt to maintain control over the working class. Every such effort was hailed by the Pabloites as a new political dawn.

Only *after* what remains of the social democratic and Stalinist left decided to make such an organisational break did the USec’s sections finally remove themselves from the decaying carcasses of the old parties. And they did so only to ensconce themselves as comfortably as possible in the new political creations of the self-same bureaucracy—redoubling their efforts to pour scorn on Trotskyism as a sign of their absolute loyalty.

Thus the USec insisted in 2003 that the great danger was that “sections of the revolutionary Marxist movement” had “fetishised their programmatic inheritance into a reified object to be defended against all comers.” What was necessary was “a rejection of the conception of an enlightened, arrogant vanguard that parasites on or subjugates the movement.”

To be continued

Notes:

(1) During the “Third Period,” beginning in 1928, the Communist International declared that social revolution was imminent. In Germany, the Communist Party took an ultra-left line, denouncing the Social Democrats as “social fascists” and opposing Trotsky’s call for a United Front against Hitler as a means of defeating fascism by exposing the Social Democratic leaders and winning the allegiance to communism of the millions of workers who were supportive of the reformists. The Communist Party’s policies were instrumental in ensuring Hitler’s victory.

(2) The Minneapolis general strike of 1934 was led by Trotskyists and resulted in a substantial growth in support for socialism amongst American workers.

(3) The United Secretariat emerged as a political tendency in the years immediately following World War II. Under the leadership of Michel Pablo, the secretary of the Fourth International at the time, it represented an opportunist adaptation to the stabilisation of capitalism. The stabilisation was based on the political betrayal carried out by Stalinism of incipient revolutionary movements in Europe and elsewhere, and the role played by the United States in resuscitating European and Japanese capitalism.

The division of Europe agreed at Yalta and Potsdam and the subsequent onset of the Cold War obliged the Stalinist bureaucracy to reluctantly carry out a programme of nationalisations in the East European buffer

states. Pablo responded to this by rejecting the struggle to build independent Marxist parties, based on the central understanding that the instrument for the realisation of socialism was the working class itself. Instead, he argued that the conflict between imperialism and the Stalinist regimes had forced the Stalinist bureaucracy to project a revolutionary orientation and would force it to do so again in future.

This capitulation to Stalinism developed into a comprehensive perspective both justifying and actively seeking the liquidation of the Fourth International. Pablo's initial prognosis of "centuries of deformed workers' states" gave way to more modest claims that a process of gradual "self-reform" of the bureaucracy was under way.

The Stalinists were, moreover, only one of a number of "blunt instruments" that could substitute for the revolutionary role previously assigned to the Fourth International. In countries where the social democratic bureaucracies dominated the workers movement, they would be the vehicle for socialist transformation, provided only that enough militant pressure was brought to bear on them by the working class. In the semi-colonial countries, various bourgeois nationalist regimes and parties—from Peronism in Latin America to, later, Castroism in Cuba—would play the same role.

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