

Bill Hunter's *Lifelong Apprenticeship* – A Criticism

A review of Bill Hunter, *Lifelong Apprenticeship: The Life and Times of a Revolutionary* (Porcupine Press, 1997).

BILL HUNTER first came into contact with Trotskyists in 1939 through Harry Wicks' and Hugo Dewar's group which had originated as a left opposition in the Communist Party. He has remained a Trotskyist to this day in various organisations – the Independent Labour Party, the Workers International League and then the Revolutionary Communist Party. He was a member of the Majority in the RCP, but when it dissolved in 1949 he was amongst those who fused with Gerry Healy's "Club" – the old RCP Minority who had entered the Labour Party two years earlier. From then on, Hunter worked in close collaboration with Healy right through the transformation of the Club into the Socialist Labour League and then the Workers Revolutionary Party until its implosion and expulsion of Healy in 1985. This book, the first of two volumes, takes us up to the formation of the SLL in 1959.

As well as a history of the development of these organisations and their relations to the broader labour movement in Britain and internationally, it is also a record of Bill Hunter's personal involvement, both in the internal disputes in these organisations and also of his activities as an industrial militant in the engineering industry as a shop steward and convenor. He vividly describes the wartime struggles to defend conditions in which Trotskyists and other trade union militants had to fight not only the bosses but the right-wing trade union leaders *and* the Communist Party workers who, from the moment Russia was involved in the war, adopted class collaboration policies, opposed strikes, and attacked Hunter and other Trotskyists as disrupters and "agents of Hitler".

Several things stand out in Hunter's book. The first is his unwavering commitment to Trotskyism, and his tenacity in overcoming obstacles and countering the undoubted frustration that the continued failure of the movement to break out of its marginalisation and develop into a mass move-

ment must have engendered; his persistence and refusal to accept defeat. The second is his refusal to face up to the basic reason for the failure of any of the various Fourth Internationalist factions to develop a mass following in any of the advanced capitalist countries.

Hunter attempts to explain this failure whilst refusing to question the basic correctness of the Fourth International's perspectives and rejecting any revising of the basic Leninist (and Trotskyist) theory of the terminal crisis of capitalism. In my opinion, his defence of orthodox Trotskyism is not convincing because he refuses to deal with the central question – to re-examine critically this basic assumption of terminal crisis and revolutionary upsurge on which all the perspectives, policies and activities of the Fourth Internationalists were based, and continue to be based.

The concept of the terminal crisis of capitalism entailed that production had reached a ceiling above which it could not rise, thus leading to ever-deepening slumps. It was accepted that economic revivals were possible, but these would be short-lived. The general trend would be downward. Increasing competition between the imperialist powers would lead to war. Even if war did not unleash proletarian revolution, the subsequent postwar continued decay of capitalism would ensure continued revolutionary upheavals. In these struggles, the Stalinist and social democratic misleaders would be exposed, and the Trotskyists would build mass revolutionary parties.

These were the perspectives which Bill Hunter and I and all those who joined the movement in the 1930s accepted. They turned out to be only partially confirmed. The war did break out, causing mass slaughter, immense destruction and misery. It did create revolutionary situations in Italy, France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, etc. The war did generate a rising wave of struggles for national liberation in the colonial countries, which forced imperialism to retreat and grant formal independence. All this is true, as Bill Hunter is at

pains to point out. He also defends the Trotskyists from their critics by pointing out that even bourgeois theorists and politicians were themselves very worried about the future of capitalism and the threat of revolution.

But – and this is a big *but* – capitalism survived the war and the near-revolutionary crises at its end, and recovered to enjoy an unprecedented period of growth. How explain this? There are several possible explanations. One is that we were mistaken in our basic assumption about the terminal crisis of capitalism and its inability to expand the productive forces. Personally, I think this explanation is valid. It explains why capitalism was able to dampen the revolutionary thrust in postwar Europe by making concessions; by conceding improved wages and conditions, by social welfare measures, housing, health, pensions, etc. Of course, it was helped in this by the social democratic and trade union leaders and the policy gyrations of the Stalinist communist parties. But the basic reason was the ability of the working class to continue to win improvements and reforms. The perspectives of the founding conference of the Fourth International deemed this impossible.

Bill Hunter ignores all the evidence. For example, that by 1964 the gross national products of Germany had increased by 220 per cent, of France by 135 per cent, of Italy by 132 per cent, and of Holland by 152 per cent, compared to the last prewar year of 1938. Between 1953 and 1965, real wages rose by 36 per cent in the United Kingdom, by 58 per cent in France, by 80 per cent in Italy, and by 100 per cent in West Germany. In Germany, just recovering from the war, real hourly wages were in 1948 at the level of 1914. But they trebled in the next 15 years. (Walter Laqueur, *Europe in Our Time*.)

Hunter will probably reply that to quote these figures is to be impressionistic or empirical. *His* picture of reality ignores embarrassing empirical facts. He writes: “We lived – and still live – in an epoch of the decay of capitalism. I have answered here those who try to pin on Trotsky and Trotskyism an error in believing this, and have shown that fear about the collapse of the system and its democratic institutions was widespread at the end of the Second World War and was not a Trotskyist fantasy” (p.402). “Our expectations of a revolutionary crisis coming out of the war were absolutely vindicated” (p.182).

What, then, is his explanation for the failure of these revolutionary crises to develop into actual revolutions, and the failure of the Trotskyists to build mass revolutionary parties? How does he explain capitalism’s survival of the revolutionary threats of 1943-48 and its continued expansion thereafter? According to him, it was all due to the betrayals of the masses by the social democrats and Stalinists.

It is true that the survival of the shaky regimes

in post-liberation France, Belgium and Italy were greatly helped by the socialist and communist parties which joined or supported the coalition governments and curbed strikes. But is this a sufficient explanation? After all, in 1938, the Fourth International was predicting that the social democrats and Stalinists would act precisely as they did. And they also predicted that these “betrayals” would “expose” these misleaders and – given the continuing worsening of conditions – the masses would turn away from these misleaders, and the Trotskyists would be able to break out of isolation and win a mass following.

In addition to discounting the possibility of economic recovery, the Fourth International dismissed any possibility of the survival of bourgeois-democratic regimes. The Revolutionary Communist Party declared at its 1945 conference: “Only if the series of revolutions fails can the bourgeoisie hope to save its system once again by resorting to a neo-fascism of monstrous reaction and repression.” These predictions were false. Not only did the bourgeois-democratic regimes survive – although precariously – the immediate post-war period up until 1948 (helped, as Hunter points out, by social democracy and Stalinism), but consolidated themselves after 1948. Again one must ask, could this have happened if capitalism – as Hunter insists – was in terminal crisis? Whilst admitting some errors, Hunter nevertheless fails to face up to this. It was all due to the Stalinist betrayals, and the weakness and mistakes of the Trotskyists.

He continues: “What of the RCP leaders? They were correct in referring to a democratic counter-revolution and in criticising a minority perspective of a slump worse than 1931. But already some of the RCP leaders were attributing the economic developments and reforms to capitalism’s strength and were thus minimising the role of Stalinist and social democratic leaders. To be sure there was a ‘democratic phase’ in Europe. To be sure there was an economic uplift, following the defeat of the revolutionary upsurges.... The possibility of more stable economic relations, however, arose and was maintained out of class and political relations established as a result of the treacherous working-class leaderships which checked, diverted and defeated the upsurges of the working class” (p.213).

Of course, the survival or overthrow of bourgeois rule is not a question of economics alone. Even in the worst economic conditions, capitalism will not collapse automatically. It will still have to be overturned politically. Similarly, economic recovery alone did not, of itself and automatically, restore parliamentary regimes in post-liberation and postwar France, Belgium, Italy, etc. This arose as a result of the political interplay of social forces. In this sense, Hunter is correct. But to fail to ignore the fact that the continued economic strength of capitalism, the

“base”, had little effect on the “superstructure” is surprising from some one who claims to be an orthodox Marxist. Hunter mentions the Marshall Plan. Undoubtedly the Marshall Plan was motivated by the USA’s fear of European capitalism’s collapse and the threat of communism – and it was a major factor in Europe’s recovery. But would the Marshall Plan and its success have been possible if capitalism (including US capitalism) had indeed been in terminal crisis, if capitalism had indeed already become an absolute fetter on the expansion of the productive forces?

Another fault in Hunter’s account is his failure to explain the continued hold of reformism, and the Trotskyists’ failure to win the workers away from it, even when they were seriously attempting to relate to workers’ existing concerns. Seeking some justification from me, Bill Hunter quotes approvingly my defence, in *Reluctant Revolutionary*, of the Club’s strategies and policies in the Labour Party in the 1950s – particularly the demands we were formulating in *Socialist Outlook*. Hunter says: “Ratner goes on to show that the attempt had to be made to deal with the actual questions around which the workers or their advance guard, were prepared to struggle. The Trotskyists were therefore helping to develop consciousness *against reformism*” (p.172, my emphasis).

But Hunter does not quote the passages just before and after this extract. If he had, it would have been clear that I was saying that, though these campaigns by the Club were correct, they did not flow from the Club’s erroneous perspectives of deepening capitalist crisis generating increasingly revolutionary struggles, but were rather a pragmatic adaptation by the Club to the existing situation. In the passage Bill did not quote, I went on to say: “The situation in 1949-50 was that there was an economic boom, full employment and no mass radicalisation. This was the situation as it was – not as we pictured it at the time. In fact, the policies and activities we actually adopted did not flow from our apocalyptic perspectives, but were a pragmatic adaptation to existing reality.” (*Reluctant Revolutionary*, p.134.)

All the struggles on the industrial front that Hunter mentions never developed beyond attempts by the workers to improve conditions within the framework of capitalism. The demands of the activists and left wingers in the Labour Party never went beyond demands that the Labour Party should go faster and more vigorously along the road of 1945, that is, a peaceful transformation of society in a socialist direction through parliamentary means, supplemented by campaigning from below. Far from their demands on the Labour leadership – demands which *Socialist Outlook* took up – helping to develop consciousness *against reformism*, as Bill Hunter imagined and hoped, they were in fact directed against the Labour Party’s retreat from

previous reformist commitments, and were pushing in the direction of *more vigorous reformism*.

Of course, “reform” and “revolution” are not mutually exclusive. And, if sufficiently radical, “reforms” are part of the transition to socialism. But the Trotskyist concept that Hunter defends – that the struggle for reforms, or “transitional demands” which cannot be achieved under capitalism, necessarily leads to revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary struggle – is highly debatable. I have attempted to tackle this problem in various articles in *New Interventions* and elsewhere.

Hunter fails to see that the whole period from 1948 until the 1970s was one of capitalist expansion throughout Western Europe, of full employment and rising living standards. He rightly points out that the working class was full of self-confidence, it had not been defeated since before the war, it was militant. But its self-confidence and militancy in this period of rising prosperity, during which it was successful in building up its shop stewards organisation and rank-and-file movements, did not lead to a qualitative transformation of its consciousness from reformist to revolutionary. Its confidence was *reformist*, directed at winning better conditions at work, higher wages, etc.

As I pointed out in my postscript to *Reluctant Revolutionary*: “The immense gap between the general political consciousness (or lack of it) of the broad labour movement and our own ideology meant that whatever the strategy or tactics we adopted – within the Labour Party or outside it – our success was limited. It is not without significance that it was precisely when we [the Healy tendency] were, according to our critics, trying to camouflage ourselves as good Labour Party members and left social democrats, that we had our greatest successes” (p.249).

Elsewhere in his book, Hunter is – rightly – concerned with revolutionaries’ relation to and integration with workers in their struggles. Hunter’s record as a shop steward and convenor, and his participation in struggles in the engineering industry at Chryslers during the war, and at the ENV factory in Willesden after the war, is something to be proud of. At Chryslers, he obviously won the support and confidence of the workers. But this was both because of and despite his being a revolutionary Marxist. The workers appreciated his defence of workers’ conditions and his fearless opposition to the bosses *despite* disagreeing with his revolutionary views. But one of the reasons he was such a good shop steward was *because* he was personally motivated by his commitment to revolutionary Marxism. And this is the contradiction. Despite their support for him as a shop steward, how many of the several thousand workers at Chryslers and ENV were won to revolutionary Marxism? Maybe he

recruited a few more than I did in my years as a shop steward in Manchester. As I pointed out, this was a measure of the yawning gap between our revolutionary Marxism and the political consciousness of the workers – a gap we were unable to bridge. In many of the interventions and participation by Trotskyists in industrial struggles recounted by Hunter in this book – on the docks, in the mines, building industry, engineering factories, in the ETU, etc – we did occasionally achieve modest successes, but nowhere were we able to establish a long-term influence. Nowhere were more than a handful of workers won to revolutionary politics.

Hunter devotes two chapters to Pabloism and the 1953 split in the Fourth International in which he played a prominent role as one of Healy's staunchest supporters. Space does not allow me to deal with this, except to say, with admittedly the benefit of hindsight, that both sides were wrong because both based themselves on a mistaken analysis of the nature of the epoch. Healy and Hunter saw the immediate future as one dominated by the collapse of capitalism and the rise of a revolutionary working class. The "Pabloites" shared the same mistaken view of terminal crisis, but combined war and revolution, and were wrong about the potential of Stalinist parties to give birth to revolutionary currents

spurred on by these same revolutionary masses; both discounted the possibility of capitalist stabilisation. After accusing his opponents of "capitulating to Stalinism" and predicting that the Soviet workers would, as Trotsky had asserted, bar the road to capitalist restoration by routing the bureaucracy, Healy ended his life hailing Gorbachev's perestroika as "the highest point" reached by the world revolution!

Those awaiting from Bill Hunter an explanation of this and of how the internal regime in the SLL and the WRP degenerated, and how the latter imploded, will have to wait until the second volume Hunter has promised. The present book, Volume 1, ends in 1959. Bill Hunter several times dismisses critics of Trotskyism as academics or bystanders not motivated by the desire to improve effective participation in the struggle. Many of those who will criticise this book did participate in the struggle – and many probably still do. This critic fought side by side with Bill Hunter during the whole period described in this volume. I share with him the desire that lessons be learnt that will help save future generations of activists from banging their heads against brick walls – doing more damage to their heads than to the wall. Unfortunately, Bill seems to want to continue in the same old way. There must be better ways of working for a better society!