

iSt/ICL: ‘New Name, Same Game’ Cynics Who Scorn Trotskyism

In its 1974 founding document, the international Spartacist tendency (iSt) modestly observed that it had “little extraneous, symbolic drawing power.” Fifteen years later, as the group renames itself the ‘International Communist League’ (ICL), it has less international “drawing power” than ever. But this does not seem to bother Spartacist founder/leader Jim Robertson. As the iSt gradually degenerated from a genuinely revolutionary organization into the political bandit operation it is to-day, its leadership has become highly ambivalent toward regroupments with experienced cadres from other political currents. The Spartacist leaders have found that people without significant prior political experience are much more likely to adjust to the peculiarities of life in “Jimstown.”

The Spartacist tendency today is appreciably smaller than it was a decade ago. Outside the U.S., only the Ligue Trotskyste de France (LTf), which for the past decade has been something of an anomaly within the iSt, has any political or organizational weight. Besides being the only section to grow appreciably, the LTf maintained a more political approach to its opponents and was also spared the homogenizing purges and witchhunts periodically inflicted on the other iSt groups. To some extent this reflects Robertson’s confidence in the personal loyalty of those at the top in Paris. However, the special treatment of the French section is mainly attributable to the political milieu in which it operates. Paris is the unofficial capital of ostensible world Trotskyism, and Robertson always placed particular importance on having a French subsidiary. The LTf had enough trouble as an organization of a few dozen in direct competition with three ostensibly Trotskyist opponents forty or fifty times its size with-out being trashed by head office.

French Fusion Explodes

Last year the LTf achieved what appeared to be a major breakthrough when it fused with a handful of cadres of the Tribune Communiste group—descendants of the Pabloist entrists in the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1950s. Tribune Communiste’s gradual evolution to the left entailed a break with the illusion that French Stalinism could ever be transformed into even a blunted revolutionary instrument. Key to the Tribune Communiste fusion with the LTf in 1988 was the latter’s positions on the Russian question—in particular, opposition to Solidarnosc and support to the USSR against the Afghan mujahedeen.

Tribune Communiste was the first important circle of cadres to join the iSt for almost a decade. The fusion was particularly significant in the context of the disintegration of the French Communist Party, a development which the LTf’s anti-Soviet competitors have been unable to capitalize on. In its 8 April 1988 issue, *Workers Vanguard* (WV), the Robertsonites’ literary flagship,

hailed the merger as an event of “international significance” and ventured that within the iSt these comrades “will play a leading role, not only in its French section.”

But the fusion exploded last spring, when the ex-Tribune Communiste members, joined initially by a half-dozen other LTfers, opposed New York’s absurd “offer” to organize a brigade to “fight to the death” under Afghanistan’s Najibullah. Having just been won to the necessity of open political struggle against Stalinist treachery, and the importance of speaking the truth to the masses, the former Tribune Communiste members were aghast at what they saw as a cynical gimmick aimed at impressing dissident Stalinists in West Europe.

While most iSt cadres who had similar reservations kept their mouths shut, the former Tribune Communiste members were openly critical of the leadership’s chimerical foreign legion. They immediately became the focus of a ferocious internal campaign in which their criticisms of the proposal were branded as “anti-communist.” An iSt delegation, flown in for an LTf national conference, turned the gathering into a heresy hunt. The conference concluded with the “victory” of the Robertsonite loyalists and the exit of the former Tribune Communiste members. The net result was an LTf which more closely approximates the norm in the iSt/ICL—smaller, more introverted and less political.

iSt: An “International” That Never Was

The ex-Tribune Communiste comrades are the latest in a long line of cadres who have been bounced out of Robertson’s mini-“international” in the past ten years. Despite a promising beginning, and some important international regroupments, the iSt never developed a genuinely international leadership. The “International Secretariat” of the iSt never transcended its origins as an administrative department of the Spartacist League/U.S. (see “The Road to Jimstown”).

The announcement of the iSt’s name-change first appeared (naturally) in the June 9 issue of Robertson’s American newspaper. This lengthy article (duly translated and/or adapted by the other sections) chiefly consists of a long-winded reprise of the state of the world. The brief discussion of the practical activity of the iSt since its founding concentrates almost exclusively on the Spartacist League (SL), which is also the only section referred to by name.

The accomplishments of the SL’s satellites are summed up in a single sentence: “Over the following decade, [since the first and only conference of the iSt in 1979] the development of the sections, particularly in Europe, and their cohering of leaderships has become an increasingly important component in shaping the international tendency.” This is an oblique and euphemistic reference to the ruthless purging and repeated humiliation of the putative leaderships of Robertson’s European fran-

chises. To ensure continuing fealty to the iSt's New York "center," expatriate SLers occupy key leadership positions in most of the European grouplets. The unfortunate indigenous leaders have generally been "developed" and "cohered" to the point where they have little or no independent political authority within their own sections, much less the tendency as a whole.

The declining importance of the Spartacist tendency outside the U.S. might raise doubts about the timing of the name-change and even the medium-term viability of the whole project. But if the overseas locals are too marginal to deserve a mention in the ICL announcement, they at least come in handy as evidence of Robertson's "internationalism." With tongue firmly in cheek, WV asserts: "we must believe that if our tendency had not achieved significant international extension, the SL/U.S. would have become an eccentric and disintegrating American sect."

Residents of Jimstown must of course pretend to believe whatever they read in WV. But the truth is that the SL/U.S. is a stagnant and increasingly eccentric American sect, and the existence of a half-dozen international satellites, which together make up barely a third of the total "ICL" membership, doesn't change that. The sections' press consists largely of *Workers Vanguard* reprints or translations. Their every organizational move, right down to the selection of members of local executives, is directed from New York. The idea that these shells exert any control whatsoever in Robertson's American center-ed obedience cult, is simply laughable.

In its degeneration, the Spartacist tendency has replicated the authoritarian hyper-centralism of Gerry Healy's International Committee, from which the SL was bureaucratically expelled in 1966. A 1966 letter from Harry Turner (then an SL central committee member) to Healy, provides an uncannily accurate description of the norms which Robertson was subsequently to impose in his own mini-“international”:

"Your attacks on Robertson were designed to make him knuckle under and adopt an attitude of humble worship for the omniscient British leadership. You were not interested in creating a movement united on the basis of democratic centralism with strong sections capable of making theoretical contributions to the movement as a whole and of applying Marxist theory creatively to their own national arenas. You wanted an international after the manner of Stalin's Comintern, permeated with servility at one pole and authoritarianism at the other."

The "Henny-Penny" School of Politics

The Healyites routinely invoked an imminent economic "crisis" which was supposed to herald the imminent collapse of capitalism and the advent of socialist revolution. This crisis-mongering was used as a substitute for a Marxist understanding on the part of the group's dues-payers and paper-sellers. The SL tops have recently employed a parallel technique. They have taken to playing "Henny-Penny"—proclaiming that the end of the world is near and that the only salvation lies in the rapid expansion of Robertson's dues-base.

The introduction to a recent SL pamphlet on the Proletarian Military Policy proclaimed: "The threat of

nuclear war is real and immediate. We don't have a lot of time left before an imperialist government (or one of its desperate and embattled junior partners) triggers a world cataclysm." WV's announcement of the ICL echoes this theme: "we must recognize that the possession of the technology of nuclear holocaust by an irrational imperialist ruling class foreshortens the possibilities: we probably do not have much time." Perhaps feeling that such apocalyptic pronouncements might not impress its politically more sophisticated French audience, the June-July *Le Bolchevik* discreetly dropped WV's speculation about timing, and substituted the following truism: "we will probably not have the luxury of seeing a revolutionary upsurge as a result of war."

Inter-imperialist rivalries between U.S. imperialism and its German and particularly Japanese rivals are sharpening, but they do not threaten to spill over into nuclear hostilities in the near future. The most probable scenario for nuclear world war remains that of a NATO attack on the USSR. But it is generally estimated that the favorable reception in the West to Gorbachev's perestroika means that the *immediate* likelihood of an imperialist nuclear first strike is considerably less today than at any point in the past decade.

The Spartacists disagree. The 1 September issue of *Workers Vanguard* asserts, "Gorbachev's appeasement of imperialism, far from easing or ending the Cold War, has increased the danger of World War III." The argument runs that by allowing free rein to capitalist-restorationist currents in Poland, Hungary and the Baltics, the Soviet bureaucracy risks creating a situation in which it may be forced to intervene militarily, and that this could lead to a confrontation with the imperialists. But while this scenario can certainly not be ruled out, the emergence of a pro-capitalist government in Poland, and the parallel development of powerful capitalist-restorationist movements among several nationalities within the USSR, has boosted the imperialists' hopes for victory over "communism" *without* nuclear war. This is one reason why the more far-sighted elements of the American bourgeoisie incline toward putting a lid on military spending as part of a program of reversing the economic decline of the U.S. relative to its imperialist rivals.

Even if Gorbachev (or a neo-Brezhnevite successor) were to intervene militarily against one or another East European satellite, the Stalinists are incapable of addressing the profound economic malaise which forced them to grasp at the straw of "market socialism" (and the associated "democratization") in the first place. A military intervention by the USSR might temporarily arrest a drive for capitalist restoration (as Jaruzelski's counter-coup did in Poland in 1981) but, in the long run, it could only postpone the disintegration of bureaucratic rule, while further inflaming anti-Soviet nationalism among the peoples involved.

The imperialist chieftains, who are well aware of this, would much prefer to see capitalism restored in the Soviet bloc *without* first turning it into a mass of irradiated rubble. Besides, despite Gorbachev's dangerous military cuts, the Soviet nuclear arsenal is still capable of inflicting tremendous damage on the capitalist heartlands. While Gorbachev's conciliationism undermines

the military defense of the USSR, it is a mistake to imagine that in this current—perhaps fleeting—period of renewed detente, the immediate likelihood of imperialist attack is greater than it was during the preceding period, when U.S. imperialism engaged in a massive build-up of first-strike weaponry and assumed an aggressive confrontationist posture.

In a historic sense the prospect of nuclear annihilation remains very real and very frightening. It lends new meaning to Frederick Engels' projection that the future of humanity will be either socialism or barbarism. But it does not follow that at every moment the dangers are equally acute. Any would-be revolutionary leadership must be able to distinguish between conjunctural ebbs and flows. Trotsky made this point in 1930 in refuting the idiotic Third Period catastrophism of the Stalinists:

"it is possible to close one's eyes to the actual development and to repeat three incantations: 'contradictions are sharpening,' 'the working masses are turning to the left,' 'war is imminent'—every day, every day, every day. If our strategic line is determined *in the final analysis* by the inevitability of the growth of contradictions and the revolutionary radicalization of the masses, then our tactics, which serve this strategy, proceed from the realistic evaluation of each period, each stage, each moment...."

— "The 'Third Period' of the Comintern's Errors," January 1930

Stalinism and "Consciousness"

The article announcing the ICL also contains the following "revelation" about the character of the Stalinist bureaucracy:

"The false identification of Stalinism with Bolshevism provided Stalin with dedicated political agents throughout the world; *only Stalin and perhaps a half-dozen cronies* (who these were changed over time) knew what it was all about." (emphasis added)

In case anyone missed the point, the idea is reiterated at the end of the article:

"No longer can a *Stalin and his half-dozen conscious accomplices* wield 'monolithic' parties as instruments of class-collaborationist treason in the name of 'building socialism.'" (emphasis added)

It is idle to speculate about exactly how many thousand Stalinist bureaucrats and GPU executioners were conscious of their anti-revolutionary role. Different individuals within the bureaucracy were no doubt characterized by varying degrees of cynicism ("consciousness") about what they were doing. But it is no accident that a good many highly-placed Soviet functionaries in the 1930s had previously sided with the Whites against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War.

Like the trade union bureaucracy in bourgeois society, the ideology of the Soviet oligarchy has a *material basis* in its desire to protect its own privileged social position. Trotsky estimated, in a 13 January 1938 article, "that the bureaucracy devours not less than half of the national consumption fund." He stated that "the big aristocrats, *the very highest stratum of the bureaucracy, live like American millionaires*" (emphasis added). When he talked of the highest stratum of the bureaucracy, he was clearly not referring to Stalin's personal clique. In June 1937, Trotsky observed:

"Even from the standpoint of 'vengeance,' terrorist blows cannot offer satisfaction. What is the doom of a dozen high bureaucrats compared to the number and scope of the crimes committed by the bureaucracy?"

Trotsky never considered that the erratic political zig-zags of the Stalinist bureaucracy, its crimes and betrayals, were determined in advance according to some design known only to "Stalin and his half-dozen conscious accomplices." The SL's recent "discovery" that, apart from an inner core of "conscious" Stalinists, the rest of the bureaucratic caste, as well as their international agents, were either hostages or unwitting pawns, has more in common with Khrushchev's self-amnestying denunciation of Stalin's "cult of the personality" than Trotsky's materialist analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy.

In a historical sense, none of the conservative and careerist bureaucrats, *including Stalin*, were fully conscious about what they were doing. Trotsky observed that Stalin was:

"capable neither of generalization nor of foresight....This weakness makes for his strength. There are historical tasks which can be carried out only if one renounces generalizations; there are periods when generalizations and foresight are a bar to immediate success; such are the periods of decline and fall, and reaction."

— "Hatred of Stalin," 4 January 1937

With the criminal idiocy of the "Third Period," the Soviet bureaucracy quite unintentionally facilitated Hitler's victory. Similarly, the Kremlin oligarchs proved to be the Nationalists' most valuable ally in the Spanish Civil War, although they did not deliberately seek to hand victory to Franco. Stalin's murderous purge of the Red Army officer corps, and his irrational confidence in Hitler's promises, laid the basis for the military catastrophe of the summer of 1941. But again, this was not what he intended.

It is ludicrous to imagine that, apart from a sinister half-dozen who "knew what it was all about," the rest of the cogs in the machine of bureaucratic terror which physically exterminated tens of thousands of revolutionists, were simply "dedicated political agents" of what they mistakenly took to be Leninism. This was certainly not Trotsky's opinion of Stalin's international lieutenants. For example, in May 1937, he referred to the top functionaries of the French Communist Party as, "completely corrupted, without principles, without honor, and without conscience."

So why are the Spartacists suddenly pushing this whole notion in the first place? Is it a Robertsonian metaphor for life in the SL? Perhaps, but it may also have a more immediate practical purpose: to make it easier for disaffected Stalinists to feel at home in the ICL.

What's In a Name?

The iSt's name-change is intended to create the impression that the group's international work is moving forward in the wake of the collapse of the much-heralded French fusion. It is also apparent that the SL leaders would like to cash in on the crisis of Stalinism by giving "dedicated pro-Communist workers throughout the world" a new "Communist" group to affiliate to. Yet, as the experience with the Tribune Communiste group

demonstrates, cadres breaking to the left from Stalinism are unlikely to enjoy the mini-deformed workers state atmosphere which pervades the sections of the ICL.

While the 9 June article announcing the ICL omitted any explanation for the name-change, regular readers of WV could find a clue in the midst of a report on SL fund-raising for Afghan relief in the subsequent (23 June) issue: "The success and broad impact of our defense efforts for Jalalabad were a key impetus in the decision by the international Spartacist tendency to launch the International Communist League (Fourth International)." So "key" was this "impetus" that whoever wrote the 9 June article, while including the fund drive in a list of the iSt's recent activities, did not bother suggesting that it had any particular connection to the "launch" of the ICL.

Workers Hammer, newspaper of the Spartacist League Britain (SL/B), supplied a few more clues about the genesis of the ICL in its July-August issue which, in the introduction to an adapted version of the WV article, reported: "On 13 May 1989 the International Executive Committee of the (outgoing) international Spartacist tendency voted unanimously to found the International Communist League." Incoming or outgoing, voting in Robertson's international—which has not had an organized internal factional opposition in over 20 years—is usually unanimous.

What is interesting about the British Spartacist version of the WV article is that it *completely omitted* all reference to the imaginary Afghan brigade and the subsequent Jalalabad fund-raising, which had supposedly provided the "impetus" for the name-change in the first

place. This discrepancy casts an interesting light on the inner workings of the Spartacist "international." We can categorically exclude the possibility that the deletion could be an expression of political disagreement, implicit or explicit, between London and New York. The British Spartacist League is among the most thoroughly "integrated" of all the Robertsonite satellites. The iSt's Afghan activity was deleted from *Workers Hammer*'s announcement of the ICL simply because the 23 June issue of WV which revealed the "key impetus" did not arrive in England before the British paper went to print.

If we assume that representatives of the SL/B, one of the few full sections of the iSt, were invited to participate in the International Executive Committee meeting that "launched" the ICL in May, then their ignorance of the impetus for the move suggests that none of the members of that august body had sufficient curiosity (or nerve) to ask why they should change their name. This might seem unlikely, but in Robertson's "international," decision-making is the exclusive prerogative of the guru and his coterie. Members of nominal "leading bodies" are not supposed to ask too many questions. Their job is to automatically (and, of course, unanimously) approve anything Robertson proposes.

For the past decade the Spartacist leadership, in transforming the iSt into a pseudo-Trotskyist obedience cult, has been in the business of *destroying* revolutionary cadres. This won't change with the adoption of a new name. A minor but unavoidable task in the struggle for the rebirth of the Fourth International therefore remains the political exposure of the counterfeit Trotskyists of the iSt/ICL. ■