

Jim Higgins Memorial Meeting

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THE MEMORIAL meeting to commemorate Jim Higgins, held at Caxton Hall in London on 18 January, featured most of the surviving leadership of the International Socialists from the early 1970s. As things stand, it was a creditable tribute to a comrade who contributed much to the workers' movement as a leading activist in the then Post Office Engineering Union and in the International Socialists. That few comrades attended who were not of the generation that fought the battles of the 1960s and '70s reflects badly on a movement that claims to be able to learn from past battles.

The meeting was chaired by Roger Protz (of Camra fame), and the main speakers were John Palmer and Nigel Harris. Both they and the speakers from the floor told many funny and sometimes touching stories of a remarkable comrade. Although most contributors were comrades of Jim's from the IS and later the Workers League, others had been his factional opponents in obscure fights. Many contributions mentioned the split within the IS that led to Higgins' departure from the group in the mid-'70s. Central to that fight were Tony Cliff and Duncan Hallas, both recently deceased themselves, and it is saddening that this split led to the political degeneration of their majority, which became the Socialist Workers Party, and the loss of the minority to revolutionary politics, after the short-lived Workers League collapsed. In a very real sense the IS rose on the tide of working class struggle of the 1960s and fell with the ebb of that tide.

The majority of comrades present, and those who could not attend due to their involvement in anti-war demonstrations, were of the generation which came to revolutionary politics in the early 1960s and were educated by some of the older comrades at the meeting such as Michael Kidron and Ray Challinor. Also present were former Labour MP Stan Newens, once a member of the IS's forerunner the Socialist Review Group, and a comrade from the Revolutionary Communist Party of the 1940s. The generational aspect of the

meeting is interesting, as most present were to leave organised revolutionary politics in the late 1970s and early '80s. This is not the first generation to succumb in whole or part to setbacks, as Higgins himself notes in his essay on the RCP and his little book on the IS ("Ten Years for the Locust" and *More Years for the Locust*).

Yet, as one comrade remarked, the IS renewed and developed revolutionary theory for its time. Succeeding generations must do the same or else stagnate, repeating the same tired ever-so-revolutionary phrases increasingly emptied of any meaning. In the late 1940s it was necessary to understand that the revolutionary wave, so confidently predicted by Trotsky, had failed to appear, and to understand the class nature of the new Stalinist states. In the 1960s the task was to understand the development of the rank and file movement within the trade unions, and today the task is to understand ... Well, that question cannot be answered here, but if the questions which the class struggle pose us are to be answered we would do well to look again at how and why the IS in its heyday asked questions and even found some answers.

The IS, during the period in which it went from being one fragment of the much fragmented Trotskyist movement to the point at which it briefly promised to break out of sectarianism, was almost unique in revolutionary politics. Although much of the theoretical bedrock that IS was built on was drawn directly from the Comintern and Trotsky, it was unusual in that it also looked afresh at thinkers such as Luxemburg and Lukács. It was not afraid to innovate and look again at forgotten and ignored aspects of the revolutionary tradition. Ideas such as bureaucratic State Capitalism, the Permanent Arms Economy, Deflected Permanent Revolution, the role of the Labour Bureaucracy and most importantly Rank and Fileism were all developed and popularised by the IS. It is this last conception which displays the grasp of revolutionary politics that evaded the various sects of the period and today's SWP, as it takes the idea of a transitional politics and applies it to where

the workers themselves are at the time; it relates to their existing consciousness and seeks to raise it to a fuller revolutionary consciousness.

It is the method of transitional politics as developed by the early Comintern and defended by Trotsky. It might be said that *New Left Review* also popularised and sought out the ideas of forgotten thinkers and published the writings of new thinkers from Europe and elsewhere. This would be true, but the *IS Journal* was very different from its more celebrated rival in that it sought to connect its intellectual work with the building of a revolutionary organisation and that its work has stood the test of time far better than have many of the once trendy characters whom the *NLR* lionised. Despite which, it cannot be denied that those ideas were inadequate to prevent the *IS* falling prey to the same sectarian disease they had fought to escape. Study of the relationship between Party and Class was pushed aside by the *IS*, as can be seen on the final page of Chris Harman's essay of the same name, and finally it was perhaps the error which broke the group apart.

The Rank and File orientation which Higgins fought for against its hollowing out by Cliff was inadequate to preserve the small Workers League in the later 1970s, as the workers' movement began a retreat that continued almost up to the present day. Meanwhile, the majority of *IS* became the SWP and degenerated politically as internal democracy became a mockery. The relationship of both groups to the organised working class became reduced to nothing. Only the discovery, almost by accident, of campaigning semi-populist areas of work such as the Anti Nazi League, and the remnants of what was left of a distinctive *IS* politics, saved the SWP from disappearing during the 1980s. Whatever their failures, the leaders of the SWP did preserve an independent revolutionary organisation, but at the cost of a sectarian degeneration which

maims any possibilities of a constructive intervention in the class movement that is slowly reviving today.

Members of the SWP who had found themselves ranged against Higgins were also present, and it was particularly pleasing that Ian Birchall paid tribute to Higgins despite past differences. This was in stark contrast to the absence from the meeting of members of other groupings who owe a debt to Higgins. A movement which cannot commemorate those who have gone before cannot hope to understand itself and move forward.

Of those comrades who worked with Higgins when he made a partial return to writing in the left press in the 1990s, supporters of *Revolutionary History* journal (who sponsored the meeting) were present, as were former members of the short-lived International Socialist Group (aka the Andy Wilson group), who published Higgins' last book *More Years for the Locust*. This little book, a savagely humorous and often anecdotal history of the Socialist Review Group and International Socialists, is also a fine discussion of how to build a revolutionary tendency in the workers' movement, debunking much of the pretentious bunkum that passes for theory along the way. Comrades will be pleased to learn that it will soon appear online.

Also due to appear on line are many other of Higgins writings from *International Socialism*, *Socialist Worker*, etc. These are planned to appear in a commemorative volume prior to their being placed online. Hopefully new comrades will discover a part of the revolutionary tradition in these writings and a humour and humanity which we are sore in need of. As a link in the revolutionary tradition, Jim Higgins made a contribution to the future emancipation of humanity. ■

AN APPEAL

A special fund has been set up to publish Jim Higgins' writings. If any comrade would like to make a donation to the fund, please contact Ted Crawford at: crawford@revhist.datanet.co.uk

In the meantime, a number of Jim's articles are available on the What Next? website, either in back issues of this journal or in the New Interventions section of the site.

<http://mysite.freemove.com/whatnext>