

The Revolutionary Press

*From the Neue Rheinische
Zeitung to Green Left Weekly*

Dave Holmes

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From the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* to *Green Left Weekly*

By Dave Holmes

As we know, the essential instrument of socialist politics is the revolutionary party. And the most essential weapon or tool of such a party is its newspaper. A history of left political parties — in the West at least — is also inescapably a history of the party press.

In this talk there is no way I can attempt a history of revolutionary socialist newspapers or even a survey. Rather, I want to look at some key episodes and try to bring out some of the central ideas which should inform our understanding of what we are doing today.

Marx & Engels & the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*

The birth of modern, scientific socialism can be dated to the formation of the Communist League and the drafting of its famous manifesto by Marx and Engels 150 years ago. But within six months they were in the thick of a revolution and were publishing a revolutionary daily, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (New Rhineland Times).

Comrades can read about Marx and Engels' activity in this period in the excellent book *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter* by Boris Nicolaievsky (Penguin Books, 1983).

Europe in the middle of last century was, apart from England and France, in the grip of feudal absolutism. In addition, the map was rather different to today, with countries like Germany broken up into a patchwork of states, some relatively large like Prussia but many quite small.

In February of 1848, the people of Paris rose up and deposed the monarchy. It was a rather bourgeois monarchy but they kicked it out nonetheless. The bulk of the

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insurgents were the workers of the city. A reformist petty-bourgeois government was installed which manoeuvred between the aroused workers and the bourgeoisie.

The February revolution touched off a revolution in Germany and other European countries. But, of course, the character of the struggle in France and Germany was quite different. In France, the question was that of the working class struggling for power against the bourgeoisie whereas in Germany power was held by the old absolutist order and getting rid of this was the key task. The bourgeoisie was much weaker and consequently the working class was also much less developed — less numerous, less class conscious and less organised — so they were necessarily in a united front with the bourgeois democrats.

In April, a number of German exiles of the Communist League returned from Paris to Germany. Marx settled in Cologne in the Rhineland, the most progressive and developed region of Germany. He became the founding editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the first issue of which appeared on June 1, 1848.

It was financed by shareholders but they were rather unreliable. Half deserted the project after the very first issue! Perhaps this was because of Marx's merciless criticism of the windbags of the All-German Frankfurt Assembly which had been formed following the March uprising in Berlin.

The paper lost the rest of its shareholders shortly afterwards when it uncompromisingly defended the workers of Paris when they rose up again, this time against the bourgeoisie in a clear-cut fight for power. But somehow the paper scraped by.

“The editorial constitution [of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*]”, Engels wrote later, “was simply the dictatorship of Marx.”

A big daily paper, which has to be ready at a definite hour, cannot observe a consistent policy with any other constitution. Moreover, Marx's dictatorship was a matter of course here, was undisputed and willingly recognised by all of us. It was primarily his clear vision and firm attitude that made this publication the most famous German newspaper of the years of revolution. [Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 167]

The *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* was not a socialist paper: on its masthead it described itself as an “organ of democracy”. The bourgeoisie wanted to cut a deal with the old order; the petty-bourgeois democrats just talked; but the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* stood for a full-blooded, all-out struggle against absolutism. In Marx and Engels' view, at this point the working class could only be the extreme left wing of the democratic movement. In the course of this struggle it would learn about politics and prepare itself for the next stage.

The Rhineland was a part of Prussia in this period. Cologne had a sizeable Prussian

garrison. The backward soldiery and their officers were extremely hostile to the townspeople. The paper was always under threat. Marx was twice forced to appear in court to answer various charges but was each time acquitted by the jury.

One day two noncommissioned officers presented themselves at Marx's private address and, announcing that the newspaper had insulted the rank of noncommissioned officer, made threats of violence against the editorial staff. "Marx received them in his dressing-gown, with the butt of an unloaded revolver protruding from one of the pockets", Engels relates. "This sight was sufficient to cause the gentlemen to refrain from further parleying, and they withdrew meekly, in spite of the fact that they were carrying their side arms". (Nicolaievsky, p. 203)

[In fact, Engels explained, outside of Cologne, people were amazed] that we carried on our activities so unconcernedly within a Prussian fortress of the first rank, in the face of a garrison of 8,000 troops and in the face of the guardhouse; but, on account of the eight rifles with bayonets and 250 live cartridges in the editorial room, and the red Jacobin caps of the compositors, our house was reckoned by the officers also as a fortress which was not to be taken by a mere coup de main. [MESW, Vol. 3, p. 171]

However, due to the bourgeoisie's fear of the masses, the timidity of the petty-bourgeois democrats and the weakness of the working class, the revolution was defeated. Marx was forced to leave Prussia and the last issue of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* appeared on May 18, 1849. It was printed entirely in red, with the front page prominently featuring a powerful valedictory poem by Ferdinand Freiligrath. The 20,000 copies were quickly snapped up, often becoming prized possessions.

No German newspaper, before or since [Engels wrote in 1884] has ever had the same power and influence or been able to electrify the proletarian masses as effectively as the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.

And that it owed above all to Marx. [MESW, Vol. 3, p. 172]

Communist League nonfunctional

While the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* played such a prominent role in the 1848-49 revolution, things were somewhat different with the Communist League itself. While League members were extremely active in the struggle across Germany, the League was altogether too weak and it ceased to function as an organised entity. As Engels wrote in the 1880s:

Three-quarters of the League members who had previously lived abroad had changed their domicile by returning to their homeland; their previous communities [branches] were thus to a great extent dissolved and they lost all contact with the League. One part, the more ambitious among them, did not even try to resume this contact, but

each one began a small separate movement on his own account in his own locality. Finally, the conditions in each separate petty state, each province and each town were so different that the League would have been incapable of giving more than the most general directives; such directives were, however, much better disseminated through the press. [MESW, Vol. 3, pp. 184-185]

Thus, the real revolutionary centre in this period was not a political party but the newspaper edited by Marx with the support of a small group of close collaborators (Engels foremost among them). This situation should not be taken as a model for our struggle today. Indeed, after the failure of the 1848 bourgeois-democratic revolution in Germany, Marx and Engels themselves concluded that it had been a mistake on their part not to work for the strengthening of the Communist League during the revolutionary upsurge.

There were attempts to reconstitute the League in exile in London later in 1849. But these subsequently foundered in the face of severe internal disagreements and state repression.

Lenin & the revolutionary press

I'd next like to consider some of Lenin's key ideas on the subject of the party press. As we know, Lenin's theory of the vanguard party as the organiser of the proletarian revolution is a tremendous original development of Marxism. Many of his fundamental notions are set forth in his 1902 work "What Is To Be Done?" and our party has drawn heavily on them.

The stormy history of the Bolshevik party is bound up with a number of famous newspapers, especially *Iskra* and *Pravda*.

Iskra — the name means "the Spark" — was first published in December 1900. It was printed in exile in Munich and smuggled into Russia. Lenin quickly became the dominant figure on the editorial board and the paper reflected his views.

As Zinoviev explains in his *History of the Bolshevik Party* (New Park, 1973), around *Iskra* was consolidated a layer of 100-150 revolutionaries, the foremost of the time. The paper fought against the opportunist trend of "Economism" — which sought to restrict the attention of the working class to narrow economic matters to the exclusion of broad political and social questions — and argued for a single, centralised revolutionary workers' party uniting Marxists throughout Tsarist Russia.

Around the turn of the century, revolutionary activity in the Tsarist empire, while increasingly widespread, suffered from fragmentation and "amateurishness" (the term is Lenin's). In an 1899 article, "Our Immediate Tasks", Lenin argues that:

All that is now lacking is the unification of all this local work into the work of a single

party. Our chief drawback, to the overcoming of which we must devote all our energy, is the narrow “amateurish” character of local work. Because of this amateurish character many manifestations of the working class movement in Russia remain purely local events and lose a great deal of their significance as examples for the whole of Russian Social-Democracy, as a stage of the whole Russian working-class movement. [Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 216]

Because of this amateurishness, Lenin continues, “the consciousness of their community of interests throughout Russia is insufficiently inculcated in the workers, they do not link up their struggle sufficiently with the idea of Russian socialism and Russian democracy.”

[Furthermore, he goes on] we must have as our immediate aim the founding of a party organ that will appear regularly and be closely connected with all the local groups ... Without such an organ, local work will remain narrowly “amateurish”. The formation of the party — if the correct representation of that party in a certain newspaper is not organised — will to a considerable extent remain bare words. [*ibid.*, pp. 218-219]

“... all party forces”, he stresses, “all literary forces, all organisational abilities, all material resources” must be concentrated on the newspaper project. (*ibid.*, p. 219)

In arguing for the newspaper, Lenin says that it “is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser.” (*LCW*, Vol. 5, p. 22) He points out that:

With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organisation will naturally take shape that will engage, not only in local activities, but in regular general work, and will train its members to follow political events carefully, appraise their significance and their effect on the various strata of the population, and develop effective means for the revolutionary party to influence those events. The mere technical task of regularly supplying the newspaper with copy and of promoting regular distribution will necessitate a network of local agents of the united party, who will remain in constant contact with each other ... This network of agents will form the skeleton of precisely the kind of organisation we need ... [*ibid.*, pp. 22-23]

Doubtless comrades can see in this argumentation a lot that applies to us today.

It is true that in arguing for the newspaper Lenin contrasts the situation in Russia with that in Germany. There the workers had not only newspapers but also the possibility of parliamentary work, electoral activity, legal meetings, legal trade union activity and so on. Lenin says that in Russia the newspaper must take the place of all of that until such time as political liberty is won.

Some people argue that Lenin’s whole concept of the party was shaped by conditions under the tsarist autocracy and is therefore not relevant in the Western democratic

countries. But while elements of Lenin's original theory obviously relate to the necessities of underground work, we have always argued that in the main it is independent of this and has a universal applicability. So it is with the newspaper idea. In conditions of wide political liberty the revolutionary press does not become less important but operates on a different terrain (as in Australia today, for instance).

Pravda

For all the invaluable work it performed in crystallising a current around Lenin, *Iskra* was not Lenin's mass political newspaper. Indeed, it wasn't until 1912 that such a paper was finally launched by the Bolsheviks (until then they had a series of factional papers oriented toward the ideological struggle within the Russian socialist movement).

In 1912, the Prague conference of the Bolsheviks finalised the split with the Mensheviks and established the Bolsheviks as the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. Following this the Bolsheviks (at first with other forces but later by themselves) launched *Pravda* (Truth) as a daily in St Petersburg.

Zinoviev explains that *Pravda* "was created quite differently from all other papers — by the half-kopecks collected by working men and women. The continual swelling influx of financial resources provided us with an accurate barometer for gauging workers' sympathies towards the Bolsheviks." (*History of the Bolshevik Party*, p. 172)

A detailed register of donations was kept and Lenin took a particular interest in these statistics.

The paper suffered constant harassment by the authorities: issues would be suspended, fines were levied against it and staff would be arrested. But the workers collected funds to keep it going and pay the fines and it survived and grew stronger. It would be distributed around the St Petersburg factories by a network of hundreds of working men, women and children. With this strong support *Pravda* rapidly outstripped the Mensheviks' *Luch* (Ray).

Just before the war, according to the historian Ralph Elwood:

The paper had acquired a national audience, being distributed to some 9444 cities in Imperial Russia. Its columns about workers' problems and interests undoubtedly gave a sense of class identity and solidarity to its readers. Its accounts of economic abuses and of successful strikes helped spread social and economic unrest. By constantly harping on the correctness of the six Bolshevik Duma deputies and championing Bolshevik candidates in union and insurance elections, it promoted factional identification which had been conspicuously absent before 1912. *Pravda*, for all its difficulties, provided a degree of political coordination and leadership that had been lacking since 1905 ... As a result of two and a half years' work, the majority of the

Social Democratic workers in Russia now apparently identified themselves as *Pravda*ists. [Quoted in Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Humanities Press, 1990), p. 194]

Comintern theses

The victorious Russian Revolution led to the creation, in 1919, of the Communist International. The early Lenin-Trotsky years of the International were devoted to trying to impart to the fledgling communist parties the lessons of the Bolshevik experience and orienting them in the stormy struggles of the postwar years.

Famous polemics like Lenin's pamphlet '*Left-Wing' Communism — An Infantile Disorder*, written in May 1920, on the eve of the Second Congress of the Comintern, are wholly in this framework. So are the theses adopted by the Third Congress in July 1921 *On the Organisational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work*.

The theses are a basic primer on Bolshevik organisation for the new and inexperienced communist parties. Generally the CPs had been formed by splits in the old, non-activist, parliamentary-oriented social-democratic organisations. That's where their memberships had been trained. Transforming the new parties into real, active, communist organisations would take time and patience.

A section of the Comintern document deals with the party press. It is very instructive and well worth studying. It makes a number of points.

- The first is that all party publications should be under party control. This may seem elementary to us but in the old socialist parties newspapers and journals were often the private fiefdoms of their editors or were even privately-owned. The *Appeal to Reason* of the old Debs Socialist Party in the United States was a private venture (albeit, in this instance, firmly on the left).

Of course, one can caricature this principle: we don't want an absurd centralism. Real party political control must be combined with a realistic measure of editorial and organisational-technical autonomy. This is precisely how *Green Left Weekly* operates.

- The theses stress that the communist press shouldn't ape the bourgeois newspapers and peddle sensation or trivia.

Our papers [say the theses] will establish their authority by the uncompromising position they take on all proletarian social questions ... The communist paper must concern itself first and foremost with the interests of the exploited and militant workers.

- The Comintern document puts a tremendous stress on involving the membership

in the newspaper on all levels

The Communist paper must strive to become a communist undertaking, i.e., a proletarian fighting organisation, an association of revolutionary workers, of all its regular contributors, typesetters, printers, administrators, distributors and sellers, and of those who collect local news, discuss and edit the material in the cells, etc.

The first thing here, of course, is that party members must support it financially. “Communist papers can only survive if party members are prepared to make substantial and regular financial and material sacrifices.”

Party members must write for the paper.

The communists must be more than just lively canvassers and agitators for the paper; they must be useful contributors. Everything that happens in the communist fraction of the factory or in the cell, any event of social or economic importance must be communicated to the paper as quickly as possible.

However, this injunction cuts both ways.

The editorial board must handle with particular care and feeling the reports on the life of working people and on workers’ organisations, which can either be published as short articles to show that the paper is close to the life of working people or used as practical examples to illustrate communist ideas ...

“Wherever possible,” the theses continue, “the editorial board must at suitable times hold discussions with the workers who visit the editorial office, listen to the hopes and complaints they draw from their experience of life’s hardships, note them down carefully and use them to make the paper more vital.”

By such methods of operating, the Comintern document stresses, party members and advanced workers will come to see the party press as “their own” and it refers to the tremendously positive experience of the Bolsheviks with *Pravda* in 1912 and 1913.

- There is a big stress in the document on increasing the circulation of the paper.

Subscriptions for our paper must be collected very systematically. During periods when workers are joining the labour movement or when political or economic events are disrupting social life there are good opportunities for winning readers and communists should be able to make the best of them.

“Paper-sellers”, it continues, “should not miss a single workers’ meeting or demonstration; they should sell subscriptions before, during and after the event.”

- The theses end by pointing out that party members must defend the party press, not only against the bourgeois press, but also “We must get the better of the social-democratic and independent socialist press by a constant offensive, which should not however degenerate into petty polemic.”

We see even from this brief look at the Comintern document that what we do today, making all the necessary allowances for changes in social conditions, is carrying on in the grand tradition of the communist press.

Cannon on the press

Another fundamental source of our thinking on the revolutionary press is the writings of James P. Cannon. Of course, we should not only be inspired by what Cannon wrote also by his tremendous example.

When Cannon and a tiny group of supporters were expelled from the Stalinised Communist Party of the United States, they began their struggle with a newspaper, the fortnightly *Militant*. This was their vehicle for getting out Trotsky's message and the reasons they had thrown in their lot with him to the membership of the CP, the organisation of the vanguard forces at that point.

The first issue of the *Militant* appeared on November 15, 1928. Its small band of adherents took bundles and went and sold it on the streets in front of the headquarters of the CP. The Communist Party at this point had a membership and periphery of tens of thousands, 10 daily papers and many weeklies and monthlies and a big apparatus. But despite all the obstacles — tiny forces, financial poverty, slander, physical attacks and social ostracism — Cannon and his comrades persevered and — painfully slowly — built a small cadre organisation. You can read about this heroic struggle of the Left Opposition in the United States in Cannon's *The History of American Trotskyism*.

But the point to be stressed here is that the effort to create a new party hinged on their newspaper; that's what they began with.

Cannon had quite a bit to say about the party press and some of his most relevant remarks are to be found in his *Letters From Prison* (Merit Publishers, 1968).

In early 1939 the *Socialist Appeal* — as the newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party was then called — went twice-weekly. Leading up to the 1939 convention Cannon was proposing that the *Appeal* come out three times a week, i.e., appear on alternate weekdays, and adopt a more popular style. These changes were envisaged as the necessary next steps on the road to a daily newspaper which could take the party deeper into the mass movement.

These plans were shelved with the outbreak of the fundamental struggle with the Burnham-Shachtman forces in 1939-40. In his *Letters from Prison*, Cannon reconsidered the original thinking on the nature of the party's press.

We used to think, or rather take for granted [he wrote] that as we broke out of the narrow propaganda circle and began to get a hearing from the workers, we should aim

at changing the weekly into a daily ...

It was also assumed that as the paper became a “mass” paper, it would be obliged to adapt itself to the political understanding of the average, if not the lowest common denominator, among its new readers; leaving the more complicated political and theoretical explanations to the monthly magazine. On closer analysis ... both these ideas require radical revision.

With the resources they had and might reasonably expect to gain in the next period, he explained:

... a daily paper would devour such huge sums as to starve the other departments of our work and defeat our plans for a symmetrical development of the movement. The task of distributing a daily would consume so much of the energies of our limited forces as to sacrifice volume of circulation for frequency of issue ...

But what we have to do next is to reach more and more new people, catch their attention at the moment when they are just awakening from political indifference, and try to reach them with our message regularly. A big national weekly is ideally suited to this task ... a weekly which is not just another radical paper but the national paper, dominating the radical labour field. [pp. 261-262]

Cannon went on in his letters to develop the idea of *The Militant* as a combination tool. The party could only afford to publish one paper so that it had to simultaneously meet the needs of the three broad categories of readership: the politically-educated party members, longer-term nonparty readers who are developing politically, and readers coming to the paper for the first time.

Catering for the large number of new readers the paper was attracting, Cannon stressed, didn’t mean vulgarisation or talking down to them but a change in presentation:

More cartoons and drawings; more light features, especially short features; more effort to give information not found elsewhere; more studied effort to convey our ideas in small doses, subtly and sometimes indirectly, for the average worker doesn’t like to be pounded over the head with direct arguments in every article and every headline. [p. 269]

The notion that the paper should be an irreplaceable source of information is a theme Cannon takes up several times in his letters. “It should be our aim”, he wrote, “to make *The Militant* the recognised leader and best and most reliable source of news of general interest to dissident and generally progressive circles.” News about attacks on democratic rights were particularly important. He even urged *The Militant* to run articles about the government’s persecution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses for their refusal to serve in the armed forces. “All other papers neglect them”, he said.

And, of course, Cannon had a lot of ideas on how to distribute the paper and boost its subscription base. Here's one passage for all *Green Left Weekly* sellers to appreciate:

Our distributors and sub canvassers should swarm like bees at every labour and radical gathering, at union meetings, in the needle trades market, etc. We should now reappear at the colleges also. Our aim should be to swamp all relatively progressive articulate circles with the volume of our propaganda; to psychologise them with the impression of our energy and aggressiveness. This is a weapon. [p. 64]

Healyite daily

As a footnote here it may be worthwhile to point to the experience of the ultra-sectarian Socialist Labour League/Workers Revolutionary Party of Gerry Healy in Britain in the 1970s. Throughout the 1960s, explains Tim Wohlforth in his book of memoirs, *The Prophet's Children* (Humanities Press, 1994), the SLL whipped up the hype for a daily newspaper:

The campaign was a way for Healy to distinguish himself on the left: Only the far-larger British Communist Party put out a daily paper. Healy felt that if the SLL could produce such a journal, it would be a great forward step for Trotskyism. And since no other Trotskyist group had ever had a daily paper, Healy's accomplishment would be a kind of concrete proof of the superiority of his brand of Trotskyism ...

The big problems a daily paper can create for a movement were ignored by Healy

...

The daily paper was a prestige project, his Aswan dam. I spoke with Healy within weeks of the launching of the daily, called the *Workers Press*, in September 1969, and he had not yet figured out how he was going to distribute it. [pp. 225-226]

In fact, as Wohlforth points out, sustaining such a project financially and achieving a circulation large enough to justify the whole thing were the crucial problems. And in fact these were what eventually sank Healy's daily. The cadres of the organisation went into a veritable permanent convulsion to distribute the paper and raise the money to keep it going. It puts even our efforts with *Green Left Weekly* decidedly in the shade.

But for all the commitment of the SLL/WRP members, the daily was not based on reality but on ultraleft sectarian hype and could not be sustained. *Workers Press* folded in February 1976. (A few months later Healy brought out the *News Line* — as a weekly, I think.)

The *Workers Press* debacle demonstrates in the negative the correctness of Cannon's arguments. A daily newspaper is only realistic for an organisation which has reached

a certain threshold of cadres and achieved a certain implantation in the mass movement. It may be a matter of debate just what that threshold is but for a small party of one or two thousand members such a project would be crippling.

Creating a national weekly which hegemonises the radical movement would seem to be the way to go. Of course, for limited periods in a fast-moving crisis situation it may be necessary and feasible to come out twice or even three times a week but this can't be regarded as a permanent option for a small group.

The revolutionary press in Australia

Coming closer to home, this coming September will mark 28 years of the revolutionary press in Australia in the postwar period. I think we can consider this almost three decades a real milestone in socialist politics in this country.

In September 1970, the first issue of *Direct Action* appeared. This was a project of the SYA — the Socialist Youth Alliance, now Resistance — and the (somewhat shadowy) *Socialist Review* group — which became the Socialist Workers League in January 1972.

Those 28 years represent over a quarter of a century of struggle to build a revolutionary workers party in this country. And the revolutionary press — first *Direct Action* and now *Green Left Weekly* — has been at the very heart of this process. We have built ourselves through our newspapers.

As most comrades will know, we took our name from the original *Direct Action* which first appeared before World War I. It was the paper of the IWW — the Industrial Workers of the World or “Wobblies” as they were often known.

The Wobblies were revolutionaries, but of the anarcho-syndicalist variety. That is, they believed in the primacy of struggles at the point of production and rejected “politics”, which they understood as dirty bourgeois politics. They didn't understand that there could be a truly revolutionary political practice. However, whatever their theoretical deficiencies, they had a proud record. As Gordon Childe explains in his book *How Labor Governs*, the IWW represented the first real challenge and alternative to the ALP's opportunism and procapitalist Fabian gradualism and reformism.

The IWW carried out an heroic propaganda and agitation against the war. Perhaps they were somewhat ultraleft: one famous cover of *Direct Action* carries an illustration of the horrors of war with the caption “War is Hell! Send the capitalists to hell and wars are impossible.” But, tactics aside, the insistent, ceaseless agitation of the Wobblies played a key role in moving larger forces into action.

But in the end the organisation was smashed by government repression and frame-ups and they were politically superseded and bypassed by the emergence of

the Communist Party in the early 1920s.

Compared to the IWW, the Communist Party represented a far higher level of political understanding.

Up to the war years, the CPA's paper was the *Workers Weekly*. Then it became *Tribune* which carried through until its demise in the early 1990s. At various times the CP had state newspapers as well.

But by the late 1920s the CPA had been Stalinised. The CPA was a contradictory phenomenon. Over the years thousands — probably scores of thousands — placed their hopes for a better world in the Communist Party (as in so many other countries). But these hopes were betrayed and wasted by Stalinism.

However, today's socialist movement stands on the shoulders of all those who have gone before and we must learn from both their successes and their failures. This must condition our approach to the legacy of both the IWW and the Communist Party.

Direct Action Mark II

Our *Direct Action* lasted for 20 years — from September 1970 to December 1990. It had a great record, something of which we can be extremely proud.

Direct Action arrived with a bang. For a start, it had bright attractive covers, designed to be noticed at a distance. *DA* was fresh, it was oriented to young people. It was not only against the dirty war in Vietnam, it was pro-women's liberation, socialist and anti-Stalinist. *DA* had an activist perspective. And it was explicitly committed to building an organisation.

To us it is clear [said the editorial in the first issue] the theoretical basis for building a socialist movement already exists. We make no claim to be theoretically brilliant but we have learnt some lessons that many socialist intellectuals have not. They merely play with theory, without bothering to build an organisation to put it into practice. For them it's a game, a fad. This month's plaything seems to be Althusser, and of course, the opportunists as well as the armchair revolutionaries clutch at this latest straw, in the hope that there may be yet another reprieve that will allow the intellectuals and the opportunists to postpone once more into the still unripe and distant future the central task facing revolutionary socialists — the construction of an organisation.

Perhaps the biggest thing *DA* had going for it was that we sold it aggressively — on the street and anywhere we could. *Tribune* was really no longer sold in this way so we were reviving an old radical tradition. There was simply no alternative if we were serious about distributing our paper and making our views known.

I remember the Saturday morning in January of 1971 when John Percy led the

active forces of the very new Melbourne SYA branch out of our Queensberry Street headquarters in Carlton down into the city to start selling the paper on the street. Perhaps some of us were somewhat nervous but we understood that it had to be done. And once we got going, the good sales — and they were very high compared to what is normal today — buoyed us up. And we've kept that up ever since — in a sense the streets belong to us, by virtue of almost 30 years of selling in cities across Australia.

The paper enjoyed very high sales at particular moments:

- In 1970-72, during the period of the big movement against the war in Vietnam sales were exceptionally high. At the June 1971 Moratorium in Melbourne, for instance, our young branch sold some 1700 copies of issue number 8 to a crowd of anything from 50,000-100,000 people. The banner headline on the cover said: "Defend the Vietnamese Revolution".

In the first six months of the same year, the best sellers could each get rid of 80, 100, even 120 papers on a Saturday morning in Melbourne's Bourke Street and its environs.

- During the election campaign at the end of 1975 following Whitlam's dismissal, we also enjoyed very strong sales. In fact, I'm sure that our easy sales at ALP election rallies in the 1970s is one reason why the Laborites have abandoned this mode of campaigning, preferring instead sanitised, stage-managed, ticket-only events for the TV cameras.
- And during the peace movement of 1980s, we not only registered very good sales: twice we gave away tens of thousands of free copies of *Direct Action*. The thinking was that this was the only way to make a real impact on huge demonstrations; not to just reach a few percent but to reach a quarter, a third or even more with our message.

On one level, these distributions were very successful. They completely swamped all efforts by other left organisations. This has always been our tradition: bold and ambitious.

Direct Action put us on the map and kept putting us there. It is absolutely unthinkable that we could be where we are today without *DA*'s tremendous 20 years.

With *Direct Action* the party and Resistance served an apprenticeship in all aspects of revolutionary journalism. We take the clockwork-regular weekly appearance of *Green Left Weekly* for granted. But we waged a veritable struggle for regularity with *DA*. It started as a (somewhat irregular) monthly. In January 1972 it went fortnightly. At the end of 1975 it became an eight-page weekly during the election period and then a full weekly at the start of 1976.

The technical quality improved steadily over the years as we upgraded our skills

and our equipment. The level of computerisation and general professionalism that we've reached today is mind-boggling to anyone who lived in the technological cave that was the 1970s and even most of the 1980s. The final all-night production effort which was such a permanent — and enjoyable! — feature of most of *DA*'s existence now seems as remote as logarithms in high school mathematics classes.

The content and the writing also improved over the years as we collectively learned our trade.

However, there were limitations to how far we could go with *Direct Action*. It was an open party newspaper and this fact ran up against the limitations of mass consciousness in the general radical milieu. As is the case today, most radicals are, if not anti-party, definitely nonparty in their consciousness. Many admired our tenacity but their heads were somewhere else.

Green Left Weekly

Towards the end of the 1980s, *DA*'s circulation was declining and there was no enthusiasm for hurling ourselves at it once more. We could only reinvigorate ourselves with a new project — *Green Left Weekly*.

In the latter half of 1990 we unveiled the project, announced we would suspend publication of *DA* and throw our resources behind a new broader paper and sought support for the whole thing. The first issue of *Green Left* appeared in the new year, toward the end of the anti-Gulf War movement.

The switch to *Green Left Weekly* was a bold move and a strikingly successful one. It massively increased our circulation and our influence. The paper improved dramatically in content and technical quality. *Green Left* proved to be an ideal tool for reaching progressive minded people at their present level of consciousness.

It wasn't clear at the start — or rather, we were not sure — what outside forces would become involved in the project or how they might participate. It is now clear that the party and Resistance continue to carry the whole project in all respects — production, sales and fundraising — and that broader involvement is only on the level of identification, financial support and some writing.

In 1996-97 we moved to sharply and consistently increase the “red” (i.e., socialist) content of *Green Left*. We don't want to abandon *Green Left*'s broad reach, but we want to push the envelope of using it as a party-building paper to the limit. We want the paper to openly and persuasively discuss fundamental solutions, socialist solutions, to all the social problems created by capitalism. And we want to have the activity and profile of the DSP and Resistance — the revolutionary Marxist current in Australia — properly reflected in the paper.

This is still work in progress. But it is clear that the changes we have made already have not put off our readers and supporters or harmed our sales. We will continue trying to make the paper a more effective vehicle for socialist politics without thereby alienating our target audience.

While we are committed to *Green Left Weekly*, we should not necessarily think that it is not, in essence, a Leninist or Cannonite paper. It is both.

Green Left is a Leninist paper. Apart from its form, in all fundamental respects it fulfils the functions of a tendency paper. It is around *Green Left* that we are building the DSP and Resistance, even though we are constantly discussing how to do this more effectively.

We reject all criticisms of the *Green Left Weekly* project from sectarian outfits. It's "too green", they say, or it's "too big" and consumes too many of our resources which would be better put into trade-union work. Our critics do not understand what a Leninist paper is or how a vanguard formation is built around the newspaper. Jibes about the DSP and Resistance being just "paper sellers" show a lack of understanding of how to build a real party and a total underestimation of the importance of combating bourgeois ideology on all levels and the role of the party press in doing this.

Green Left Weekly is also Cannon's combination paper: it talks to the party membership, giving them the information, line and arguments; it is suitable for our broader periphery with plenty of solid material etc; and it is also aimed at new readers, with a whole range of attractive and diverse features, columns, etc.

Arguably the first and most important role such a paper plays is to inform, arm and inspire the membership of the party and Resistance. Each issue of the paper gives us the line and the main arguments on the key questions of the day. I always wince inwardly whenever someone goes by in the street and says in a friendly but dismissive way: "You're preaching to the converted here." Well, we are "converted" and we need to be convinced of the political line and know how to argue it more than anyone else and that's what the paper does.

Green Left's future depends wholly on the DSP and Resistance. That's why *Green Left Weekly* is still here whereas *Tribune*, *Broadside*, *Australian Society* and the recent ill-fated *Republican* have gone. We are not dependent on commercial distribution or support from advertisers. We have a dedicated band of supporters who believe in the paper and back up their convictions by getting out and selling the thing themselves. Many of the people originally attracted to the *Green Left* project were looking for some vague "alternative" paper which would miraculously just sell itself. But experience has given the lie to all such hopes. Only a paper supported by an organisation and based on people who are prepared to sacrifice for it will get anywhere in this climate.

That is precisely our strength.

And if we sustain the paper, it is also the case that the DSP and Resistance ride on its back. The paper amplifies our voice and presence and pushes our powerful ideas into diverse milieux.

On the other hand, while *Green Left Weekly* seems ideally suited for the situation we face today, we shouldn't think that is immutable, that there will never be a case for changing it. I think *Green Left's* strong "green" focus should be a permanent fixture. Any left paper from today to the revolution absolutely must give this question a tremendous weight: capitalism is destroying the planet and only socialism can put a stop to this madness. I also think the bold and colourful appearance of *Green Left* is a must: we've decisively given the lie to the idea that a left paper can't be stylish and appealing. But, it may be, some time in the future, we decide we need an openly party paper — or whatever. The change from *DA* to *Green Left* challenged our thinking and we may face similar challenges in the new century.

A clear-cut alternative

At this stage our paper is a very long way from rivalling the capitalist press in circulation. In time, as the tempo of the class struggle speeds up and our organisation expands significantly and our implantation and support increases, the circulation of our press will grow also and we will distribute tens and even scores of thousands of copies of the socialist press. The *Green Left Weekly* — or whatever it may be called then — will be followed and cherished by large numbers of ordinary people as their own; it will be their banner and under it they will fight for a new society.

But right now we do offer a clear-cut political-ideological alternative to the line of the bourgeois media. There is really nothing else in this regard.

And while we want big sales, our paper can only be judged by different, i.e., revolutionary criteria. The sales of our paper help build the socialist movement and the party which will lead the struggle to replace this rotten dog-eat-dog social system with a cooperative, collectivist, solidaristic socialist society.

From this perspective the 100 or so sales of *Green Left* that the branch makes each week in, say, Hobart or the two or three sales a comrade might make standing for an hour on a street corner in some city or town are of the utmost importance. We should feel proud of them, understand their true significance and resolve to persevere with our efforts, come what may.

Resistance books