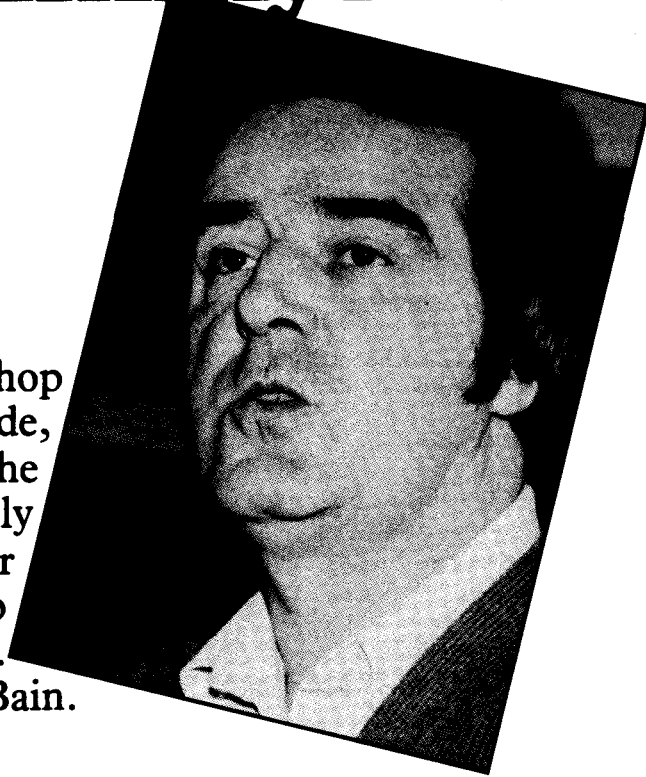


Interview with Jimmy Airlie

Jimmy Airlie, shop steward on Clydeside, one of the leaders of the UCS struggle and recently elected AUEW organiser discusses the present threat to shipbuilding, and other issues. Interviewed by Dougie Bain.



Just how serious an effect would the closures and redundancies proposed by British Shipbuilders have on the industry?

Total disaster. Effectively, in the longer term, it would lead to the destruction of Britain's merchant shipbuilding industry. The proposed maximum of 400,000 gtr just couldn't be sustained in the longer run and the industry would cease to be viable.

Now we're not arguing that every last job in the industry can be saved. In that sense we're realists. But we are adamant that there will be no reduction in the facilities and yards within British Shipbuilders. That's cardinal.

Could you say something about the alternative proposals brought forward by the Govan Joint Shop Stewards Committee to resolve the present crisis.

Well, of course, these proposals are no longer just the property of the Govan stewards — they were unanimously adopted in total at the special conference of shipbuilding unions convened on August 23rd by the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions.

So what are we saying? Basically and fundamentally we're arguing that the work is there to keep the shipbuilding industry operating at roughly its present level if certain things are done. And we're suggesting 22 possibilities. I'm not going to go through the points — they've been published in the press and so on. But the point is this: *if the Government has the will* it can do a whole range of things to keep the

industry going, preserve jobs and, at the same time, serve the best social and economic interests of Britain. That's it in a nutshell.

In addition we're making the point that the Government's two year financial limitation is totally unrealistic and must be both eased and extended.

How important is it for the shipbuilding workers to win this fight?

I don't think it's any accident that British Shipbuilders have decided to put the boot into Scotland first. The shipbuilding workers here on the Clyde are the best organised in Britain and if British Shipbuilders can batter through their closures and cuts up here, they know it will be easier in the future to hack away at the rest. So my first point is that this fight is about the future of one of Britain's most important, basic industries and about the communities that depend on that industry.

But it goes beyond that. You know how difficult it's been to get the fight-back on closures and redundancies — Monsanto, Prestcold, Singers, Goodyear and all the rest. It's got to be stopped. The line's got to be drawn somewhere and we're drawing it here on the Clyde. We're challenging the whole trend to de-industrialisation and we made that clear from the Confed Conference in August.

So, in effect, we're challenging the strategy of this Tory government. Not for party-political reasons but because they are experimenting on workers and their families with their lunatic economic philosophy. You know, Dougie, when I look at that Tory cabinet — Keith Joseph, Margaret Thatcher etc — I wonder whether we've been a bit hasty in opposing hanging. Maybe there are special cases!

Dougie Bain is Glasgow Area Secretary of the Communist Party

Anyway, I think the shipbuilding struggle is also important because it's typical of all the problems that face workers in effectively developing resistance to job cuts and closures. It's all there for us to overcome.

I don't need to tell you about the problem of the redundancy payments. And they'll be offering enhanced payments now to seduce the workers and make it as hard as possible for us to win. Workers who have lived from hand to mouth all their lives will have a bob or two in their pockets; 'you'll never be poor again' and so on. And it's not an easy one. I've heard people preaching at them: it's not your job your selling, it's your children's jobs. Well I'm not going to pontificate at them because I know it's hard for workers.

And then there is the drip, drip of the media: 'There is no work. Everybody's in the same boat. What can you do? You cannae keep a guy on if there's no work' and so on. So not only workers but whole communities are indoctrinated. Redundancies and closures are inevitable. It's just a matter of time. So the sooner you get the boot in the balls the better — the waiting's over.

But I believe we can win. There is no other section of workers — with the exception of the miners, maybe — better equipped to fight. A long history and tradition behind them; long time unionised and well organised. A community of workers that's part of a community. But it will take nerve and good leadership.

And if we win, the repercussions will be enormous. Workers will have faced up to their responsibilities in full. After all the defeats we will have won a major victory. It will be a body blow to government strategy. And workers will learn the lesson: that if you organise and fight, you can win even against all the odds — and unless workers are won to fight, then the alternative strategy means nothing. Workers can change things if they fight — that's lesson no. 1 of the alternative strategy.

In thinking about the struggle ahead, an obvious point of reference will inevitably be the historic UCS struggle in 1971 when the Heath government tried to dismember and destroy the industry here on the Clyde. How does the situation compare today?

Well, of course, the big difference is that then there was plenty of work, relatively speaking. This time, there's none. That's the central difference. The main thing we were up against then was a doctrinaire government with its 'lame duck' philosophy. And it soon became obvious that the Tories hadn't really thought through their strategy. They were taken aback at the span of the struggle; the ability of the workers to mount what was essentially a political struggle. So things became impossible for them and they had to back down.

With the world wide recession in shipbuilding, the argument is more difficult this time. And of course the Tories have learned a thing or two as well. They know this time what to expect and they will prepare accordingly. Sometimes we think it's just us that have to learn from mistakes but the ruling class learns as well. Reaction never sleeps.

But, as you see, there's a deeper problem. At one time no British government would ever have even contemplated moving away from the commitment to full employment. But that's changed. We've been conditioned to accept the idea that high unemployment is normal. In fact the really big jumps in unemployment came under Labour governments and the Tories, if you like, just took it from there. And it isn't just a question of *one* problem. For the first time really, things are getting worse instead of better. So problems multiply and things begin to build up for workers and you get the reaction: 'when the time comes, I'm fuckin' this lot up'. I know that's a crude way of expressing it but that's how they would see it.

But even so, I believe the feeling is still there that won us through in 1972; they haven't destroyed it.

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The 'work-in' tactic was used very effectively in the UCS struggle both to hold the workforce together and in appealing to the sympathies of the public at large. From what you say about the lack of orders, obviously it's not appropriate this time. How important to the struggle is the 'lock-in' of Polish ships?

It's of limited value. It was only intended to have a limited effect. By announcing that the Polish ships would be quarantined, the stewards were giving notice to British Shipbuilders that they were in for a fight. It helped to unite the yards. The fact that the workers had leant over backwards to get these ships finished on time gave an extra punch to the tactic. It puts British Shipbuilders on the defensive. It embarrasses them. It gives them another headache to worry about.

One of the striking features of the UCS struggle was the extent to which support was won far beyond the bounds of the trade union movement. Do you think that kind of support will be forthcoming this time?

To be truthful, I think the situation is less favourable in that respect. Shipbuilding isn't the only problem facing people; we've had a whole string of closures — some of them without a blow being struck. You know what they say: every victory reveals a new frontier — well, every defeat reveals more people down in the dumps! So you get a climate of opinion that closures and redundancies are inevitable. Unemployment is the order of the day and, anyway, 'it isn't too bad; after all they'll get £5,000 and I wish I was getting £5,000' and so on and so on.

And on top of that there's the cuts in social services, prices spiralling, the big cities are being run down — so we're not the only problem.

But, of course, the support we got last time didn't just come out of the blue — we had to fight for it and I can tell you that Communist leadership was a big factor there. If there was one lesson for the working class movement that came out of the UCS struggle it was that building a broad alliance is absolutely basic to mass struggle. So whether we get the support again this time will depend on the kind of fight the shipbuilding workers put up, the level of solidarity from the movement, and the quality of the leadership.

International solidarity was another much quoted aspect of the UCS struggle. How important will it be in the current battle — and here I'm thinking particularly of the European Metal Workers.

I think it's peripheral. I know there's a lot of talk about organising at a European level — forming a front with the European Metal Workers. But I believe that the Lord helps them that first help themselves. The key to the fight will be what happens here in Britain, because I believe we are the best organised shipbuilding workers in the world. European unions for historical reasons are at a different stage of development. So if British shipbuilding workers give the lead, the rest will follow — and I'm not being chauvinist when I say that. International support will be a bonus but only if we get the fight going here first.

Anyway, there are a number of problems in this area of things. European yards are also facing an acute shortage of orders at the present time. Now I don't want to be accused of narrow nationalism here, Dougie, but if there has to be cuts — and I'm not saying there

necessarily has to be — but if there has to be, then I'm arguing that these cuts shouldn't be made in Britain. What we're talking about here is a long established basic industry with whole communities that have historically grown up around them; but it's really only in the past

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decade, for instance, that the Spanish shipbuilding industry has arrived on the scene. There have already been massive cuts in our industry so — if you like — we've done our bit. On top of that, of course, is the fact that many of these foreign yards have been building British ships and we're for British ships being built in British yards.

Another argument that's become fashionable is that our highly sophisticated, technological economy shouldn't be producing ships — we should leave that to the developing third world nations like Korea. Heavy engineering is absolutely basic to the British economy and shipbuilding is an essential element in that heavy manufacturing base not only in absorbing manufactured goods but in creating industrial skills and so on. If you take out shipbuilding, you throw the whole economy out of balance. So it's central to any alternative economic policy.

But there's a wider argument that's got to be taken into account. Britain's an island. Building our own ships to carry our goods in and out of the country is vital if we want an independent foreign policy. To destroy our shipbuilding capacity puts us at the mercy of a third party and is tantamount to treason, in my view. And I say that as a Communist. I'm for an independent foreign policy. That's why I want Britain out of the Common Market. Let's get our own house in order and then questions of international solidarity become less complicated.

When the UCS battle was fought out, the industry was in private hands. It has since been nationalised. Do you think that will strengthen the fight now to save the yards?

Let's put it this way: but for nationalisation there probably wouldn't be a merchant shipbuilding industry today. Maybe if it had been nationalised ten years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are now. We talk about nationalisation as a victory for the working class — and in an important sense it was — but if it hadn't been nationalised when it was, nobody would have kicked up more than the owners. The industry had been bled white; the bottom was out of the market and they knew it.

So it was nationalised at the worst possible point in time. Right at the height of its crisis. Its best days behind it. And that leaves us with a problem. Workers who have always known full employment and plenty of overtime now face the collapse of the industry. Wars and rumours of wars — that's all it's been since nationalisation. So they look over their shoulders to the 'good, old days', when Lithgow and Swan Hunter 'looked after' them — 'oh, aye, they knew how to run a business and get orders' and so on it goes. It's all very well sloganising; but workers judge things practically not ideologically and nationalisation hasn't exactly come like manna from heaven.

Naturally, the Tories don't miss a trick. With one stone they can kill off a 'lame duck' and at the same time prove that nationalisation always leads to disaster. They can use nationalisation as an advert against itself. That's why they slip in the one about de-nationalising Yarrows — a lifeline to the workers with the compliments of Private

Enterprise.

What I'm saying is that nationalisation hasn't necessarily led to a heightened socialist consciousness, but that, without it, we probably wouldn't have an industry to fight for.

But what about the question of Yarrows — do you think it could become a divisive factor in the struggle?

Some of the Confed officials have been arguing that this is a key challenge and that we must concentrate on it. In my view it's a red herring. At this stage it doesn't matter a monkey's. The only thing that matters here and now is to win the battle on the closures and redundancies. If we can do that, the Yarrows threat will be killed stone dead. It would only become a problem in the context of a defeat for the overall strategy of the workers when their unity had been fractured.

Has the role of management changed appreciably with nationalisation and what kind of role will they play in the struggle?

Management are our allies in this struggle and will remain so if they are approached and handled in the correct way. As Marx pointed out eventually the capitalist class comes to alienate the very classes they rely on for their salvation. These lads who are managers, technicians and the like are seeing their future disappear. Maybe they're not completely convinced about our strategy and, let's face it, who's fault is that? Maybe ours. Maybe we don't pose it in the right way because we're still sectarian. These are all problems we have to think more about in terms of building a broad democratic alliance.

But when the chips are down, it's the workers who will be decisive and it would probably be true to say that the managers are only a factor in a winning struggle.

I was listening the other night to an interview with Ian Farningham, one of the top executives in British Shipbuilders, and he prefaced certain remarks he was making with 'Much as I admire the tactics of the Govan Shop Stewards . . .'. It does seem that over the period since the UCS the Govan Shop Stewards Committee has matured politically, overcoming problems of sectionalism and restrictive practices, setting aside traditional demarcation rules to ensure the Polish order would be completed on time, offering to work during the holiday period, always projecting the welfare of the industry as a whole to an extent that you, as convenor, and now Sammy Gilmore, have come to be recognised as the spokesmen for the industry. How conscious a strategy was this?

Oh, it was conscious, all right. We knew we had an ideological battle to win not only for the workers, but in relation to the public at large.

What was the main argument used against us in the past? That we were an inefficient industry always late with orders. An industry bedevilled with Victorian work practices; stupid demarcation battles; fratricidal union disputes. It wasn't trade unionism — it was tribalism! It wasn't an easy battle for these problems have deep roots. We had to convince the workers that change was necessary for the sake of unity and to secure the future of shipbuilding. The stewards made that breakthrough and established a new concept in the minds of the workforce — that it was *their* industry; *their* responsibility; and that its future was in *their* hands. Where else has such a position been achieved? Where else do shop stewards speak for an industry and not the management? We had a policy. We knew where we were going. It was our policies that became the policies of the Confed and even the European Metal Workers Union.

And what does it all add up to? We're not on the defensive any more! We're pointing the way for shipbuilding. Management has

fallen in behind us. We can make the appeal, over the heads of the workforce, to the populace as a whole. Surely, that's what building the broad democratic alliance is all about.

I know that the British trade union movement is one of the oldest, strongest and best organised — but, by Christ, its also one hell of a stupid movement! How many unions to build a ship, a plane, a motor car? It maybe made sense in 1860 but it doesn't make any sense now! The press snipe away about 'too many unions' but who's against amalgamation basically? The employers and those in the trade union leadership who care more about their careers than the interests of the working class.

Oh, yes, it was a conscious strategy and I'm convinced that the labour movement has lessons to learn from what the Govan stewards have done.

How important to shipbuilding workers is the current engineering claim? Will there be any problems in fighting on two fronts as it were?

The claim is very important, although it should be said that in Govan we have already won the position on the £80. Mind you, the way the prices are going, there won't be much change left at the end of the week!

But for five years it's been swallow this and swallow that with the social contract and so on. After a while it begins to seep through the whole movement.

But for five years it's been swallow this and swallow that with the social contract and so on. After a while it begins to seep through the whole movement. If we could get a really strong lead from the unions involved, we could put the employers in a box with no room to manoeuvre. This is a key fight for the bosses and the Government because they know what's at stake. If two million engineers in action can inflict a defeat on the engineering employers it would constitute a body blow to the Thatcher government which would consequently weaken their position. That could only be good news for shipbuilding workers in the struggle.

For shipbuilding workers there's no contradiction. A victory would give a real boost in confidence not just to shipyard workers but to the whole movement and the political climate would begin to change. Success breeds success. If we win on the claim we're more likely to win on the closures and redundancies.

OK. I accept that. But maybe we could pursue this one a bit farther. What's facing us here on the Clyde is deindustrialisation on a massive scale. Beyond that the threat to jobs from unplanned technological innovation is incalculable. To date we have not been too successful in resisting these pressures and you have already indicated some of the problems we have to overcome. Traditionally we have put the priority on the wages fight and seen it as the cutting edge of our political and ideological work in the movement. Do you think we need to look again at the priorities within our overall strategy?

No, I think wages is still the key to the struggle. If workers are not satisfied with their wages, you'll not get them to fight for their jobs — they'll say the job isn't worth fighting for. You can't separate jobs and wages because mass unemployment is the other side of the coin to incomes policy. They're tied together.

But if you're asking me about winning people to a broad democratic alliance; to support an alternative economic strategy then in my view jobs is the key, not wages. The wages issue can be confusing and divisive. You know the kind of argument: 'why should they get £100?

Look at the old age pensioners . . .' Or think of the reaction from the public to strikes affecting the social services. Or all the hassle about differentials and parity disputes. It's a complicated one.

But when you're talking about jobs, you're talking about human dignity, the right to useful employment, the right of communities not to become ghettos, the right of youth for a future, the United Nations Charter — you can fling in the lot! It's a moral issue as well as an economic one.

And in another sense it's more fundamental. On wages, well, you win some, you lose some. Maybe you picked the wrong issue at the wrong time in the wrong place. Then again the boss might add it up and decide it's cheaper to pay up. But it won't be the end of the world — he'll still be there next time. But talk to him about jobs and manning and about having a say in what's going to happen to you — and he'll fight like hell! It's more fundamental.

So, what I'm saying is — wages is the key to struggle. It's what workers work for and it's what they'll always fight for. But in winning allies, building a broad democratic alliance, jobs will be the key. That was the lesson of the UCS. And there are a lot of other issues that are now becoming priorities in people's minds — urban decline and deprivation, the environment, the nuclear question, in fact the whole quality of life. We've got to take these issues on board as well if we are going to win allies and create a socialist consciousness.

But if you're right about jobs being ideologically a more loaded issue than wages, then it will have significance not only in winning broad support but also in its impact on the workers themselves who are fighting for jobs. The UCS, of course, was not about wages but about jobs and the stewards were, of necessity, involved in a highly ideological and tactical struggle making the argument for work as a basic human right, why Britain needs a shipbuilding industry, and so on. Do you think, as a result of that experience and others before it, that shipyard workers on the Clyde have some understanding of the Left's alternative economic strategy. The point I'm trying to get at here is that it seems to me that the alternative strategy is still very much the property of union conferences and is confined to the leading sections of the movement. Maybe we need to think more about how it will become the property of, at least, the leading sections of the workers. Do you have any thoughts on this?

I think shipyard workers are really much the same as other workers. They're just as susceptible to the media. Their thought processes are no different from the society they live in. They might have a gap now and then but basically they accept the capitalist system — it's the best we've got and it's better than socialism because they don't have any freedom over there and so on. So if you're asking me if they see a socialist solution to their problems, then the answer is, in my opinion, no.

So what have they learned? Where are they at? Well they know they can change the status quo if they take things into their own hands — that they can win. And it's when workers challenge the status quo and win that they learn the most. Maybe even more important, they know there has to be a certain approach — that they have to win allies in their struggle. OK, they're not socialists but they have a respect for Communist leadership — and not just for the Reids and the Airlies and the other so-called folk heroes, although I've got as big an ego as the next man. Shipyard workers have a loyalty to the industry and a feeling for it. They have a loyalty to their shop stewards so they'll say, fuck it, we're going to fight because that's what we've been asked to do and we're loyal. I'm being frank with you, Dougie. That's the reality.

The alternative economic strategy? Well, it's still you and me that talk in these terms and I'm not being elitist — just realistic. But it's the basis of our struggle and our argumentation so in the long run it all comes together.

Moving on, could you say something about the shipbuilding branch of the Communist Party and its role in the struggle?

The shipbuilding branch covers the three Glasgow yards — Govan, Scotstoun Marine and Yarrow, as you know.

The role of the branch? Absolutely vital to the struggle. And I'm not talking in the usual clichés here. I don't see the Party as a totem pole or a flag. The fact is that the branch has by and large provided the leadership of the shop stewards committees over the past decade at least. So I'm talking about real mass influence — something that's maybe unique — I don't know.

But that can bring its own problems as well. Sometimes people are critical because being in the leadership of the stewards, there's not enough consultation and discussion with the branch. That can become a problem, if you don't mind me saying so. I'll explain it to you. I think it's got to be said. You see there can be a strategy worked out by the leadership — of the stewards, I mean — and there can be problems if it's immediately taken into the branch and discussed. It's not being secretive, but, well, the shipbuilding comrades are not always . . . it's difficult to put this, Dougie . . . not always aware of the subtleties of a particular strategy. But it gets sorted out in the end.

But, despite what you've said, the point has to be made that there hasn't been a growth of the branch for a number of years — although that's not peculiar to your branch. How do you think the work of the branch could be improved — or indeed the industrial and political work of the Glasgow Party?

Dougie. Can I make a point here? We really are soul-searching and tearing ourselves apart for nothing! You say there hasn't been a growth — maybe even a decline. What are we? 90 members? But I'll argue that the authority, the status, the influence and the standing of the Party has never at any time been greater than it is today in the shipbuilding industry. I'll argue that objectively. The Party is acceptable, respectable — and I don't want that word put in inverted commas.

So what are we saying? The workers have fled the revolution? We cannae see it in that way! I happen to believe that workers are, by and large, not joiners of parties. How many of them are joining the Labour Party or the SNP? Oh, aye, they'll vote for them — we haven't broken that one — but how many of them are joining these parties?

I'm for the perspective of a mass Party, but it's just not there at present. In fact I would question whether the Labour Party is either in any real sense of the word. For them it's all about manoeuvring and positions. I'm not being a salvationist here — 'save me from the sin that's touching all!' — but that's how they are. Labour Party membership is falling. There's a new cynicism. It's not surprising our membership is down and it's not unique to the Party. Thousands of people can stand back and broadly view the philosophy and policy of the Communist Party but they still won't vote and they still won't join. I don't believe a Communist government is round the corner. You don't believe it. So we can't blame them if they don't see it either.

We've got to get away from the Band of Hope outlook: 'how many souls still to be saved?' I was dying and the *Morning Star* saved me! The Party is finding its level under present conditions and unfortunately it's a decline. In a sense we have to accept it.

In one way it's a good thing — and you can erase this bit if you like — but we have also been getting rid of a load of bam-pots in the process. People who, in my view, are just not suited psychologically for life in general, who always have to be in opposition. So when they saw the Party sliding into 'revisionism' they hopped it to the Trots or the NCP or what have you. I've never just been against things. I've

always wanted to be in the mainstream of life where Communists ought to be.

Coming back to the Labour Party for a moment. One of the Labour lefts — I think it was Eric Heffer — recently argued for factory branches of the Labour Party to be set up. How would you view a shipbuilding branch of the Labour Party?

We would welcome it. The shipbuilding branch of the Communist Party would welcome it.

Mind you I very much doubt if any of them would know how to go about it, but I'm very much encouraged that they're talking about it. In my view, the Labour Party isn't a political party in the same sense that the Communist Party is. There's a very big difference. The Labour Party has always been an electoral machine, a ladder to the top. I think there is a danger that it could degenerate even further. And it isn't just a question of making Tony Benn leader or even of democratising the Party although I completely support those that are trying to bring about changes. It's also about action, struggle. Factory branches would bring the Labour Party more into touch with the workers and with the Left including the Communist Party. It would make them face up to the issues.

I think the leadership of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Party in particular would oppose the idea. The right wing in the movement would oppose it.

It could help the Communist Party by opening up debate and discussion. We're not afraid of discussion. We thrive on it. So I'm for Labour factory branches.

A final question, Jimmy. You've recently been elected as AUEW Divisional Organiser for Glasgow — one of the few Left victories. How do you view the prospects for extending and developing left unity, particularly here in Glasgow?

I want first of all to say that I have always held that the development of left unity is fundamental to the advance of the working class movement. Never was there a time when it was more important to bury niggling differences for the sake of a broad unity of the left.

I think the prospects are very good. In many regards, Scotland is, and has been for some time, in the forefront of left and progressive developments. The struggle of the shipbuilding workers, the role of the miners, the result of the General Election, the devolution fight and so on. All this is reflected in the steady shift to the left in the STUC over recent years.

We're now moving into an anti-Tory struggle. Scotland will be in the frontline there because Thatcher has no mandate for her policies north of the Tweed. What I'm arguing is the unity won't come out of smoke filled rooms — it will grow out of struggle and struggle is what we're likely to get plenty of!

The Communist Party is the Party that's best equipped for the job of building unity. I don't mean that we should dominate other organisations because that's never been our aim but nor should we be subservient either. There are and there will be differences. These have got to be discussed. But they shouldn't be an obstacle to the kind of broad unity we need — the broad democratic alliance.

I've made the point already — I've never accepted us playing the numbers game pure and simple. It doesn't worry me that we were 30,000 ten years ago and that we're 22,000 now. But what does matter is that we have a mass attitude. That's what will lay the basis for unity and for a bigger Communist Party. And let's be clear — I'm for a much bigger Party!

But there's nothing easier than talking about left unity. We're all experts at talking about it. Let's put it on the ground in the fight to save the yards and the jobs of the shipbuilding workers. □



Stalin played a massively important role in the transformation of the Soviet Union. How to assess his contribution?

Stalin - a centenary view

Joseph Stalin was born on 21 December 1879, the son of a shoemaker and former serf. During his life he participated in the greatest events of the twentieth century, rising to become the head of a new world power, the first socialist country. He died at the age of seventy three on 5 March 1953.

For Communists to establish Stalin's place in history will never be easy. Firstly, Stalin was a great man, but great individuals are not easy to place within a materialistic conception of history. We are used to history as the business of masses, classes, parties and institutions. Sometimes it is tempting to picture Stalin as the mere embodiment of impersonal 'historic' forces. But Stalin was more than this. The forces which created him and his place in history were often sharply personal and individual, although the individuals were many and we do not know all their names. In addition Stalin personally influenced the development and transformation of his own basis in society.

Equally we should not ignore the social forces and reduce it all to the deeds or misdeeds of a great man. Stalin was a great man, but it was not his personal capacity for good or evil which made him so. He acted within a social context which created space for him, and which actively responded to him. Therefore, I hope it is clear that I don't see my task in a biographical way, and that our subject must be broader than Stalin the individual. Others can write with greater authority of Stalin's daily life, his personal relations and moral attributes. I consider my real subject the relationship of the individual to society, which in Stalin's case we know as Stalinism.

Consequently I do not use the word 'Stalinism' to refer just to Stalin's morality or intellectual outlook. The reader will find the word applied below to conceptions, models, practices and institutions embracing every level of society. What these have in common is that they are all involved in the many-sided, two-way relationship between Stalin the individual and fundamental social forces, especially the Soviet working class.

There is also a second reason why it is difficult for Communists to establish Stalin's place in history. It is our history too. Marx once wrote that 'Men make their own history', but they are also controlled by it; in the process of struggling to change the world, they are drawn for security and legitimacy back to 'the spirits of the past', borrowing from them 'names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise . . .'.¹ The figure of Stalin still provides the terms of reference for many of today's battles; we often engage in the struggle for a new tomorrow as though its real purpose is to confirm or revise the outcome of battles fought to a conclusion thirty and forty years ago.

In reality the verdicts of these past battles, and the resulting course taken by world history, are unalterable facts which can no longer be revised. My purpose is not to revise these events. My purpose is rather to reconsider the substance of the original alternatives and the circumstances and results of the choices between them. Without this knowledge we cannot grasp how these unalterable facts may affect us and how our own history may influence our choices in the revolutionary struggles of the present and future.

It is appropriate to start by looking for Stalinism's historical roots. We do not have to start from scratch, since there are two ready-made solutions. In the view which carries most popular conviction, we see

the October 1917 revolution dominated by historical continuity — the essential thread which runs from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin. In this first view the Bolsheviks reproduced everything, revolutionised nothing.² The second view, based in a Marxist awareness of history as a process of change, discontinuity and the emergence of new phenomena, was clearly stated by the late John Gollan in his reassessment of the Twentieth CPSU Congress: Bolshevism broke with the institutions and traditions of despotic rule, but Lenin died and Stalin departed from Lenin's principles.³ Each of these views contains important elements of truth, but neither tells the whole story.

Where did Stalinism come from?

Every revolutionary movement must solve in its own way the problem of how to revolutionise society, by means which do not reproduce the most hateful and oppressive structures of the old order. In Russia this historic problem was particularly acute. The liberal bourgeoisie proved itself unable to overturn military absolutism and its feudal foundations, since it depended for its own regulation and safety upon bureaucrats and Cossack troops. Of the revolutionary movement, the terrorist wing (the populists and anarchists) found that its actions only accentuated the police rule of the Tsarist state. The Bolsheviks had a real revolutionary inspiration rooted in mass politics; they would revolutionise society. However in doing so they also replicated certain structures of the old order. I shall argue that the heritage of the October 1917 revolution was contradictory; Lenin left an ambiguous testament. Stalin was able to build upon institutions and practices which already existed, which the Bolsheviks had taken over or re-created from the past.

As is well known, the Bolsheviks took power on the basis of a limited programme: Peace, Land, Bread. These demands were the focus of their active, mass majority support in October 1917. There did not exist a majority for socialism, nor did the Bolsheviks of 1917 have a strategy for achieving it. All of them without exception (not just Trotsky and his adherents) depended on illusions concerning the speed of approach of the Western socialist revolution which alone would yield the material and political conditions for socialism in backward Russia. The Bolsheviks had little inkling of a nationally based road to socialism initiated by the actually existing minority working class, with the active participation of the vast, far-flung peasantry, in the conditions resulting from the failure of the Western revolution. Their perspective on the socialist reorganisation of society was not strategic and practical, but abstract and theoretical.

Their experience of revolutionary struggle did not greatly illuminate this problem. How could it? The conditions of struggle against

1. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, London 1968, p. 96. Writing in a previous age, the founder of the theory of practice used the word 'men' to include women.

2. See for example the centenary articles by Edward Crankshaw carried in *The Observer*, 20 and 27 May 1979.

3. 'Socialist Democracy: Some Problems'. *Marxism Today*, January 1976.