

Solidarity forever? - John Sullivan and Tom Hillier, and Maurice Brinton's reply



At the end of 1968 John Sullivan and Tom Hillier left Solidarity to join International Socialism (I.S.) the trotskyist group around Tony Cliff, and produced a pamphlet criticizing Solidarity. It's reproduced here together with Solidarity's reply by Maurice Brinton.

Transcribers Introduction

Solidarity for Workers' Power Vol.5 No.7 (Jan or Feb 1969) contained an article by John Sullivan attacking 'Capitalism and Socialism', an article by Maurice Brinton in the previous issue. As an example of Sullivan's tone he described Brinton's article as "a warmed-up version of the soggy humanitarianism of the Christian Socialists, Ramsay MacDonald, and the right wing of the ILP."

In *Solidarity for Workers' Power* Vol.5 No. 11 (June 1969) the following appeared:

Two members of the group (Tom Hillier and John Sullivan) have recently 'dropped out' of libertarian politics, and are now members of International Socialism, one of them already well up in the hierarchy. On leaving Solidarity they produced a singularly inaccurate pamphlet ('Solidarity Forever') in which they criticized us for various alleged actions and shortcomings. We have decided that these 'criticisms' should be answered and the record set straight. Afficionados of this sort of thing may order our reply-pamphlet now (10d., post free). An excerpt of this reply-pamphlet, giving the September 1968 views of T.H. on J.S. is published below.

No mere debating society consisting of John Sullivan and his "chosen few" of intellectuals who with two exceptions, have never produced an article with political theory as its subject — indeed Cde Sullivan has so far written two short articles on Vietnam and several book reviews. Something more positive than this is expected from someone as anxious to get

theoretical discussion going within the group. His contributions to the Industrial Ctte are in all honesty even more meagre.

The text of Maurice Brinton's reply is reproduced below. Both of these texts are taken from the copies on the Whats Next website, [here](#) and [here](#). Solidarity's reply evidently included some quotations from Sullivan and Hillier. However the one by Tom Hillier referred to above isn't included in the version on What Next, suggesting this may not be everything contained in Solidarity's pamphlet.

Solidarity Forever?

"A group which decries organization becomes simply a circle of friends and can become in practice as exclusive as any vanguard party. Assumptions which are tacitly accepted as being agreed upon within the group may prevent the discussion and development of new ideas just as successfully as the most rigidly bureaucratic constitution. Real democracy requires a framework however fragile in which to operate. It requires regular and reasonably structured meetings at which ideas are jointly elaborated, criticisms aired where all can hear them, and where policy can be collectively challenged and charged." ("Structure and Function", *Solidarity* Vol.4, No.7.)

A Suitable Case for Study

The *Solidarity* group has existed now for more than seven years. During this time it has produced a number of articles and pamphlets which have been of interest to many people whose politics were not those of the group. Their journal also claimed to offer a theory of working class organization. We, as ex-members, feel that there is a lesson to be learned from the experience of this organization. Some may feel that the internal workings of a tiny group can be of no interest to anyone outside it. We feel, however, that a study of this attempt to transcend the usual form of political organization will have some value. In the perennial debate between anarchists and socialists this experience may illustrate the incoherence of the anarchist position.

The precise status of the *Solidarity* group was always ambiguous. It proclaimed itself a revolutionary socialist organization, and at various times it made sporadic attempts to recruit people. At other times it seemed to see itself as a publishing house. The actual form of the group, as distinct from its image of itself, was a group of friends who formed a retinue around the leader, M.B.

The ambiguity extended to *Solidarity's* political ideas. It did not proclaim itself as anarchist, although it contained within itself most of the confusions of anarchist theory. Notably, it remained uncertain whether bureaucracy was an inevitable product of organization or whether it was possible to create a rational, libertarian organization of social and economic life – i.e. socialism. Members could point to the Soviets as examples of real democracy, while maintaining that a committee was by definition bureaucratic.

It would be possible to deduce the errors and sectarian excesses of *Solidarity* as an inevitable working out of its ideas. This would be a mistaken approach. The ideas were themselves confused, so there could have been many different conclusions from them.

The Uses of Ambiguity

Solidarity's ideological fuzziness had a function. It prevented it from being torn apart by the doctrinal quarrels which have split Marxist groups. The attitude was adopted that if agreement could be reached on immediate issues there was no need to quarrel about abstract

matters. In practice the group settled for a matter-of-fact empiricism which sometimes degenerated into mindless militancy. This empiricism and ideological fuzziness undoubtedly enabled *Solidarity* to unite a number of people of quite different political views to perform specific actions. In the long run, however, the failure to think or discuss had fatal consequences. The inability to argue about issues was also not accidental. It reflected the suppressed realization that the group contained incompatible elements.

In fact, rather than *Solidarity's* aberrations resulting from working out of general ideas, they can be explained only by the specific experience of the group.

Origins

Solidarity, like most other left organizations, originated [from a] split in the Trotskyist movement. It moved rapidly away from Trotskyism for two reasons:

- 1) It took over the ideas of the French group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* which had published a large body of work since its appearance in 1949.
- 2) *Solidarity's* origins coincided with the upsurge in the peace movement, around the Committee of 100. Although it did not originate in this movement, the group soon became very influential in the anarcho-pacifist milieu around the Committee.

A glance at the magazine during this time showed how deep its immersion in this type of activity was. Many people thought of *Solidarity* as part of the peace milieu, rather than of the labour movement. This was, however, rather misleading. *Solidarity* made concessions to pacifism but so does every group which tries to work in a specific sphere. It inevitably recruited people who were pacifists and understressed the ideas of class division.

However immersed *Solidarity* was in the peace movement this was never its sole interest. Even at the height of this activity it still carried articles on industry and on working-class struggle.

Pacifism

Solidarity had been attracted to the peace movement by their use of the tactic of direct action, which it saw as a revival of an older Syndicalist tradition. It never subscribed to the pacifist philosophy behind this tactic, but thought that this difference was secondary. Here we find a recurrent characteristic of *Solidarity's* activity – the raising of tactical questions to greater importance than those of political principle.

It will be difficult for those who have come into politics during the past five years to realise how understandable *Solidarity's* overestimation of the peace movement was. In the early 1960s many thousands of people were marching with CND. This immensely colourful and active movement seemed like a classless rebirth of revolutionary politics. Today, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that it was the last gasp of middle-class radicalism, not a new manifestation of revolutionary politics.

Because *Solidarity* rejected the consideration of overall strategy, it never had a correct evaluation of the peace movement (although it was quick to pounce on the backslidings of the leadership). *Solidarity's* lack of a democratic structure or clear ideas meant that it was too involved in the peace movement to realize the extent of its collapse.

Industry

Solidarity's other main preoccupation was the rank-and-file struggle in industry. This was in accordance with the original mixture of Syndicalism and residual Marxism. (The sub-heading of the magazine was "For Workers Power".)

The studies of specific industrial situations are what *Solidarity* will be remembered for. These articles improved on the general level of left-wing journalism. They were serious studies which went beyond the over-simplified "down with the bosses" which still forms the gist of the industrial articles in most left-wing papers.

Solidarity's isolation from the working class meant that these articles were mainly sociological studies for a predominantly middle-class readership. Here lay one of the greatest weaknesses of this approach. *Solidarity* never attempted to work out an industrial strategy. Although it was an explicitly revolutionary journal, its concentration on careful, accurate description of things as they were contained the likelihood of leaving things as they were. A concentration on description of existing reality, with no strategy for changing it eventually leaves this reality as something which in its totality must be accepted. One could only struggle against the manifestations of the system; the system itself remained inviolate because it was not understood.

A socialist strategy for industry would have to go beyond careful empirical examination. Such glimmerings of an industrial strategy as could be deduced from the pages of *Solidarity* were merely repetition of classic syndicalism, with all the virtues and weaknesses of that tradition. Syndicalists were justly annoyed when *Solidarity* presented the ideas which they had propagated for decades as brilliant new discoveries.

The *Solidarity* leadership realized that something was lacking in a purely syndicalist approach, but instead of attempting a total critique of capitalist society – a critique which would realize that there were many struggles in society but that the class struggle in industry was the crucial one – they documented a number of struggles, without having any clear ideas of which was primary. This approach is the logical corollary to a practice which consisted in joining in any struggle which came along, without trying to see its relevance to the whole.

The leadership was aware of the elementary fact that life did not begin at the factory gate. It saw that a socialist journal had to deal with other aspects of life. But the aspects which they chose to report contributed to the paper's lack of success among the people it tried to influence. The non-industrial articles in *Solidarity* tended to be ornamental, which sometimes meant that they were eccentric (the fluoridation fringe which haunts some of the wilder fringes of the left were distressingly interested in our aberration). One of the articles which provoked most response was a cretinous piece which tried to present the development of the symphony orchestra as part of the bureaucratic phenomenon.

Divisions

It was not really *Solidarity's* fault that the different strands of its activity did not fuse together into a united movement. No other group had any greater success in converting peace activists to revolutionary politics. Perhaps the potential for such a fusion did not exist.

Industrial workers maintained an attitude of tolerant indifference to the peace movement. Peace movement activists saw no need to look beyond the next sit-down. Supporters of *Solidarity* were prepared to sell the group's theoretical pamphlets but were not prepared to read them, and certainly not to discuss them. This produced one of the most curious aspects of *Solidarity's* activity. Pamphlets which aroused a lively reaction outside the group were not discussed within it. *Solidarity* appeared as the carrier of a disease which it did not itself suffer from.

Solidarity's move away from the peace movement did not follow from an analysis of the inherent limits of the movement, but from a reaction to the fact that the dog was not only dead, but stinking abominably. The move back toward industry followed.

The Noose Trial

The tensions within the group were revealed most obviously by the publication of an article in *Solidarity* Vol.4 No.1 in April 1966. The article, entitled "No Noose is Good News", was a defence of the so-called workers' courts which in several factories had imposed sanctions on blacklegs and rate-busters. There had been a vicious and sensational press campaign against these "courts", alleging that innocent men were being driven to the brink of suicide by them.

The *Solidarity* article, editorial in tone, although signed by three members, was an excellent explanation and defence of the "courts", pointing out that they were an expression of working-class values and objectives, which presented a challenge to bourgeois law and order.

This article was not printed as an editorial because the anarcho-pacifist members of the group objected. From their point of view workers' courts were identical to the bourgeois variety: both tried to tell the free individual what to do. The article was, therefore, quite rightly not printed as an editorial. (We wish that *Solidarity's* contents had always been decided so democratically.) But it does say something about the political level of the group that it was split on an issue which is basic not only to the objectives of working-class organization but even to its existence.

The publication of "No Noose is Good News" started a process of political differentiation within the group. People did not present a point of view and resign when it was defeated. As *Solidarity* did not have formal membership no thorough discussion took place. But a number of the anarcho-pacifists took their distance from the group.

Six Years Hard

The new direction within the group was clearly shown by the article "Six Years Hard" in Vol.4 No.5. This article, a summing up of the work of the group, announces the intention of leaving the peace milieu. At the same time it tries to justify the group's past immersion in it. (The editorial was a joint production of one of the authors of this article and *Solidarity's* leader M.B.) It is highly inadequate in that it praises the peace movement with faint damns, but nevertheless it does announce its break from it towards working-class activity, and the intention to institute some kind of formal membership. The article may be schizophrenic but it is frank. A few quotes will give the main direction of the new line.

"Unlike most of the left, who paid only superficial attention to the upsurge round the peace movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, we considered this movement to be extremely important; we thought that it marked a new stage in the struggle for a free society. We said that this was the only mass movement in existence. The 'entrists' pointed to the slumbering millions who were allegedly members of the Labour Party – or who would become members 'once things started to move'. Unfortunately these do not constitute a movement. They do not participate in any way in 'their' organization."

"We think we were right in trying to work with the activists of the peace movement. That is not to say that we think the experiment has been an unqualified success. In many respects it has been a failure."

"The peace movement has not developed its moral protest at the atrocities of the warfare state into any overall criticism of society. Lacking any coherent system of ideas it is imprisoned by the concepts of established society. The activists' protest becomes an isolated moral gesture which at its worst degenerates into irrationality and exhibitionism. They have been unable to participate in the undramatic day-to-day issues which for most people comprise the reality of the class struggle. They lacked a bridge (or even any understanding of the *need* for a bridge)

to the mass of ordinary people. The easing of international tension and the consequent decline in fears of atomic war has therefore left them aimless and isolated."

"Others accuse us of precisely the opposite failing. They resent the basic framework of our ideas our talk of class and class struggle. The way to freedom, for them is a molecular process, the slow addition of one free individual to another free individual. We have even heard it put forward that the only real revolutionary force in society today consists of those who have 'seen through the necessity to work' and who have 'emancipated themselves through drugs'. We are criticised for not having developed a sufficiently total critique of society ... by those whose notion of totality includes ignoring the real struggle in industry, where most people spend the major part of their life."

Solidarity generally did not discuss its ideas so frankly. It usually maintained an effective silence about its internal affairs which would have been the envy of any hardened Bolshevik organization. In an organization which does not have a public discussion of its views, seemingly minor events have a special significance.

The previous issue of *Solidarity* had carried an article criticising part of the Spanish Anarchist CNT for co-operating with Franco's official Sindicatos. Connoisseurs of the left scene know that any criticism of Spanish anarchism will be hotly resented by the anarchist pseudo-community. Even the mildest reformist English pacifist anarchist feels an emotional bond with this violent proletarian movement.

The *Solidarity* leadership was well aware of this. Printing such an article was part of a move away from anarcho-pacifism.

The move away from the peace movement had already started when a motion to remove the sub-heading "For Workers Power" was introduced and narrowly defeated.

There was an alliance between the Marxists and the group leadership on this question. The revival of left politics made it obvious that any group which seriously tried could make an impact. But to carry out the minimum work in a larger group it would be necessary to have some division of labour. The leader himself felt unable to carry out all the tasks which he had done till then.

Organisation and Bureaucracy

The discussion on this move was a curious one. Those opposed to it felt that *organisation in itself was bureaucratic*. They rejected, not the frustration and malfunctioning of the democratic process which constitutes bureaucracy, but the democratic process itself. Elections, voting and discussing were considered bureaucratic.

Democracy, it seems, could best function by means of informal private discussions, telephone calls, and personal political horse-trading. The anarcho-pacifist idea of democracy bore an uncanny resemblance to the processes of "soundings" which resulted in Lord Home being made leader of the Conservative Party

However, the decision to have formal membership went through. It was decided that committees would be formed to carry out specific tasks, an outline of the group's aims was produced ("As We See It"), and it was decided that we should make serious attempts to recruit members. A curious fact about *Solidarity* then emerged: some of the most active comrades felt morally bound to decline membership!

In practice the decisions on a formal structure were largely inoperative. Things soon drifted back to their old ways, confirming the anarchists in their belief that formal structures do not work.

The Functioning of Solidarity

For anyone outside the *Solidarity* group a knowledge of its decision-making processes must be limited. More surprisingly, this was also true for the members of the group! The decision-making machinery was shrouded in mystery.

Pamphlets would appear "out of the blue" and would be issued without discussion after having been read by one or two people. Even the date of publication of the paper rested with one comrade. Many theoretical articles were translations from the French of P. Cardan. These would be presented to the trusting English comrades at the last moment. It was claimed that there were yet unmined treasures of theoretical writings which awaited translation.

Though the group claimed to be a factory of ideas, it would be more correct to describe it as a retailer. Most of the theoretical material consisted of translations from the French magazine *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Yet when the *S. ou B.* group, the parent factory as it were, collapsed there were, unlike on the occasion of every other factory closure, no protests or demonstrations, let alone a post-mortem. *Solidarity* was opposed to traditionalism, but on this occasion the one-minute silence has lasted for several years.

The smallness of the *Solidarity* group made the task of producing a paper more difficult. The people who did the actual production work felt that they had special rights over content and timing. It was noticeable that something which met with the leadership's approval would be quickly typed and duplicated, while something which did not would be delayed "for technical reasons". When one comrade dared to mention a publication deadline he was met with outbursts of emotion and was prudent enough to keep quiet in future.

Hue and Cry About Greece

The crucial event that frustrated *Solidarity's* attempted escape from the peace ghetto was the Greek Embassy occupation.

The colonels' coup in Greece, sparked a lively reaction in the British left. Academics, scholars and gentlemen, who would not have given a damn if the entire workers movement in Turkey, Japan or the Argentine had been decimated wrote indignant letters to the *Times* and decided not to go to Greece that year. Why? Well, Greece is the cradle of western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. (This included slavery, but never mind.)

So there was a sympathy for the Greek people and for the ousted Papandreou's regime which is in striking contrast to the massive indifference to the genocide which accompanied the suppression of the C.P. in Indonesia. The anarcho-pacifist wing of *Solidarity* were at one with the readers of the *Times* in feeling outrage at the murder of Greek democracy. Out of this feeling there came the break-in at the Greek Embassy.

The people involved were mainly the remnants of the activists who had been around the Committee of 100, and *Solidarity*. These, of course, overlapped, although *Solidarity's* recent decision to turn away from the peace movement, would, if implemented, have made cooperation with such people impossible.

Shortly after the coup there was a meeting at LSE to consider some kind of direct action over the Greek situation. The meeting had been advertised only by personal contact. (An outstanding feature of the whole action was the military efficiency with which it was carried out, combined with a total lack of understanding of its political meaning). At this meeting a number of people committed themselves to a sit-in at the Embassy.

People did not yet realise what they were letting themselves in for. Contrary to the revolutionary myth which developed after the event the occupation was seen as basically similar to those which had taken place at other Embassies.

The reason for the authorities taking the thing so seriously remains uncertain. The whole operation was more elaborate less spontaneous than other sit-ins. The police were probably annoyed at the presence of prominent veterans of the civil disobedience movement, like M. Randle and T. Chandler.

The political point of the sit-in did not get across. Probably none of the participants were supporters of the ousted Papandreou regime but the whole escapade inevitably seemed to be in defence of the corrupt Greek parliamentary system.

Two Styles of Politics

Once the demonstrators had been charged they were faced with the familiar dilemma of all political offenders: whether to use the court as a political forum, and therefore invite heavier sentences, or to try to get the lightest sentence, conducting a conventional legal defence. There can be no a priori answer on which of these is the right course; it will depend on the specific circumstances. In this case the relevant circumstances were:

1) The colonels' regime had consolidated itself by that time. A gesture could not have the marginal effect in shaking it which might have been hoped for in the first weeks of its existence.

2) The British working class displayed a massive indifference to the whole business. Not having a classical education, they did not share Sir Maurice Bowra's concern. Greeks were just like other foreigners.

3) Very few of the demonstrators were Greek. The sit-in could hardly be presented as a legitimate protest by outraged Greek citizens; it was too easily dismissed as another Rentacrowd exploit.

4) *There was no political agreement among the defendants.* We think, therefore that the LSE socialists were right to take the attitude that they should conduct a conventional defence and try to get the lightest possible sentence.

The anarcho-pacifists round *Solidarity*, took a different view. To them, *any* trial was a suitable occasion for a political demonstration. The LSE students' arguments on tactics were dismissed as cowardice. The pacifists were unable to make any distinction between principles and tactics. To them the least tactical question was one of principle, and also a matter of personal pride and honour. Of course if every tactical question becomes one of principle real discussion of principles becomes impossible, and discussion of tactics consequently becomes futile.

Eventually, all of the defendants, including the *Solidarity* Pacifist block pleaded guilty. Only the Quaker, Mike Randle, made a political speech.

Hatchet Work

What followed; was one of the most shameful episodes in the history of any left group. A. Anderson, a *Solidarity* supporter and one of those involved in the occupation, produced a pamphlet, "The Greek Embassy Case which was a vicious and scurrilous attack, on the LSE students. The pamphlet was not a *Solidarity* production, but it had been produced on *Solidarity's* duplicator and A.A. had been given editorial assistance by *Solidarity's* leader MB.

This is an example of the disadvantages of the informal structure of the *Solidarity* group. The leader when challenged denied responsibility for the Anderson pamphlet. However *Solidarity* Vol.4 No.10 carried comment of the same scurrilous nature. No analysis of the fiasco appeared in the paper. *Solidarity* was not formally, organizationally, responsible for the pamphlet or for the conduct of the defendants, in spite of the fact that most of its resources were being devoted to the aftermath of the Embassy affair.

The leadership were able to avoid discussion of the lamentable episode. The *Solidarity* supporters who had sat-in were even more reluctant to discuss it. Any mention of the affair provoked the hysterical reaction: "You are not involved!"

The pacifist wing produced a thoroughly dishonest collection sheet entitled "Save Greece Now" which seemed to suggest that contributing money to their fund would help to do something about the situation in Greece. The leaflet did say that the collection was for the defendants in the Greek Embassy case, but it was the heading which most people responded to.

Principles and Tactics

The nearest we have to a considered *Solidarity* view of the Greek Embassy occupation is an article by Dan Thersites in Vol.4 No.8, July 1967 – i.e. several months after the event.

The article, written in boys' adventure story style, informs us that the Embassy "was a difficult nut to crack". We are told all about the door being locked, the necessity of split-send timing, the importance of timing the operation to fit in with newspaper and television headlines, and many thrilling details of the operation – *but almost nothing about the politics*.

The most significant item in this account is that the occupiers included everyone "from ultra pacifist quaker to blood and thunder revolutionary" and that "many people who had been inactive for three years or more re-emerged to participate in this project. Action forged a unity which no amount of talk could have done".

"Thersites" goes on: "Our reporter met with a discreet and judicious silence when probing for details of the prior organization of the demonstration." This is nothing to the wall of silence which the authors have met when they have tried to discover the relevance of the whole operation.

The first and presumably the most important conclusion drawn by Thersites is that "people of quite diverse views are prepared to work together on projects involving radical action". We never doubted this but ...

Should Thersites' account be dismissed as a mere childish caper? We think not. It illustrates in a grotesque form the weakness of *Solidarity's* position on principles and tactics. Obviously people of quite diverse views can agree on tactics. Disagreement on the timing of an exploit for instance would not normally correlate with political views. But the same people who agree to cooperate on tactics will find themselves disagreeing on the meaning and significance of their action.

We think that the LSE students should be criticised for taking part in this brilliantly executed but politically ambiguous venture. But their conduct when faced with a trial was sensible. *Solidarity* should have dissociated itself from Anderson's scurrilous attack.

The whole sorry episode was an illustration of the criticism *Solidarity* had made of the peace movement activists in "Six Years Hard" only a few months before. "The activists protest became an isolated moral gesture which at worst degenerates into irrationality and exhibitionism."

Syndicalist Split

Following the decision to create a formal structure, *Solidarity* presented a deeply mystifying appearance. The formal structure remained ornamental. The leader lacked the desire to implement it. The aftermath of the Greek fiasco had alienated political supporters, while the pacifist wing continued to decay. Three tendencies began to form in *Solidarity*:

- 1) The anarcho-pacifists, this group tended to be senior in having been group members for longer than the others.
- 2) The syndicalists, who wished the group to concentrate more exclusively on industrial issues. They also resented the hierarchical functioning of the group.
- 3) The semi-Marxist, consisting of Marxists and others, who rejected a purely syndicalist orientation but agreed with the syndicalists that the group should have a democratic structure.

A formal structure was mutually agreed in Nov. 1968, but the discussion was carried on at an incredibly personal and politically low level. The leader's tendency denied that they were opposed to a structure for the group, so the discussion took the form of a legalistic haggling which disguised real differences. Confidence in each other's good faith was absent.

At a meeting in January 1969 the syndicalists suddenly announced that they were forming a separate *Solidarity* group. They offered no explanations. At this point, the leader congratulated the seceding group on the maturity of their approach which avoided the tedious wrangling which follows political differences in traditional groups! He also announced that the group was really a geographical division. Several of the seceding group happened to live in South London. Thus a division caused by political differences compounded by personal hatreds was presented as a geographical division of labours while the failure to provide an explanation was accepted as a sign of maturity. It seems to us that this procedure is grossly inferior to that in traditional political splits.

The split left the leader's faction in a majority. They proceeded to take advantage of this by starting to dismantle the structure, while denying that this is what they were doing. *Solidarity* will now, we are convinced, become more and more openly the loose group of friends which it never entirely ceased to be. Those who still demand a democratic structure will be edged out while the anarcho-pacifists will be welcomed back into the fold.

Organization and Democracy

If we ask ourselves why *Solidarity* failed, the answer must be that it failed to define its function. It was never sure whether it was a magazine produced by the informal group around M.B. or whether it was an attempt to build a socialist organization. Both of these functions are legitimate, but they call for different structures. Failure to be clear on what the nature of the group was led inevitably to incoherence and bad faith.

The group's failure to distinguish between tactics and principles meant that it alternated between narrow, apolitical direct action – direct action conceived not as a tactic, but as a philosophy – and a romantic, absolutist, political theory.

Thus the paradox which struck most people about *Solidarity*, its careful, detailed industrial reports with its romantic adventurism does have an explanation. A failure to politicise day-to-day struggles finds its corollary in romantic adventures as a compensation.

The mixed elements of political idealism and petty personal spite which characterized *Solidarity*'s internal discussions likewise form a unity. The leader gets no personal advantage out of the members' work for the magazine. His commitment and dedication is something which might be emulated by more level-headed people. But the failure to distinguish personal

and political matters flow precisely out of a total commitment to the magazine which was therefore treated as part of himself.

The Politics of Gesture

The *Solidarity* leadership were able to observe the empirical fact that the working-class did not go for the same kind of direct action and politics of demonstration as the middle class pacifists. They hoped to fuse the two elements together. But they did not realise that the different styles of politics are not an accident but follow logically from the class composition and politics of the different social groups. Similarly the form of organization is a logical expression of the different life-styles and modes of behaviour. The type of loose friendly association is not accidentally but inevitably a product of a middle class group.

Solidarity propounded a theory of industrial and political organization which demanded instant recall of delegates and of anyone elected to a position of responsibility. But since the group did not provide any political education for its members there was no possibility of revoking the leadership. No one could replace them.

Consciousness

Solidarity had always stressed the importance of mass consciousness rather than leadership. However, without political discussion the term consciousness is quite meaningless. Internal democracy could not flourish in an atmosphere where political decisions were secondary to personal prejudices and whims. The ability to replace comrades on committees with others capable of taking on the responsibilities depends on the political consciousness of the rank and file. Without the stimulus of discussion and education all constitutional safeguards are just pious words

Socialist Organization

Libertarian socialists could draw certain lessons from the history of *Solidarity*:

1) Organization should not be confused with bureaucracy. Democratic organization is a basic necessity if the working class is to achieve consciousness of its class interests.

We do not claim that the socialist organization can be a working model of the socialist future, but socialist ideas are not compatible with forms of association which maintain the hierarchy of leader and follower.

2) Any organization which seeks to win acceptance for its ideas must be *accessible* to potential supporters. Membership of the organization should not be dependent on personal friendships.

Any small political group runs the risk of becoming an exclusive clique of inward-looking sectarians, but this danger is much greater for the informal group which makes no distinction between political and private life.

A political group is necessarily an *artificial* association, that is, it consists of people who come together on the basis of shared ideas. The group should accept people who accept these ideas and are prepared to assist in the group's work. Therefore there must be a boundary between members' private and political life.

3) People who share specific ideas and work together to implement them, by definition form a group. The anarchist device of refusing to have formal membership or of refusing to specify the functions of individual comrades has no advantages.

We would urge serious libertarian socialists to abandon the politics of melodramatic gestures and the cosy life of the small group, centred round a patriarchal leader, to participate in the task of building a socialist movement which is both democratic and revolutionary.

Small personal groups might have had some value at a time, when the socialist movement was at a low ebb. Today, when it is both possible and urgently necessary to build a revolutionary movement, the self-imposed isolation of groups like *Solidarity* cannot be justified.

Solidarity Forever? by J.Sullivan and T.Hillier

Review by Maurice Brinton

"Seven years with the wrong woman is more than any man can stand" runs the chorus of an old ditty which then went on to list the strains and stresses in many a "happy home". The same kind of tensions can develop in a small revolutionary group and result in a noisy chucking about of the political cutlery. But whereas matrimonial disputes can be settled in the civil courts, the tribunal for political differences is of necessity the wider movement itself.

Two members of *Solidarity* (John Sullivan and Tom Hillier) have recently made a noisy exit from the organisation. They have been welcomed into International Socialism (I.S.), with whom they had in fact been having a tepid liaison for at least a year. If their ideas are now the ideas of I.S., their action would be logical, and their departure require no further comment from us, except perhaps to stress the tremendous pull still exerted by traditional politics and traditional organisations even in this period of disintegration of the traditional left.

But in leaving *Solidarity* Sullivan and Hillier thought fit to produce and widely to circularise to *Solidarity* subscribers and others the pamphlet under review. The pamphlet is written as a kind of political obituary for *Solidarity* ("Why *Solidarity* failed", "What *Solidarity* will be remembered for" etc.). Unfortunately the "corpse" refuses to lie still. And it is precisely because the ideas we put forward are invoking an increasing echo (Vol.V No.10 reached the top circulation over 1900 copies) that we will depart from our usual practice of debating only real issues and deal with some of the puerile accusations made.

The aim of the Sullivan-Hillier pamphlet was not simply to clarify their own ideas – badly though some might consider this to be needed. There was a wider objective. I.S., the organisation they have joined, is at present wracked by a fissiparous discussion on the "organisational question". One of the functions of the pamphlet is to sidetrack the wide discussion about libertarian socialist ideas – including *Solidarity* ideas now taking place within I.S., by diverting attention from the main issues and seeking to focus it on the alleged incoherences and malpractices of a minute group, whose "threat" to I.S. resides solely in the ideas which it disseminates. About these ideas, however, the pamphlet remains discreetly silent.

It says nothing, for instance, about our analysis of modern capitalism and the nature of its crisis, [1](#) nothing about our conceptions of manipulation in consumption and leisure, [2](#) nothing about our emphasis on the need for a *total* critique of how capitalism affects people's lives, [3](#) nothing about our conception of socialism [4](#) as workers' self-management plus the rule of workers' councils (rather than nationalisation plus the rule of the Party), nothing about our description of the regimes in Eastern Europe as societies [5](#) in which the working class never really held power in production (i.e. societies in which the basic class relations of production were never really overthrown), nothing about our attempts to re-establish the historical record, [6](#) or to assess the role of Bolshevik ideology and practice in preventing the revolution

from going on beyond a mere expropriation of the bourgeoisie, on to full workers' management of production [7](#) – nothing finally about our explanation of the degeneration of the traditional left seen by us today as one of the main repositories and disseminators of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois organisational conceptions. [8](#)

Instead we get a crude and rather pathetic misrepresentation of the practices of *Solidarity*, compounded of half truths, gutter gossip, malicious distortions and downright falsehoods. The pamphlet adopts the political method – widespread among the traditional left – of continually using labels as a substitute for discussing ideas, and of smearing individuals whose arguments they feel impotent to deal with politically. At this level we can recommend it to all our readers. It epitomises a method in politics.

Our record, we feel, speaks for itself. Comrades who were active in the direct action wing of the anti-bomb movement, in the tenants' movement, in industry or those in the universities who have heard our speakers will have their own ideas, based on their own experience, as to whether we are "pacifists", "anarchists", "syndicalists" or any of the other beasts unearthed by Sullivan and Hillier during their rummaging in the terminological garbage cans. What these comrades will lack however is inside knowledge with which to refute some of the wilder allegations made in the Sullivan-Hillier pamphlet. The purpose of this pamphlet is to deal with some of these allegations.

1. “Ideological fuzziness”

This is perhaps the most absurd of all the charges. Relative to its size and resources, *Solidarity* has probably produced more serious theoretical material than any other group on the left today. Our ideas may be different from those of I.S. or from those of other groups. They may be right or they may be wrong. But they are certainly not "fuzzy". Texts like *Socialism or Barbarism* are an explicit formulation of a coherent world outlook. We have attempted to analyse *Modern Capitalism* and to give some idea of what, for us, is *The Meaning of Socialism*. There is an intimate connection between these texts which only the politically presbyopic will fail to perceive.

Our historical material is also intimately related to this total analysis. And so is our industrial material. If we focus attention on certain forgotten areas of history or on certain aspects of modern industrial disputes it is because they are related to a certain vision of socialism: workers' management of production and the rule of the workers' councils.

The charge of "ideological fuzziness" comes rather oddly from members of an organisation that comprises both Labour Party members and very orthodox Trotskyists, that changed the name of its journal from *Labour Worker* to *Socialist Worker* without any real analysis of fifteen years of "entrism" experience, that can oscillate from a position where in 1964 it called on people to vote Labour and later proclaimed that its "support for the Labour Government was not conditional on its having socialist policies" to a position where it's anybody's guess what they will do next time, that can denounce Russia as State Capitalist and yet advocate measures over here which lead straight to State Capitalism, that can talk (in one and the same leaflet) of "defending the trade unions" and of "workers' power", etc., etc. People who live in ideological swamps can only throw mud.

2. The Committee of 100

It is true that between 1961 and 1963 comrades around *Solidarity* played an active part on the Industrial Sub-committee of the Committee of 100. But it is quite wrong to identify this with "immersion" in an unspecified "peace milieu" as the Sullivan-Hillier pamphlet does. The work carried out by *Solidarity* during this period included systematic work on the docks and

in relation to a number of factories; our *Appeal to Trade Unionists*, distributed in tens of thousands of copies, stands up to critical examination seven years later; the famous *Against All Bombs* leaflet was distributed in July 1962, *in the streets of Moscow*; [9](#) to say nothing of various other activities which cannot yet be "declassified".

During our association with the Committee of 100, our refusal to endorse "non-violence" as a principle stood out like a sore thumb in everything we said or did. Our editorials "From Civil Disobedience to Social Revolution" (Vol.I No.8), "Civil Disobedience and the Working Class" (Vol.I No.9) and "Civil Disobedience and the State" (Vol.I No.10) made our position crystal clear. We in fact specifically denounced bourgeois pacifism in an article (Vol.I No.10) entitled "Down with the Army: Down with the pacifism of leaders and bosses!" During the period we published such pamphlets as *The Standard-Triumph Strike*, *The B.L.S.P. Dispute*, and *The Meaning of Socialism* – hardly "understressing the ideas of class division". As for "making concessions to pacifism", this is best rebutted by a text written by Sullivan himself, in December 1968, as a draft letter to those seeking more information about *Solidarity*. His words are reproduced on the opposite page. [Reproduced here :]

"The founding of *Solidarity* coincided with the peak of the anti-war movement. We were active within this movement, particularly around the Committee of 100. The Group was never pacifist, we did not originate from the Peace Movement. We participated in it because it was the only place where methods of direct action were being carried out. The titles of some of our pamphlets show our interests at that time. We combined activity around the peace movement with industrial activity and argued that both were facets of the same struggle."

Now he can't have it both ways. Either the passage quoted opposite is true – in which case the charge of "concessions to pacifism" falls. Or the charge of "pacifism" is true – in which case this passage is dishonest bunk. Whichever one chooses! Sullivan seems to have created a credibility gap for himself. But readers' doubts, if any, should be resolved by a glance at our *Death of CND as performed by the Grosvenor Square demonstrators under the direction of themselves alone*. [10](#) If this is "pacifist" then Enoch Powell is a leading spokesman for Black Power. To return to the charge of pacifism after our publication of such a pamphlet is worse than flogging a dead horse – it is an act of positive political necrophilia.

3. Industry

The Sullivan-Hillier pamphlet claims that "*Solidarity* never attempted to work out an industrial strategy". It acknowledges the seriousness of our industrial reportage but goes on to make the amazing statement that an accurate description of things as they were contained the likelihood (sic!) of leaving them unchanged, and that for *Solidarity* "the system itself remained inviolate because it was not understood". One might be dreaming! To any sane person it might appear more likely that *not* describing things as they were contained a far greater likelihood of leaving them unchanged. To seek to influence an imaginary world is no mean task (although admittedly many on the traditional left are engaged in just such a practice).

For us only the truth is revolutionary. And to understand the truth one must begin by seeing things as they are (and not as one would like them to be – or as they were when described by Marx, towards the end of the last century). The validity of our industrial coverage (which Sullivan and Hillier understand) stems directly from this conscious attempt at demystification (which Sullivan and Hillier do *not* understand).

But describing things as they are has never been the be all and end all of our approach to industry. It has always been our hope that understanding would be the prelude to action.

Accurate descriptions highlight areas of managerial weakness; they focus attention on the nature of the union bureaucracies; they suggest meaningful methods of intervention; they bring to workers techniques of struggle improvised by other workers; and they seek to develop self confidence and self reliance.

In our article "For a socialist industrial strategy" (Vol.IV, No.10) we start by reiterating and documenting what should by now be known to all socialists, namely that the unions cannot be reformed, captured, or even made systematically or seriously to defend the elementary interests of their members. We *expose the false solutions* of "industrial unionism", of "changing the union leadership", or of creating "break away" or "revolutionary" unions. We stress the need to concentrate on job organisation, on building up links between militants (within various unions if possible, but outside them if necessary). We urge the use of *new methods* of struggle (for instance, those that can be used within the factory), methods which are cheap and effective for the men and damaging to the employers. We stress the *type of issue* that involves job control, that challenges managerial prerogatives, and that therefore has an implicitly socialist content. In many other publications dealing with industrial topics we have stressed that how a demand is won is just as important as what is won. We have never contributed to the sowing of illusions concerning the union bureaucracy, which we have described unambiguously as a social stratum with interests of its own, different from those of the working class. We have stressed that the struggle for "workers' control" starts here and now, with control over their own organisations and over their own disputes.

To describe this painstaking and difficult work as "mindless militancy" or as just "glimmerings of an industrial strategy" is only a comment on the factional bad faith of the authors of the pamphlet. It comes strangely from members of an organisation which over the years has continuously equivocated on all these issues, never really understanding the social basis of the trade union bureaucracy, being mealy-mouthed about the union officials, welcoming some as better than others, failing to grasp the real implications of "unofficial action", sowing illusions in the unions as such, tail-ending the Communist Party as often as not, and always "intervening" in industrial dispute with a main eye to recruiting, rather than to helping men in struggle to win.

4. Greece

Over a quarter of the Sullivan-Hillier pamphlet is devoted to discussing *Solidarity's* attitude to the Colonels' coup and to the occupation of the Greek Embassy in London, on April 28th, 1967. [11](#) Two years later one ought to be able to assume that they considered this attitude worthy of a serious political critique. If they have such a critique, we are as unaware of it as ever. In fact falsification and smearing reach their height in this section of the pamphlet. They write "the anarcho-pacifist wing of *Solidarity* were at one with the readers of the *Times* in feeling outrage at the murder of Greek democracy. Out of this feeling came the break-in at the Greek Embassy".

It will be difficult for present supporters of *Solidarity* to appreciate the dishonesty of this allegation. The links between *Solidarity* and sections of the Greek left go back *long before* the Colonels' coup. And they were scarcely of a kind that readers of the *Times* would approve of!

During Easter 1963 an anti-bomb march in Athens had been smashed by the police. 2,000 people had been arrested. Some British Committee of 100 participants – including people who had worked closely with *Solidarity* – had been beaten up and deported. In June 1963 the "Save Greece Now Committee", on which several of our supporters were represented, decided to call a big demonstration in the streets of London during the proposed Greek Royal

Visit. The Communist Party and other sections of the traditional left, fearing "adventurist" civil disobedience, opted out. But the "Save Greece Now Committee" was determined to show real solidarity with their Greek comrades who were then in no position to demonstrate. This determination provoked a political crisis in Greece. The Greek Premier resigned when his advice to the Greek royals to defer their visit to London was disregarded. On July 9th the Greek King and Queen arrived in London to a "police state welcome" (*Evening Standard*, July 9th 1963). On July 10th the Greek and British royal families went to the Aldwych theatre and were loudly booed and hissed as they entered. The Home Secretary did his nut. So did the police. The Challenor brick planting episode followed. The police image took the biggest knock it had for decades. The Establishment hit back. In December 1963 our comrade Terry Chandler was sentenced to nine months prison for his role in organising the demonstration. Neither Sullivan or Hillier were closely associated with *Solidarity* at the time, but their deeply ingrained ignorance about these matters does not excuse their smearing.

The occupation of the Greek Embassy in April 1967 is described as a "brilliantly executed but politically ambiguous venture" (*Solidarity Forever?* p.12). It was certainly a venture of a new kind. While the traditional left passed its customary resolutions "denouncing the coup", some people had tried to show practical solidarity with the muzzled people of Greece. A number of *Solidarity* supporters (and some rank and file members of I.S.) participated in this "venture". But this had nothing to do with support for Greek bourgeois democracy. To associate those who occupied the Embassy with "those who wrote indignant letters to the *Times*" because they saw Greece as the "cradle of Western civilisation and the birthplace of democracy" is – at one level – a vicious amalgam. At another level it is utterly ridiculous. The *Times* had had its own comments to make about those who had organised the Queen Fred "riots" in July 1963.

Following the occupation of the Embassy differences of opinion arose in relation to the trial. We do not propose to argue here the pros and cons of the different tactics considered. A pamphlet written by a *Solidarity* member [12](#) and published by him on behalf of a number of the defendants deals with this matter and provides an interesting description of the collusion between Prosecution and "Defence" counsels in manipulating defendants "in the interests of the court". Sullivan and Hillier refer to this pamphlet as "one of the most shameful episodes in the history of any left group". If they had been referring to the behaviour of certain I.S. members who were involved in the case (as described in the pamphlet) the accusation might have been comprehensible. But it was precisely the exposure of this behaviour which so upset Sullivan and Hillier. They were no less annoyed when *Solidarity* (Vol.IV No.10) quoted part of a statement which had appeared in the "shameful" pamphlet. The statement had been made in court by counsel for the I.S. members, C.L. Hawser, Q.C., and *Solidarity* reported it as follows:

"My Lord, of the six I represent, my instructions are that none were either leaders or organisers of the demonstration – they were not responsible, not any of these six, for bringing the implements, the wedges and so forth for the demonstration."

Was Mr. Hawser *really* instructed to say this? If not, when will his clients publicly repudiate him? *Revolutionary leadership?*

Sullivan and Hillier referred to this as "hatchet work" and "comment of a scurrilous nature". What term would they use for "comrades" who in court have their counsel say that *they* were not ringleaders or organisers (implying that their co-defendants were)? We are still waiting for an explanation. Pending its arrival we will continue to call it "ratting".

As for the "thoroughly dishonest" collection sheet entitled "Save Greece Now", it was not produced by the "pacifist wing" of *Solidarity* (as unidentified, in the Sullivan-Hillier

pamphlet, as the "anarcho-pacifist wing") but by members of the resurrected "Save Greece Now Committee", which had organised the July 1963 demonstrations. There was nothing "dishonest" about the sheet. It is moreover quite untrue that "most of the resources of *Solidarity* were being devoted to the aftermath of the Embassy affair". On this issue the bad faith of the authors is only equalled by their ignorance.

- [1.](#) See *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, a *Solidarity* book
- [2.](#) See "Mommy in Toyland", *Solidarity* Vol.III No.8.
- [3.](#) See *Socialism or Barbarism*, pamphlet No.11, and *The Crisis of Modern Society*, pamphlet No.23.
- [4.](#) See *The Meaning of Socialism*, pamphlet No.6.
- [5.](#) See *Hungary '56*, a *Solidarity* book.
- [6.](#) See *The Workers' Opposition*, pamphlet No.7; "Kronstadt 1921", by Victor Serge, Vol.I No.7, available as a reprint, or *The Kronstadt Commune*, by Ida Mett, pamphlet No.27.
- [7.](#) See *From Bolshevism to the Bureaucracy*, pamphlet No.24.
- [8.](#) See "Working Class Consciousness", *Solidarity* Vol.II, Nos.2 and 3, and "The Fate of Marxism", Vol.III No.7.
- [9.](#) "The most direct challenge to official Soviet policies and ideas to have been presented to the Soviet man in the street since freedom of speech died under Stalin." *The Guardian* July 12, 1962.
- [10.](#) *Solidarity* Pamphlet No.28.
- [11.](#) For background information see "Bobby Idar", Vol.III No.2, and "Police mob seize Embassy", Vol.IV No.8.
- [12.](#) *Inside the Greek Embassy Case*, by Andy Anderson