

The Communist Bulletin Group

In the twelve years since the first **Communist Bulletin** was published in June 1982 the world has undergone profound changes. We have witnessed the global restructuring of capital, the descent into barbarism of much of the periphery of the capitalist world, the re-emergence of nationalist warfare in Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. Underpinning, circumscribing and defining these massive changes is the class struggle.

When the **C.B.G.** emerged from the increasingly closed world of the **I.C.C.** it, like other communist groups, had little inkling of the devastation which was shortly to overtake capitalism. We, like all other elements, had greater or lesser awareness of the new phenomenon of Thatcherism. At the time of our split from the **I.C.C.** our primary concern was the why and wherefore of revolutionary organisation. Having been expelled/split from the **I.C.C.** on the basis of its inability to handle internal disagreement and discussion our theoretical/historical explorations were dominated by the problem of what weight must be given to openness within and between organisations; and flowing from this what formal structures best suited the needs of openness.

The **C.B.G.** was formed around this central problem. As a consequence it did not see itself as a pole of regroupment around which a reconstituted movement would form. The central reason for its existence was to clarify the organisational question; it committed itself to working with all elements of the communist milieu. We argued that by its very nature, social reality was so constituted that definitive answers on all questions, or even on all important questions, was simply not possible. We accepted that this entailed the ever present possibility of disagreement; indeed we held that because of the very constitution of reality, disagreement was a sign of a healthy organisation. Hence an organisation must not only be able to contain disagreements, it must positively structure itself in order to give full expression to them. Only by remaining open to disagreements, by accepting that beyond certain core positions unanimity was not in itself a desirable thing, could a formal and theoretical structure be built which would allow healthy co-operation to exist within and between groups. From this position we could, for example, quite happily accept that some revolutionaries worked from a Luxemburgist analysis of the economics of Capitalism while others stood by the Grossman-Mattick view. These positions, we said, could in principle be encompassed within the one organisation.

Starting from this position it was clear that the audience to which the **C.B.G.** addressed itself was the existing revolutionary milieu, to other political fractions, particularly the **I.C.C.** and the **C.W.O.** We set out our stall and looked to convincing other groups that if we did not get this organisational question correct then the likelihood was that the tendency towards disintegration and sectarianism would accelerate, leading to even greater isolation from the

working class and the probable spiral into less and less understanding of the course of class struggle. In other words the question of organisation was a profoundly political one.

In the twelve years since we first formulated this problem we have set out in theoretical and historical texts justifications for and explanations of this approach. As stated above circumstances have profoundly changed in the intervening years and so has the **C.B.G.** To state it bluntly the **C.B.G.** has come to the end of its particular road. It can no longer undertake the tasks it set itself in 1982. It is an open secret that for at least two years the organisation has ceased to function in any meaningful way as a political group. It has not, and does not, consistently pursue its political goals within the milieu; it has not and does not intervene in the larger class struggle. In short it is a group in name only. Consequently we believe that to maintain any semblance of honesty and to try to ensure the continued political survival of the individuals concerned within the **C.B.G.** it is now time to dissolve the organisation, to give up the pretence of still being a political fraction. There are those who will crow over this and take it as final proof that the **C.B.G.** never had any genuine political reason for existing. But we would say that the demise of the **C.B.G.** is not in itself proof of the incorrectness of the positions defended by the group; demise does not invalidate our critique of organisational and political practices. However the dissolution of the organisation does demand an explanation.

The most obvious reason is the spiralling interaction of isolation and demoralisation. Our isolation can be broken into two distinct components. One is the larger historical isolation which afflicts all revolutionary groups and which was a product of the defeat of the working class in the 1920s and 30s. This is a profound isolation and one which has defined to a great extent the capacity of revolutionaries to establish a presence within the larger class struggle. This problem is one which will not be explored here: suffice to say that it is one which, needless to say, requires political transcendence, but also requires much more theoretical and historical work to clarify the issues and to hint at solutions. This larger isolation could in no way be overcome by the actions of the **C.B.G.** We recognised this but, nonetheless, it had a corrosive effect on the long term morale of the organisation. Every organisation in the communist political milieu suffers from this isolation; none has found an answer.

The level at which we could expect to have some impact was that of the isolation among groups. To a greater extent the **C.B.G.** was constituted at this micro level; its *raison d'être* was the need to overcome sectarianism and to bring groups and individuals together. We simply did not achieve this. This was particularly devastating. From the very founding of the **C.B.G.** we had argued for immediate and constant joint activity, seeing this allied with theoretical clarification as the only way forward. It seemed that we were simply speaking to ourselves. The organisations to whom we principally addressed the message by and large ignored our arguments. For years we were isolated - that is, until the emergence of the **E.F.I.C.C. (Fraction)**. With the emergence of the **Fraction** from the **I.C.C.** we saw confirmation of all that we had said of the parent group. This was a window of opportunity for the **C.B.G.**, a moment when fraternal dialogue seemed possible. At last we were presented with an opportunity to overcome some of our isolation. Some time later this was extended when the **C.W.O.** opened itself up in a fraternal way and entered into discussions with us.. On the face of it it seemed as if the years of arguing our case were about to bear fruit. But in the end it was still born. For reasons relating to the internal dynamics of both

the Fraction and the C.W.O. the promising future never materialised. But it was more than this, for the C.B.G. proved incapable of taking up the tasks presented. Why was this?

At one level we can say that it was the consequence of a general level of demoralisation which undermined our militant activity. Years of relative isolation, of speaking to a deaf revolutionary public was not the best preparation for extending our political commitment.

But our demoralisation was more than this. It was borne also out of the larger political, class changes of the 80s and 90s and the internal/external debates of the C.B.G. and the milieu.

The C.B.G. set itself the relatively modest goal of seeking to work with all revolutionaries and through this to achieve some degree of solidarity as a basis for building a larger, more coherent and effective movement. It was also modest in its claims to certitude about the nature of the component parts of class struggle and the development of capitalism. On the other hand we did tend to take for granted that our critical approach to social reality was sufficient, if not to produce final answers to all the problems we perceived, at least to be able to confront the questions. In fact, given our insistence on the need for constant debate, this is hardly surprising. By and large, in the early years, we were not questioned on this unstated assumption. So long as the central problematic was that of organisation it was never put under significant stress. But a test did arrive and this was not from within the milieu as such but from the larger world.

In relative isolation revolutionaries can argue until they are blue in the face; they can spin the most Byzantine web from the most arcane arguments. But what they cannot do, if they have any significant contact with reality, is ignore the larger world, or simply walk away from it. By the end of the 1980s it was becoming apparent to members of the C.B.G. that something had gone wrong with our (and other revolutionaries') grasp of the course of class struggle. Things were not happening as the general theory tended to predict. Most immediately, at the end of the decade there was the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. Irrespective of how some groups might want to interpret their pasts nobody in the communist movement saw this coming and nobody was prepared for it. The Gospel according to revolutionaries was that the course of capital was towards increasing confrontation between the two imperialist blocs finishing in eventual global war (with modifications being made dependent upon the actions of the working class - see below). But here we had the scenario of the fall of one side of the equation and no all encompassing nuclear carnage. This particular debate did find a degree of healthy life in the C.B.G. This is not to say that we were not astonished at the course of events. We did try all sorts of acrobatics at times to save the phenomena but to no avail. Something real and significant was happening. Hence we found ourselves having to jettison some much-loved beliefs. But better this than hold on to views which were largely untenable. It was not an easy debate to pursue; on the one hand there were entrenched positions to be abandoned and on the other there was the sheer novelty of the situation to be in some way integrated and interpreted coherently within the theory of the decadence of capital. Throughout the debates we did, generally, show ourselves able to confront the questions and hold internal discussions.

Sadly this was not the case with the central question which events forced us to confront: whither the working class? What was happening to the working class and where was its actions taking it? A debate of sorts was got under way in the C.B.G. but very quickly it

tended to polarise in an unhealthy fashion. One pole pointed to the major defeats suffered by the British working class in the 1980s and the apparent consequences of its withdrawal from struggle. At the same time it reflected upon the existing, and largely unstated, position of the C.B.G. that deepening economic crisis, long term historic deepening, would lead to ever-increasing class tensions and actions which would lead towards a development of class consciousness. We never believed we could give a detailed plan of this but it was thought that the broader brushstrokes of progressive confrontations with capital would be apparent. This was seen not to be happening. If this was the case then did this indicate the defeat of the working class and that we had moved out of a general pre-Revolutionary period? A very bleak vision of the nature of the period began to be articulated. This was not eased with the attempt to tie it to the problem of the historical isolation of revolutionaries from the class. Baldly stated this was, by its very nature, (given our understanding of decadence and disavowal of reformist programmes), that the working class in the present period cannot build permanent organisations which will express its interests at a mass level fighting for economic/political change. Any attempt to build such a base will inevitably fall into reformism. A consequence of this was that revolutionaries had to live on the fringes of the life of the class, unlike communists of an earlier period who could work within social democracy and hence could have contact with the mass activities of the class. In other words our theory dictated that short of momentary rises in class conflict and cataclysmic outbursts of struggle, we remain isolated from the working class.

Flowing from these perceived problems and from the perceived failure of the class to respond on their own terrain to the attacks of capital over the past decade elements within the C.B.G. asked whether the class could now re-emerge at all as not just a militant force but a force which could once again be revolutionary? Can the historic disjuncture ever be overcome? Have we evidence that on a significant global scale revolutionaries and class can establish the interaction necessary for a successful assault upon capital?

We were ill equipped to confront these questions. There was a more-or-less deafening silence in response to them. Certainly the debate formulated in this way posed a serious threat to the organisation. Nonetheless one would have expected a healthy response to them through either rebuttal or theoretical exploration. However, after an initial attempt to confront the problems the debate didn't so much fizzle out as remain largely ignored. This was profoundly unhealthy for the organisation. The C.B.G. had prided itself on being open to any discussions within the revolutionary movement but here it was with one of its own debates on a subject at the very heart of its existence plugging its ears and shutting its mouth.

Why was it that we were able to deal with other questions but not this one? Simply put, it was fear. Fear that the old certainties might no longer be valid. Bad enough that we had to deal with the global restructuring of capital - at least this could, it was thought, be contained within the core theory. Not so, or at least apparently not so, the question of the course of class struggle. For this question struck at the very heart of our political theory and put into question the revolutionary nature of the working class itself. At the end of the day there was no necessary reason why these problems cannot be answered or reformulated in such a way as to keep the revolutionary proletariat at the heart of our analysis. However the discussion was still-born. But it would not go away. The C.B.G. was stymied. Not surprisingly this had a corrosive effect on the organisation and members for at every turn questions demanded answers which were not forthcoming.

This, coupled to the general long term low morale of the organisation, and its long term low level of application to the tasks at hand finally sealed the fate of the **C.B.G.** as a distinct political fraction.

Failure to resolve the question of the nature of class consciousness and its dynamic in the present period paralysed our working as a coherent political fraction as every question we posed relating to the dynamic of the blocs, to the possibility of war, to the very nature of capitalist decadence are themselves underpinned by a conception of where class consciousness comes from, how and in what circumstances it emerges and develops. Coherent political activity thus foundered on an inability to agree on this fundamental. And without such agreement the **C.B.G.** could not continue to exist. In fact the attempt to brush the question under the carpet in the name of keeping the **C.B.G.** alive merely revealed our inability to positively address the question (never mind the answer) while we continued as a supposed political fraction based upon a coherent political stance that no longer existed on such a fundamental question. The **C.B.G.** was itself a hindrance to even attempting to resolve this question.

In order therefore to allow this debate to take place, and to stop pretending that our current level of activity merits the name of formal organisation, we have decided to end the life of the **Communist Bulletin Group**. Those remaining within the organisation who seek to continue the political debate on these critical issues have decided to reform themselves into a discussion group. This, as we all know, can become the rocky road to complete political oblivion. But we believe that it will enable those who remain to clarify their positions and to reformulate/reject/strengthen the old certainties and at the same time keep the door open to ongoing work and discussion with other revolutionaries.

C.B.G.

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contact us via Ingram.