

The Revolutionary Odyssey of John Lawrence (Part 2)

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This is the concluding part of a study of John Lawrence's political career. The first part, in *What Next?* No.26, took the story up to 1954, when Lawrence's tendency broke with the Fourth International and continued their work as a loose grouping of political allies around the Labour left paper *Tribune*. We hope to publish this study as a pamphlet in the near future.

LAWRENCE'S NEW plans encountered troublesome obstacles. His ambitious orientation towards *Tribune* achieved little. With the proscription of *Socialist Outlook* in the autumn of 1954 he faced competition here from Healy who was similarly bereft of a paper. Apart from their superior organisation, the Healyites had an issue – the breakaway of the dockers in the Northern ports from the TGWU in 1954-55 to join the Stevedores and Dockers, the Blue Union. This appealed to *Tribune*'s dynamic editor Michael Foot and it concretised what was, all too often, just talk of “Bevanising” the unions and thus undermining the TGWU leader Arthur Deakin's hold on Labour's national executive. Lawrence had no such exciting or initially successful crusade to offer. He was handicapped by his opposition to the breakaway as an adventure and, unfortunately for him, Foot proved a stronger force on *Tribune* than Lawrence's St Pancras comrade, Peggy Duff. Lawrence's main contributions to the paper were in the summer and autumn of 1955. He published a number of articles on strikes and tenants' issues and was briefly advertised as “our automation correspondent”, documenting new trends in technology and discussing their implications for workers.¹⁸⁷ The group was able to secure coverage for its activities in the Labour Party in London. But by 1956 they were: “Disappointed with their relations with *Tribune*. Not much of their stuff published. What did get in heavily cut. No progress with their proposal for Marxist discussion feature in *Tribune*.”¹⁸⁸ Lawrence held out few hopes for future progress: “Michael Foot the boss and very anti-Communist. He had forced through the line on the Blue Union in spite of disagreement by others.”¹⁸⁹

As for his politics, the manifesto which Lawrence issued with Braddock in December 1955, *Labour's Way Forward*, promised little new. Here again was the

repeated assertion of capitalist crisis to which the only answer was the maximum programme of socialism: “Monopoly capitalism is doomed – let us unite our forces to finish it off. Then a real start can be made on the urgent task of planning Britain's economy in accordance with socialist principles.”¹⁹⁰ But the only link between the booming Britain of 1955 and the socialist future was the not very robust fight over wages in the unions, the struggle for better and cheaper housing on the councils and the drive to replace Labour's leadership and remove the Tories. Braddock and Lawrence stressed the significance of local government and Poplarism was invoked. And once again they displayed a fatalistic faith in Russia, China and the irreversible revolutionary process: “... a solid wall of colonial revolt stretches clear across the world.... Millions of people starting with the Russians in 1917 have shown that they want something better.... China has broken away completely from the capitalist camp and joined with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in constructing the new socialist order.”¹⁹¹

This suggests the continuing influence of the ideas of Deutscher on Lawrence despite his break with Pablo. In Deutscher's view, the developing changes in Russia and China would stimulate radical reverberations inside the national Communist Parties and it was the CP to which Lawrence now turned. It appears unlikely that he was looking towards organising an opposition in the CP, at least as conceived in traditional Trotskyist or Pabloite terms. As far as Pablo was concerned, Lawrence's place was deep inside the Labour Party directed by the Fourth International, not penetrating the CP. There was certainly at this time no opposition of any significance inside the CP. The only factional group that emerged in the 1950s was that in Glasgow around Harry McShane. In the summer of 1953, Healy

had been sufficiently excited to pronounce its appearance as auguring “a serious crisis in the party”. In reality it was short-lived and its repercussions minor. It seems more probable that, with Deutscher, Lawrence looked rather towards the CP’s gradual regeneration through the emergence of an organic current in the party sloughing off Stalinism and moving together with the Russian and Chinese bureaucracies back onto the path of revolution. And that he saw a place for himself and his supporters in such a current. If he thought about the barriers to this, he must have perceived them as flimsy impediments in the face of the irresistible revolutionary process.¹⁹²

As early as the autumn of 1954 a former Club member now sympathetic to the CP reported: “Lawrence had told him ... that there were no Trotskyists in the British Communist Party. Shaw said, however, that he saw the possibility under certain circumstances of the Lawrenceites entering as a group or sending a group into our party. The present line of the Lawrence group of working with the Party could be a preparation for this.”¹⁹³ Even at this stage one of Lawrence’s increasingly disillusioned supporters recalled “incidents where I could see that they were drifting towards Stalinism”.¹⁹⁴ This was confirmed by CP reports: “2 or 3 people he has spoken to seem to be in a quandary since Lawrence line has been ‘approaching’ CP line.”¹⁹⁵ However, at this stage there seemed little chance of the CP welcoming Lawrence. The party’s expert on Trotskyism, Betty Reid, had no doubts on this score. She circulated the leadership: “...almost certainly Lawrence is an agent and a dangerous man.”¹⁹⁶

A further factor in Lawrence’s turn towards the CP was that his disillusion with *Tribune* also reflected some disenchantment with Bevanism which was on the wane from 1955. Lawrence was disturbed by its leader’s enduring emphasis on Parliament and considered: “Bevan and the Bevanites in general proved a broken reed as far as building a Left movement.”¹⁹⁷ While this brought him closer to the CP’s view, he was aware of the importance of staying inside the Labour Party where he had a base and a relatively large audience. But he was also aware, after the refusal to endorse him as a parliamentary candidate and the proscription of *Socialist Outlook*, of the limits which the Labour Party apparatus placed on progress and the consequent fragility of his position. Yet it is apparent that from 1954 and his break with the Club and Pablo, Lawrence had no clear strategy which integrated immediate action and immediate issues with the relatively long haul orientation required if he was to achieve anything of significance in the Labour Party. Turning his back on the past, he turned his back on some of the lessons of past entrism. This exacerbated his tendency towards volatility and outspokenness. It was dangerous in terms of serious work in a situation where it is also clear that he was being observed by the Labour Party bureaucracy. From the start, but increasingly, he looked towards the CP as a possible way out of his

problems.

In January 1956, twelve Camberwell councillors around Goffe and Roddy Hood were expelled from the Labour Party for voting against the Labour group’s differential rents scheme. Deprivation of their primary framework for activity created immediate difficulties. Goffe reflected: “... while we continued to meet as a group, those of us who had been in the struggle in Camberwell, there became less and less point. Either we could get back into the Labour Party and I personally couldn’t ... there really was no independent way and it was a steady drift away from active participation in socialist politics.”¹⁹⁸

Lawrence knew that an independent, open group was not on the agenda and he foresaw the problem. He immediately wrote to the London District Secretary of the CP, John Mahon, asking for a discussion of the position. He noted:

“We are doing very well in St Pancras ... but the NEC is sniffing around and asking for information about us! I’ll tell you personally Johnny, that I would join the CP tomorrow if I only had myself to think about. Trouble is that I am looked upon as the ‘leader’ of quite a good bunch of boys and they are not all of the same opinion as myself about this thing. However, we can’t let it run much longer. I feel that all of us who see the necessity of building a Communist Party must take our place with you. But that was another thing I wanted to talk about.”¹⁹⁹

Healy had advised the members of the Club only three years earlier – and on this occasion, at least, his advice was good – of “the necessity to remain within this mass movement [the Labour Party] and to fight at all times against being separated off from it. This is not as easy as it sounds and sometimes causes a certain impatience”.²⁰⁰ Yet after only some eighteen months of independent work in the Labour Party Lawrence was already evincing “we can’t let it run much longer”. His lack of stomach and stamina for long term entry was apparent. One again gets the sense that as Peggy Duff put it: “John was really an old fashioned type of agitator ... his personality won him friends and followers.”²⁰¹ His desire and capacity to lead an organisation or faction on any sustained basis were questionable. It seems this was never his aim. It is, moreover, apparent from this letter to Mahon which predated the 20th Congress of the Russian party that Lawrence’s desire to join the CP was not simply dependent on Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin but predated it.

By this time he was working closely with CP members in St Pancras, particularly through the Holborn and St Pancras United Workers’ and Tenants’ Defence Committee, and was on friendly terms with Mahon and other district leaders. Local collaboration led towards wider co-operation and he became an executive member of the CP-influenced National Association of Tenants and Residents. That by early 1956 he was thinking seriously of joining the party is corroborated by a discussion the London CPer Jack Sutherland had with Lawrence supporters Phil and Kath Sheridan and Roy Beecham a month later: “Their

general idea is that 'John' (i.e. Lawrence) would join the CP tomorrow. I don't think it has occurred to them there would be any problems about this."²⁰² However, the counter argument was put by Phil Sheridan: the best policy for the group was to continue to develop the left inside the Labour Party and withdrawal or expulsion would simply strengthen the right.

Others in the Lawrence group, notably Goffe, shared this view: Goffe saw joining the CP as joining another only slightly larger sect.²⁰³ The group continued their high level of activity inside the Labour Party: Lawrence was a delegate from St Pancras to the annual conference four times in the 1950s, featuring prominently in a debate on Tories' Rent Act in 1957, while Dinning spoke on nationalisation in 1953, Goffe on housing and Goldberg on nationalisation in 1955.²⁰⁴ But Lawrence's predilections, while already apparent, were buttressed by the events of 1956. He saw Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Congress as not only confirming his past concerns but, centrally, affirming the bureaucracy's willingness to change itself. Lacking the calculative, and at times restraining, strategic brain which an entrust organisation could provide, and identifying more enthusiastically with the CP, Lawrence began to take a higher and more dangerous profile in St Pancras. Peggy Duff commented:

"... his excesses had a charm of their own, a sort of slap-happy, up and punch 'em approach which enlivened the council chamber and even delighted the Tories. When he got up to speak, they would settle down in their seats and enjoy the show. He would call the Tory ladies 'gals' and oddly enough they liked it. They enjoyed the excitement and the way in which St Pancras was getting the headlines."²⁰⁵

But if the Tories lapped it up, some Labour Party members did not; the development of an anti-Lawrence faction was not overlooked by Labour's national executive. Reid remarked that as Lawrence came closer to the CP and moved away from the traditional, careful confines of entrust tactics "... it did not require much political experience to know right at the beginning that action by the Executive Committee was inevitable – the only question was how long they would let it continue – especially when it included such gifts as red flags and committees on which Communists were officially invited to participate as representatives of the Communist Party branch".²⁰⁶

It might be worth saying a word here about the respective merits of the Labour Party and the CP as sites for revolutionary work at this time. Lawrence had merely been stating what was obvious, axiomatic and the beginning of socialist strategic wisdom when he wrote in 1953: "The British Labour Party commands the loyal support of the vast majority of the working class."²⁰⁷ Quite apart from considerations of class allegiance and the platform it offered in national and local government, Labour was, at least in relative terms, a mass party; the CP was a big group. Labour Party membership

increased from 608,487 in 1947 to 1,004,685 in 1953, declining to 912,989 in 1957. In the context of the crucial trade union link by which industrial activists could work in the party, the constituencies in the 1950s were, in comparison with later decades, busy arenas of activism with a powerful left. If Bevanism needs to be seen in proportion, it was far from the insubstantial current it is sometimes depicted. If the early 1950s constituted "the high tide of Labourism", these tendencies were sustained through the decade.²⁰⁸ In contrast, the CP was less plastic, politically marginal, a sizeable sect in sustained decline. Membership dropped from 43,000 in 1948 to 33,000 by 1956 and decline accelerated thereafter: by 1959 there were only 25,000 members, less than half the party's 1943 peak.²⁰⁹ The CP's real strength, and the lure for many, its specific weight in industry, was important. But it was significantly circumscribed by its militants' lack of access to the Labour Party and the forbidding insignia of Stalinism. It seems incontrovertible that for serious socialists the Labour left was the place to work, despite the restrictions on political dissidence, restrictions which, however, were tighter in the CP than in the Labour Party.

But if Lawrence had started off in 1954 with somewhat confused ideas of working with the CP while taking issue in some important ways with its politics, he seemed to be increasingly identifying with those politics. Moreover, in the Labour Party work he was beginning to succumb to impatience. From the summer of 1956 through 1957, his group met with London CP activists such as Mahon, Sam Aaronovitch, Claude Berridge and Dennis Goodwin. Our sources on these encounters are CP reports and they reflect perhaps an element of both wish-fulfilment on the CP's part and playing to the gallery on Lawrence's. Nonetheless, they disclose different perceptions among Lawrence's group and a characteristic erraticism on his part. In one meeting he is writing Bevanism off.²¹⁰ In another he is asserting: "Bevan was still the dominant and most popular figure on the left regarded as representative of the socialist trend.... He estimated that the socialist trend would become dominant and raise Bevan to the leadership."²¹¹ Lawrence repeated that he was finished with his past: "Trotskyism: JL affirmed complete break – basis found getting nowhere and could not accept increasing anti-Soviet and anti-Communist attitude e.g. on German rearmament – 'wasted my political life in Trotskyist movement'."²¹² While Lawrence sometimes criticised the CP for seeing every Labour left as a potential party member, rather than relating to the Labour left's own dynamic, the CP were impressed by his attitude to Khrushchev's speech: "[Lawrence] seems to have been very restrained in taking up questions after the 20th Congress and since many of his criticisms have now been corroborated this restraint is probably an indication of how far he is anxious to maintain and develop his relations and perhaps even apply for membership of the party."²¹³

What is probably very important in terms of

Lawrence's evolution is his continuing emphasis on the need for joint work between his group and the CP in industry. At Briggs, Lawrence was in touch with, but still outside, one of the strongest CP factory branches in Britain, while in broad terms one of the party's most successful post-war initiatives was its recruitment among shop stewards in the car industry. At Briggs, the CP's Kevin Halpin was a powerful figure. At the adjacent Ford complex – Ford would shortly assimilate Briggs – the CP dominated the stewards' committee and Berridge was the AEU full-time officer for both plants.²¹⁴ Lawrence was drawn into this dense, demanding world of industrial politics. He worked best as part of a team and the CP constituted the best available collectivity. Increasingly he felt the lack of a paper – Labour Today Publications was going nowhere – and asked the CP about using the *Daily Worker*. Like the Ford activist, Johnny McLoughlin, who refused to leave the CP in 1956 because of its industrial base, Lawrence must have considered: "The Labour Party had not got and could not have, factory organisation. The Communist Party branch at Briggs was of great value to the workers there."²¹⁵

What appealed strongly to the isolated members of the Lawrence group in the unions was the CP's industrial machine, for it provided both a strategic network and a community of militants, and at times it could operate insulated from the CP's reformist programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. In engineering, Emmett and Dinning were increasingly drawn to it. Dinning was soon publicly defending the leader of the CP fraction in the AEU, Reg Birch, against hostile comment from *Tribune* that he was suppressing criticism of the right to improve his election chances. In St Pancras itself, David Goldhill, who had become secretary of the trades council, worked closely with CP trade unionists, notably the railway activist Jock Nicolson and Don Cook, an AEU shop steward at Handley Page.²¹⁶ A CP activist in USDAW informed King Street of his discussions with Goffe over a long period, discussions which on this account demonstrated how far collaboration between the CP and the Lawrence group could go:

"We reached agreement on policy points for the annual gathering, dealing with wages, trade union organisation and the decline of membership, colonial questions and foreign policy in general.... We also reached agreement on the panel of names to submit for the Labour Party conference and the TUC as well as the women's sections ... his willingness to hold discussions with us, the information he is prepared to give us and the fight that he puts up on policy questions inside the union are developments worth noting."²¹⁷

The most striking case was that of Goldberg, who had been in earlier days a prominent critic of the corrupt and entrenched CP leadership of the ETU around Frank Haxell and Frank Foulkes. He mended his fences and with leadership support was elected to the union's national executive. The lack of opportunities for the group in the Labour Party was

confirmed in 1956 by the refusal of Labour's executive to endorse Goldberg as the parliamentary candidate in Nottingham South. In consequence he became more immersed in the ETU, defending its leaders against the allegations of ballot-rigging and clashing in the pages of *Tribune* with both ETU moderates and with left critics such as Healy's supporters, Dave Finch and Peter Fryer.²¹⁸ Goldberg's new course eventually led him into the dock at the ballot-rigging trial where he was exonerated of corruption but disdainfully described by Mr Justice Winn as "a not very scrupulous henchman of Haxell".²¹⁹

The powerful attraction which the CP held for Lawrence and his supporters in industry was strengthened by the group's growing belief that the unions constituted the primary arena of activity:

"The trade unions are the decisive force in the Labour Party and the only firm basis for a left because of their class basis. When the unions come into conflict with the employing class and the state, then there would be a serious rift in the Labour Party. Main opposition to right wing leaders is the CP. They considered discussions in the factories between Labour and Communists and the development of factory forums where all sides of socialist opinion could be expressed and the active participation of Trade Union left was essential."²²⁰

By the summer of 1957, these factors were propelling the group towards joining the party to realise their aspiration of "full co-operation with the Communists".²²¹ As the issue of unilateral disarmament moved towards the centre of labour movement politics and delivered the *coup de grace* to Bevanism, Lawrence publicly advocated the CP policy of multilateral disarmament. Fundamentally, his defence of the invasion of Hungary in the Labour Party at a time when the CP needed every friend it could get demonstrated unqualified endorsement of Stalinism and boosted his credibility with the party. This might of course be perceived as in some contradiction to his belief in bureaucratic self-reform. But, no doubt like Deutscher, he believed that success for the Hungarian revolution would impede the drive to socialist regeneration and turn the clock back. The bureaucracy would change at the pace history, not the working class, dictated.²²²

Lawrence's stand in support of bureaucratic coercion led to severance of his last links with the American Socialist Union. It drew a line between his group and the growing anti-Stalinist left. Defections – Acheson, Audrey and Johnny Wise, Goffe, among others had seen the way things were going and retired from the scene – clarified, hardened and homogenised the group's position. The CP report of a joint meeting emphasised: "With the XX Congress they felt that some of their points had been met, there was no point left in the old controversies and they could now wholeheartedly support the SU. When Hungary came they considered without delay or hesitation that the Soviet policy was correct".²²³ However, the party also noted: "After the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Lawrence remained firm on this and so did his main group. But

a substantial proportion of his supporters (for example, the Camberwell councillors) who were previously under his influence went over to Healy and the Newsletter.”²²⁴

Lawrence’s rejection of strategic restraint inside the Labour Party was graphically highlighted in the summer of 1957. Prompted by the council’s decision to convert the civil defence office into a block of flats to house the homeless, the government put in a commissioner to supervise civil defence in the borough. In response, Lawrence chained himself to the gates of the building until forcibly cut free by the police.²²⁵ Matters now came to a head. At a meeting on 17 November 1957, the group, emphasising that “the CP was indispensable for a socialist revolution”, explicitly raised the question of whether they should join the party. They accepted this would mean the loss of their positions and required careful consideration. But they were emphatic that “if the CP felt that they should stay in the LP they wanted their work to be seen as part of the general activity of the CP”.²²⁶ The previous day, Emmett had applied for party membership. In his letter he stated: “I consider the Soviet Union to be the world’s first socialist state which is still in the process of development towards Communism.” He recalled his past criticisms but affirmed: “I welcome the decision of the 20th Congress to eliminate certain bureaucratic features from Soviet political life.” He felt that this made the USSR “more than ever worthy of the unqualified support of socialists”. The Trotskyists, he declared, had “degenerated into little more than sectarian groupings whose insistence on “the revolutionary overthrow of the bureaucracy” in the Soviet Union and other socialist states is counter-revolutionary... Hungary is a clear example of this”.²²⁷

Once again it was clear that what had impelled Lawrence and his comrades towards joining the CP was the Soviet Union. But it was not as simple as that. What transpired provides a fascinating case study of the stringent vetting procedures which the CP adopted before enrolling erstwhile enemies. The secretary of the CP’s Central Organisation Department, Betty Reid, meticulously verified Emmett’s biography and the position of others in the group whom were seen as likely to follow Emmett’s test case by applying *en bloc*. Some of her comments are intriguing and raise wider issues. For example, she wanted to acquire detailed information about their experience of Trotskyist organisations before 1954 from the applicants. She later noted about the second and third Congresses of the Fourth International: “Our friends were desperate for information about these Congresses and they had material from me based on my limited information.”²²⁸ This appears to be a reference to Reid’s role in passing material to the Soviet security apparatus. Moreover, she was concerned about the probable presence of agents of Healy, Pablo and the police in Lawrence’s group which, while it would leave few genuine members, she judged “almost certain”. She went on to refer to “evidence of considerable police attention to these

organisations ... although the same could be said, of course, of our own Party. We know that on the occasion of the B[ulganin] and K[hrushchev] visit, systematic attention to all the individual members of the Trotskyist lists was undertaken and that the information on the activities of these people was remarkably accurate].” Precisely what Reid is referring to – it appears to be some sort of police or Russian security operation which she had inside knowledge of – is unclear from the text.²²⁹

While she felt that the advantages of recruiting the Lawrence group to the CP were obvious, she remained convinced that at least some were infiltrators. Despite all the evidence, she remained puzzled and unsure as whether the group had changed its skin, indeed whether such change was possible after decades in such a degenerate political formation as Trotskyism. As Reid anxiously averred, on the surface everything seemed perfectly in order: “... they have remained absolutely solid in support of the line of the Party ... they had been able to stand up to all the problems of the 20th Congress and the renewed attack of all the old Trotskyist ideas without batting an eyelid and with a tenacity that many Party members of longstanding might envy. What is particularly impressive is that this has extended to all the Lawrence group.”²³⁰

But her sixth sense and disdain for the appearance of things told her it just might be too good to be true. Why did they want to join the CP when many party members of longstanding were jumping ship, when the Soviet Union was under renewed assault, when Trotskyism was resurgent? Could hardened Trotskyists of this stripe really change their nature? She worried: “It may be that he [Lawrence] is a man of considerable power and influence. It may be that they have confidence in his long term strategy. When we see what has happened to many good comrades, it remains a remarkable feature that a background of twenty years total immersion could be sloughed off without difficulty in spite of the particular problems of the 1956 period.”²³¹

The CP leadership seemed to have accepted her position that a group with this record could not simply walk into the party, still less bed down quietly in ones and twos in pursuit of what might turn out to be subversive purposes. The party’s position appears to have been that to handle Emmett’s application individually would be a mistake. The matter should be deferred while Lawrence and his group collectively clarified their position, the CP gave it some thought and, crucially, the situation in the Labour Party was resolved. This seems a plausible explanation for the break in the documentary evidence until October 1958. It seems probable that the basic reason for delay was related to the group’s Labour Party work in St Pancras. The period between November 1957 and October 1958 saw the climax of Lawrence’s struggle under the slogan of “not a penny on the rates, not a penny on the rents” which defied the Tory government and tested the patience of Labour’s establishment; the hoisting of the Red Flag

and Lawrence's subsequent arrest on 1st May 1958; a wave of hostile publicity; Lawrence's suspension from Labour Party membership; the dissolution of the Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party; and the subsequent expulsion of some 30 members including Lawrence and 13 other councillors. Matters were not resolved until the Labour Party conference in October 1958 turned down their appeal.²³²

It is clear that on Lawrence's part caution and self-denial had been cast to the winds: the consequences were, as Reid had noted, inevitable. Speaking on the same platform as a CP candidate in the London County Council elections and preventing the Home Secretary, Henry Brooke, being heard at a meeting on rents, was behaviour which played into the hands of Labour's national executive. Once the blow fell, Lawrence did little to encourage leniency. He refused to retreat before Labour's big guns, informing the press that if he lived in France or Italy he would join the CP. It was all a matter of size and influence. Residing in Britain, he declared, untruthfully echoing Pablo, he had no intention of leaving a big party to join a small one. Such sentiments were nonetheless utilised by Labour's general secretary Morgan Phillips to justify expulsion.²³³ Whether the approach of Lawrence and his supporters was unilateral or worked out in conjunction with the CP at London district or national level remains unclear. But if they wished to retain Labour Party membership the path they took was indubitably adventurist. It ensured eventual expulsion and it simplified matters in relation to CP membership.

But it did not resolve them. Lawrence's application for membership on 17 October 1958 was again all about the Soviet Union. But it triggered a further inquisition and intensive soul-searching on the part of the CP leaders. Lawrence stated that he had been seriously considering joining the CP for three or four years; he had held back only because of the situation in St Pancras. He expressed himself "in full agreement" with the policy of the party and described his recent attempts at building unity between Labour and Communist workers as his most satisfying experience in twenty-one years of struggle. He briefly reflected on his time in the Trotskyist movement, concluding, "it plays an essentially reactionary role in the labour movement ... its viciously anti-Soviet propaganda serves well the purposes of the Cold War". Trotskyism was a defeatist, pessimistic tendency which yielded to the temptation to criticise "the authoritarian forms" which the dictatorship of the proletariat had perforce taken in the face of the isolation of the Soviet Republic. Trotsky's ideas of world revolution and "the forcible overthrow of the Soviet government" were essentially adventurist and endangered the revolution. His prediction that the bureaucracy was a brake on progress and that in the absence of world revolution the Soviet Union would collapse had proved mistaken: "Stalin's characterisation of Trotsky as a man possessing little faith in the ability

of the revolution to survive ... was I now realise essentially correct."²³⁴ Errors had been made in the Soviet Union and by the CPs but they had been corrected. Trotskyism was:

"A semi-anarchist, semi-pacifist, essentially petit-bourgeois current representing the impatience of the middle-class elements and the immaturity of sections of workers. That its leaders are reactionary is proved by their fierce support of the Hungarian counter-revolution. I am glad that I severed all connections with this movement at least before the crowning shame of its alliance with Dulles and Mindsenty against the Red Army in Hungary.... That Trotskyism can still be a trap – especially for youth – I realise only too well. I, myself, was attracted to it in 1939 from what was, I now realise, a pacifist attitude towards war. I was young (only 23) and lacked any experience of the Labour Movement, but I have since paid a heavy price for that initial mistake. Believe me, Comrade Mahon, I bitterly regret the years I have spent with the Trotskyists, especially since I was a fairly prominent propagandist and was myself responsible for sowing confusion in the ranks of the workers. It has not been easy to work my way out of the morass.... It is never easy to admit that one has spent twenty odd years in a movement which is fundamentally wrong in every respect. I console myself with the thought that a lesson learned through such an experience is a lesson well learned. I, therefore, hope most sincerely that the Party will accept my application for membership is made with no reservations whatsoever."²³⁵

Lawrence's position did not demonstrate, as Cannon and Healy concluded, that Pabloism led automatically to Stalinism. The career of Pablo – and Healy – negated that. It nonetheless suggested it could play a part, that a misplaced Deutscherite faith in the Russian bureaucracy could, in conjunction with other factors, with a favourable impression of CP work in industry and local government, point a path from Pabloism to Stalinism. Lawrence's decision to join the CP was not thought through in forensic, clinical fashion. Such decisions rarely are. There seems to have been an element of impressionism and confusion on his part. He does not seem to have seriously studied developments in Russia and China or the relationship between revolutionary change and the CP's programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. This would later cause him great difficulties. Concentrating on foreign affairs and industry, it seems that he assessed the CP only in a one-sided fashion.

Lawrence's letter was accompanied by ten other applications including those of Lane, Goldhill, Hood and Phil Sheridan, all former Trotskyists, as well as the earlier application of Emmett. The CP gave particular attention to those "with a record", although they appear to have concentrated on Lawrence. His application received support from the London district and from Essex, whose secretary, Dave Kelly, commented: "If Lawrence and Co. are not admitted to membership of our Party then there

would be a negative effect on the situation in the Dagenham factories, especially Briggs, and there is some possibility that we might lose a few members.” He commented, “with respect to Lawrence and his work in Essex we have nothing but the highest regard ... whatever guidance he has given to the Briggs shop stewards movement has been generally correct.... This is also the view of the comrades in the factory.”²³⁶

However, given their anxiety over the matter, the CP leadership utilised the historical technicality that Lawrence was in fact seeking re-admission to the CP to insist that the matter be discussed by the Political Committee and the party executive. Lawrence was also subject to further probings from the Trot-finder General, Reid, about his activities in 1953-54 and his break with Pablo. She demonstrated her qualities as an inquisitor, forensically pursuing the implications of a single sentence which Lawrence had *probably* uttered in 1954 about the impact of the CP on Trotskyists who joined it. She remained reluctant to the end, re-emphasising the police angle before wearily and warily concluding: “I am almost resigned to the inevitability of letting them in, although I shall doubt whether one shouldn’t put up a barrier against the three or four with records – however”²³⁷

That Reid’s fears were shared was clear from the meeting of the Political Committee on 16 October 1958. Its members were presented with confidential material on the history of Trotskyism, apparently the results of CP surveillance of the WIL and RCP by another expert on ultra-left deviation, Walter Wainwright. The redoubtable author of *Clear Out Hitlers’ Agents*, a man who had certainly once believed that the far left was identical with the far right and that Trotskyists should be treated in the same way as open Fascists, did not, it seems, completely trust his own leaders. He carefully collected back in the dossiers he had distributed in order to avoid security leaks. The party leaders were also supplied with copies of Lawrence’s articles in *Socialist Outlook* on Deutscher’s *Trotsky*, the death of Stalin and his joint statement with Healy, Braddock and Stanley condemning the CP’s 1954 revelations about the paper. The committee was deadlocked 6-6 on a vote to admit Lawrence.²³⁸

At the executive meeting on 8-9 November 1958, all who spoke seem to have accepted that there was a real risk which it was impossible to ignore that Lawrence was pursuing an entrust strategy to disrupt the CP. But the majority were prepared to take the bull by the horns. The veteran diagnostician of leftist errors, J.R. Campbell, emphasised that it would not redound to the CP’s credit with workers in St Pancras and Briggs if they rejected Lawrence. They had to look at the facts: Lawrence’s good work in the movement, his support for the CP over Hungary, his support for Reg Birch in the AEU. If he was rejected, the problems were real ones: if he was accepted, they were hypothetical and unknowable. Reid’s fellow connoisseur of Trotskyism, James Klugmann, believed the risks were “grave”, particularly if with his

prestige Lawrence gained power and position in the party. Peter Kerrigan, the national industrial organiser whose daughter Jean would some years later become an organiser for Healy’s group, was not impressed by the support proffered to Lawrence by the CP in St Pancras and Briggs. He did not believe that Lawrence was “sincere” and the risk of admitting him was too great.

The future general secretary, Gordon McLennan, took a similar line, but the distinguished educationalist Brian Simon thought some were looking a gift horse in the mouth. Lawrence had done nothing but good by the CP, particularly over Hungary and he fully deserved a reciprocal vote of confidence. The future industrial organiser, Bert Ramelson also supported Lawrence’s application and thought its opponents were coming near to asserting: “once a Trot, always a Trot”. The increasingly unpopular theoretician Palme Dutt similarly believed that at times one should not beware of Greeks bearing gifts. There was no such thing as the guarantee of sincerity Kerrigan demanded. The test was political. Lawrence’s political evolution was credible: in a difficult situation for the CP, on everything they knew about him, Lawrence had passed the political test. Mahon was strongly in favour: he knew Lawrence and did not see him as “a subtle operator”. John Gollan, the general secretary, thought like Campbell: to exclude Lawrence was to definitely damage the CP. While the dangers of admitting him were unclear, it would be extremely difficult for Lawrence to hoodwink them when they knew all about him. Gollan was firmly in favour of admission. After rejecting a motion to postpone the issue for twelve months, which most felt was simply prevarication, the executive voted 23-9 to inform the London District Committee that it had no objection to Lawrence’s readmission to membership.²³⁹

At its meeting on 16 November 1958, the District Committee, after a report by Mahon and a motion by Sam Aaronovitch, voted unanimously to accept the eleven applications. On 24 November, the *Daily Worker* reported that Lawrence, Lane, Goldhill, Roy Beecham, John Edwards and the Sheridans had joined the CP in St Pancras. It is not clear what happened to the other promised four recruits, but Bernie Holland certainly became a member and Roddy Hood probably did. Outside St Pancras, it seems Mitchell and Emmett joined, but Goldberg did not and the position of Dinning is unclear. Whatever the final harvest, in the longer term it produced very little.²⁴⁰

6. The Rank and File Leader: Communist Party Dissident, 1959-1964

1960: Britain was booming. Harold MacMillan was Prime Minister and we had never had it so good. Footballers were still on a maximum of £20 a week, average earnings were only a little over £3 a week. Marilyn Monroe, Hitchcock, CND and Tottenham Hotspur were at their peak. *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was on trial. The Russians put several monkeys and shortly Yuri Gagarin into space. Bevan died and the

Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell was battling the unilateralist tide. Elvis got out of the army and mass struggle came to St Pancras. On 21 September, the tenants' leader Don Cook informed CP headquarters at King Street:

"I write this from my barricaded top-floor council flat at Kennistoun House, St Pancras, where we are reaching the climax of a long struggle against rising rents. As we await the bailiffs in the fourth week of this siege, many hundreds of council tenants are now on full rent strike. Over 500 notices to quit have been issued. In the courtyard below the guard on the gates is maintained by a mass picket twenty-four hours a day, made up of tenants and local trade unionists, many ex-servicemen and women. A rocket stands mounted, ready to fire an alert which will bring hundreds of neighbours rushing to the defences within minutes from the blocks of council houses and private dwelling houses whose roofs I am looking down on from behind the barricades."²⁴¹

The storming of Kennistoun House by hundreds of bailiffs and police the following day and the consequent eviction of Cook brought months of confrontation between St Pancras tenants and police to a climax. That night a *Daily Express* correspondent reported:

"Hundreds of police have just charged a crowd in the Euston Road and are locked face to face in the most vicious fighting I have yet seen. I heard dozens of women screaming as they went down.... It was a nightmare of confusion of flying fists and boots ... unconscious men, blood streaming from their faces, were dragged across the streets. Five policemen at a time manhandled rioters behind their cordon.... Someone picked up a policeman's helmet. Immediately four policemen grabbed him and threw him down. His head hit the pavement."²⁴²

The *Daily Herald* reporter commented on the running fights on the evening of 22 September: "The police action last night was the worst and most frightening I have ever seen."²⁴³ The *Daily Worker* had headlines across its front page: "St Pancras War Goes On ... Big Street Battles ... Epic of the Barricades"²⁴⁴ The Home Secretary, Rab Butler, stepped in and used the Public Order Act 1936 to prohibit all demonstrations in St Pancras for the next three months.²⁴⁵

These events, which culminated in Lawrence being sentenced to serve three months in Brixton gaol, had their roots in the earlier campaigns he had led against rent increases. But the focus now shifted from the Labour Party and the council chamber to the estates and to grassroots mobilisation. In the local elections in May 1959 the Tories narrowly won control of St Pancras council, the local paper heralding their success as the *quietus* of all Lawrence had stood for: "Rents up, Red Flag Down, Closed Shop Out".²⁴⁶ Lawrence and Lane quickly discovered the rigours of life outside the Labour Party. Standing as CP candidates, they both lost their council seats with humiliatingly low votes. The CP's only residual purchase on local government was through the

Lawrence supporters Alderman Kath Sheridan and the printworker Alderman Charlie Taylor who did not have to stand for re-election.²⁴⁷

There were other problems for Lawrence in 1959. Together with 22 other councillors who had supported the decision not to pass on to tenants the increases required under the 1957 Rent Act, he was surcharged £200 by the District Auditor. The councillors who were still in the Labour Party appealed successfully to the auditor but the Lawrence group, on Duff's account seeking publicity and political martyrdom, took their case to the High Court.²⁴⁸ There, Lord Chief Justice Parker firmly rejected their argument that the auditor had acted beyond his powers. Placing the applicants in a long and noble tradition, he cited the comments of the judge in the case involving George Lansbury and Poplar Council, repeating that the affairs of local government could not be administered on the basis of "eccentric principles of socialist philanthropy".⁹ Exasperated, Lawrence asked him: "... have councils any powers whatever other than administering the siting of public lavatories?"²⁵⁰ With costs awarded against them, the group turned their attention to the slow and painful process of raising the money.²⁵¹

But the leadership Lawrence had demonstrated as well as the Tories' enduring determination to establish higher rents had stiffened resistance among tenants. The approval by the council in July 1959 of increases which went beyond those recommended in the Rent Act sparked a new upsurge in which Lawrence, who had a flat in Seymour Buildings, Churchway, although the family now lived in Trafalgar Avenue off the Old Kent Road, played, together with Lane, Hood and their comrades, an important role. In August, a new United Tenants' Association (UTA) was formed from 24 local associations representing 7,000 tenants. The UTA was a broad movement involving activists across the political spectrum but there could be little doubt that its driving force was the CP. There were committees on every block and weekly meetings of up to 3,000 tenants representing committees across the borough which established policy. The UTA tried to deepen what was a real element of mass involvement by attempts to mobilise shop stewards' committees and union branches against the rent increases – although there were no big factories in the borough and the strongest concentrations were of council workers and railwaymen – and by persistently demonstrating outside council meetings.²⁵² This provoked repeated confrontations with the police outside the Town Hall, culminating in the exclusion of tenants from the public gallery in May 1960. The Labour Group walked out and Lawrence and Cook chained themselves to their seats. Intense pressure was placed on Tory councillors: groups of women visited their offices and homes demanding explanation of the rent rises and rang them at all hours of the day and night.²⁵³

In January 1960 the UTA implemented a mass withholding of the new increases. This was met by firm action from the Tories who immediately issued

notices to quit. In consequence, the rent strike was significantly weakened: faced with eventual eviction, numbers of tenants began to pay the increased rents. When the court cases against strikers commenced in May, the UTA decided that most tenants should begin to pay off arrears, leaving a small number whose eviction could be defended by mass action. On 28 June, eviction notices were granted in the Bloomsbury County Court against three tenants, Don Cook, Arthur Rowe and Gladys Turner (whose arrears were later paid). Cook effectively utilised the court as a political platform, the judge was sympathetic, resistance stiffened and the strike was relaunched in July.²⁵⁴

On 21 September 1960, the day before the evictions were scheduled, 500 tenants demonstrated outside the Town Hall where the Housing Committee was meeting. They were told to move along and then charged by mounted police. As the protesters were forcibly dispersed, Lawrence maintained, supported by five witnesses, that a police superintendent pointed him out to his men, shouting, as if in a gangster movie, "There he is! Get him!"²⁵⁵ Three or four constables then dragged him away, bundled him into a police van and beat him up. The police story was that it was Lawrence who initiated events by punching a police constable. Bailed, he was in the thick of the action the next day as the evictions took place, manning the defences at Rowe's flat at Silverdale on the Regent's Park estate and leading a march of building workers from the Shell site at Waterloo to Cook's besieged residence at Kennistoun House.²⁵⁶

Lawrence later recalled how the bailiffs, armed with crowbars and hacksaws, cut their way through the ceiling onto Cook's floor while hundred of police cordoned the flats. Defending pickets soaked the bailiffs with filthy engine oil and fought them with staves, bricks and, in one case, a fish tank. It took the bailiffs a further two hours to get into the flat which was barricaded with barbed wire and twelve pianos. They found Don Cook placidly enjoying a cup of tea.²⁵⁷

At Rowe's flat the door had been removed and fastened in its place was a bulkhead lined with six-inch thick steel plates, buttressed with baulks of timber. The windows were barred with thick planks. In the face of the ingenuity of the now almost vanished post-war British working class, the bailiffs were stymied. "Work commenced on the door", they later reported, "but no impression was made".²⁵⁸ Showered with bottles, they regrouped and finally secured access by the simple means of driving a hole through the five foot thick wall of the flat. The day's struggle ended with the "near riot" and more arrests on the Euston Road.²⁵⁹

As the dust settled, Lawrence reflected that the approach of mobilising workers to take on the state and not giving an inch to the police had been the right one. Its weakness lay in the failure to involve greater numbers and the limited solidarity action by trade unionists. There had been brief sympathy stoppages in August by railway workers and council

employees. But there was little development and only token strike action on 21 September – a missing dimension, at least compared with later years, was radical action by town hall workers in NALGO and NUPE. While the St Pancras tenants received revolutionary support from the labour movement across Britain, the absence of radical action, even in London, ensured that they remained isolated.²⁶⁰ For Lawrence the answer lay in more of the same, in deepening the tenants' struggle. However, some in the CP questioned precisely what further violent confrontation would achieve. Eyewitnesses already saw significant differences between Lawrence and his comrades. Duff caught the flavour of the differences at one meeting called to review the situation to the extent that in innocence she depicted Lawrence as independent of the CP, thus reflecting what was already an important truth: "John Lawrence was there – He wanted as usual to challenge the state, to defy their ban on demonstrations. This was, he thought, the beginning of a revolution. The Communist Party was also there, cautious and much more careful. They did not at the time use the word 'adventurism' but that was what they meant...."²⁶¹ Nonetheless, resistance continued: on 28 September the UTA decided to organise a total rent strike to starve the council of income. But its impact was limited and the Labour Party began to concern itself to a greater degree with the UTA and its influence waxed.²⁶²

Meanwhile, Lawrence's active role in the agitation was cut short by the state he was so eager to confront. On 6 October he was found guilty of assault on the police during the night of 21 September and at Clerkenwell Magistrates Court he was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. In an hour-long address, he declared that the police superintendent who suggested that he had started the fighting had been suffering from hallucinations: "I had the impression that some sort of television western was in his mind with the gallant sheriff defending the council from a wild lynch mob.... This story was produced for one reason only – to justify their brutal attack launched to disperse what was admitted to be a peaceful gathering of citizens at their own town hall".²⁶³ Claiming political victimisation, Lawrence announced that he would appeal but in the end he thought better of it. He did his time, as did Roddy Hood who refused to be bound over to keep the peace and got six weeks. Before he turned himself in, Lawrence was presented by tenants with a cigarette lighter inscribed: "To John Lawrence, Silverdale Siege, September 1960".²⁶⁴

Even in 1960 Brixton prison was no holiday camp. It was three in a cell with primitive sanitation. Lawrence was set to scrubbing floors from 9.00am to 4.30pm, his 2s 2d a week wages just about paying for his half ounce of tobacco. He attended classes in gardening and choral singing. The library, he complained, was largely stocked with westerns but he read *Huckleberry Finn* with enthusiasm. The harsh prison diet ensured that he lost a stone in weight but

his spirits were revived by a demonstration outside the gaol mounted on 27 November by the UTA. With a month's remission he was out for Christmas. Cook and Rowe and a group of tenants were outside the gates on 12 December and his appearance was greeted with shouts of "There's our John".²⁶⁵

His brief stretch had affirmed at first hand his view of state coercion and the need to fight it. He was "eager to hear all the latest developments in the campaign and determined to get back into the struggle against the Tories".²⁶⁶ But the campaign was now flowing strongly away from street fighting into constitutional channels. By January 1961 there was little enthusiasm for a repeat of the previous September's direct action over a new threat to evict five tenants. The following month, with support for the rent strike clearly on the wane, Cook announced on behalf of the UTA:

Our position has altered in the light of previous experience. We cannot see other tenants thrown out into the streets. I can assure you that we are not surrendering.... If the majority of tenants were withholding the rent there would be no need for this change of policy.... We must work to see there is a defeat for the Tories in the coming London County Council elections and above all we have got to work for the return of a Labour Council next year. We are not withdrawing from the battle. We are going to fight in a different way.²⁶⁷

The main line of march of the CP was now the return of a Labour council, not direct action at the grass roots. Their parliamentary candidate in St Pancras emphasised: "We want a Labour and progressive council at the Town Hall".²⁶⁸ This recognised that direct action was difficult to generate, harder to sustain. Mounted in one borough it was likely to be unfruitful and, in relation to the wider political arena and the CP's peaceful parliamentarianism, it could be counterproductive particularly if exploited by the Tories. The fact that after the expulsion of Lawrence and his supporters from the Labour Party in 1958 a Labour Council had raised rents was simply laid aside and the UTA put all its efforts into gaining a Labour majority pledged to reduce rents. *Plus ça change*. When in May 1962 Labour regained control in St Pancras with a decisive majority of 51 seats to 19 for their opponents—Lawrence did not stand and the CP failed to win a single seat – they received legal advice that rent reductions were beyond their legal powers. Pronouncing, "We can't defy the law and nobody can expect us to do it".²⁶⁹ It was not so much Judas as Pontius Pilate as the Labour Council simply washed their hands of the UTA.

1963: The year of Profumo, Christine Keeler, Rachman, Harold Wilson and the Great Train Robbery. It was the year that saw the beginning of the 1960s, cultural revolution, satire and satyr, sexual intercourse and the Beatles' first LP. We watched *Billy Liar* and *The Great Escape* and read *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Ginger Man*. Cassius Clay, Martin Luther King and Mary Quant made waves. MacMillan gave way

as Prime Minister to Sir Alec Douglas Home. Kennedy was assassinated and Lawrence left the CP to indulge his new taste for freedom.

His career in the party had started well enough. He became secretary of the South St Pancras branch and in early 1960 accepted nomination for the District Committee, although, interestingly, he was omitted from the final panel recommended by the leadership to district congress.²⁷⁰ But differences soon emerged. In October 1960 three members resigned from the branch committee, partly because of disagreements with Lawrence.²⁷¹ While scrutiny of these problems by the District leadership was shelved until his release from prison, it seems clear that, even at this early stage, these differences were related to what was happening on the ground. Unlike Deutscher, Lawrence was not a socialist intellectual. He was definitively an activist. He could not withdraw, as Deutscher had recommended to those who favoured neither capitalism or Stalinism, to the isolation of the watchtower to study the world dispassionately. Instead, his practice led to his break with both Deutscherism and the CP. Lawrence's politics largely flowed directly from his experience and his relentless political search now continued. What was happening in St Pancras appears to have led him to re-embrace and in some ways go beyond the leftism he had rejected on joining the CP. What he participated in immediately and infectiously in 1958-60, from outside even the lower echelons of state power structures as represented by the council, was the exhilarating power and creativity of mass action by workers. He saw only its potential, not its limitations. And in this context, he perceived the turn to the Labour Party as regressive. He began to understand that it was an integral part of CP politics. He began to perceive more clearly and to question more seriously the CP's role as a reformist ginger group subordinate to Labour rather than the independent mobiliser of the masses that he had perceived through rose coloured glasses and which had so impressed him in 1958. He began to question the parliamentary approach of *The British Road* and ultimately he began to question his cherished conviction in the progressive role of the Russian bureaucracy which had brought him into the party.

Lawrence increasingly believed that what was most important was what he had witnessed at first hand: the uninhibited willingness of workers to take on the state. The degree of advanced consciousness which this represented was, he felt, sorely underestimated by the CP. He maintained: "The level of the struggle can be determined by the degree of willingness of workers to engage in struggle with the police".²⁷² It must, he believed, be directly developed beyond the Labour Party, beyond safe parliamentary channels, not, as he saw in the practice of the CP, diverted back into them. In contrast,

"... once the direction had turned into the anti-eviction struggle and the police had started to attack demonstrations, the Communist Party began to see direct action as 'adventurism' and their members advised caution in private meetings while still saying

publicly that the struggle must continue. There was undoubtedly a desire not to see people hurt by police attacks ... but there was also a large element of electoral manoeuvring.²⁷³

The CP could point to the limitations of the St Pancras struggle, its unevenness and, even if successfully developed, the ultimate "Passport to Pimlico" unviability of insurgency in one borough. Lawrence in turn could emphasise the complete failure of reliance on Labour in St Pancras and the possibilities of breaking out of isolation if more work was put into building the struggle at the grassroots and taking it into the unions.²⁷⁴

In his work in the unions at Dagenham where he remained secretary of the shop stewards' committee and editor of the *Ford Worker*, Lawrence could witness in close-up what some characterised as the CP's compromised role as "a manager of discontent". By 1961, the real inevitable problems of harnessing militancy to strategy in the face of a management offensive on a wide front were posing intractable problems for the CP inside Fords. After the 1957 victimisation of the CP activist Johnny McLoughlin, the stewards were on the defensive in the Dagenham plants. CP full-time officials, such as Claude Berridge, played an ambivalent role, attempting simultaneously to strengthen union organisation and party influence while making important concessions to management and manoeuvring in face of pressures from the right-wing union leaders. Discouragement of sectional militancy, on both tactical grounds and in accordance with the unrealised strategic vision of complex-wide unity, by CP stewards was perforce deepening divisions between the committee and its members on the lines. Moreover,

"... there was a strand in CP politics that expressed a Stalinist suspicion of workers' undirected self-assertion. There was enthusiasm for leadership control beyond the need for tactical caution and avoidance of adventurism in protecting gains. In the AEU the party's attempts to combine winning workplace leadership and full-time positions could cause problems when conflicts erupted between stewards and full-time officials, particularly when both were in the CP."²⁷⁵

No doubt Lawrence began to draw parallels between the CP's attempts to reconcile the union apparatus and rank and file at Fords and its attempts to reconcile the Labour Party and grassroots struggle in St Pancras. What is certain is that by early 1961, when he had been in the party little more than a year, Betty Reid was remarking that Lawrence had significant differences over the role of violence and the peaceful transition to socialism, and over the Labour Party which he believed should be exposed as an obstacle to progress, not dressed up as a central instrument in an illusory peaceful path to socialism. Reid was lamenting that rather than taking up her offer of a study group on the *British Road* and writing up the self-critical analysis of his years in the Trotskyist movement which he had promised when he joined, Lawrence had plunged into hyper-activity.

Practice alone could not be expected to produce political clarity. While he had abjured Trotskyism, he could not, she contended, be expected to recover from the disabling beliefs of almost twenty years without conscious intellectual correction. His problems with party politics, she was convinced, were rooted in the resilience of his earlier ultra-leftism.²⁷⁶

Discussion between Lawrence and Reid does not appear to have improved matters. At the 1961 party congress he stated that his recent immersion in struggle and its careful contemplation in prison had confirmed for him the unlikelihood of a peaceful transition to socialism:

"Does this all mean that Communists don't want a peaceful transition? ... it is not what we want; it is what the bourgeoisie wants to give us. History teaches us. The Russian Revolution teaches us. It took fifteen years of civil war to establish the Chinese People's Republic. All this history teaches us that the bourgeois will never relinquish power voluntarily and the Labour Party will never face the question. There we were, fighting against the Tory council in St Pancras ... they hit us with everything ... the violence came not from the tenants but from the police. We had members of our Party say in our branch that by organising these demonstrations and facing attacks from the police we were acting in contradiction to the peaceful road to socialism."²⁷⁷

Lawrence concluded that in Britain, just as in Russia or China, securing working-class power would provoke civil war. Further, in the international sphere, the CP was grievously mistaken in prioritising peaceful co-existence over the fight for socialism outside the "socialist" countries.²⁷⁸ Cogent as these views were, Lawrence's position, as Sam Aaronovitch pointed out in response, was in fundamental conflict with the programmatic basis of the party.²⁷⁹

Replaced as branch secretary, Lawrence's opposition deepened. He cast off his enthusiasm for the CP and took on the role of party dissident. By the summer of 1961 his successor was informing John Mahon that "... serious political differences which came to the surface during the period of the tenants' struggle continue to exist and hamper the work of the branch".²⁸⁰ What worried him was that Lawrence's differences had developed to a point where they were incompatible with party membership and even more worryingly, he had supporters in the branch. Many of his ideas about the CP's practice were by now well-known "... and culminate in his disagreement with the policies of peaceful co-existence and peaceful transition as expressed at Congress".²⁸¹ But there was more to it than that:

"I had not realised before that as regards the period prior to the 20th Congress he still adhered to the views he held as a member of the RCP, for instance with regard to the Party's role in Spain and the nature of the 2nd World War.... When I said to him that whereas he had assured me that he was not a secret

Trotskyist, all his actual opinions seemed to tie in with Trotsky's, he agreed and went on to defend Trotsky's position in detail, saying that on all the main issues (except on the trade unions) he had been right. He expressed the view that, in any case, Lenin and Trotsky had had no major disagreements but the trouble only started with Stalin. He also objected to the removal from the historical record of Trotsky's role in the revolution.... The overthrow of Trotsky combined with the attempt to build Socialism in a backward country had resulted in a politically degenerate and tyrannical bureaucracy gaining control. Lawrence had hoped that this was to be brought to an end by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress but said he had been disappointed since then."²⁸²

Two conclusions must be added to an explanation of Lawrence's disillusion based on his practical experience of CP politics on the ground which was primary. First, what had impelled him initially towards the CP was the promise of bureaucratic self-reform in Russia, rejection of socialism in one country and a return to the dictates of the world revolution. The putative instrument of world revolution, Khrushchev, and its John the Baptist, Isaac Deutscher, had failed Lawrence. He had overestimated both change in Russia and resurgence of revolutionary ideas in the CP, and was now a disappointed man. Second, his comments on Trotsky's role were in contradiction to those he had made in 1958. The likeliest explanation is that in joining the CP he was motivated by repugnance towards the sectarianism and factionalism of contemporary Trotskyism and his experience of the benefits of CP organisation in industry, as a functionary, and in St Pancras, as a councillor. He had not rigorously explored the history of Trotskyism, its roots, the growth of bureaucracy in the USSR or the role of Trotsky and Stalin: as Mahon said at the time, he was not well read in these matters. This, in turn, influenced his inflated hopes of bureaucratic self-reform. The failure of radical change to emerge had, by 1961, led to reassertion of some of his old beliefs, partly organically, partly in opposition to a party which he felt had let him down. He maintained his belief in world revolution but now saw himself trapped in a reformist organisation whose first loyalty lay with the USSR as it was, not as Lawrence believed it should be.

The alternative scenario that Lawrence was now revealing himself as an entrism seems ruled out by the evidence in terms of *entrism pro* Pablo and questionable in relation to a specific entrism errand of his own. Lawrence had undoubtedly believed that he would be able to put forward his own ideas within a CP moving back to revolution. But he had erroneously believed that the party would be automatically propelled forward by Deutscherism – and the absence of even rudimentary organisation – such as, for example, the platform of the Mestre group inside the French party – argue against entrism as usually conceived. Moreover, the ring of truth in his declarations of 1958 suggest that it was the impact of

events between 1958 and 1960, his lack of the patience and conviction of Deutscher, his experience of struggle as a CP member, and his belief that in terms of what he had hoped for he had got it all wrong, that drove Lawrence into opposition. Not some pre-conceived plan. His ideas as always evolved. He had returned in significant ways to his past. For example: "He compared the present leaders of the Socialist countries to rightwing trade union bureaucrats more concerned with preserving their positions than winning world socialism.... Comrade Lawrence expressed the view that the best thing which could happen in Germany would be for the East German workers to rise up against the leaders of the GDR! This would spark off socialist revolution in the whole of Germany".²⁸³ But his increasing disillusion with leaders was in fact taking him beyond his earlier ideas and motivating him to question the idea of leadership itself. His increasing faith in untrammelled working-class action was beginning to make him question its direction and harnessing by politicians, no matter how radical. His developing politics would shortly take him beyond both Stalinism and Trotskyism.

Meanwhile, the attempts by Reid and Mahon to convince him of the political potency of the *British Road* and their illusion that studying the *Essentials of Marxism-Leninism* would lead him onto the path of rectitude came to nothing.²⁸⁴ The immediate solution seems to have been the removal of Lawrence from St Pancras where events had sparked his dissidence. In the early summer of 1962 he was transferred to the Peckham branch and moved to Love Walk, Camberwell. It was an attempt to deprive him of support and facilitate a new start in a situation where, although the tumult of 1956-8 in the party had passed, there were still those in the London district willing and able to challenge the CP's reformism from a variety of perspectives.

Not surprisingly, Lawrence continued on his oppositional course and a handful of CP documents tantalisingly suggest the potential and the limits for challenging party politics at this time. In July 1962, Pat Conroy, an activist in the Peckham branch took the tube to see Reid in the Organisation Department at King Street. He was "perturbed about the advent of John Lawrence backed by 4 supporters ... and asks for urgent action before the support for Lawrence gets too big and the branch is ruined".²⁸⁵ Conroy reported:

"Lawrence appears. A vote on some subject raised by Lawrence. Vote in his favour 9 to 7. Next there is a discussion of last Friday's EC statement in DW. Lawrence is critical. This is not the way to fight the Fascists, asking a capitalist government that supports them to bring in an anti-racial law. The thing to do is get out on the streets and fight the fascists. EC should give a call for Communists to get up to the Square on 22nd.... Younger comrades lap this up. Vote for Lawrence about 2/3rds in his favour.... The Branch Committee thinks they have a solution to the problem by taking a decision not to let Lawrence or any of his 4 get on the platform ... they

have now asked Pat Conroy to be the speaker.... Pat says 'He was in St Pancras with Lawrence and fought him there.... He is willing to take up the fight again but it needs consistent time being spent'.²⁸⁶

Apart from a reference to an unminuted report to the District Committee in December 1962, we hear no more about Lawrence's activities in Peckham.²⁸⁷ But he now rejected the CP as an instrument of working-class emancipation and he was caught up in the leadership's trawl for dissidents sparked by the activities of Michael McCreery and his supporters. The tremors of Trotskyism in the late 1950s gave way to the first murmurs of Maoism. But there were those like Lawrence who, while they agreed with McCreery's disdain for reformism and the *British Road*, no longer identified socialist progress with Mao Tse Tung. McCreery and seven of his supporters in the Committee to Defeat Revisionism were expelled by the London District in November 1963 and Lawrence's name appears on a list of putative Trotskyists and Maoists drawn up that August:

"Has a known Trotskyist record. For the last two years has consistently criticised the Party policy which he claims has altered since he joined the Party. Does not accept the British Road to Socialism. In July his dues collector Jim Plummer reported that he was resigning from the Party together with his wife. Some weeks previously Peter Kerrigan had been informed by Kevin Halpin that Lawrence had told him he intended to resign because he could not agree with the Party."²⁸⁸

Lawrence left the CP he had joined with such high hopes in late 1963.²⁸⁹ Existing accounts – "Lawrence did not in fact survive the centralised discipline of the Communist Party for long and left after about six months"²⁹⁰ – are mistaken. But his five years in the party were troubled ones. By 1963 he was largely isolated. Order had been restored in St Pancras. Maoism did not appeal to him. In the autumn of 1962, Ford management's moves to break the back of stewards' committee climaxed in the sacking seventy "troublemakers", mostly militant stewards. The ensuing strike was terminated with full-time officials promising to secure reinstatement of all those victimised. There was disillusionment with CP officials pushing a return to work and CP stewards supporting it. After a Court of Inquiry in January 1963, seventeen key rank and file leaders, including the CP's Kevin Halpin and Ernie Stanton, remained outside the gates. Workplace organisation and the CP were qualitatively weakened and Lawrence lost his job with the stewards' committee.²⁹¹ As 1964 dawned, it was time for a new beginning.

7. The Shop Floor Agitator: From Stalinism to Anarchism, 1964-1974

I first saw John Lawrence on Thursday, 1 May 1969. He was in those days the driving force in the London May Day Committee which had campaigned for strikes and organised a demonstration on the day itself, not, as was usual, on the nearest weekend. Now there were rumours of the of the CP taking over. At

the time, I was a supporter of the International Socialism group which supported the May Day Committee and its planned march to a carnival in the East End. In those heady days, lobbying Parliament was cherished by the CP and the Socialist Labour League. It was scorned by those at the cutting edge as "like lobbying your boss". When I arrived at the assembly point at Tower Hill on a soft, sunny, early summer morning, I was at once among the masses I talked about. There was a strong speckling of banners, the billowing blue of the AEU's London South District, the Spartan red of London North surrounded by a cluster of Maoists, numerous print chapels, largely SOGAT, with a sprinkling of CP and IS. The atmosphere was charged with insurgency and a strong dash of counter cultural energy. Leafletters plied a busy trade in the sunshine. Paper sellers enthusiastically purveyed their incendiary wares, the *Morning Star* declaiming on the struggle against *In Place of Strife*, the *Socialist Worker* May Day special instructing us that romantic gestures and May Day holidays were not enough, the SLL's *Newsletter* assuring us that the slump was still on its way, the crisis of leadership still unresolved. A recent refugee from the SLL pointed out Lawrence to me, retailing a melodramatic account of his relations with the Great Satan, Pablo.

CP stewards armed with megaphones were already lining up the crowd behind the banner of their front organisation, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions. What they termed the "official" march would, they announced, move off at 10.30, not the planned 11.30, to listen to left MPs like Stan Orme in Lincoln's Inn Fields and thence to lobby Parliament rather than parade through the East End and enjoy the sunshine and music in Jubilee Park. There was a commotion: fronted by the "Chief Marshall", the burly SOGAT Imperial Father of the Chapel (FOC), Bob Doyle, the CP refused to let the diminutive new MP for Mid-Ulster, Bernadette Devlin, speak. Bernadette was lectured about "wrecking" the march and eventually forced to address the crowd under the May Day banner from a lorry which IS had apparently donated to the Committee for the day. Clambering onto the platform, Brian Behan, ironically a relative of Doyle, told the crowd that the march was scheduled for 11.30 not 10.30; he insisted that there would be further speakers. He was over-optimistic: the CP removed the lead from his microphone and for once he was stultified. There was nobody the party cadre liked less than a former member turned anarchist. A brass band struck up. Under the firm direction of Lawrence's former comrade at Ford, Kevin Halpin of the LCDTU, the majority marched off behind a giant banner with portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse Tung. They were followed in some confusion by the IS. Lawrence remained together with Behan, a small knot of supporters from the Committee, *Solidarity*, *Freedom*, even some IS. I remember him, jaw jutting, mortified but defiant as the marchers, many mobilised by his efforts, vanished from sight, a

vignette in miniature of a political life.

Out of work in 1964 he had found a job with the Press Association in Fleet Street. He worked in the "racing room" compiling information and results for the newspapers. He became active in the clerical and editorial chapel of the National Association of Operative Printers (NATSOPA). By the time NATSOPA, led by the increasingly authoritarian Richard Briginshaw (1908-1992), amalgamated with the National Union of Printing, Bookbinding and Paper Workers in 1966, Lawrence had become FOC in the new, fused Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT) and active in the former NATSOPA, now renamed Division 1 of SOGAT. By that time he had moved decisively towards libertarian socialism and syndicalism.

It was, after the gloomy, pinched and puritanical, perpetual rainy Sunday of the 1950s, a sunshine spangled age of social freedom, personal liberation and anti-authoritarianism. This was reflected in Lawrence's political progress. If there were some hints of it in his behaviour, his time in the CP did not produce a reversion to Trotskyism. Far from returning to the past, he now rejected wholesale any attempt to influence the state, even to use Parliament as a revolutionary platform. Elections and political parties, all political parties, were a means of diverting the working class: it did not need their counterfeit leadership for it possessed within itself, waiting to be unleashed through mass action, the potential to overthrow capitalism. Only loose, federal, non-hierarchical organisation was necessary to foster spontaneity. Conscious socialists should enter a real dialogue with workers, not ram down their throats the one-sided "leadership" of the CP and the Trotskyists. Lawrence now rejected the factionalism, manoeuvres and intrigue of those organisations that had formed his earlier life. The way forward lay through the development of tenants and community groups independent of the state and rank and file groups in the unions independent of both the bureaucracy and political organisations, whatever their denomination.

The early 1960s saw a renewal of syndicalism and attempts to build rank and file organisation in which former members of the SLL played an initial role. Behan, who had taken the leading part in the SLL's industrial work now turned to syndicalism. He complemented his short-lived Workers Party with an equally ephemeral Industrial Rank and File Movement (IRFM) which also enrolled members of the ILP such as Bill Christopher, as well as Chris Pallis, Bob Pennington and Ken Weller who, after leaving Healy's League, formed the "Socialism Re-Affirmed" group around the journal *Solidarity*. Influenced by the ideas of Cornelius Castoriadis and the French *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, they emphasised independent struggle in the workplace, workers' control over production and intransigent opposition to bureaucratic state socialism. Another focus in this small ferment was the Syndicalist Workers Federation (SWF), long an integral if sporadic part of

the Anarchist movement, and its paper *Direct Action*. There was a great deal of overlapping of personnel and ideas, as well as organisational flux and shifting allegiances. The IRFM, for example, turned into the Committee of 100's industrial sub-committee and the emergence of direct action around the unilateralist movement strengthened the insurgent, anti-authoritarian mood. It was this world which Lawrence entered in 1964.²⁹²

He had come into contact with Behan (1926-2002) and the IRFM while still in the CP in St Pancras but while Behan exercised a strong influence on him, his first temporary port of call on leaving the party seems to have been *Solidarity*. Here his experience with Healy and his experience in the CP was shared by many, particularly by Ernie Stanton, one of the victimised 17 stewards who by 1964 had developed a detailed critique of what he saw as the party's conspiratorial, manipulative attitude towards Ford workers.²⁹³ Lawrence was involved with *Solidarity* in a project to stand as an anti-parliamentary candidate in the 1964 general election. Although little came of this, it led to his questioning Pallis's understanding of true anti-parliamentarianism.²⁹⁴ He turned to the more traditional SWF where he worked with members of the London Anarchist Group, notably Peter Turner, a carpenter active in the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers and shop steward on London building sites, and Christopher, another NATSOPA activist in Fleet Street. Obscure differences with Ken Hawkes, the *Sunday Citizen* sports journalist who was a leading light in the SWF led to Lawrence becoming less active in it. But he remained in the orbit of the London Anarchist Group and the long-running paper *Freedom*, established by Kropotkin in the nineteenth century.²⁹⁵

The Anarchist movement was enjoying a new lease of life, the circulation of *Freedom* was increasing and, while the SWF never made a breakthrough, rank and fileism was growing in other quarters. When the London Industrial Shop Stewards' Defence Committee (LISSDC) was established in January 1966, animated by IS, Turner was a member of its executive and another member, Jim Higgins recalled that Lawrence was involved and helped with its bulletin, *Resistance*.²⁹⁶ When the LISSDC was outflanked by the CP's LCDTU, he was also involved, again critically. Reporting on the December 1966 LCDTU conference against Wilson's wage freeze, he was scathing about both the CP and the SLL and what he saw as their equally futile attempts to pressurise Wilson to change course (CP) and "make the left MPs fight" (SLL):

"It is surely the task of the militants to encourage every action (even the smallest) by the workers themselves against the Government. To preach reliance on the Labour party, Right or Left, to get us out of trouble is not only wrong, ridiculous and essentially futile, it also runs counter to the experience of the 'ordinary' trade unionist who today feels absolutely disgusted with politicians of all brands.... The job today is not to sustain the rapidly dwindling faith in political leaders but to develop this disgust

into a positive confidence that the workers themselves, if they have a mind to, can not only smash the Prices and Incomes Act but can eventually build that cooperative socialist society which it is clear from this Conference still inspires the shop floor militant.”²⁹⁷

To this end, Lawrence established the Association of Rank and File Printworkers and a bulletin, the *Printworker*, launched at a meeting of 150 largely SOGAT members at St Bride’s Institute, Ludgate Circus, in October 1966. He argued that, with a sixth Labour government attacking the workers, there was a need for a workers’ movement independent of all political parties and union leaders. There was a need for printers to link up with rank and file movements in other industries and campaign for the unions to ballot their members on disaffiliation from the Labour Party.²⁹⁸ The group was based on a five point programme which also included one union for printing and solidarity action with strikers.²⁹⁹ The paper appealed to workers through information, argument and humour. It ridiculed Briginshaw and other union leaders for living high on the hog and socialising and drinking with the press lords.³⁰⁰ It urged support for other activists such as the Barbican shop stewards in the face of adverse press publicity:

“Where is the FOC who wouldn’t want men like the Barbican builders in his chapel, men who he knew would stop work until kingdom come if the employers dared to victimise elected representatives? And don’t imagine it couldn’t happen here. Right now the printing industry is involved in a dispute over wages. There is an overtime ban.... It could lead to lockouts and attempts could be made by the press barons top sack chapels and recruit scab labour. If this happens, wouldn’t *you* get angry, wouldn’t *you* have a go at the scabs, wouldn’t *you* expect your members to stand loyally by the elected chapel representatives? Of course you would. That is what the Barbican strikers have done.”³⁰¹

By 1968 Lawrence was a well-known figure in Fleet Street trade unionism and the bane of Briginshaw and the leadership of SOGAT Division 1. Tensions were developing within the amalgamation. A conference held in the autumn of 1968 to agree a united rule book for what were within the amalgamation still in substance two unions, broke up in disarray. Briginshaw led his delegation out, claiming that Division A, the former Paper Workers, was using its greater voting strength to impose its own rules. Lawrence questioned this and when the Division 1 executive decided to recommend termination of a cost of living bonus, the PA chapel circularised members urging a vote against. Although he was carrying out the instructions of his chapel, he was charged by the committee of the Clerical branch with “conduct detrimental to the interests of the Society”. He was banned for life from holding office, a verdict that was upheld, despite the *en bloc* resignation of the chapel committee. Given that the ban did not include service as an FOC and his disdain for higher position, he took it in his

stride.³⁰²

That year, in company with Fred Emmett, now the convenor at the engineering firm Dewrance and Co. and a member of the AEU’s South London District Committee, Behan, Laurens Otter, another anarchist and SOGAT FOC at the *Guardian*, he formed a loose grouping, Workers’ Mutual Aid. He had burned his boats with other leftwing organisations. He noted with satisfaction: “The Communist Party – who would normally profit from a mass disillusionment with Labour – are in no position, thank God, to capitalise on the discontent with Labour. As a reformist, authoritarian party which have staked all on infiltrating the Labour Party with its ideas in order to ‘change the policies and leadership’, they won’t tolerate any deviation. Here surely is an opportunity for libertarian socialists.”³⁰³ His antipathy to the SLL was confirmed when he was removed from what was supposedly a march open to all by Healyite stewards.³⁰⁴ He wanted something new, something fresh, authentic and straightforward. The aims of Workers’ Mutual Aid were simplicity itself: “To advise that no trust can be placed in politicians and political parties and to encourage independent action by workers themselves to secure control of their own lives.... To give help to all who fight for better wages and working conditions, shorter hours and less hard work, more free time.”³⁰⁵

Workers’ Mutual Aid’s philosophy demanded a clean break with the past. The need for a fresh start was heralded by the front cover of its only pamphlet which depicted a worker brushing away not only racism, bureaucracy, wage freeze, the Tories and labour, but Trotskyists and Maoists. On the back page the brush swept away the entire history of the twentieth century. A section on unions headed from “Tolpuddle to the House of Lords’ condemned union bureaucrats as “the jailers of the workers”. Workers, it stressed, did not need “directing or leading”. The Labour Party, it was claimed, was simply a fraud, the CP the pawns of the Russian state, “one of the most dictatorial regimes in the world today.... The British Communist Party advocates this kind of “communism” for Britain and that is surely all that needs to be said about them”.³⁰⁶ Opposing the state, its policies and all political parties, the group wanted “to work with people not for them” and support all struggles of the working class – widely defined as including white-collar workers, housewives and students.³⁰⁷ But in terms of practical initiatives matters were to be left to its members and little in fact transpired.

Lawrence had travelled a long way from his earlier conviction that British workers should defend the gains of October, work inside the Labour Party to clarify the left wing and build a revolutionary, democratic centralist party. His subsequent belief that the rulers of Russia and China were the instruments of world revolution was likewise consigned, together with Trotsky, Stalin, Deutscher and Pablo, to the dustbin of his political past. For that was how he saw it: he firmly rejected his political

history and Marxism itself. Those who knew him at this time recall that he often spoke about the CP critically, if more in sorrow than in anger, but was terse or taciturn about Trotskyism where perhaps the personal investment had been greater and the disillusion sharper. Nonetheless, some discerned bitterness and most disappointment that he had spent his energies on causes which he now despised.

The man who had searched relentlessly for substitutes now believed that only the workers, by themselves, through themselves, could make the revolution. The man who had assiduously studied leadership now argued it was unnecessary and counterproductive. He had gone to the people and dispensed with false gods. But if he despaired of politics, he never deserted the struggle. Most lunchtimes he could be found in the Bell at the bottom of Fleet Street, discussing what was to be done with a circle of similarly intransigent printworkers. Among his comrades were Peter Gold, who worked at *The Times*, Bill Christopher, another anarchist, Jimmy Benjamin, Laurens Otter and the veteran Oehlerite, Joe Thomas, who also worked at the *Guardian* – all of whom were active in SOGAT. Lawrence was increasingly close to Behan and friends, recognising their shared anti-parliamentarianism, passion and commitment to revolution, contrasted the turbulent, torrential Dubliner with the equally compelling but enclosed English anarchist.³⁰⁸

My impression is that Lawrence's embrace of anarchism was essentially an existential declaration of personal freedom, a determined exercise in self-liberation after decades of subordination of self to restrictive collective structures, an assertion, bred of desperation with his previous paths, of openness and honesty in confronting political problems. It also reflected the atmosphere of the 1960s. But the political problems, which he had confronted in a variety of ways, remained. What had attracted him to anarchism was its anti-authoritarianism, its insistence on direct action, its accent on grassroots campaigns. Once again, his conversion reflected his experience. His new faith allowed his personality far freer play and provided an escape from the Byzantine high politics and manoeuvrings of the Trotskyists and the CP. It enabled him to solidarise directly and authentically with workers, rather than hiding some things from them and preserving an area of autonomy for the "leading", the "advanced" elements. He now saw this as a harmful and dishonest dualism which facilitated manipulation of the working class by self-appointed elites.

But his rejection of party left largely unresolved the conundrum of how workers were to organise to combat and confront capitalism in the face of efficient capitalist organisation and dominant capitalist power. If the diffuse federalism of the anarchist groups might be suitable for one-off grassroots campaigns, the complex question of how these campaigns were to be linked, sustained and developed beyond the immediate and the local, the complicated problem of how a *strategy* was to be

created to transcend sectionalism and take the *working class* forward as a whole were puzzles which anarchists no more than Marxists had succeeded in solving. If progress to socialism was to be left to the workers themselves, the thorny issue of their prevailing non-socialist consciousness remained. And these intractable difficulties were scarcely resolved by resort to incantation concerning the potential of spontaneous ignition of a new revolutionary consciousness stiffened and extended by exemplary action and propaganda from convinced anarchists. If the Marxists' parties constituted a dangerous prefiguration of a "socialist" future where the state still dominated society, they at least attempted to confront problems of political strategy, consciousness and power.

Some of these difficulties could be seen in the most important initiative which Lawrence took in these years, the London May Day Committee. For years the Labour Party and the CP had held demonstrations not on May Day itself but on the nearest Sunday. Lawrence, who was always intensely proud of the paid holiday he had introduced for the St Pancras workers in May 1958, described this as conniving in the maintenance of capitalist production. He discovered that the policy of the old NATSOPA had long embodied demands for a paid holiday on 1 May. He believed that strikes and demonstrations on the day itself could provide a focus for a fight back against Wilson's policies. But his main motivation seems to have been the recovery of May Day as a day of resistance, as an anti-capitalist carnival asserting worker insurgence in contrast to the pallid socialism for Sundays of the traditional parties.³⁰⁹ The Rank and File Printworkers took up the idea and Lawrence's chapel convened a meeting of Fleet Street trade unionists on 29 March 1967. A statement was read to the meeting from John Lewis, the secretary of the clerical branch quoting a letter from Briginshaw. The union leader pronounced in his usual tortuous prose that the chapel had no authority to convene such a meeting: it could only be held as "an unofficial rank and file meeting". Amid merriment, the gathering formally constituted itself as such and established an organising committee which would campaign for strikes on 1 May open to all workers and distribute 10,000 leaflets across London.³¹⁰

With limited time and support, the innovation was not initially a great success: on 1 May 1967 some 250 workers marched from SOGAT headquarters in Blackfriars to the Memorial Hall, Farringdon where Lawrence chaired a meeting addressed by printers, building workers and engineers.³¹¹ The following year saw an improvement despite continuing disinterest and disapproval from the Labour Party and CP. In preparing the demonstration, Lawrence repeated his essential message that if workers acted together incomes policy could not work: "There just aren't enough prisons to make the wage freeze work if the working class decides to defy it."³¹² An added incentive to action in 1968 was the rise of Powellism

and 2,500 workers marched from Tower Hill to Transport House where the engineering unions were deliberating on government policy. The march was judged a success “entirely due to the efforts of John Lawrence and his small committee of dedicated workers”.³¹³ The marchers included printers; engineers; tenants’ associations; IS; the Anarchists; at least one CP branch; and LSE students officially striking to support it. IS ingénues chanted “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh”. Lawrence’s wife, the veteran Trotskyist Janet Alexander asked: “Can they have read of Uncle Ho’s expertise at murdering political opponents?”³¹⁴ Lawrence, Emmett, Terry Barrett, John Palmer and Peter Turner spoke. There was heckling from Powellite dockers and Lawrence was always proud of the way Janet stood up to them.

“Some of the marchers then took up the cry of “Arrest Powell” and to answer this John Lawrence pointed out to them that they must not ask the state to do anything for them. “Who will do the arresting?” he asked. “The same police who have taken away your banners and will arrest you if you give them the power.”³¹⁵

Tariq Ali nevertheless made a speech demanding the use of the new Race Relations Act against Powell. *Freedom* severely opined: “It was sad to hear such a reformist speech at an anti-government meeting.”³¹⁶

Lawrence was determined to build on this small success. The Committee, he announced, would be kept in being despite opposition to it: a deputation of members had gone to the *Morning Star* in an attempt to persuade it to publicise the demonstration, an unavailing attempt which led at least one printworker to resign from the party.³¹⁷ The Committee was an open forum: anyone could attend and there were no subscriptions. Lawrence had high hopes for it. He subscribed to the view that there was “a vacuum on the left”. Labour was discredited while the “Communist Party associated as it is with the dictatorial regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe offers no alternative”.³¹⁸ There was real danger that Powellism and Fascism could flourish; an ecumenical May Day Committee could provide part of a socialist alternative. Leaflets were produced supporting strikes of engineers and busworkers and meetings were organised across London: “You can say what you like on the May Day platform providing you are for ending capitalism. There will be no “line” and no control over what is said and done. Like millions of people everywhere we are opposed to orders from on high.”³¹⁹

The Committee broadened out beyond May Day. It declared: “We are not a political party and we don’t want to become one.”³²⁰ Its primary aim was to convince workers that they could, through their own organisations, unions, tenants’ and student committees, dispossess the capitalists. The key demands to be pursued were complete independence from the state, action in support of any grouping coming into conflict with state pay policy, rank and file control of the unions and opposition to all forms of racialism.³²¹

As 1969 got underway, the class struggle deepened. The decade had just climaxed in the inspirational French events of May 1968. The strike rate was accelerating and so was the state’s offensive against trade unions, now centred on Barbara Castle’s package of anti-union legislation, *In Place of Strife*. In January the May Day Committee commenced a campaign for strikes under the slogan “May Day is May 1st or it is nothing”.³²² Peter Turner proclaimed “a day of music and dancing, games, plays.... No violence, no appealing to Parliament – just a solid act of defiance by taking the day off, enjoying ourselves and showing both the employers and the government that we are not as yet the slaves they would like us to be”.³²³ Lawrence believed:

“This May Day is going to be different. Not a dreary slog through the City and the West End but a short march and then off to an open space, Victoria Park in the East End, to enjoy ourselves with bands, groups (pop not political), dancing, sports and anything else that the members want to do ... it will be free day in every sense of the word, free from work and free to do what you like.... As one worker at our May Day Committee said: “My gov’nor will be choked if I take the day off and he’ll be double choked if he knows that I’m enjoying myself as well.”³²⁴

Lawrence and Turner ridiculed the CP’s continuing insistence on “marshalling their troops for a Sunday walk”. But the May Day Committee had only limited support from SOGAT chapels, IS, Workers’ Mutual Aid, the London Federation of Anarchists, Essex University Socialist Society and similar groups. It lacked the leverage to mobilise significant numbers of trade unionists. Yet such mobilisation was beginning to take place, focused on *In Place of Strife* and increasingly organised by the CP’s LCDTU. The party was cautious about calling for action which it felt would attract inadequate support. But there were stoppages on 27 February 1969, the day the special conference of union executives met to discuss the proposed legislation and calls for strike action on 1 May were supported by a LCDTU conference in April. Suitably emboldened, the party decided to organise its own May Day demonstration in London.³²⁵

On 23 April the *Morning Star* carried an announcement that a meeting of engineers, printers and building workers had decided to hold a lobby of Parliament on 1 May, starting from Tower Hill at 10.30, an hour before the May Day Committee procession was scheduled to move off. When Lawrence rang George Matthews, the editor, he (Matthews) refused to say anything about the CP march or its organisation or print a statement from the May Day Committee. On 27 April he again refused to talk to a delegation from the Committee which turned up at his office. However, through the Joint Sites Committee, they were invited to attend a meeting the following day, which had been convened to put the final touches to the CP’s plans. When Lawrence and his comrades arrived, they discovered that the meeting had been called by the LCDTU. Its

chair, Kevin Halpin, refused them admittance on the grounds that the meetings were by invitation only and open exclusively to bona fide trade union bodies – he also turned away representatives from tenants' associations.³²⁶

The big battalions did nothing. The AEU national committee, for example, refused to support a strike on 1 May. The only unions doing so nationally were the Stevedores and Dockers and the Lightermen and, more ambiguously, the Cine Technicians. Overall, around 200,000 workers across Britain stopped work. In London, the docks, building sites, engineering factories and Fleet Street were silent. Most dramatically, no daily papers were printed in London. Around 20,000 marched. The CP, as we have seen, was able to gain control. It was a small group of around 500 that eventually marched off to Victoria Park behind the May Day Committee banner. Once again, a grassroots movement had been taken over by the CP. Lawrence had every right to feel aggrieved. As the May Day Committee leaflet pointed out: "This is the third year we have fought for a stoppage of work on May 1st as a means of defying the government and all their wicked, anti-working class measures. We marched in 1967 and again in 1968 in the middle of the Powell uproar."³²⁷ While Lawrence had been organising in 1967 and 1968, the CP had done nothing; indeed, it had opposed his initiatives.

Socialist Worker denounced "the dishonesty and manoeuvring of the CP". But it also criticised Lawrence's "sectarianism", claiming that its attempts on the day to secure a united march had met with disinterest from both sides. It was also wary of Lawrence's "romanticism": the emphasis of the May Day Committee, it suggested, should have been more clearly on fighting Wilson not establishing an annual holiday. *International Socialism* deplored the CP's "apolitical" control: what was the point of listening to the very mildly left-wing Stan Orme? *Solidarity* savaged "The slimy tactics of the hatchet men of King Street". But it also joined with *Freedom* in criticising IS: "... off they marched to Parliament. International Socialism had supported the May Day Committee but seeing the real live proletarians marching behind half a dozen SOGAT banners was too much for them and they switched sides rapidly."³²⁸ Supporters of the Committee such as Janet Alexander commented scathingly:

"One issue this march has raised is the conspiratorial nature of the Communist Party, never acting in its own name when another will do and prepared to use violence on anyone who stands in its way. On this occasion the mask was made to slip a little, and the oftener this happens the better it will be for everybody's health."³²⁹

Lawrence agreed. But he remained equable. He was used to reverses. At least some remember him as a pioneer. By 1973, the TUC General Council was calling for a day of action against the Heath government on 1 May, although Lawrence's aspiration for a workers' festival presaging and prefiguring a new stateless society of cooperation and

mutual aid remains unrealised to this very day.³³⁰

But as 1970 developed, there were more urgent if parochial matters to attend to. That November, Lawrence was expelled from his union; in Fleet Street the closed shop meant that loss of a union card also involved automatic loss of employment. His problems began with the unilateral announcement by the executive of SOGAT Division 1 (the former NATSOPA) which was dominated by Briginshaw, that it was terminating the SOGAT amalgamation and resurrecting NATSOPA. Briginshaw claimed that his executive had been advised by a QC that the merger contract had been repudiated by Division A of the union, the former Paperworkers, led by Vincent Flynn, which had allegedly failed to make due payments into SOGAT funds. On 17 October Flynn and the Division A executive were granted an injunction restraining Briginshaw from breaking up the union. There was legal action and counteraction, allegation and counter-allegation and much confusion. The stand-off had been prompted by a range of factors from Briginshaw's dictatorial inclinations and fear of job loss by Division 1 officials, to clashes over policy in Scotland and the autonomy which Division A branches exercised over financial matters. This constituted a particular problem for Briginshaw, for the former CP branch secretary was already embarking on a career of corruption which would lead to the House of Lords and attract only mild disgrace.³³¹

Briginshaw justified his decision on the grounds that he possessed the support of the Division 1 executive. Lawrence's chapel opposed it on the grounds that a ballot of members had been necessary for amalgamation and was just as necessary to dissolve that amalgamation. Lawrence himself supported one union for printers, ideally a federation of completely autonomous chapels and in his philosophy there were no good leaders: for Lawrence, the more left-wing Flynn was ultimately no more preferable than Briginshaw. Some of his members disagreed and preferred the state of affairs in the old NATSOPA. But all were united in opposition to Briginshaw's announcement. There was also support for the chapel's stand from elsewhere in Fleet Street, notably at the *Guardian* where his fellow anarchist, Laurens Otter was FOC. Lawrence reflected:

"The biggest opposition was in the London Clerical branch where two chapels, the Press Association and the *Guardian* refused meekly to submit to this diktat of the Executive. They declined to recognise the independent union NATSOPSA at least until the membership had by ballot decided otherwise. It must be stressed that the opposition of the two chapels (and others who didn't hit the headlines) was to dictatorship, to direction from above, to the Executive riding roughshod over the rights of the members."³³²

The two chapels agreed to withhold dues from the revived NATSOPA until matters were resolved. As Division A refused to accept their money, the PA and *Guardian* chapels sent it to the receiver appointed

by the courts as a result of the legal action by both divisions.³³³ Briginshaw was apoplectic. His furious determination to silence his opponents was made manifest when a reporter from the *Observer* rang his office on 31 October requesting his views on a story about the split which the paper intended to publish the following day. Briginshaw informed him in measured tones that "... if he printed a word 'you will have no paper tomorrow'".³³⁴ Within minutes of the call, the machine minders at the paper rang the editor to say they might have problems working on the edition if it contained a report on the affair. When the *Observer* finally published the story a week later after negotiations between Briginshaw and the Newspaper Publishers' Association, the editor noted: "The union leaders' view seemed to be coloured by the opinion they held of the PA SOGAT Father of the Chapel Mr John Lawrence. Mr Lawrence does not conceal that he has at various times been an active Trotskyist."³³⁵

At the London Clerical Branch meeting on 15 October, Lawrence proposed that all affiliated chapels follow the PA example by withholding their dues. The chair refused to accept the motion and a few days later Lawrence was summoned to attend a branch inquiry into his conduct. He refused on the grounds that he only recognised SOGAT not NATSOPA. He was given notice to attend a further meeting which would discuss his possible expulsion. He attended simply to make a declaration that he did not recognise the authority of the tribunal and was formally expelled from a union the existence of which he did not accept.³³⁶

Nonetheless, his livelihood and political work were at stake. Moreover, the union leadership was threatening disciplinary action against the militants and even the branch secretary, John Lewis, was briefly suspended. It was felt that a court case might stem Briginshaw's offensive and stimulate other chapels to join the battle. A legal fund was launched and, although it might be thought incongruous for an anarchist, Lawrence resorted to the courts. After a hearing in the High Court on 10 November 1970, he was granted an order, subsequently extended, restraining the Division 1 officials "from purporting to exercise any disciplinary powers over him or from taking any steps to enforce any decision they may have come to at a meeting last Monday night by claiming that he had been deprived of union membership ...".³³⁷ In a second action, Lawrence, together with Otter, asked the court for directions as to the proper person to receive chapel dues.³³⁸

These were interim orders pending a full hearing which would in all probability prove expensive and was unlikely to take place in the near future. Briginshaw backed off. He concentrated on unpicking the amalgamation and consolidating control over the new NATSOPA. He contented himself with warning members "to be alert for anarchistic outriders in our movement who have sought to penetrate and divert us from our proper tasks", comparing these "agent-provocateurs" with the "terrorists" who had bombed

the home of the Tory employment minister, Robert Carr. Briginshaw's second-in-command, Owen O'Brien, complained that the "noisy and vociferous minority hell-bent on creating the maximum of disruption and anarchy seems to have made considerable inroads in some areas of the clerical section".³³⁹ In the end there was no way out of the deadlock except the dissolution of SOGAT. Restoration of the two constituent sections to independent status was agreed in 1971 and an uneasy, temporary truce prevailed between Lawrence and Briginshaw.³⁴⁰

Lawrence had fought through the dog days of the post-war boom. Now he exulted as the working class went on the offensive. In the militant and vibrantly iconoclastic atmosphere of the early 1970s, Lawrence was brimming with confidence about the future:

"It is freedom and anarchy which today is being vindicated by life – it is compulsion, competition and inequity which stand condemned as the chief enemies of mankind. There is no need to despair, freedom is on the move again because life demands it. The students and workers of Paris shook society to its foundations with their reassertion of the brotherhood of men and their rejection of the values of this rotten capitalist society. They were, I am convinced, but the forerunners of a movement which is going to sweep the whole world."³⁴¹

He became an editor of *Freedom* and wrote extensively for it. Like most anarchists, he chose his own causes. Together with Brian Behan, he campaigned against the 1971 census and for a referendum on Britain's entry into the Common Market.³⁴² Unlike other anarchists, he was strongly in favour of working inside the trade unions. But he always stressed the indispensable necessity of independent rank and file organisation and action. He supported union activity tactically, simply because it was easier to develop grassroots mobilisation from inside rather than outside. Unions per se were neither enemy nor saviour.³⁴³ He embraced the militant mood of the times, but never uncritically. He opposed "the rotten position of the Communist Party on UCS", arguing that the yards should be owned and controlled by the workers not sold off to predatory capitalists in affirmation of the inevitability of exploitation.³⁴⁴ As occupations and work-ins spread, he argued that the "right to work" slogan was fundamentally mistaken. Inevitably linked with the search for new masters, private or public, it defused workers' struggle rather than taking it forward. The central demands should be for workers' ownership and workers' self-management. It was wrong, he maintained, to claim that this strategy was fated to failure. The co-operative movement had demonstrated it could attain some measure of success. Even "islands of socialism" were preferable to its complete absence, particularly if achieved through struggle and emulated and extended. Self-managed enterprises could strengthen class consciousness and stimulate further struggles.³⁴⁵

While he defended the workers attacked by the

Tories' Industrial Relations Act 1971, he felt that the deepening of militancy necessitated the raising of wider issues, condemned by others as propagandistic and diversionary. When the railway unions were brought before the courts he saw it as an opportunity to discuss how the railways were run.³⁴⁶ He sometimes probed uncomfortable problems which he felt the left glossed over. During the battles between dockers and the Heath government, he challenged the CP and IS over the uncritical support he saw them as giving the dockers as against the container men and cold storage workers. He argued that the unpalatable reality of internecine struggle between workers for jobs had not been confronted. Much of the left, he felt, gave "a veneer of socialist respectability to what was essentially a pathetic dog-eat-dog fight over a diminishing bone. Never once did they criticise the dockers and never once did they suggest that brotherhood and solidarity was the way to preserve work and wages for all".³⁴⁷

When the occupation of the Briant's Colour plant began in the summer of 1972, Lawrence produced a new edition of Tolstoy's *The Slavery of our Times* for the workforce.³⁴⁸ He was increasingly impressed by Tolstoy's vision of the essential evil of politics, an evil which could only be banished by the dissolution of the state and its replacement by self-sufficient, self-governing communities, rooted in the countryside, and by his emphasis on the individual, individual conscience and individual responsibility. He was taken to task by other anarchists who pointed to Tolstoy's mysticism but he affirmed.

"For me Tolstoy was the best of all the anarchists although he himself always denied he was one. He has that disturbing ability of making the individual face up to his own responsibilities for the evils of society. I find this uncomfortable (we are all forced to compromise), and at the same time refreshing, because it gives each man the feeling that he as a person is important and can make things change. He puts the individual at the centre of things. There is no hiding behind 'historical processes', 'economic laws', the 'party line', or in any of the other excuses which we put forward for justifying inaction in the face of injustice."³⁴⁹

It was this philosophy, underlining just how far he had travelled from his political past which informed Lawrence's beleaguered and often lonely battle in the unions. But here the endgame was approaching. On 19 October 1972 Lawrence was dismissed by PA boss G. Cromarty Bloom for alleged breach of contract. It was the third day of industrial action – a mandatory chapel meeting – called in pursuit of a pay claim. The chapel was worried that national negotiations covering the PA, Reuters and Exchange Telegraph would be caught up in the wage freeze threatened by Edward Heath if the CBI and TUC failed to reach a "voluntary" agreement on control of wage rises. The chapel, therefore, put in a claim for an increase in their house agreement of £2-50 a week but were offered only £1-50. Fearing prevarication was being employed, that the

management was simply waiting on state intervention and angered by a big increase to PA journalists, they commenced sanctions on 17 October. Their initiative had an immediate impact in denying racing information to the press, although the journalists and telegraphic staff were still working. The PA sought to break the action by sacking Lawrence, whom they branded as "a professional agitator" and the initiator of the problem. The NATSOPA members walked out and set up picket lines at the bottom of Fleet Street.³⁵⁰

They were fighting on two fronts. The NATSOPA leadership saw their opportunity to rid themselves of the troublesome anarchist and not surprisingly they grasped it with both hands. Lewis, the branch secretary, instructed the chapel to return to work, stating that he could only consider their request to take up Lawrence's reinstatement once they had terminated this strike. The position hardened when the Exchange Telegraph chapel threatened to strike on 27 October if Lawrence was not reinstated. The London Committee of NATSOPA branches immediately issued a circular urging that no support be given to the PA strikers and that in order "to control this anarchistic situation", they should return to work forthwith. Ted O'Brien, the secretary of the committee, condemned their "blackshirt tactics". According to the strikers, Briginshaw directly informed Lewis that nothing should be done on Lawrence's behalf: the strikers must return without him. NATSOPA rules barred any representations being made on behalf of those on unofficial strike.³⁵¹

The turning point came on 24 October. Bloom stated that management would "delay the final stages of implementation [of Lawrence's dismissal] to enable NATSOPA to inquire into the unofficial strike".³⁵² This conceded nothing at all: when clarified, it transpired that all it involved was the postponement of the final calculation of Lawrence's holiday pay and pension entitlement. Meanwhile, as far as management were concerned, he would remain at home while work recommenced. But it was seized on by some of the strikers in the context of rumours that the PA had asked Lewis to supply replacement labour. At the same time, a long letter was sent by Bloom to the homes of strikers, threatening further dismissals. Press references to Lawrence's "colourful political career" probably did little to help.³⁵³ On 24 October the strikers voted 118-48 to remain on strike. But about 20 workers refused to accept the decision. They returned to work citing Briginshaw's statements that they were in breach of union rules and arguing that they would get nowhere fighting both the PA and NATSOPA. The following day another 50 strikers crossed the picket lines. On 26 October the remaining strikers voted 40-20 to end the stoppage.³⁵⁴

Once the strike was concluded without his reinstatement, Lawrence's fate was sealed. When in November the clerical branch instructed Lewis to negotiate Lawrence's return with the employers, the branch secretary was in turn instructed by Briginshaw to make no approach to management on

the issue. By this time, Briginshaw was the sole owner of the agency supplying labour for NATSOPA areas in Fleet Street to employers, including the PA.³⁵⁵ The annual general meeting of the branch on 25 January 1973 broke up in uproar. The chair, Barry Fitzpatrick, formally declared that the statement on the strike in the annual report of the branch and Lawrence's victimisation could not be discussed as Briginshaw, in characteristic, self-interested debasement of the English language, had determined that the issue was "sub judice". Fitzpatrick, who possessed some reputation as a left-winger, had been taken aside and quietly warned by the general secretary of the limits of his powers as chairman and adjourned the meeting as a compromise. Lawrence remained on the dole: even at the zenith of post-war industrial militancy, he was cast as a victim of the struggle he had prosecuted with such determination for so long.³⁵⁶

It was to be his last engagement in the front line. He was now 57 years of age. He moved, at the urging of Behan, to Shoreham-by-the-Sea near Brighton. Here they lived side-by-side in houseboats and had many more adventures together. Lawrence found work in a small print factory and became active in SOGAT. But in 1976 he suffered the first of two heart attacks and retired to Love Walk. He remained true to his anarchism. Maintaining that Tolstoy, had he lived, would have ended his life in the gulag, he was particularly supportive of campaigns to free Russian dissidents. One of his old comrades from St Pancras who ran into him in his long retirement remembered: "A couple of years ago I was to see John on the opposite side of the street, all dressed up like a Tolstoyan character: long hair, flowing beard and sandals. I'm sure he will be strikingly different right to the end."³⁵⁷

Valedictory

Lawrence loved music and enjoyed cricket and football. He appreciated good books, good beer and good company. He did and felt much more than we shall ever know or understand. I have almost certainly made far too clear cut, patterned and ordered much of what in his unfolding life was complicated, confused and emotional. But it was an intensely political life. And it is of tremendous interest because it was marked by obscurity rather than eminence, because it was lived against the grain, most of it, from the orphanage and the army to anarchism, spent on the margins, in isolated and impotent opposition. Perhaps it was the orphanage. We shall never know. But something made Lawrence definitively an oppositionalist, an adversary of capitalism, an antagonist of and within Stalinism and Trotskyism. He was typically a loser, sometimes a victim. He lacked the accomplishments and perhaps the will to build or influence an enduring organisation and when it came to revolution he never did get the job done. He will be remembered best for his time in the Labour Party as a pioneer of municipal socialism, perhaps the most prominent of a not inconsiderable band who struggled to act as socialist councillors in the years between Lansbury and Livingstone. Here again his

achievement was restricted and temporary. But from Stalinism to Anarchism he kept on trying.

You can draw a range of conclusions from Lawrence's inspiring, flawed lifetime of socialist endeavour. The central lesson which he drew himself, if somewhat belatedly, was that "socialism" from above and the despairing search for short cuts and substitutes for socialism as self-emancipation, which he had shared with Pablo, Deutscher, Healy and so many others, corrodes not only the essential, necessary vision of socialism as workers' power but can corrupt the human spirit. This is important: while it is unlikely that a rebirth of socialism will see a resurrection of Stalinism, progress may well breed different deformities. Lawrence's final emphasis on libertarianism holds lessons for us today. Nonetheless, there is no need to accept his anarchism or to go along with his despair of class politics and his belief that commitment to workers' self-emancipation requires a root-and-branch rejection of Marxist theories of capitalism, the state and political organisation of the working class

What is compelling is his insistence that socialists start at the bottom, integrate themselves with existing workers' struggles, appreciate what workers see as important, listening and facilitating. But also arguing and developing. Where we would part company with the later Lawrence is over our conviction that developing is indispensable and that it requires linking grassroots campaigning with the accepted framework of politics. We have to work with and often within this framework although we ultimately reject it. This means getting our hands dirty. It means encountering and resisting temptation. It means confronting politics not only in the workplace but in the union, in union elections, in council elections and in Parliament. And this necessitates creating strong, developed organisation to confront capitalist ideology and capitalist power.

The fundamental conception that workers must make their own revolution is unfortunately only the beginning, not the end, of wisdom. What is striking on the left today is the existence of groups allegedly based on "socialism from below" in which policy and practice is ruthlessly determined from above. In their disdain for internal democracy and authoritarian political culture, some approximate to the Healy regimes Lawrence knew from the 1950s to the 1970s. Other organisations indulge in more subtle forms of domination. Meanwhile the splits – the fusions seem to have disappeared – and the expulsions grind on. This is despite the fact that while Lawrence would readily recognise the sectarianism, the pursuit of organisational self-interest and the crippling lack of democracy in the cause of human liberation which scars the contemporary left, he would find it increasingly debilitated in terms of political influence in the class struggle. The connection of the left groups with workers, always slender, always fragile, are stretched almost to breaking point. Yet despite this weakness and despite, at least to some extent, a softening of differences, "unity" continues to

constitute a cynical charm word in the sophisticated sectarian's vocabulary. Lawrence was no intellectual. But we should not gloss over his commonsense critique of Trotskyism, which was based on his experience and has been shared by thousands, as well as his eventual dismissal of Stalinism. Nor should we too quickly pass over the links between post-war Trotskyism and Stalinism.

Diagnosis of the germs of this malaise is still disputed. But whether they flow from virulent strains in Bolshevism, the influence of Stalinism, the isolation of Trotskyism or something inherent in the constitution of small, left-wing groups based on doctrine, bureaucratic centralism, sectarianism and opportunist politics continue to flow. Sections of the left still deprecate the political primacy which the Labour Party still wields over the working class and emulate Lawrence and the CP in underestimating or rejecting the necessity to work within it. Sections of the left are still defending and making concessions to Eastern dictators and religious fundamentalists as eagerly as Pablo and Lawrence once made them to Stalin and Messali Hadj.

History can instruct us in these follies. But there comes a time when History herself tells us to follow Lawrence, at least in turning our backs to the past. Many refuse to do so. There are some who, in pursuit of a new communism, claim that it is essential to current concerns not to simply appropriate the symbols but to sanitise and renew the tradition of British Stalinism. Conscientious historical excavation suggests it is simply not worth the effort. What was primary, what was determinant in that tradition was the perversion of socialism in Russia and, by extension, beyond. Let it go. Vociferous opponents of this group, having adopted, intact and embalmed, a conjunctural heresy forged in open conflict with Trotsky in the very different world of the 1940s, insist in their turn that they are the inheritors of the questionable Trotskyist tradition which we have seen at work earlier in this essay. Lamenting the central fact that Trotsky died too soon to endorse their views, they go so far as to purvey a self-serving and unprovable historical counterfactual: had the uxorious Old Man survived, he would have followed Natalia and recognised that he was wrong and the opponents he had excoriated in fundamental terms were right. All this has much more in common with the desire of barbarian peoples to establish their descent from the Egyptians or the British *nouveau riche* from William the Conqueror than with the construction of socialist resurgence. It reflects a conservatism which all too often preserves the worst of the past. Again, the lesson which history teaches us is that it is more than time to move on.

But if the hour is late for fundamental reflection, self-criticism and political change, the prognosis is far from favourable. It may be that we shall have to go on struggling in the current, inadequate, fragmentary fashion. Certainly, the collapse of "already existing socialism" in the early 1990s did not have that creative, galvanising impact on the left

many of us had hoped for. In important ways, it has been chastening but far from uniformly negative. Rather than foreclosing on its possibility, it removed an impediment to genuine socialism. But it raised yet again very real obstacles, centrally the deep-seated difficulties inherent in undertaking an overturning of capitalism and the taxing dilemmas of organising a planned alternative, fundamental problems which the left has often engaged with minimally and superficially. Yet if in some senses the aftermath has been sobering, subsequent events in America, in Russia, in Argentina, in Iraq and in Palestine, confirm what for many of us, who always eschewed inevitability and historical laws, has always been the starting point for socialism: capitalism does not work; it distorts humanity and endangers its future. It is this moral imperative which underpins for us economic and political critique grounded in the experience of the international working class to reaffirm the existential necessity to struggle against capitalism whatever the odds. Like Lawrence, we must keep fighting it as best we know how.

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Notes

187. See, for example, John Lawrence, 'Back This Strike', *Tribune*, 23 July 1954; Norman Dinning, 'Beware The Profiteers', *Tribune*, 18 February 1955; Norman Dinning, 'Reward For Skill', *Tribune*, 20 May 1955; John Lawrence, 'The Word Is Automation', *Tribune*, 18 June 1955; John Lawrence, 'Strike Stories They Didn't Print', *Tribune*, 24 June 1955; John Lawrence, 'Automation Our Way', *Tribune*, 1 July 1955; John Lawrence, 'Utopia – But You Will Have To Battle For It', *Tribune*, 29 July 1955; John Lawrence, 'Dole Queues Unless', *Tribune*, 2 September 1955; Lawrence, 'Operation Strangle', *Tribune*, 16 September 1955; John Lawrence, 'Automation: Shop Stewards Lead The Way', *Tribune*, 30 September 1955.

188. Unsigned CP document, n.d., 1956

189. *Ibid.*

190. Tom Braddock and John Lawrence, *Labour's Way Forward* (Labour Today Publishing), December 1955, p.7

191. Braddock and Lawrence, *Labour's Way Forward*, pp.4-5.

192. Philip Williams, 'Serious Crisis in the British Communist Party', *SO*, 14 August 1953; Hugh Savage, 'Why I Left the Communist Party', *SO*, 1 August 1953. One or two of the Glasgow dissidents briefly joined Healy's group. McShane and others joined with Eric Heffer in the Socialist Workers' Federation: Harry

- McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (Pluto Press), 1978, p.253.
193. CP, Information on Trotskyists, n.d., autumn 1954; Report on Trotskyist Activity, 31 August 1954.
194. Acheson interview.
195. Information on Trotskyists, n.d., autumn 1954.
196. Betty Reid, Further Report on Trotskyist Org, 1 February 1955.
197. Unsigned CP memo, n.d., 1956
198. Goffe interview.
199. Lawrence to Mahon, 30 January 1956.
200. Philip Williams [Gerry Healy], 'Problems of Labour's Left', *SO*, 20 February 1953.
201. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.85.
202. Jack Sutherland to Mahon, 26 February 1956.
203. Goffe interview.
204. Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1953, p.117; Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1955, pp.207, 115; Labour Party Annual Conference Report, 1957, p.99.
205. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.85.
206. Betty Reid, Some Comments, n.d., November 1958.
207. John Lawrence, 'Some Comments on the Prague Trial', *SO*, 2 January 1953.
208. Henry Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (Macmillan), 1973, p.172; Jenkins, *Bevanism*, chapter 5.
209. Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991* (Pluto Press), 1992, p.218.
210. Unsigned CP document, n.d., 1956.
211. CP, Memo of Meeting on Sunday July 22 1956.
212. Unsigned CP document, n.d., 1956
213. CP, 'Developments in the Trotskyist and Other Anti-Party Groupings Since the 20th Congress', 13 June 1956.
214. See John McIlroy, "'Every Factory Our Fortress": Communist Party Workplace Branches in a Time of Militancy, 1956-79, Part 2: Testimonies and Judgements', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 12, Autumn 2001.
215. Ibid., p.75; Report of Meeting, Sunday 17 November 1957 with Councillors John Lawrence, Bernie Holland and David Goldhill.
216. Letters, *Tribune*, 2, 25 May 1956; Norman Dinning, 'Did Tribune "Smear" Birch?', *Tribune*, 1 June 1956.
217. Quoted in Charlie Pottins, 'How Britain's Stalinists Spied on the Left', *Lobster*, 31 October 1996, p.5.
- 218 'Letters', *Tribune*, 4 May 1956, 24, 31 January 1958; John Lloyd, *Light And Liberty: History of the EETPU* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1990, pp.345, 375, 472.
219. C.H. Rolph, *All Those In Favour: The ETU Trial* (Andre Deutsch), 1962, p.239.
220. Report of Meeting, Sunday 17 November 1957; unsigned CP document, n.d., 1956.
221. Ibid.
222. For the verdict that the Hungarian revolution was counter-revolutionary, see Isaac Deutscher, *Ironies of History: Essays on Contemporary Communism* (Oxford University Press), 1966, pp.44-6. The events represented "a fully-fledged struggle between communism and anti-communism", *ibid.*, p.45.
223. Report of Meeting, Sunday 17 November 1957.
224. Betty Reid, Report for CP Executive, November 1958.
225. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, pp.87-88.
226. Report of Meeting, Sunday 17 November 1957.
227. Emmett to Mahon, 16 November 1957.
228. Reid, Memo to John Gollan, n.d., 1958; document on Emmett's application, n.d., 1957.
229. Ibid. The visit to Britain of the Russian leaders Bulganin and Khrushchev in April 1956 stimulated a major security operation which involved MI5, Scotland Yard, the security staff at the Russian embassy and the Russian security services. Fourteen members of the Russian secret police flew to London in advance of the visit to discuss arrangements. Most of the active protest which emerged came from émigré groups and the right, notably the League of Empire Loyalists – Colin Jordan and Nikolai Tolstoy were among those arrested. But the Healy group took up the demand for the release of political prisoners which was put forward by the Labour Party leaders (see M. Banda's letter in *Tribune*, 25 May 1956). Walter Kendall pressed the case of the imprisoned Invergordon mutineer Len Wincott, and Betty Hamilton announced a campaign to rehabilitate Trotsky and other victims of Stalinism (*Tribune*, 23 March, 20 April 1956). Against this background the security services, British and Russian, no doubt welcomed information on Trotskyists, real or imagined.
230. Ibid.
231. Ibid.
232. See Bob Pitt, 'Red Flag Over St Pancras'.
233. *St Pancras Story: Appeal of the Expelled Members of Holborn and St Pancras Labour Parties* (John Lawrence), 1958; *Sunday Times*, 27 April 1958.
234. Quotes from Lawrence to Mahon, 17 October 1958.
235. Ibid.
236. Dave Kelly to Mahon, 22 October 1958.
237. Reid to Gollan, n.d., November 1958.
238. William Wainwright, Material Relevant to Application For Membership of John Lawrence and Others, memo, 14 October 1958.
239. Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting Held on 8-9 November 1958.
240. Minutes, London District Committee, 16 November 1958. See Hilda Lane, 'Why I Joined', *Labour Monthly*, January 1959. There is no mention of Dinning in the documents but see Norman Dinning, 'In Defence of Shop Stewards', *Labour Monthly*, November 1959. Goldberg apparently was not a member of the CP in 1961 but as a member of the CP faction in the ETU, being able to point out that he was not a party member was very useful. See Rolph, *ETU Trial*, pp.153-4.
241. Don Cook, 'The Siege of St Pancras', *Labour Monthly*, October 1960, p.475.
242. *Daily Express*, 23 September 1960.
243. Quoted in Dave Burn, *Rent Strike: St Pancras 1960* (Pluto Press), 1972, p.18.
244. *Daily Worker (DW)*, 23 September 1960.

245. *DW*, 24 September 1960.
246. Mathieson, Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party, p.222.
247. Pitt, 'Red Flag', 4, p.4.
248. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.92.
249. *DW*, 29 January 1960; Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.92.
250. *DW*, 29 January 1960.
251. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.92.
252. Burn, *Rent Strike*, pp.6-8.
253. Mathieson, Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party, p.232.
254. Cook, 'Siege of St Pancras', p.476.
255. *DW*, 5 October 1960.
256. *Ibid.*; *DW*, 23 September 1960
257. John Lawrence, 'Tenants and Workers Unite!', *Freedom*, 27 April 1968.
258. *Ibid.*
259. *Ibid.*
260. *Ibid.*
261. Duff, *Left, Left, Left*, p.94.
262. Ian MacDonald, 'Housing: the Struggle for Tenants' Control', *International Socialism*, 33, Summer 1968.
263. *DW*, 6 October 1960.
264. *DW*, 12 October 1960.
265. *DW*, 13 December 1960.
266. *Ibid.*
267. Mathieson, Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party, p.248.
268. *DW*, 29 September 1961.
269. Burn, *Rent Strike*, p.22. See also Arthur Rowe, 'Lessons of St Pancras 1959 – Don't Rely on Labour', *Labour Worker*, May 1968.
270. London District Congress, 21 February 1960, Nominations.
271. London District Committee Minutes, 4 December 1960.
272. Quoted in Betty Reid, Lawrence, Notes for 30 January 1961.
273. Burn, *Rent Strike*, p.24.
274. Sam Aaronovitch, 'Why We Should Reject these Arguments', *World News*, 22 April 1961.
275. McIlroy, 'Communist Party Workplace Branches', p.78.
276. Reid, Lawrence.
277. John Lawrence, 'Can We Win Socialism Without Civil War?', *World News*, 22 April 1961, p.207.
278. *Ibid.*
279. Aaronovitch, 'Reject these Arguments', p.208.
280. Colin Boatman, secretary of South St Pancras Branch, to Mahon, 2 August 1961.
281. *Ibid.*
282. *Ibid.*
283. *Ibid.*
284. Betty Matthews to Boatman, 8 August 1961; Mahon to Boatman, 18 August 1961.
285. Jack Eighteen, Report from Pat Conroy, Peckham Branch, 11 July 1962.
286. *Ibid.*
287. District Committee Minutes, 16 December 1962, Secretary's Report on Lawrence, verbal.
288. CP London District document headed 23 August 1963.
289. Betty Reid, 'Trotskyism in Britain', *Marxism Today*, September 1964, p.278.
290. Mathieson, Holborn and St Pancras South Labour Party.
291. McIlroy, 'Communist Party Workplace Branches', pp.79-81; Henry Friedman to author, 15 July 1996.
292. The best guides to this world are the files of the *Agitator*, *Solidarity* and *Freedom* for the early 1960s. I have also benefited from comments by the late Jim Higgins and Laurens Otter.
293. Conversation with Jim Higgins; Ernie Stanton, 'Inside the Fords Defeat', *Solidarity*, 3, 11, n.d., 1964.
294. *Solidarity*, 3, 11, n.d., 1964; Laurens Otter to author, n.d., 1996.
295. *Ibid.*
296. Conversation with Jim Higgins; *Freedom*, 12 March 1966.
297. John Lawrence, 'Conference Against the Wage Freeze', *Freedom*, 17 December 1966.
298. John Lawrence, 'Don't Pay the Hangman', *Solidarity*, 4, 5, n.d. 1966 (reproduced from *Printworker*); *Freedom*, 23 April 1967.
299. *Freedom*, 23 April 1967.
300. *Freedom*, 11 November 1967, reproduced from *Printworker*.
301. *Printworker* leaflet in *Freedom*, 28 October 1967. The chapel was the basic unit of organisation in printing and for its members the most immediately important. The branch represented a number of chapels: in the 1960s the SOGAT clerical branch had up to 20,000 members.
302. *Socialist Worker*, 17 October, 16, 23 November 1968.
303. John Lawrence, 'Solidarity with the Miners', *Freedom*, 13 May 1967.
304. Conversation with Jim Higgins; cf Janet Alexander, *Freedom*, 7 June 1968.
305. John Lawrence, *Workers' Mutual Aid* (Fred Emmett), 1968, inside cover.
306. *Ibid.*, p.5.
307. *Workers' Mutual Aid*, inside cover.
308. This is based on conversations with Jimmy Benjamin, John Fitzpatrick and Pete Gold and correspondence with Laurens Otter.
309. *Printworker*, 'May Day – Stop Press', *Freedom*, 23 April 1967; 'May Day 1967', *Solidarity*, 4, 7, n.d., 1967.
310. *Ibid.*, *Freedom*, 13 May 1967.
311. *Solidarity*, 4, 7, n.d., 1967.
312. John Lawrence, 'Defy the Wage Freeze Laws', *Freedom*, 13 April 1968.
313. *Freedom*, 11 May 1968.
314. Janet Alexander, 'Impressions of May Day', *Freedom*, 11 May 1968.
315. *Freedom*, 11 May 1968.
316. *Ibid.*
317. *Ibid.*; *Solidarity*, 5, 1, n.d., 1968. Nonetheless, the *Morning Star*, 2 May 1968, reported the meeting and march.
318. John Lawrence, 'The May Day Committee', *Freedom*, 25 May 1968.
319. *Ibid.*
320. John Lawrence, 'Aims of the May Day

- Committee', *Freedom*, 21 September 1968.
321. Ibid.
322. John Lawrence, 'May Day is May 1', *Freedom*, 18 January 1969.
323. *Freedom*, 19 April 1969.
324. Lawrence, 'May Day is May 1', *Freedom*, 18 January 1969.
325. Pete Gold, 'May Day - Give Your Guv'nor That Choking Feeling', *Socialist Worker*, 5 April 1969. See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Organising the Militants: The Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, 1966-79', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 37, 1, 1999, pp.1-31.
326. 'Thoughts About May Day', *Solidarity*, 5, 11, n.d., 1969; Janet Alexander, 'May Day Brings Out Big Brother', *Freedom*, 10 May 1969.
327. *Freedom*, 10 May 1969.
328. *Socialist Worker*, 1, 8 May 1969; 'Editorial 2, May Day', *International Socialism*, 37, June-July 1969, pp.2-3; *Solidarity*, 5, 11, n.d., 1969; *Freedom*, 10 May 1969.
329. Janet Alexander, 'May Day Brings Out Big Brother', *Freedom*, 10 May 1969.
330. John Lawrence, 'Towards a New Kind of May Day', *Freedom*, 1 May 1971.
331. *The Times*, 12, 17 October 1970; Keith Sisson, *Industrial Relations in Fleet Street* (Basil Blackwell), 1975, pp.129-30; Keys v Boulter, *All England Law Reports*, 16 May 1972; Christopher Hird and Patrick Wintour, 'How Was NATSOPA Brought to the Verge of Bankruptcy', *New Statesman*, 30 March 1979; 'Lord Briginshaw', *Times Obituaries* (Times Publishing), 1992.
332. John Lawrence, 'A Spectre is Haunting Mr Briginshaw', *Freedom*, 15 May 1971.
333. *Freedom*, 12 December 1970.
334. *Observer*, 8 November 1970.
335. Ibid. Briginshaw, declaring that he was "in industrial dispute" with the *Observer*, again threatened to close the paper down if his reply was changed in any way and not featured prominently in the body of the paper rather than appearing as a letter. He was successful, even though his lengthy harangue stated he could not comment on the specific issue as it was "sub judice" and consisted largely of a proposal for an inquiry into the ownership and control of newspapers (*Observer*, 15 November 1970).
336. *Freedom*, 12 December 1970; *Financial Times*, 11 October 1970.
337. *Financial Times*, 11 November 1970; *Socialist Worker*, 24 October, 14 November 1970; *Freedom*, 12 December 1970.
338. *Freedom*, 19 December 1970.
339. Quotes from *NATSOPA Journal* in Lawrence, 'Spectre', *Freedom*, 15 May 1971.
340. Keys v Boulter, May 1972.
341. Lawrence, 'Towards a New Kind of May Day', *Freedom*, 1 May 1971.
342. John Lawrence, 'Anarchists Burn The Forms', *Freedom*, 8 May 1971; *Freedom*, 31 July 1971.
343. John Lawrence and Peter Turner, 'Trade Unions: Neither Enemy Or Saviour', *Freedom*, 14 October 1971.
344. John Lawrence, 'The UCS Struggle: End of the Reid Road', *Freedom*, 6 May 1972.
345. John Lawrence, 'Thoughts on Workers' Control', *Freedom*, 5 August 1972.
346. John Lawrence, 'Lets All Be In Contempt', *Freedom*, 19 April 1972; John Lawrence, 'What A Way To Run A Railway', *Freedom*, 20 May 1972.
347. John Lawrence, 'Oh Brother: Reflections on the Dock Strike', *Freedom*, 26 August 1972. .
348. *Freedom*, 12 August 1972.
349. John Lawrence, 'Tolstoy on the Telly', *Freedom*, 25 March 1972.
350. This account is based on *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Financial Times* and *Morning Star* reports, 17-28 October 1972.
351. Quotes from *Morning Star*, 24 October 1972, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 1972.
352. *Financial Times*, 24 October 1972.
353. *Daily Telegraph*, 17, 20 October 1972.
354. *Morning Star*, 27 October 1972.
355. Hird and Wintour, 'How Was NATSOPA ...'
356. *Socialist Worker*, 10 February 1973.
357. Jock Nicolson, unpublished memoirs, typescript, p.104.

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