

# The Socialist Workers Party and the Stop the War Coalition

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This piece consists of excerpts from notes for a speech given to a seminar organised by *Signs of the Times*. We took this version from Paul Anderson's website, *Gauche* (<http://libsoc.blogspot.com>), and it is reproduced without permission. A full version is available as a discussion paper on the *Signs of the Times* website ([www.signsofthetimes.org.uk](http://www.signsofthetimes.org.uk)).

THE SWP is the only organised force on the left that can mount a serious national initiative. Because of its internal discipline and access to resources, it was able to move quickly to establish the Stop the War Coalition and then to go on to build the big national demonstrations (though certainly not without the essential collaboration of much wider forces). The SWP should be given credit for its work in this regard: without a single, nation-wide organising centre, a clear public focus, the anti-war movement would not have been able to make the mark that it did – which is not to say that there aren't many serious criticisms of the SWP's handling of the Stop the War Coalition.

For the most part, independent leftists have failed to organise and failed to focus; in critical moments – like the run-up to war – we are unable to act collectively, to take and shape initiatives. So criticism of the SWP must be accompanied by self-criticism. This is partly a problem of our making, a reflection of our inadequacies over many years.

The answer to the frustrations many of us have felt with the SWP is not to demonise them. Many individual SWP members all over the country make real contributions to numerous struggles for social justice. We should beware of SWP-bashing and reverse sectarianism, and of any form of red-baiting – the organised far left has a right to contribute and take part; we should not dismiss initiatives simply because they come from the SWP – in fact, those who stayed away from the Stop the War Coalition in its early days because of the SWP's prominence within it merely helped ensure the SWP's ultimate domination of it.

Most importantly, we mustn't dismiss the classical Marxist tradition with which the far left

groups are associated. In my view that tradition is incomplete, but we need to know about it and engage with it and respect its struggles. If we walk away from that heritage, there is a danger that too much time will be spent reinventing the wheel.

We should also remember that the foibles we associate with the SWP – the control freakery, the intellectual dishonesty, the casual attitude towards democracy – are not confined to that group – in various measures they are shared by other far left groups, and by much of the Labour and trade union left, and the independent and anarchist left is not untainted by them.

And we should also remember that the two political initiatives often cited as relative successes by critics of the SWP – the Scottish Socialist Party and the PRC in Italy – both emerged out of groups spawned by the Leninist tradition.

Finally, the desire for unity in action is strong. Without that unity people can never fully realise their own potential power. That unity is a goal for which it's worth making sacrifices, gritting your teeth, working with people you distrust – though it must stop short at silence and complicity with what you believe to be wrong.

Having registered those caveats, I have to say, on the basis of my experience in the Socialist Alliance and the Stop the War Coalition, that I believe the SWP is constitutionally incapable of working with others on an equal, honest and transparent basis. In the end, their aim is dominance, and anything that threatens or undermines that dominance will always, in their eyes, be suspect.

I've never agreed with the SWP's programme – or the programmes offered by any of the Leninist

groups – but that’s not the core of the problem. It’s not about programme, it’s about method.

Everyone here will have had the experience of attending a meeting ostensibly to discuss or organise an initiative or campaign only to find themselves faced with a block of SWP members who have arrived with a pre-determined line and set of priorities. The non-SWPers present may hold a variety of views or doubts, but these end up rotating around the axis established by the SWP. It’s a lopsided and ineffectual discussion because a key participant – the SWP – is playing by a different set of rules, and not engaging openly and fully with the debate as others see it.

More broadly it’s my experience that the SWP leadership have an alarmingly contemptuous attitude towards democracy and a knee-jerk hostility to any challenge to their views or priorities. In particular, the concept of accountability seems virtually absent from the SWP’s collective consciousness. SWP members who are officers of wider bodies tend to treat them like playthings, and rarely make an effort to account for their actions and decisions to the broader movement.

The SWP consider themselves THE vanguard and despite the lip-service to pluralism retain the conviction that they ALONE offer the movement proper leadership. They seem to be driven by a highly competitive dynamic: the group and its claims must be sustained at all costs. A premium is placed on having the answers and exercising leadership. Doubt or agnosticism have no place – indeed they are regarded as weaknesses. Truth is reified in the form of a jargon – and any nuance that cannot be expressed in that jargon is ruled out of consideration.

In the end, the SWP is imbued with an authoritarian ethic – most recently confirmed by their readiness to dub as “divisive” or “disruptive” anyone who voices political preferences contrary to theirs. We’ve seen this in the Socialist Alliance, where they have dumped dissenters from national officer positions and crudely packed a meeting in Birmingham in order to force out one of the few genuinely independent (and respected) trade union activists the SA could boast. We’ve also seen it in the Stop the War Coalition where decisions are taken by the SWP leadership and foisted on the STWC with barely a semblance of democratic consultation, where SWP members appear on platforms as “STWC” spokespersons, though they have no links to any STWC structures, where the priorities of the SWP leadership (at the moment, campaigning for George Galloway), take precedence over the priorities of the wider movement (surely, at the moment, stepping up the pressure on Blair regarding the absent WMD and building

a long-term campaign against the occupation of Iraq) – and where anyone who wanted a slightly greater emphasis on direct action, or a broader approach to the choice of speakers on the big demonstrations, or didn’t totally buy into the crude construction of “the Muslims” as a homogenous (manipulable) entity was effectively excluded. And in both the SA and the STWC, on the rare occasions when initiatives not under the direct control of the SWP emerged from democratic discussion, they were either ignored or undermined by the SWP.

It’s hardly new to note that blind loyalty to an organisation is a dangerous state of mind, and it saddens me that despite all the evidence of the left’s past errors, the SWP by and large will not engage in critical examination of their own history or current analysis and practice. When events embarrass them, the error is buried in silence. There is a fear of looking harsh realities or awkward questions in the face and a reluctance to spend time addressing them. There seems to be an imperative to move on to the next campaign or issue or intervention without pausing to assess the success or otherwise of previous efforts. I suspect that some of the leaders fear that if the membership is not kept constantly distracted, they might begin to ask awkward questions.

The competitive dynamic that drives the SWP also leads to an air of unreality in its assessment of events and movements. Instead of sober assessment of our success and failures, strengths and weaknesses, we’re offered empty boosterism – the numbers attending meetings or demos are routinely inflated, and the complexity of multi-faceted developments is unacknowledged. This habit was a problem for the SWP in the Socialist Alliance – where election results could not be inflated and the realities of public opinion could not be massaged away. And it is a problem in the STWC – where it is self-evident that, for all our achievements, we did not stop the war, and people are rightly asking now: how we can do better in the future? To which the SWP can answer only: let’s do more of the same!

Large-scale demos and rallies top-heavy with speakers are the SWP’s preferred type of activity because these activities lend themselves to top-down control and offer the best ponds in which to fish for new members.

Finally, what has disturbed me most in working with the SWP has been their flagrant ethical relativism. This is an ancient foible of the left – a conviction that the class struggle, or the building of the revolutionary party, or the sheer evil of the forces we find ourselves up against justifies any behaviour, no matter how dishonest, duplicitous, or destructive to others. In their competition with

the rest of the left, in their drive to maintain control (including control of their own members), anything goes. Meetings can be packed, democratic decisions circumvented, dissenters smeared and threatened, cheques forged and money misappropriated.

Over many years on the left, it's my experience that mutual trust is far more important than detailed political agreement – and in my bitter and abundant experience, it is impossible to trust the SWP. They are too willing to sacrifice our common goals, values and principles for their own short-term advantage.

It's been obvious for years that this kind of practice on the left – from whatever source – puts people off in droves. It hampers honest discussion, distorts debate, obstructs participation, leads to tactical and strategic errors.

However, we should remember that all of this is a part of a much greater problem. We are all the

products of the society we aim to challenge and overturn. In their hunger for status, their competitiveness, their reified perception of social realities, and their ethical relativism, the SWP mimic the dominant forces in the society they oppose.

So how can the deformed products of a deformed society overcome this dilemma? Part of the answer is democracy. We're all weak, we're all fallible, and it is only when we work together within democratic, transparent, accountable, participatory structures that our weaknesses and fallibilities, our ego-driven errors and arrogant myopia, can be corrected and disciplined. It's argued that the Leninist party provides this correction and discipline but the evidence – quite overwhelming at this juncture in history – is that it actually institutionalises and reifies those weaknesses and fallibilities, cocoons them from the harsh winds of social reality, and insulates them from collective scrutiny. ■

## A NEW VIDEO FROM PLATFORM FILMS

Platform Films, makers of anti-war films including *Not In My Name* and *Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen* have completed a new film, **THE HUMAN SHIELDS**, which we hope to distribute as widely as possible to help mobilise opposition to the US/UK occupation of Iraq.

In January 2003 around 25 people got in three London double-decker buses and set out for Iraq. Their aim was to stop a war. Our film follows their journey across Europe, Turkey and Syria to Baghdad. They receive huge support along the way and they inspire hundreds of other people to become human shields. En route there are problems with the press and disputes over the leadership. After their 3000-mile drive they enter Iraq and discover the disturbing realities of a country suffering from the effects of sanctions, killer diseases and the depleted uranium weapons used in the first Gulf War. There are disagreements between some shields and the Iraqi regime. Some go home, but around 140 stay. They describe the impact of the US-led bombing and invasion. The film contains one shield's own footage of the bombardment. The film asks: What difference did the human shields make? Did they save lives? Did they affect the conduct of the war?

Beta SP/VHS/DV, 58 minutes, June 2003.

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